

Credit: Chuck Cochran



View from the funicular between Citta Alta and Bergamo Bassa

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Alta or Bassa: BERGAMO ENCHANTS

"Bergamo is a city of marvels," said architect Frank Lloyd Wright. "It is amazing; it stuns whoever comes near it."

My husband loves to tell people we flew to Italy for dinner.

Although it wasn't a mad-cap romantic adventure, it had everything to do with love. Chuck and I traveled from Washington, D.C. to dine with my son Harry, a convert to the Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who is serving a mission in northern Italy.

Many people think Mormon missionaries cannot communicate with their families. Quite to the contrary, one of their responsibilities is a weekly e-mail or letter home. The restrictions lie in phone calls: two per year (Mother's Day and Christmas), and visits are dis-



Palazzo Nuovo, Piazza Vecchia

couraged. These and other guidelines keep 50,000 or so young adult Latter-day Saints on track and in dedicated service all over the globe. My non-member status emboldened me to

ask permission for us to visit. I was told that a long dinner would be fine, any day but Sunday. I didn't push for more, uncharacteristically; I want to go over again.

For all the popularity of Italian hill towns, this area at the foothills of the Alps is pretty much ignored by

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Nights in the Eternal City

Four Fabulous Places to Stay

It seems that no matter what the month, except for maybe August, it can be a challenge to find a hotel room in Rome. And even August this year might be a challenge. According to the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) Rome is the second most popular international destination for Americans this summer (number one is London).

While availability may be one hurdle to overcome, in my work as a travel agent, both in visiting numerous properties and getting feedback from travelers, I find that 3-star hotels in Rome are far less consistent than in other Italian cities. This is further complicated by the fact that Romans aren't generally what you would call "service oriented."

To help you in your search for the perfect Eternal City hotel, I've visited a handful of 4-star and 5-star properties, both bargains and truly affordable places, most are brand new. Here's what I found:

Empire Palace Hotel

This design hotel, four blocks from the Via Veneto and within walking distance of the Villa Borghese, was originally constructed in 1870 as a palazzo for a Venetian noble family. Despite the fact that it has over 100 rooms, the hotel has the feel of a boutique property.

Italy in general is known for its sense of style and design, and one can see that very clearly in this hotel, whose design theme is based on three elements: Venice, modern art and the stars of the night sky. All of these come together in the lobby of the hotel where its internal and external areas combine well.

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Bergamo is 29 miles northeast of Milan.

“From a distance it is a mass of rooftops, Gothic, Medieval and Renaissance buildings

Americans. We are justifiably blinded by the heavenly beauty of Tuscany, grandeur of Rome and dazzle of Venice. Bergamo was not on our radar either – until my son became an inhabitant. Situated between Lake Como and Lake Garda, Bergamo is a natural addition to a northern lakes vacation, and a worthy off-the-beaten-track destination in itself.

The city has two parts, and two personalities.

Bergamo Alta

The ancient walled city, Bergamo Alta (high) – referred to as *Città Alta*, has most of the charm. From a distance it is a mass of rooftops, bell towers, domes and spires. Houses spill down between Gothic, Medieval and Renaissance buildings anchored on the craggy slopes. Threading around the mountain are more than three miles of fortification walls, built by the Venetian Republic over five

decades, starting in 1561. We felt lucky to find ourselves in Bergamo, and glad Harry was in such a charming city. He had started out in Ravenna, and loved it as well. Chuck and I wandered around without plans.



Chuck Cochran

Bergamo Alta



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Santa Maria Maggiore

Our first stop was the *Basilicata di Santa Maria Maggiore*. We were ignorant of the 14th century fresco of the Last Supper and many other riches within the Romanesque structure. Inside, we saw an elaborately-carved Baroque confessional, expansive Flemish and Florentine tapestries from the 16th and 17th centuries, and scenes created with inlaid wood on the backs of the presbytery benches.

The church was built around 1157 on the foundation of a 7th century church

Getting There

Although most Americans fly into Milan, Bergamo is also served by nearby *Orio al Serio Airport*, for flights from other Italian and European cities. Bergamo's main motorway to and from Milan is the A4. Trains arrive in Bergamo from Milan and Rome once every hour.

Don't plan on driving in Bergamo Alta. Parking places are rare, car traffic is prohibited on Sundays, limited otherwise, and a nightmare in general.



Italian Government Tourism Board

Colleoni Chapel

that had been built on the site of a Roman temple, typical construction in Italy. Next to it is the *Colleoni Chapel*, the combination Gothic, Florentine and Lombard Renaissance tomb of *Bartolomeo Colleoni*, who fought to keep control of Bergamo for Venice. The chapel's outside walls were designed in a kind of argyle pattern of squares using marble of various colors. Also in the piazza is the bell tower called the *Torre Civica* or the *Campanone* because of its huge bell that still rings (many times) at 10 p.m., announcing the curfew of another era.

We found plenty to occupy us in Città Alta, which is rich in restaurants, colorful markets and interesting shops, none with more appealing merchandise than the handmade knits at *La Bottega di Nonna Betta*. Chuck would argue however that the best item for sale was at a nearby lunch place that displayed twenty or so varieties of pizza in the window.

We resisted singing that old Italian song when we rode the two Bergamo funiculi. In 1887, one of these cable railways made for steep inclines was installed to connect the upper and lower parts of Bergamo. A second funicular was added in 1912, to take people between Città Alta and the tiny settlement of *San Vigilio* further up the

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mountain. We had to see what was up there, and discovered that scenery was the main attraction. In San Vigilio, anyone with a camera can take photos worthy of a fine coffee table book. We stopped and said a prayer in a church with glorious statues in glass vitrines, a few skulls, a gold canopy and an antique violin.



San Vigilio
Chuck Cochran

Città Bassa

Down at the base of the original funicular is the more modern, commercial center, *Bergamo Bassa*, where merchants set up shop in 1620 – and where Harry lives with three other missionaries. Its main promenade, part of a 1920's urban planning project, is called the *Sentierone* (big pathway), a wide avenue lined with enormous horse-chestnut trees, businesses, apartments, shops and cafés. It's not all business: Città Bassa has an 18th century opera house, *Teatro Donizetti*, with five tiers of boxes; churches with masterpieces by Venetian *Lorenzo Lotto* and other artists; and a beautiful tall clock tower. We loved just walking around. The architecture is an interesting mix of *Mussolini-era* buildings, neo-classical, Renaissance and Art Deco.

Even with our poor preparation, we knew about *Accademia Carrara*, one of the great provincial art museums in Italy. The 18,000 piece collection includes works by *Bellini*, *Botticelli*, *Donatello*, *Lotto*, *Raphael*, *Rubens*, *Tintoretto* and *Titian*. Oddly, the names of many paintings are typed on small paper

labels and casually taped on railings below. *Jan Brueghel* was loose!

Not big fans of modern art, we skipped the adjacent *Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea*.

I wanted to locate Harry's address, mainly to see the neighborhood. I feared it would be an inexpensive apartment in a rundown part of town but was relieved to see that he lived in a modern urban apartment complex in a nice, residential neighborhood with a decent-sized grocery store, dry cleaners, cafes and pizzerias.

Knowing he would be out all day, we walked right up to his door. From a buzzer label tagged *Anziani* (meaning 'elders' – this is how Mormons address male members of the church), we figured out he was on the first floor, so we wandered around to the back. On the apartment's low balcony, there were a couple of old bikes and some American sneakers with socks sticking out. Yes, this was the place, for sure.

Where to Shop

La Bottega di Nonna Betta

Via Colleoni, 3/E

Città Alta

(39) 035 244913

Fashionable cashmere and fine wool knits.

Stelio

Portici Sentierone, 46

Città Bassa

(39) 035 226131

Fashionable men's shirts and ties at incredibly low prices.

Chuck wanted to find *Stelio*, a shop Harry recommended. *Stelio* is a steal: silk ties for \$15, pure Italian cotton shirts for \$25. Best of all, they were interesting styles and patterns, some with eye-popping colors. We purchased many ties to bring home. We met the owner, Mr. Stelio, who told us Anziano Clarke was a fine boy, very polite and friendly. He even pulled out a Book of Mormon from under

the cash register, and gave us a discount on our purchases.

At Long Last, Harry

We were meeting Harry and his companion, Elder Bjork, in the *Piazza Vecchia* at 6:00 p.m. sharp. Even after

I realized it would be highly unlikely to run into my son in a city of 117,000, my eyes never stopped scanning for one second while I was in Bergamo. They strained to spot Harry's stride in the crowd, his height, his thick brown hair.

After we'd dropped off our shopping bags and changed into dinner clothes,

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Beauty of old Bergamo a "city of muteness."

Chuck and I had time to kill. We made our way from our hotel, *Il Gourmet*, down a tangle of winding cobblestone streets to the *Caffé della Funicolare*, a Belle Epoque-style bar and restaurant atop the station. We sat outside on the terrace with perfect *espresso*, perfect pastries, and a perfect panoramic view...but it was difficult to relax.



Chuck, Harry and Ann
 We walked to the Piazza Vecchia and waited by the fountain as instructed in Harry's last e-mail. When he approached, time stood still for a mother who had not seen her boy in six months. After many hugs and kisses and not a few tears, we started walking.

Harry chose, at my urging, "the best restaurant in Bergamo." At *Da Mimmo*, in one of the oldest buildings in town, I imagined my mother and grandparents smiling down from Heaven hearing him order and converse in fluent Italian. The meal was delicious and the pace was perfect. Harry said, in the middle of dinner, "Mom, doesn't this feel just like any of our regular family vacation dinners?"



Italian Government Tourism Board

Piazza Vecchia

Excelsior San Marco

Piazza Repubblica, 6
 Città Bassa
 (39) 035 366111
 www.hotelsanmarco.it



This is the place to stay if you need a big, modern, full-service hotel.

Rates:

Average 160€ per night, breakfast included. Special weekend rate for double rooms is 99€ with breakfast.

Il Gourmet

Via S. Vigilio, 1
 Città Alta
 (39) 035 4373004
 www.gourmet-bg.it

Reasonably priced but not that charming a place, clean but dull.

Rates: A double room is 98€ per night, a single is 66€ and a triple is 130€ nightly,



year-round, including breakfast.

Agnello D'Oro

Via Gombito, 22
 Città Alta
 (39) 035 249883
 No Web site.

Funky and inexpensive, in the center of the old city
Rates: This 2-star has rooms for 72€ per night, including breakfast.



It did seem relaxed and familiar, and like enough time, surprisingly. Chuck, a Midwesterner of no discernable ethnic group, fell in love with Italy early in our marriage. We took our blended family of four kids on two Italian vacations: to Venice for Thanksgiving a few years ago, and to Rome just this past spring. Harry was ecstatic to have been assigned to serve his mission in Italy, and has not come down to earth yet.

He began his work in *Ravenna*, and although it was hard for him to leave he has fallen hard for Bergamo, too. In a two-year mission (girls serve 18 months), the guys usually move four to five times.

At midnight, stars were sparkling in the deep purple sky and nothing was left unsaid. Although it was not easy to

say "*ci vediamo*," I was satisfied. Chuck may have had to pick up the pieces after the taxi pulled away, but in that moment I experienced perfect happiness. Goodbye, Saints of Bergamo!

In more than one letter, I had told Harry it didn't matter if he had been assigned to serve in Bergamo or Calcutta or Mongolia. I would go anywhere on earth to put my hand on his cheek, to see his face, to hear his voice...but how sweet that we were blessed with Italy.

As the 19th century French writer Stendhal put it, Bergamo is "the most beautiful place on Earth, the most fascinating which I have ever seen." Amen.

— Ann Cochran

Ann Cochran writes about health, lifestyle and travel, and last wrote for Dream of Italy about Venice, her family's favorite city.

Where to Eat

Caffé della Funicolare

Piazza Mercato Delle Scarpe
 Città Alta
 (39) 035 210091
 Open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.
 Closed Thursday.
 Incredible view, good food, low to moderate prices.

Capri da Nasti

Pizzeria Trattoria
 Via Zambonate, 25
 Città Bassa
 (39) 035 247911
 Open for lunch and dinner.
 Closed Monday.
 Hole in the wall with literally hundreds of types of pizzas.

Ristorante Da Mimmo

Via B. Colleoni, 17
 Città Alta
 (39) 035 218535
 Open for lunch and dinner.
 Closed Tuesday.
 Gourmet dining, warm service, in a 1357 building.

La Marianna

Largo Colle Aperto, 2
 Città Alta
 (39) 035 247997
 Open for lunch and dinner.
 Closed Monday.
 Lovely, fine restaurant with terrace upstairs; gourmet gelateria downstairs.