



UNIVERSALLY CONSIDERED TO BE THE WORLD CAPITAL OF VIOLIN-MAKING

CREMONA

A CITY OF ART AND MUSIC

The cradle of the Middle Ages and heart of the Pianura Padana, Cremona preserves important historical treasures, immersed in a green and extensive countryside, a corner formed by land and water where the rivers Po, Oglio, Serio and Adda flow. Today Cremona is characterized by a prevalently agricultural economy, linked to well-known foodstuff industries, but is also rich in craft activities and mostly renowned for the art of making stringed instruments and especially violins. It is home to mustard and nougat, delights famous even beyond the country's borders.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Located at the centre of the Pianura Padana, along the left bank of the river Po, Cremona lies on a natural terrace which arose during the last glaciation, over the alluvial plain at 47 m above sea level. According to legend it was founded by Hercules; actually it was founded by the Romans in 218 B.C., perhaps there had even been Celtic settlements in pre-Roman times, and in the 3rd century B.C. it became a "castrum romano" on the river Po and an important bastion against

the Gauls. Thanks to its strategic location on the river and along the Via Postumia, the town flourished both from a commercial and cultural point of view, mainly during the whole of the Republic period. After a period of stagnation under the Byzantines, Lombards and Carolingians, Cremona increased its power during the rule of the Bishops-Count, in the late Middle Ages. The clash between the gonfalonier Giovanni Baldesio, called Zanen, and the Emperor Henry IV's son, is legendary: he was unhorsed by the Cremonese knight and had to renounce the valuable annual tribute he was used to receiving from the city, consisting of a golden ball of 5 kilos. A free Commune in 1098, Cremona received the donation of Crema and its territory and became one of the most powerful towns of the Pianura Padana.

However the conflicts amongst Guelph and Ghibellin towns and lords involved Cremona, not always favourably, in various changes of rule. In 1406, under the Signoria of Visconti, it was absorbed into the Ducato di Milano, following its changes up to the Unification of Italy and alternating periods of economical, cultural, religious and urban development to periods of decline.

THE HISTORICAL CENTRE

Today the town centre lies around the Piazza del Comune, heart of the social life and one of the most attractive and well preserved urban spaces in our peninsula; it is also the most representative image of the town. In the Middle Ages as well, the town life took place around the major square that was both the political and religious centre. Piazza del Comune is surrounded by the most important buildings, remarkable Romanesque-Medieval monuments, that include the Torrazzo, the Duomo, the Battistero, the Palazzo del Comune and the Loggia dei Mili, all of them dating back, at least in their main structure, to the end of the 12th century.

The Torrazzo, a bell tower about 111 m high, dominates the urban scenery and is the symbol of Cremona. It has a square layout and is surmounted by an unusual octagonal garland with a typical Gothic spire. If you climb the 487 steps up to the top, you will be rewarded by a terrific view that, in the clearest days, embraces both the Apennines and the profiles of the Alps. On its façade you can admire a big astronomic clock with its original mechanism dating back to 1500.

Amongst the most significant religious buildings in Northern Italy, the Duomo is an excellent example of Lombard Romanesque style; some Gothic, Renaissance, Mannerism and Baroque elements have been gradually added since.

The Duomo is like an open-air museum of sculptural art; its marble façade, a work by the masters of Campione, boasts two tiers of columns with open galleries, a rose window and the prothyrum with some bas-reliefs by the Antelami school, surmounted by an aedicule. The loggia known as "Bertazzola" that extends from the Torrazzo along the whole façade of the Duomo, was then built at the end of the 15th century. The Latin cross interior with a nave and two side aisles has monumental dimensions and preserves rich decorations: worthy of admiration is the large frescoed fascia visible between the arches and the women's galleries, a big pictorial cycle realized in the first half of 1500. The side chapels should be noted as well; among them we would like to mention the one dedicated to the Madonna del Popolo with paintings by Campi and Il Malosso. Built at the end of the 13th century, the Loggia dei Mili preserves the emblem of Cremona, a "double simulacrum" of Hercules, considered to be the mythic founder of the city.

To the south of the square you can see the Battistero, a Romanesque structure octagonal in shape, with a bronze statue of the Archangel Gabriel standing out on the top of the building.

The Palazzo del Comune, which gave the square its name, is a building of the 13th century, whose portico has six arches supporting a large upper hall.

MORE MONUMENTS TO BE VISITED

Beyond the main square, the town preserves other remarkable monuments that include the Palazzo Raimondi, home to the Scuola Internazionale di Liuteria e della Facoltà di Musicologia, and the Ponchielli Theatre, one of the most ancient Italian theatres with a horseshoe-shaped layout and three tiers of seating.

Totally restored according to its original structure, Palazzo Cittanova, erected in 1256 at the will of the Guelphs, reminds you of the two opposing town communities, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. Amongst the various significant religious buildings, the Church of San Pietro al Po is worth visiting; it was built in the 11th century, when the river used to pass by the front square. The Latin cross interior with a nave and side aisles has a beautiful and rich decoration and, in the transept vault there is a frescoed decoration realized by Antonio Campi and dating back to 1579.

The Church of San Sigismondo, built starting from 1463, represents one of the most interesting examples of the evolution of Renaissance style in Cremona. The interior boasts some rich decorations in the nave and in the side chapels, valuable painting works by Campi and their school.

The churches dedicated to Santa Margherita e Pelagia is the most typical Cremonese work of 16th century art, realized according to Giulio Campi's artistic and architectural principles; here, he created a significant synthesis of his extraordinary pictorial and compositional style.

The cultural institution of the town avails itself of important museums featuring various sectors, such as the Museo Civico Ala Ponzzone, the Mostra Permanente degli Strumenti vincitori dei Concorsi Triennali Internazionali di Liuteria, the Civica Collezione di Violini, the Museo

Stradivariano, since 2001 housed at Palazzo Affaitati, the Museo Civico di Storia Naturale hosted at the Parco del Vecchio Passeggio, the Museo della Civiltà Contadina and the Museo delle Pietre Romaniche.

The Museo Civico Ala Ponzone, at Palazzo Affaitati, also hosts the Art Gallery which preserves the complete heritage of the Cremonese art, with special attention to the 15th and 16th centuries paintings.

FESTIVALS AND FAIRS

Cremona, surrounded by a fertile countryside and the river waters, is mainly an agricultural territory, rich in food products. Consequently there are various events celebrating the local gastronomic produce all the year round, attracting both the local population and visitors. Together with the "mostarda" (mustard), the other star of the town delights is the "torrone" (nougat) that, this year, will be celebrated from the 21st to the 23rd of November in an important "Festa del Torrone" (Nougat Festival). The kermesse, dedicated to the "sweet" symbol of the town, re-enhances, with a rich and historical parade taking place in the square, Bianca Maria Visconti and Francesco Sforza's wedding celebrated in 1441, when it is said that the first nougat was created in the honour of the newlyweds. Other gastronomic feasts, we would like to mention, are the "Festival del gusto - The fish of the river", held at Cremona and in the surroundings in September, an annual meeting for those who love good food, as well as the "Gran Bollito in piazza", held on the last Sunday of November in the splendid Cortile Federico II of the Palazzo Comunale. Another important event is the annual livestock fair "Fiera Internazionale del Bovino da Latte" from the 23rd to the 26th October 2008. From 3rd to 5th October, Cremona Fiere also organizes "Mondomusica"- Salone Internazionale degli Strumenti Musicali d'Artigianato e degli Accessori per la Liuteria - a display of musical stringed instruments and their accessories, dedicated to people who are lovers of the string music. "Liuteria in festival" with meetings, auditions and concerts, taking place at Cremona from the 27th September to the 19th October, is aimed at promoting the cultural and scientific aspects of the art of making stringed instruments. Finally, if you are interested in coming to deepen your understanding of the most important river of our peninsula, you should not miss the "Festa al Padre Po", on the 13th September, a conference concerning the river Po accompanied by a sculptural, pictorial and graphical exhibition and a final boat race.

THE ART OF MAKING STRINGED INSTRUMENTS

Il violino nella sua forma moderna nacque a Cremona nel sec. XVI e per questo la città viene unanimemente considerata la capitale mondiale della liuteria. Oltre ad Andrea Amati, caposcuola della moderna tecnica costruttiva liutaria, qui nacque anche il sommo Antonio Stradivari, con il quale la tecnica della costruzione dello strumento raggiunse l'assoluta perfezione. Proprio a Cremona venne commissionato anche il violino preferito da Paganini. Anche oggi nelle oltre 100 botteghe liutarie vengono prodotti strumenti di alta qualità nel solco della tradizione cremonese. Inoltre, la Scuola Internazionale di Liuteria richiama allievi da tutto il mondo. In occasione del Concorso Triennale Internazionale degli Strumenti ad Arco (prossima edizione nel 2009), la mostra allestita con gli strumenti che hanno partecipato al Concorso è meta di visita di un numero considerevole di esperti e interessati. All'interno del Museo Stradivariano sono esposti oltre 700 cimeli e reperti che provengono dalla bottega del maestro. Necessario complemento della visita al Museo Stradivariano, sezione del Museo Civico, è la Civica Collezione dei Violini conservati nel Palazzo Comunale, che annovera alcuni tra i capolavori della scuola liutaria cremonese e contemporaneamente permette di visitare anche le antiche sale del palazzo stesso. Tra gli strumenti storici esposti in particolari vetrine che ne permettono una visione agevole e completa, ci piace citare lo storico Carlo IX di Francia del 1566 di Andrea Amati e il Cremonese ex Joachim del 1715 di Antonio Stradivari, strumento in eccezionale stato di conservazione e giudicato uno degli esemplari più belli e caratteristici del miglior periodo del maestro. Non dobbiamo dimenticare nel campo musicale il compositore cremonese più illustre, Claudio Monteverdi (1567 - 1643), cui Cremona dedica ogni anno un festival al Teatro Ponchielli e nella Chiesa di San Marcellino. Giunto nel 2008 alla XXV edizione, il cartellone del festival di quest'anno (3 - 24 maggio) è interamente dedicato alla musica di Venezia, da Monteverdi a Vivaldi, al periodo in cui la città lagunare diventa il centro principale del concerto strumentale.

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LUNGO LE VIE NAVIGABILI E LE PISTE CICLABILI

The River Po, historical resource for the local populations, even if no more suitable for swimming, still maintains here its harbour and the boats for sailing.

The inhabitants of Cremona express their love for the river with a renewed interest in tourist sailing, organizing boat trips to Mantova and Venezia and other destinations.

Sailing along the river, both the local inhabitants and tourists can enjoy the charm of fragrances, colours and sounds of nature flourishing along the banks, especially in Summertime.

In the Province of Cremona, you have also the opportunity to sail the river Adda on boat tours that can last from one hour to the whole day; the tours start from Pizzighettone and, along the interesting natural environment of the Parco Adda Sud, pass Camairago and reach the Commune of Formigara.

During the tour you will also have the chance of visiting some quite interesting places.

All the four provinces of the Bassa Padana (Pavia, Lodi, Cremona and Mantova) feature a vast plain territory, rich in natural parks, and offer various and quite easy routes to those who love biking.

So if you are interested in getting to know more deeply the Province of Cremona and its naturalistic and historical heritage, experience it slowly and stop from time to time to discover the secrets of its land, the best way to do it, is biking around and soak up the atmosphere and its genuine fragrances.

Amongst the various cycling routes to be followed around Cremona, we would like to mention the trail of the Città Murate (walled towns) situated in large numbers in the territory, thanks to the strategic location of the area between the Ducato di Milano and the Repubblica di Venezia. About 38 km-long, the itinerary crosses the Province of Cremona from south to north, from Pizzighettone to Soncino.

You should not miss the walls of Crema, the walls of Pizzighettone, the well-preserved Rocca di Soncino and the valuable fortified evidences of Castelveverde. Besides a few attractive views of the rivers Adda and Oglio, the route reaches two interesting local Parks: the Valle del Serio Morto and the Valle dei Navigli.

A shorter trail, only 12 km-long, goes through the Bosco di Santa Maria, on the left side of the river Po: starting from Lido Po of Casalmaggiore, you enter in the natural surroundings of rare beauty, such as the long and charming "Tunnel degli Olmi" and the "Isola Maria Luigia", an important area from a naturalistic point of view.

From here you can return to Casalmaggiore, through Martignana Po and pay a visit to the magnificent Sanctuary of Santa Maria dell'Argine, right outside Casalmaggiore.

Another interesting itinerary, 17 km-long, runs among the "Bodri" (ponds), wonderful farmhouses and protected natural reserves rich in marshy vegetation: you go cycling in the countryside of Stagno Lombardo, whose main square is the starting point of the route and the end of the tour. Going further on there is a short interesting trail in the area of Pieve d'Olmi, the circular route finishes again in the hamlet that in the past used to be called Stagno Pagliari.

Cuisine

The Cremonese territory is a land mainly rich in agricultural produce and plentiful with various aromas and flavours, that warmly welcomes even the most refined palettes.

The tastes of the local cuisine maintains the simple features of tradition with a hint of originality. When you travel in the land of Stradivari you can experience a recipe book of 1400: "De honesta voluptate et valetudine" by Bartolomeo Sacchi, called the Platina. Amongst the various typical dishes, we would like to mention the "Gran Bollito Cremonese", the typical second course of the territory that must be cooked at least with five different kinds of meat and is usually accompanied by the Mostarda di Cremona, sweet and sour mustard, made with candied fruit immersed in flavoured glucose syrup. The Salame Cremona is a product that requires a complex preparation and contains only Italian pork.

The cheeses, besides the well seasoned Grana Padano, include the excellent Salva Cremasco DOP, square in shape with a dark rind, a traditional agro-industrial product of the Bassa Lombardia that can be accompanied by both sweet and spicy flavours. You cannot finish the meal without tasting a piece of the characteristic nougat with almonds, honey and white of egg.

Getting to Cremona

By car: A21 Motorway Piacenza-Cremona-Brescia.

By train: Cremona is connected with the main towns of Lombardia and Northern Italy by the Trenitalia Spa network.

By plane: G. D'Annunzio Airport - Montichiari (BS).

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