



## Taking the Kids -- and visiting Mantua, a hidden Italian gem

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After all, I'm staying in a palace -- the Palazzo Castiglioni, which dates back to the Renaissance, located right across the piazza from the 500-room Palazzo Ducale in Mantua, Italy.

Where? That was my reaction when Kit Burns, whose company Doorways specializes in booking villa vacations to Italy, suggested we spend a few days in the palazzo that has been owned by the same family since the Renaissance, in a city just 40 minutes from Verona. (If you know your Shakespeare, you'll know this is where Romeo came to buy the poison.)

Today you won't find that many tourists here, but you will find the quintessential Italian experience -- restaurants spilling out onto cobblestoned piazzas, locals starting their morning with a cafe, the weekly market that takes over the entire Piazza Sordello (we see it from our window) selling everything from socks to cheese and sausage. During the Renaissance, we learn, Mantua was famous for its music, art and the powerful Gonzaga family. I'm so glad we're here but we nearly missed the opportunity. Burns acknowledges that suggesting visitors stop here can be a hard sell when there are so many more famous sites to see in Italy, but that makes Mantua (Mantova in Italian) all the more special. "It's hard to find a place that's off the beaten track in Italy," Burns said. "Here you can immerse yourself in what was and what is." Without tripping over other tourists, she adds.

At one time, Mantua rivaled Florence for its art. But sadly, the Austrians and then Napoleon stole much of it. There's still amazing architecture and frescoes like the Camera Picta painted room in the Ducal Palace with huge wall paintings by Andrea Mantegna. There's the amazing Biblena Theater where Mozart played as a young teen; In June, there is a music festival where chamber musicians play short pieces in the ancient rooms of the Ducal Palace.

I was nervous suggesting Mantua to the extended family traveling with us, but nothing ventured, nothing gained, I thought. The stop turned out to be a high point of the trip. We met Guido, Luisa and their father, Baldesar Castiglioni, whose family own the Palazzo Castiglioni where we stayed (a portrait of their ancestor by Raphael hangs in the Louvre right near the Mona Lisa). There are also impromptu pasta-making lessons in a tiny restaurant outside of town, the local Sbrisolona traditional tart, amazing frescoes in the Palazzo Te, the pleasure palace Federico II Gonzaga, a young duke, built for himself with the help of Raphael's top pupil Giulio Romano, to get away from his mother -- some things never change!

Most important, unlike other Italian cities packed with tourists and cruise passengers, the locals were genuinely glad to see us and show us their city. That's why in 2015 I'm going to aim to get off the tourist track more -- and I encourage all of you to do so as well. Of course, when you let the kids lead the way you always go in new and unexpected directions.

That doesn't mean you'll always find a hidden gem -- like Mantua -- but when you do, you remember why you're traveling in the first place -- to get out of your comfort zone and share something new with those you love most and, of course, eat great food!

"Come see our pasta maker," said Daniela Bellintani, who with her husband, Fernando, owns the charming La Locanda delle Grazie in the village of Grazie just a few miles outside of Mantua. The pasta maker turned out to be Chef Fernando and three smiling young men who were happy to show us how they make the local specialties -- the pumpkin ravioli, which we happily sample along with pasta with homemade duck ragout, an assortment of local salamis and ham and local Lambrusco wine.



"My father says if you don't share your recipes, they just die with you," says Anita Aldighieri, the couple's daughter, explaining their plan to offer cooking classes, including those for families who will want to visit the Santa Maria del Grazie church. This is a church like none other you'll visit -- and one the kids will remember most. Even before the church was built in the 15th century, pilgrims came to pray for miracles. You'll see the strangest statues of those whose prayers were heard -- a man fished out of a well; another who couldn't be hanged when a beam broke. Perhaps the strangest and what kids love most is the embalmed crocodile hanging from the ceiling that's at least 500 years old.

Every August, thousands make a pilgrimage of a different sort here for a unique festival during which artists from around the world are chosen to create chalk paintings on 10-by-10-foot squares of pavement about something that relates to the miracle-making Madonna.

The Castiglioni family -- Luisa owns a villa rental management company in Italy -- has turned a few rooms of their palazzo into the most unique inn I've ever seen. (Think sleeping in a palace room -- there is even one with an ancient fresco on the wall -- but with all the modern conveniences and breakfast, starting at under \$200 a night.) While they don't want their city overrun with tourists, they certainly would like more people to discover its charms -- like the Palazzo Te, which is considered one of the great Renaissance palaces.

Kids love the Hall of Horses with life-sized paintings of some of the young duke's favorites from the 1520 and the astounding Chamber of the Giants with paintings that cover the walls and ceilings, telling the story of the fall of the giants who tried to climb Mount Olympus. When a big fire was going in this room, we're told, with light playing on the walls, it was like a Renaissance 4-D experience.

It's pretty great in the 21st century, too.

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