

The Cincinnati Enquirer

COVER STORY

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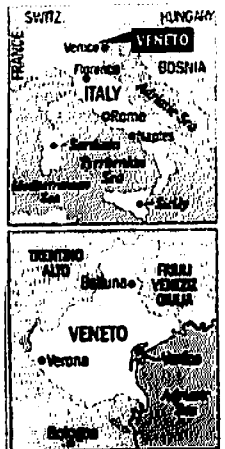
MARY S. GILBERT

Exploring the architectural and cultural wonders of the Veneto is a benefit of traveling with Butterfield & Robinson.

JOURNEY

Toronto-based Butterfield & Robinson is offering two types of Veneto-Venice trips this year: a combined biking and walking adventure and a walking-only tour. Both take in the Veneto hills, farmlands and Palladian villas and conclude at Venice's Grand Canal.

For an idea of price, an eight-day, seven-night Veneto trip is \$4,350. Information: (800) 678-1147, www.butterfield.com



BIKING, HIKING the villas of Veneto

By Mary S. Gilbert
Enquirer contributor

Everyone should be in granny gear going up these hills, exhorted Carl, our guide. Despite the somewhat irreverent name for the easiest setting, she had no argument from me — or anyone else — as 18 of us pedaled our new, blue Cannondale 24-speed bikes up the steep, winding hill into Rolle, amid the oh-so-picturesque peaks of the Pre-Alps.

I was on a self-propelled visit to the Veneto region of Italy. That is, I was walking and biking my way with a group of travel agents from the United States and Canada on a "fun," or familiarization, trip with Toronto-based Butterfield & Robinson

Self-propelled tour of Italian region lets travelers enjoy special treats of countryside

(B&R), the premier supplier of upscale biking and walking tours. B&R schedules these fun trips periodically for travel agents (and, fortunately for me, a friend of an agent) to acquaint them with the company's travel philosophy: "Slow down to see the world."

Hiking and walking, by definition, enable an upscale and personal look. To proceed at a hurried pace — or enclosed in a car or a tour bus — would be to deprive oneself of the opportunity to savor Veneto's inherent beauty and bounty. The Veneto may not be as well-known to

American tourists as perhaps the Tuscany region or Rome, but it is rich with history, culture, architecture and medieval hilltop villages.

The terrain varies from flatlands to mountain ranges, which allow for a rather temperate climate by protecting the area from cold northern air. Rolling, terraced hillsides are cultivated with vineyards, many of them growing grapes for prosecco, the Veneto's naturally fermented sparkling white wine.

The region also is known as the land of the Palladian villas, thanks to the influence of the legendary architect, Palladio, whose signature design elements include symmetry and arches.

In the 1500s, the doges, or leaders, of Venice required the

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city's noble families to buy property in Veneto, cultivate the land and build homes to help maintain Venice's finances. The nobility constructed expansive villas as testaments to their wealth and the aestheticism of the Renaissance, and some 1,000 of them remain, albeit in various states of repair.

From a gastronomic standpoint, the Veneto boasts a culinary tradition that incorporates locally produced ingredients. Risotto is more common as a primo course (first course) than pasta. Another dietary staple is polenta, made from cornmeal. Beef, poultry, fish and game are on most menus, and horsemeat is an unexpected but common inclusion.

Favorite vegetable include mushrooms, radicchio and asparagus, while chestnuts are a fall delicacy served roasted and even incorporated into ice cream. Among the more popular wines are scave, valpolicella and merlot.

According to Cari and our other guide, Chris, an American expat living in Venice, B&R crafts one-of-a-kind journeys for travelers who value personal freedom. The company schedules its trips in the most interesting regions around the globe; meticulously maps routes that are scenic, challenging and off the well-worn path to circumvent traffic. It hires experts to illuminate the local culture and arranges access to places and events not readily available to regular tourists.

Generally, B&R's itinerary runs a week and consists of one principal means of getting around, be it walking or biking (although transportation as exotic as camel riding is an option on the Moroccan trip).

Ours was a four-day excursion of two days walking and two days hiking and was designed to capitalize on the Veneto's breathtaking scenery, welcoming hospitality and hearty cuisine.

Our starting point was Venice with a lavish kick-off dinner at the exclusive Hotel Cipriani, where the management presented us with mementos of colorful rings and paperweights from the glass-blowing artisans on the nearby island of Murano.

We rendezvoused the next morning at Piazza Roma, the closest point cars can approach this city of canals, to board mini buses which drove us about two hours north. We disembarked in the town of Coste and, fortified with glasses of prosecco and a substantial lunch at the family-run Osteria Al Moer, we proceeded to walk through lush forests and fields, up rocky paths and down paved country roads, past quaint towns and alongside olive groves.

Each day, we walked or biked three to five hours. "Extra credit" excursions are available for those intrepid enthusiasts who wish to delve even more deeply into their surroundings.

Being super physically fit is not a requirement, although it does help to have a base level of aerobic fitness. B&R assigns each trip a degree of difficulty to help its clients select a journey with the



Shopping for fresh produce on market day in Follina is a family affair.

MARY S. GILBERT photo

appropriate amount of activity. The average age is 50 for B&R walking trips and 52 for the biking excursions.

To help us stay hydrated and fortified, our guides drove a van (jokingly called the sag wagon), stocked with cookies, candy, fruit, juice and water, which miraculously appeared just when we would begin to fade.

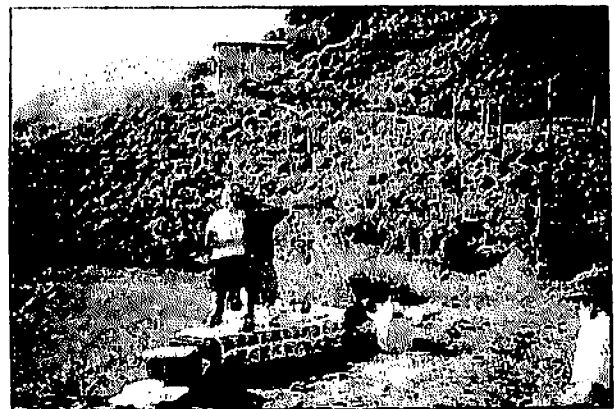
Hiking the next day took us to two 400-year-old Palladian villas — Villa Maser (also called Villa Barbaro) and Villa Emo.

Villa Maser, still well preserved, features ornate and colorful frescoes in the main salon and side rooms and a typical Venetian floor made of layers of crushed marble.

Villa Emo is a prime example of the villa's original dual purpose as a distinctive, gracious residence blended with a working farm. The central building comprised the living quarters, while the two long lateral arcades housed animals and machinery and stored produce.

For additional mileage, we biked to Brion Cemetery, which featured a contemporary tomb designed by Carlo Scarpa. The site is internationally renowned — visiting architects make pilgrimages here to marvel at Scarpa's deft interplay of natural and man-made materials and to interpret the design elements symbolizing life and the afterlife.

The first two nights we stayed at the classic Villa Cipriani (no relation to the Venetian hotel) high atop a forested hillside in Asolo. The Italian verb *asolare*, a derivative of Asolo, means "to spend one's time in an agreeable but purposeless manner," and that is exactly the feel-



An impromptu lunch at fresco amid the vineyards of the Veneto features the locally produced prosecco sparkling wine.

ing that overcame us after hours spent exploring the countryside. There certainly is purpose in enjoying the visual and culinary pleasures of this chic retreat.

Dinner one night began under the stars in the garden of Villa Cipriani with Bellini cocktails (a blend of the region's famous prosecco and peach nectar) and hors d'oeuvres. We moved to a glass-walled private dining room for a specially prepared meal that included choices of ravioli with butter and sage, risotto with local vegetables, grilled chicken, fillet of John Dory and veal piccata.

The next night we had a wine tasting

in a local enoteca, or wine store, and we collectively held our breath as a member of our group dramatically slashed the air with a saber to open a bottle of prosecco. Chris had persuaded the owners of Ca' Derton to open their normally closed restaurant just for us, and they treated us with much fanfare as they presented a potato tart, risotto with mushrooms, roasted duck and a creamy dessert with grilled hazelnuts.

Home base for our final two days was in Follina at the romantic Villa Abbada, a former nobleman's palace from the 17th

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century and the same hotel where actress Sandra Bullock stayed while filming *In Love and War*.

Our bike ride the following morning took us to Possagno, birthplace of Antonio Canova, one of the great Neoclassical sculptors.

We toured his gipsoteca, which comprises his house and studio containing the original gypsum and plaster casts for his most famous marble statues, now housed in noted museums and private collections throughout the world.

This day's route took us from the flatlands into the much more rolling and breathtaking foothills of the Pre Alps, an area sprinkled with charming villages and dozens of wineries.

We biked across one of the few bridges that spans the Have River, which, before the construction of the modern road system, had been the region's main artery of transportation.

The bridge was, by necessity, heavily traveled, but we rode along with confidence.

Italians love biking — it is their favorite sport, second only to soccer — and drivers briefly tap their car horns as they pass by, simply as a courtesy to let you know that they are there.

We were amply rewarded for our energetic efforts at dinner that night at al Caschetto (Da Chemy) in nearby Veduggia di Follina.

The owners of this trattoria brought huge bowls and platters of food for us to inhale in a congenial, family-style setting.

There was turkey with mustard sauce over arugula, carpaccio, polenta with buffalo mozzarella, risotto with squash, spaghetti with radicchio and chicken and beef grilled over the open hearth.

Our final getaway was on foot under brilliant blue skies and bright sun, primarily on paved tractor paths that traversed mostly uphill through vineyards and woods.

After scaling one 2-kilometer-long ascent, we reached Riva del Tur, a noted prosecco producer.

The vineyard's owner was helping his neighbors with the harvest, so Chris



Hillsides terraced with grape vines attest to the Veneto's wine-making prowess.

assumed the role of host, explaining that the grapes go through a double fermentation process, like champagne, to produce the now familiar bubbly beverage.

We rounded a bend to discover a serendipitous luncheon picnic of bread,

tomatoes, cheese, meat, fruit and chocolate — topped off with, of course, prosecco, — which Cari had spread amid the sun-drenched grape vines.

Dining al fresco is a B&R tradition, indicative of its resolve to have you



The ever-present dog wagon offers hikers a chance to refresh themselves.

experience the country up close and in an unobscured manner.

On our return, we shopped at Marie Do, a sister-owned cashmere store, where production occurs on the first floor and the second floor serves as the showroom.

We certainly contributed greatly to the store's profits that day, and we all wore our purchases that night for our final dinner, which was a fine dining occasion at Ristorante Da Gigetto in Milano.

When we arrived, we sipped prosecco in the underground, multiroom stone wine cellar, boasting several million dollars worth of truly liquid inventory.

Cari and Chris had planned the meal around three of the Veneto's favorite culinary ingredients — mushrooms, radicchio and chestnuts, all at peak season.

Romaine and prosciutto encased in pastry, carpaccio with mushrooms, mushroom soup, roast goose with polenta and roasted chestnuts were just some of the courses, all accompanied by the perfect wine.

As is the tour's tradition, on the group's last night together the guides had decorated the dining table with photos of our trip for us to take home as mementos and then encouraged us to reveal our most treasured memories.

Surely for me it had to be just what we were experiencing at that moment — an energetic yet intimate camaraderie fueled by extraordinary sights, tastes and experiences, the hallmark of a perfect vacation.



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