



57

THE GREAT SPA TOWNS OF EUROPE – MONTECATINI TERME

“A balm that comes from underground and opens up to daylight.”

Odi, Giuseppe Parini

This serial site comprises 11 spa towns in seven European countries, which have in common water with special properties; of these, the only Italian one stands out: Montecatini Terme. The Tuscan town is the perfect example of the international culture, which since the 18th century, has outlined a fully-fledged type of holiday linked to spa bathing and treatments, in that warm and dreamlike atmosphere which over the centuries has inspired painters, writers and filmmakers. It is no coincidence that when you go to the spa of Montecatini you are welcomed by the precious verse by Parini, which appears on the neoclassic façade of the Terme Tettuccio. Everything starts off from the intelligent exploitation of this underground “balm”, i.e. the natural resources which, although already known in very ancient times, have been gradually used to form ensembles of architecture and a new type of town built around its springs. Alongside the historical and aesthetic aspects, there is also the medical and therapeutic side, thanks to the recognition of the benefits on the body and the mind of the spring waters from these specific areas. Together with Baden bei Wien (Austria), Spa (Belgium), Františkovy Lázně, Karlovy Vary and Mariánské Lázně (Czechia), Vichy (France), Bad Ems, Baden-Baden, Bad Kissingen (Germany) and Bath (United Kingdom), Montecatini Terme is therefore universally recognised as an oasis of peace and well-being; it also features largely in the history of tourism and spas seen as discovery, enjoyment, relaxation, purification and regeneration.



CULTURAL, SERIAL AND TRANSNATIONAL HERITAGE

UNESCO DOSSIER: 1613
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: FUZHOU, CHINA
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 2021

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The great spas of Europe had an important exchange of innovative ideas which influenced the development of medicine, balneology and recreational activities from about the 18th century to the 1930s. “Taking the waters”, both externally (bathing in them) and internally (drinking and inhaling them), entailed a highly structured and programmed daily routine, and a combination of medical and leisure aspects. These parameters directly influenced the layout of space in the spa towns, as well as the shape and the function of “spa architecture”.





“We ended up catching him at the Hotel Pace in Montecatini.”

What was the hard-up Count Mascetti (played by Ugo Tognazzi) doing in the most luxurious and fashionable hotel in Montecatini? One of the many gags set up by the group of friends from Florence, the heroes of the successful trilogy of *My friends*, features precisely the fashionable spa resort, from which the Count will flee with the stratagem of pretending to be a porter and leaving the hotel at the first light of dawn.

Montecatini is not only luxury and exclusivity: on the contrary, it is a very people-friendly town, nestling in greenery, capable of welcoming everyone and being visited on foot to enjoy its fascinating beauty as much as possible. Its carefully tended shady gardens are perfect for a pleasant stroll, while the long tree-lined avenues lead to the spas which, as well as being centres for wellness, are also architectural masterpieces. Walking through Montecatini therefore means discovering its history step after step, as though in an open-air museum, where every detail reveals an interesting past. Here everything has been modelled around water, according to a project initiated by

the Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo of Lorraine between 1773 and 1783: from then on, Montecatini Terme started to attract travellers from all over Europe, reserving a welcome for them which still distinguishes it today. The **1** **Hot Springs** are the town's green lung and even those who are not interested in spa treatments will be impressed by the monumental and eclectic architecture, with decorations in the Art Nouveau style, of the various buildings. Taking **2** **Viale Verdi**, a wide road that the Grand Duke wanted in 1782, you will find yourself on the “Walk of fame” of Montecatini, here called “Passi di Gloria”, precisely because so many important figures have gone down it. From film stars of

the past to royalty, presidents, artists and sports champions, they have all left their mark in Montecatini, which in turn wanted to pay tribute to these celebrities with small plaques bearing their names and the year of their first visit to the city: from Giuseppe Verdi in 1882 to Audrey Hepburn in 1954 and many others. Along the avenue that connects the Terme Tettuccio to Piazza del Popolo, you first come across the **3** **Padiglione Tamerici**, a fine example of Art Nouveau architecture facing the Teatro Verdi, then the **4** **MO.C.A.**, the Museum of contemporary art in the Palazzo Comunale: works by important artists, including the Catalan surrealist Joan Miró, are on display in its rooms.



TREATMENT FOR OVERINDULGENCE

“Just as Ariadne inebriated by Bacchus, invokes in the dithyramb by Redi all the waters of the world, and none seems clear enough for her obsession, I asked Novello if he knew of waters that were purgative, laxative, digestive, diuretic, emetic and stomatic. Novello, who boasts of recognising the quality and the price of a mineral water from a single sip, cried out: Montecatini!”

Il ghiottone errante, Paolo Monelli

This is how the “wandering glutton”, Paolo Monelli, a journalist, writer and gourmet, ended his food and wine journey through Italy in the 1930s: in the place where “those who have overindulged their stomachs and kidneys; and those who made their intestines the receptacle of every desire and pleasure”. The spa waters of Montecatini are appreciated for the curative properties of the liver and kidneys; in the detailed *Tractatus de balneis* (1419-1420), Ugolino da Montecatini describes their therapeutic qualities and how they can help against various disorders, from kidney stones to stimulating the appetite: “solvit ventrem mirabiliter et renum opilationes aperti, aliquando lapidem solvit et necat et expellit vermes, per accidius excitat appetitum”. There are 11 natural springs in the area of Montecatini Terme. Four of them are used and gush from a stratum at about 60-80 metres underground: the water passes through various geological strata, which enrich it with minerals.



"[...] THE GREAT MODERN TUSCAN STORY, PINOCCHIO, CAME INTO BEING IN COLLODI, WHERE THE VILLA GARZONI STANDS, WITH ITS SPLENDID 18TH CENTURY GARDEN. HERE TUSCAN COARSE LANGUAGE DID NOT GIVE ITSELF UP, BUT BECAME SOFTER IN THE TALE. HERE (AND THE ASSOCIATION IS NOT PLAYFUL) WE HAVE WITH MONTECATINI THE GREATEST OF OUR SPA RESORTS. SPA WATERS

ALMOST ALWAYS GUSH IN AREAS WITH A KIND TEMPERAMENT."

This is how the journalist and writer Guido Piovene describes the Valdinievole in his *Viaggio in Italia*: a "fairy tale-like" valley, if only because adults and children alike can find here the origins of one of the best loved stories of all times, but also for other reasons: Montecatini Terme and the whole surrounding area offer different possibilities for family excursions. People don't go to Montecatini only for the spas since higher up, in the hills, there is the medieval village of **1 Montecatini Alto**, which can be

reached from Montecatini Terme by a typical funicular railway (it does not run in the winter): two small red trains – Gigio and Gigia –, have connected the two villages since 4 June 1898; that day, the composer Giuseppe Verdi also attended the inauguration. The slow journey, the view, the wooden benches and the space for standing on the outside platform of the vehicles will certainly be enjoyed by both adults and children. If you are travelling with children, less than 20 kilometres from Montecatini you reach a place of wonders, namely **2 Pinocchio Park** in Collodi (a hamlet of Pescia), one of the first amusement parks in Europe, inaugurated in 1956. Old-fashioned merry-go-rounds, workshops, performances, artistic installations, an interactive museum and the tallest Pinocchio in the world (16 metres): everything here is dedicated to the adventures of the famous puppet that came out of the pen of Carlo Lorenzini, better known as Collodi. Near the park it is also possible to visit with children the historical and scenographic **3 Garzoni Garden**, one of the loveliest in Tuscany with its spectacular staircases, terraces and fountains, as well as the House of Butterflies, home to hundreds of butterflies from tropical regions, where these delicate insects are larger and more colourful. If you want to take your children to learn about other animals from a long way away, then you can also go to the **4 Pistoia Zoological Garden**, which organise workshops and other activities for children, and which since its foundation has been committed to protecting endangered species. Lastly, about 30 minutes by car from Montecatini, you can also get to know the genius of Leonardo da Vinci. The house where he was born and the Leonardo da Vinci museum are both in **5 Vinci**, with guided itineraries for families and interactive games.



MONTECATINI TERME in books

Reading suggestions to discover the history of the spas and their surrounding areas.

- **Tractatus de balneis**, Ugolino da Montecatini (1419-20). Ugolino da Montecatini, a 15th century doctor, was the first to analyse and celebrate the therapeutic waters of Montecatini, and for this reason is considered the father of hydrology, as well as a fundamental source on the vision of spa waters in the past.
- **Odi**, Giuseppe Parini (1761). A collection of poems which deals with moral and civil subjects but also scientific aspects and civic education raised to a literary level; all in the midst of the Enlightenment. The poems include *La Magistratura*, the ode from

which the line that welcomes everyone who goes to the Terme Tettuccio in Montecatini is taken.

- **Il ghiottone errante**, Paolo Monelli (1935). The journey through the Italy of food and wine by the journalist and passionate gourmet Paolo Monelli, together with the tee-total illustrator Giuseppe Novello, is one of the first of its kind: the tour ends in Montecatini, "to wash ourselves of impurities and get our slim and slender bodies back".
- **Viaggio in Italia**, Guido Piovene (1957). Piovene travelled in Italy for three years to write this unique and highly detailed reportage, considered a classic of Italian travel literature. From the Alps to Sicily, also via Tuscany and Valdinievole, the author's gaze is an invitation to discover the wonders of Italy.

• **Montecatini Terme Patrimonio dell'Umanità**, Angela Bechini, Simona Romani, Sebastiano Nerozzi (2022). A thorough analysis of the reasons and strong points that in 2021 led Montecatini Terme to be recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, together with ten other spa towns in Europe. Moreover this analysis reflects on the unexpressed potential of this area.

• **Morte e rinascita di una città termale: Montecatini 1554/1773**, Vasco Ferretti (2022). From the Grand Duke Cosimo I de' Medici to the Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo of Lorraine, from international fame in the 20th century to UNESCO World Heritage Site: in a historical study on Montecatini, the events and the figures that gave it an international name.