

Dream trip for car lovers: Ferrari, Maserati and more in Modena, Italy

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(Photo: Susan B. Barnes)



Walking through the historic city center of Modena, Italy, cobblestone streets dating back centuries meander away from the main square, lined with boutiques, cafes and gelato shops. Couples walk arm-in-arm, laughing groups of friends and window shoppers stroll underneath the arcades. Noticeably absent from the scene are cars - the rules are that

only those who live within the city center's boundaries are permitted to drive its streets.

What's ironic about the lack of cars in its city center is that Modena lies within Northern Italy's Emilia Romagna region, or better known to car enthusiasts as Motor Valley. It's here, in the midst of vineyards, Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese farms and traditional Balsamic vinegar villas, that some of the biggest names in luxury car brands make their homes, too: Ferrari, Maserati, Lamborghini, Dallara and Pagani, plus Ducati motorcycles. Enthusiasts aren't too surprised, however, considering that these names associated with luxury and speed come from humble, agricultural beginnings.

Case in point: Hombre Farm, which specializes in Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese production yet is just as well-known for its impressive Umberto Panini Collection of vintage cars, mostly Maseratis. It was here on a recent visit that I was surprised to see an antique tractor with the name Lamborghini tacked onto the side. Indeed, Lamborghini made tractors to meet agricultural needs before it veered into luxury automobiles.

The vast collection of vintage vehicles on display at Hombre Farm spans decades of Maserati production, including one of four Maserati A6GCS/53 ever made, and the 1957 Maserati 250F. We joined a local car club perusing the collection, further indication that this collection is not to be missed.

Next stop was a visit to the Maserati facility in Modena; the company moved to the city in 1939. The hour-and-a-half tour became available on a regular basis to the public in September; it was previously an insider's look available exclusively to existing and (serious) prospective Maserati clients.

The Maserati tour, available Monday through Friday, begins in the sleek showroom designed in 2002-2003 by architect, artist and industrial designer Ron Arad. After a quick history of the brand, the tour quickly moves to the assembly line and right to the action. It was on our walk over to the assembly line when we first heard the purr of newly-installed engines and saw firsthand the grace with which well-trained technicians hand-assemble the cars using modern tools and technology. Two Maserati models are made at the facility in Modena, where 4,000 custom-made cars are produced annually.

Not far from the Maserati facility, the Enzo Ferrari Museum's avant-garde building is a terrific setting for the exhibits it houses, and across the plaza is the former workshop of Enzo's father, Alfredo Ferrari, in which the young boy would watch his father tinker, and perhaps mold his interests in mechanics. Today, the Ferrari Museum of Engines is housed on the first floor of former workshop, where memorabilia and Enzo's office are also found.

Back in the museum's contemporary space, the year-long Driving with the Stars exhibit showcases Ferraris enjoyed by Europe's royal families, as well as celebrities who became unofficial ambassadors, like Eric Clapton and hometown boy Luciano Pavarotti. It's also a tribute to Ferrari's 70th anniversary being celebrated this year.

Get up close to - but don't touch! - the magnificent cars through the decades. Enzo Ferrari at one time wanted to be a tenor but was dissuaded by his mother because "he didn't have a good voice," so in his cars, he declared the engine is the music.

For more Ferrari, a shuttle bus tour of the Ferrari Factory is available, as is a visit to the Fiorano track, but visitors must remain on the bus at all times. If you do indeed want to get in the driver's seat of a Ferrari, head back to the museum and settle into one of two semi-pro simulators to virtually experience driving an F1 - you'll feel the surface of the track, and if you hit a rumble strip, you'll feel that, too!

Even more luxurious cars are found in Modena. Make plans in advance to visit the Pagani factory, whose latest model, the Huayra Roadster, is set to fetch about €2.28 million for each of the 100 cars created. In addition to Ferrari, Maserati and Pagani, the Lamborghini Museum in Bologna opens its doors to enthusiasts and dreamers alike are.

It's easy to satiate the need for speed during a visit to Modena, Italy, if even by simply looking at the cars. In the meantime, take a look through the gallery above for a bit of car envy.

If you go: Modena is easily accessible via car or train, between Bologna (about 45 minutes by car, two hours by train) and Milan (about two hours by car, three hours by train).

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