

# Light up in



Piazza Vecchia,  
Bergamo

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Nejdet Duzen



# Lombardy

A new Italy-focused escorted tour operator is delving deep into the country's culinary and spiritual soul, discovers **India-Jayne Trainor**

I'm in the hotel kitchen, rolling minced pork and sultanas into tiny balls and pressing them into yellow, hand-stretched handkerchiefs of pasta, before folding them into misshapen bundles.

Our efforts are overseen by Giampiero, whose family own and run the Miramonti Hotel & Spa in the small town of Rota d'Imagna. With his wife, Olga, he deftly creates dozens of neat little *casoncelli*, a traditional Bergamasque pasta, which are then tossed in butter and pancetta ready for us to eat.

This is just the start of our Essence of Lombardy trip, an itinerary created by new trade-only escorted tour operator Magari Tours. The brand was introduced earlier this year by Kent-based Albatross Group to offer a selection of small-group tours across Italy – including Tuscany, Puglia and Umbria – that focus on deeply local experiences. Trips hop around hidden churches, rustic trattorias and countryside vineyards that offer an insight into authentic Italian life, and

feature family-run accommodation and businesses that support local communities.

## IMAGNA VALLEY

To the east of Lake Como is the Imagna Valley, where rolling hills and tiny towns are set against the dramatic backdrop of the snow-capped Bergamasque Prealps. Sliding open the balcony doors of my room on our first day, I spy clouds swirling over the distant hills. We venture there by coach in search of the Cornabusa Sanctuary, a spiritual refuge inside a cave. Led by our friendly and knowledgeable guide, Wendy (who speaks fluent Italian and seems to know every Lombardian we meet), we learn about the history of the sanctuary.

Pulling ourselves away from the panoramic views over the valley below, we're treated to a variety of speciality cheeses, honey and chutneys by local restaurant managers Davide and Simona. ➤



# DESTINATIONS

## ESCORTED TOURS | ITALY



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The commune of Rota d'Imagna; pasta-making class; Bergamo's Città Alta (Upper Town); the atmospheric Cornabusa Sanctuary PICTURES: India-Jayne Trainor

Advise any clients who travel with Magari Tours to pack clothes with a stretchy waistband, thanks to the wonderful culinary experiences on offer. Antica Locanda Roncaglia, a village trattoria in the hills with mountain views, is just one of many, where owner Sara serves up four courses of regional recipes, including wild herb risotto, pork with polenta and homemade pasta. It's followed by some traditional *Elisir de Còrt*, a strong local liqueur made from hay by one of our hotel's staff, which quickly sends us to sleep.

### BERGAMO AND BEYOND

After unwinding in the Miramonti's indoor-outdoor pool and spa, the next morning it's time for some more adventure.

Our 40-minute drive to Bergamo is filled with snippets of local insights from Wendy. The ancient city sits high on a hill, surrounded by Unesco-listed walled fortifications and filled with ornate churches and cobbled streets. We're led around the Città Alta (Upper Town) by another guide, Elena, who shares fascinating details about every church, piazza and museum we pass. Although time is short on our taster fam trip, the full version of this tour also includes the colourful city of Brescia, which is scattered with Roman ruins.

Our next stop is Castello di Grumello, an ancient wine-growing estate that overlooks the sloping vineyards in Valcalepio. We enjoy a tour of the wine cellar before our trio of tastings, paired with breads, meats and cheeses.

We get a welcome chance to stretch our legs just a stone's throw away at Lake Iseo. Surrounded by mountains, the medieval villages along the shoreline are best seen from the water on a scenic boat trip, which is included in the itinerary.

The journey includes a final local experience at Cascina Carretto, a working farm and wine estate. After strolling among the vines and peeking into the sparkling wine cellar, we are served a five-course lunch, all made from home-grown ingredients. By the time we depart, the restaurant is brimming with local families chatting over their glasses of *franciorta* wine – a true taste of Italy. **TW**

### BOOK IT

Magari Tours' seven-day Essence of Lombardy tour has its first departure on October 8, priced from £1,795 including flights, transfers, accommodation, excursions and selected meals. [magaritours.com](http://magaritours.com)

## ASK THE agents



**Tracy Felstead**  
The Travel Concept

"The trip was genuinely authentic and goes to areas where you won't see any other tourists, with lovely family-run hotels and locally produced

food. It's a perfect tour for clients who love Italy and who might have already visited major cities like Florence – they'll enjoy getting under the skin of a less-visited place and adding the beautiful region of Rota d'Imagna to their Italian repertoire. It could also work well for clients who might not have been on a tour before but are considering it – the group size is small and the itinerary goes at a relaxed pace."

**Holly Thomas Wimpres**  
Westway Travel



"What I found amazing about this tour is that it's fully immersive – it's perfect for clients wanting to delve deeper into a new region

of Italy. I love that Magari Tours works with local people, from Giampiero and his family at Miramonti Hotel, to eating at the beautiful hillside restaurant Antica Locanda Roncaglia, run by Sara. It's a very local and sustainable experience. The Cornabusa Sanctuary, with its incredible cave church, was my favourite part of the trip, because it combined a visit to somewhere that sees few tourists with a lovely family-run cheese tasting – two amazing experiences that may not be found on larger group trips."



**Elaine Ferry**  
Elaine's Travel

"The guides were extremely knowledgeable: Wendy was fantastic and an expert in everything we visited. The tours depart in shoulder

seasons, meaning clients won't face the queues or crowds found in the summer months. It's ideal for those who want to explore Lombardy at a slow pace – you really get to enjoy the countryside and surrounding area when you're not driving. I loved visiting the Cornabusa Sanctuary, which was a really spiritual experience, but the entire tour includes so many little stops that you would never find without in-depth local knowledge and connections."

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