

13: From Parma to Ferrara and Bologna

A fine, clear and sunny morning. After a long, solid sleep, I rise refreshed at about 8.30, wash, then eat a simple breakfast of bread and cheese. Undecided as to where I should go, I study the map and make up my mind to cycle to Guastalla, where there is a youth hostel. In no hurry – the distance is not great – I leave at about ten o'clock and set off north-eastwards in the direction of Mantova (Mantua). However, I soon discover that I am on the wrong road; although more or less heading in the right direction, I will now pass the small town of Casalmaggiore, which I have been planning to see on a separate visit. Like most of the roads here, this one is noisy, very straight and monotonous. A constant stream of lorries passes me and the flat landscape is mostly industrial.

On the way I stop at a small town named Colorno, which I find to be quite picturesque; it has a number of churches and a fine Ducal Palace built in the eighteenth century for the Farnese family. I buy some food for lunch and am greeted kindly by the locals. Before leaving, I take a photograph from the main road of the palace reflected in the River Parma, then press on for Casalmaggiore.

When I arrive, I feel glad that I have not gone out of my way to visit this town, which has little of interest to see apart from its main square. Here I get my first glimpse of the rather filthy-looking River Po. In the square I sit down to my picnic lunch. An Italian man stops to talk to me in broken English; he explains that he works as a translator and that he speaks French and German better. In the middle of our conversation he excuses himself, walks over to a nearby café and returns with a can of beer for me. I am very touched by this act of kindness; certainly the people are very friendly here. As soon as the man leaves, a young chap who has just got out of a van approaches me and speaks to me in excellent English.

I leave the town at about 1.30 p.m. and continue along uninteresting roads, passing more towns, villages and churches. Before I reach Guastalla, I stop at Gualtieri, some three kilometres before my destination, and take a quick look at this very quiet and picturesque town. Like many old Italian towns in the region, it boasts a fine square and an elegant watch tower.

I finally reach Guastalla by 4.30 p.m. and sit down in the square to study my map and decide where I shall go next. Afterwards, I amble around, admiring the square, the town hall, various churches and then the cathedral, where I watch a funeral procession. It is quite pleasant here. I then try to find a grocery shop, but all the shops are closed at this hour.

Finally I find my way to the youth hostel, which is a couple of kilometres away and situated in a forest by the River Po. It is blissfully peaceful here. As I have arrived too early, I sit outside and wait until the hostel opens at six o'clock. The people in charge here are very pleasant; they question me about my nationality and compliment me on my Italian, which is very kind of them considering that it is so poor.

After I am installed for the night, I wander down to the river, where I watch men fishing with nets attached to long rods, and people canoeing against the fast current. I notice that there are large clumps of mud in the water along the banks of the river. As I gaze at the scene, the sun begins to set. I am taken by surprise when a man on a horse suddenly comes galloping out of the forest.

When I wander back to the hostel, I chat to a young man who tells me about the clumps of mud in the water, in Italian. He describes how the river becomes a raging torrent during rainy periods and deposits soil and vegetation on the banks.

Back in the hostel, I chat as best as I can in German with a young Bavarian chap while we wait for our evening meal. A crowd of locals turns up and the dining room effectively becomes a restaurant. Nearly everybody orders something different. The Bavarian chap and I are given spaghetti, meat and vegetables, bread, wine and a pear from the garden. Although not exactly *haute cuisine*, it is a good, hearty meal. The atmosphere is very homely here and there is a lot of talking and laughing – quite a pleasant change from what I have been experiencing so far.

After the meal is finished, there is a slide show; the Bavarian chap and I are invited to join the spectators, but as we find ourselves looking at pictures of children at a party, we leave and retire to bed.

This morning I start the day with a hot shower and eat breakfast with my Bavarian friend. This consists of dry rolls with butter, jam and *caffelatte*. The bill, which includes yesterday evening's meal with wine and this morning's breakfast, comes to 9,000 lire, which is good value.

At 9.30 I set off eastwards for Ferrara. I had intended to go to Bologna, but discovered that the youth hostel there no longer exists. I have therefore decided to stay in Ferrara, where there is a hostel, and journey to Bologna by train.

It turns out to be a good morning for cycling, and I manage to keep on reasonably quiet and pleasant roads for most of the journey. However, once again the scenery is not up to much. In no time at all I find myself in Reggio, where I stop to buy some provisions in the market, and then set off along the quiet country roads, passing some interesting old buildings and churches. I manage to bypass Poggio Rusco and take the very quiet main road to Ferrara, but stop at a tiny village named Mal Cantone for my picnic lunch, sitting on the steps of an old locked house. This is the second village I have encountered today with a similar name; earlier I have passed Mal Cantare!

As soon as I have finished eating, I press on, still making good speed. Although things are beginning to go better for me now, I find myself thinking about Marta and wondering where she may be. Maybe it would have been nice to cycle with her, I think, but I realize that on my own I can do exactly as I want and travel at my own speed. I remember her saying that she intended to see the lakes in the northern part of this region; no doubt they are very pretty, but I have decided to visit the historic towns, which are of great interest to me.

I eventually arrive in Ferrara at about 4.30 p.m., feeling a little exhausted. I immediately find my way to the train station, where I note the train times to Bologna for tomorrow. Afterwards I cycle to the town centre, where I collect some maps and literature from the tourist office. I relax on a park bench, then take a look inside the cathedral – or rather the Basilica Cattedrale di San Giorgio Martire, Duomo di Ferrara – a fine Romanesque building dating from the twelfth century. Afterwards I walk around some of the streets, buy some food and then make my way to the youth hostel. As I am early, I chat to a German girl who speaks English very well and tells me that she has been in Dublin. While waiting to check in, I chat to a couple of pleasant young English girls.

Once ensconced in the hostel, I spend the evening eating, relaxing and chatting to the girls, a couple of other English girls and, later, a lively and friendly Scots girl who gives me a huge plateful of pasta, salad and grapes – she obviously realizes that I'm in need of a good meal! I make tea for her and the second couple of English girls; later I

make more for the first couple and then for an English lad who has been cycling around the continent at a ferocious speed. It seems to me that this hostel is very popular with the English! The Scots girl wants to know everything I can tell her about Ireland and James Joyce. She is very generous with her food and offers it to just about everyone staying here. Later I chat to the cyclist and finally retire to bed.

Up at seven this morning, and after a quick wash I take a brisk walk to the train station. As I have eaten so much last night, I feel that I can do without breakfast. I arrive on time and catch the 8.05 *locale* train to Bologna, which costs me just 1,500 lire – about 80p. However, the train does not leave until 8.30. It is a long journey, with stops at every station; as the name *locale* may suggest, I see many of the locals boarding and alighting. I while away the hour-long journey by studying some Italian and then examining my map of Bologna. I try to get hold of a better one in the station when we arrive at 9.30 but they have nothing on offer in the tourist office.



Portico, Bologna

I start my visit to this fine old city, the capital of the Emilia-Romagna region, by heading towards the old town centre. I walk down the Via Galliera, with its old buildings and distinctive porticoes over the pavements. On the way, I stop to visit and admire several churches; most of them are lavishly decorated inside with painted and stuccoed ceilings.

I finally reach the Piazza del Nettuno with its large, impressive Gothic buildings and fountain, and enter the Palazzo d'Accursio in order to visit the Municipal Art Collection. I am delighted to discover that admission is free. I ascend the grand staircase to the first floor, where I find a suite of very fine rooms with much of the original décor still intact. In fact, the rooms are far more interesting than the rather pedestrian paintings displayed in them. The ceilings here are particularly ornate and impressive. The curators here are very friendly; an elderly lady points out various things to me and explains that a lady that is to be seen in several of the paintings is the wife of the artist. Because many of the rooms are closed to the public I am unable to see everything, though the visit is most enjoyable nonetheless.

Outside again, I walk to the Piazza Maggiore, where I find workmen arranging or taking away seats for a public performance, and then take to the smaller streets where I pass more elegant buildings and fascinating porticoes.

I eventually make my way along the Via delle Belle Arti and arrive at the Pinacoteca Nazionale or National Picture Gallery. Once again, admission is free and so I spend an hour or two wandering through the various rooms, admiring the paintings, most of which are Italian and religious. Although the ubiquity of these religious scenes does become wearisome after a while, I do enjoy the experience of being engulfed by so many of these exhilarating Renaissance and Baroque masterpieces. As many of the artists' names are new to me, it is interesting to become acquainted with their work. In one room are reconstructed frescoes from an old chapel; these date from around the time of Giotto and are quite fascinating. At one point I stop to listen to explanations of some of the works given by a knowledgeable English chap to some American visitors, which I find quite enlightening.

I finally leave at one o'clock and sit in the shade on a park bench, where I eat a picnic lunch. It is similar to many such lunches that I have been eating here in Italy: bread, cheese, a tomato, some beer and a peach. This time I eat some type of smoked cheese, which I have bought earlier and which I have never eaten before. Its unusual texture puzzles me and I'm not sure whether I like it or not.



The Garisenda and Asinelli towers, Bologna (*courtesy of Bologna Welcome*)

Fed and rested, I set off again through the old streets and slowly make my way to the two towers that Bologna is famous for: one very tall (the Asinelli) and the other shorter and leaning at a precarious angle (the Garisenda). I pay 500 lire and, taking it in easy stages, climb to the top of the tall one, where I and several other tourists enjoy a spectacular view of the city, with its red-tiled roofs, its other towers and church domes. It is thrilling to be here. I am surprised at how small and self-contained the town centre is – I have previously imagined it to be large and ugly. The towers are quite extraordinary; originally built by rich inhabitants during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it seems that they were used for defence purposes. As can be imagined, there was a certain amount of rivalry: the tallest towers were invariably built by the richest and most powerful citizens. It is thought there were up to 180 towers in the city at one time; today only about twenty of them are still standing.

Back on ground level, I continue my peregrinations through the streets and squares. Away from the old town centre, these are pleasantly quiet and peaceful – probably because it is a Saturday. I take a look inside some more fine churches and eventually

return to the Piazza Maggiore, where I pay a visit to the large and rather gaunt Basilica di San Petronio, with its unfinished façade. Begun in the fourteenth century, it is regarded as being the most imposing church in Bologna. The interior is relatively plain but well proportioned. While I am here, somebody is practising on the organ, the sound of which is swallowed up by the highly reverberant nave. Just to make matters worse, the instrument is horribly out of tune.

I leave after 5.30 p.m. and begin to walk back to the train station. I look out for a grocery shop but everything is closed. Not for the first time I curse the shops here in Italy – there is no telling when they are open and closed. Tired by now, I arrive at the station, buy a ticket and collapse into a carriage of another *locale* train, which sets off on its slow journey at 6.32 p.m. I listen to some young people arguing with a ticket official and fall asleep for a while.

Back at the youth hostel, which I reach by about eight o'clock, I sit down to a spartan meal of bread and sardines, chat to some of the English girls and eventually write some of my diary. Although the day has been tiring, it has been enjoyable; I am glad that I have made the effort to visit Bologna.

I start the morning with a welcome hot shower and breakfast on tea, bread and some more of the smoked cheese, which now seems to taste better. I leave the hostel at nine and begin a day of sightseeing in Ferrara by looking for food. However, as it is Sunday morning, all the shops are closed; all I can find open are bars, cafés, flower shops and other establishments that are of no use to me.

The first place I stop to visit is the small church of Santa Maria in Vado, begun in the twelfth century and restored at the end of the fifteenth century. The rather plain façade is made of dull red stone but the interior is quite fine. Next I stop to look at the church of San Domenico, originally begun in the thirteenth century, then rebuilt in the eighteenth. This has a more ornate and pleasing façade.



Castello Estense, Ferrara

In the main square I approach the imposing Castello Estense with its moat, towers and typically Italian brickwork. This castle had been built by the Marquis Niccolò II d'Este following riots in 1385 by the people of Ferrara, who had been driven to desperation by taxes and flooding. When the defensive function of the castle became less important with the growth of the city, transformation works were begun by Ercole

Il d'Este after a fire in 1544, and his architect Girolamo da Carpi gave the castle its present external appearance.

I enter the courtyard with its two wells and go upstairs to view the one room that is open to the public; the others are all closed for repairs. As this room is not particularly impressive, I leave shortly afterwards and walk towards the cathedral, which I have already visited. I have a look at a book market in the square beside it, dally for a while watching the pigeons and people, and then walk along the Via Giuseppe Mazzini to the Church of San Francesco. Although this is highly praised in my brochure as being of the Renaissance period and designed by Biagio Rossetti, I discover that it has a very plain façade and is quite bare inside. However, I am glad to have seen it.



Casa Romei, Ferrara

I now make my way to the Casa Romei, a fine fifteenth-century house built by the merchant Giovanni Romei, who had married an Estense princess. My brochure informs me that Lucrezia Borgia once stayed here. Nowadays the building houses an exhibition of old Italian manuscripts and printed books. I pay 1,000 lire to enter, and spend some time viewing the decorated wooden ceilings, frescoes, the beautiful colonnaded courtyard and the general décor. The exhibits are quite fascinating: illuminated manuscripts, prayer books and printed volumes. The house has a wonderfully intimate atmosphere and there are not many people in it.

When I feel that I have seen everything, I leave and retrace my steps to the Pinacoteca or National Picture Gallery, for I have discovered that it will close at one o'clock. Admission to this gallery, situated in the impressive Palazzo dei Diamanti (an Estense residence), is free – just as well, as I discover that it contains little of interest. There are some fine religious paintings and some excellent early portraits in the entrance hall, but there is no sign of an artist's name.

After I have seen all that I need to see, I leave and return to the town centre, where I find a quiet little square and sit down to eat some more bread and cheese, for that is all I have. Shortly afterwards an Italian family arrives and sits down nearby; like me, they produce a picnic lunch and begin to tuck in. The husband kindly offers me a glass of red wine; as I have nothing to drink, I gratefully accept it. He then strikes up a conversation. I explain as best as I can, in my faulty Italian, where I come from and what I am doing. The children crowd around me, fascinated, and ask me all sorts of questions. The couple then tell me about various towns, and advise me to go to places such as Florence, Pisa, Assisi, Ravenna and so forth. They invite me to come with

them to a nearby café, where I am treated to a tiny cup of coffee. As a parting gesture, the man gives me his address, which is near Ravenna. It is so refreshing to make contact with local people in this manner. This, I believe, is one of the advantages of travelling alone, although I have to admit to feeling down from time to time, due to a certain amount of loneliness. At least my journey through Italy, which has begun badly, is now beginning to improve.

Having said goodbye to my new-found friends, I head for what I have been looking forward to seeing here: the Palazzo Schifanoia, built in 1385 for Marquis Alberto V d'Este. I pay 1,000 lire for a ticket (even though I plead that I am a student without my card) and walk around the building, admiring its ceilings but paying little attention to its contents, which are few. At last I come to the best room, the *Salone dei Mesi*, which is adorned with frescoes depicting the months of the year designed by Cosmè Tura, Francesco del Cossa and Ercole de' Roberti between 1469 and 1470. Realizing the importance of these paintings, which depict the cycle of months as an allegorical pageant peopled by Olympian gods, I spend quite some time studying them. I find them fascinating. Although some of them are the worse for wear, they are very vivid, colourful and interesting. As well as the fanciful scenes and pagan gods, they show various aspects of daily life in fifteenth-century Italy. The room is huge: 25 metres long by 11 metres wide, and the frescoes cover the entire walls, which are 7 metres high. Despite the enormous scale of such an undertaking, which in itself is staggering, the detail, when examined closely, is very fine and interesting. As well as walking around the room to view everything closely, I also sit on the benches supplied, drinking it all in, enchanted.

After a while, a young Filipino enters the room and begins to chat to me in English. As it transpires that he is also staying in the hostel, we leave together and stroll through the streets, talking. He tells me that he has been living in Spain for a couple of years and is now studying in Paris. It transpires that he can speak several languages, including Italian, quite fluently. We search for some other place to visit, but by now all the museums are closed. Feeling a little frustrated, we amble back to the main square, where we sit in front of the cathedral, chatting. Finally, as we are both exhausted, we return to the hostel, where I join Fiona and Clair, the two English girls, and sit down to another unexciting meal of bread, tinned sardines and tea. I am certainly at a disadvantage not knowing how to cook – a result of living with my parents for so long. However, I make myself useful by making tea for an English lad who joins us and he, bless him, gives me half of his apple and some honey.

Later I write my diary while the girls play cards; the warden, who is eating his evening meal with his wife, invites me to take a glass of wine from his bottle. By now I am enjoying the friendly atmosphere of this hostel; it is homely and has become a welcome base for me. I decide to stay here for a few more days, and take the train to Ravenna and perhaps Florence.

A fine morning. Feeling tired and lazy, I get up late, have a hot shower and walk to the bakery at the corner of the street, where I buy two bread rolls for breakfast. Back in the hostel, I eat with the English chap who proves to be quite interesting and, in a strange way, entertaining. He is tall and lanky; his hair is sparse and he wears round steel-rimmed spectacles. Although he probably can be classified as a hippy, he is always cheerful and very generous. As I offer him some tea, he encourages me to share his margarine, peanut butter, and what he likes to call his 'runny honey'.

Today I intend to take things easy and relax. I leave the hostel to buy a bag of provisions in a shop down the street: tomatoes, cucumbers and some fruit, all of

which costs very little. As I have been eating so little over the weekend, I am determined to enjoy a good meal this evening. As the hostel is still open, I leave my purchases there except for one apple, which I bring with me. I then buy some fresh brown bread and set off again. I walk down the Via Ludovico Ariosto, which is not far from the hostel, and stop to look at the poet's house. Ariosto, born in 1474, is the author of the famous epic *Orlando Furioso*, a continuation in verse of Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*. Ariosto's poem describes the adventures of Charlemagne, Orlando and the Franks, who were fighting against the Saracens. Ariosto's house here is small; as there seems to be little or nothing of importance to see inside, I do not bother to go into it.

I then pop into the rather plain church of the Capuchins, then amble along the rather noisy Corso Porta Po to the Palazzo Prosperi-Sacratì. I stop to admire its fine architecture and entrance. Across the road is the Diamanti or Diamond Palace. A little farther on is the Palazzo Massari, which houses the Boldini Museum. As it is not quite ten o'clock, when it will open, I stop to make up my mind whether to visit it or not. I eventually decide not to bother, as I have already seen enough second-rate museums and art galleries for the time being. Instead, I turn a corner and walk up a street to see the church of San Cristoforo alla Certosa with its unfinished façade, begun in 1498. This church had been added to a monastery of the Carthusian order, built in 1452 by Borso d'Este, in what had once been an isolated place outside the city. From the road I can see the monastery's extended cloisters. I discover that the church is at present closed for repairs. All along the shady road leading to the church are little shops selling flowers and religious objects, including lamps; many people are arriving on foot or by bicycle to buy flowers, which they are bringing to the nearby Certosa cemetery. The atmosphere in this part of the city is very peaceful.

Just across the main road I find a large, pleasant park in a square, with fine old buildings and porticoes surrounding it. I walk along the covered walkways, passing people sitting at café tables, either sipping coffee, relaxing or chatting in their usual cheerful manner.

Taking the pleasant and quiet back streets, I find my way to the Palazzina (or Little Palace) Marfisa d'Este, but stop to peep at the Church of Santo Spirito, begun in 1519, on the way. As it had suffered damage from an earthquake in 1570 and more in 1830 when the ceiling collapsed, the church is now very plain and rather uninteresting. Inside, I find people praying fervently and somebody practising on a horrible-sounding electric organ.

Emerging on to the main thoroughfare, the Corso della Giovecca, I find the Palazzina Marfisa d'Este – just about every major building here has some connection with the Este family. This particular one looks rather small and bland on the outside, but, as I discover, it is exquisite inside. I pay 500 lire for a ticket and wander around the few rooms that are open to the public. I spend a long time gazing up at the richly decorated ceilings and the frescoes along the tops of the walls, admiring the various swags, motifs and strange beings, some of them half human, half beast. Some of these creatures are quite amusing. Immediately I am put in mind of the décor used in fine Irish houses of the Georgian era which, of course, is based on Italian designs. As there are so few people here, I almost have the place to myself. It is wonderful to just amble around, undisturbed, admiring everything, including the fine contemporary (but not original) furniture in the various rooms. In contrast to the colourful frescoes, the furniture is dark, solid and plain.

Delighted at having been in this palace, I make to leave at midday but am invited to visit the garden and loggia, which I do. I then find my way back to the main square

by the castle, stopping to buy a can of beer on the way. I walk to 'my' little square nearby, sit down and at 12.30 start my lunch of bread, cheese, beer and an apple. Much to my surprise, I am joined by the English chap from the hostel. We eat together – my friend gives me a pickled gherkin – and have a long chat. I learn that he lives and works in Cambridge, that he is a vegetarian, and that, although interested in all sorts of music, he has studied the bassoon and is familiar with the music of Rameau, Couperin, Telemann and many of the classical composers. He tells me that he is on a month-long hitch-hiking holiday and although he is interested in good art and architecture, he spends quite a lot of time relaxing in bars and cafés, where he likes to write letters. We chat together for some considerable time. He then produces a tin whistle, which, he tells me, he is learning to play. After he attempts to play a few simple tunes, I take the whistle and tootle some Irish tunes for him. An Italian man sitting nearby turns up the volume of his transistor radio – he obviously doesn't appreciate good music.

All the while we are sitting here, Italians come to sit down, relax, eat sandwiches and leave. After our lunches I study a little Italian and take a short siesta. Refreshed, we finally leave at about two o'clock and go our separate ways.



Ferrara Cathedral

I amble around by the castle, find the Palazzon Roverella, a Renaissance palace on the main thoroughfare, but discover that it is not open to the public. I then make my way around to the cathedral (or Duomo) and go upstairs to the small museum. This is a one-roomed affair containing a collection of fine illuminated manuscripts, tapestries and sculpture. Although there is not much to see, the collection is interesting. As admission is granted on an *offerta libera* basis, I leave 500 lire on the plate, sign the visitors' book and leave.

Downstairs in the main part of the dark cathedral, I sit down and rest. I watch an artist repainting the bottom part of one of the great decorated columns and gaze at the splendid array of glass chandeliers suspended from the high ceiling. I leave soon afterwards and slowly make my way back to the hostel via the back streets in a fruitless search for a supermarket that the English chap has been using. However, I do stop at *pizzicagnola*, where a most wonderful smell of fresh cheese wafts from the inside of the shop. I buy a large chunk of cheese for 3,000 lire and leave.

I arrive at the quiet corner by the hostel before six and wait until the warden opens the door. Inside, I wash some clothes and prepare an evening meal of bread, salad,

sardines and tea. I sit with the English lad (who has been to see the Palazzina Marfisa d'Este), a quiet but very pleasant Swiss girl (who shares her grapes with us) and a lively German girl. We dally over our meal, discussing this and that, and as the evening wears on and the English chap drinks more beer, we begin to tell silly jokes. Our English friend's stories are long, dramatic and rather corny.

Afterwards, we all go off to a café to drink some wine. We eventually end up in a very exclusive establishment in front of the castle, now illuminated, where we are served white wine in delicate glasses on silver saucers, with peanuts. Unsurprisingly each of us has to pay 1,500 lire each, but we all enjoy sitting here and chatting. I now realize that conversation and relaxation are exactly what I need, for I have been too busy dashing about from one place to another, intent on seeing everything of interest.

Eventually we leave and amble back to our humble accommodation, arriving by eleven o'clock. We chat a little longer and finally retire to bed. It has been an enjoyable day; despite my intention to relax, my feet are tired from all of today's walking! Nevertheless, it has been worth visiting the palace this morning and the museum this afternoon. Tomorrow I plan to take the train to Ravenna.