

Destination guide: Emilia Romagna

What to do on a whistle-stop journey across Italy's gastronomic heartland, the birthplace of film director Federico Fellini

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On his ITV show *Italian Escape*, Gino D'Acampo described the northern province of Emilia Romagna as "A fertile region that produces some of the world's finest food". It's a bold claim, but then we are talking about the official home of Parma ham (prosciutto di Parma), Parmesan cheese (Parmigiano Reggiano) and balsamic vinegar, to name but a few gastronomic delights.

Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon toured the swankier Amalfi Coast on their *Trip to Italy*. And while Rome, Florence and Venice also suck in millions of visitors annually, this part of the country is a path less trampled by the sweaty sandal of tourism. And is all the better for it, I say.



Heading for the hills

The Region

Emilia Romagna is named after an ancient Roman road, and the motorway bisecting the region links the towns of Rimini, Bologna, Modena, Reggio Emilia, Parma and Piacenza like tomatoes on a vine. This means that, although train services are available, a car is advisable if you want to get the full value from your trip.

En route between the towns, you'll encounter a flat landscape resembling northern France, flecked with lobster- and sunset-coloured farmhouses. The Appenine mountains cut a pale silhouette into the horizon, like a chain of paper dolls.

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Turret's-eye view from the Castello di Vigoleno

If you venture off piste, into the loftier areas to the south, a patchwork of stunning vistas more reminiscent of Tuscany awaits. Scattered across the peaks are dozens of medieval castles, some of which are barely ruins, while others have been impeccably restored. A castle crawl won't break the bank either, with admission prices around a third of what you'd expect to pay in the UK.

Among the most impressive is the Castello di Vigoleno, where the 80s fantasy flick *Ladyhawke* was filmed. Within its walls lies a chocolate-box village containing a couple of shops, a rustic tavern and (bizarrely) a museum themed around dancing bears. The views from its towers are among the best you'll get anywhere.



No shortage of options in the region's delis

The Food

The region's capital, Bologna, is nicknamed *La Grassa* (the fat) by Italians, and the locals are fiercely proud of their grub. Cured meats (culatello, prosciutto di Parma, strolghino) are a speciality you'll find hanging from the ceiling of any delicatessen worth its salt.

As well as the cascading meaty antipasti, steel yourself for seasonal specialities like pumpkin tortelli, porcini mushroom soup and ravioli stuffed with ricotta and spinach. I recommend washing the lot down with a shot of the hazelnut digestif nocino. At 40 per cent volume, this syrupy brown liqueur is as strong as grappa, but far more palatable (unless they palm you off with the cheap stuff).

The [Ristorante da Faccini](#) is set in the idyllic countryside midway between Parma and Piacenza. During the mild weather, the corn fields are an ideal backdrop for an alfresco lunch. It's a popular spot (perhaps partly due to the outstanding locally-produced wine), so be sure to book.



Shopping in Parma

The Towns

Parma, Piacenza and Reggio Emilia are three fascinating urban areas in the region. Parma is the biggest of the three, but, despite taking a battering during the war, its centre retains some classy medieval architecture, notably the Palazzo della Pilotta and the fresco-covered Parma Cathedral.

If history's not your thing, there's just as much fun to be had meandering through the cobbled streets, admiring the pastel-shaded buildings, peering nosily into gated indoor gardens and skipping into shops dripping with dangling hams.

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A Piacenza pizzeria

Farther west, Piacenza is a charming labyrinth of piazzas, markets and gothic churches. Its proximity to Milan means many residents commute to the fashion capital. And this perhaps explains the number of chic citizens I spotted, floating around like something from Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* film.

Be warned, the twisting, high-walled alleys surrounding the main square (the Piazza Cavali) are deceptively easy to get lost in. I had to ask directions from at least half a dozen bemused but helpful Italians after ducking down a side street and losing my way.



The calm before the storm on Reggio Emilia's Piazza Camillo Prampolini

For me, if you visit any town in Emilia Romagna it must be Reggio Emilia. While it has plenty of bars, shops, history and culture, it's also small enough to walk (or cycle) everywhere. Unspoilt by wartime bombing, its centre glows with gorgeous colours, ornate balconies and intriguing archways.

It also has a much younger feel than the other towns, at least it did when I visited on a Saturday afternoon. During the day, you couldn't move on the high street for teenage posers, who come to show off their haircuts as well as take advantage of the shopping.

Don't let this deter you though; there's something in Reggio Emilia for everyone — whether it's the stylish contemporary art museum, the baroque opera house or the leafy streets just outside the centre, which bring to mind New York's Greenwich Village.

If you're planning to stay near the central Piazza Camillo Prampolini, bear in mind that it can get noisy at night. A room overlooking the square might seem like a good idea — until you're lying awake at 3am listening to a chorus of rambunctious boozers. If you can't beat them, join them?

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Gary travelled to Italy with support from [Emilia Romagna Region Tourist Board](#). easyJet flies direct to Bologna from London Gatwick, from £36.49 one way. www.easyjet.com. There are regular flights to Bologna with easyJet and British Airways from London Gatwick, and Ryanair from Stansted, Manchester, Bristol, Edinburgh and Dublin. When Radio Times contributors receive assistance from travel providers such as tourist boards, airlines and hotel to conduct first-hand research, we retain our editorial independence at all times, and never accept anything in return for positive coverage.