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FERRARA, CITY OF THE RENAISSANCE, AND ITS PO DELTA

“Oh adventurous city [...] your glory shall so rise, that you shall have the honour and glory of all of Italy.”

Orlando furioso, Ludovico Ariosto

Perhaps Ariosto was exaggerating – galvanized by his love of his country (he was from Reggio Emilia, but he moved to Ferrara at the age of nine) – when he hoped for such a bright future of glory for Ferrara. In fact, for 15th-century Ferrara such ambitions were not that excessive. At that time, the city of the Este family had achieved the political and cultural role of a great capital and had grown in size and prestige. Built as a linear village in Byzantine times, it flourished in the early Middle Ages. It did not grow around a road axis but, like a seaside town far from the sea, all its houses-warehouses faced the then waterway of the Po di Volano (today's Via delle Volte). Ferrara then expanded north: cathedrals and gigantic fortresses surrounded by moats were erected and, most importantly, new parts of the city were built, conquering the flat plain that, on a clear day, can be admired from the Torre dei Leoni of the Estense Castle. The most glaring expression of the greatness of Ferrara praised by Ariosto are these urban “additions”: the city was expanded by adding new sections to the previous urban fabric, conquering the surrounding land until, with the Addizione Erculea, the city's surface area was doubled. An unprecedented and unparalleled artistic and urban planning laboratory, Ferrara is a paradigm of Renaissance modernity and experimentation. A city that deserved “praise and credit”: the city of the Renaissance.



CULTURAL HERITAGE

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CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: A perfect testimony of a city conceived during the Renaissance, Ferrara is a settlement with an intact ancient heart, showcasing urban planning principles that have left an indelible mark on the future development of cities through the centuries.





“While thou, Ferrara! when no longer dwell / The ducal chiefs within thee, shall fall down, / And crumbling piecemeal view thy heartless halls, / A Poet’s wreath shall be thine only crown...”

Poignant and romantic, Lord Byron’s verses depict Ferrara after the fall of the duchy; a fall that had already taken place at the time of their writing. And perhaps, at that time, they made more sense than they do today, for the city’s “heartless” palaces are anything but “crumbling” ruins. Nor is Ferrara decadent. On the contrary, quietly crossed by bicycles and pedestrians, it is a lively and cheerful city, with vibrant alleys and squares, trattorias and shops. While streets teem with nowadays life, the life of the past continues to emerge from its old palaces. Ferrara is also a city of grand and magnificent interiors, which speak of a hedonistic life lived to the fullest.

From the moment it is mentioned, we know from its Italian name that **1 Palazzo Schifanoia** is not named after a family, but after an intention: that of repelling and banishing boredom. The busy frescoes of the **Cycle of the Months** painted on the walls represent this attitude towards life. Their characters look as if they wanted to jump out of the frescoes to resume the dance of life: a pleasure to the eyes.

The gaze wanders through a labyrinth of microscopic decorations and then goes up to admire the grotesques of

2 Palazzina Marfisa d’Este, where Francesco d’Este’s daughter lived, perpetuating the memory of the duchy, even after the devolution of Ferrara to the Papal State.

Look up again and, with a sigh of wonder, take in the ceiling of the **Treasure Room** of **3 Palazzo Costabili**, a splendid Renaissance residence designed by Biagio Rossetti and home to the **National Archaeological Museum**.

4 Casa Romei, with its crooked courtyard and the remains of frescoes peeping out from the walls, still

seems to echo with the shrieks and laughter from Renaissance times, while the **5 Camerino delle Duchesse**, overlooking the Estense Castle, still exudes a sense of privacy. It was the space reserved for Eleonora and Lucrezia d’Este, daughters of Duke Ercole, who lived for decades virtually locked away at court. A cozy room dedicated to their makeup and hairdressing activities and in which they could stay warm in the winter months, it still holds the secret whispers of the two sisters.



THE MEMORY GARDEN

“The monumental tomb at the cemetery: the only mistake, the only sin (of taste, above all), that Moisè Finzi-Contini could be accused of. Nothing else.”

The Garden of the Finzi-Continis, Giorgio Bassani

In a way, the Jewish Cemetery in Ferrara – a place of recollection, peace, a park of rest and memory – is the garden of the Finzi-Continis of choice, since the garden mentioned in the novel does not really exist. Here lies the monumental family tomb, described in Bassani’s book as a “true horror”. The cemetery is one of the main places of memory of the city’s Jewish community, which suffered so much during the Second World War and beyond. From the access road, a secondary street branches off to the right, leading to the mortuary dedicated to the victims of deportations. Most of the burials date back to the 19th and 20th centuries, but the cemetery has a much older history. The tombstone bearing the earliest date is from 1549; documents certify the existence of the cemetery from 1626, and in the eastern part of the cemetery there are some 18th-century graves that escaped destruction by the Inquisition in 1755. The few graves dating back to the 18th century are located in the eastern part of the cemetery, beyond a large lawn.

In that same area, near the boundary wall, rests also the grave of Giorgio Bassani: a literary pilgrimage destination, designed and created by sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro and architect Piero Sartogo in 2003.



‘THEY HAD SENT HIM TO VENICE ON A DIPLOMATIC MISSION AND ON THE WAY BACK HE HAD FALLEN ILL. ‘THOSE DAMN SWAMPS,’ HE THOUGHT. BUT AT LEAST HIS WORK WAS FINISHED.’

Yes, at least his work was finished. Had it not been the case, we would not be able to read the most important masterpiece of Italian literature: Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*. Dante, a “proud, ambitious, contemptuous”

man, as the title of Paola Cantatore and Alessandro Vincenzi’s book defines him, died of malaria after being bitten by mosquitos in the swamps of the Po Delta, around the Pomposa Abbey, shortly after finishing writing his *Paradise*. This is where his life’s journey ended and where ours will end too, in far less tragic (hopefully) circumstances. As if waking up from a dream, we enjoy the suspended atmosphere between water and sky of **1 Comacchio** and its extraordinary **Trepponti Bridge**, commissioned by Cardinal Pallotta in 1638 as a sign of papal rule and the desire to revamp this town, innervated by a network of

canals and capital of the water district in the province of Ferrara. This small alternative Venice also has its own lagoon, the **2 Valli di Comacchio**, crowded with eels below the surface of the water, and flamingos above it. The vibrant colours in the valleys are just a taste of what can be discovered by hopping on a bicycle and venturing into the landscape of water and earth of the **3 Po Delta**. If you think that the Delta is just a splendid network of river branches snaking through foliage and pine forests, you are mistaken. In addition to this extraordinary environment – most of which lies further north in the province of Rovigo – the Delta area includes primordial forests that are home to the last colonies of Italic deer, also called dune deer.

This is the case of the **4 Great Mesola Wood**, habitat of the large mammal that was probably a favourite prey of the Dukes of Este, who built here the **5 Mesola Castle**, used first as a fortress, then as a hunting lodge. If the presence of native deer in these areas (if you don’t spot them on a guided hike in the forest, you can still visit the dedicated museum in the castle) has amazed you, you will be even more impressed by the **6 Massenzatica Fossil Dunes**: they mark the place where the coastline was in prehistoric times and can be visited on the way to the magnificent **7 Pomposa Abbey**, a Benedictine complex dating back to the 9th century, where many important historical figures stayed, including the poet Dante Alighieri on his way back from Venice to Ravenna.



FERRARA AND THE PO DELTA in books

Reading suggestions to immerse yourself in the city of the Renaissance.

- **Orlando furioso**, Ludovico Ariosto (1516). *Orlando furioso*, an archetypal fictional tale, discusses the war between the Franks and Saracens, Orlando’s mad love for Angelica, and the origin of the House of Este, ruling over Ferrara.
- **Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage**, George Gordon Byron (1812). In Canto IV, Lord Byron describes his travels through Italy and reflects on his own past and experiences, tying them to observations about society and history.
- **Rime e ritmi**, Giosuè Carducci (1899). *Alla città di Ferrara* is the title of one of the poems in the collection *Rime e ritmi*, in which Carducci emphasizes, with courtly language, the urban and architectural value of the “city of the Renaissance”.

• **Elettra**, Gabriele d’Annunzio (1903). The poem appears in the collection *Le città del silenzio*, contained in the second book of the *Laudi*. Hidden in d’Annunzio’s nationalism-laden verses are the monumental features and atmosphere of the city.

• **The Garden of the Finzi-Continis**, Giorgio Bassani (1965). The garden does not exist in reality, but it may be one of the many gardens hiding behind the walls of Ferrara. This is the backdrop of the life of the Finzi-Contini Jewish family and the story of the protagonist, who is in love with Micol, as racial laws and Nazi-Fascist persecution rage.

Children’s books:

• **Anita e Nico. Dal Delta del Po alle foreste casentinesi**, Linda Maggiori (2014). In the first part of this imaginary bicycle journey, the two young protagonists cross the Po Delta, travelling through Veneto and Emilia Romagna, and meet many animal and human characters who will help them in their adventures.

• **Una luce nel buio**, Alessandra Parmiani and Francesco Corli (2018). From the mists of Comacchio, Sante, raised as a fisherman, begins a dreamy journey into the waters of Ferrara, following a light beneath their surface.

• **Dante Alighieri. Superbo, ambizioso, sprezzante**, Paola Cantatore and Alessandro Vincenzi (2021). An entertaining version of Dante’s life that recounts all its highlights with historiographical rigor and, at the same time, with many references to current events for children.

• **Francesco e Marcella alla scoperta delle stagioni nel Delta del Po**, Silvia Valentina Pasini Ferrari (2023). The story of the friendship between Marcella and Francesco, who has recently moved to a small town on the Po Delta and misses his hometown. Marcella, whom he meets at school, knows how to make Francesco’s nostalgia and sadness disappear: together, they embark on an adventure to explore nature and its seasons.