



The Arena di Verona: spectacular, even if you're up in the gods

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THE SUMMER OF CULTURE 2011

Europe is brimming with cultural treats. Mia Aimaro Ogden kicks off our three-page guide to the season at the opera in magical Verona

Everyone knows that Verona is fair. Shakespeare told us so in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the guidebooks have been repeating it, from parchment to iPad, for the past 400 years. So why did its loveliness still take me by surprise? It was the music.

You may be familiar with its opera festival, which every year attracts 500,000 spectators to the Roman Arena di Verona. It began in 1913, with a diva-studded production of Verdi's *Aida* — you can catch it this year, along with *La Traviata*, *The Barber of Seville*, *Nabucco* and *La Bohème*, under the stars in the atmospherically crumbling amphitheatre. But that's not the only auditory highlight this city has to offer. The music of Verona is constant. From the moment you throw back the shutters to your last drink of the night on the medieval Piazza della Erbe, it's everywhere. Jazz, classical and Italian pop (not that bad, honestly) — all are thriving here, at a price everyone can afford.

My musical experience starts when I check in at my hotel, the 14th-century Due Torri, on the Piazza Sant'Anastasia, the palazzo of choice for Maria Callas and Mozart (00 39-045 595044, www.duetorrihotels.com; doubles from £405, B&B). The sun is going down on the

newly restored Italian-gothic basilica. Outside, a curious gaggle is waiting, phone cameras at the ready: four 15-year-old girls, a 40-year-old woman with dreads, two Germans with three dogs and a parrot. I ask the receptionist what they're doing. "They're here for Marco Mengoni," he whispers (he won the Italian *X Factor* in 2009, you know). I don't think he's really meant to say.

As I walk through the grand *salone*, with its soaring arches, Venetian-glass windows and Murano chandeliers, I catch sight of Renato Zero being hustled out of a side door. Now he really is huge, the Italian David Bowie of his day. He's here for the Beady Eye Awards in the arena — not that I need to ask, as you can hear them, live, wherever you go.

Later, to the amplified strains of Liam Gallagher's *Beady Eye* (yep, he's here too, though thankfully not in my hotel), I stop for a swift glass of Amarone under the 12th-century riverside arcade at Osteria Sottoriva (045 8014323). Dinner is under the beady eye of Dante's statue on Piazza dei Signori, a showcase of the city's architectural history, where the tasting menus at the Ristorante Antico Caffè Dante (045 800 0083, caffedante.it; mains from £14) come with a jazz soundtrack. The walk home is blessedly silent.

Next morning, I open the windows of my plush hotel room and my ears are

met by the sound of a soprano practising her scales at the Conservatorio di Musica, on Via Abramo Massalongo, 100yd away. Throughout my stay, if it's not vocals I can hear, it's the piano or the violin — all for nothing.

That's the lovely thing about Italians and their opera: it's for everyone, as they're forever telling you, loudly. If you're on a budget, try the Hotel Verona (045 595944, hotelverona.it; doubles £105, B&B), a design-savvy bolt hole by the architect Vincenzo Valentini. Or there's the charming Casa & Natura (045 800 5053, casaenatura.progettoindue.com; doubles £105, B&B), a B&B where everything is organic, from the bed linen to the breakfast. Each room comes with a pair of bicycles for greener sightseeing.

Today, I'm going to the opera — not just to the arena, to check out the preparations for the 89th annual festival, which began a couple of weeks ago, but outside the city, to the workshops where the sets are made. A car takes me to an unpromising-looking industrial estate where, in vast hangars, I see the great Egyptian pillars for *Aida* being

painted with hieroglyphs; 6ft-high roses for *The Barber of Seville*, still waiting for their stalks; and vast, savage creatures, sculpted from foam for *Nabucco*, getting their final silver coat. It's a curious world: fairy-tale pieces handcrafted by a team of workers in paint-spattered shorts and T-shirts.

That afternoon, I end up in the arena itself. Built in the 1st century AD to seat 20,000 spectators for gladiatorial combat, it now hosts the opera festival (tickets from £15; 045 8005151, www.arena.it), which this year features Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*, a rare local treat. For real buffs, backstage tours are available — from a whopping £2,640 for a group of up to 50 (020 7808 7330, liaisonsabroad.com). It's targeted at the corporate sector, and you can see why.

Music doesn't only happen on a grand scale in this city. After a modern Italian dinner — grilled octopus brochettes with tomato jam — in the fairylike courtyard of Ristorante Al Cristo (045 594287, ristorantealcristo.it; mains from £14), I catch the final half-hour of Villa in Canto's production of *L'elisir d'amore*. It's an inspired scheme to bring small bites of opera (this summer, *Bohème*, *Traviata*, *Butterfly* and *Tosca*) to tiny audiences in the delicately restored *salone* of the Palazzo Camozzini (£45; 045 803 0370, www.villaincanto.eu). It's just you, the soloists and 19 other people — breathtaking.

My last morning begins with a trip to the Duomo, Verona's 12th-century cathedral. A bride and groom are leaving as I arrive; inside, the organist and a lone violin play Gounod's *Ave Maria*. It's a genuinely tender performance. I see the wedding party again an hour

later, as I visit the historic Casa di Giulietta — my one concession to Shakespeare, even though he never came here, Juliet probably didn't exist, and the balcony is improbably high (£3.50; 045 803 4303).

Then it's a final lunch at a local favourite, Al Pompiere, hidden down the tiniest of tiny streets (045 803 0537, alpompiere.tv; mains from £10). I choose Amarone risotto, recommended to me by a Veronese. It doesn't disappoint. What she can't have known is that, on the table next to me, I would find Marco Mengoni. My cup runneth over.

✦ Mia Aimaro Ogden travelled as a guest of British Airways and Liaisons Abroad

Getting there: fly to Verona with British Airways (0844 493 0787, ba.com) or EasyJet (0843 104 5000, easyjet.com), from Gatwick; Flybe (0871 700 2000, flybe.com), from Southampton; BMI Baby (bmibaby.com), from East Midlands; or Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com), from Stansted.

Tour operators: Liaisons Abroad (020 7808 7330, liaisonsabroad.com) has two nights in Verona at the Due Torri from about £490pp during the festival (until September 3), excluding flights, but with a personal guide. It can arrange festival tickets; from £15. Page & Moy (0844 567 6633, pageandmoy.co.uk) has four-day city breaks at festival time from £595pp, including flights from London, three nights in a three- or four-star hotel and two nights at the opera. Other operators include Citalia (0844 415 1987, citalia.com) and Kirker (020 7593 1899, kirkerholidays.com).

