

Bra

Urban Itineraries

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LANGHE
MONFERRATO
ROERO

The Home of BuonVivere

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The Baroque “taste” of Bra.

“So if you are not leather merchants or tannin merchants or even hunters, you will never have the chance to come all the way here, to drink black wine and eat salads of raw meat minced with a little oil, garlic and pepper. And those mixed boiled meats with parsley and mustard sauces, served steaming in the pot by the master himself, while everyone is loosening their belts at their conscription and wedding lunches.”

Giovanni Arpino

“Regina di cuori” (Araba Fenice, 1989)

Bra, city of art and culture, Bra city of Slow Food and today Slow City, Bra city attentive to the quality of life, Bra city lounge where you can go for a walk and discover some unexpected corners. Bra, with its elusive Rocca, overlooking the Tanaro Valley and winking at the Langa. Bra, whose hamlets touch gently the Roero with its Rocche and woodlands, Bra of the products of excellence that gourmet lovers around the world come to seek out. Roman Bra and Baroque Bra, Bra of the Social Saints and the Holy Cottolengo, Bra of museums for all, but also Bra of the summer aperitif, Bra the perfect setting for so many of Giovanni Arpino's works, modern Bra that speaks the languages of the world thanks to the students of the Università di Scienze Gastronomiche (University of Gastronomic Sciences) of Pollenzo.

Many faces of a single city: at first glance, as discreet as any provincial Piedmontese town, it reveals itself later, at a closer look, with its mix of different, yet definitely complementary elements, ready to be remembered by the visitor, from the child in search of the games of bygone days to the archaeology enthusiast.







Bra characters.

“Now the city has rolled down the hill like a handful of marbles, and every day it widens and stretches out into the plain, with chimneys and inns with boules and vegetable gardens. And houses have been built where once only mushrooms grew.”

Giovanni Arpino
“Regina di cuoi” (Araba Fenice, 1989)

A classic provincial town, but rich in outstanding personalities who, in various fields, have achieved excellence. Let us start with the city's saint, **Giuseppe Cottolengo**, born in Bra to wealthy Provençal cloth merchants. The young priest divested himself of all possessions and dedicated his life to the poor, founding the Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza (Little House of Divine Providence) in Turin which today is still called after him. Cottolengo was the first social institution created to relieve the pain of the multitudes of poor who filled the ranks of the first urban proletariat in

Turin. Always at the side of the poorest, Cottolengo not surprisingly died of typhus. In the city, a statue and his Casa Natale (Birth House) help visitors get to know his story.

Turning to literature, much of Bra is described in the novels of **Giovanni Arpino**, a journalist and writer much at home in the town where his mother was born. A charming, ironic and rough character, Arpino spent the years of his youth in Bra before moving to Turin. His bond with Bra was deep, almost visceral, to the extent that the city, its sights, its people are extensively



featured in his works. From the family café in the city centre, in fact, Arpino used to collect snapshots of real life, which he would then report in his works and which, today, keen fans can retrace thanks to a special itinerary. He was also a passionate narrator of sport and elastic ball, about which he wrote some memorable articles in the columns of the newspaper La Stampa.

When it comes to gastronomy and sustainability, Bra will most certainly play an important role in the annals, because the Arcigola movement, later to become

Slow Food, was born here in 1986. Slow Food, an institution attentive to the themes of good food, material culture and sustainability, owes its success to the insights of **Carlin Petrini**, a visionary man for his time. His ideas resulted in a worldwide movement with a focus on the most topical issues and this is where events, that today are a must in the Italian enogastronomic scene and beyond, were born and developed. A stroll through the city centre, therefore, simply has to include a stop in Via MendicITÀ Istruita, where that snail symbol of Slow Food is now an unmissable future-oriented selfie.





Bra, strolling through the city.

“From the kitchen windows I could see the town hall square, all stones, with the statue of Blessed Cottolengo surrounded on Friday, market day, by the stalls of the cloth and shoe merchants. All around were the churches ringing the quarter, half, three-quarter and hour peals with their loud bells”.

Giovanni Arpino

“Gli anni del giudizio – Storie dell’Italia Minore”

(Mondadori Editore, 1990)

Bra is a beautiful lady all pleated with baroque drapes, whose historical glories are to be found in its elegant churches, in Santo Cottolengo and in the Slow Food movement. The name derives from the medieval “brayde” (of Lombard origin, they were large properties given to a squire for pasture): the squires then became the “De Brayda” and gave their name to the town.

Today’s Bra is both industrial and agricultural, rich without ostentation in the discreet charm of its old alleyways and historic cafés, and forward looking thanks to the ongoing cultural and artistic ferment, especially among young people, which you will easily spot as you wander through the city streets. Bra preserves the heritage of a proto-industrial town (tanneries, hemp and cheese production) with an insightful eye on the future: it is the headquarters of the Slow Food movement (born here as Arcigola) and of the *unicum* of the Università di Scienze Gastronomiche di Pollenzo (University of Gastronomic Sciences). Today, the city boasts several gems of Piedmontese Baroque, the result of the great religious fervour between the 17th and 18th centuries, combined with a keen interest in the arts, which led many local families to invest in fine churches and palaces, all of which can now be fully “enjoyed”.

“*Brayde Oppidum, vernaculé Bra*”: this is the caption of a view of Bra, painted by Giovenale Boetto in 1666. The view,

in which a fairly large urban area can be clearly distinguished, is extremely interesting from a historical point of view, capturing the town halfway between the present and the more distant past.

Yesterday’s Bra has remote origins, dating back to shortly after the year 1000. Here, in the 13th century, the De Brayda family commissioned the construction of a solid turreted castle protected by moats. In 1515 the stronghold was attacked and destroyed by a large French army, which was led by Gian Giacomo Trivulzio, and was finally dismantled in 1552.

However **Palazzo Traversa**, then owned by the Operti family, was saved. This 15th-century fortified mansion, probably built by the Malabaila family from Asti, is located between Via Parpera and Via Serra, the historic heart of Bra from which this itinerary starts. Just a few steps from the Town Hall square, the building has its own artistic value, enriched by fine mullioned windows with two-light ogival windows, graceful terracotta decorations and a crown of battlements added in 1688. Donated to the Municipality, which oversaw its restoration, it is currently home to the **Museo Civico di Archeologia Storia e Arte (Civic Museum of Archaeology History and Art)**: this is the perfect starting point to get to know the town, from the archaeological section on Roman Pollenzo to the one dedicated to the local area.





But let's return to Piazza dei Caduti per la Libertà where, to our right, we find the beautiful **Palazzo Valfrè**, clearly of medieval origin, and, to our left, the 18th-century **Palazzo Garrone**, with its beautiful atrium and staircase, which borders the beautiful scene of the square.

This is where **Palazzo Mathis**, home to important exhibitions held in its frescoed halls featuring works from the 17th and 18th centuries, and the **Palazzo Comunale (Town Hall)** with its undulating

Baroque motifs, are also located, facing each other. The setting is completed by the imposing Church of Sant'Andrea, built between 1672 and 1682 to a design by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, re-adapted by Guarino Guarini: a majestic building with three naves, it is impressive for its grandeur and the two-order façade of refined Baroque taste, clearly visible from afar.

Beyond Piazza Caduti lies one of the most representative and socially vibrant places in Bra, which the local people call simply



“la Rocca”, the upper part of the town overlooked by the most diverse human activities (Piazza XX Settembre), culminating in the hillock of the Giardini della Rocca, a place brought back to life, where people still dance on summer nights.

As you walk along the path carved out above the 19th-century market wing, you head back towards Piazza Caduti per la Libertà, where you can find the monument dedicated to San Benedetto Cottolengo, the founder of the Picco-

la Casa della Divina Provvidenza (Little House of the Divine Providence). He was one of those Social Saints who, in the 19th century, turned Turin into a factory of pious deeds aimed at helping the weakest. To get there, you pass by the Casa Natale (Birthplace), marked by a plaque standing out on the façade. Furthermore, along the way, a quick stop at the Church of the Santissima Trinità, commonly known as the Church of the Battuti Bianchi, is a must: unpreten-

tious on the outside, it is splendid on the inside, with its soaring, light-filled single nave covered by a barrel vault and richly decorated with stucco.

Not far away is also Santa Maria degli Angeli, a charming church with frescoes by Pietro Paolo Operti and Luigi Morgari: in the 19th century, it was used as a barracks, arsenal and salt and tobacco warehouse, before being restored and returned to religious use in

the 20th century.

Several narrow streets branch off from the “Rocca” and descend towards the centre, where it is pleasant to walk along at least the intriguing Via della Mendicizia Istruita, where the famous Slow Food movement was born and is still based. Please make sure you do not miss a tasty break with Salsiccia di Bra (Bra sausage), a local delicacy made with veal meat, unique in its kind thanks to a



Royal Decree by Charles Albert of Savoy, who approved the recipe and allowed its consumption by the rich Jewish community living in nearby Cherasco.

The street takes you into the city centre along Via Vittorio Emanuele and the parallel Via Principi di Piemonte which, together with Via Audisio and Via Cavour, form the “strolling” quadrangle. This is the beating heart of life and commerce of the Bra area, where you can find a series of fruit and vegetable shops, the most delicious gastronomy and charcuterie shops, the famous pastry shops and cafés which preserve the atmosphere of Piedmont in the last century.

Near the crossroads with the pedestrian Via Cavour you will find the Church of San Giovanni Decollato or dei Battuti Neri, which was begun in 1591 by the Confraternita della Misericordia (Brotherhood of Mercy), which took on the task of assisting prisoners condemned to death and providing for their burial. It houses a valuable painting by Giovanni Claret dating back to 1664 and paintings by Agostino Cottolengo dated 1834.

At the other end of Via Cavour, there is the Church of San Rocco, now deconsecrated and used as an exhibition centre, whose construction was completed in the 18th century but dates back to the 16th century.

Right behind the church are Piazza Carlo Alberto and Piazza Roma, with the prestigious **Politeama Theatre** and the

inevitable bustle of the railway station.

We continue along Via Vittorio Emanuele up to the small Via della Provvidenza, which leads back to Via Craveri, where the **Museo Civico di Storia Naturale (Civic Museum of Natural History) “Craveri”** awaits us. Founded as a private collection in the first half of the 19th century by Angelo Craveri, it’s a meteorological station since 1859. Its rooms house collections of geo-paleontology, ornithology and European birdlife that are among the most important in the region.

The architectural gem of the city is located at the corner between Via Craveri and Via Barbacana: the **Church of Santa Chiara**, the greatest monument of Piedmontese Baroque. Built between 1742 and 1748 based on a project by Bernardo Antonio Vittone, who designed it in the shape of a four-leaf clover, surprisingly undulating outside and inside, decorated with stuccoes and frescoes and culminating in a complex perforated double dome vault that creates impressive plays of light. The church was commissioned by the religious community of the Clarisse nuns, who had already been present in the city since 1632, with a significant financial investment for the religious order, to the extent that some of the completion work lasted until 1786. The history of the building speaks of changes of ownership and abandonment, with the final transfer to the municipality of Bra by the Cappuccini Fathers.

The church, with its bold shapes and structure, culminating in the dome and domed vent, is a true masterpiece of the Piedmontese Rococo style. The three interior altars are the result of relatively recent restoration, with portrayals of Santa Chiara, San Francesco d'Assisi and various characters dear to the Franciscan Order. Some of the frescoes are by Pietro Paolo Operti, a native of Bra. One of the altars is also adorned with a precious painting that comes from the first church, by the Flemish artist Giovanni Claret. Behind the altar, not to be missed, is the choir, an exceptional venue for classical music concerts.

After admiring this treasure, hidden among the houses, let us return to the top of Via Barbacana, where we find Palazzo Traversa, our starting point. We strongly advise you to take a stroll without haste (it's a Slow City) through the maze of streets that lead up the hill to the top of Monteguglielmo, where you will find the **Zizzola**, a peculiar 19th-century octagonal building, once a 'villa of delights' and today a symbol of the city. Surrounded by a lovely garden and with an unparalleled view of the city, Monviso and the entire chain of the Alps, the building now houses the spectacular multimedia museum display of the Casa dei "Braidesi" (House of the people of Bra), a display of images, music and words to tell the story of Bra, thanks to the testimonies of its inhabitants, its famous people, its business-





es and the products that have made it famous throughout the world.

The museums in Bra deserve a special mention. In addition to the already mentioned Palazzo Traversa and the “Craveri”, there are many realities to be discovered, both within the old town walls and in the immediate outskirts. These are great little gems, which, as such, are only revealed to the attentive visitor. And there is something to please everyone. Next to the Library, the **Museo del Giocattolo (Toy Museum)** is ready to enchant the children of today and of yesterday with a collection of toys from the past, over 1000 items dating from the 18th century onwards. Another place that is deeply tied to Bra is **Museo “Rolfo” (“Rolfo” Museum)**, set within the grounds of the historic wagon and coach building company founded by Giorgio Rolfo, today a leader in the truck industry. A valuable space to fully understand the history of the city and its industrial fabric. A special mention also goes to the **Museo della Bicicletta (Bicycle Museum)**, which offers cycling enthusiasts an impressive collection of objects related to two wheels and various relics of champions of the past, and the curious **Museo della Scrittura Meccanica (Mechanical Writing Museum)**, a unique place with more than 300 typewriters, which is a rarity to explain to digital natives who know nothing about keys and ink.

Before leaving Bra, we advise you to visit another highly symbolic place in the city, which is more easily accessible by car. This is the **Sanctuary of the Madonna dei Fiori** (on the homonymous avenue), a vast religious complex built in 1626 on the site of a very old chapel, erected after the apparition of the Virgin Mary on 29 December 1336; one of the oldest sanctuaries of Marian worship in the province, it is famous for its “flowers in the snow”, a rare case of winter flowering. Inside, there is a painting of the Virgin Mary, made by Claret in 1638, and the statue of the Virgin, which is carried in procession through the streets of the city every year on 8th September. Outside, the majestic mosaic by Rupnik, depicting more than 200 scenes from the sacred texts, is to be enjoyed in full.

Finally, just outside Bra, you can immerse yourself in the greenery and venture into Roero, reaching Pocapaglia from America dei Boschi, following the ridge of the Rocche, sheer canyons that offer ochre-coloured landscapes, an open-air museum for an outdoor experience to remember.

Top Art and Culture

- Church of Sant'Andrea
- Church of Santa Chiara
- Church of Santissima Trinità (or of Battuti Bianchi)
- La Zizzola - House of the "Braidesi"
- Palazzo Mathis
- Sanctuary of the Madonna dei Fiori

PLEASE NOTE

The opening times of the sites listed in this itinerary may be subject to change. Keep updated and please check www.visitlmr.it



Bra and its Museums

- Bicycle Museum
- Civic Archaeological Historical Artistic Museum “Palazzo Traversa”
- “Craveri” Civic Museum of Natural History
- Museum of Mechanical Writing
- “Rolfo” Museum
- Toy Museum

PLEASE NOTE

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Pollenzo, amidst history and taste

“Between two rows of houses people play boules, make bargains and comments, watch the cars of strangers heading into the poplar woods on Sundays to have snacks. At the far end, beyond the woods, is the estate of the royal castle of Pollenzo, some still manage to cross the boundary wall at night and hunt pheasants and hares with lanterns”.

Giovanni Arpino,
“Lispettore dei passeri – Storie dell’Italia Minore”
(Mondadori Editore, 1990)

Bra covers an extensive area featuring many hamlets, an integral part of the city fabric. On one side, the road runs towards the hills of the Roero, along the ridge of the Rocche, to enter the many villages in this part of the territory. On the other side, it stretches towards the Cuneo plain, with the ever-present chain of the Alps in the background.

But the biggest surprise for visitors is the **Pollenzo** reserve, a small village on the road to the Langhe. Just 5 km from Bra, the centre is worth an unhurried visit, to immerse oneself in a history that goes way back in time.

Ancient *Pollentia*, this is the name of the village in Roman times, was the largest inhabited settlement between *Alba Pompeia* and *Augusta Bagiennorum* (today's Bene Vagienna) and preserves evidence of the Roman amphitheatre on which the ancient concentric design of houses in the heart of the village is built. Strolling around, walking past the houses, visitors can get a glimpse of the ancient structure of the village, while moving to Palazzo Traversa, in the centre of Bra, significant traces of this period can be found.

Pollenzo is certainly also worth a visit for the neo-Gothic albertine revival that affected the village from 1762, when Pollenzo became property of the House of Savoy. In 1832, the King bought the Castle of Pollenzo and embarked on a radical modernisation of the urban fabric of the village, by involving in the works some of the most

prominent artists of the time from Pelagio Pelagi to Ernesto Mellano to Xavier Kurten for the park. This resulted in what we can enjoy today: the square, the Church of San Vittore, the Castle, the Tower, the Park and the Agenzia (Agency). This last building was strongly desired by the King, whose aim was to manage the various agricultural activities of the royal house and carry out groundbreaking experiments in the agricultural field. Unfortunately, during the flood of '94, the park suffered some serious damage and is still being restored.

While the park and castle are now private properties, this is not the case for the Agency, which has been revived thanks to Slow Food, which has taken a chance on the future here by investing in education. In fact, this small village is enlivened by the vitality of students from all over the world, ready to discover the secrets of food thanks to the **Università di Scienze Gastronomiche (University of Gastronomic Sciences)**. Next to, or we should say literally underneath the university premises, is the **Banca del Vino (Wine Bank)**, an innovative tour among the labels of the most renowned wines of Langhe Roero and the whole of Italy. It is no coincidence that it is located in the cellars of the old Agency where Staglieno, the royal oenologist, laid the foundations for the vinification of Piedmontese red wines.

Last but not least, Pollenzo has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1997 as part of the Royal Residences circuit. Definitely a must to be included in any travel itinerary.



Top Art and Culture

- Archaeological Site
- Complex of Carl Albert of Savoy
- Parish Church of San Vittore

Top Wine and Gastronomy

- Wine Bank

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Cheese



Milk, rennet and salt: three ingredients for a product of excellence, cheese. But behind every cheese, there are people: the shepherds who choose the best pastures, the cheesemakers who create, the refiners who wait patiently. But let us not forget the most important ingredient, the local area, that elaborate ecosystem wherein each toma cheese is an expression, an added value to be fully savoured in the mouth.

And where else but the home of Slow Food could we pay tribute to this extraordinary product, both simple and ancient? The rendez-vous is in Bra, dressed up for **Cheese**, the biennial festival that gathers the world in the city of the Zizzola. An open-air market where you can find Italian and international excellence of all kinds, in all shapes and forms and for all tastes. A rich programme, enhanced by conferences and talks on the future of a great product, with a focus on sustainability and food education, issues that are dear to Slow Food.

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The Home of BuonVivere

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