

# Bellinzona

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A modern telephoto lens apparently shrinks the distance between Montebello castle in the foreground and Castel Grande (background). Between the two lies old Bellinzona

# Bellinzona

TRAVELLERS coming from the North over the Nufenen, Gott-hard, Lukmanier or San Bernar-dino passes are always astonished when greeted by the castle-dominated silhouette of Bellin-zona.

The capital city of the Ticino has earned the name "Gateway to the South" because of its location on the border between the fruitful Lombard Plain of Italy and the rugged Swiss Alps.

A visit to this majestic old town is always rewarding, with so many interesting places to discover.

Important as industry and rail transport are here, don't let the modern facets of this remarkable medieval town fool you.

The ancient fortifications – the three castles, the barrage, and the city walls – still rule supreme. You can hardly round a corner without confronting a section of the old wall – or viewing one of the three castles from a fresh perspective.

Such a strategic position was naturally contested over the centuries. Historic 15th century Milanese families like the Visconti and the Sforza slowly but surely converted the city into an impreg-nable fortress.

The oldest and largest of the three castles, the Castel Grande, has superb defences, first mentioned in documents of the sixth century, and constantly thereafter.

The immense courtyard, which can be visited, was used in time of crisis as a refuge by the entire population.

Steep walkways lead from the old city to the castle's heights, from where a panorama of city roofs and wide expanses of countryside can be viewed. The ancient walls have been well preserved, even today joining Castel Grande and its coun-terpart, Montebello.

Montebello originated in the late 13th or early 14th century and

## The Ticino's 'Gateway to the South'



The Sasso Corbaro watchtower guarded the ancient approaches to Bellinzona. Lake Maggiore and Monte Gridone lie in the background

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Arcades on the Piazza Nosedo ... not a great deal of room,



The elegant inner loggia of the castle of Sasso Corbaro.

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was then destroyed and restored many times in the course of Bellinzona's history. Its main tower and "Palazzetto" (small castle) house a modern museum, featuring both history and archaeology.

High above them all is the castle of Sasso Corbaro, some 750ft above the city.

This castle was built in 1479. Construction took only six months, since Milan feared Bellinzona could be surrounded by victorious Swiss troops after their impressive victory at Giornico. Several rooms in its tower are dedicated to a collection of folk art and folklore.

The market of the old city, clustered around Piazza Collegiata and Piazza Nosedo, has provided a focal point for commercial activity throughout the centuries.

It still does so, with an atmosphere of the comfortable merchant-life of past epochs prevailing. The elegant facades of patrician homes, ornamental iron balconies and gateways, rococo portals, and signs hanging outside old inns continue to cast their



*Council House*

magic spell on the passer-by.

In 1924, the Council House, with its characteristically high tower, was constructed in the Renaissance style of Lombardy.

Protected by broad arcades, the visitor can enjoy a stroll even in rainy weather.

On Saturday mornings the centre of the city is transformed into a busy, colourful marketplace. Local people do their shopping here – and chat with friends.

Tourists wander among the stalls of the merchants, impressed by the variety of the wares offered: fruit; meat; delicatessen; cheeses from the Valle di Muggio, the Leventina, and Valle Maggia; all sorts of bread; clothes; shoes; and handicrafts. And more often than not, a Ticino “bandella” plays spirited airs.

For art lovers, three churches merit special attention. The collegiate church of SS Pietro e Stefano, an important Renaissance structure with baroque interior, dominates Piazza Collegiata.

The former Franciscan church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, situated on the road to Lugano, contains a fascinating Renaissance fresco depicting the cru-

cifixion.

In the suburb of Ravecchia, the tiny romanesque church of San Biagio houses wall paintings by the Lombard-Sienese school of the fourteenth century.

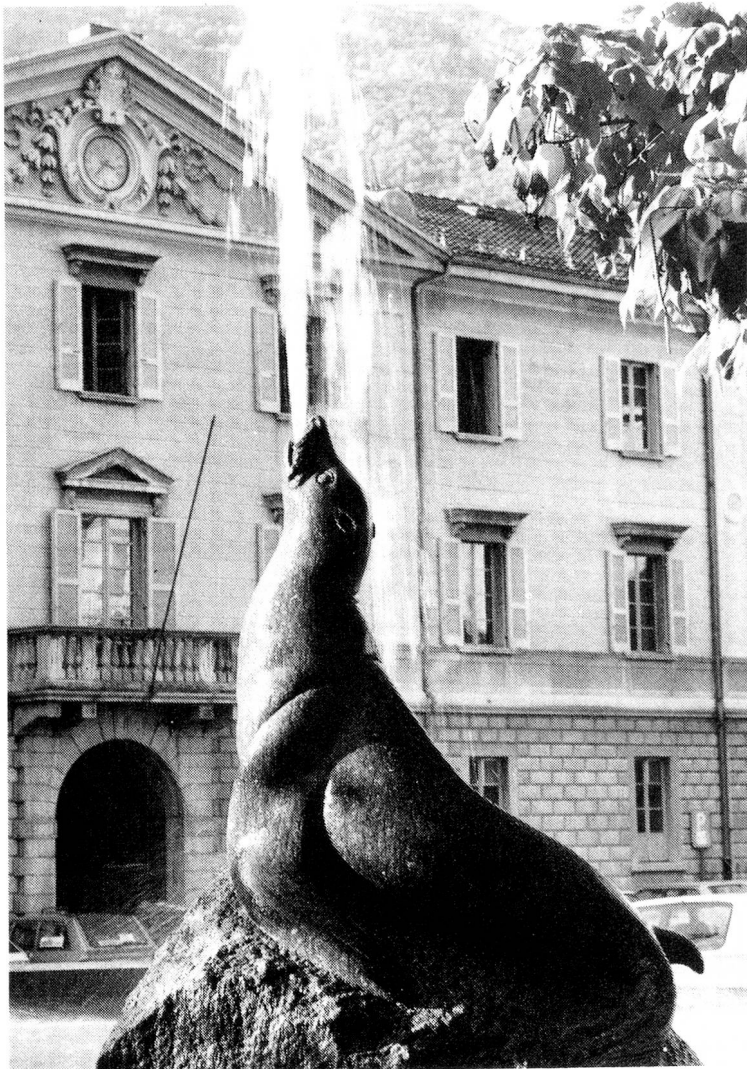
Travellers remaining for more than the briefest of visits will certainly want to get to know the surroundings better. A trip by car or by post-bus leads through many curves into the lonely yet enchanting Valle Morobbia and its exceptional chestnut forests.

The sunny terrace of Mornera, a rewarding vantage point for the area, can be reached by aerial cableway. Hiking is a natural sport here.

The villages surrounding the town offer a restful scene of tiny churches, farmhouses and, of course, the renowned “grotti” – garden inns under large shade trees – to the visitor.

There is also something most unusual, the “Climbing Garden” at Molinazzo, near the centre of the town. Its 24,000 square metres of terrain offer no less than 23 possible climbing tours.

Locarno is not far away, with its own romantic valleys: the Verzasca, Maggia, Onsernone and Centovalli.



*Sea lion guards cantonal offices on Piazza Governo*



*Ornamental iron signs enbellish the old town*