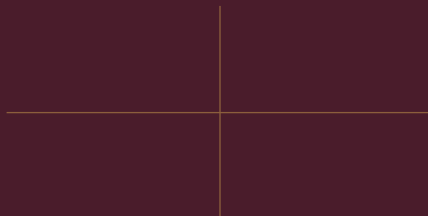


Sacred Stones of Asti & Monferrato

A Guide to the Historic Churches of the Astigiano

Seven centuries of faith, art & devotion

Piedmont · Italy



A Land Built on Faith

Asti is, above all, a city of towers, wine and prayer. Long before the first Nebbiolo vine was planted on these rolling hills, the Astigiani were building churches — Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque — each one a record of the age that raised it and the faith that sustained it. The seven churches in this guide span more than eight hundred years of history, from a hilltop sanctuary first recorded in the 11th century to a sanctuary built over a medieval city gate that is still a living centre of popular devotion today.

Together, they form a kind of walking biography of the city: plague vows and noble patronage, martyred saints and masterpiece paintings, Baroque pomp and medieval simplicity. Whether you visit on a bright autumn morning or a quiet winter afternoon, each church offers something unexpected — a fresco tucked in a dark apse, a carved stone that has been touched by ten thousand hands, a view over the vineyards that has not changed in centuries.

This guide is arranged in a suggested visiting order, beginning at the hilltop sanctuary of Viatosto and working inwards to the heart of the old city.

Church I**Chiesa di Santa Maria di Viatosto**

The Madonna on the Hill · c. 11th–14th century

LOCATION

Borgo Viatosto, ~4 km north-west of Asti

ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

Romanesque-Gothic

Perched on a gentle hill north-west of Asti, Santa Maria di Viatosto is one of the most beloved churches in the Astigiano. The earliest records, dating to the 11th century, call the site *Santa Maria de Riparupta* — a name whose Latin root suggests rupture or ruin — and archaeological excavations in the 1990s uncovered 11th-century burials beneath the left chapel, all oriented towards the east in the Christian tradition.

The present building owes its character to a dramatic episode of civic devotion. In 1340 a wave of plague swept through Asti. The city's noble families made a solemn vow: if the Virgin interceded and the pestilence ended, they would rebuild her hilltop church. According to tradition, the plague ceased *via tosto* — 'very quickly' — and the name Viatosto was born. Construction of the new Gothic church followed in the 1340s–50s, funded by the great Astigiani families whose heraldic crests still appear on the keystone bosses of the ribbed vaults inside.

The interior — three naves, cross-vaulted, with quadrilobed pilasters — preserves a remarkable cycle of frescoes attributed to the anonymous 'Maestro di Viatosto', painted in the 1380s–90s. Look for the Annunciation, Saint George slaying the dragon, and above all the rare *ex-voto* known as the 'Legend of Viatosto': three kneeling Astigiani noblemen presenting their plague vow before the Madonna, with Saint Anthony Abbot interceding on their behalf. A recurring motif of nursing Madonnas suggests the church was also a place of pilgrimage for young mothers seeking protection during childbirth.

The 14th-century wooden Madonna enthroned in the apse niche — the Christ Child playing with a small bird — is considered among the finest local sculptures of the Trecento. In 1660, Pope Alexander VII established a Confraternity of Maria Ausiliatrice here, granting plenary indulgences to those who visited on the second Sunday of May.

◆ NOT TO MISS

The 14th-century wooden Madonna · The 'Legend of Viatosto' fresco (plague of 1340) · Panoramic view of Asti from the churchyard

Church II

Collegiata di San Secondo

Church of Asti's Patron Saint · 13th–15th century

LOCATION

Piazza San Secondo, historic centre

ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

Romanesque-Gothic

Standing at the very heart of Asti, the Collegiata di San Secondo is the city's most historically charged church — the place where, according to ancient tradition, the Roman soldier Secundus was martyred and buried in 119 AD under the Emperor Hadrian. The earliest document mentioning the site dates to 880 AD, making it one of the oldest continuously venerated spots in Piedmont.

Secundus of Asti is said to have been a Roman officer who converted to Christianity and, after performing works of mercy, was arrested, tortured, and beheaded at this very location. His feast day, 30 March, is celebrated with great solemnity, and his silver reliquary — housed in the 6th-century crypt whose ancient columns you can still see today — is one of the most venerated objects in the entire region.

The present building dates primarily from 1256 and continued growing through the 14th and 15th centuries. Its terracotta façade, completed around 1462, features three magnificent marble portals; inside, twelve columns support arches and cross-vaults over a Latin cross plan. The left nave contains a masterpiece by the Astigiani painter Gandolfino d'Asti, completed around 1520, depicting the Madonna enthroned with saints and donors.

From the 10th century onwards, the Collegiata became deeply identified with the city's merchant class — it was known for centuries as *San Secondo de Mercato*. Today it is inseparable from Asti's most famous tradition: the Palio. Each year, the colourful Palio banners won by competing districts are ceremonially presented to the church in a medieval pageant known as the 'Offering of the Palio', held on the first Tuesday of May. The Carroccio — the historic war-wagon of the Astigiani — is permanently housed in the first chapel of the right aisle.

◆ NOT TO MISS

The 6th-century crypt and silver reliquary · The polyptych by Gandolfino d'Asti (c.1520) · The Palio drapes and Carroccio in the first right-hand chapel

Church III

Cattedrale di Asti

Duomo di Santa Maria Assunta · 14th century (origins 5th–6th century)

LOCATION

Piazza Cattedrale, historic centre

ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

Gothic (Lombard), with Romanesque campanile

The Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta is the spiritual and architectural crown of Asti — one of the largest Gothic churches in all of Piedmont, stretching 82 metres in length and soaring to 24 metres in height. Its origins reach back to the 5th or 6th century, when the first episcopal church was raised within the city walls. In 1095, a rebuilt Romanesque cathedral was consecrated by Pope Urban II himself, who was passing through Asti on his way back from Clermont, where he had just proclaimed the First Crusade.

The present Gothic structure is the result of three major rebuilding campaigns spanning seven centuries. The principal reconstruction began around 1309–27 under French bishop Arnaldo de Rosette, whose episcopal crest appears on the capitals of the nave pillars. By 1354 the great Gothic shell was largely complete: terracotta and tuff, polychrome decorative bands, and soaring pointed arches expressing the full ambition of Lombard Gothic. The Romanesque campanile, rebuilt from 1266 and containing nine bells, predates the current nave and stands as a symbol of the city's medieval power.

Inside, one of the most precious survivals is an 11th-century polychrome floor mosaic in the presbytery — a rare relic of the earlier Romanesque cathedral beneath the Gothic grandeur above. The side entrance on the south, the Portico Pelletta, was embellished in 1470 by the wealthy Pelletta family and features a marble statue of the Assumption surrounded by winged angels. The cathedral holds major works by Gandolfino d'Asti, including the painting of the Madonna Enthroned, and a striking group of terracotta sculptures depicting the Deposition (1502).

An extraordinary footnote: in 1718, a Eucharistic Miracle was reported here — a consecrated host that reportedly turned to blood. The relics were authenticated by Church authorities and are still preserved in the Cathedral today. When the Duke Vittorio Amedeo II of Savoy visited in 1711 and saw the still-low apse relative to the towering nave, he reportedly called it 'a superb body with a humble head' — prompting the 18th-century raising of the apse by architect Bernardo Vittone.

◆ NOT TO MISS

The 11th-century floor mosaic in the presbytery · The Romanesque bell tower (1266) · The Portico Pelletta side entrance · Works by Gandolfino d'Asti

Church IV**Chiesa di Santa Caterina**

Church of Saint Catherine · Consecrated 1773

LOCATION

Rione Santa Caterina, adjacent to Corso Alfieri

ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

Baroque with early Neoclassical influences

The Chiesa di Santa Caterina, dedicated to Saint Catherine of Alexandria, stands at the eastern edge of Asti's historic centre, where Corso Alfieri opens towards the wider city. It is the sole church in Asti to have been included in the prestigious catalogue of the 1963 Piedmontese Baroque Exhibition — a distinction that speaks to the quality and coherence of its interior decoration.

Consecrated in 1773, the church represents the mature Baroque spirit that swept through Piedmont in the 18th century, touched here by early Neoclassical restraint in its proportions and detailing. Its dedication to Saint Catherine of Alexandria — the learned early Christian martyr associated with philosophy and scholarship — reflects the intellectual currents of the age.

Behind the church, the Torre Rossa (Red Tower) rises as one of the most unusual ancient monuments in Asti. This extraordinary 16-sided Roman tower was built during the imperial period and later incorporated into the city's medieval defences, eventually serving as the bell tower for the earlier church dedicated to Saint Catherine that preceded the present 18th-century building. The interplay of Roman stonework and medieval brick gives this corner of Asti a layered historical atmosphere unlike anywhere else in the city.

A visit here pairs beautifully with a walk along Corso Alfieri — Asti's elegant main thoroughfare — and the nearby ancient city walls, where the Roman, medieval and Baroque layers of the city's history can be read almost like an open book.

◆ NOT TO MISS

The only Asti church in the 1963 Piedmontese Baroque Exhibition catalogue · The ancient Torre Rossa (Red Tower) visible behind the church — a 16-sided Roman structure reused as a medieval bell tower

Church V**Chiesa di San Rocco***Church of Saint Roch · Built 1720*

LOCATION

Historic centre of Asti

ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

Baroque

The Chiesa di San Rocco was built in 1720 for the Confraternity of Saint Roch, a brotherhood that had previously gathered at the Collegiata di San Secondo. San Rocco (Saint Roch or Roque) was a 14th-century French pilgrim who devoted himself to caring for plague victims across Italy, contracting the disease himself before miraculously recovering. His intercession was widely invoked against plague and epidemic, making him one of the most popular saints in northern Italy.

The Confraternity of Saint Roch was a lay religious brotherhood dedicated to serving the sick and accompanying the dying — a deeply practical expression of Counter-Reformation piety. Members wore a distinctive long cream-coloured hooded robe with a green sash — the same colours in which the hamlet of San Martino-San Rocco still runs in Asti's famous Palio horse race today, a living thread connecting the 18th-century confraternity to modern civic life.

The church's sober exposed-brick façade gives little hint of the richly Baroque interior within: tall rectangular grooved columns with ornate Corinthian capitals, a single nave with side chapels, and a dome flooding the space with light. The magnificent high altar by Francesco Ferrari, composed of a great variety of polychrome marbles, is the centrepiece — a typical expression of the Piedmontese Baroque love of colour and luxury.

The church's history has been turbulent. French soldiers were billeted here as prisoners in 1793; Austrian troops requisitioned it in 1800 and dismantled the organ. Flooding in both 1943 and 1994 caused further damage. That it survives in such fine condition today is testament to the continued devotion of the Astigiani faithful.

◆ NOT TO MISS

The high altar in polychrome marble by Francesco Ferrari · The ornate Corinthian capitals on the interior columns · The dome over the single nave

Church VI**Chiesa della Madonna Addolorata***Our Lady of Sorrows · Founded 1724*

LOCATION

Historic centre of Asti

ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

Baroque

The Chiesa della Madonna Addolorata — also known as *degli Alterni* — was founded in 1724 at the initiative of Abbot Michele Vittorio Della Villa, who would later become Bishop of Ivrea. It is dedicated to the Madonna Addolorata, or Our Lady of Sorrows: the Virgin Mary in her grief at the Passion and death of Christ, a devotion that found particular resonance in the Baroque era's engagement with human suffering and compassion.

The church's most precious treasure is a wooden sculptural group depicting the Pietà — Christ laid across his mother's knees — dating to the early 15th century and showing the earliest Flemish artistic influences to reach this corner of Piedmont. Scholars have noted the distinctive draping of the mantle and the emotional posture of the figures, drawing comparisons to works from the Meuse valley tradition, suggesting connections between the Villa family's patronage and the sophisticated artistic networks of northern Europe.

Today the church remains a living centre of popular devotion. Each year, on the feast of the Addolorata, the statue of Our Lady of Sorrows is carried through the streets of Asti in solemn procession, accompanied by the faithful — one of the most atmospheric and moving traditions in the city's religious calendar. This kind of street procession, rooted in medieval confraternal piety and continuing into the present day, is one of the aspects of Astigiani life that most surprises and moves visitors from outside Italy.

◆ NOT TO MISS

The early 15th-century wooden Pietà with Flemish influences · The annual Good Friday procession through the streets of Asti

Church VII

Santuario della Beata Vergine del Portone

Our Lady, Gate of Paradise · Built 1902 (origins medieval)

LOCATION

Via Ospedale / San Marco district

ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

Romanesque-Byzantine

Of all Asti's churches, the Santuario della Beata Vergine del Portone has perhaps the most intriguing origin. Its name — *Porta Paradisi*, the Gate of Paradise — derives not from theological metaphor but from physical reality: the sanctuary was built directly above one of the medieval gates in Asti's city walls, the Porta San Giuliano, the passage between the western and southern quarters of the city.

Medieval city gates were natural focal points for popular devotion: images of the Madonna were routinely placed at gates to invoke her protection over those entering and leaving. At this particular gate, a painted image of the Madonna enthroned with the Christ Child attracted growing veneration. Around 1500, the great Astigiani painter Gandolfino da Roreto retouched and enriched the image, adding on either side the figures of San Secondo, Asti's patron saint, and San Marco, patron of the local hamlet — a work of quiet beauty that became the spiritual heart of the entire district.

A staircase with a wooden loggia was constructed beneath the fresco to allow devotees to approach it, and in 1689 a small chapel was built around it. The present imposing sanctuary — Romanesque-Byzantine in style, with three naves, a soaring 41-metre dome topped by a gilded copper Virgin, and an atrium of Byzantine granite columns — was erected in 1902 to replace the modest 17th-century chapel, while carefully preserving the earlier sacred spaces within. The Baroque sacellum, the innermost heart of the sanctuary, retains a remarkable late-Baroque fresco cycle depicting scenes from the life of the Madonna.

In 2002, on the occasion of the sanctuary's centenary, the façade was enriched with mosaics and statues of Asti's patron saints — a statement of civic and spiritual pride that connects the medieval gate, the Renaissance painter, the Baroque chapel and the modern city in a single act of devotion.

◆ NOT TO MISS

The 14th-century Madonna fresco retouched by Gandolfino da Roreto (c.1500) · The 41-metre dome · The Baroque sacellum with its 17th-century fresco cycle

Practical Notes

Most of Asti's churches are open for visits in the morning (typically 9:00–12:00) and again in the late afternoon (15:30–18:00), though hours vary by season and religious feast days. The Cathedral, Collegiata di San Secondo and the Madonna del Portone sanctuary have the most regular hours. Santa Maria di Viatosto, being a short walk from the city, is best visited on a clear day when the panorama over the Astigiani hills — and on bright days, the distant Alps — is at its finest.

Entrance to all these churches is free, though donations towards their upkeep are warmly welcomed. Appropriate dress (covered shoulders and knees) is expected and appreciated. Photography is generally permitted in the nave but not during services — when in doubt, simply ask.

The Palio di Asti

If you visit in September, you will encounter Asti at its most theatrical. The Palio — a bareback horse race among the city's historic districts and neighbouring towns — is Italy's oldest recorded horse race and takes place on the third Sunday of the month in Piazza Alfieri, preceded by a magnificent medieval pageant through the old streets. San Secondo, the Collegiata, and the Palio are inseparable: the winning banner is offered to the saint, and the Carroccio in the church stands as a permanent reminder of Asti's proud medieval identity.

We hope this small guide deepens your experience of this extraordinary corner of Piedmont. The stones here have been worn smooth by centuries of hands and feet, and the silence inside each church carries the weight of all that history — waiting to be discovered.