

City Slicker: Now's the time to harvest Parma's delights

We kick off our new season of guides in this unsung Italian city. Sarah Barrell offers some ideas for new and returning visitors

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ALAMY

Parma is small but perfectly formed and packed with sights

Why visit?

Autumn is a good time for foodies to visit Parma, one of Italy's most quietly elegant and unsung cities. Harvest season sees several food festivals across the region, the heartland of central Italian cuisine, so this is the moment to find prized porcini mushrooms (from the Taro Valley, south of Parma) and young wines in restaurants and delis in and around the city.

It is also the time to celebrate the city's most succulent export: Parma ham. Parma is best known for its eponymous ham and cheese. A less known delicacy is culatello, a silky sweet cured meat made from the leanest backsides of select local pigs in the nearby village of Zibello, a place worth visiting in its own right for the stellar restaurants. (My favourite is La Bucca at Via Ghizzi 6.) The annual Parma Ham Festival (festivaldelprosciuttodiparma.com) takes place in 12 such gastronomic satellite towns; it began on Friday and runs until 19 September.

Parma is relatively small but perfectly formed – easily navigable but densely packed with sights, from Romanesque churches to frescoed medieval cloisters and contemporary art galleries. It is also home to one of the country's most celebrated 19th-century theatres, the grand, neoclassical Teatro Regio, with which Giuseppe Verdi, a native of nearby Busseto, was closely associated, along with Toscanini, the great Italian conductor. Parma's starry opera season runs from December to April but the city holds an annual Verdi festival in October (teatroregioparma.org).

Don't miss...

... **Piazza Duomo.** One of Italy's more dignified Piazza Duomo thanks to the complete absence of pavement cafes, shops and traffic. Its centrepiece, a 12th-century Romanesque cathedral, is the Po Valley's finest, with a heart-stopping fresco of the Assumption by Parma's most celebrated artist, Correggio. The adjacent 13th-century pink marble Battistero (Baptistery) has a vast gallery of frescoes on its dome and enough turrets and arches to give it fairy-tale quality.

... **Diocesan Museum.** Many of the cathedral's treasures can be seen in here, including mosaics from the ancient Paleochristian basilica and local archaeological finds.

... **San Giovanni Evangelista.** This great church dates back to the 10th century but was largely rebuilt in the 1500s. It features work by both Correggio (in its cupola) and Parmigianino (early frescos by the "second" Parmesan painter).

... **Apothecary.** Once part of the San Giovanni monastery, this teeny pharmacy is stocked with 17th-century majolica chemists' jars, medical texts with ancient symbols, old scales with "dram" and "scruple" measures, and waist-high pestle and mortars.

... **Camera di San Paolo.** These former apartments of a 15th-century abbess contain a masterpiece of the late Italian Renaissance, a chamber elaborately decorated with gorgeous frescos that include plump cherubs disporting with soft white dogs against a luscious blue background.

... **Palazzo della Pilotta.** Built to house the ducal court of the Farnese family, this 17th-century palace ended up being used, as it is today, for cultural purposes. At its heart lies the Farnese Theatre, a wooden cathedral-like structure that's dramatic even without a performance on its stage.

What's new...

Governor's Palace

Set in two 13th-century buildings, the former seat of the Capitano del Popolo dominates the central Piazza Garibaldi. After years of restoration works, the palace has opened again as a venue for modern and contemporary art. The public is admitted only when there's an exhibition and the next one will take place in mid-September.

Details: palazzodelgovernatore.it

T Palazzo

Right within view of the pretty pink baptistery, this is clearly the new place to brunch and browse. The new café-gallery has everything from video installations to glossy art books. The Dalla Rosa Prati family has owned this palazzo (also a hotel) for centuries, yet the look could not be more contemporary. The choice of food is limited yet excellent, from little Parma ham panini to delicate pastries and velvet coffee, all sourced from trusted local suppliers. Details: temporarypalazzo.it

Hub Café

Parma's university might be one of the world's oldest but its student community is determinedly forward thinking. This new café-bar-gallery in the left-leaning Oltretorrente district shows the work of young local artists. Backed by the Comune di Parma, with its curved glass walls and posh cocktails, this is no worthy-looking municipal project.

Details: Piazzale Bertozzi.

House of Sound

The Casa del Suono is a new museum featuring a collection of more than 400 music-related items, from phonographs to MP3, including a wide range of vintage radios. The museum's aim is to explore how we listen to and understand music and explains the history and evolution of the tools with which we do it.

Details: museodelsuono.it

River biking

Want to work off some of that ham and cheese? Pedal a bike along the Po river and surrounding Parmense countryside with the new Nolo Bike rental scheme.

Details: nolobikeparma.it

National Giuseppe Verdi Museum

The latest homage to the composer is a half-hour's drive from Parma, in his native town of Busseto. Learn about the composer's operas – all 27 of them – represented chronologically within a theatrical set designed by octogenarian opera director Pier Luigi Pizzi. See original scenographies of the Casa Ricordi publishing house, the rich fabrics of the 19th-century costumes and fashion plates of the performers. Plus, of course, the music.

Details: museogiuseppeverdi.it

Insider's secret: 'When I come to my home town I come to eat'

Tania Magliulo

"I come to Parma, my home town, several times a year and when I come, I eat. Bar/Pasticceria Pagani (Via XX Marzo 4) is my favourite place for breakfast. The cappuccinos are delicious and you can have wonderful little cakes – pasticcini – and savoury nibbles. It's one of the oldest bars in town (it dates from 1859) and has a superb selection of dessert wines. Enoteca Fontana (via Farini 24) also has great wines and fantastic panini and primi piatti. There's a great atmosphere in the evening when the locals all arrive to have their aperitifs and it can get very crowded. Trattoria Corrieri (via del Conservatorio 1) has typical local food cooked to perfection. It's a few doors down from the music college (Conservatorio), so when you walk past you can often hear students singing Italian arias."

How to get there

Parma airport is 5km from the city centre and is served from the UK by Ryanair (ryanair.com). Sarah Barrell stayed as a guest of the Palazzo dalla Rosa Prati (00 39 0521 386429; palazzodallarosapрати.it), an all-suite hotel which offers rooms from €180 (£148) per night.

Further information: turismo.comune.parma.it

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Shenandoah Bed and Breakfast 1 month ago

A comprehensive detail of Parma, Italy. This small city has all for its tourist i.e. art, food, live music, variety of green spaces, parks, shopping and sports. I suggest tourists to visit Castle of Duchy. You find this amazing and see true picture of cultural and artistic beauty of Parma.

Like