Travel and Adventure: Serene pleasures of the Veneto

by Susan Van Allen

SANT'ERASMO, Italy - La Serenissima (the most serene) is the nickname for the magical city of Venice. But when I got there during high tourist season last July and joined the crowds in the Piazza San Marco, the scene was far from serene. An American couple passed by grumbling about the 10-euro prices for a Coke at the Caffe Florian. A toddler wailed as his parents struggled to set him up for a photo in front of the basilica. As the church bells rang, I looked up to see that even the resident pigeons were swooping away.

TRAPPED BY TOURISTS - Crowds of tourists fill the Piazza San Marco in Venice during high tourist season. CNS Photo courtesy of the Italian Tourist Board. AWAY FROM THE CROWDS - A fashionable signora walks through the streets of Vicenza, an elegant city north of Venice. CNS Photo by Susan Van Allen. WHERE ASIAGO COMES FROM - The northern Veneto region, at the foot of the Dolomite Mountains, is home to such mountain towns as Roana, where Asiago cheese is produced. CNS Photo courtesy of the Italian Tourist Board. KING OF VICENZA - A sculpted lion on a palazzo in Vicenza, a city in the Veneto region of Italy, symbolizes the region's mascot. CNS Photo by Susan Van Allen. From previous visits, I've learned that this spectacular piazza is best visited in the early morning or late at night when day trippers have gone. Still, I needed to pay my respects, and then be thankful that I was heading away from the Venice mainland with a group of friends to explore the surrounding Veneto region, where art and culinary treasures abound with fewer tourists and lower prices.

Our base was the recently opened Hilton Hotel Molino Stucky, which sits across Venice's Zattere canal on the island of Giudecca. In years past, tourists like me would vaporetto over to Giudecca for drinks at the luxurious Cipriani Hotel, chocolate cake at Harry's Dolci, or to enjoy a peaceful walk along its waterfront. Those were its attractions, as it was known as a working-man's island. But now Giudecca is being slowly transformed, with many of its older industrial buildings being renovated, including the Molino Stucky, a flour mill since 1895, which Hilton turned into a stunning hotel that has the look of a buffed-up 19th century village.

The property was named for the flour mill's founder, Giovanni Stucky, a Swiss man who was apparently such an unpopular employer that one of his workers murdered him in 1910. A bust of Stucky now sits outside the Hilton's glamorous spa, and as I indulged in the pleasures his buildings now offer - a lively rooftop bar and pool, luxurious guest rooms and restaurants that prepare excellent Venetian classics - it was clear that things around here have improved from the days of the tyrant boss.

A 45-minute boat ride away took us to The Secret Garden of Venice - Sant'Erasmo, which sits between the better-known Venetian islands of Murano and Burano. We were met by Carlo, a dark-haired, genial local farmer who welcomed us to this spot, which is covered with gardens that have been supplying the markets of Venice with vegetables for centuries.

"I've made a snack," Emanuele, the owner of Lato Azzuro, Sant'Erasmo's only accommodation, said. The snack turned out to be a humble feast: marinated zucchini, fried sage and vegetable frittatas, all prepared with what was grown in Emanuele's gardens and served with jugs of wine made from her vineyards. I took a look around the Lato Azzuro guest house, which sits graciously on a hill of thick grass.

With its wide veranda, it reminded me of a lake house in Maine where I spent some teenage summers. Its simple rooms, which start at 50 euros ($74) a night for a single, are a bargain compared to Venice accommodations, and with vaporetto service to the mainland available 24 hours a day, I made a mental note that this would be a perfect retreat for a future visit.

As we walked along a quiet road, admiring a stretch of purple artichokes, Carlo told me, "This is where Venetians come for a peaceful day. There's a free beach, they can rent bikes to circle the island, and then have a great meal at Ca' Vignotto, Sant'Erasmo's only restaurant. Except for the cars, nothing has changed here in thousands of years."

Driving an hour inland, we landed in Vicenza, the City of Palladian Villas. The ultra-elegant town and its surroundings are packed with beautiful buildings designed by the 16th century master Andrea Palladio and his

followers, inspired by ancient Greek and Roman temples. Banners and brochures I spotted around the city announced that Vicenza was gearing up for a 2008 celebration of Palladio's 500th birthday, when special exhibitions and concerts will be staged to honor their native son.

One of the most impressive villas we toured, set on a hillside just outside of Vicenza, was the Villa Malmarana ai Nani, filled with frescoes by the 18th century painter Giambattista Tiepolo.

"Cupid takes control," Attilio Pollini, our octogenarian tour guide, said, as he gestured from his heart to a fresco that illustrated a scene from the epic poem "Orlando Furioso." All the artworks in the villa depict classic love stories, and with Pollini's passionate narration, the dramatic paintings, and no other tourists around to distract us, we got completely caught up in the dizzying effect of the masterpieces.

The highlight of our Vicenza city walk was a look inside the Teatro Olimpico, a theater dedicated to the gods, which was Palladio's final design. I sat in the wooden bleachers awe struck by the proscenium of sculpted portals that frame ancient Greek street scenes, painted in rich pastels. As we drove farther north, the flat terrain of vineyards and cornfields transformed to soft green hills and we came upon the medieval walled town of Marostica. Its main square, surrounded by a castle, arched walkways and pale stone buildings, was completely empty.

This is a far cry from what this piazza will look like in September 2008, when thousands will flock here to see the town's famous game of chess, where live characters serve as game pieces. The traditional game and festivities that accompany it began in the 16th century and feature 600 characters in Renaissance dress, flag throwers, horses, dancing, music and fireworks. Even without folks in costume walking around, the town had an old-world, noble feel. We poked around tiny shops where ceramic makers and woodcarvers were diligently at work and walked along the 13th century crenelated walls to the upper castle.

There, at Castel Superiore, I realized why the town was so quiet. Three wedding receptions were in full swing at the restaurant built into the castle, and it seemed everyone in town was there celebrating, with brides and grooms fully decked out, posing for photos on balconies that overlooked the landscape of hills and cypress trees. Feeling like fortunate party crashers, we settled in at the edge of the restaurant to listen to mandolin music, sip Prosecco and nibble on fritti - rich snacks of fried olives, zucchini flowers and onions.

Our final day took us farther north to the foothills of the Dolomites, where the atmosphere became Bavarian: narrow church steeples, store signs with Germanic lettering, houses styled like Swiss chalets, and Fresia cows grazing in lush, green valleys. It seemed we'd left Italy; in fact, we were on the edge of what was its Austrian border before World War I.

We landed in Roana, a village dotted with mountain huts (or malga) where Asiago cheese is produced from the milk of those Fresia cows. Luckily it was lunchtime and a turn down a gravel dirt road got us to Malga Pusterle, where we joined Italian families at picnic tables overlooking a valley and ridge of fir tree-covered mountains. A blond teenage waiter in jeans and a T-shirt served us the hut specialty: Asiago cheese lasagna, made by his mamma, that had us oohing and aahing to the last forkful. A gentle breeze blew through, carrying with it the scent of fresh grass. It was simple rustic Italy at its finest: heavenly.

I walked through the meadow surrounding the hut, flashing on the crowds a couple of hours away filling the Piazza San Marco. Sure, I'll get back to Venice sometime soon and surrender to all its magic. But the places of such beauty and delicious tastes that surround La Serenissima will pull me back to discover even more of the serene treasures of the Veneto region.

IF YOU GO

AlItalia Airline: www.alitalia.com.

Italian Government Tourist Board: www.italiantourism.com.

Accommodations:

Hilton Hotel Molino Stucky

Giudecca, 753

011-39-041-522-1267, 800-HILTONS

www.hilton.com/venice

Rates start at $268 for standard rooms, $1,600 for suites.

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Il Lato Azzuro

Via Forti, 13, Sant'Erasmo

011-39-041-523-0642

www.latoazzurro.it

Rates start a $70 for a single room, including private bath and breakfast

Restaurants:

Sant'Erasmo:

Ca Vignotto Ristorante

Via Forti, 71 011-39-041-244-4000

Lunch 12-4, daily; dinner 7, Saturday only

Moderate, reservations essential.

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Marostica:

Ristorante al Castello Superiore

Via Consignorio della Scala, 4

011-39-0424 73315

www.castellosuperiore.it

Moderately expensive; closed for lunch Wednesday and Thursday.

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Roana:

Malga Pusterle di Basso Sergio

Strada della Valdassa

Loc. Ghertele, 26010 Roana

011-39-044-466-0529

Inexpensive; open June through September.

ATTRACTIONS

VICENZA

For information on museums, palazzos and 2008 events to commemorate the 500th birthday of Andrea Palladio, visit www.palladio2008.info.

MAROSTICA

Next live chess game: Sept. 12, 13 and 14, 2008

Ticket prices: 10-80 euros ($15-$118).

Information: www.marosticascacchi.it.

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