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**TRAVEL Feature By Angela Lehman-Rios**

*Vicenza Italy*

**Honors 500 Years of Andrea Palladio**



The Basilica Palladiana anchors the old city center of Vicenza.

his own vision, Palladio's designs reflect the order and beauty of an ideal world, yet were supremely functional for his clients. In essence, he updated Roman design for the 16th century.

In the city of Vicenza, he was often called upon to incorporate an older structure into a new, larger home or public building with columns and loggia, elegant covered porches.

In the surrounding countryside, where Venetian merchants were looking to diversify their income away from the competitive sea trade, Palladio designed villas that harmonized the farming functions of the estate with his clients' desire to have a suitably grand country home.

**“Four Books” for Posterity**

If Palladio had only been a great architect, he may well have been forgotten outside of Italy. But he was driven by larger goals.

“Palladio wanted to be thought of as not just an architect, but also an artist, a writer, a humanist,” said Guido Beltramini of the Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio (CISA) in Vicenza.

In 1570, Palladio published “The Four Books of Architecture,” a collection of many of his building plans with commentary. It is, ultimately, a

treatise on the vital role that design plays in everyday life.

“The Four Books” resonated with Britons in the 18th century, who wrote books of their own and in turn inspired Americans. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, considered “The Four Books” his architectural Bible.

**The Great Exhibition**

To celebrate Palladio's 500th birthday, Vicenza is preparing an exhibit to “show the mystery of this strange story” of a boy from a humble family rising to immortality, said CISA's Beltramini, co-curator of the exhibit.

In addition to showing 86 of Palladio's original drawings, they have gathered related drawings and paintings, including works by Raphael, El Greco and Titian. The exhibit will include coins, manuscripts, scale models and more.

The exhibit will be shown in the Palazzo Barbaran da Porto, one of Palladio's works from 1569 in the center of Vicenza. It runs September 20, 2008 to January 31, 2009, then travels to London.

**You know that show, “This Old House”?**

It's now also a website, magazine and - surely some day - a line of designer caulk, too. Well, I did some research and discovered that, since it's a U.S.-based show, none of the homes on it were built before 1492. Actually, very few are from before 1800.

That's nothing if you're in Vicenza, Italy.

Like most European cities, Vicenza is full of buildings that were makeover candidates when our old houses were brand new. But unlike other cities, it was the hometown of the renowned architect Andrea Palladio. His villas dot the countryside, and his churches and palatial residences are scattered thickly throughout Vicenza's city center.

**Westward Expansion**

Vicenza is an easy drive or train ride west from Venice. In the heart of the Veneto region of Italy, it is known for asparagus, wine, gold, and a poor stonecutter who became the most sought-after architect of the northern Italian Renaissance and whose architectural principles of proportion and function have spread over the world.

Palladio's skill as a stonecutter led him to opportunities to design residences for noblemen who wanted to show they were hip to the renewed interest in classical Rome. Based on his meticulous measurements of Roman ruins and infused with



Villa Cordellina follows Palladian principles.

Plans for a third venue, possibly in Washington, D.C., are being finalized.

## Walk Through History

The significance of the exhibit is without doubt. Yet all of Vicenza and the surrounding countryside is a living exhibit of Palladio's works and influence.

A walking tour of the city center, which is closed to motorized vehicles, is an enlightening way to start a visit. The Vicenza tourist information office supplies professional guides on Saturdays. You can also choose one or more self-guided walking routes, accompanied by a good booklet in English, which also contains driving tours of the country villas.

If you're in Vicenza for the art, fit in a visit to Palazzo Thiene. Because it is a working bank, tours are only by appointment on Saturdays, but they're worth it. Besides the chance to admire Palladio's beautiful lines, you'll see restored frescos everywhere, a collection of coins dating back to the ninth century, two of the most monstrously odd fireplaces you'll ever encounter, and an attic art gallery.

## The Villa Life

Plenty of newer buildings - from the 1700s, for example - are worth a stop as well. The gorgeous Villa Cordellina Lombardi was completed around Jefferson's time, but its architect deliberately used a Palladian design.

We arrived at the villa on a quiet Thursday morning. The sky was bright enough that we had to squint as our guide pointed out the "Romeo" and "Juliet" castles on the hills above. (Shakespeare stole his story from a book written by Vicenza-born Luigi da Porto.)

Our tour was informative yet not overwhelming; relaxed yet not lengthy, like an Italian supper on a summer evening, set on a Palladian-style porch overlooking the countryside.

As we stepped onto the porch, our guide helped us imagine tables being brought out for food, a breeze drifting across the garden and through open doors and windows.

"When you come to a villa, you never have to rush in," she said. "You have to stop and look back."

So we did. We looked back at the villa's formal garden with its potted lemon trees, back at the green fields of corn and grapevines, and the hills beyond. It was like looking back in time, back when what is old was new.

*--Angela Lehman-Rios is editor of Fifty Plus in Richmond, Virginia.*



## S I D E B A R

With the possible exception of art historians, preservationists, and our charmingly tireless tour guide of Vicenza's center city, most people can take in only so many enormous old buildings before they start feeling small and ephemeral. Luckily, Vicenza and its environs have plenty of other entertainment. I also enjoyed:

- **Tasting** wines and touring the museum and cellars at the Zonin vineyards in nearby Gambellara.

- **Seeing** jewelry, wood carvings, ceramics and more at ViArt, a museum dedicated to the work of contemporary Vicenza-area craftspeople.

- **Shopping.** Technically, this is not true, because I did my shopping in the Venice airport. But if you're a true shopper, you'll love the options in downtown Vicenza: clothing and shoes, purses, pipes, fine pens and much more.

- **Eating.** Go with an open mind, forget the baths of red sauce. Expect an emphasis on seasonal produce and a greater variety of fish preparations than you'll encounter in an Italian restaurant over here. Most exciting of all, during the Palladian celebrations, many restaurants are offering a menu inspired by the foods of the 1500s. For instance, instead of potatoes - a New World product - the Jerusalem artichoke offers mild, yet more flavorful alternative.

**Furthermore,** *I can't wait to go back so I can:*

- **Attend** a concert or opera performance in the Teatro Olimpico.

- **Check** out the thermal springs and drive through the mountains west of Vicenza.

- **Drink** an espresso at the restaurant in Juliet's castle, then see a play in Romeo's castle.

- **Visit** Museo dei Cuchi to see (but not hear) 10,000 sculpted clay whistles from around the world.

**And don't leave yet!** There are golf courses, ski slopes, discos, spas and numerous other delightful diversions.

**On the Web,** see [www.palladio2008.info](http://www.palladio2008.info) for extensive English-language information about the Palladian celebration, including three- and four-day packages. If you'd like to arrange a tour through a U.S.-based tour provider, try Select Italy at (312) 664-4200.