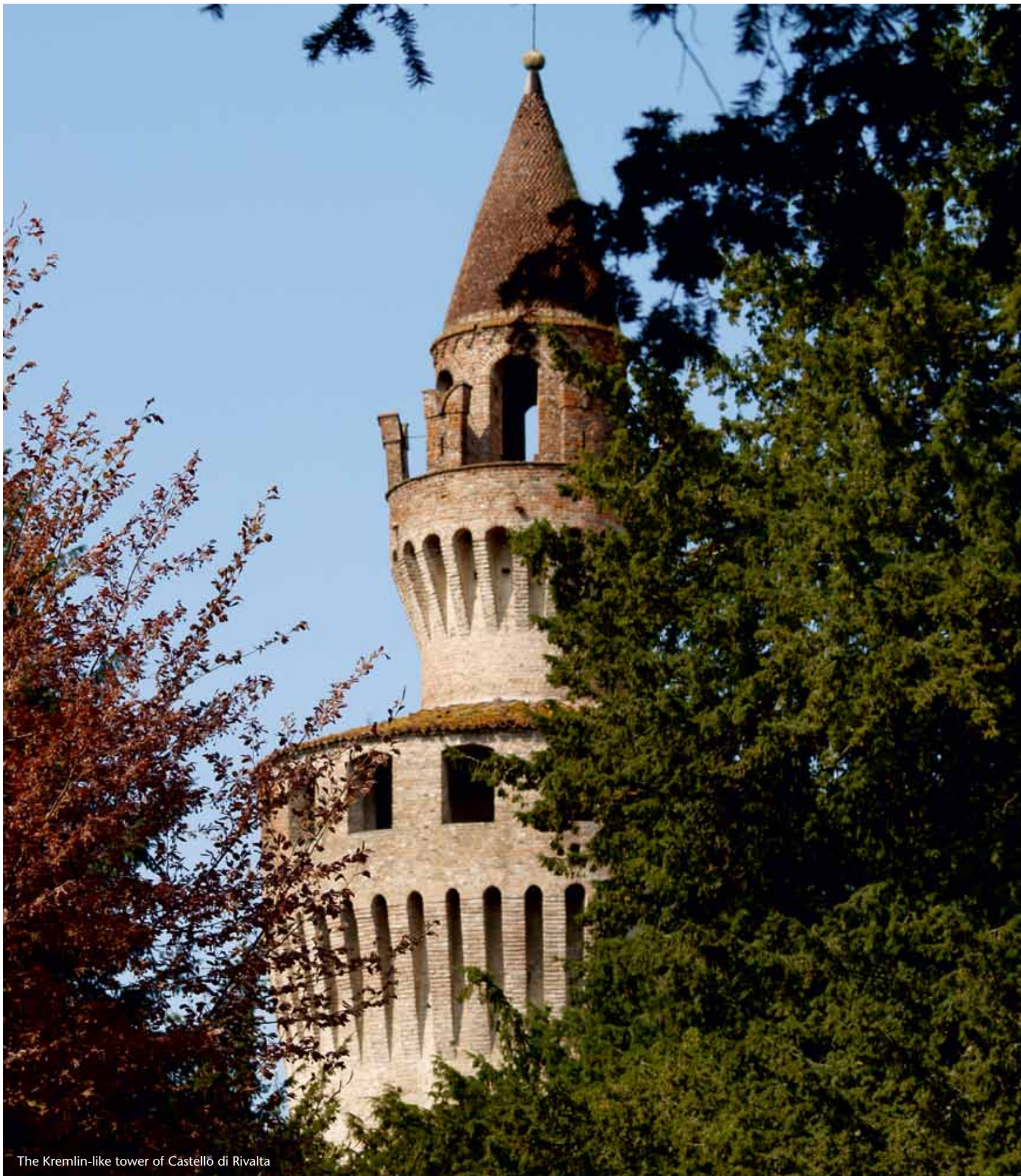




On the
castle trail

HIDDEN IN THE HILLS OF WESTERN EMILIA ROMAGNA
IN NORTHERN ITALY IS AN AREA OF UNDERSTATED BUT
INDISPUTABLE BEAUTY, CROWNED BY CASTLES IN THE SKY.
MARIE BARBIERI TAKES TO THE CASTLE TRAIL.



The Kremlin-like tower of Castello di Rivalta



Latticed brickwork in Castello di Rivalta's tower



Castello di Rivalta's interior courtyard



Castello di Rivalta's staircase

After committing adultery with her childhood lover, Rosania was buried alive within the castle's walls by her unforgiving husband in the 1200s.

The map insists I'm somewhere between Milan, Parma and Genoa, but I'm clearly in the middle of nowhere. Driving away from the crowds of Italy's more renowned haunts, I feel as though I'm amongst the first to chart this alluring terrain. Yet it seems I'm being watched. Through sentinel eyes, imposing castles stand guard over the province of Piacenza's hilltops and valleys.

Spotting its soaring tower, I approach the 11th century Castello di Rivalta with dreamy visions of damsels being rescued by armour-clad horsemen. But the real purpose of this sinister spire soon dispels any romantic myths. Brushing the cold, damp wall, I creep up the tower's vertiginous coiling staircase. Solari (the architect of the uncannily similar Kremlin) restructured this narrow climb with an anticlockwise spiral to hinder invaders using their right-handed weaponry. Mid-climb, I swear I hear whispers from the wall's crumbling cracks, but soon realise they are being wheezed out from my own shivering shadow.

Atop, I discover that the tower harbours a void, and peer down its chilling 60m drop, at the bottom of which waits a monstrous mangle of metal blades that once hungered for enemy soldiers.

Vertigo subsiding, I gaze across the tranquil banks of the River Trebbia, and understand why Castello di Rivalta is a favourite stay for the British Royal Family. Retreating into the romantic internal courtyard, where terracotta bas-reliefs of the (still-resident) Landi family decorate the ancient porticos, I halt between timeless walls. A ripe silence overwhelms the echo of my footsteps.

This afternoon, the eighth century Castello di Gropparello helps to restore my faith in romantic medieval myths... to an extent. Mushrooming up from a strikingly scenic peak within the serpentine woods of the Vezzeno Valley, it seems straight out of a fable. Indeed, strolling through the mesmerising Parco delle

Fiabe (Fairytale Park), I wonder if I've arrived in Tolkien's Middle Earth, as a raucous school party run riot. Children dressed up as knights re-enact narratives of elves, gnomes and witches. Led by an enchanting White Knight (whose wink makes me blush), they act out a battle against ogres and druids.

For safety's sake, I retreat into the castle via its ancient drawbridge. A multilayered topography gifts this fort with a most dramatic layout and I manage to work up a ravenous appetite for a medieval feast at the castle's ancient inn. Hosted by notable medieval characters (such as the astronomer, Copernicus), our group is fitted out with period costumes, before dining on spelt soup followed by tenderly-braised suckling pig and local wine, afore flickering candelabras.

"Attenzione signora!" breathes a quavering voice down my neck as I leave the grounds. Pitchfork in hand, an elderly gardener admonishes me with the tragic tale of Rosania Fulgosio. After committing adultery with her childhood lover, Rosania was buried alive within the castle's walls by her unforgiving husband in the 1200s. I can almost see her ghost appear in the moving canvas of this gentleman's cratered wrinkles as he tells me that many still swear they hear Rosania's screams on stormy nights.

After a nightmare-free(ish) sleep, I click my heels and head for Emilia Romagna's prize jewel. Castell'Arquato, the medieval village par-excellence, was voted one of Italy's most beautiful boroughs. Crowning the tip of a steep cobbled laneway I find the 14th century Rocca Viscontea. Entering its fortified gates is like opening a Russian doll to the Middle Ages. From the russet-stained central square, I face three medieval super-powers: the military in the fortress itself, local government in the 13th century Palazzo del Podesta (magistrates' palace) and Catholicism in the 12th century collegiate church of Santa Maria Assunta.

To the locals' relief (and mine), the military



View of Santa Maria Assunta from Rocca Viscontea



Overlooking the quaint town of Castell'Arquato from Rocca Viscontea



Castello di Vigoleno offers mesmerising views from its terraced gardens

Details

When to go: To take advantage of maximum opening hours and to enjoy the Italian countryside in full bloom, visit between April and September.

Places to stay: Castello di Vigoleno: watchtower accommodation from €200/night, www.castellodivigoleno.it
Residenza Torre di San Martino (Residenza Torre di San Martino): only a catapult's throw from Castello di Rivalta, the Deluxe Junior Suite costs from €500/night, www.torredisanmartino.it

Where to eat: The modest prices of €19/pp for the themed and costumed medieval lunch and €38/pp for the Noblemen's Banquet at Castello di Gropparello are not reflective of the extravagant setting and sumptuous local fare served up on ancient platters. Booking required. T: +39 0523 855814, www.castellodigropparello.it

Castles info: www.castellidelducato.it

castle has been reassigned to tourism. The siege room features a multimedia display where I learn about military attack and defence techniques. But it's the climb to the cloud-shrouded donjon (once a prison) that assaults the senses most. Its height dominates both the town nestled below and the Arda Valley's patchwork of greens beyond. Beneath the tower I hear an opera singer, and then spot a wedding in progress, and become steeped in the enduring romanticism of the medieval.

My last castle encounter is probably in the most resplendent setting of all; the medieval township of Vigoleno. Surrounded by woodlands and vineyards, I march through the elegant ravelin and beneath the arch into town.

Converted into a splendid residence, the prestigious 11th century Castello di Vigoleno sits 350 metres above the meandering River Stirone which divides the Parma and Piacenza provinces. I meander through pristine terraced gardens, peppered with renaissance statues and water features overlooking the split-level pool and Stirone Valley. Once a favourite hide-away for illustrious guests such as Italian writer Gabriele D'Annunzio and German artist Max Ernst, the castle's cavernous interior conceals the smallest theatre in Europe (with enough seats to furnish a doll's house).

After snuggling up in front of a roaring fire which has been crackling since the 1500s, I retire for the night to my 14th century watchtower; a cylindrical retreat coroneted by merlons. Surrounded by antique furniture from the castle's own museum, I absorb the endless narratives of those who have preceded me.

Breakfast will be delivered to my bed tomorrow morning, so this damsel is certainly not in need of rescuing tonight.