



Adventures in the VENETO



I'm still reeling from a fantastic time in early July visiting the Veneto. As I've been to Venice many times, on this trip I decided to venture away from the San Marco experience. It was a whirlwind journey that began on Giudecca island, one of the islands of Venice, then took us to other islands in the lagoon and inland to experience the treasures of this northern region. It's no wonder that the Veneto has Italy's fastest growing tourism industry: more and more of us are discovering its wonders.

Here are the highlights from my travel journal:

Giudecca and Venice's Newest Landmark

Just checked into my suite. The sunset view is hypnotic — the sky changing from gold to rose over the *palazzi* and churches across the canal. A sea breeze floats in from the six windows, along with sounds of water gently lapping, seagulls, and the occasional church bell. I roam from bedroom to sitting room in



awe. They don't call Venice *La Serenissima* (the most serene) for nothing.

I've take the *vaporetto* over to Giudecca on previous trips, for cocktails at the *Cipriani*, chocolate cake at *Harry's Dolci*, and to see Palladio's *Rendetore* church. In 2005 I remember walking along the waterfront where construction noises at the

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far end of the island were so *anti-Serenissima* I headed back. I didn't realize that what I heard were renovations that turned a flour mill into this 5-star Hilton Hotel Molino Stucky.

Let's face it: "Stucky" does not sound appealing. The hotel was named after a man from a Swiss family, *Giovanni Stucky*, who built the mill in 1895. Apparently the guy was such an unpopular employer he was murdered by one of his workmen in 1910. A bust of Stucky now sits outside the hotel's glamorous spa. *Hee-hee.*

The Hilton did an amazing job buffing up the mill's turrets, towers, and decorative pale-brick facade — the 13-building complex now looks like an inviting 19th century village. Inside, they've retained the timber beams and iron columns from the mill, and ingeniously blended that with travertine, *Murano* glass chandeliers, contemporary earth-toned furnishings and every modern touch — as in plasma TVs, Wi-Fi, and spacious bathrooms.

The hotel just opened in June and workmen were still tooling about — fixing up gardens, a ballroom and conference center in the back buildings that will hold a thousand people, making it the largest in Venice. This is the perfect hotel for business meetings or for those who want to stay in great comfort away from the bustle of the mainland without paying sky-high Cipriani prices.

I get my Venetian food fix in the *Il Molino* restaurant: creamed *baccala*, fried sardines marinated with onions — *delizioso*. Along with local specialties, the menu offers "Hilton classics": hamburgers and club sandwiches.



The star-filled sky and view of the golden lights of San Marco from the rooftop bar is dreamy. Even if you're not staying here, come over for the bar — it has a lively late night scene that can be hard to come by in this city. And there's a gorgeous pool up there too — the only rooftop one in Venice!

The hotel has a complimentary shuttle boat that runs every half hour from 7 a.m. to 2 a.m., stopping at *Zattere* and San Marco. Rooftop bar opens at 5 p.m. — check it out!



"...we walk around the fenced-off mixed with sea air, enjoying

Certosa: Attention Boating Enthusiasts!

Alberto Sonino, a tan, fit, world champion sailor in his early 30s, waves us ashore at this island that sits across from the *Arsenale*. We've come over by water taxi, but if you take the 41 or 42 *vaporetto*, you can ask the driver to stop here.

Certosa just officially opened to the public and there's an exciting buzz around this former military island that's been given a new lease on life by *Sonino's Vento di Venezia* organization.

They've opened a maritime academy here for sailing classes, offer yacht rentals and have a harbor where boats can be moored. "The yacht for *Casino Royale* was based here during filming," *Sonino* proudly tells me.



"And there's still nature in the city," *Sonino*, who's dedicated to preserving the ecology of the island, says. Plans are in the works to turn the

rest of *Certosa* — 22 lush wooded hectares that surround the ruins of a 12th century monastery — into an urban park. As the project is still underway, we walk around the fenced-off edge of the woodlands, inhaling the smells of rosemary and sage bushes mixed with sea air, enjoying the shade of poplar trees and view of Venice in the distance. I imagine myself a year or so from now, strolling

All Venetian gondolas must be painted

edge of the woodlands, inhaling the smells of rosemary and sage bushes the shade of poplar trees and view of Venice in the distance."

along peaceful green paths, just ten minutes away from the Venice mainland.

Sant' Erasmo: The Secret Garden of Venice

I gasp at a stretch of purple artichoke flowers, standing tall in a *Sant'Erasmo* garden. "You should have been here two weeks ago, when they were all in bloom," Carlo, a local farmer tells me. Carlo is one of 800 residents of Sant'Erasmo — a peaceful island between Murano and Burano that's covered with gardens that for centuries have supplied the markets of Venice.

Our destination is agriturismo *Lato Azzuro*, a sprawling house set on a hill of thick grass, surrounded by fields of fig trees, tomato and corn. With its wide veranda, it reminds me of a place in Maine where I spent time during teenage summers. Owner *Emanuele* sets up a picnic table with "a snack": an amazing spread of marinated zucchini, eggplant, fried sage leaves, tomatoes stuffed with tuna and vegetable frittatas. Her hotel offers simple rooms at incredibly low prices — starting at 50€ for a single. They also rent bikes for day-trippers to circle the 2.5-mile island.

We head away on our water taxi, watching families sunning themselves and wading in the shallow water of the beach. "Venetians come here for the free beach, to walk or bike, and then have a great meal at *Ca' Vignotto*, the only restaurant on the island," Carlo tells me. "Except for the cars, this whole place hasn't changed in thousands of years."

Vicenza: City of Palladian Villas

Attilio Pollini, our octogenerian tour guide, spouts off stories for every statue, painting, and palazzo we lay eyes on. And there's loads.

We've left the lagoon and traveled by bus through flat fields of vineyards to Vicenza. You can take the train from Venice to get here — it takes about an hour. This amazing "city of palaces" is where the 16th century architect *Andrea Palladio* and generations of artists who were inspired by him designed homes for the wealthy, in a style that recalls classical Greek and Roman temples.

Now we're oohing and aahing over the *Tiepolo* frescoes in the *Villa Malmarana Ai Nani*. *Attilio* passionately gestures from his heart to the frescoes, where characters draped in richly colored costumes interact with swooping deities, in scenes from tales of Homer, Virgil, and the epic poem *Orlando Furioso*. *Attilio's* pale blue eyes exactly match *Tiepolo's* skies and I'm drawn into the fresco's fantasies as if they were true.

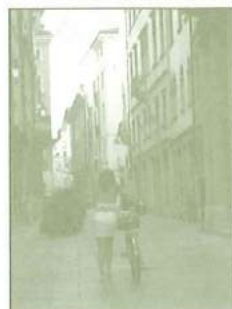
My favorite story comes when I ask about the statues of dwarves (*nani*) that top the stone wall surrounding the villa. According to *Attilio*, the house was originally owned by a couple who gave birth to a daughter who was a dwarf. Wanting to protect her from finding out she was different, they hired servants who were also dwarves. One day, when the girl was 15, she was playing in the garden and her

servants had fallen asleep. Curious about the outside world, she climbed the wall, saw a handsome man on horseback, fell in love with him, and then realized: *Oh NO! I'm a dwarf!* Distraught, she flung herself off the mountain. The servants woke up, ran to find her, discovered her dead, and froze in grief at the top of the wall.



We head into the Vicenza historic center for a look at the magical *Teatro Olimpico*. Its proscenium is a dizzying vision: baroque arches frame portals of scenery that represent ancient Greek street scenes,

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black unless they belong to high officials.

carried off with an exquisite sense of perspective. Yes, it's a theatre fit for the Gods.

The town's main drag, *Corso Palladio*, is packed with glorious architecture created by Palladio and his followers. Equally impressive are designer shop windows that display sumptuous purses and chic dresses. I take a *campari* and soda break at a *caffè* to watch the *passeggiatta*, trying to figure out how *signore* on bicycles can so expertly pull off such sophisticated looks.

When I head back to the W.C., I find a vestige from my Italian travels of decades ago: a squat toilet. It's a hilarious contrast to all that elegance outside.

Marostica: City of Chess



As we travel farther north, the flat terrain transforms into soft green hills. We arrive in *Marostica* in the late afternoon and find the piazza completely empty. I stand in the middle of it, on a red stone square, turning to admire the 13th century castle, pastel buildings and arched walkway that border it.



This peaceful experience is a far cry from what happens when the town hosts its historic game, where live characters serve as chess pieces. It takes place right here every two years on the second weekend of September. Thousands of spectators come for the festivities, which feature 600 characters in Renaissance dress, flag throwers, horses, dancing, music and fireworks.

The chess game originated in 1454 when two noblemen were vying for the hand of *Linora*, the daughter of the

lord of Marostica's castle. Rather than have the men duel it out, the lord decided the rivals should play chess, and that townspeople should be used as the chess pieces.

Even without characters in costume walking around, the town has an old world, noble feel. We poke around tiny shops where ceramic makers and woodworkers display their wares. Thirteenth century crenellated city walls, all still intact, enclose the upper and lower castles.

Up at *Castel Superiore*, I get a clue as to why the town is so quiet. Three wedding receptions are in full swing at the restaurant that's built into the castle. Everyone must be up here partying. Brides and grooms pose for photos on the balconies and terraces, overlooking the *Pausolino* hills, dotted with cypress trees. We settle in at the edge of the celebrations to sip *Prosecco* and nibble on *fritti* — rich snacks of fried olives, zucchini flowers and onions.

Steps away from the castle, in a small grassy amphitheater, we watch a falconry show. Young folks with thick gloves and serious expressions parade the majestic birds before us. The falcons fly off over the green carpeted valley, then swoop back to perform tricks — zooming in to capture fake rabbits. Even with the corny background music (a boombox blasting Celine Dion's song *My Heart Will Go On*), it's breathtaking.



Roana: Land of Asiago Cheese

The bus curves up pine-covered hills toward the Dolomites. We're entering Veneto's *Altopiano*. Houses styled like Swiss chalets, store signs with Bavarian-like lettering, narrow church steeples... Are we still in Italy? Brown and white *Fresia* cows graze in the valleys. This is the land where *Asiago* cheese is produced.

At *Azienda Agricola*, Riccardo shows us around his mountain hut (*malga*) where from June to September he makes *Asiago* with the help of his wife and daughter. He's got the lanky build of a basketball player and takes us into a small, cool storage room, where cheese rounds sit aging on fir wood shelves. "The wood gives the cheese its sweet flavor," he tells us. "And we rub the rounds with olive oil to keep them moist."

The *malga* is surrounded by meadows where shaggy collies and kittens meander around as birds twitter about. A pig stall stands on a mountain edge. I buy souvenirs of fresh and aged

Asiago to wow the folks back home.

In winter Italians flock to this area for skiing. But as this is July, we head up a gravel road to *Malga Pusterle*, a bigger mountain hut that produces award-winning cheese and has a restaurant. We join in with other Italian families, sitting outside on a long wooden table that over-



green carpeted valley, then swoop back to perform tricks—to capture fake rabbits.”

looks a valley and ridge of fir tree-covered mountains that marked Italy's Austrian border before World War I.

The pure white Asiago cheese *lasagna* that the teenage waiter sets in front of me is incredibly delicious — light and creamy with a subtle sharp tang. We wash it down with house wine we pour from glass pitchers. A scrump-

tious apple cake is served for dessert as a gentle breeze blows through, carrying with it smells of fresh green grass. This is simple rustic Italy at its finest: heavenly.

As I walk in complete silence through the meadow surrounding the *malga*, I think of the crowds a couple of hours away filling San Marco. Yes, I'll get

back to the *Florian Caffè* and all the marvels of Venice, but I look forward to exploring more of what the wonderful Veneto region has to offer.

—Susan Van Allen

In the May 2007 issue, Susan Van Allen wrote about a Roman cuisine tour hosted by New York Times writer Maureen Fant.



THE DETAILS

GIUDECCA

Hilton Hotel Molino Stucky

Guidicca, 753

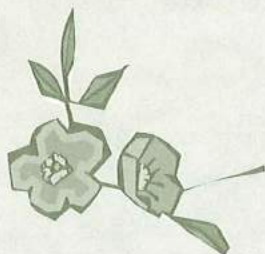
(39) 041 5221267,

www.hilton.com/venice

Rates: Start at \$268 for standard rooms, \$1,600 for suites

CERTOSA

By request, vaporetto lines 41 and 42 stop here between 6 a.m. and 8 p.m. For information on yacht rentals (starting at 1,300€) and sailing classes: (39) 041 5208588 www.ventodivenezia.it



SANT' ERASMO

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www.latoazzurro.it

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VICENZA

2008 marks the 500th birthday of Andrea Palladio. For more on special events, visit www.palladio2008.info

Attilio Pollini, Tour Guide

(39) 0444 541497

www.vicenzae.org

Rates: Start at 105€ for half-day tours and 210€ for full-day tours.

Villa Valmarana Ai Nani

Via dei Nani, 8

(39) 044 4321803

Open March 15 through November 15.

Open Thursday, Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m. to noon and 3 to 6 p.m. except Sunday, when it is open 2:30 to 5:30 p.m.
Admission: 5€

Teatro Olimpico

Contra S. Pietro, 67

(39) 044 422 2800

Open Tuesday through Sunday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Admission: 4€

MAROSTICA

The next live chess game takes place September 12, 13 and 14, 2008. Ticket prices range from 10 to 80€.

www.marosticascacchi.it

For more information on falconry shows and outings, visit www.lafalconeria.it

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final work and completed after his death.