



Aosta, Como & the Italian Alps

Churches, Castles & Roman Ruins

26 June–3 July 2022 (MI 397)

8 days • £3,070

Lecturer: John McNeill

An important and influential area for Roman and medieval architecture – secular and sacred.

Travels through charming and relatively unexplored areas of north-west Italy.

Led by renowned architectural historian John McNeill.

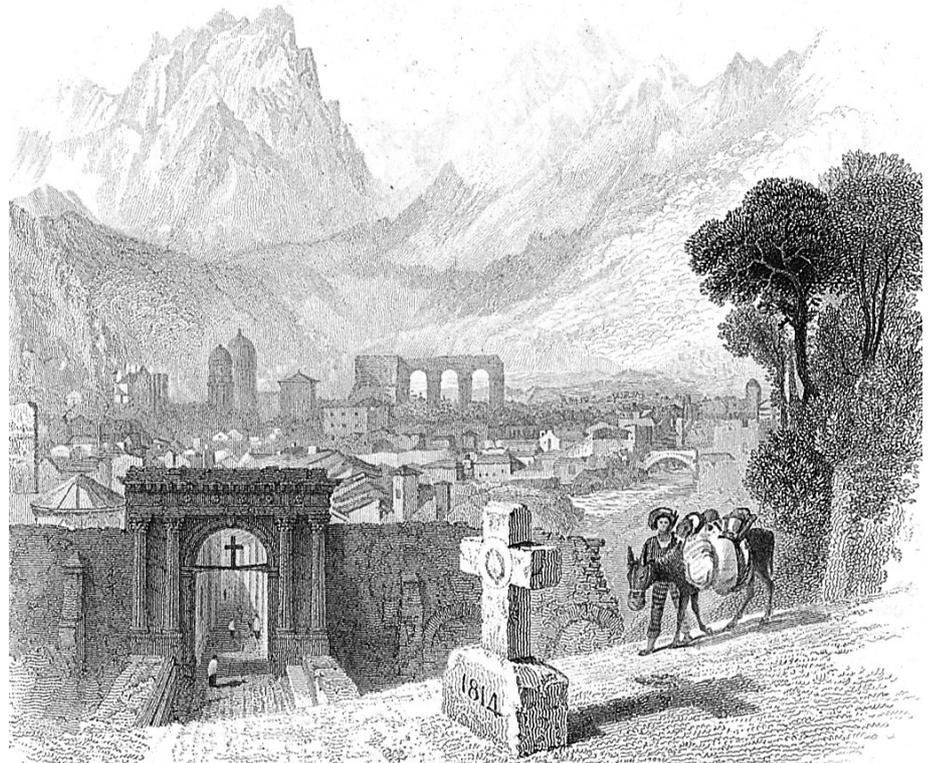
Attractive, well preserved town centres and a dramatic mountain landscape.

Italy's alpine frontiers are better known for their skiing than their monumental culture, though there is, in fact, no shortage of architecturally distinguished towns that sit within the foothills. This tour intends to take advantage of that by joining the upper Rhone and Val d'Aosta with the great monuments of northern Lombardy. The north-western Alps thus form the backdrop, one that lends a particular cultural and topographical character to the two towns that act as our bases.

Both Aosta and Como lie at the southern end of major mountain passes linking Italy with north-western Europe. The Romans acknowledged this by creating a major city within the plain (Milan) and a line of cities beneath the Alps (Como, Varese, Ivrea). At the point closest to the most important of the western Alpine trade-routes – the Great St-Bernard Pass – Augustus established the city of Aosta.

An impressive amount survives of Roman Aosta, which forms the basis of what we shall see. Even more remarkable are the survivals from the early Middle Ages – the tiny chapel at Castelseprio, the stunning church treasures in Monza and, among major early Romanesque buildings, the recently restored crypt at Ivrea and spectacular wall-paintings of c. AD 1000 at Sant'Orso at Aosta. While to the east, steps towards a fully articulated and sculpturally enriched Romanesque architecture were taken in the last quarter of the 11th century at Como and Milan, and in their wake Lombard architectural sculpture came of age. By the beginning of the 13th-century public spaces were alive with richly sculpted façades and got their first taste of the communal palace – whose dramatic juxtapositions of tower, raised hall and staircase were probably born here – and spectacularly survive in the Broletto at Como.

Full-dress Gothic arrived over the Alps, and there is no doubting the verve with which Vercelli attempted to emulate the luminous



Aosta, steel engraving c. 1850.

and crystalline shaftwork of Lausanne cathedral. Successors were less impressed, and ambivalence to Gothic constitutes another theme – seen at one level in the minimal Gothic of the mendicant churches, and at another in the folie-de-grandeur of the new cathedral of Milan.

Itinerary

Day 1: Lausanne (Switzerland). Fly at c. 9.30am (British Airways) from London Heathrow to Geneva, then transfer by coach to Lausanne. Visit Geneva cathedral, one of two great early Gothic cathedrals built on the north-western slopes of the Alps in the late 12th century, before driving along the shore of Lac Léman to Lausanne. Overnight in Lausanne.

Day 2: Lausanne, Sion, Martigny (Switzerland), Aosta (Italy). A morning devoted to Lausanne cathedral, the second of the great Gothic cathedrals, whose magnificent rose window and fully-painted south portal vie with the most splendid of northern French Gothic buildings. Afternoon in the upper

valley of the River Rhone at the wonderfully picturesque late medieval church of Notre-Dame de Valère in Sion and at Roman Martigny. Drive across the Great St Bernard Pass to Aosta, where the first of two nights is spent.

Day 3: Aosta, Fenis. In the morning, there is an exploratory walk around the ancient core of the city. Start with a visit to the Roman theatre, built in the first century, its southern façade is still intact. The early Christian Basilica of S. Lorenzo was built on top of a protohistoric funerary settlement. The collegiate church of S. Orso contains a beautiful 15th-century choir and its cloister, completed in the early 12th century, is a great example of Romanesque sculpture. In the afternoon there is an excursion to the late medieval castle of Fenis, built as a residence for the Challant family.

Day 4: Issogne, Ivrea, Vercelli. The morning is spent in the Val d'Aosta, stopping at the exquisite 15th-century painted castle of Issogne. Continue onwards to the early medieval cathedral of S. Maria Assunta at

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Ivrea. Afternoon drive through the rice fields to Vercelli, home to the stunning early Gothic church of Sant'Andrea. First of four nights in Como.

Day 5: Como. Begin this morning's visits with the epoch-making communal palace, the Broletto. Construction began on the adjacent cathedral in 1396, and its walls are decorated with paintings by Luini and Ferrari. Continue to the civic museum which has a collection of both Greek and Egyptian artefacts as well as local archaeological findings – Paleolithic, Roman and Medieval. See also the magnificent Romanesque Basilica of S. Abbondio. Free afternoon.

Day 6: Milan. A full day excursion to Milan, beginning with fourth-century S. Lorenzo. The church of S. Ambrogio is one of northern Italy's most important survivals from the early middle ages, the fabric largely of the fourth–13th centuries. See also the city's surprisingly little-known archaeological museum, which explores the history of ancient Milan. In the afternoon, visit Milan's spectacular marble cathedral, the greatest Gothic building in Italy.

Day 7: Castelseprio, Castiglione Olona, Cantù. A varied day in the hills around Como. Castelseprio, the site of a Roman fort in antiquity, and Torba form a gloriously juxtaposed pair of early medieval buildings. Castiglione Olona was rebuilt in the 15th century with frescoes by Masolino. In Cantù, San Vincenzo Galliano retains the most important early Romanesque paintings in Lombardy.

Day 8: Monza. Morning excursion to Monza to see the stunning early medieval cathedral treasury, famed for the Lombard Queen Theodolinda's early medieval gifts. Afternoon flight from Milan Linate, arriving London Heathrow at c.3.15pm.

Lecturer

John McNeill. Specialist in the Middle Ages and Renaissance – lectures for Oxford University's Department of Continuing Education. He is Honorary Secretary of the British Archaeological Association, for whom he has edited and contributed to collections of essays on medieval cloisters, chantries, Anjou, and King's Lynn and the Fens. In 2010 he established a biennial series

of international conferences on Romanesque visual culture. His most recent effort in this field – *Romanesque Patrons and Processes* – was published in 2018. He is also author of the *Blue Guides* to both Normandy and the Loire Valley.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,070 or £2,950 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £3,640 or £3,520 without flights.

Included: Flights (Euro Traveller) with British Airways (Airbus 320 and 321); travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts; 4 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer.

Accommodation. Château d'Ouchy, Lausanne (chateaudouchy.ch): comfortable 4-star hotel on the shores of Lake Geneva. **Hotel Duca d'Aosta, Aosta** (alpissima.it): recently renovated 4-star hotel in the city centre. **Palace Hotel, Como** (palacehotel.it) prestigious 4-star hotel with excellent location. *Single rooms throughout are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? There is a lot of walking, some of it over rough ground on archaeological sites: agility, stamina and sure-footedness are essential. Coaches are not allowed into historic centres. Many of the historical buildings visited are sprawling and vast. The tour should not be attempted by anyone who has difficulty with everyday walking and stair-climbing. Fitness is essential. Some days involve a lot of driving. Average distance by coach per day: 64 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.