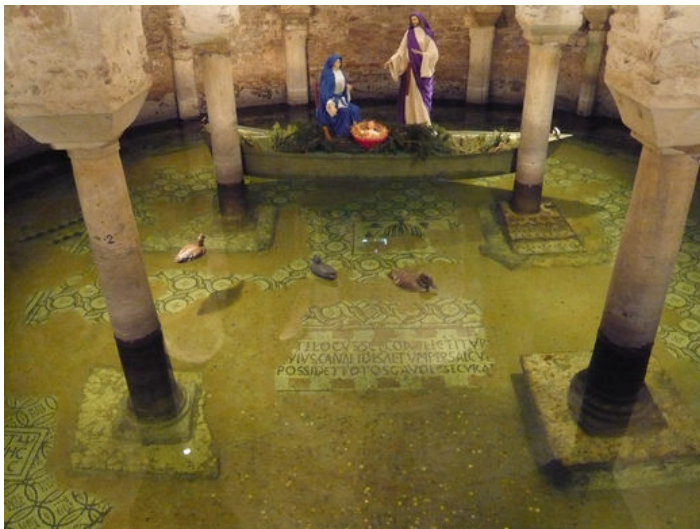


## 14: Ravenna and Ferrara; Mantova, Verona and Cremona

I have intended to catch the 8.01 train to Ravenna this morning, but as I wake at around seven feeling groggy, I stay in bed and get up when it suits me. I eat a leisurely breakfast with the German and Swiss girls and the English chap, whose name I still don't know. Again, he invites me to help myself to his honey. I finally amble off to the station at nine. I am in luck as there is an express train at 9.32, though it arrives ten minutes late. For some reason I have to buy a first-class ticket and so I just pay 4,200 lire for a one-way journey. Yet, when the train arrives, I can find no first-class carriage. Instead, I sit in a deserted no-smoking second-class carriage. Even though there are no stops, the journey takes a good hour.

In the station at Ravenna I study a plan of the town centre and walk towards it, firstly stopping to look at the fine, though rather plain, Basilica of Saint John the Evangelist, built in the fifth century. The church and its Benedictine monastery were renovated in the Gothic style during the fourteenth century, then in 1747 most of the mosaics were removed. The church was heavily bombed during World War II and later restored. Inside, I note the long lines of columns flanking the nave on both sides and also the vaulted wooden roof; along the aisles, sections of crude mosaics are displayed. Although hardly worth seeing because of its poor condition, I am glad to have visited this church. The reason I have come to Ravenna is to set my eyes on its fabulous Byzantine basilicas decorated with elaborate mosaics – a style imported from Byzantium (or Constantinople – now Istanbul in modern Turkey) during the early days of Christianity. As Ravenna is on the east coast, close to the Adriatic Sea, it is no wonder that the Byzantine style was adopted here.



The flooded crypt and cloisters of the Basilica San Francesco, Ravenna

I next find my way to the peaceful Piazza San Francesco and pop into the tourist office, where I collect a brochure and map of the city. Sitting on some steps, I read a little of the brochure and then enter the simple yet pleasant Basilica San Francesco,

where Dante's funeral was held in 1321. Again, this church has been altered during its history, and so it only looks vaguely Byzantine; I notice that there are mosaics in the apse. The crypt, I discover, is unusual in that it is full of water, beneath which can be seen a fine mosaic floor. In order to see this, I have to peep through an archway under the altar. Thanks to the tourists, most of whom are German, the lights stay on as they keep putting coins in the slot. I stay for while to admire the restrained décor and then, having consulted my map, I move off.

Next door is a delightful little courtyard with grass and a well in the centre, surrounded by beautiful cloisters. In the cloisters is an exhibition of drawings by Emilio Greco, a highly-rated Italian sculptor, engraver and medallist born in Catania in 1913, who, among other things, has designed stamps. However, I do not care very much for his round-faced and rather clumsy-looking figures, most of them lightly sketched and heavily shaded with cross-hatching.

Outside again, I stop to admire a lovely portico beside a little garden. The atmosphere here is enchanting, especially in this part of the old town. I detect something special about this region (the Emilia-Romagna province) and especially in this city of wonderful art and such ancient traditions. In this beautiful square, sunlight peeps through the leaves of the trees and, where I am standing in the shade, the morning air is deliciously fresh. Smartly dressed Italians and tourists walk around at a relaxed pace. I peep into the beautiful sepulchre of Dante, with its ornate Baroque decoration dating from the 1780s and its marble relief of the poet carved by Pietro Lombardo. The sepulchre is tiny but quite exquisite.

I now walk along the rather uninteresting and noisy streets to the Classense Library, but stop to buy a can of beer in a grocery shop. The man behind the counter is slowly and carefully weighing a large selection of fruit and vegetables that an old lady has selected, and I have to wait until he and the lady are finished. I notice that the dialect that is spoken here seems to be different from what I am familiar with: the vowels at the ends of words are often dropped.

The Classense Library, housed in the Camaldolese Abbey, is a couple of streets away. It is an elegant, large Baroque building within the complex, which includes fine cloisters and gardens. The Aula Magna or Libreria was built in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and was used after 1803 to store confiscated books during the Napoleonic era. An exhibition is advertised here, but I do not bother to look at it. Instead, I walk on and find the splendid little Baptistery of Neon beside the cathedral. This rather plain octagonal building is the oldest in the city; it was partly erected on the site of the Roman baths and built around AD 500 as part of a basilica, then completed by Bishop Neon in the sixth century. I manage to get in just before it closes at midday, pay just 100 lire and spend enough time inside to admire the very fine mosaics. The colours are remarkably vivid and the whole interior is rich in decoration. The ceiling mosaic depicts John the Baptist baptizing a bearded Jesus in the River Jordan. It is amazing to think that the décor is so old, for it looks so fresh and new.

Explaining that it is time for her to eat, the lady at the door gently drops a hint that it is time for me to leave. I apologise for delaying her and depart. Realizing that I should stop now for lunch, as the cathedral and many other places are now closed, I head off in the direction of the main square. On the way, I pass a couple of not particularly beautiful palaces and look inside a food market, where I inhale a heady whiff of assorted cheeses.

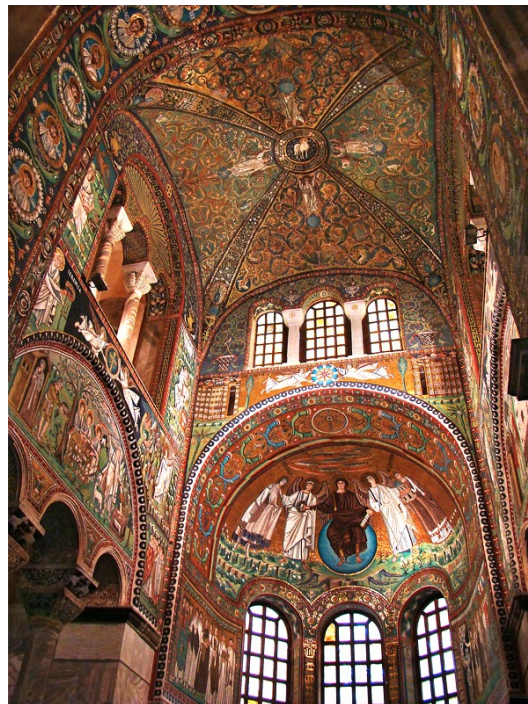
The Piazza del Popolo or main square is wonderful: it contains a fine old town hall with a clock tower, a church, various old buildings, a Venetian palace, a couple of columns and a flock of hungry pigeons. The fact that I am not far from Venice is very

obvious. The sun shines down on the yellow, brown and orange buildings, and people sit at numerous café tables or amble around. Despite the number of people here, it is not noisy, as the square is closed off to most traffic. I sit on the base of one of the



Piazza del Popolo, Ravenna

columns when a space becomes available and apply myself to crackers (given to me by the English chap who said that he didn't want them), cheese and an apple. I then relax and drink in the relaxed, pleasant atmosphere. Finally, after studying my map, I make a move and head off to see more sights.



Basilica di San Vitale, Ravenna (*interior: courtesy of Tango7174*)<sup>1</sup>

I now find my way to the famous sixth-century Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna's most important example of Byzantine art and architecture. It is famous for its mosaics, which are considered to be the best preserved examples outside Constantinople.



Sitting in its cool interior and gazing around at the breathtaking, though rather over-the-top decoration of such a large church, I find it somewhat overpowering and cannot make up my mind whether I really like it or not. Certainly the mosaics are of very high quality and are very well preserved, but nearly every inch of the walls and vaulted ceilings is covered in them. The section in which I am seated is decorated with early mosaics, but the central octagonal cupola is painted in the ornate Baroque style. Apart from this, one can be forgiven for mistaking the basilica for a Greek Orthodox church – the giveaway here is the use of Latin and the Roman alphabet for the inscriptions. Overall, the church has an oriental feel about it. It is full of French and German tourists, who are busy taking photographs of everything. Because of the simplicity of my little Olympus camera, I cannot photograph much indoors.

When I have rested and seen enough here, I wander outside and over towards the exquisite but tiny Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, a building dating from the fifth century, and gaze, fascinated, at the simple but colourful mosaics inside. Maybe the reason why I like this place is because much of the intricate décor is blue: the ceilings, which depict the night sky, contain constellations of glittering stars. The mosaics look fresh and sparkle in the spotlights that, thanks to the tourists' coins, remain lit. This really is not a mausoleum but a cruciform chapel or oratory built between AD 425 and 450 – Galla Placidia in fact was buried in Rome. I stay here for a long time, admiring everything; here are probably the earliest examples of Ravenna's mosaics. Naturally the designs are fairly crude, but they have great charm because of their naivety and they make a welcome change after seeing so much exuberant Baroque art.



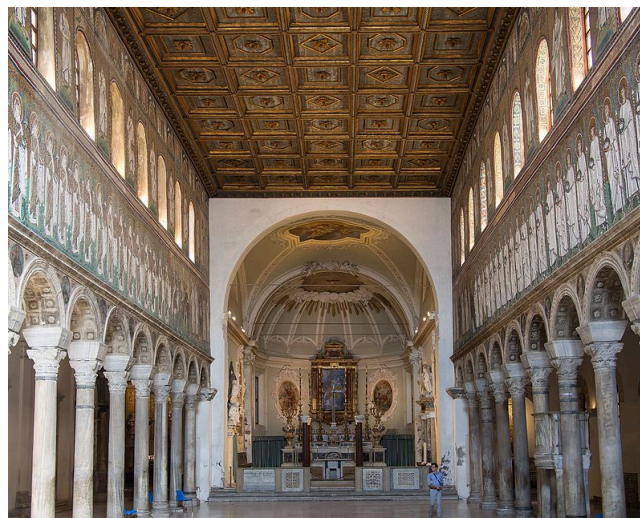
Mosaics in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna (*courtesy Petar Milošević*)

After visiting this wonderful chapel, I walk back through the basilica for a last look and out into a shady courtyard, where I admire the imposing exterior of the building. Then, walking through quiet back streets, I head for the remains of the Brancalone Fortress, built by the Venetians in 1457. I realize that it must have been an impressive structure at one time, but now all one can see are long walls and round towers. Inside is a park, which I find full of mothers watching their children play on swings, see-saws and slides. I use the public loo, leave and make my way to the interesting but very plain Mausoleum of Theodoric, built in AD 520 for Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths, a Roman-era Germanic people. No doubt it is of great historical interest, but there is nothing inside to see, except for a modern staircase leading to the two storeys. I join the tourists who are flocking towards it, but just walk in and out. I am a little annoyed at having had to walk so far to see this. Again, Doctor Johnson's phrase comes to mind.



Arian Baptistery, Ravenna (Petar Milošević)

I return to the town centre and stop to visit the tiny but beautiful Arian Baptistery, erected by Theodoric the Great in around AD 500. All that is to be seen in this rather unremarkable hexagonal building is a wonderful mosaic on the circular ceiling, which depicts the baptism of Christ in the centre and the twelve apostles arranged around it, like the spokes of a wheel. This is certainly worth seeing. Arian Christianity, I discover, is an early sect that dispensed with the concept of the Holy Trinity and concentrated on God the Father and Jesus, the Son of God.



Basilica di Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna (*courtesy of Username.Ruge*)<sup>2</sup>

Farther south, along the Via di Roma, is the Basilica di Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, also erected by Theodoric during his lifetime. This is a really fine basilica containing wonderful sixth-century Byzantine mosaics, though many of the originals were destroyed as they were considered to be too overtly Arian. I stop to admire one that depicts a procession of virgins and martyrs. Rows of saints adorn the walls over the columns that flank the nave; on one side Theodoric's palace is featured. The flat ceiling is made of wood, and rows of windows on either side of the nave fill the



interior with light. I join some rather familiar-looking German tourists to view this fine church, craning my neck to look up at these wonderful works of art that look so fresh and new. By contrast, the side chapels, which are decorated in the Baroque style, are not in such good condition, as parts of the frescoes have been worn away.

Next on my list is the ‘so-called’ Palace of Theodoric, which is behind the basilica and is nothing more than a stone façade. However, the experts are undecided as to what this building really is, for it seems that the location of the real palace, which was rather small, is somewhere behind the façade.

The final church on my list is the Basilica di Santa Maria in Porto, built in the early 1500s, but with a rather fussy baroque façade added in the eighteenth century. I find the interior rather bland.

By 4.30 I have finished my tour of the churches and buildings of Ravenna, missing just the cathedral and the Basilica di Sant’Apollinare in Classe, which Magdalena (the German girl in the hostel) and all the guidebooks recommend as being well worth seeing. As this lies outside the city to the south, and near the sea, I decide to try to catch a bus. I find a bus stop nearby and an elderly lady who is waiting for the number 4, which is going in that direction. Soon the bus arrives and we board it. Having no idea how to purchase a ticket, which cannot be bought on the bus, I take a chance and travel free of charge.



Basilica di Sant’Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna

Soon we are zooming along country roads and at last the distinctive basilica comes into sight. I wonder if it is still open at five o’clock, but it is; coachloads of tourists are arriving and departing. I take a photo of the rather plain façade and walk inside, where I am horrified to discover that the nave is full of scaffolding to facilitate repairs of the wooden roof. Although it is obvious that this basilica, built in the beginning of the sixth century AD, is a fine and very pure example of early Christian basilicas, there is very little to see, save for bands of small mosaics over the columns and a large, impressive mosaic of Saint Apollinare in a rustic setting over the altar. I have to climb over a barrier to see this properly; the colours are vivid and it is in excellent condition.

Satisfied at having seen the place – and of having gone out of my way to see it – I leave and make my way to the bus stop, where I find fowl pecking in the grass. As there is no sign of a bus, I walk to the main road, where one soon appears. Again I travel free of charge and am dropped off at the train station. As a train to Ferrara is about to leave, I quickly buy a second-class ticket for only 2,600 lire and dash to the

platform, only to discover that the train has left five minutes earlier. I now realise that I have misread the time on my watch.

As another train is due shortly, I wander out of the station and return to the first church that I have visited, the Basilica of Saint John the Evangelist, where I sit down and relax. After a short while, a couple of women begin to say the rosary over the loudspeakers and the few women who are in the church mumble the prayers with them. This seems to be a common practice here – I have heard it elsewhere recently.

I finally leave, return to the station and, when the train arrives, I collapse on to a very comfortable seat in what seems to be a first-class carriage that is now labelled second class. As my feet are so tired and I am so exhausted, I put up my feet and fall asleep for most of the journey. It takes longer this time, for it is a *locale* train that stops at every station. When awake, I gaze out of the window at the flat landscape which now looks much nicer in the twilight. By the time we reach Ferrara, before eight, it is dark.

Back in the hostel I eat a simple meal and chat to Magdalena, who tells me that she missed a train to Bologna and has spent the day wandering around Ferrara instead. After I have finished my meal, we wander out and make our way to the *castello* and this time find a much cheaper establishment, where we sit down and drink a glass of red wine. We spend the rest of the evening chatting about Italian art and the many churches to be seen here. Eventually I pay the bill and we leave. We return to the hostel by eleven, where I retire to bed and fall fast asleep.

I have been thinking about going to Florence today but, as I wake up feeling sleepy and lazy, I decide to spend the day doing nothing in particular, for I feel that I am in need of a good rest. By now my legs are aching because of all the recent walking. I eat a leisurely breakfast with Magdalena and another girl from London.

I leave at about nine, do some shopping and walk to the square, where I sit down and begin to write my diary for the last couple of days. This takes me the remainder of the morning to do. Later I eat my standard lunch of bread and cheese with beer, followed by an apple. Pigeons fly down and pinch breadcrumbs from under my feet.

Afterwards, I work out some of my distances, study a little Italian and then take a siesta, lying on the bench.

When I wake up, I return to my diary and bring it right up to date. People come and go; a friendly young dog plays with a couple of beautiful girls and some elderly French tourists sit down beside me. They tell me that they are on holidays here with a tourist group but, as they both walk painfully with sticks, they find the tramping around very tiring. After a long conversation I leave them just before six o'clock and walk to the cathedral square, where I watch the Italians, all of them smartly dressed in the latest fashions, out and about for their evening *passeggiata* or stroll. Teenage boys show off by bumping over the cobblestones on mountain bikes. Pigeons flutter in the air and the cathedral façade glows pink in the light of the setting sun. I stay put, watching until the magic wears off and finally I return to the hostel. I spend the remainder of the evening eating and reading, for the hostel is now quite empty. Again I find myself thinking of Marta, wondering where she may be and if I will have the pleasure of meeting her again in Venice.

A cool though fine morning – ideal for cycling. I rise at about seven, shower, eat breakfast, pay my bill of 22,000 lire (cheap for six nights) and leave at nine on my bike for Mantova (Mantua): the city where art, music and culture were famously

promoted by the Gonzaga family and where opera as we know it was effectively born, thanks to the composer Claudio Monteverdi.

First of all I head back towards Guastalla along the same road that I have used previously; once again I pass the same uninteresting scenery, though this time I am viewing it from the opposite direction. At first the traffic is heavy – lorries go roaring by – but after a while it eases off.

I arrive at the small town of San Giacomo delle Segnate (or *San Iàcom dli Sgnàdi* in the local dialect) by half past twelve, and, as my legs are aching by now, I decide to stop for lunch. I sit at the base of a monument surrounded by pigeon droppings and make short work of bread, sardines, some cucumber and tomatoes. I somehow manage to avoid the muck descending from above, but a few droppings fall dangerously close to the food.

When I am finished, I wash my hands under a tap and set off again, passing a flat landscape of fields, horses, villages and small factories. I stop in San Benedetto Po to admire its fine Polirone Abbey and church, then speed on to Mantova, which I reach by about four o'clock.



Mantova (Mantua)

I immediately start a rapid sightseeing tour of the town, using a little map that has been given to me by a chap in the hostel the previous evening. I firstly visit the Church of Santa Caterina, a large dark Baroque structure rebuilt in 1738, then make my way around the noisy streets to the suburbs and the Palazzo Te, a large but not very imposing building built in the early sixteenth century for a member of the powerful Gonzaga family. It is surrounded by a wide moat. I manage to slip in without paying and wander around some of the rooms that are open. Although they are very fine, the décor is rather heavy and overpowering, though some of the frescoes are very dramatic. Although it is delightfully cool in these great bare rooms, I do not spend very long in the palace.

I then retrace my steps and head for the railway station, passing the Casa Mantegna (Mantegna's House, completed in 1502), the fine early Renaissance Church of San Sebastiano, the Palace of Justice and a few more churches on the way. My overall impression is that the town is not particularly beautiful; like Cremona, it seems to be very noisy and dirty. At the station I note the times of trains to Cremona and Verona, then find my way to the youth hostel through the town centre, which looks somewhat better than where I have been so far. Here I stop to peep into the huge Basilica of



Sant'Andrea, begun in the fifteenth century, where I admire the fine and very rich decoration and listen to somebody practising on the organ. I then stop to look at the twelfth-century Rotonda di San Lorenzo, the oldest church in the city, where there is little to be seen as it is very plain inside. Quickening my step, I just pass the Palazzo di Giustizia (Palace of Justice) with its interesting clock tower, the Palazzo Bonacolsi and the great Palazzo Ducale in the Piazza Sordello, and the cathedral.



Palazzo della Ragione, Mantova

As it is now approaching six o'clock, I cross the river (which is as wide as a lake here) and find the youth hostel by the roadside, overlooking both the river and the town. It is situated in an old castle with a tower. Inside, the warden brings a German girl and me up to the tower, where the dormitory is situated. The hostel is very clean and neat but there are too many rules and regulations for my liking. I decline the evening meal and eat my own food outside at a table. When I finish, I chat with a group of Germans who are interested in Italian architecture. Later, I retire indoors to avoid the mosquitoes and write my diary while the others eat their evening meal.

After a night of vivid dreams, I wake up this morning with a dose of the runs – the first time I've felt sick since I started this mad caper. I take a couple of tablets that I have brought with me and by eight o'clock I feel a little better. Breakfast in this hostel consists of just one tasteless roll with jam and no butter; I drink tea instead of coffee. As I feel well enough by nine o'clock, I decide to take the train for a day trip to Verona.

Knowing that I will miss the 9.10 a.m. train, I take my time about walking to the station, especially as I am still feeling rather weak. En route, I amble through the old quarter and change another £50 in a bank. Afterwards I stop to look at a couple of churches and finally reach the station, where I buy a ticket for just 2,200 lire and catch the 10.55 train. I take the opportunity to rest during the journey and arrive in Verona at about 11.35. I study a map of the city, made famous by Shakespeare's plays *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and also the operas held in the Roman Arena (or amphitheatre), then head for the town centre. This involves walking through wide, modern and very noisy streets.

I make it to a park by the main road, where I collapse on to a bench and decide to eat something as it is midday by now. I nibble some white bread and cheese, followed by a slice of apple, but feel weak and sick again. I lie down on the bench to rest; after

a while I fall asleep and finally wake at around three o'clock, when I feel better and more energetic.

I slowly walk down the main road, go through the old gateway to the Piazza Bra (here we go again: yes, that *is* the name), from where I have a look at the Roman amphitheatre. It is in good condition and some of the original seating still survives. After using the public loo in the square, I follow a group of English tourists down the Via Mazzini, a narrow street lined with shops, to the old quarter. I soon arrive at the Piazza delle Erbe, with its wonderful old and ornate buildings. One of the buildings, a house, has frescoes painted on the upper part of the façade. In the centre is a market, with stalls selling a variety of commodities, such as vegetables, fruit and souvenirs.

From here I wander around the fascinating old back streets and numerous squares, not exactly knowing where I am going as I have no map, but just soaking up the atmosphere. Shakespeare refers to 'fair Verona' in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*; I think that it is not so fair any more, but it is interesting – it is certainly full of churches. This, to me, seems to be the only part of the city worth seeing. It is pleasant just ambling around without a set sightseeing schedule, stumbling across this and that.



Scaliger Tombs, Verona

I stop to look at the Scaliger Tombs – five Gothic funerary monuments – located in a small square outside the little Church of Santa Maria Antica, then several large churches, including one with huge and very elaborately decorated wooden doors. I find that the church interiors here are rather fussy and over-decorated.

Walking down another street, I see another old building in the distance. When I approach it, I discover that it has the balcony supposedly used by Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The ground floor is now a restaurant and up on the balcony I see a man watering some flowers. I then make my way back the way I have come and finally arrive, after some more sight-seeing stops here and there, at the River Adige. Here I look across to the opposite side, where I see buildings and castles. I then retrace my steps to the first square, the Piazza Bra, and after relaxing and taking a look around, I travel by bus back to the train station.



River Adige, Verona

Thus ends my visit to this famous city: not a very thorough or energetic one, but enjoyable enough. I catch the 5.45 p.m. train, snooze during the journey and arrive back in Mantova by about 6.20. I walk slowly and somewhat painfully to the hostel, go up to the dormitory, climb into bed and, after chatting to an English chap, fall asleep at about eight o'clock. I am woken later by some English lads with swanky accents eulogizing London, comparing it to the Italian towns that they have visited and saying how much better it is. I refrain from commenting and soon fall asleep again.

Up at 7.30 this morning, feeling fit and well again. At breakfast time, the warden explains that no bread has arrived and gives us little packets containing sweet pastries. They are a little tastier than the bread rolls, but certainly not filling. However, as I am prepared for something like this, I have already eaten a leftover roll with cheese before this meagre repast.

I leave an hour later and walk across the bridge to the old town centre. My plan today is to revisit Cremona. First of all, I buy some provisions. Then, as I have some time to spare before catching the 10.13 train, I consider visiting the Palazzo Ducale here in Mantova. I arrive at the entrance just as it opens at 9 o'clock, but as it looks rather forbidding inside and as there is a long queue of people waiting to buy tickets for a conducted tour, I decide to skip this as it is obvious that I will not have enough time. Instead, I content myself with walking around the squares within the huge palace structure, which are quite interesting and very peaceful at this hour of the morning. Peering through open windows, the palace looks gaunt and bare.

Afterwards, I buy some cheap tomatoes in the market that I find in the next square and make my way to the train station. I buy a return ticket to Cremona for 3,400 lire and then bump into an American lad from the hostel with two German girls, who are off to Verona for the day. The American confirms my hunch that there is little of interest to see in the Palazzo Ducale. While we chat I notice a train departing from platform 5. Much to my horror I discover that this is my train to Cremona, which should have departed from platform 3, where we are standing! Obviously there has been a change (quite usual here in Italy) and an announcement in rapid, unintelligible Italian over the loudspeakers. I am annoyed by this unwelcome turn of events as I will now have to wait until 11.15 for the next train. My companions leave and I wander down the street in search of a bookshop. I find one and buy a small notebook and a



detailed map of the region between Vicenza and Venice. A lady in the shop almost makes off with one of my bags; this sparks off a conversation with the woman at the counter, who kindly compliments me on my Italian.



Palazzo del Comune, Cremona

Back at the station, I successfully catch the correct train and arrive in familiar Cremona at 12.20. Map in hand, I make my way down to the Palazzo del Comune, but stop in a shady garden in a square for my lunch of bread and cheese. Afterwards, I continue to the Palazzo, built in 1206, which comes as something of a let-down, for the photographs in the brochures make it look so wonderful. Today I find a wooden stage and lots of red plastic chairs placed in the square – obviously for a performance of some type. A large, ugly wooden hoarding blocks the archways of the Palazzo. However, the very tall clock tower and the façade of the cathedral are both very impressive. I take a good look around, and as everything is closed at this hour of the day, amble towards the tourist office for some information. I am told that the Stradivarius museum will be open at three o'clock this afternoon – this is what I really want to see. Unfortunately the exhibition of Stradivarius, Guarnierius and Amati violins at the Palazzo del Comune will be closed this afternoon as it is a Saturday. This is a disappointment – if I had caught the earlier train this morning, I could have seen this.

To fill in the time, I go wandering around the streets, admiring all the fine old palaces and churches. I look through the gateway of the interesting Palazzo Fodri, built in the early 1500s, and find my way to the large Gothic church of Sant'Agostino, which I find open. Inside, a couple of lads are practising the accompaniment of some folk hymns on a guitar and an electric organ. I take a long look at the highly-decorated interior with its paintings by Perugino, born in 1446, and décor by Bonifacio Bembo, born in 1420.

I then leave, walk to the Church of Sant'Agata, beside the Gothic Palazzo Cittanova, and pay it a visit. The original church was built in 1077, then rebuilt in the twelfth century; of this church only the bell tower remains. The interior was again rebuilt in 1496 and the impressive Neoclassical façade added in 1835. Unfortunately nearly all the fifteenth-century frescoes were lost and substituted with nineteenth-century ones.

After visiting this fine church, I pass what used to be Stradivarius's house and an interesting violin workshop, where two men stare out of a window at me, then make my way back towards the Palazzo Affaitati, built in the sixteenth century, where the

Stradivarius Museum is located. A man is opening it when I arrive. He lets me in and asks me to enter my name in a book. That's it – admission is free. This is just as well, as the museum is contained in just one room. Despite the fact that there are no violins by Stradivarius to be seen, the exhibition is interesting. I spend a good hour here, looking at display cases full of the master's drawings, forms, patterns, tools, bridges, pegs and various other parts for violins, violas, cellos, bass viols, viole d'amore, lutes, guitars, theorbos, dancing-masters' fiddles and so on. Some of the paper patterns have been cut out of manuscripts. I find everything quite fascinating, as it is not the sort of thing that one normally sees.

I leave at about four and head for the nearby Palazzo Raimondi, which houses the school of violin making and is open this afternoon, the man in the museum tells me. As I am very interested to visit this school, I am disappointed to discover that the place is locked up. Looking through a window, I can see a couple of unfinished cellos. It is really frustrating to find places closed on the days when I choose to visit them!



Cathedral, Cremona

Annoyed, I return to the Palazzo del Comune, where I find it open, but only for an exhibition of modern paintings. Again I am told that the violin exhibition is closed today. As the nearby baptistery is locked, I pay a visit to the cathedral with its very tall *torrazzo* or bell tower, which is the symbol of the city. The cathedral has an unusual appearance, as it was originally built in Romanesque style, then restored and extended in various later styles. Although the interior houses various important works of art, I find it very dark and over-decorated. Afterwards I walk off in the direction of the fine church of San Sigismondo, but on discovering that it lies two kilometres outside the town (which is not obvious on my map), I turn back and make do with visiting the Basilica of San Michele, a rather plain but interesting Romanesque church.

I then make my way back to the train station through the narrow streets, passing more churches and small squares. I stumble across the delightful little church of Sant'Abbondio, dating from the sixteenth century. It is richly decorated inside and has

several tiny side chapels, which are dark and mysterious. Beside it is a lovely square, surrounded by cloisters, where some young boys are enjoying a boisterous game of football. Nearby, another red-bricked church has a square with cloisters, in which a book sale is being held.

I have quite enjoyed this leisurely visit to Cremona, even though I am laden with plastic shopping bags. It is such a contrast to my recent experience here when I arrived by bicycle in the noisy streets and had trouble finding accommodation. Now that I have seen it, I do not feel inclined to return, even though I have missed a couple of important things.

Back at the station, I catch the 6.34 train to Mantova, fall asleep and wake up just as the train is pulling into the station. I leg it back to the hostel, which takes me longer than expected, and arrive by 8.15 p.m. This evening I join the American chap and the two German girls for the set dinner, and afterwards sit down to write up some of my diary from yesterday, but I do not get very far with this as I am tired. I retire to bed by eleven and fall fast asleep. Tomorrow I plan to cycle to Padova (Padua).

Notes (licences for images):

1. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Emilia\\_Ravenna5\\_tango7174.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Emilia_Ravenna5_tango7174.jpg)
2. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ravenna\\_Basilica\\_of\\_Sant%27Apollinare\\_inside.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ravenna_Basilica_of_Sant%27Apollinare_inside.jpg)