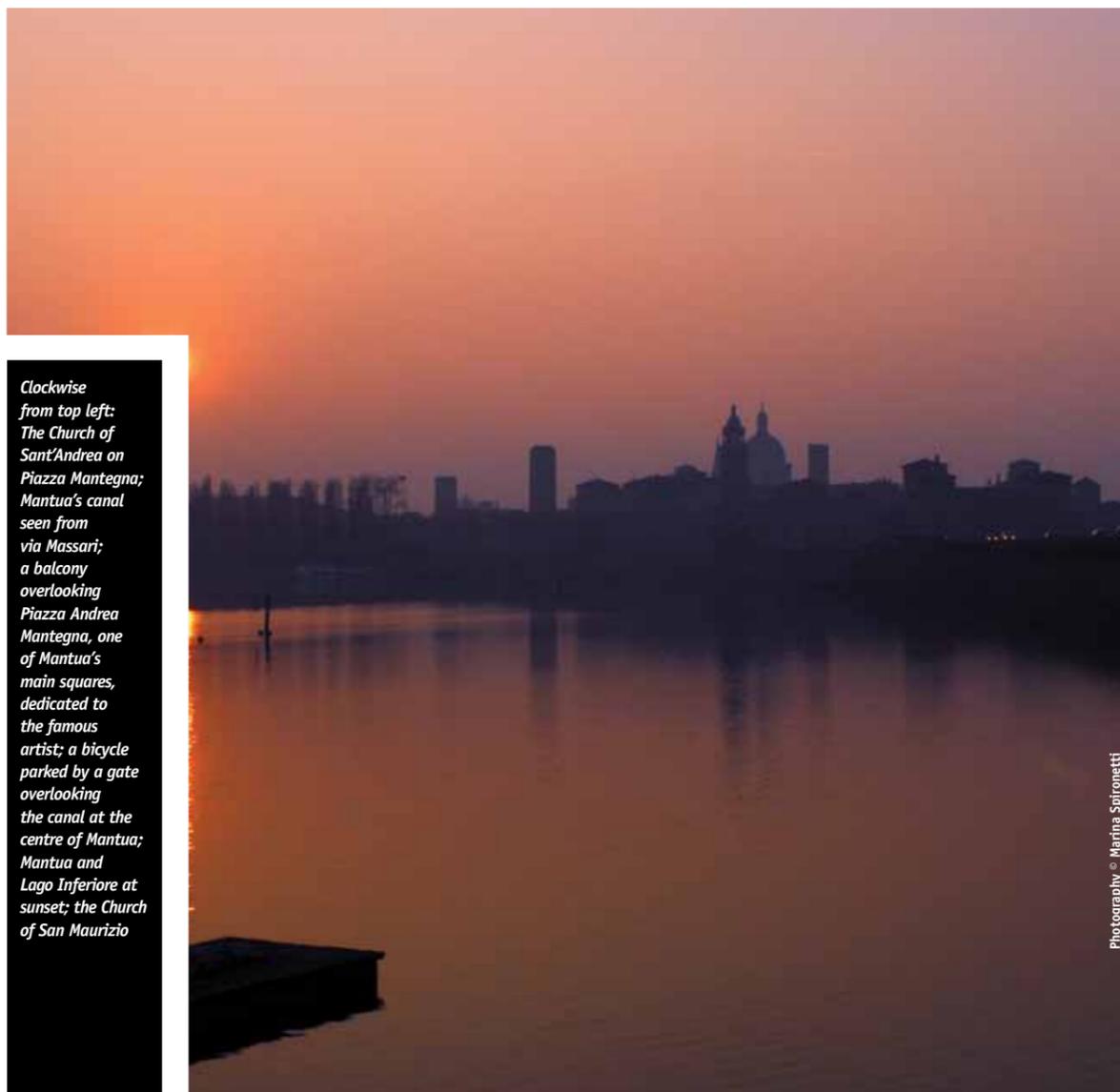




48 HOURS IN...

Mantua

Follow **Marina Spironetti** as she unveils the treasures of the cobbled city of Mantua, one of the most atmospheric places to visit in northern Italy



Clockwise from top left: The Church of Sant'Andrea on Piazza Mantegna; Mantua's canal seen from via Massari; a balcony overlooking Piazza Andrea Mantegna, one of Mantua's main squares, dedicated to the famous artist; a bicycle parked by a gate overlooking the canal at the centre of Mantua; Mantua and Lago Inferiore at sunset; the Church of San Maurizio

Photography © Marina Spironetti

A year ago yet another earthquake shook most of northern Italy, causing considerable damage. When I went back to Mantua a couple of months ago, I did not know what to expect. I knew some of the sights were closed to the public and the city was still struggling with the consequences. Apart from some scaffolding in the centre, though, I was relieved. In the 15th century, writer Baldesar Castiglione defined Mantua as "a city in the form of a palace" and I was pleased to note that the definition was still valid. Even after the earthquake, Mantua has that feeling of untouched beauty.

The *centro storico* is a pleasure to ramble around. Its narrow cobbled streets abound with antique shops, atmospheric cafés and delis – and every now and then they open up into one of those harmonious piazzas the city is famous for. If you are familiar with other northern Italian cities, Mantua will strike you for being a mixture between Bologna and Venice. Spiritually – and, by coincidence, geographically also. It has the same elegant arcades and the joyful comings and goings of bicycles as Bologna. With Venice, on the other hand, the connection is on a deeper level: water. Just like *La Serenissima*, water seems to be the lifeblood of the city. Approaching the city from the San Giorgio bridge, its medieval skyline of towers and domes appears almost completely surrounded by it. The river Mincio has swollen out into three lakes, which turn the city almost into an island. In addition to that, the city is divided into two by a *rio*, a medieval canal. ➤



WHAT TO SEE AND DO

LA DUCALE CAFÉ

Via Pietro Fortunato Calvi 25

☎ +39 0376 150 4122

www.ladualecafe.com

A lovely Liberty-style café, which should not be missed. Over the years, they have specialised in a range of flavoured coffees. Their delicious *caffè al pepe* (pepper coffee) is definitely the best espresso I have had in years. Alternatively, try the one with cardamom or the *caffè al peperoncino*, flavoured with chilli peppers.

SATURDAY MORNING FARMER'S MARKET

Lungorio IV Novembre

If you are a foodie, plan your Saturday morning around this weekly market. It sells everything from organic fruit to fresh-hunted game, aged Parmesan and local wine, including local Lambrusco – pleasantly low in alcohol but fruity and *frizzante*. Open from 8am to 1pm.

UNESCO BUS LINE MANTUA-SABBIONETA

☎ +39 0376 230 339

www.mantovasabbioneta-unesco.it

A brand-new bus service which links Mantua to the nearby world-famous UNESCO site of Sabbioneta (journey time around 45 minutes) is up and running. On board there is also a guide to help you plan your visit. Booking ahead is advised. Running at weekends and public holidays until 30 June and then again from 7 September to 27 October. Single ticket €5, return €8.

MANTUA CATHEDRAL

Via Fratelli Cairoli

Soak up the grandiose architecture of the city's cathedral, with its Gothic façade and Baroque-style interior. Entrance is free.

BIKE TOUR TO SABBIONETA

If you visit in spring or autumn, make the most of the Ciclovía Unesco, a 47km-long bike track linking Mantua to Sabbioneta. Along the way you will come across several small towns such as Buscoldo with its late-Baroque church and Commessaggio with its imposing Torrazzo. The tourist board organises group excursions for a minimum of four participants.

PALAZZO DUCALE

www.mantovaduale.beniculturali.it

One of the most impressive pieces of architecture in the city, the Palazzo Ducale was once the largest palace in Europe. In its heyday it was home to a staggering population of over a thousand people. Now it serves as a museum with a total of 37 rooms open to visitors. Entrance to the Camera degli Sposi is limited to 1,500 people a day for conservation reasons, so you may have to book ahead to avoid disappointment when you visit.



A detail of the Camera di Amore e Psiche, inside Palazzo Te

DON'T MISS

MANTUA JAZZ FESTIVAL

Indulge in listening to world-class musicians in the historical setting of Mantua. This year the festival ran in April, but it can vary over the springtime months so check www.mantovajazz.it for the exact details for 2014. Lots of events sprawl across the city, making it an especially vibrant time to visit.

► The bond with water also constantly changes the ambience of Mantua: humid and sticky in the summer, when its western lake turns violet and pink with delicate lotus blossoms; moody and misty in the winter months. The fog, which is regarded by many as a curse, only adds to its charm. In its vapours, the city is still the sombre background of Verdi's *Rigoletto* and the setting of Romeo's exile.

SPRINGING INTO LIFE

In ancient times, being the birthplace of Roman poet Virgilio was Mantua's only trait of distinction. Not much else was heard from it until the 14th century, when it became the playground of the Gonzaga family. They were to Mantua what the Medicis were to Florence. Under their rule, Mantua flourished into one of the most renewed and admired cities in Europe. Needless to say, artists of the highest calibre flocked there: Pisanello, Leon Battista Alberti, Giulio Romano and Andrea Mantegna, as well as musicians like Claudio Monteverdi.

Any tour of the city should start from the delightful Piazza delle Erbe, bordered by the rear façade of Palazzo Broletto, the Casa di Boniforte da Concorezzo with its elegant stuccoes, and the evocatively-named Palazzo della Ragione (Palace of Reason), with a stout tower featuring an astronomical clock. The tower is currently closed because of the earthquake – and I do hope it will reopen to the public, as from its top you can enjoy one of the most beautiful aerial views of the city.

Sunk below the level of the modern pavement is the 11th-century Rotonda di San Lorenzo, modelled on the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. From there, the grand cobbled Piazza Sordello is only a stone's throw away. On one side rises the sombre Bonacolsi palace with its Torre della Gabbia, thus named because of the iron cage that was kept to suspend the prisoners over the city back in the Dark Ages. When the Bonacolsi were overthrown by the Gonzagas in the military coup of 1328, the latter built their own Palazzo

Ducale, just opposite the one of their predecessors (mantovaduale.beniculturali.it, €6.50). The Gonzaga's personal Versailles was created in times when modest understatement was yet to be discovered: 500 rooms connected by a labyrinth of corridors, ramps, staircases and courtyards over a total floor space of 35,000m². After the 2012 earthquake the

The fog adds to its charm – in its vapours the city is still the background of Rigoletto

palace temporarily closed to the public and has only recently reopened its doors. Some parts are sadly still not accessible, including Mantegna's Camera degli Sposi, which captures the life of Ludovico Gonzaga and wife Barbara almost like a modern family album.

THE CHAMBER OF GIANTS

A pleasant 20-minute stroll to the other side of the city will take you to the equally impressive Palazzo Te, Giulio Romano's masterpiece

(www.palazzote.it, €8). Its name does not derive from tea – *te* in Italian – but from the less evocative word *tejeo*, a dialect term to describe a drainage canal. The palace stands indeed on a former swamp, quickly drained in order to build a love nest for Federico II and his mistress Isabella Boschetti. The interior is spectacular, featuring room after room of erotic frescoes.

The most famous, the head-spinning *Chamber of the Giants*, depicts the mythical battle between the giants and the Greek gods. The scary effects of the vast murals spreading from the walls all over the ceilings is augmented by the tremendous acoustic effect: drop a button on the floor in here and the noise will be heard five rooms away. Rumour has it that Federico and his lover were particularly fond of making love there, which must have made quite a commotion. ►



The back of the Palazzo Ducale



A detail of the battle of the Amazons from a copy of a sarcophagus in Palazzo Te

WHERE TO STAY

HOTEL BROLETTO

Via Accademia 1

☎ +39 0376 326 784

www.hotelbroletto.it

A stone's throw from Piazza Sordello, this small hotel provides the perfect location for your stay in Mantua. The renovated rooms are decorated in a simple modern style and have free wifi. Half-board is also available.

Double room from €72

PALAZZO CASTIGLIONI

Piazza Sordello 12

☎ +39 0376 367 032

www.palazzocastiglioni mantova.com

If you don't want to settle for anything less than the best, Palazzo Castiglioni is the answer. Originally the home of the Bonacolsi family, the first rulers of the city, this 14th-century *palazzo* later became the residence of the descendant of Baldesar Castiglione, one of the iconic authors of the Italian Renaissance. One double room and four luxurious suites – each individually furnished. Internet connection and mini-bar included in the price. For a real treat, book the super deluxe Torre suite, on top of a 14th-century tower: four poster bed and frescoes, plus a terrace with city views.

Double room from €120/Suites €220

VILLA DEI TIGLI

Via Cantarana 20, Rodigo

☎ +39 0376 650 691

www.hotelvilladeitigli.it

Just 15km away from the city, this is the perfect choice to treat yourself: a stylish Liberty villa surrounded by a beautiful park. The recently renewed spa offers anything you need for a truly pampering experience.

Double room from €89

HOTEL ITALIA

Piazza Cavallotti 8

☎ +39 0376 322 609

www.hotelitaliamantova.com

Conveniently located halfway between Palazzo Ducale and Palazzo Te, this family-run hotel is great to explore the historic sites of Mantua. Some rooms are on the smallish side but the friendliness of the staff and the better-than-standard breakfast will make up for it.

Double room from €85

AL DUCA

Via della Stamperia 18, Sabbioneta

☎ +39 037 552 474

www.albergoldalduca.com

Basically the only choice for those wishing to overnight in Sabbioneta. Still, this family-run hotel offers clean, comfortable rooms, friendly service and abundant breakfast. There is also a restaurant where you can sample the tasty local cuisine.

Double room from €60

DON'T MISS

CYCLING

One of the best ways to explore the number of beautiful villages in the surrounding area is to hire a bike and make use of the network of cycle paths that stretch as far as Lake Garda, over 43km to the north. Of course such distances are not for the faint-hearted and shorter rides can be enjoyed around Mantua's lakes or along its river banks.

WHERE TO EAT

OSTERIA DA PIETRO

Via Chiassi 19, Castiglione delle Stiviere
 ☎ +39 0376 673 718
 www.osteriadapietro.it
 This Michelin-starred restaurant in the town of Castiglione delle Stiviere, a few kilometres away from Mantua, is perfect for those who seek a unique foodie experience. The setting is spot on for a romantic dinner, under the vaults of an enchanting 15th-century palazzo. Fabiana and Pietro will help you discover the flavours of the *cucina mantovana*, from the mouth-watering *malfatti* pasta to snails and delicious fresh water fish such as *luccio* (pike).

Price code €€

DAL PESCATORE

Località Runate 15, Canneto sull'Oglio
 ☎ +39 0376 723 001
 www.dalpescatore.com
 This three-starred Michelin restaurant means true culinary excellence and it's one of Italy's best. This exquisite restaurant is hidden in the natural reserve of the Oglio Sud park, and it is easy to reach if you fly into Verona. The cuisine is overseen by Nadia and Giovanni Santini, and features both classic and avant-garde dishes.

Price code €€€

AQUILA NIGRA

Vicolo Bonacolsi 4
 ☎ +39 0376 327 180
 www.aquilanigra.it
 Housed in a 13th-century palazzo, it serves elegantly prepared regional dishes. Wide choice of seafood and meat, with the menu changing seasonally but the traditional recipes of the local cuisine staying ever present. Excellent selection of wines.

Price code €€€

MASSERIA

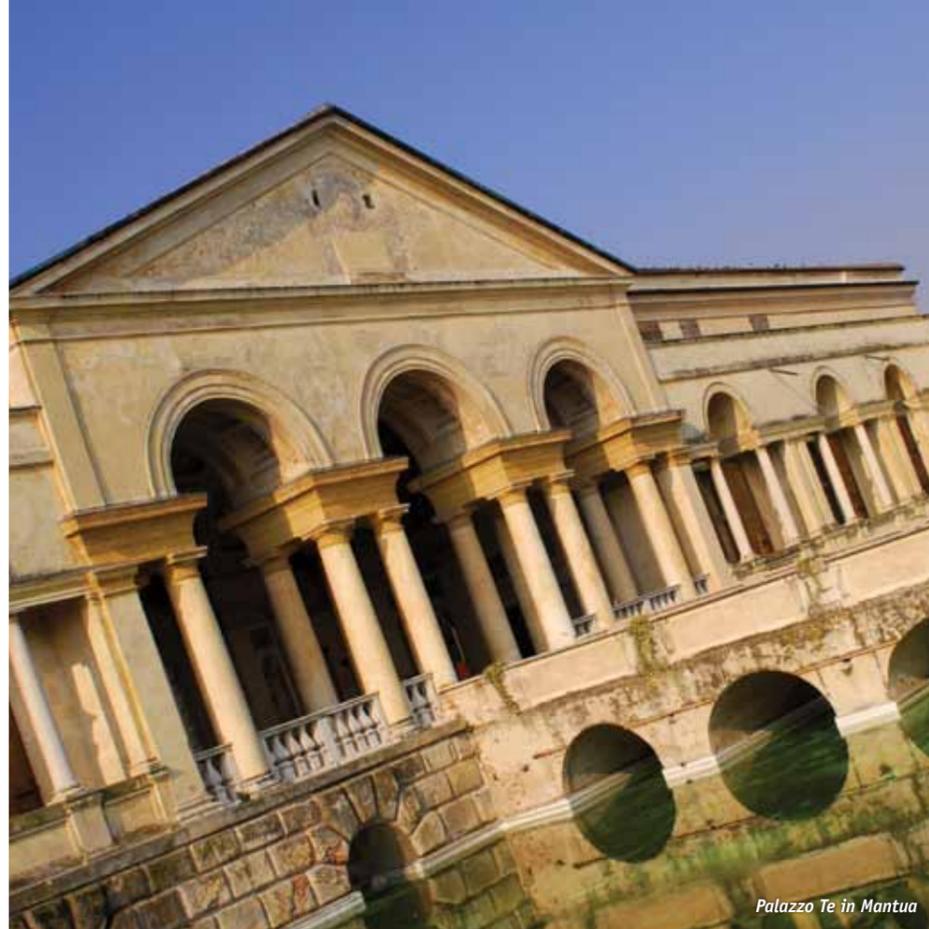
Piazza Broletto 8
 +39 0376 365 303
 www.ristorantemasseria.it
 Dine surrounded by ancient frescoes inside the Palazzo del Podestà, one of Mantua's most beautiful palaces. Try traditional dishes such as the famous *tortelli di zucca*, the Mantua-style risotto *alla pilota* with the typical *salamella* sausage and the delicious *Sbrisolona* cake.

Price code €€

TRATTORIA QUATTROTETTE

Vicolo Nazione 4
 ☎ +39 0376 329 478
 The most bizarre thing about this place is its name, which literally translates into 'four tits'. Away from the tourist areas, this is a favourite with locals and you can easily understand why: simple, tasty food in an informal atmosphere, all for a good price.

Price code €



Palazzo Te in Mantua

DON'T MISS

THE LITERARY FESTIVAL

Every year, at the beginning of September, writers and readers gather in Mantua for the prestigious *Festivaletteratura*. Published authors from all over the world come to take part in readings, book signings and author discussions. See www.festivaletteratura.it for information and tickets.

► A trip to the nearby walled town of Sabbioneta should also be part of your stay. An hour's drive southwest of Mantua, it was built as a sort of ideal dream city by Vespasiano Gonzaga, prince of Bossolo and member of a cadet branch of the Gonzaga family. Particular worth seeing are the Palazzo Ducale with its wooden

made from the flesh of a donkey. It all sounds like a world apart. Apart from donkey casserole, Mantua is a foodie paradise and has a lot to offer even if you don't have a very adventurous taste. If you like pumpkin, for example, you are in the right place: sweet *tortelli di zucca* (large ravioli stuffed with pumpkin and almond) are ubiquitous, and

Compared to other regions of Italy, people tend to eat some quite unusual things here...

equestrian statues of Vespasiano and his kin, and the small 16th-century Teatro Olimpico, the second-oldest surviving indoor theatre in the world after the one in Vicenza, which served as its model.

GLORIOUS FOOD

Art-loving Gonzagas are also responsible for the city's peculiar cuisine. Compared to other regions of Italy, people tend to eat some quite unusual things here. Deep-fried frog legs, for example. Rabbit ragù. Or even the less-than-appealing marinated raw eel. Or the notorious *stracotto d'asino* – stew

so is risotto, due to the proximity of abundant rice fields. The most typical is the risotto *alla pilota*, served with *salamella* sausage. Beef stew can be a safer alternative to the donkey version if you're not feeling intrepid – try it with zesty *mostarda di Mantova*, a local condiment made from candied sour green apples.

Those with a sweet tooth will not be disappointed either. The most famous dessert is the *torta Sbrisolona*, a mouth-watering almond and sugar-based hard cake. Its name literally means "crumbly cake" due to the fact that you cannot cut it into slices



The 14th-century Castello di San Giorgio



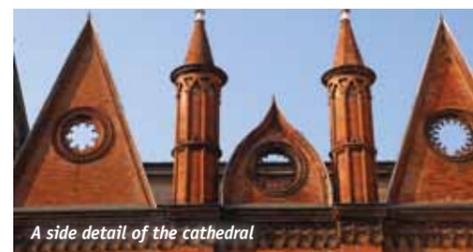
View of Lago Inferiore, one of the three lakes formed by river Mincio



A sculpture of Rigoletto in the courtyard of the Casa del Rigoletto



Bicycles adorn the streets at every turn



A side detail of the cathedral

but you have to break it in pieces. It is delicious for breakfast, dipped in a *caffè latte*, or after lunch, accompanied by a glass of dessert wine such as *vin santo*. ■

GETTING THERE

► **BY PLANE**

The closest airport is Valerio Catullo in Verona, which is only 33km away. Alternatively, you can fly into Montichiari-Brescia (60km) or Parma (60km). If landing in Verona, there is a new shuttle bus linking the airport with Mantua's city centre (two stops, one in Piazza Don Leoni in front of the train station and the other in Piazza Sordello).

► **BY TRAIN**

Mantua is only a 45-minute train ride from Verona and a little more than two hours from Milano Centrale. The train station is in Piazza Don Leoni and it's only a 10-minute walk from the city centre. Check www.trenitalia.com for timetables and prices.

► **BY CAR**

The city is easily accessed from the rest of Italy, just off the A22 linking Modena to the Brenner pass.

► **KEY TO RESTAURANT PRICES** (full meal per person, not including wine)

- € Up to €25
- €€ €26-€50
- €€€ More than €50

DON'T MISS

WATERSPORTS ON THE LAKE

Mantua is surrounded by three lakes making it a haven for watersport enthusiasts. There are many places to rent canoes and kayaks if you want to get active, or if you prefer to relax while you explore the lakes you can hop on one of the serene boat cruises that run all year round.

The tower of the Castle of San Giorgio seen from the arcades of Piazza Castello

