

Ravenna: what to see and where to sleep and eat

by Lucy Gordan | Travel, Travel blog



Apse of the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe

Since New York is nicknamed “The Big Apple”; Chicago “The Windy City”; Paris “The City of Lights”; Venice “La Serenissima”; Ravenna on Italy’s Adriatic coast should be “The City of Mosaics”. Ravenna’s heyday was during the Middle Ages when it became the capital of the Western Roman Empire in 402 and remained prominent first as the capital of the Ostrogothic Kingdom and then as the Byzantine capital of Italy until the 8th century. During the first century and a half of glory its eight churches and mausoleums:

the Baptistry of Neon (c.430), the Mausoleum of the Empress Galla Placida (c. 430), the Arian Baptistry (c. 500), The Basilica of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo (c. 500), the Archepiscopal Chapel (c. 500), the Mausoleum of Theodoric (520), The Church of San Vitale (548), and the Basilica of Sant’Apollinare in Classe (549), now all UNESCO World Heritage Sites: “Early Christian Monuments of



The Mausoleum of Galla Placida



The Baptistery of Neon

Ravenna”, decorated with magnificent mosaics, were built.

Not to omit that later the Florentine poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), accused of corruption and financial wrong-doing, in 1302 chose exile over being burned at the stake, and spent the least three years of his 20-year peripatetic exile moving from Arezzo, to the Lunigiana, then to Bologna and Forlì, before settling in 1318 in

Ravenna, where he completed the *Divine Comedy*. He died of malaria on September 13th or 14th, 1321 and his Tomb, annexed to the medieval church of St. Francis, where the poet’s funeral was held, are both Ravenna sights. It’s also possible to book several different walks that follow in Dante’s footsteps to all the local places he mentions in the *Divine Comedy*.



Dante’s Tomb

As of last November, Ravenna is also home to a three-in-one museum: the first museum in the world dedicated to England’s great Romantic-era poet Lord George Gordon Byron opened in Ravenna, a second to the Risorgimento or Unification of Italy and a third to toys and dolls. It was an appropriate date to a Byron Museum since 2024 was the 200th anniversary of his death on April 19 probably from rheumatic fever, in Missolonghi, Greece where he, a champion of liberty, was fighting for Greece’s independence from Turkish oppression.



Entrance to Palazzo Guiccioli

The Museum is located in the city center in the vast 16th-century Palazzo Guiccioli (Via Cavour 54). Byron, flamboyant, breath-takingly handsome, and forever restless, lived here blissfully from 1819 to 1821, with his soul-mate mistress Teresa Gamba Guiccioli (1799/1800-1873). She'd already been living here with her husband, Count Alessandro Guiccioli (1761-1840), a miserly widower always in search of money, after her father, Count Ruggero Gamba, had arranged their marriage. Teresa was 18 years old; Guiccioli almost 60. Not to mention that Teresa was his third wife.

The lovers first met in April 2, 1819 in Venice at the “salon” of Countess Marina Querini Benzon. Accompanied there by her husband, Teresa had been married only a few months and was three months pregnant, but it was love at first sight, although their love story has several slightly different versions.

Byron had been living in exile in Venice since 1816. For on April 25th of that year, facing mounting pressures resulting from his failed marriage, his numerous scandalous affairs, and huge debts, he left England never to return.

Informed by anonymous letters of his wife's affair, Guiccioli took Teresa home to Ravenna, but, after she lost their baby, she refused to get out of bed unless he accepted Byron as her “cavalier servente” and agreed to host him in Palazzo Guiccioli. In spite of public ridicule, the Count agreed in June 1819 and covered for the two lovers until Byron refused his never-ending requests for money.

Soon afterwards, with her father's support, Teresa petitioned Pope Pius VII for a separation. Although the Count tried to defend himself by pointing out his wife's infidelity, on July 14, 1820 the Pope granted the separation on the condition that she live with her father. So, Teresa had to move out of Palazzo Guiccioli, but Byron remained at first in the company of his 3-year-old daughter Allegra who sadly soon died, numerous servants, and a “zoo” which included monkeys, guinea pigs, geese, cranes, and an owl.



Byron's Study in Palazzo Guiccioli

For certain, Byron's sojourn at Palazzo Guiccioli spanned his most prolific years. In his small study there, which he had decorated with erotic frescoes, he completed his masterpieces *Don Juan*, *Sardanapalus*, *The Two Foscari*, *The Prophecy of Dante* (visiting his tomb everyday) and the final canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. In addition, during horseback rides in the pine forest outside Ravenna (still certainly worth a visit) Teresa's brother Pietro, who later accompanied him to Greece, enflamed Byron's politically revolutionary conscience so much so that, thanks to Byron's passionate and financial support, Palazzo Guiccioli became the local revolutionaries' meeting place and arms deposit.

The multi-media Byron Museum on the Palazzo's mezzanine floor consists of eight rooms: "On his travels", "In Venice", "In Ravenna", "Listening to Byron", "Literature and Life", "Byronmania", "The Romances", and "In Greece". Many of the objects on display had belonged to Teresa. Particularly sentimental are the traveling chest she used to preserve her Byronic memorabilia, locks of his hair, shards of his sun-burnt skin, a basket full of their love letters, and Byron's traveling desk which he'd brought from England and gave to a heartbroken Teresa, along with several manuscripts, at his departure on July 16th, 1823 for Greece, thereby indicating to her his decision to abandon composing poetry in favor of politic action.



Byron's Traveling Desk

Today almost all of Byron's papers are in three collections: Pforzheimer, Arents, and Berg, all at the main branch of the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street. Instead, his last letter to Teresa, dated March 17, 1824 is also in New York City, but in the Morgan Library and Museum as are some of his papers.

Speaking of 19th-century politics, on the main floor is Palazzo Guiccioli's second museum dedicated to the *Risorgimento* or the Unification of Italy. On display here are some 450 paintings sculptures photographs, weapons, military uniforms, medals, documents and posters, which belong to the municipality of Ravenna, the Fondazione Spadolini Nuova Antologia and the Fondazione Bettino Craxi. For the politicians Giovanni Spadolini and Bettino Craxi were the foremost collectors of *Risorgimento* memorabilia.



Anita's Garibaldi's ring

The largest section here is devoted to Giuseppe Garibaldi and his wife Anita, who, after their unsuccessful Defense of Rome, died, pregnant and sick with malaria, on August 4, 1849, in her husband's arms at Guiccioli Farm in Mandriole near Ravenna. On display here are an elaborately-carved coral and gold bracelet, given to Anita by Giuseppe, her boots and her bright yellow shawl.

The Doll Museum, located in the early 20th-century annexes of Palazzo Guiccioli, features some 2,000 toys, but mostly dolls plus their clothes, accessories, and houses. Dating from 1850 to the mid-20th century, the dolls are made of porcelain, cloth, celluloid, felt, and papier-mâché. Noteworthy are those made of paper sent to Italian girls thanks to the Marshall Plan after World War II.

All three museums are multi-media with videos and touch-screens. They're open from 10 AM to 6 PM Tuesday-Sunday. Closed Monday. Entrance fees: adults 10 euros, the elderly (over 65) 8 euros, young people (until age 26) 5 euros, and children until age 11 free. For advance booking click on www.palazzoguiccioli.it.

To have time to visit Palazzo Guiccioli, Ravenna's mind-boggling medieval churches, and Dante's tomb, you will need to spend at least two nights. Here are some suggestions of where

to stay and where to eat: Hotel Palazzo Galletti Abbiosi near the Mausoleum Galla Placida and Sant'Apollinaire Nuovo, Palazzo Bezzi Hotel near the Church of San Vitale, Chez Papà also near the church of San Vitale, and Hotel Central Byron on a central-city pedestrian, are all reasonably-priced and within easy walking distant to the main sights; for local home-made pasta and fish specialties: Al 45, Trattoria da Betti, Locanda Vecchiacanala Bistrot, and Osteria il Paiolo.

The “national dish” of Romagna, the region of Italy where Ravenna is located, is the piadina, a kind of pancake, either folded in half or rolled and classically stuffed with melted cheese prosciutto or mortadella, but also with many other fillings to choose from. It’s the local street food so often sold at stands or prepared food shops. Ravenna’s best are *La piada di Ale* (Via della Lirica 11), *Profumo di piadina* (Via Cairoli 24), *Cupido* (Via Cavour 43a , a few doors from *Palazzo Guiccioli*), *La piadina del Melarancio* (Via IV novembre 21), and *Piadineria Lokalino* (Via Bartolo Nigrisoli 37).



Piadine

City

FIND HOTELS