

Serenity? Forget Venice – head for the hills to experience true tranquillity, Renaissance-style



These days it's impossible to imagine a world power having the foresight to plan a graceful retirement, but the Republic of Venice did exactly that. After acquiring a dazzling fortune in trade, it turned to real estate, expanding into nearby fertile lands. Slowly it acquired an empire that in 1454 stretched from Bergamo to Trieste, with the Veneto at its heart. It happened in the nick of time. In 1498, news that Vasco da Gama had rounded the horn of Africa caused shares on the Rialto to plummet, as Venetians realised their trade monopoly with the East was

doomed. But bank accounts were still full, and over the next three centuries Venetians played like there was no tomorrow. By the 18th century, the Most Serene Republic was Europe's capital of unbridled hedonism – in winter. In summer, patricians retreated to their villas in the hills of the Veneto.

These villas rank among the most exquisite creations on the planet. Older Italian country houses resembled minicastles, all thick walls and tiny windows – until influential architect Andrea Palladio (1508-1580) came along. His architectural arias delivered his clients beauty and grace – at affordable brick-

Little charmer: fall under the spell of the Renaissance hill town of Asolo

and-stucco prices. Endlessly imitated, his buildings are lyrical masterpieces, deliciously set amid gardens, vineyards and fields of maize, with the Dolomites shimmering on the horizon.

The rural glories in the heart of the Veneto – Vicenza and Palladio's villas – as well as urban Renaissance gems such as Bassano del Grappa and Asolo, all lie within an hour's drive of each other, making it easy to spend a weekend immersed in the idylls of a gentler, more optimistic age. There's only one downside – you can't throw away your return ticket to the 21st century. >

Dana Facaros



RENAISSANCE URBANITY

- Find a table at the Gran Caffè Garibaldi in **Vicenza's Piazza dei Signori**, sip coffee and admire the play of light and shadow over Palladio's first masterpiece, the **Basilica**, his 1549 refurbishing of the medieval town hall. Replete with the prolific architect's handiwork, Vicenza has been a World Heritage site since 1994. Stroll Corso Andrea Palladio and at the north end, stop to see the bright and airy **Palazzo Chiericati** – now an art museum (00 39 0444 222811, www.museicivici.vicenza.it; £6.80 with a Museum Card).
- Built on a tilt for an illusion of depth, the 16th-century stage in Vicenza's **Teatro Olimpico** so perfectly evoked the Renaissance dream city that it has remained in situ ever since. Palladio's last project (commissioned 1580), it is the oldest operational indoor theatre in the world. Palladio died before it was completed, leaving his follower Vincenzo Scamozzi to build the set for the Accademia's first production, *Oedipus Rex*. Book a concert here in the spring Settimane Musicale (00 39 0444 222800, www.olimpico.vicenza.it).
- A striking wooden bridge, the **Ponte degli Alpini** is the landmark in **Bassano del Grappa**, 35km from

Vicenza. The River Brenta regularly goes berserk and damages the bridge, but each time it is perfectly reconstructed according to Palladio's original plans.

- In September, kings, queens, bishops, knights and pawns swan around **Marostica**, west of Bassano. It's part of a tradition that began with a quarrel in 1454: two noblemen loved the fair Lionora. Disdaining a duel, her father arranged a public game of chess, using real people and horses. It was such a hit that a huge chessboard was painted in the piazza, and the game is re-enacted biennially with costumes and pageantry. Catch it the second weekend of September in even-numbered years. Or see the costumes displayed in the **Museo dei Costumi** (www.marosticascacchi.com; £1 by appointment).

- The air sighs with romance in **Asolo**, 10km east of Bassano. The Veneto's most gorgeous hill town was given to Queen Caterina Cornaro after Venice forced her to abdicate her throne in Cyprus. This left her to while the days away in her castle (now home to the Eleonora Duse theatre) – attended by handsome painter Giorgione, who wandered her gardens plucking his

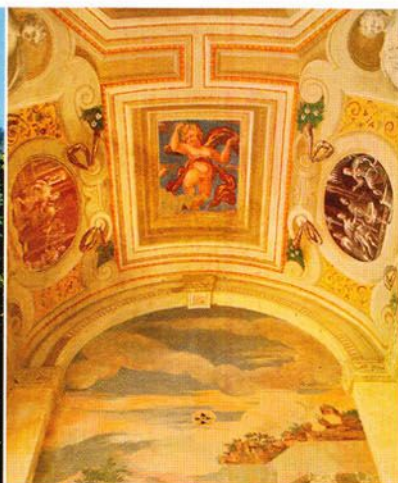
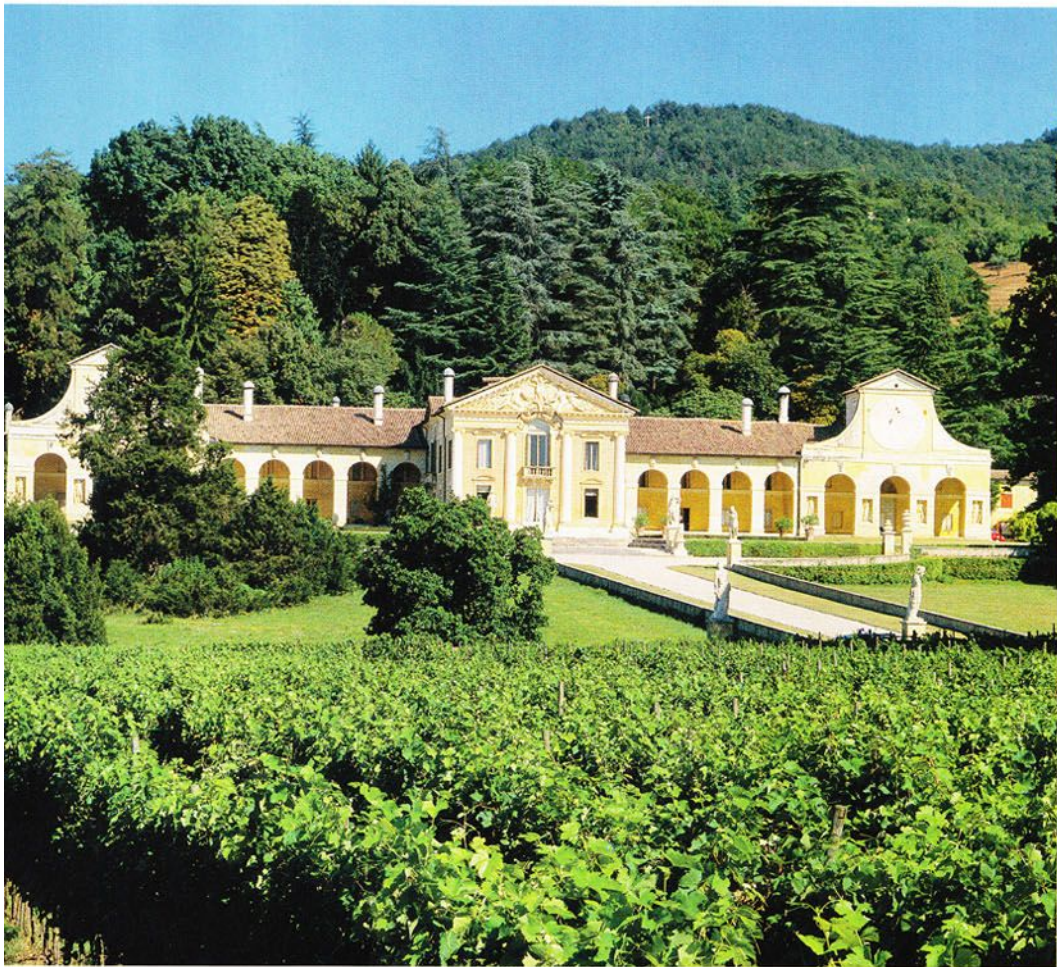


Clockwise from top left, purple haze: nightfall in Asolo; cycling across Bassano's Ponte degli Alpini; 'living' chess in Marostica; Veronese frescoes in Villa Barbaro, Maser

lute, and poet Pietro Bembo, who wrote dialogues on love. Near the castle, a 16th-century fountain splashes in the **Piazza Maggiore**: idle the day away in a cafe, surrendering to Asolo's gentle spell.

RURAL RETREATS

- Palladio's **Villa La Rotonda** (00 39 0444 321793; £17) sits atop one of the hills of the **Monti Berici**, a 40-minute walk south of Vicenza. Commissioned in 1566 by a retired priest for summer parties, La Rotonda was inspired by the Pantheon and Imperial Baths



Palladio had visited in Rome. It's a sphere on a cube fronted by four identical porches. Standing in the central hall, with all four doors open to the countryside, is pure magic.

- Palladio's first country house, **Villa Godi Malinverni**, 25km north of Vicenza in **Lonedo**, has a far chunkier charm. You can see key Palladian elements here in embryonic stage – notice the high ceilings that kept rooms cool in summer, but also gave them a feeling of space and lightness. The walls are frescoed with gods, heroes and muses (00 39 0445 860561, www.villagodi.com; open Tue, Sat, Sun afternoons; £5.20).
- For a true Palladian experience, sleep under one of his roofs. One villa makes it possible: **Villa Saraceno**, 30km south of Vicenza in **Agugliaro**. Dilapidated for years but recently restored by the UK's Landmark Trust, the villa is serenely elegant. Frescoed by the school of Veronese, it's open Apr-Oct, 2-4pm. (00 39 0444 891371,

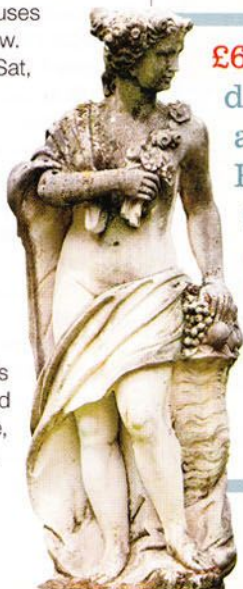
www.landmarktrust.org.uk; £304 per night to rent – call 01628 825925).

- If the elongated five-part profile of the **Villa Emo**, 40km northeast of Vicenza in **Fanzolo di Vedelago**, looks vaguely familiar, it's because it served as a model for the US Capitol building. Here Palladio perfectly combined the client's desire for status and pleasure with the needs of a working farm (a prosperous farm, especially as the Emo family was the first in Europe to plant maize). It remained in the family of the original owners from 1559 until it

Clockwise from above left, Palladian splendour: Villa Barbaro, set in vineyards, Maser; sleep under this roof at Villa Saraceno; Piazza dei Signori, Vicenza; below, statue in Teatro Olimpico

was sold in 2004 (00 39 0423 476334, www.villaemo.org; £4.30).

- If you only have time to visit one villa, make it the magnificent **Villa Barbaro** at **Maser**, 10km from Asolo. Commissioned by humanist brothers Daniel and Marcantonio Barbaro, it is alive with Shakespearean swagger, the result of a collaboration between Palladio and the Venetian painter Veronese: rooms romp with *trompe l'oeil* scenes representing the Barbaro family, guests and pets. (00 39 0423 923004, www.villadimaser.it; £5.50). >



£6 BUYS: A bottle of the area's delicious Prosecco Extra Dry di Valdobbiadene DOC. **LATE BLOOMER:** Most Renaissance artists learned their trade as children, but Andrea di Pietro della Gondola was a 30-year old stone-cutter when scholar Giangiorgio Trissino took him under his wing, educated him and gave him a new name: Palladio. **ALL THAT GLITTERS:** Vicenza is the gold capital of Italy, employing 11,000 people. **FILM SETS:** Look familiar? Palladio's buildings feature in many movies. Vicenza's La Rotonda and Teatro Olimpico were in Losey's *Don Giovanni*; and Villa Emo was in the 2002 *Ripley's Game*.



WHERE TO STAY NO EXPENSE SPARED

Hotel Due Mori, Via Mazzini 73, Marostica (00 39 0424 471777, www.duemori.com). Behind the doors of an 18th-century townhouse near Marostica's famous Chess Square, these luminous rooms with stone floors and exposed beams were recently re-designed by friendly owners Monica and Riadh. Monica is a registered

guide and a font of all knowledge. Excellent restaurant and free parking, too. Doubles from £85, B&B.

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ON A BUDGET

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WHERE TO EAT NO EXPENSE SPARED

Ca' Derton, Piazza d'Annunzio 11, Asolo (00 39 0423 529648, www.cader-ton.com).

From left to right, the oldest guesthouse in Vicenza, the Hotel Due Mori; wine-tasting at Casa Vinicola Zonin, Gambellara; the 18th-century Ca' Sette. Below, Prosecco bubbly: the local speciality

caderton.com). Asolo means 'romance' and chef Nino delivers the goods in this 17th-century palazzo, tickling the palate with his imaginative take on Venetian classics: artichoke flan topped with a light cheese sauce, or deboned breast of guinea fowl filled with quinces and prunes. Be sure to book. Mains from £19.

Al Ponte, Via Volpato 60, Bassano del Grappa (00 39 0424 219274, www.alponte dibassano.com). Dine under the mighty plane trees along the Brenta, with views over Palladio's famous bridge. There are two menus: one of classics, the other of dishes based on seasonal ingredients. The proprietors, the Strafella family, are famous for their traditional cherry cake and their chocolates. Mains from £14.

MIDDLE OF THE ROAD

Trattoria Tre Visi, Corso Palladio 25, Vicenza (00 39 0444 324868). Tre Visi has been in business serving Vicentine dishes for some 400 years, so they have a pretty good idea what's what in the kitchen – try asparagus in season, goat's cheese with *mostarda*, *bigoli con anitra* (fat homemade spaghetti with duck sauce), and one of the best versions of Vicenza's rich salt-cod classic, *baccalà alla vicentina*, followed by a selection of desserts. Dine alfresco in the courtyard or in the convivial dining room. Mains from £12.

Osteria Inosteria, Via Cassoni 2, Crosara, Marostica (00 39 0424 702460, www.inosteria.it). The Veneto is famous for its tasty vegetables, and



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