

TRAVEL DIARY

Dear Diary,

My journey in Lombardy starts in Bergamo. I land at the Caravaggio International Airport, then I take a bus to the city centre from where I can already see the magnificent Upper Town.

The Upper Town is a medieval town and the first thing I notice is that it is surrounded by ramparts. They were added to pre-existing fortifications in the sixteenth century, during the Venetian domination and made the town an impregnable fortress. Bergamo would not be the same without its imposing Venetian Walls: over five km long, an inestimable artistic and cultural value which was recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 2017. And listen to this: in 2017 Bergamo won the World Guinness Record for the longest chain of hugs, a human chain which involved 5,730 pairs joined for 10 seconds along the 5 km of the Venetian walls.



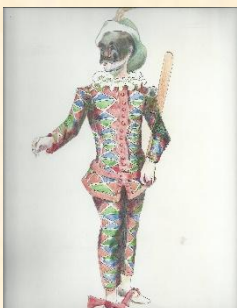
I reach the Venetian Walls going up one of the stairways that from more points connect the Lower and the Upper town. After a long walk along the Venetian walls I decide to finally get started with discovering this amazing medieval town. The most known and frequented part of the Upper Town is Piazza Vecchia, with the Fontana Contarini, the Palace of Reason, the Civic Tower (nicknamed Big Bell). The square often hosts unusual installations that transform the place in a stage for nature and beauty. All around there are lions: the symbol of the Venetian Republic. Beyond the Palace of



Reason I can see the Duomo with the Colleoni Chapel and its funerary monument to the leader Bartolomeo Colleoni, the baptistery and the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore with its beautiful side portals. I then walk along Via Colleoni, which connects Piazza Vecchia to the Citadel Square, the heart of the Upper Town.

While hanging around I happen to bump into quite a number of students: the Upper Town is also the seat of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Bergamo.

While walking to my restaurant I notice two boys all dressed up and dancing in the middle of the street. I stop by and ask what costumes they are wearing: they are disguised as Harlequin and Gioppino. The former is a mask from the Comedy of Art born in Bergamo. His costume is made of colourful patches and he wears a hat,



also colored. The character is irreverent, a prankster and often hungry. Whereas Gioppino is a traditional local mask whose full name is *Giuseppino*. He's a simple farmer with rough ways, poor education but quick-witted. The three big goiters are his main feature, he doesn't consider them as a flaw, but as something to show, like precious jewels. Nowadays the word *Gioppino* has become part of the vocabulary and if someone calls you a "*Gioppino*" it means you are too arrogant or a weasel, so not exactly a compliment.

Finally I say goodbye to the guys and reach my restaurant. I am obviously really hungry after all that walking so the waiter suggests I should try *polenta*. Polenta - he explains - is a typical food from northern Italy, in particular from Bergamo. It is made of cornmeal cooked in slightly salted water. Then it is served on a wooden cutting board. It can be used as a side dish, instead of bread or as a complete meal, if seasoned with certain ingredients. It has always been the bread of peasants and mountaineers and poor people in general. It's amazing to think that a dish which has been considered for years as a food linked to hunger and poverty, today is habitually eaten on celebrations.



As a traveller I learn to appreciate lots of nuances of the place: history, traditions, art, culture and gastronomy that in Bergamo in particular are blended in a harmonious fusion. Looking around I realize how important all these ingredients are for the vitality of the place.



Dear Diary,

My trip continues to Cremona, a city in the heart of the Po Valley, near the banks of the Po river. I get off the train and head towards the city centre. I immediately notice that the color red dominates the local architecture: not only the roofs but also the bricks used for palaces and towers are red.



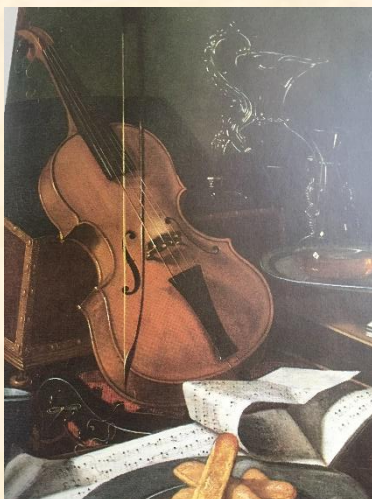
Once in the town square I am struck by the impressive Bell Tower, the world-famed Torrazzo, emblem of the city. Together with the cathedral and the baptistery it represents the centre of the ancient medieval town. A group of students is listening to a guide, so I get closer to eavesdrop and to find out more about the monument: with its 112 mt it is rated the tallest historical Bell Tower in Italy. If you feel like climbing up 502 steps, from its top you can enjoy an amazing view of the town and of the Po. Its most unique feature is the astronomical clock dating from 1583 and still working today.

I start walking through the square and find myself in a street filled with stands. I'm struck by one in particular, dedicated to desserts. Seeing a strange sweet I ask the man behind the stand if he knows anything about it: the sweet is named *torrone*, nougat. It's

made with egg whites, honey and sugar, filled with almonds, peanuts or toasted hazelnuts, often covered by two layers of host. It's a really popular Christmas dessert in Italy. Both its name and origin are linked to the Torrazzo: it seems to have been invented for the marriage of Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan and the chefs made the dessert into the shape of the Torrazzo, from where its Italian name, *torrone*, also comes.



I'm longing for a break to eat nougat and start looking for a free bench. I find one where two guys are sitting and decide to join them. They look friendly, so I ask them for advice about some nice place to visit. Museo del



Violino is their tip. From them I learn that Cremona is the city of music. Antonio Stradivari, the well-known violin maker, was born here. He created instruments that are still considered the finest ever made. People say that there is an indissoluble and ancient link between Cremona and violin making. It is such a unique art that traditional violin craftsmanship in Cremona has been inscribed on the Representative List of the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity since 2012.

My time in Cremona is over, my train leaves soon, it's high time I went back to the railway station.

Dear Diary,

The next stop is Milan. The main city in Lombardy, the beating heart of this region. A key-player both on national and international scale, a mix of culture, history, traditions which help to shape a dynamic economy and a well cohesive and inclusive society.



I get off the train at the Stazione Centrale, and once in Milan, I decide to go and have a look at the Politecnico: after visiting Bergamo University, I now want to see what the largest technical university in Italy is like.

When I get there I see a guy who doesn't seem to be in a hurry, so I approach him and start talking to him. His name is Mattia and he tells me lots of really interesting things both about the Politecnico and his personal experience. Mattia has just started his 4th year. He has already got a degree in environmental engineering and now he is going to specialise in environmental remediation. He has chosen this specialisation

because he thinks that in the future economy will be linked to environmental respect, so there will be more work in this field.

He says that the most difficult part of his experience at the PoliMi was obviously the first year; he was upset by the size of the University that is made up of more than 26 buildings and is attended by about 42.000 students. He chose to go to the Politecnico because of its prestige: it is ranked 5th for design, 10th for architecture and 17th for engineering according to the international university rankings. He suggests I should find an accommodation in the area near the PoliMi in case I decide to attend the university, because in this way you can better enjoy your experience as a student as you don't depend on public transport.



The university, he adds, also offers a lot of courses totally in English that require a B2 level and there is the possibility to take part into the Erasmus Exchange Programs. The courses also offer visits to companies nearby,

real laboratories and meetings with famous experts who often come from abroad. I discover that the PoliMi is also the Italian university with the highest number of foreign students and that 80% of the students graduated at the Politecnico find a job within 3 months and 95% within 6 months. Before saying goodbye he tells me that his dream is to work in Africa, in the environmental remediation field.

Living in Milan gives you the opportunity to experience the cultural vibe of the city. Therefore, after a long chat about the university, Mattia keeps on telling me about an interesting event he attended the night before. It was about poetry, and about Alda Merini, a famous poet from Milan. She was born in 1931 and is an example of a woman really rooted in her city, even in her neighborhood, in her own life: her poems depict really well both contemporary living and its contradictions. Her story is quite unusual and to some extent sad: after publishing several collections of poems, she experienced mental health problems and faced psychiatric care, which deeply affected her late work. Mattia was particularly struck by this poem because it is about us, young people:



*O giovani
 pieni di speranza gelida
 che poi diventerà amore
 sappiate da un poeta
 che l'amore è una spiga d'oro
 che cresce nel vostro pensiero
 esso abita le cime più alte
 e vive nei vostri capelli.
 Amavi il mondo del suono
 a labbra di luce;
 l'amore non si vede
 è un'ode che vibra nel giorno,
 fa sentire dolcissime le notti.
 Giovanetti, scendete lungo i rivi
 del vostro linguaggio
 prendete la prima parola
 portatela alla bocca
 e sappiate che basta un segno
 per far fiorire un vaso.*

I'm going to summarise the content because there is no English translation available, or at least I couldn't find one. Alda Merini says that we, the young generations have a hope which will grow as love, love is essential to life, we will perceive it, although it cannot be seen. It is something that vibrates in the air, that makes the nights sweet. The poem ends saying that just a little gesture is enough to make a vase bloom.

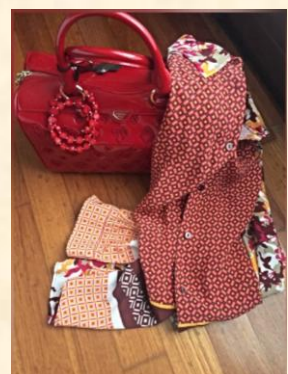
Then I get to the Duomo by subway. If you want to visit Milan, it is a real must-see. With its white marble and incredible number of decorations - spires, pinnacles, 3400 statues (!!)



and 55 stained glass windows - it well deserves the role of symbol of the city and of the region. It is also the most important example of Gothic architecture in Northern Italy. I learn that the history of the Duomo began in 1386 but it took over 500 years to complete it! If you have time, you can even reach the rooftop for a close-up of the spires and the Madonnina and enjoy an awesome view of the whole city. The experience will be more than you had imagined and you will discover that every season adds its own magic to the site.

The Duomo Shop is the perfect place where to buy some souvenirs. Here an entire department is dedicated to gastronomy, the shop assistant tells me that the income is used for the renovation works of the Duomo. One of the most traditional product is the well-famed *Panettone*, another major symbol of Milan. Nobody exactly knows who first invented it and when, its history is based on various legends. It is not only Milan's but also Italy's typical Christmas cake. Its dough is made with water, flour, butter, egg yolk, to which candied fruits, orange and cedar peels and raisins are added. It probably dates back to the Middle Ages, when people used to celebrate Christmas with a bread richer than the one they had every day.

Looking around Duomo Square I am stunned by some people dressed in a particular way; they are coming out from a building: the headquarters of *The National Chamber for Italian Fashion*, an association which promotes and supports the development of fashion worldwide.



Actually, I can't help but notice how fashion is one of the great motors of Lombardy, an inspiration which comes from beauty and art but also from a textile tradition, made of passion and hard work as I saw in the village of Crespi d'Adda with its old industrial buildings, dedicated to create fabrics of value in an atmosphere of serendipity for all the workers or in the most famous streets of Milan: Via della Spiga or Montenapoleone which in March, during the fashion week in Italy, are full of strange but interestingly gorgeous people, full of colours and very particularly dressed.



Italian fashion is a very strong mix of tradition, love for beauty, industrial market and art I can observe in all the shops or open markets I visit both in big cities or in smaller ones, where I find products which have been handmade very carefully and with grand style.

I fall in love with fashion and I wish I were rich to buy all these garments and bags or shoes, but I think a pair of comfortable trainers can be the best choice to go on with my adventure.

07/03/2018

Dear Diary,

Travelling northwards, just 50 km away from Milan, I reach Lake Como. | Even today the lake is often called with its ancient Latin name, Lario.



The two most important cities are Como and Lecco. It is a very popular tourist destination, world-famed for its villas built along the coasts, used as summer retreats for decades and that can now be visited all year round.

The sports culture is strongly valued from water sports to trekking or free climbing. And if you are a bike fanatic, Lake Como with its long cycle paths is the right place for you.

And of course you cannot forget the local food tradition: the fish from the lake represents an essential part of people's diet; often the fish is eaten together with polenta, a traditional dish all over Lombardy. Local products range

from a variety of wines, vegetables, meats, to cheese and olive oil. Here beauty is the real motor of the area, as a matter of fact tourists come here to appreciate landscapes, art, tradition, taste.

And actually when I reach the lake, the awesome view leaves me breathless: stunning gardens all over, luxuriant vegetation and amazing buildings my attention is captured by Villa del Balbianello It reminds me of something Now I got it: it's a scene from the worldwide famous "Star Wars" saga, yes, in episode II – *Attack of the Clones* some scenes were filmed right here on the spectacular terraces overlooking the lake.

Located on a headland in the western part of the lake, it's a complex with buildings, a church and its well-known terraced gardens.

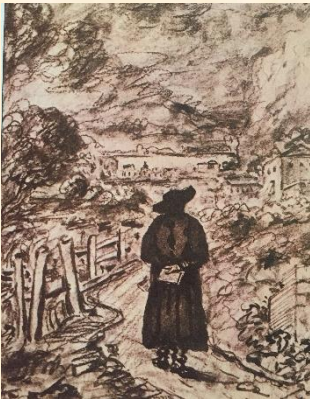


In the past it belonged to the Visconti family and hosted famous intellectuals among which Alessandro Manzoni, whose masterwork "*The Betrothed*", opens with a spectacular photography of the lake and its surroundings:

"That branch of the lake of Como which extends towards the south between two unbroken chains of mountains, which, as they advance and recede, diversify its shores with numerous bays and inlets. Suddenly the lake contracts itself, and takes the course and form of a river, between a promontory on the right, and a wide open shore on the opposite side. The bridge which there joins the two banks seems to render this transformation more sensible to the eye, and marks the point where the lake ends, and the Adda again begins – soon to resume the name of the lake, where the banks receding afresh, allow the water to extend and spread itself in new gulfs and bays." Translation by Archibald Colquhoun, 1959

Today the building belongs to FAI, The National Trust for Italy which has taken care of the place since 1988, when the explorer Guido Monzino, who decorated the villa with keepsakes from his expeditions around the globe, died without successors and donated the villa to the trust.

Leafing through the pages of *The Betrothed* I find out that this is a milestone of the Italian literature, among the most important historical novels in Europe.

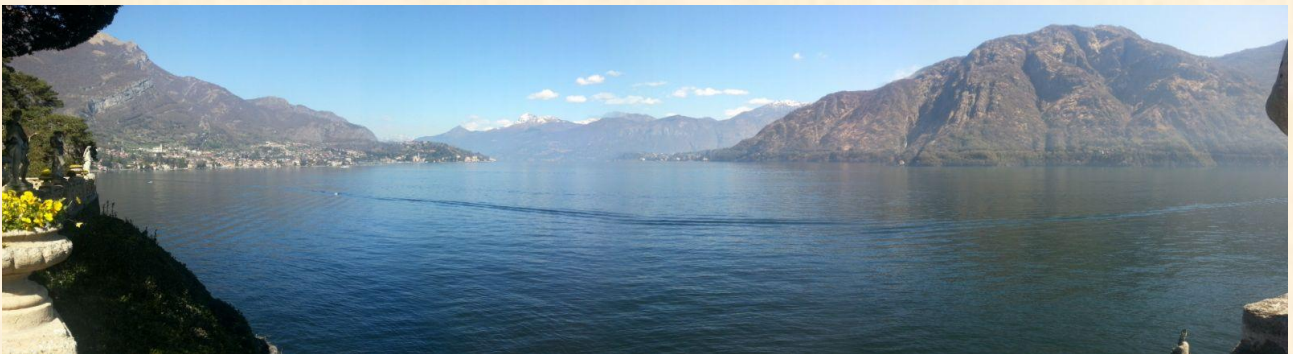


Published in 1827, it is focused on the love of Renzo and Lucia, a couple who is prevented from marrying by a local lord because he wants Lucia for himself.

But the more I read, the more I realize that *The Betrothed* is much more than the story of a troubled love: it provides the reader with a photography of Northern Italy in the 1600s from the political, economic and social point of views.

Set during the time of the Spanish rule, it covertly describes the injustices perpetrated by the Austrian Empire which ruled the area at the time. The dangers faced by the two lovers enable the author to investigate among others the plague, a pandemic which spread all over Europe killing a high number of people.

Alessandro Manzoni also succeeded in creating some unforgettable characters such as the Nun from Monza, Father Cristoforo or the terrible tyrant Don Rodrigo as well as the mysterious 'Unnamed' which are indelibly stamped in the collective imaginary of the nation.



Dear Diary,

After I have visited Como and the villa, I decide to keep on moving and reach Bormio, a small medieval town on a historic route from Venice to Switzerland, in the Province of Sondrio, in the upper Valtellina valley right at the heart of the Stelvio National Park.



I discover it's a popular winter sports resort: it annually hosts the Alpine Ski World Cup! Furthermore Bormio is a tourist attraction due to its thermal baths known as "Bagni Vecchi" and "Bagni Nuovi", they are awesome ... They are real Roman baths already used in ancient times, today a place of

high interest where I can relax in warm waters observing the alpine landscape.



Bormio is also a regular stop on the World Cup Circuit, thanks to "The Pista Stelvio", I find out it's the second-longest downhill course in the world! Bormio is linked to many routes, such as Stelvio, Gavia, Mortirolo, theater of the "Giro d'Italia". They represent a myth for cyclists all over the world who dream of travelling through those paths, some of the most beautiful trails in the world, both easy and difficult, so if you are interested in cycling ... this is the place!

Obviously while cycling or relaxing in the Roman Baths you can take advantage of Bormio's beautiful landscape: forests, rocks, glaciers, parks... it is an immense natural heritage. I also have the chance to visit a couple of artificial lakes, such as Cancano's and San Giorgio's lakes, both built after the Second War World.



After a journey so interesting and exhausting the baths are a good place to relax.

And then, after the regenerating experience of the baths, let's move on: Germany is my next stop.