

# The Treasures of Northern Italy

BY DONA DE SANCTIS

When Rome fell in 476 A.D., Western Europe went dark. All the power was in the hands of the few, who kept the masses poor, uneducated and hungry. Most people were peasants living in isolated villages near a warlord's castle. They worked the land, producing whatever the lord needed in exchange for his protection. Civilization took a giant step backward.

## THE ITALIAN CITY-STATES

This did not happen in Italy where many cities founded by the Romans and Etruscans, largely in northern and central Italy, survived as independent city-states. The greatest was **Venice**, but others included **Verona**, **Vicenza**, **Mantua**, **Padua**, **Ferrara** and **Bologna**. Most had no absolute ruler. Instead, they were republics governed by a body of elected citizens.

The Alps' rugged mountains protected these cities from attacks from the north while Venice's lagoon and strong navy allowed its republic to exist for more than 1,000 years, until Napoleon conquered it in 1797.

Between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, these city-states flourished, thanks to their stable governments, thriving international trade and innovative business and banking practices, which included double-entry book-keeping. As they prospered, the city-states extended their power over the towns and villages in the surrounding countryside.

Attracted by the opportunity to earn more money, peasants began flocking to these cities. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Venice, Florence and Milan had over 100,000 people while others, like Verona and Bologna had more than

50,000 each. Italy became the most urban society in the world and the people of northern and central Italy were its most literate. More than one-third of the men could read and so could a small but significant number of women.

## RENAISSANCE JEWELS

As these northern Italian city-states grew in wealth and power, they experienced a cultural rebirth. They built great cathedrals, magnificent palaces and imposing fortresses. They supported art, music and literature.

The most famous Italian city-state is Florence, often called "*la culla delle arti*" (the cradle of the arts) because it was there, supported by the



Verona, home of Romeo & Juliet



The Estensi Castle in Ferrara



A gondola ride is a "must" in Venice

## Padua's Basilica of Sant'Antonio



## A sampling of Bologna's famed cuisine



rich and powerful Medici family, artists and writers first began to learn about and imitate the sculpture, architect and literature of ancient Greece and Rome. But soon, other city-states contributed to the amazing explosion of creativity and genius we call the Renaissance.



In **Ferrara** during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Estes rivaled the Medicis as patrons of the arts. Under this powerful family, the city became a cultural center, famed for its music and art. Ferrara is a walled city with broad streets and many early Renaissance palaces, but the most imposing of all is **the Estense Castle**, sur-

rounded by a moat, in the very center of the town.

Nearby **Padua** claims to be the oldest city in northern Italy. According to a tradition dating back to Virgil's *Aeneid*, Padua was founded 3,100 years ago in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC by a prince fleeing Troy. Only 25 miles from Venice, it has an 800-year old university, where Galileo once taught. A picturesque city with many arcaded streets, Padua is the setting for Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. But it is also famous for its magnificent 13<sup>th</sup> century **Basilica of Sant'Antonio**, where the remains of the saint rest in a chapel. In the piazza in front of the basilica stands **Donatella's equestrian statue** of the Venetian general, Gattamelata. Cast in 1453, it was the first full-size equestrian bronze cast since antiquity.

Only eight miles from Padua lies **Vicenza**, "the city of Palladio" because it has 23 buildings designed by the famous architect, including **the Villa Rotonda**, the most

imitated building in the world and the inspiration for Thomas Jefferson's Virginia home, Monticello.

One of the best-run cities in Italy is **Bologna**, whose university, founded in 1088, is the oldest in the West. For this reason, Italians refer to the city as *la Dotta* (the learned one), but its famed cuisine, based on meats and cheeses, has also earned it the nickname, *la Grassa* (the fat one.)

Bologna invented the pasta called *tortellini* and gave its name to the rich tomato sauce made with chopped meat called *ragù bolognese*. Among its most popular cured pork meats are prosciutto, salame and mortadella, a version of which Americans call "baloney" (aka *bologna*). For these many reasons, in the year 2000, the nations of the European Union named Bologna "the European Capital of Culture."

When Julius Caesar wanted to go on vacation, he headed to **Verona**, whose Roman amphitheater, **the Arena**, completed 1,770 years ago, still stands. It is the third largest in Italy after Rome's Colosseum and the arena in Capua. In its prime, it could seat some 25,000 spectators in its 44 tiers of marble seats. Today, it is the site of a famous summer opera festival with, reportedly, the toughest opera audience in the world.

The remarkable legacy these city-states left the world has made them the crown jewels of the Italian Renaissance. And, in fact, **Venice, Ferrara, Verona, Vicenza, Padua** and **Mantua** have all been named *World Heritage Sites* by the United Nation's Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).



Palladio's famed Villa Rotonda in Vicenza



**Venetian masks at Carnival time**

### TOUR THE TREASURES OF NORTHERN ITALY

Beginning September, the Sons of Italy, the biggest national organization in the United States for men and women of Italian heritage, will launch weekly tours of these seven famous city-states. **The Treasures of Northern Italy** explores their traditional cuisine, ancient roots and historic monuments with an English-speaking guide.

“Home” for the week is the **four-star Hotel Milano** in historic **Padua**. From there, participants will take daily excursions to **Venice, Vicenza, and Verona** as well as **Bologna, Mantua and Ferrara**.

Along with tours by a personal guide, participants will have time for shopping and sight-seeing on their own. Breakfasts and dinners feature the region’s rich cuisine and sparkling wines.

**Personal itineraries** for travelers who wish to extend their visit can be arranged, subject to availability of hotels, auto rentals and airline passages. Clubs, lodges and groups can reserve “**Members-Only**” tours. However, all reservations are on a first-come, first-served basis and require a minimum of 25 people.

The tour package includes round-trip airfare; hotel; all breakfasts and dinners; and an English-speaking tour guide. Cost ranges from \$2,149 to \$2,549 per person, depending on the season. See details and application form on page 35. For more information, call 1-800/777-7432 or email Marianna Pisano at [mpisano@unitours.com](mailto:mpisano@unitours.com).

## Trip Itinerary

- Day 1: DEPARTURE - Overnight flight New York/Venice (via Rome)
- Day 2: **ARRIVE** Padua – Free afternoon
- Day 3: Tour of Venice (Afternoon free)
- Day 4: Tour of Bologna
- Day 5: Tour of Ferrara
- Day 6: Tour of Padua (Afternoon free)
- Day 7: Tour of Vicenza
- Day 8: Tours of Verona & Mantua
- Day 9: **DEPART** – Venice/New York (via Rome)



**Padua’s four-star Hotel Milano**

*Dona De Sanctis is editor-in-chief of Italian America magazine, the most widely read publication in the U.S. for people of Italian heritage. It is published in Washington, D.C.*

### Average Temperatures in Northern Italy

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Year
Average high °F	41	47	55	63	72	79	84	83	76	65	52	43	64
Daily mean °F	35	40	47	54	62	69	74	73	64	56	45	36	55
Average low °F	28	32	38	45	53	59	64	63	57	47	38	30	46