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Seeking Fellini, Ferrari, and the Perfect Parmigiano in Emilia Romagna, Italy

Written by Alexandra Kirkman · February 01, 2016



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A sunset over Tiberius Bridge in Rimini, Italy.

Though often overlooked for more popular regions, Emilia Romagna has a can't-miss collection of culture, cuisine, and personality.

While Italian tourism mainstays like Tuscany's bucolic hills and the Amalfi Coast's glittering hamlets tend to garner more headlines and visitors, the country's comparatively unsung Emilia Romagna region is its most popular leisure destination as measured by average number of nights stayed, attracting nearly nine million tourists each year. Steeped in history and gastronomy and bordered by the Po River to the north and the Apennine Mountains to the south, Emilia Romagna is home to rarefied car-racing brands including Ferrari, Maserati, and Lamborghini, and the birthplace of such exalted Italian sons as Giuseppe Verdi, Luciano Pavarotti, Federico Fellini, and Giorgio Armani.

With nine provinces, the region offers plenty to do, from 10 "art cities" to 15 ski resorts. But where to begin? Here are four can't-miss experiences guaranteed to showcase Emilia Romagna's inimitable culture, flavor, and pantheon of personalities.

A WALK THROUGH FELLINI'S WORLD

The singular spirit of acclaimed Italian director Federico Fellini looms large in the northeastern coastal resort of Rimini, one of Italy's most frequented summer hotspots, founded by the Romans in 268 B.C. While he never filmed there, he called his beloved hometown his source of "all wonders," and recreated some of its most recognizable sites in his prolific oeuvre, though always with his telltale twist.

For a walking tour that pays homage to his formidable legacy, start at Piazza Cavour, a central square of Rimini, whose fountain was the scene of the memorable snowball fight in Fellini's 1973 film, *Amarcord*. Continue on to the trendy cobblestoned neighborhood of Borgo San Giuliano, a former fishermen's village, where colorful murals depict Fellini's cinematic journey via scenes from *La Strada*, *8 ½*, and *La Voce della Luna*. Leaving San Giuliano you'll come upon a square dedicated to the director in Marina Centro, and right next door, his favorite stomping ground: the Grand Hotel Rimini. Its legendary grandeur, derived from its enchanting pink Liberty-style façade, sprawling terraces and exotic gardens, was an enduring source of inspiration for Fellini, who described it as "a fairy tale of wealth, luxury and pomp from the Orient ... on summer evenings, it became Istanbul, Baghdad, Hollywood." Stroll its lushly landscaped private park bearing his name, or dine beachside on just-caught seafood at the aptly monikered La Dolce Vita restaurant.



Everett Collection

Federico Fellini with actor Marcello Mastroianni on set the set of *8 1/2* in 1963.

Avowed Fellini-philes, take note: A new museum dedicated to the director is slated to open this spring in Rimini's famed Cinema Fulgor movie theater, where he saw his first film seated on his father's knee. Designed by Oscar-winning production designer Dante Ferretti, it will exhibit an unprecedented array of his drawings, unpublished works, and other treasures.

A GOURMET GLIMPSE OF MODENA

Even seasoned foodies may be surprised to learn that Emilia Romagna brings more *Denominazione di Origine Protetta* (DOP)— literally “Protected Designation of Origin”— foods to the global table than any other part of Italy. This exclusive certification ensures that they're locally made and packaged by farmers and artisans, using traditional methods often dating back centuries. Italians are *molto serio* about the distinction: by law, only DOP products can use the word “traditional” on their labels. Emilia Romagna's mouth-watering list includes savory delicacies like prosciutto di Parma, aceto balsamico tradizionale di Modena (arguably the most prized balsamic vinegar in the world), and a perennial favorite of cheese-lovers everywhere, parmigiano reggiano.

For a unique taste of the DOP production process and the region itself, visit [Hombre Organic Farm in Modena](#), the only local producer of entirely organic parmigiano on a closed-cycle farm. Translation: everything that goes into the cheese—from the alfalfa, corn, and barley that feeds the farm’s 500 Italian Friesian cows to every ounce of milk—comes from the 750-acre premises. You can take a guided tour to observe Hombre’s artisans crafting the cheese in giant copper cauldrons, where each day 6,000 liters of milk become 12 coveted wheels.



Getty

Emilia Romagna is famous for its parmigiano reggiano.

Speaking of wheels, edible ones aren’t the only kind you’ll find at Hombre: An unassuming outbuilding across from the retail cheese shop happens to house the world’s most complete collection of Maserati cars. The farm is owned by the Panini family, the global leader in published collectables including soccer stickers cherished by virtually every child in Italy. In 1996, when late patriarch Umberto Panini learned the collection was to be broken up and sold separately at auction following Maserati’s sale to Fiat, he purchased the entire lot to ensure it stayed in Modena, where the venerated brand has been headquartered since 1940.

FERRARI'S LATEST FEAT

Maserati is just one storied carmaker to which Emilia Romagna is home. The region's celebrated Motor Valley, encompassing the area from Bologna to Modena and the idyllic enclaves in between, is also the birthplace of Lamborghini, Pagani, and most famously, Ferrari. While the ne plus ultra of racing brands was founded in Modena suburb of Maranello in 1947—where the original Ferrari museum remains—it unveiled its latest showstopper, [Museo Enzo Ferrari Modena](#) (MEF), in 2012. The brainchild of founder Enzo Ferrari's only living son, Piero, the singular museum juxtaposes two wildly disparate but complimentary attractions: the historic workshop where Enzo's father Alfredo first tinkered, and a hyper-futuristic main hall—best described as equal parts sculpture and building—that's an engineering marvel on par with Ferrari's most dazzling creations. Designed by the late visionary Czech architect Jan Kaplický, the gleaming white, pillar-less exhibition space displays up to 21 cars, and its double-curved aluminum roof, measuring 3,300 square meters, is the first large-scale application of the metal of its kind. Fittingly, the roof is painted bright yellow, the official color of both Ferrari and Modena.



Alamy

Museo Enzo Ferrari Modena

Besides a range of Motor Valley-related exhibitions, MEF offers a thrilling F1 simulator that can be upgraded to “professional” mode for serious speed-demons. The museum’s most compelling draw, however, may be a video retrospective of Ferrari’s incomparable history that plays regularly in the main hall. Using 19 multi projectors, it’s narrated solely with music—most of it that of Modena’s own Luciano Pavarotti—for a thoroughly immersive, exhilarating, and unexpectedly emotional experience.

AT HOME WITH PAVAROTTI

Along with high-performance cars and scrumptious fare, Modena may be equally proud of its claim to fame as the hometown of Pavarotti, the legendary tenor. Last May, the [eponymous foundation](#) founded by his widow, Nicoletta Mantovani, opened the Casa Museo Luciano Pavarotti, a house-museum in the city’s lush countryside where the maestro lived from 2005 until his death in 2007. The green-shuttered country villa was built to his exacting specifications; blacksmiths, carvers, and other craftsmen from across Italy contributed to its construction, rich in beamed ceilings, oversized windows, and traditional tile work. The result is a disarmingly modest home that reveals the personal passions of the larger-than-life performer. Overflowing with photos, videos, and other artifacts charting his prolific career (including the requisite bent nails he slipped into his pockets for good luck before every performance), it also holds more telling effects: The colorful and surprisingly artful paintings—signed “Lupa”—to which he devoted himself in the twilight of his life; silver-framed photos of him with his family and fellow opera giants; and his beloved collection of Russian matryoshka dolls. A 1983 caricature of him with Frank Sinatra—a gift from Ol’ Blue Eyes himself, inscribed “Caro Luciano—you are the greatest!”—enjoys pride of place in the simple bedroom where he died, while the basement brims with an array of gifts from adoring fans, including portraits and dolls created in his likeness. The house-museum’s overall effect is strangely moving, offering a window into the soul of a complex artist who loved his homeland as much as his music.