

Piedmontese sanctuary rewards all pilgrims

By Necee Regis
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

OROPA, Italy — We're huddled on a rock, my friend Lori and I, two city gals on a moderate hike along a ridge in the Biella Alps, pondering the habits of animals in the wild.

In front of us: 24 goats with slits for eyes and enormous curved horns.

Surrounding us: a 360-degree view of craggy mountain peaks, clusters of small villages nestled amid steeply sloping forested hills, and cumulus clouds drifting past almost at eye level.

Beneath us: The sprawling complex of the Sanctuary of Oropa, appearing and disappearing in gauzy fog. From this height, its monumental architecture is reduced to the size of Monopoly houses, glinting in the waning light. The sanctuary is our destination, once we navigate around the goats.

According to historical lore, the sanctuary was founded in the fourth century, though its first mention in written documents is the beginning of the 13th century, when its two simple churches served as a resting point for travelers in the region. Fast forward 800 years, and it's a popular destination in its own right. One of the largest Marian sanctuaries in the Alpine curve, it attracts pilgrims devoted to its medieval statue of the Black Madonna as well as those who simply wish to revel in the magnificent setting.

The sanctuary is 6 miles from the town of Biella, the capital of the province of the same name in the Piedmont region. At an altitude of almost 4,000 feet, and ringed by mountains with even higher peaks, the sanctuary could easily serve as the backdrop for a remake of "The Sound of Music."

The property unfolds like a map, with three levels of grand courtyards leading one to the next. From the parking area, stone and metal gates open onto the first square bordered by multilevel porticos housing gift shops, a dozen restaurants and cafes, and the office for overnight guests to check into one of the 300-plus rooms.

At the far end of this commerce-oriented square, an enormous flight of steps leads to a curved atrium and the second courtyard. Flanked by two-story Baroque buildings, the square is home to the 16th-century Basilica Antica. Inside, a conserved ninth-century shrine — considered a church within the church — is where to find the Black Madonna. Covered with gold and precious stones, the Swiss pine-wood statue was carved in the nearby Aosta Valley in the 13th century.

The third square, gained after another imposing flight of steps, is dominated by the Basilica Superiore, whose green and gold dome topped with an octagonal lantern adorns the landscape like a multitiered cake.

One could easily spend days wandering the grounds of the sanctuary, and many do. The Treasure Museum displays archaeological finds dating to 200 BC, a collection of jewelry, crowns, chalices, monstrances, and historic paintings. One can also tour the 18th-century apartment of the Royal House of Savoy.

Most captivating of all are two galleries above the porticos in the central courtyard. In long hallways with arched ceilings and stone floors, the walls are covered by hundreds of votive paintings (or ex-votos) dating back centuries. These small, curious images, executed by anonymous artists, were created as a way to give thanks to the Black Madonna for providing aid in a time of need. Most scenes depict traumas from ordinary life: a horse-drawn wagon almost crushes a man; doctors gather around a patient in an operating room; a



PHOTOS BY NEECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Across a courtyard of the Sanctuary of Oropa stands the Basilica Superiore. Ex-votos line a sanctuary wall, in gratitude to the Virgin Mary for help. Outside the city, goats roam a hillside.



woman slips off a bridge and falls toward rocks in a river below.

The art-as-religious-installation theme continues in the Sacro Monte chapels, 12 structures built in the 17th and 18th centuries that are now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Each chapel contains life-size painted terra cotta figurines depicting scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary. The experience of walking up the hill, from scene to scene, was conceived as a kind of sacred theater. The largest and most grandiose installation in the cycle can be found in the last chapel, where over 150 sculptures of angels and assorted saints rise toward Mary's coronation in heaven.

Sports and nature enthusiasts will take advantage of the Special Nature Reserve. Founded in 2005, it covers 3,700 acres and, depending on the season, offers opportunities for hiking, fishing, ice diving, mountain biking, and downhill or cross-country skiing. Many paths begin directly from the sanctuary, and there's also a cable car to a peak at 5,900 feet from which it's a short hike to Mucreone Lake. Beyond the lake, it's possible to access a section of the Grande Traversate delle Alpi, or GTA, a hike that links all the

valleys in Piedmont.

If you venture down the mountain, there's plenty to see and do in the area.

The province of Biella is known for its yarns, wool, and cashmere. More than 1,000 textile companies operate in the area, including Ermenegildo Zegna, Cerruti, and Piacenza. Many facilities have factory stores that are open to the public, with prices below what you find in the States or larger Italian cities.

The town of Biella, population 45,000, is a lovely place to stroll, shop, sip cappuccino, and explore well-preserved historic sites. The upper, medieval section is easily accessed by funicular, and has a lively farmers' market and restaurants in its central square. The lower city dates from Roman times. In the Cathedral of St. Stefano is a painting known as the Sunday Christ. (You have to ask to see this work — and you should — located in a side room from the main church.) The circa 1470 work is a rare piece of medieval iconography outlawed by the Council of Trent. In it, Christ is pierced and wounded by tools of the era: pitchforks, axes, machetes, trowels, hammers, and scissors. The moral? If you work on Sunday, you hurt Jesus.

If you go . . .

How to get there

Oropa is approximately 70 miles from Malpensa Airport in Milan. For fly and drive options, US-based Central Holidays custom creates programs for individuals or groups, including hotel stays and rail transportation. 800-935-5000; www.centralholidays.com

Where to stay

Sanctuary of Oropa
011-39-015-2555-1200
www.santuariodioropa.it
Doubles \$48-\$158.

Where to eat

Ristorante Croce Bianca
Sanctuary of Oropa
011-39-015-245-5923
www.ristorantecrocebianca.it
One of several restaurants on the sanctuary grounds. Elegant dining, Piedmontese specialties. Entrees \$26-\$40.

Ristorante Antico Ca d'Gamba

Via Basilio Bona 78
13817 Sordevolo
011-39-015-256-8813
Casual fine dining. Regional specialties include risotto, gnocchi, veal with mushrooms. Entrees \$16-\$21.

Caffe' Ristoro Stazione Cucco

Piazza Cucco, 10b, Biella
011-39-015-263-42
Casual dining inside or out at the top of the funicular. Affordable, fresh pastas, salads, meat and seafood dishes, and desserts. Entrees \$7-\$13.

What to do

Sanctuary of Oropa
Basilica Antica and Superiore, Treasure Museum, Savoy Royal Apartments, ex-votos, cemetery, library, Sacro Monte, Special Nature Reserve, Oropa Cable Car. www.santuariodioropa.it

Tour Biella

Information Office
Piazza Vittorio Veneto 3
011-39-015-35-11-28
www.atl.biella.it

It's also well worth a detour to the nearby town of Sordevolo, where folk theater is elevated to high art. Once every five years for the past two centuries, the 1,200 townspeople produce a play, "La Passione," from June through September. The three-hour performance, a highly polished spectacle reenacting the Passion of Christ, involves 400 actors and almost 1,000 volunteers. If you visit in an off-performance year, the Museum of the Passion illustrates the tradition through photos, film, costumes, and artifacts.

As for wine and food, the region is celebrated for both. Wines like Dolcetto d'Alba, Barolo, and Erbaluce are enjoyed with dishes such as polenta with mountain cheese and butter, polenta with game, risotto, and braised beef. The area is also known for its hazelnuts, truffles, chocolate, and cow and goat cheeses.

Up on the mountain, we eye the goats that are eyeing us.

"Are they wagging their tails in a friendly way?" I say.

We'll never know for sure, but as our thoughts turn from goats to cheese, to wine with dinner, we throw caution to the wind. Circumnavigating the herd, we make our way, like so many pilgrims before us, down the trail to the sanctuary.

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The Black Madonna in the Basilica Antica in the Sanctuary of Oropa.

Maps for walking tour of city: Cathedral of St. Stephen, gardens, funicular, boutique shops, cafes.

La Passione and Museum of the Passion

Sordevolo
011-39-015-256-2486
www.passionedicristo.org/index_eng.php
Three-hour Passion Play performed every five years for past two centuries, \$28-\$46. In off-performance years, museum offers historical films and artifacts, free.

Piacenza Outlet Store

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