



Cheese and balls: Reggio Emilia, Italy

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It's not often on holiday that you start the day at 7.30am with plastic coverings on your boots at a Parmesan cheese factory and end it by dancing in at a castle at midnight at a ducal ball, but that's exactly what happened to me on a recent visit to the provinces of Reggio Emilia and Piacenza in Italy.

I suppose, had I wanted to loll about, I could have headed to the Adriatic coast – instead, I chose to be inland among the castles and farms of these lesser-known districts of the Emilia Romagna region, where the people are so friendly, you never know where you might end up.

I began my stay in the city of Reggio Emilia, a vibrant, stately place, with grand buildings, chi-chi boutiques and airy piazzas. While taking a short stroll to get my bearings, I came across a Franciscan monk on a bicycle with a bright rucksack on his back. I paused to see if I could surreptitiously take a photograph and realised that he was not the only monk in the vicinity, in fact, half the town seemed to be dressed as St Francis of Assisi. Back at the Hotel Scudo di Francia in the city centre, I asked the barman if there was a monastery in the area. He seemed confused. I explained my encounter with the monk on the bicycle and he laughed. The city was playing host to the first Franciscan festival, celebrating the 8th centenary of St Francis, and was overflowing with members of the religious order. Only in Italy.

The next day I headed out of town for my visit to the Parmesan dairy. I've had a fascination with this salty, crumbly cheese since my Italian friend first taught me to cook risotto at university and the Parmigiano Reggiano consortium are happy to arrange a guided visit to most of their dairies free of charge. It was a crisp, clear morning and although it seemed impossibly early to me, the cheese-making process had already begun. Parmigiano is made using milk from the evening milking that has been left in holding basins for the cream to separate, combined with the whole milk from the morning milking. It is then warmed in huge copper cauldrons, while rennet and whey starter are added, which curdles the milk and the cooking begins. The granules of cheese settle at the bottom of the cauldron and have to be lifted out with cheesecloths and then placed in a mould where it rests for a couple of days. It then receives its mark of origin and is lowered into brine where it absorbs the salt for about 20 days. The wheels of cheese are then placed on long shelves that rise high into the lofty barn, where they are aged for 12 or 24 months.

It was fascinating to watch the skill and precision that these dairy farmers applied to their craft, and the best thing was there was a shop attached, which enabled me to buy huge hunks of Parmigiano to take home – with no question as to its origin.

The creativity of the dairy farmers had inspired me, and I'd heard that Gropparello Castle not far away in Piacenza offered traditional cookery courses, so I went to investigate. I joined a group learning to make gnocchi, which is surprisingly simple (100g of flour, 100g ricotta cheese, 100g parmesan or pecorino cheese and one egg – mix it together, roll into snakes and chop). The best bit was sitting out at a huge table under a vine-clad awning in the grounds of this medieval castle and eating our creation alongside the finest in local cuisine. It was then, talking to the owner of the castle, that I received the surprise invite to

the duke's ball at neighbouring Rivalta Castle, that evening. I wasn't sure that my rhythmic head-nod was up to the dancing standard expected at an Italian ball, but help was at hand in the little town of Castell'Arquato. Here, a couple of local dancers put me in a medieval costume and taught me the moves that would have been used in the finest houses in the middle ages. And to bolster my confidence further, I bought myself some fabulous costume jewellery from one of the little boutiques before going to check in at the Torre del Borgo B&B - a lovely little place that is the nearest thing you'll get to a boutique hotel in the middle of the Italian countryside - to try to do something with my hair.

The ball was a remarkable experience. The wealthy and the beautiful convened on Rivalta Castle, where tables were set around the swimming pool and a huge dining room heaved with people serving themselves from the biggest buffet I've ever seen in a private house. But when it came to the dancing, although there were a few couples waltzing, it seemed that rhythmic head-nodding and foot tapping is the now the kind of dancing accepted in the finest houses.

Ryanair fly to Bologna and Parma, both airports provide a gateway to the region.

Location:

Reggio nell'Emilia, IT
