

Renaissance City Is In Beautiful Zone

By Patricia Arrigoni

BELLINZONA, Switzerland – The Italian translation for this southern Swiss city means “beautiful zone” (or area), and it lives up to its name.

It is a handsome Renaissance city with castles, decorated churches, old market places, bell towers, ancient walls, broad arcades and ornamental iron balconies on patrician houses.

Unlike the usual mountain villages nestled in the Alps just beyond the Lukmanier, San Bernardino and Gotthard passes, Bellinzona has retained the influence of the historic families of Milano, Italy, the Visconti and Sforza, who converted the city into an impregnable fortress when they ruled here in the 13th and 14th centuries.

Called “Gateway to the South,” it once blocked the main road from Germany to Italy with the use of a great wall that ran down to the bank of the Tessin river. It stopped travelers from going between the Swiss Alps and the fertile Lombard Plain of Italy.

Its strategic importance was recognized as far back as the Romans, who used the area as a buffer against Germanic tribes to the north and as a trading post.

I arrived in Bellinzona on a Saturday morning in time to enjoy the lively and colorful marketplace set up in the Piazza Collegiata and Piazza Nosetto. A light rain did little to dampen the spirits of the determined shoppers.

Our tour of the city included a stop at Town Hall with its impressive stone bell tower. Rebuilt in the Renaissance style during the 1920s, its internal courtyard contains double arches and lovely mural drawings of the old town.

The main attractions of the old city, yet to be discovered by many Americans, are the three ancient castles located on surrounding hills.

The largest and oldest is the Castel Grande, which has a courtyard so immense that the entire population of the city could seek refuge there in times of peril. It has had several different names over the centuries, the last of which was “Castle of San Michele” in 1818. The castle has two medieval towers, once called “Bianca (white) and the other “Nera” (black).

The view from Castel Grande of the city and surrounding country is spectacular. To reach it, climb up the steep pathway that leaves from the Piazza Collegiata and Piazza Nosetto. The castle’s internal court is open year-round from Monday to Friday.

The Castello di Montebello or Castel Piccolo (little castle) is located above Castel Grande on Montebello Hill. The walls of old town start here.

The castle dates back to the 13th and 14th centuries. Building continued through the 15th century and included structural work done by Storza's civil engineers. It has internal and external courts and towers.

Today there is a history and archaeology museum which opened in 1974. On exhibit are ceramics, glasses, cinerary urns, furnishing, jewelry made from iron and bronze, design sketches, engravings, carvings and 50 pieces of ceremonial and war arms.

The view is also superb from this castle, extending all the way to Lake Maggiore in Italy. You can reach it by footpath or by car, following the road beginning at the train station. It is open year-round.

The third castle is Castello di Sasso Corbaro, which stands 750 feet above Bellinzona. It is called a typical Sforza fortress, with the courtyard enclosed by high walls, an adjoining watchtower and a dungeon.

The castle was ordered built by the Duke of Milano in 1479 and was finished in six months of continuous work. Its name is derived from the hill on which it stands. Like the other castles, it has some magnificent views, including Lake Maggiore and the Riviera Valley to the north.

A Costumes and Stamps Museum is located in several of the rooms in the dungeon. There are also exhibits, color slides and photographs which show the millenary history of the city.

Tourists can get there by road from the Castle of Montebello. The castle is open from April 1 to Oct. 31.

For more information, contact the tourist Office, Palazzo Civico, Via Camminata, 6500 Bellinzona, Switzerland.