

Princely Italy — yours for £100

Vicenza has all the elegance of Venice, with classic hotels for half the price. By **Anthony Peregrine**

Visiting Vicenza if ignorant of Andrea Palladio is like arriving in London having never heard of the Royal Family. You don't quite get the point. You flail. You're left behind in conversations.

It happened to me. Of course, I was on solid ground with Roberto Baggio and Paolo Rossi, two other lads local to this Venetian hinterland. But Andrea Palladio? Which team did he play for? Fortunately, I hadn't time to ask before Wilma the guide was showing me round Vicenza's splendid old town and pointing out the buildings designed by a man who, it transpired, was the 16th century's most influential architect. Ah, that Palladio. But of course.

There were palaces, there was the green-domed basilica, was the extraordinary Teatro Olimpico: effectively a classical outdoor theatre created inside a medieval fortress building. It was even better than football.

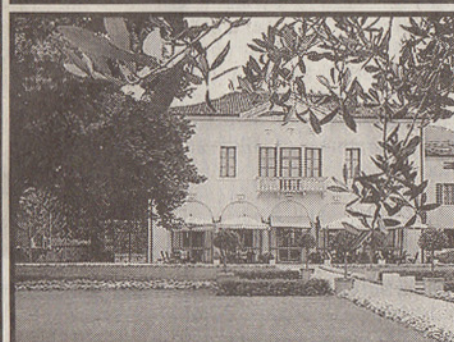
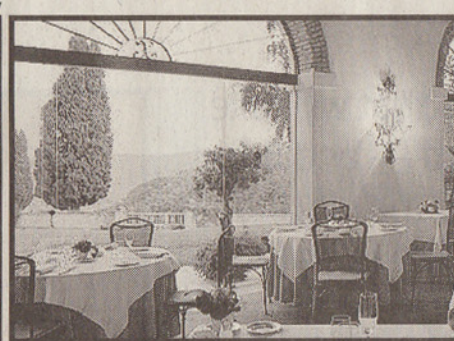
Quite simply, old Andrea is the Renaissance current running through, and defining, Vicenza. And like all civilised places, the town lives easily with the grandeur, as if things couldn't possibly be otherwise. It claims proportionately more aristocrats than anywhere else in Italy, which may help.

But grandeur and nobility aren't confined to the city. Palladio's villas, which so impressed later generations of Anglo-American builders, dot provincial Vicenza's landscape. Going north from the plain, village-topped hills give way to tougher mountains — the Asiago plateau, Monte Grappa — stained by first world war bloodshed. Hemingway was at Bassano with the Red Cross.

Folk have always worked hard here. These days the region is a jewellery centre, and light industry is woven into the farming flatlands. But that just lends an air of prosperity to the place. Off the main tracks, the landscape remains unspoilt — but awake. There's none of the dozy menace of some zones further south.

Visitors to this slice of north-east Italy generally overlook Vicenza province to stay in Venice or Verona. Let me suggest that you do the reverse. It's cheaper, the tourist population is smaller — and you can get to the other two "Vs" by train within an hour. Most of all, there is a scattering of lovely hotels in fab locations. A couple of them test our £100-per-double limit, but believe me, they're worth it. You might not be a Vicenza aristocrat, but these will give you a feel for the role.

■ All prices are for a double room, including breakfast



Value palaces: seeing Vicenza in style. Far left, the 16th-century Villa Angaran, designed by Andrea Palladio; top right, Villa Michelangelo; centre right, Casa Belmonte.



Piazza degli Scacchi. Here, in 1454, young bloods played out an epic match, with humans as pieces, for the hand of Lionora, nubile daughter of the local lord. The loser got her ugly sister, which seems fair enough.

The event is celebrated with a big festival, and human-sized chess, on the second weekend of September in even-numbered years. That's this year, so there's no point in trying to book the Due Mori then: it's full. But you should at any other time.

Tucked away on a town-centre street, and an auberge for 250 years, it's recently been filleted and put back together in the best of light, breathable modern taste. The lady of the house, Monica Facchini, is quite as beautiful as Lionora. She and her Tunisian husband, Riadh, speak most of the languages of the UN and serve first-class contemporary regional cuisine. Signora Facchini is also a qualified guide, well able to advise on the hills and mountains right behind, and arty villages and towns nearby. Checkmate to her, I'd say.

Details: 0424 471777, www.duemori.com; from £74, or £69 at weekends. Dinner from £20. From the A31 Valdagno motorway, take the Dueville exit to Marostica (and Bassano).

DUE MORI Marostica

As in many Italian medieval settlements, the town walls of Marostica appear designed more for decoration than for fighting. From the ruined castle up top, they run down both sides of the cypress-clad hill to enfold the little town below, where you will find a gigantic chessboard laid out in the main

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Travel brief

Getting there: British Airways (0870 850 9850, www.ba.com) flies from Gatwick to Verona, 45 minutes from Vicenza; from £95. Alternatively, Venice's Marco Polo airport is about an hour away and is served by Jet2 (0871 226 1737, www.jet2.com) from Leeds/Bradford, from £41; BA from Gatwick, from £69 (Manchester from £139); and EasyJet (0871 750 0100, www.easyjet.com) from Stansted and Nottingham, from £31.

Venice (Treviso) and Verona (Brescia) are both also about an hour away and served by Ryanair (0871 246 0000, www.ryanair.com) from Stansted; from £36. Aer Lingus (0818 365000, www.aerlingus.com) flies Dublin to Marco Polo, from €123.

Getting around: Alamo (0870 400 4562, www.alamo.co.uk) has a week's car hire from £140. Or try Holiday Autos (0870 400 0011, www.holidayautos.co.uk).

Further information: www.vicenzae.org.

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