

16: Vicenza

Nobody in the dormitory has slept properly last night because of an Italian man who has snored noisily all night. Banging and shaking failed to wake or stop him. In the end a professor who is leading a German group on a tour of the nearby Palladian villas resorted to pouring water from a bottle over him. The man woke with a start and loudly cursed the German. The Italian, who is still fast asleep and snoring when we leave the hostel, has been the main topic of conversation over breakfast.

Today I decide to start my own tour of Palladian villas and buildings – something that I have been wanting to do for some time. Desmond Guinness and Julius Trousdale Sadler Jr's book, *Palladio: A Western Progress*, which I bought the previous year, begins:

Andrea Palladio is the only architect whose name has been immortalized in a style of building known throughout the world. The influence of his architecture is to be found amid the snows of Russia, under the relentless Indian sun, and as far afield as Australia and America... Free to develop in an architectural void, it remained the accepted style of building for a hundred years until the Greek and Gothic Revivals of the 1830s and the Victorian revolt which followed... Simple lines and satisfying proportions have an enduring quality above the dictates of fashion.

Palladio was born here in Padova in 1508 and died in Maser, near Treviso, in 1580, aged 71. He is widely considered to be one of the most influential individuals in the history of architecture, and is remembered at the expense of his contemporaries mainly because he published his designs and wrote *I Quattro Libri dell' Architettura* ('The Four Books of Architecture'), in which he explained his theories. Several of his masterpieces are to be found in Vicenza, which is where I have decided to go today.

I walk briskly from the hostel to the train station, where I buy a return ticket, visit the tourist office and pick up a brochure on the Palladian villas in and around Vicenza, which is written in German. On the 9.33 train I study it, trying to make up my mind which of the many fine villas I should visit. I arrive by ten and, after consulting a map of the town centre, I head straight for the Corso Andrea Palladio, one of the main streets. I am quite disappointed to discover that the city is very grim and dirty-looking. I stop briefly to look at a couple of old buildings and am not very impressed. I take a quick look at the cathedral, which I find very stark. I do not delay here as a small congregation is attending Mass.

I next find my way to the Piazza Signori, where I find the Basilica Palladiana. This takes me by surprise, for I am expecting to see a church but in fact it is a modified public *palazzo*, originally built much earlier. It is an uninviting structure of blackened stone with arches, niches and statues. It also has a very tall bell and clock tower. Eventually I find an entrance and go upstairs to have a look inside. Here I find a huge, gaunt hall containing an architectural exhibition. I leave a few minutes later and return to the square. After looking briefly at some of the other buildings, I hurry off to find the famous Teatro Olimpico, which I am anxious to see.

At the end of the main street I turn off into a tranquil courtyard filled with trees and plants, and suddenly I hear the welcome sound of music – something that I have not

heard for quite a long time. I stop to listen to a piano and flute being played in one of the buildings – the music, I think, is by Debussy.

Having listened for a while, I make my way to the theatre, which is in this beautiful courtyard, and buy an entrance ticket for 1,000 lire. The first room contains some fine old frescoes; some of them are faded but they are painted in mellow colours such as brown and yellow. The next room, which serves as a bar, is not particularly interesting.



Teatro Olimpico, Vicenza

Then comes the famous theatre, which I have seen in photographs. It is absolutely thrilling to see the real thing: the stage and its permanent backdrop, the columns, the statues and the elegant décor. All this was built in 1580 and was Palladio's final work. Enchanted by the novelty of the design, which is based on the classical Roman theatre, I sit down by the door to gaze at the statues above the seats and under the ceiling. Then, when a group of Italian tourists leaves, I move up into the seats to study the wonderful stage and its set, which has been made to resemble an enormous triumphal arch divided into three sections. The streets behind the arch are made to look realistic by means of exaggerated perspective. I now feel that it has been worth all the effort to come here, if only just to see this, for the theatre has not just lived up to but has in fact exceeded all my expectations.

At this point, an American group arrives and a lady guide delivers a very interesting introduction to the theatre, to which I listen attentively. I then set about trying to take some photographs – a procedure made a little difficult by the relative lack of light. Afterwards I just take my ease, sit back and soak up the atmosphere. I am delighted to be here.

I leave the theatre at midday and go to a nearby tourist office. I speak to a very helpful lady who speaks English and who supplies me with information about the various Palladian villas and their times of opening, then gives me a map of Vicenza.

When I leave, I decide to hit off straight away for the hill outside the town in order to visit the two local villas: the famous Rotonda and the Villa Valmarana ai Nani. On the way, I pass Palladio's fine Palazzo Chiericati, bristling with columns and statues, and now the Civic Museum. As it has become very hot by now, it is wonderful to escape from the noisy main roads and climb up the steps of the hill, under the welcome shade of trees. Here I meet a man who proves to be far too friendly towards me; fortunately I manage to give him the slip. I pass the Villa Valmarana ai Nani and head straight for Palladio's La Rotonda. However, I discover that it is closed until two o'clock. As it is not possible to eat my lunch in the grounds, I retire to a nearby garden, sit on the steps of a little locked-up chapel and eat my lunch in the shade. It is a pleasantly peaceful spot. A young Italian couple appears, perch themselves on the wall and start their picnic lunch. We start chatting and soon become good friends. Before we leave to visit the villa, they give me a glass of white wine.



La Rotonda, Vicenza

At two o'clock we approach the grounds of the villa and I pay 1,000 lire for a ticket. Because restoration work is in progress and the fine building is surrounded by scaffolding, we can only get a glimpse of the façade. Although this is disappointing, the place is still well worth seeing. I have been warned that it would probably be closed, and so I am not too surprised. This Villa Almerico Capra Valmarana, as it is properly called, was inspired by the famous Pantheon in Rome. Designed by Palladio, building began in 1567 but was not completed until 1592, after Palladio had died.



La Rotonda, Vicenza

This very elegant building is placed in a lovely setting; although the surroundings have been ruined by motorways and houses, the small grounds and gardens are splendid. For me it is very satisfying to view this masterpiece that has inspired so many other architects, even though I can only see it from the outside. The Italians take a photograph of me and, before we part, we exchange addresses. I take a few photos and, when satisfied that I have seen everything, I set off for the Villa Valmarana ai Nani.



Villa Valmarana ai Nani, Vicenza

This villa, which was not designed by Palladio, but built in the Palladian style in 1669, is a humbler and more homely affair with a rather plain façade: it is a *palazzina* rather than a villa. On the walls surrounding the house are seventeen stone statues of dwarfs or *nani*. The setting is idyllic: the house is surrounded by shaded gardens bright with colourful flowers, and looks out over a vista of exquisite mountain scenery, fields, cypress trees, old buildings and distant church spires. Inside I buy a ticket and sit down to read some printed notes in English. Surrounded by such elegance, I am in my element. In no hurry whatsoever I set about seeing round the house, allowing everything to sink in gradually. Beautiful frescoes are painted on the walls, and overall the house is charming, homely and very lived in; sunlight streams

through the windows, here and there I see bowls of flowers, there are books everywhere, and the furniture is simple yet comfortable. As the villa is so conducive to relaxation and as there are so few tourists about, the visit is a delightful experience – I almost feel that I have been allowed to live in this wonderful place for an hour or two. The glass of wine after lunch has also helped to put me in such an receptive state of mind.

The first room I examine is what one would expect to be an entrance hall, but it turns out to be a living room. According to the printed information, this villa was begun in 1669 by Antonio Muttoni and finished by his brother Francesco. The Valmarana family (who still live here) moved here in the eighteenth century and commissioned Gianbattista Tiepolo and his son Giandomenico to paint the frescoes in 1757. Here in the intimate living room (and in the other rooms), the frescoes are mostly painted by Tiepolo senior. On the walls and ceiling are depicted scenes from Homer's *Illiad*: the departure of the Greek fleet to Troy. Soldiers stand between painted columns, and other architectural details are painted in perspective. The whole effect is light, airy and pleasing. In contrast to the heat of the afternoon, it is deliciously cool in here.

When I have finished admiring the living room, I enter the first room to the right, where I find more vivid scenes from the *Illiad* painted on the walls. I sit down to examine them in detail and relax. A bookcase contains a full set of the *Enciclopedia Italia*. Although the furniture is rather unremarkable, it is unobtrusive. A few people now pass through on a ten-minute tour of the villa and leave.

In the following room are frescoes depicting scenes from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and a rather ugly grand piano. A strong smell of turpentine assails my nostrils: a workman is busy repainting the shutters. Some young girls come in, laugh and run off to play. I emerge at the back of villa, stand on a balcony and admire the long garden with its flowers and folly at the end, and the vista of the surrounding hills.

In the next room, which is to the left of the living room, the frescoes depict Virgil's *Aeneid* but unfortunately the ceiling has been destroyed. I finally enter the last room, where I find a television and a hideous-looking old-fashioned wireless set. Here the frescoes depict scenes from Torquato Tasso's poem *Gerusalemme liberata* ('Jerusalem Delivered', 1581). I am vaguely familiar with this poem, as I have often listened to Claudio Monteverdi's setting of one of the episodes in it, *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* ('The Combat of Tancredi and Clorinda', 1624).

After a most enjoyable and rewarding hour here, I leave reluctantly and walk across to the *foresteria* or guesthouse. I ring the bell, as instructed, and am greeted by a pleasant lady who opens the door and gives me more historical notes in English. I begin another leisurely tour of the small rooms which contain frescoes painted by Tiepolo's son, who obviously had a wry sense of humour. His paintings in the Chinese Room (a bedroom and the first to be seen) are very whimsical, zany and, at times, quite funny. Next I enter a room with frescoes of peasants in idyllic pastoral settings – this one is quite lovely. The 'Seasons' room, which is next and is decorated with painted neo-Gothic architectural details, strikes me as being rather overdone and ugly. The following room contains frescoes of the Olympian gods. In the last room to be seen are clever frescoes of staircases on two of the walls: a monkey is perched on the banisters of one and a servant is ascending the other.

Although this is a very fine and pleasing guesthouse, it is not as light, airy and beautiful as the *palazzina*. By contrast, the furniture in this building is decidedly ugly. However, this does not spoil my general enjoyment of the place. Outside I find the lady in charge chatting to some people who are sitting at a table drinking coffee.

There is a very casual, friendly and informal atmosphere in this beautiful place. Feeling quite exhilarated by now, I leave at around five o'clock and chat to a couple of English lads in the garden. I finally take one last look around and head downhill towards the railway station, feeling that I have seen the best of Vicenza and have not missed much in the town centre.

The six o'clock *espresso* train is twenty minutes late – there is something rather Irish about timekeeping here, I notice. Once again I spend the journey reading about other Palladian villas in the vicinity. Back in Padova, I return to the tourist office to get information on the villas along the Brenta Canal and a booklet on cycling tours in the area. Walking along the noisy roads towards the hostel, I stop to buy grapes and apples. In the hostel I meet Philip and we eat our evening meal together. Afterwards we chat to a young Greek couple who have just arrived and then I sit down to write my diary. This has been a really wonderful day.

As the Italian snorer is not in full swing during the night, we all sleep better. However, I am woken early in the morning by the sound of people shouting outside. After a hot shower I breakfast with Philip, who leaves this morning. I have decided to stay for a few more days here, and so I pay up. As it will be pointless setting off on a cycling tour of more Palladian villas today, as none of them are open on Thursdays, I decide to leave this to the weekend and spend another day in Vicenza, taking a proper look at the town and its buildings, even though I have not been enthusiastic about returning.

I set off at nine for the train station, stopping at a bank en route to change more money at 1,900 lire to the Irish pound. Unfortunately I miss my train by just a few seconds and have to wait until about ten o'clock for the next one. Feeling a little sleepy, I doze during the journey.

It is horribly gloomy by the time I reach Vicenza. I amble up the Corso Andrea Palladio, stopping to examine the old and grimy buildings more carefully. This time I am able to appreciate them a little better. From what I have read, a great deal of damage has been done to the city during World War II. Many places mentioned in my brochure are not marked on the map and so are difficult to find.



Palazzo Trissino, Vicenza (*courtesy of Città di Vicenza*)

First of all I walk down the Corso A. Fogazzaro to the not particularly interesting Tempio di San Lorenzo. Next I return to the main street and enter the fine old Palazzo

Trissino, now used as government offices, and ask if it is possible to see the frescoes by Giulio Carpioni, painted in the seventeenth century. I am directed up to the first floor, where a man very kindly shows me around some elegant and magnificently decorated rooms. A large room with a splendid ceiling is particularly impressive. The smaller rooms are not so elaborate, but are very pleasant. I assume that these fine rooms are used for conferences and reception areas. Looking across from a balcony around the inner courtyard, I can see other fine rooms with decorated ceilings.

Back in the streets, I set off in search of the Palazzo Thiene, which I have difficulty in finding. When at last I do stumble across it in a side street, I discover that it is a bank and therefore it is not possible to visit it. I content myself by examining the façade and courtyard. Being so massive and dark, it fails to impress me, though according to the brochure it is an important landmark.

I now amble around the side streets, stopping every now and then to examine more old buildings. Many of them look vaguely Venetian, with gothic arched windows, pillars and balconies. The entrances are interesting: inside can be glimpsed old wooden ceilings with lamps, and passages leading to courtyards or gardens. Slowly I begin to appreciate what I am seeing and begin to enjoy exploring the city

Next I make my way to the Piazza Signori, where I once again take a look at the Basilica Palladiana, though this time through the stalls of an open-air market. I also study the other buildings in the fine square, including the impressive and unusual Loggia del Capitanio, designed by Palladio in 1565. I sit on the steps of this building and begin my repetitious lunch of brown bread and some unusual rubbery cheese that actually squeaks when I chew it. I make a mental note not to buy this type again. At a stall nearby, I watch women trying out bras (over their clothes, of course) and stretching knickers before buying them from a man behind his portable counter. Then, at midday, down comes everything: the wares, the tables and the large colourful umbrellas. Everything is bundled into vans and off they go. Within half an hour, most of the market has disappeared.

After lunch I set off walking around the streets again; by now they are quiet. I discover that a companion of Magellan the explorer had lived in a small Gothic house. It turns out to be quite pleasant around the narrow Retrone River and its old bridges; here willow trees grow by the water's edge. I pass the Oratory of San Nicola da Tolentino, but it is closed.



Basilica di Monte Berico, Vicenza

I then turn back towards the city centre, but change my mind as I realize that most places will be closed at this time of the afternoon. Instead, I decide to ascend the hill once again, but this time visit the Basilica di Santa Maria di Monte Berico. As it has by now turned quite hot, it comes a great relief to be able to shelter in the cool of a covered walk that winds its way up the hill. From here I can look out through the numerous archways at the trees and surrounding scenery. I pass several luxurious houses and stop at the large and splendid basilica with its tall dome and bell tower. Tired after the steep climb, I go inside immediately to sit down and admire the rich décor. The interior is light, airy and quite magnificent. Overall, the style is Baroque, but around the altar there are ugly later additions. At the back is an elegant pipe organ, and on the walls are some fine frescoes and paintings which, according to my brochure, are by Veronese. A lovely painting by Montagna catches my eye. I like this church very much.



Monte Berico, Vicenza

Back outside, I take a photograph and amble over to a balcony that overlooks the town. I take another photo and sit down to take a rest and look at the dramatic view before me. Later I move off and make my way downhill, stopping to take a shot of the Rotonda and the Villa Valmarana together through the trees. The scenery is very beautiful at this point, but now it has turned gloomy and hazy – a threatening bank of clouds hangs overhead.

Walking down the hill, I suddenly become aware of the change of season (it is coming towards the end of September). The trees are now assuming their mellow autumnal colours; leaves and chestnuts are beginning to fall. Seen through the archways of the walkway, the trees and scenery look magical. I stop briefly to photograph a man sitting on a park bench, reading, and move on. At the bottom of the hill, some leaves overhanging the walkway have begun to turn flaming red in colour. What a pleasure it is to experience this gentle transition from summer to autumn on this extended holiday!

Back in the busy city, I find the remarkable Oratory of San Nicola da Tolentino open. This is quite splendid inside; the intricate decoration and the paintings on the walls and ceiling are just breathtaking. White stucco work stands out against dark frescoes and classical motifs abound. I sit for a while, gazing around this lush and wonderfully intimate chapel. The pews are, for some unknown reason, draped in red material.



Palazzo Chiericati

Heading up towards the Teatro Olimpico, I pass the Palazzo Chiericati again and stop to visit the Gothic-style Church of Santa Corona, which is recommended in my brochure. Although the façade is rather uninteresting, the interior is quite good. The main point of interest is the collection of paintings to be seen in the side chapels, including a fine Montagna, the famous *Baptism of Christ* by Giovanni Bellini, and an excellent Veronese by the entrance. Under the altar is a rather bare crypt, but it contains the tiny but beautiful Valmarana Chapel designed by Palladio in the late sixteenth century. According to a placard, it has been restored by the American Society of Antiquities. I am very glad that I have visited this church.

Feeling that by now I have seen the best of what Vicenza has to offer, I now foot it back to the train station, stopping to buy a kilo of apples in a market and food for the weekend in a supermarket: bread, cheese, a hunk of ham, orange juice, and sardines. I struggle with this load on my way to the station and arrive just as it starts to rain. I catch the 6.55 *locale* back to Padova.

By the time I return, the rain has stopped. I begin to walk towards the hostel, but because of threatening thunder and lightning, I hop on to a bus, get out at the Prato della Valle, and walk the short distance to the hostel.

This evening I eat some of the ham that I have bought. An Algerian lad asks me for a little of it; he is interested to taste it as his religion forbids him to eat pork. Afterwards I write my diary and retire to bed. It has been a very enjoyable day.