

The Art & Palladian Villas of Northern Italy

We met at daybreak on 20 May 2013 and made our way to Gatwick airport. The journey went well and our Tour Manager Ludovico was waiting for us in Verona along with Bruno our coach driver. En route to our hotel we passed the town of Soave, familiar all over Europe for its dry white wine, and saw its ancient castle "Rocca Scaligera" perched on the hilltop. Shortly before reaching our hotel we passed the Villa Giusti: the Armistice signed here on November 3rd 1918 ended warfare between Italy and Austria-Hungary on the Italian Front in World War One. We arrived at the 4* Terme Roma Hotel in Abano Terme at lunchtime, checked into our rooms and had the rest of the day to benefit from our early start and relax. Several people made use of the swimming pools and Jacuzzi which were all filled by thermal springs. Others made use of the time to explore the nearby pedestrian area with its stylish shops and cafes. Many of the latter were caught in a dramatic storm with torrential rain and the loudest clap of thunder we had ever heard. The day finished with dinner at 7.30pm and an early night.

On **Tuesday morning** we set off at 8.30am for Villa Barbaro at Maser. The villa was bathed in sunshine when we arrived with sweeping views of the surrounding countryside equally beautiful in the sun. The pastoral frescoes by Veronese inside were exceptional. Some of us thought they must have been heavily restored but our guide, Monica, assured us they had not. The cuckoo was singing as we left the villa and set off for Asolo in the foothills of the Dolomites for lunch. The attractive tiny walled town was once ruled by Queen Caterina Cornaro (1454–1510) the Venetian wife of the King of Cyprus, who poisoned her husband so that Venice would gain Cyprus. She then swapped Cyprus for a castle in Asolo plus 8,000 ducats a year. Famous figures such as Robert Browning loved Asolo and Freya Stark lived here until her death in 1993.

The day continued with a guided tour of Villa Foscari also known as La Malcontenta (away with boredom) situated on the Brenta Canal, which flows into Venice. In times past this was the only way to reach the villa – we walked! It is considered to be one of Palladio's loveliest villas. Built in 1560, the interior was decorated with frescoes by Zelotti and it was great to know that its ownership is now back with the Foscari family, one of whom was there to welcome us

Finally, back to our hotel where the options included a swim, a visit to the pedestrian area for an ice cream or a Spritz Aperol (recommended by Ludo) in one of the bars before meeting up for dinner at 7.30pm

Wednesday took us to Mantova the capital city of the Lombardy region. It took a little longer than planned to get there as torrential rain had caused a landslide partially blocking the motorway. (Incessant rain prior to our arrival had left acres of vineyards underwater). The approach to the city is magical. The road crosses two of the three artificial lakes which surround the city and were created during the 12th century fed by the River Mincio from Lake Garda, whilst the panorama ahead reveals the city's splendid architecture. It was easy to understand why the city became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2008. Our guide Christina was waiting for us but we were unable to visit the Palazzo Ducale (one of the highlights of Montova) as it needed repairs following an earthquake last autumn. We were able to go into the Early Renaissance church of San Sebastiano but this was heavily disguised by scaffolding for cleaning and repairs. The highlight of the morning was the brick built Rotonda di San Lorenzo, the most ancient church in the city. It had been built in the late 11th century inspired by the Holy Sepulchre church in Jerusalem. At some stage

it was deconsecrated and completely buried by dwellings and shops until the beginning of the 20th century. Later all these external additions were removed and it was restored to the original simple and very beautiful Rotonda. After lunch we were off to the suburbs of Mantova to the Palazzo Te built in the early 16th century for the Gonzaga family as a base from which they could go riding. Outstanding memories were the life-sized horse frescoes – the Duke had cross bred Arab horses with other breeds to achieve the type he wanted; the ceilings, particularly memorable being the scantily clad Apollo viewed from beneath and leaving nothing to the imagination whilst driving his chariot and horses, and finally, Giulio Romano's famous Room of Giants where the trompe l'oeil painting on the ceiling created a dome which was difficult to believe and where the Titans all round the walls were doing their best to demolish everything.

Next, back to our hotel of course for the now familiar activities before dinner – mainly drinking at the American Bar or similar or swimming.

Thursday's visit took us to Emilia – Romagna and the town of Ferrara still surrounded by its ancient walls. On arrival, we had a coffee stop in the pretty garden of the Palazzo Schifanoia. Built in 1385 as a place of rest and amusement for the Este family and their court, the most interesting room is the Sala dei Mesi (Hall of the Months). Each month is divided horizontally into three parts: the upper part always depicts a triumph of a pagan god, the central one the Zodiac, the lower one features scenes of the court and everyday life. From here we went to the centre of Ferrara to the Cathedral dating back to 1135 when it was consecrated to St. George. The façade depicted vivid scenes from the Last Judgement – lots of devils and cooking pots. Next we scattered for lunch followed by a tour of the Palazzo dei Diamanti named after the diamond motifs on its façade. Apparently the palace is the masterpiece of Biagio Rossetti but most of us found the paintings inside very dark and dreary. Not the most interesting day of the tour but the sun shone and members who had never been to Ferrara were delighted to have the chance to appreciate its beauty and once again the day ended on a high with a swim or a Spritz Aperol back at base followed by dinner.

Apart from the dramatic storm on day one we had been blessed with perfect weather. All was to change on **Friday** though (Ludo had warned us). We set off for Vicenza and by the time we arrived it was raining. We watched our guide approach (Monica again), complete with umbrella and *wellington boots* and wondered what lay ahead! We squelched up the hill to the Villa Rotonda, the most famous of Palladio's buildings but it was worth it. Visitors are not allowed inside but we walked round and peered through the windows at the vast interior. In Monica's words it was built for giants, not humans. We moved on from here into the city for coffee. One of the group was not content with being rained on and managed to step into the biggest puddle he could find to fill his shoes with water for good measure. Rain or no rain we continued to the Palazzo Chiericati and as one person said "And blow me, there he was again in all his glory", referring to the naked charioteer flying over the ceiling. The last visit of the morning was the Teatro Olimpico, the oldest indoor theatre in the world and undoubtedly one of the highlights of the holiday. It had the wow factor and took peoples breath away. The scenery represents the Greek city of Thebes and the streets are cleverly painted in perspective and rise at a steep angle to give the illusion of great length. Monica told us that she had danced on the stage adding that at the time she had been 15 kilos lighter. It was now lunch time and groups disappeared into cafes to get warm and dry – and to have some lunch. The afternoon was free to choose from a selection of galleries. Several people found the Palladio Museum with an exhibition of drawings by Palladio and beautiful scale

models of various villas and palaces. Others made their way to the Palazzo Leoni Montanari. It is the only residence in Vincenza with a decidedly baroque style, marked by exuberant decoration rich in stucco reliefs, friezes and frescoes. Some galleries here house a collection of 18th century Veneto paintings and the upper floor is home to a marvellous collection of over 140 Russian icons, one of the greatest collections in the west. When we left the gallery there was just enough time to pop into the Gothic Santa Corona Church. The interior was light and bright and as we walked round we could listen to the organ being played, a very fitting end to our day in Vincenza. As we made our way to the coach we spotted a statue of Palladio but it was too wet to stop and have a good look. Elizabeth felt it had been a tremendous achievement for the group to have survived the day intact in spite of the continuous rain. Then it was time to get back to Abano Terme to the bars and the hot pools.

Saturday and time to checkout of our hotel and travel to Verona. Ludo left us in the sunshine by the statue of Victor Emmanuel 11, the first King of Italy, atop his horse with instructions to meet by the statue at 2pm. In the meantime we could visit the Arena, look at the shops and have lunch. Would you believe it at about 1.55pm it started to rain? Everyone was reluctant to leave the shelter of the cafes to meet up with Ludo and our brilliant guide Katya who did her best to show us many of the towns treasures, including the Piazza Erbe where the stalls are shaded by huge umbrellas, the Arco della Costa, or the Arch of the Rib, named after the whale rib long ago hung beneath it. There were some Scaligeri tombs behind a wrought iron fence which incorporates the ladder emblem of the family's original name ("della Scala" meaning "of the steps") and numerous pretty squares and interesting buildings. Finally to the Romanesque Basilica di San Zeno one of the highlights being the west doors. The 48 bronze panels depicting biblical stories; those on the left date from 1030 and survive from an earlier church on the site; those on the right were made after the earthquake of 1137. The Basilica is also famous as the place of the marriage of Romeo and Juliet.

After all this it was time to head for the airport and bid farewell to Ludo and Bruno and wait for our 8pm flight (delayed until 9.30pm) finally arriving home about midnight.

Everyone of the group contributed something to the above report but the following are a few additional comments:

Ludo, our competent, friendly, informative and very dishy tour manager! - The view from the bedroom balcony in the morning, when the sun shone on the distant snow-capped mountains - I'm two inches shorter and two inches wider - Fields of red poppies everywhere - We saw lots of toms (tombs) and nobbles (nobles) - The hotel was excellent and the thermal pool on the 4th floor (the roof) a special privilege - Skip the "art", from someone who enjoyed the Jacuzzi, the sauna and swam most nights until 11pm - It was good to be back in Italy and soak up the atmosphere; everything sounds better in Italian.

The group had found the trip very enjoyable and rewarding despite the variable weather.

PH