

SPECIAL REPORT: EMILIA-ROMAGNA

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# Bicycling Through the Renaissance in Ferrara

When my guide *Roberta Falchieri* and I picked up our bikes on Ferrara's main square, she told me we'd be riding north along the *Corso d'Ercole*. Then we'd turn right at *Porta degli Angeli*, the city's northern gate, and bike along the city walls. Though out of practice and a bit wobbly at first, I soon acclimated because the cobblestone streets were wide and there was little traffic.

"Only residents can drive cars or motorcycles in Ferrara," Roberta informed me. Apparently most residents also favored bicycles, and I soon noticed that the bike riders ranged from seven year olds on their way to school to silver haired men and women with groceries in their front baskets.

A World Heritage Site in *Emilia-Romagna*, this medieval and Renaissance city has excellent food, art and architecture. And music year-round — in fact, Ferrara and its "bigger sister" Bologna, 27 miles to the southwest, are known as northern Italy's "Musical Cities."

"Make sure to come back here," Roberta's voice echoed as she yelled, extended her arm, and made extravagant pointing movements toward a large building on our left. We were passing *Palazzo dei Diamanti* (Palace of Diamonds), perhaps the most photographed structure in Ferrara because of the 8,000 uniform white and pink marble points that protrude from its walls. As we peddled on into the less congested area of the city, we began to see more Renaissance palaces with spacious

yards, bright green lawns, and colorful gardens.

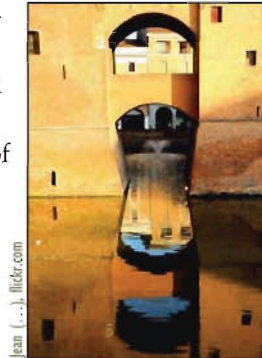
At *Porta degli Angeli*, we exited and began our ride on a wide clay path that covered a former moat alongside the old city walls. Remains of a second city wall and its bastions and bridges occasionally popped up out of the grass on our other side. A wide vista of fields, farms, and small forests stretched out over the flat Po River Valley to the horizon. The clay path was smooth most of the way. In fact, the only time we had to hop off our bikes and walk was when we came upon the occasional large puddle or when walkers came by in the opposite direction.

After winding around to the southwest entrance of town, *Porta Paola*, we went back into the city and began the trip back up to the center. Roberta explained that medieval Ferrara began in this section, and that *Lucrezia Borgia*, daughter of the infamous *Pope Alexander*, entered this part of the city in a lavish procession when she came from Rome to marry *Count Alfonso* in 1502.

After annulling her first marriage, and arranging a quiet murder of convenience for her second, her father had then negotiated for a third marriage into the Este family so he could increase his land holdings. When Alfonso's father died, Lucrezia became the Duchess of Ferrara.

*Castello Estense*, with its drawbridge, moat, decks, and towers, sits right in

the center of the spacious town square. It was built in the late 1300s as a residence for the lords who were sent to Ferrara to provide stability at a time of violent feuds among families and city states. We returned our bikes and entered the castle.



Castello Estense

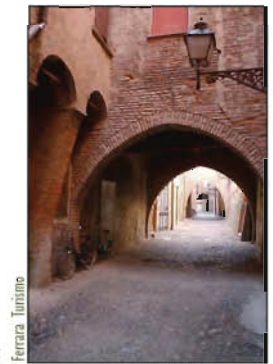
The Gothic halls, with their oil paintings, embellished ceilings, chapel, game rooms, ducal kitchens and terraces, give a hint of how the noble families lived and how they were isolated from the city itself. Outside the castle,

Renaissance Ferrara was a melting pot of north and south, where science, art, poetry, theatre, and music thrived along with industry.

As we entered the vast ducal kitchens where the now-popular pumpkin-stuffed ravioli and other delicacies were invented, the terraces that looked out to the square, and the prison where one brother had put another for 30 years, we got a glimpse of Ferrara five or six centuries ago.

"Of course, the earthquake of 1570 greatly altered the castle," said Roberta, "and what we see is a recreation of those rooms in the 17th-century style." Parts of the vast apartment that Alfonso renovated for Lucrezia Borgia can be seen today, although the decorations are from more recent centuries.

A series of frescoes in the castle's art



Via delle Volte



Palazzo dei Diamanti

museum say even more about everyday life and religion. One entire hallway is devoted to games played by both adults and children. In a painting by *Geronimo*, plump cherubs peek out of the clouds, and one gallery has a carved wooden ceiling from 1155. At the time of our visit, there was an exhibition of paintings by *Garofalo*, known as the “local Raphael,” who lived here in the early 1500s and later went to Rome and Venice.

Across the square from the castle, the lifelike Romanesque sculptures on the front of the main cathedral beckoned. I bought a children’s t-shirt at one of the open stalls that had along the side

of the cathedral since the medieval era. A few small streets and several piazzas later, we started walking along *Via delle Volte*, a long street with periodic overhead vaults and open spaces that appear as a long tunnel with shards of light coming in from above.

“Peek around through the gate and look at the railings on the top of the courtyard. The masonry and wood go back six hundred years,” said Roberta as we entered a wider street. “Look. You can see where the modern plaster has been added to make repairs.” Not far away, at the corner of *Via Savonarola*



and *Via Priasolo*, I found a plaque marking the spot where

Lucrezia Borgia would meet a secret lover via an intermediary, the Ferranese poet *Ercole Strozzi*.

On my second and last day in Ferrara, alone and on foot, I discovered streets such as *Via San Romano*. Its porticos served as a market that led down to the Po River before major floods of the 12th century changed the river’s course and made it run to the north as it does now. I searched out paintings that told stories about the Middle Ages and the Renaissance at the Cathedral Museum, traditional masterpieces and modern works at the gallery in Palazzo dei Diamanti, and an elaborate series of frescoes at *Palazzo Shifanoia*.

In the evening I ate elegantly prepared pasta at *Ristorante il Don Giovanni* and attended a modern soprano and violin performance, “Kafka-Fragmente” by György Kurtág, at *Teatro Comunale*, an angular corner building with porticos on both sides. It was built that way in order to protect theater goers from the rain while they waited for their carriages.

As I walked across the square in the moonlight, I passed the castle with its lights casting shadows across the shimmering moat. The castle terraces, where Renaissance ladies would have come out to look down at performing musicians, actors, and court jesters after a lavish dinner in the ducal kitchens, were empty and quiet.

— Emilie C. Harting

*Emilie C. Harting is a Philadelphia author who often writes about exploring cities.*

## The Details

### Where to stay



#### Hotel Ferrara

Largo Castello, 36  
(39) 0532 205048  
www.hotelferrara.com

Rates: A double room averages 210€ per night, with breakfast. Check the Web site for discount rates of up to half off.

Right across from the Castello Estense on the main square, the hotel is a former Renaissance palace where cardinals stayed when they visited the city. It offers ultra-modern rooms, delicious breakfasts, helpful staff and free bike rentals.

### Where to Eat

#### Ristorante il Don Giovanni

Corso Ercole I d’Este, 1  
(39) 0532 243363  
ildongio@tin.it  
Open for dinner only; closed Monday.

One block off the main square; very good spaghetti and tortellini dishes and a wine bar for informal and faster service; contemporary art on walls makes a striking contrast to the old building.

#### Italia da Giovanni Big Night

Largo Castello, 38  
(39) 0532 242367  
bignight.info@gmail.com

Adjoining Hotel Ferrara, this restaurant features delicacies such as ricotta pie and lavish chocolate cakes. Gets the rays of the castle and moat at night.

#### Hostaria dei Savonarola

Piazza Savonarola  
(39) 0532 208681  
Closed Monday

Traditional local and international dishes including *capellacci*, homemade ravioli stuffed with pumpkin. A block from the castle, this is a good place to stop for lunch while touring the city.

### Private Tour Guide

Roberta Falchieri  
(39) 338 7730203  
obi72@libero.it

### Bicycle Rentals

If your hotel doesn’t offer rentals, there are many places around the city where you can rent a bike by the hour or day.