

VareseNews

What is interesting in our area? A 1000-year-long walk, from Castiglione Olona to the Torba Monastery

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There is a bit of **Tuscany in Lombardy**, in Varese Province, to be precise. The village of **Castiglione Olona** is a **treasure chest of history**, whose roots date back to times long ago, which has a particular bond with the Tuscan Renaissance. Castiglione Olona has many things for a tourist; what we suggest is a **walk through a thousand years of history**, an **easy walk that is suitable for everyone**, that retraces the steps of ancient emperors and monks. These few kilometres **connect the fifth and fifteenth centuries**, a timespan in which the village was a hub for the most important lines from and to Como, Milan and the Pre-Alps.

The centre of the village looks as though it is **suspended in the atmosphere of the 15th century**. Gabriele D'Annunzio called the village “**a Tuscan Island in Lombardy**”, because of the **ancient heart of the village centre**, which was shaped in accordance with the **canons of Renaissance humanism** at the behest of **Cardinal Branda Castiglioni**, one of the most distinguished men of his time. He was a **connoisseur of the arts, a great diplomat** and a right hand man of several popes and of Emperor Sigismund of Hungary.



The Collegiate Church

Our walk begins at the highest point of the village, **the Collegiate Church**. Situated on the top of the hill that overlooks Castiglione Olona, the Collegiate Church **was built in just 3 years, from 1422 to 1425**, on a design by the **brothers Alberto, Giovanni and Pietro Solari** (who were also involved in the architectural redevelopment in Milan and Pavia, in the wake of the great tradition of the Lombard Romanesque style), and is getting ready to celebrate its **600th year**, in 2022. Before that **7 January of 1422**, when **Pope Martin V granted Cardinal Branda Castiglioni a Bull** authorising him to build the Collegiate Church, this was the site of a castle which had been destroyed and rebuilt several times. As you walk along the streets of the village, you **sense the presence of the ancient castle court**, and see the remains of the castle walls and of the drawbridge. However, before venturing along the narrow streets in the centre of the village, you should visit the Collegiate Church, the Baptistery and the Rectoria. The complex also hosts a coffee shop.

COLLEGIATE CHURCH OPENING TIMES

The Collegiate Church is open **from Wednesday to Sunday**, from 10.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m., and from 3.00 p.m. to 6.00 p.m.

The **full ticket price** is €6, and the reduced ticket price is €4.

For all of the details about visits, opening times and conditions for groups, **[click here](#)**.



The Branda Palace

Let's now head on towards the centre of the village, along the street that leads to Piazza Garibaldi and to the **Branda Castiglioni Museum (Castiglioni Palace)**, which was the **Cardinal's residence** and which today houses within its walls the **works of Masolino and Vecchietta** (students of **Leon Battista Alberti**), a clear image of its owner's humanist mindset. The Cardinal's descendants continued the artistic enrichment of the building, commissioning several works and family portraits. Like the Collegiate Church, the Branda Palace can also be visited.



BRANDA CASTIGLIONI MUSEUM OPENING TIMES

The Branda Palace is open on **Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday**, from 9.00 a.m. to 12.00 p.m. and from 3.00 p.m. to 6.00 p.m.

On **Sunday**, from 3.00 p.m. to 6.00 p.m. (during the Summer, it can be visited also in the morning, from 10.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.)

The full **ticket price** is €3.00, and the reduced ticket price is €2.00.

For all of the details about visits, opening times and conditions for groups, [click here](#).

The Olona River and the RTO Park

On coming out of Palazzo Branda, take Via Roma and walk along the side of the walls, descending gradually to a small bridge over another feature of this trip: **the River Olona**. On the other side of the river, just a few metres from the bridge, there is a **pedestrian and cycle path**, which follows the river for tens of kilometres, and which takes you to your next destination: **Torba and the monastery, a UNESCO site.**



Walk beside the slow-flowing river, **surrounded by the lush greenery** of the **Rile Tenore Olona (RTO) Park**, a **1550 m²** “lung” that is extremely important from an ecological point of view, because of its strategic position in one of the most urbanised parts of Lombardy. Along the 3 km to Torba, you might see herons, amphibians and small mammals, as you **follow in the footsteps of ancient monks and emperors**. Yes, because the pedestrian and cycle path you are on coincides with a section of the **Via Francisca del Lucomagno**, the ancient route that pilgrims travelling from Germany and Switzerland to Pavia (and then on to Rome) used to cross the Alps. It is currently the object of a recovery and redevelopment project, and today boasts many reception facilities along the route and **hundreds of pilgrims** who walk it every year.



And while they continue their journey on to Pavia, we come, **after a 40-minute walk** beside the river, to the **Monastery of Torba: a UNESCO site protected by the Italian National Trust – FAI**. From 1400, in just a few steps, **we have reached 400 AD**, when the Romans built an **outpost** here, near Castelseprio, to halt the advance of the Barbarians. Its watchtower, which is still clearly visible, is a reminder of its function as a defensive *castrum*.



The church and the convent of which it consists were **built in the 8th century** by **Benedictine nuns**. It was distinguished by its all-female management for seven hundred years. The memory and testimony of their religious life can be relived in the tower, which is full of beautiful frescoes that are not without mystery. When the nuns left the convent, it went through a period of decay and it was **only in 1976, thanks to the FAI**, that it was restored. Continual findings from the Longobard era led to **its inclusion in the UNESCO list of Heritage Sites, in the series “Longobards in Italy: Places of Power”**, which includes six other places that preserve artistic works and monuments of the period.

MONASTERY OF TORBA OPENING TIMES

The Monastery is open **until 30 September, from Wednesday to Sunday: 10.00 a.m. – 6.00 p.m.**

From 1 October to 8 December, from Wednesday to Sunday: 10.00 a.m. – 5.00 p.m.

Guided tours are available, for a fee, in Italian and English (**to book, click here**).

Back to the future

The complex is surrounded by greenery and has a non-equipped **picnic area, toilets, a bar and a restaurant** where you can take a break and enjoy the atmosphere of the place in full, before setting off again **to return ... to the 1400s**, to the village of Castiglione Olona, along the same pedestrian and cycle path taken on the way out. Almost a journey back to the future: to the 1400s of Renaissance Humanism, and then on to the present day.

Total distance, roundtrip: approx. 8 km

Travel time roundtrip: 2 hours (excluding visits)



HOW TO GET TO CASTIGLIONE OLONA

By car: A8 Milan-Varese motorway, exit in Gazzada, then take the SP57 for 4 kilometres to Lozza, where you turn towards Castiglione Olona.

By train: the nearest railway station is Venegono Superiore, on the Milan-Saronno-Varese-Laveno line (4 km)

By bus: the Varese – Lozza – Castiglione Olona – Tradate line (stop in Via Mazzucchelli – 500 metres)

By bicycle: the Valle Olona cycle path from Castellanza to Castiglione Olona (Via Mazzucchelli – 500 metres)

Near the route:

The TIGROS supermarket, Castiglione Olona

Via Cesare Battisti, 95, 21043 Castiglione Olona VA

0331 857107

Open daily, from 8.00 a.m. to 8.00 p.m.

Sunday from 8.30 a.m.

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