

Vicenza: Who needs Venice?

With magnificent art, food and architecture, Vicenza, in Italy, is more than a match for its pricey, crowded neighbour Venice, says Sophie Butler.

By Sophie Butler

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Nearly always overlooked in favour of nearby Venice, Vicenza has to work hard to entice visitors away from its celebrated neighbour. But the small, almost perfectly formed city in the flatlands of northern Italy's Veneto is a wonderful destination in its own right. It is gloriously embellished with neoclassical architecture, stylish hotels and excellent regional restaurants.



Vicenza makes an excellent alternative to the crowds of Venice Photo: GETTY

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Currently coming to the end of a year of celebrations to mark the 500th anniversary of its famous son, architect Andrea Palladio (1508-1580), the city and its region have produced another trump card for 2010. Next year marks the 500th anniversary of the birth of local artist Jacopo Bassano, one of the big names of the later Renaissance. His art can be seen in Vicenza's Palazzo Chiericati, or you can take a day trip from the city to immerse yourself in the paintings displayed in the museum at nearby Bassano del Grappa, his home town.

Whether you are moved by the art, the architecture or the local cuisine, Vicenza makes an excellent alternative to the crowds and high prices of its watery rival.

Travel by...

Plane. British Airways (0844 493 0787, www.ba.com) flies to Venice Marco Polo, from Gatwick and Heathrow,

from £90 return, or Gatwick to Verona from £120 return. There are also flights to Venice and Verona with Alitalia (www.alitalia.com), Bmibaby (www.bmibaby.com) and easyJet (www.easyjet.com) From both Venice Marco Polo and Verona airport, it's about an hour's transfer (by bus then train) to Vicenza. Information on www.atvo.it and www.ferroviedellostato.it

Stay at...

The Hotel Palladio (0039 0444 325347, www.hotel-palladio.it), a chic, 22-room base, which opened this year in a narrow back street close to the Piazza dei Signori. Sometimes busy with wedding parties on Saturdays; doubles from 160 euros.

The six-room Relais Santa Corona (0039 0444 324678, www.relaisantacorona.it) is another stylish newcomer, with minimalist rooms in a quiet area. Doubles from 104 euros.

The best two-star hotel – and the oldest, dating from 1873 – is 53-room Due Mori (0039 0444 321886, www.hotelduemori.com), with its fabulous roof terrace and views of city towers. Standard rooms are 80 euros; superior ones, with queen-size beds, air conditioning and internet, are 100 euros; breakfast is 5 euros.

Spend the morning in...

The Teatro Olimpico (www.olimpico.vicenza.it) Designed by Palladio in 1580, it is said to be the oldest covered theatre in existence. It has an extraordinary interior: elliptical in shape, the statues, seating and trompe l'oeil stage backdrop remain unchanged from the 16th century. Be sure to visit the art gallery housed in another Palladian masterpiece, the Palazzo Chiericati on Piazza Matteotti, which has works by Jacopo Bassano and his sons Francesco and Leandro.

The best-known paintings here are The Rectors of Vicenza and Adoration of the Child. You can save money on the sights by buying a biglietto unico, which covers all Vicenza's museums, including the Teatro Olimpico and Palazzo Chiericati, for 8 euros.

Have a break at...

Tutto Gelato (0039 0444 545378), a gelateria artigiana hidden in the small back street of Contra Fracche del Gambero, where the ice cream is highly rated by locals. Then squeeze in a pre-lunch visit to the gothic cathedral, started in 1482, but only finished 80 years later with the addition of a dome in 1566, designed by Palladio. When it's time for lunch, try one of the many outdoor cafés in town. For example, Opera (0039 0444 327501) at 8 Piazza Matteotti, next to the Teatro Olimpico, serves reasonably priced salads (from 7 euros) and a variety of sandwiches on a shaded sun terrace.

Stroll around...

The pedestrianised city centre, dominated by classically proportioned buildings with a smattering of gothic and baroque architecture. The best way of orienting yourself is by renting an mp3 player for 3 euros from one of the tourist offices (8 Piazza dei Signori or 12 Piazza Matteotti). Alternatively, pick up a leaflet called Palladian Routes, which picks a way alongside streets leading off the Corso Palladio (the wide shopping artery), past the basilica and loggia of Piazza dei Signori (main square), and finishes by the city gates in the west.

Have dinner at...

One of the small *trattorie* in town serving traditional dishes including *baccalà alla vicentina*, not made from salted cod (as elsewhere in Italy), but from stockfish (dried, unsalted cod), mixed with oil and milk, accompanied by polenta. Try Agli Schioppi (0039 0444 543701, www.ristoranteaglischioppi.com) for good, home-made pasta, or Al Pestello (0039 0444 323721, www.ristorantealpestello.it), where the menu is written in the local Veneto dialect (waiters will translate). Main courses about 15 euros. Round off your meal with a glass of local grappa.

Stay up late...

In the café-bars around the Piazza Signori and adjacent Piazze Erbe.

Spend the next day...

Walking to the panoramic viewpoint of Monte Berico on the southern outskirts (climb the steps from Viale Margherita). Then continue to the 17th-century Villa Valmarana "Ai Nani" (www.villavalmarana.com), so called because of the nani or dwarves that line the garden wall. The delicate and colourful frescoes are the result of a rare collaboration between artist Giambattista Tiepolo and his son Giandomenico in 1757, and depict scenes from the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*, among others. Close by is the Villa Capra (known as "La Rotonda"), considered Palladio's greatest masterpiece where sloping lawns and panoramic views circle this Pantheon-inspired, temple-like structure.

Take an excursion...

To Bassano del Grappa, the birthplace of Jacopo Bassano, a 50-minute train journey from Vicenza. Don't miss the small town museum built into cloisters that dedicates a room to the artist.

At all costs avoid...

Mondays, when most sights are closed.

Further information

Vicenza Tourist Office www.vicenzae.org.

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