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Unesco Swiss World Heritage Sites

Bellinzona's three castles

Bellinzona's three castles are outstanding examples of fortified medieval architecture – and a major Swiss tourist attraction. Castelgrande, Montebello, Sasso Corbaro, as well as the town's defensive wall and ramparts were added to the Unesco list of World Heritage Sites in 2000. The town's complex defensive system was built largely by the Dukes of Milan in the 15th century. They considered Bellinzona as key to the Alpine passes and an essential gateway to Italy.

Castelgrande, the Old Castle

Brilliantly restructured by Ticino architect Aurelio Galfetti, Castelgrande is the first of the three castles. Over the years, it has been called the Old Castle, Uri Castle and St Michael's Castle. Located in the town centre, Castelgrande is a silent and elegant observer of the town's daily life. At the foot of its craggy walls, in the Piazza del Sole, people meet, and festivals and concerts are held. It is also the setting for official receptions and international events. The castle can be reached on foot or there is a lift set into the rock. The complex comprises a history museum, a restaurant, a wine bar and a multifunctional area. On the north side, the castle is defended by rocky, almost vertical walls.

Montebello, the Middle Castle

The imposing Montebello complex – previously known as small, new, or middle Castle in the 14th and 15th centuries, as Schwyz Castle from 1506, and from 1818 as Saint Martin's Castle – stands on a rocky spur in the east of the town centre. It dates from the late 14th century. Allowed to fall into a state of disrepair, Montebello was in imminent danger of collapse by 1900. A major restoration began in 1903, and between 1971 and 1974, the interior was restructured for exhibition purposes.

The castle now houses the Civic Museum and its archaeological collection, featuring artefacts from prehistoric burial sites in the Ticino region. Montebello, which is possibly the most fairytale-like of the three castles, is often the setting for celebrations and the museum is much visited.

Sasso Corbaro, the Upper Castle

The highest of the three castles, Sasso Corbaro, overlooks Bellinzona. It stands on the highest point of a rocky ridge, immersed in greenery, in the south east of the town. The castle offers an impressive view. It, too, has changed names over the centuries, previously having been called Unterwalden Castle and St Barbara's Castle.

The project to redevelop the fortification, masterminded by Ticino architect Paola Piffaretti, has restored light and lustre to a building which in 1894 was described as "a ruin on the point of collapse". Simple, sober, functional and innovative measures have transformed the edifice, which now houses both a restaurant and exhibition areas. The surrounding landscape is also magnificent. The entire hillside had been tidied up and a network of walking trails has been added.

Town walls and murata

Bellinzona's defensive wall and ramparts are also impressive. Unlike other cities, whose fortifications are arranged in concentric circles around the urban nucleus, Bellinzona has two separate sets of walls, according to Werner Meyer in a guidebook on the subject. At either end, they rise and join with the defensive structures of Castelgrande and Montebello, and are so closely knit that it is difficult to see where the city walls begin and the external castle structures end.

The original ramparts, sixty per cent of which have survived, have been much altered over the last hundred years for urban redevelopment, and to provide access for pedestrians and vehicles. Connected to the western flank of Castelgrande and following a natural ridge is the murata, a mighty defensive wall built to block the valley, which once ran as far as the mountainside on the right bank of the Ticino River. Meyer says that the wall still bears its secrets. "Unfortunately, over the years, large parts of the murata have been lost, leaving unanswered questions as to the extent and function of the overall defensive system," he writes.

Source: www.swissinfo.ch (Françoise Gehring)



Castelgrande

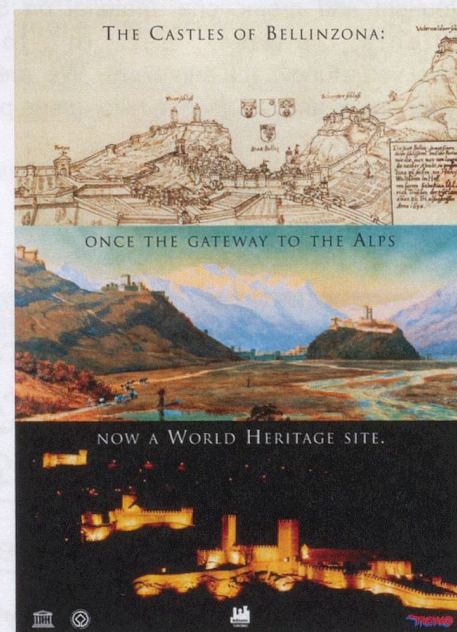


Montebello



Sasso Corbaro

The three pictures above of "castles in the snow" have been provided by Ursula Nixon of the Auckland Club, who grew up in the Ticino and whose mother currently lives in Bellinzona.



Promotional posture to support the listing of Bellinzona's castles as a World Heritage Site
www.bellinzonaturismo.ch