

Clockwise, from top left: Carvings on the cathedral's exterior; The medieval hilltop village of Castelvetro; Modena's tranquil streets; Formula One at the Ferrari factory; Castelvetro's picturesque centre; high quality, peaceful shops await your custom; Barrels of the famous balsamic vinegar; Fresh produce at the market





48 HOURS IN...

Modena

Famous for making some of the world's best cars, Modena is also at the heart of Italy's Food Valley and can boast one of the nation's most beautiful cathedrals. **Sarah Lane** explores

The city of Modena has numerous claims to fame. It's where the legendary Ferrari racing cars are made, it was the hometown of the late and great tenor Luciano Pavarotti and it's also one of the Emilia-Romagna region's great gastronomic cities, producer of balsamic vinegar among other things. But what is the real Modena like? Having lived in nearby Bologna for years I'd made brief forays into the city, but, apart from the cathedral, I knew little about the place. Even my partner, Malaga, a Bologna resident all his life, knew little more than I, so we set out on a trip of discovery. Arriving in the late afternoon we made for the main square, Piazza Grande, to see the cathedral as the sun set. It is one of the most attractive churches in Italy, boasting a number of fascinating medieval features.

TOWERING APPEAL

Building work began on the Romanesque cathedral in 1099 at a time when the city was without a bishop – the pope's choice had not met with local approval – and it was the people of Modena who commissioned, oversaw and paid for the work. Many of the gleaming white stones covering the exterior of the brick structure are ancient Roman tombstones, as was discovered during restoration when inscriptions were found hidden on the inside. The carvings around the doors and other parts of the exterior were mostly done by Wiligelmo, an innovative sculptor of the time, who rendered his figures in a more lifelike fashion than the flat characters created by his Byzantine predecessors. ➤





The 13th-century castle at nearby Formigine, after a period of extensive restoration



The 86m-high Ghirlandina tower with its distinctive lean, a symbol of the city

➤ Although the facade was mostly covered due to ongoing restoration, the four fabulous bas-reliefs showing the story of Genesis could still be seen. Wiligelmo used lead to make the eyes of his figures more expressive and the piercing dark stares coming from the white stone have a surprising effect. Two lions dating from Roman times flank the main doors and another pair of lions, made from pink marble and several centuries more recent, guard the monumental door onto Piazza Grande. On the other side of the church, below the arch linking it to the Ghirlandina tower, you can

The city is most famous for its balsamic vinegar and is also proud of its Lambrusco wine

see carvings of King Arthur and his knights, some of Aesop's fables and an astonishingly clear 12-month calendar complete with the names of the months and the depiction of an agricultural task linked to each.

The pink marble sections of the cathedral were added in the 13th-14th centuries by a family of master masons called the *Maestri Campionesi*, who worked here for five generations. Their work is more Gothic, but fits in exquisitely with the simple Romanesque style of the original building. One unused slab of pink marble can still be seen in the corner

of the square where it became used as a platform for orators. The *Maestri Campionesi* were also responsible for building the archway connecting the cathedral to the adjacent Ghirlandina tower in an attempt to stabilise the latter. The tower, always used for civic purposes and nothing to do with the church, has a definite lean, and when it was built work was halted for a couple of hundred years before the final section – leaning the other way to counterbalance it – was added.

Piazza Grande has always been the hub of city life and until 1931 when the covered market was built it was

also Modena's marketplace. The back wall of the cathedral bears a series of standard measures to put a stop to squabbles in the market, and there are even templates for the correct size and shape of roof tiles and bricks to be used for building work.

GOURMET DELIGHTS

We reluctantly left the tranquil, protective atmosphere of the square, trying not to look too closely at the alluring bars where tempting *aperitivo* snacks were being set out. We'd been invited to the annual Grand Gourmet event in nearby Carpi that evening ➤

WHAT TO SEE

IL DUOMO 1

Modena's magnificent Romanesque cathedral dates back to 1099. Looking at the details of the exterior is like walking through a medieval history, including sculpted anecdotes featuring King Arthur. Don't miss the outstanding biblical bas-reliefs on the façade. There's plenty of interest inside too.

PIAZZA GRANDE 2

Entirely traffic free, Modena's main square is the hub of city life. The cobbled square together with the cathedral and the Ghirlandina tower are celebrating ten years as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Climb the tower for unbeatable views, or sit at one of the pavement cafés.

A SHOPPER'S DELIGHT 3

Top quality shops of all kinds jostle for attention around the narrow streets of the centre. For fresh local produce head for the market, and for more sophisticated gastronomic goods check out Salumeria Giusti, founded in 1605, in Via Farini, or Telesforo Fini in Corso Canal Chiaro.

THE D'ESTE LEGACY 4

Although the d'Este family's palace is now home to Italy's military academy, it does occasionally open its doors to the public to show off some of the sumptuous interior. The dukes' extensive art collections are in Palazzo dei Musei.

CASTLE SPOTTING 5

Visit some of the magnificent castles in the area around Modena. Vignola (the town famous for its cherries) has one of the most impressive castles, with fabulous frescoes inside and a delightful walkway around the ramparts. Formigine's 13th-century castle has recently opened its doors after lengthy restoration work.

CLASSY CARS AND PARMESAN 6

Visit Maranello to see fabulous cars on display at the Ferrari museum (www.galleria.ferrari.com). Tours of the factory are strictly for Ferrari owners only, but the nearby Maserati factory does allow visitors. Another interesting collection of cars is at the organic Hombre parmesan cheese farm where you can also watch the cheese-making process (www.hombre.it).

EXPLORE THE AREA 7

There are some fascinating towns and villages around Modena. The picturesque medieval hilltop Castelvetro is famous for its Lambrusco, Carpi is an attractive small town with a huge main square, Sassuolo has an impressive Ducal Palace with some colourful *trompe l'oeil* decorations and frescoes and Nonantola has a splendid eighth-century Benedictine monastery.

DON'T MISS

BLACK GOLD

Balsamic vinegar making is a widespread, centuries-old family tradition. Nowadays most families don't sell what they make in their lofts, but those that do undergo rigorous checks. See how it's produced at the Acetaia di Giorgio (www.acetaiadigiorgio.it) or the museum in nearby Spilamberto (www.museodelbalsamicotradizionale.org).

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

L'ERBA DEL RE 8

Via Castel Maraldo 45
 ☎ +39 059 218188
 www.lerbadelre.it
 Excellent food, a great wine list, fabulous surroundings and prices that aren't over the top all add up to a memorable dining experience. Luca Marchini, the chef, does prepare a selection of local food for traditionalists, but he also lets his creative side experiment. There's a fantastic range of exciting and unusual dishes.
Meal for two about €70

CAFFÈ CONCERTO 9

Piazza Grande
 ☎ +39 059 222232
 www.caffeconcertomodena.it
 This stylish bar-restaurant is on Modena's main square. Come for breakfast, at *aperitivo* time or for a romantic dinner in the atmospheric vaulted rooms. The lunchtime buffet is one of the best things here, though. There's a fabulous choice of delicious, freshly prepared dishes, including lots of tempting desserts.
Buffet lunch for two about €30

LA FRANCESCANA 10

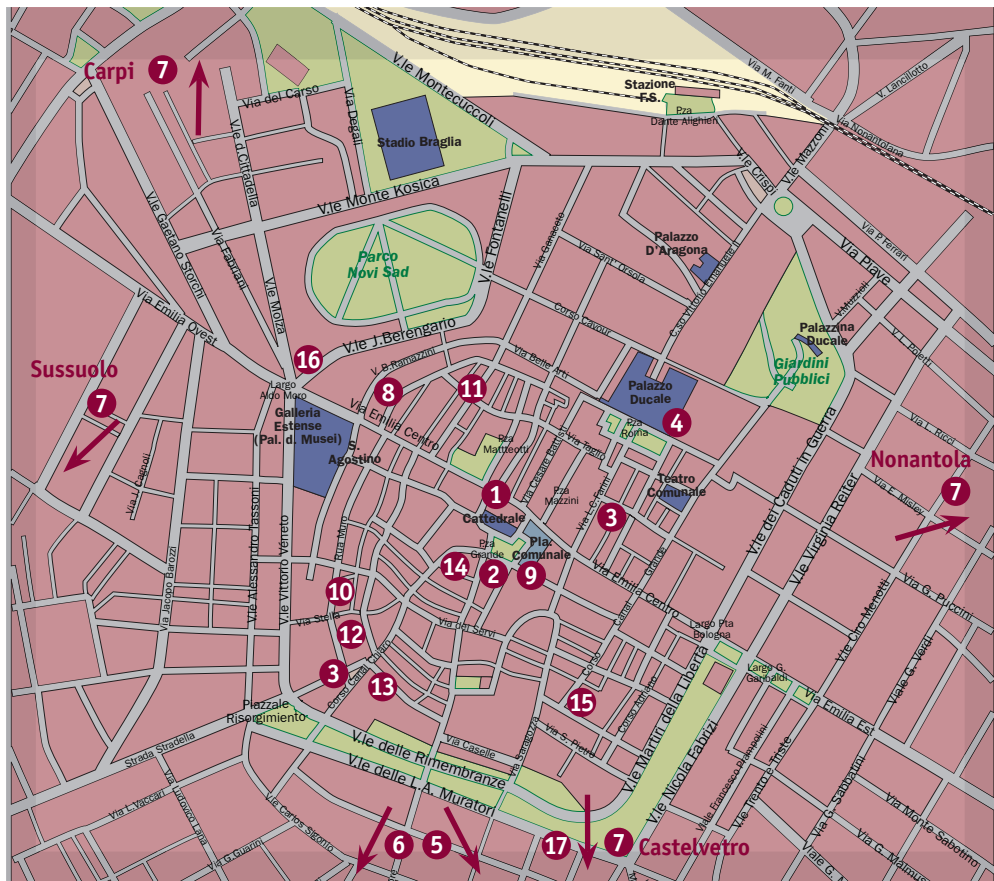
Via Stella 22
 ☎ +39 059 210118
 Modena's top restaurant oozes sophistication. The décor in the intimate dining rooms is smooth and subtle, with comfortable black leather chairs and frosted windows designed for the privacy of the clients – many celebrities come here. The menu includes most of Modena's traditional favourites, plus all sorts of other wonderful creations.
Meal for two about €180

TRATTORIA ERMES 11

Via Ganaceto 89-91
 ☎ +39 059 238065
 This cosy, rustic trattoria is a real find. Ermes himself is a colourful local character and he will tell you what tasty fare is available. There isn't a written menu and he doesn't put up with requests that go against his firmly rooted ideas on the traditional local cuisine.
Meal for two about €35

L'INCONTRO 12

Largo San Giacomo 32
 ☎ +39 059 218536
 If you fancy some well-prepared, genuine local cuisine come to this warm and welcoming traditional trattoria in the centre of town. If the weather allows, sit at one of the terrace tables overlooking the picturesque cobbled square and watch the world go by. Excellent pasta dishes and delicious desserts.
Meal for two about €70



DON'T MISS

TASTY TREATS
 Modena is famous for its melting *gnocco fritto* – a kind of fried bread – and similar but baked *tigella*. Try both with local cold meats and cheeses, including parmigiano reggiano – Modena is within the official parmesan making territory. Wash down with some local Lambrusco and round off with a walnut liqueur.

➤ and still had to get ready. Among its sights, the attractive small town of Carpi boasts a square that at around 15,000sqm is the third largest in Italy. A huge marquee was set up to seat over 500 guests who would enjoy some excellent cuisine prepared by one of Italy's top chefs. The evening was wonderful and the food exquisite and what we saw of Carpi certainly whetted our appetites. We vowed to return during the day to explore more.

Next morning, we spent time wandering between ochre and terra cotta-coloured buildings – nowadays, residents of central Modena are obliged to stick to the traditional shades – along cobbled streets and through pleasing piazzas. The ancient Roman road, Via Emilia, acts as a dividing line through the centre, with straight streets to the north and a more higgledy-piggledy setup south.

Situated on such an important artery (fundamental in ancient times) Modena thrived under the Romans, but then underwent a long period of relative anonymity until as late as 1598 when the ruling d'Este dukes made it their centre of power. The d'Este family's former base of Ferrara had been reclaimed by the Papal states, but the dukes, who were to stay for 200 years, saw potential in Modena and set about revamping the town.

Their new home was the imposing Palazzo Ducale, which they built over the existing castle. It's a vast palace,

but, nowadays, as it hosts Italy's prestigious military academy, it's hard to visit. Booking is essential for days when the public is allowed in. We simply admired the splendid façade, which revealed a curious solution to a lack of funds. The right half is decorated with sculpted decorations, those on the left are merely painted. Behind the palace is a park open to the public – a great place to relax.

THE BALSAMIC TRADITION

One of the best things about Modena in general is the fantastically relaxed atmosphere that pervades the centre. It's full of shops selling quality goods – a sign of Modena's position as one of Italy's wealthiest cities – and frequently busy with shoppers. But what is happily lacking is that frenetic air of rushing that you find in so many cities nowadays. We took a long lunch at a terrace table in one of the city's most attractive squares, Largo San Giacomo. Along with the rest of the Emilia-Romagna region, Modena is proud of its fresh filled pasta, such as tortellini. The city is most famous for its tangy balsamic vinegar and is also proud of its Lambrusco wine, which is nothing like the varieties you find on supermarket shelves in the UK. Apparently it is a wine that hates to travel – enjoy it at its best in Modena.

After lunch, still with the taste of vinegar on our lips, we set out to see how the glossy brown liquid is made.





Delicious snacks and aperitivos will tempt you at the many bars that line the streets



A contented cow at the organic Hombre farm, where parmesan cheese, and others, are produced



Row upon row of the organically produced cheeses from Hombre farm, just outside Modena

L'Acetaia di Giorgio is on the outskirts of town in a house that has belonged to the family since 1850. Giorgio, Giovanna and daughter Carlotta live here and make balsamic vinegar in their loft according to local tradition. Giorgio, a tall former volleyball player who now works as a coach, showed us the rows of wooden barrels where the vinegar is made. At least five barrels are needed to make a set and each year a little of the final product is taken from the smallest barrel, which is topped up from the preceding one and so on along the line, as far as the first

Families set up a new group of barrels on the birth of a baby, particularly a daughter

barrel into which some of the year's grape must is added.

Seeing the curious rows of barrels – Giorgio has about 500 grouped into about 50 sets – and finding out more about the intricate processes and customs surrounding the tradition is fascinating. Families still set up a new group of barrels on the birth of a baby, particularly a daughter, and she takes it with her as a dowry when she weds. Carlotta's set of balsamic vinegar barrels is dated 1986, the year she was born, but wedding bells are not imminent, her father assured us.

After saying goodbye to Giorgio and his multi-lingual wife, who was

showing a group of French speakers around the balsamic vinegar loft, we headed further out of Modena towards Maranello and the Galleria Ferrari.

Although I'm not a motor freak, and Malaga is far more passionate about the two-wheeled variety, neither of us could deny the seductive pull of the legendary red cars, currently celebrating their 60th anniversary.

ADDICTED TO SPEED

Approaching Maranello, the number of prestigious vehicles on the roads – such as Ferraris, but others too

– multiplied and the gallery's car park was like a foretaste of the displays inside. The ground floor of the futuristic building is dedicated to Formula One, with many trophies and cars, including Michael Schumacher's, a reconstruction of a pit lane and a reproduction of Enzo Ferrari's simply furnished study. The city of Modena has recently acquired the great man's former home in Modena, which will eventually be opened to the public.

After admiring more of the Ferrari world in the extensive exhibition, we got back into our own humble vehicle to return to Modena and explore some of the city's wine bars. Partly ➤

DON'T MISS

ON YOUR BIKE! Take advantage of the free bike scheme and pedal around town. You pay a deposit at the tourist information office and get a key to use at any one of 27 pick-up points. And if you really want to get active, why not head for the beautiful Apennines near Modena and go skiing or walking in the stunning mountain scenery.

WHERE TO STAY

HOTEL FINI SAN FRANCESCO 15

Rua Frati Minori

☎ +39 059 2057511

www.hotelrealfini.it

Fantastic attention is paid to detail here at Modena's only 5-star hotel, such as top name cosmetics and tv screens in the bathrooms, so you can watch while you wash. Services include a gym and wellness suite and the hotel is attached to the classy Fini restaurant and the famous Fini delicatessen, which dates from 1912.

Double room from €330

HOTEL CERVETTA 5 14

Via Cervetta 5

☎ +39 059 238447

www.hotelcervetta5.com

Comfortable and stylish, this smart modern hotel is right in the centre of town, just round the corner from Piazza Grande. There is no lift, but the rooms – decorated in soothing shades of white – are welcoming, as are the staff. There's a great collection of cacti around the family-run hotel.

Double room from €95

HOTEL CANALGRANDE 15

Corso Canalgrande 6

☎ +39 059 217160

www.canalgrandehotel.it

The elaborate decorations in this centrally located hotel date from the 17th and 18th centuries when the building was lived in by nobles, although it had originally been built as a convent. There are some excellent frescoes and life-size portraits and a general air of old-style glamour. Enjoy the relaxing large terrace garden.

Double room from €176

HOTEL ESTENSE 16

Viale Berengario 11

☎ +39 059 219057

www.hotelestense.com

This pleasant and comfortable hotel is set in a handy location a stroll from the main sights of the centre and adjacent to the Novi Sad park. The rooms are decorated in warm colours, which echo the attractive terra-cotta hues of the town's buildings. The breakfast buffet is excellent.

Double room from €130

LOCANDA DEL FEUDO 17

Via Trasversale 2, Castelvetro

☎ +39 059 708711

www.locandadelfeudo.it

This gorgeous small hotel is set in the picturesque hilltop village of Castelvetro. The rooms, all suites, are cosy and decorated in a traditional, smart, rustic style. The hotel, which also has an excellent restaurant, is run by dynamic young brothers, Andrea and Roberto Rossi.

Double room from €100



Part of the imposing castle at nearby Vignola, some of which dates back to the ninth century



The vast Palazzo Ducale, now home to the military academy, once residence to the ruling D'Este family

GETTING THERE

► BY PLANE

Modena's nearest airport is at Bologna, 39km away. British Airways flies here from Gatwick and there's a handy direct bus service that takes about 50 minutes from the airport to Modena. For information see www.atcm.mo.it/aerobus.asp. An alternative is to fly to Parma, about 60km away. Ryanair run flights here from Stansted.

► BY TRAIN

Modena is well served by fast and frequent trains from all parts of the country. The journey from Milan takes about 1h40, from Rome it's at least 3h, it's 20 minutes from Bologna and about 1h30 from Florence. The railway station is handily situated, not far from the centre of town.

► BY CAR

Italy's main north-south motorway, the A1, goes past Modena and on to Milan in one direction, Rome in the other. There are two exits at Modena – north and south – both of which are fine for reaching the town centre. The A22 motorway runs from Modena to the Brenner Pass, going past Mantua, Verona, Trento and Bolzano en route.

DON'T MISS

CELEBRATE

Relive the Renaissance and the golden years of the Estense dukes' rule of the city during the yearly week-long festival held at the end of June. Celebrations for patron saint San Geminiano, on 31 January include a huge market. Another great event is the International Philosophy Festival in September (www.festivalfilosofia.it).

► thanks to its student population – the city's prestigious university was founded in 1175 – Modena has a good share of lively bars and restaurants.

LOCAL ATTRACTIONS

We had a drink at Fusorari in Piazzale Torti, a new place aiming to be a meeting point for serious travellers. You can also eat here. Each weekend a chef from a different nation or region of Italy takes up residence for three evenings and serves a menu based on their own traditions. It's a stimulating place with frequent events.

In springtime people come from miles around to enjoy the sight of the cherry trees in bloom

On our last morning in Modena we returned to the central Piazza Grande, to climb the Ghirlandina tower. You can't go up the whole 87m, but there are fabulous views from the tower. On one of the lower floors of the tower look out for the curious suspended bucket. This is a copy of the unlikely trophy snatched by Modena from arch rivals Bologna in 1325 to symbolise their having finally gained the upper hand. You can see the original bucket – *la secchia* – opposite the tower in the Palazzo Comunale, where it's kept in an alarmed display cabinet. Such is the significance of the bucket in local

folklore, Modena-born poet Alessandro Tassoni wrote an epic poem on the saga 300 years after the event!

Leaving Modena to return to our home in its historic rival city, Bologna, we stopped off at Vignola to visit one of the many castles to be found throughout the province of Modena. The small town of Vignola is dominated by an impressive fortification, parts of which are said to date from the ninth century.

The castle used to be frescoed both inside and out, and although little remains of the external paintings, the

interior is a stunning succession of rooms decorated in vibrant colours. Another great feature is the rampart walkways with fabulous views over the surrounding area, which is particularly famous for its cherry farming.

In springtime people come from miles around to enjoy the sight of the cherry trees in bloom, and the cherries themselves are also exceptionally tasty – a delicious end to a feast that is 48 hours in and around Modena. ■

COMING SOON Next month we take you to the very heart of Italy and Assisi, in Umbria, where you will find the famous Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi.