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Verona: So Much More Than Juliet's Balcony (September 2010)

Did you see the recent movie, *Letters to Juliet*? It's not too bad for what is basically an improbable little chick flick. But I never would have gone to see it if it weren't for that magical word "Verona" in the title – and I confess that I'm a sucker for two hours of glorious Italian countryside. But I could have used a bigger dose of Verona itself. I love Verona, one of the premier art and architecture cities of the north.



Draw a straight line from [Venice](#) to the west, through [Padova](#), and you come to Verona, in the far western part of the [Veneto](#). Verona sits along the banks of the *Fiume Adige* (Adige River), with most of its must-see sites located in the centro storico on the south side of the river. This is a very walkable and, therefore, very livable city. Visitors feel at home right away, despite the city's centuries-old history of political and artistic dominance and wealth.

Verona was in its prime, artistically and culturally speaking, in the 13th and 14th centuries during the somewhat petulant *Scaligeri (della Scala)* period. In 1405, the city surrendered to Venice, which continued to rule until the 1797 invasion by Napoleon. Verona flourished under Venetian rule, controlling much of the Veneto and even some of Tuscany, to the south. Visitors to Tuscany will recall seeing the balls of the Medici crest everywhere; in Verona, they will notice the ladder (la scala) around town, symbolic of the Scaligeri family.

Today, Verona is a fascinating mix of medieval and Renaissance structures, of three very distinct main piazzas and of enough cathedrals, museums and Roman ruins to keep visitors interested for days. And because Verona is one of the major cities of the vibrant and sophisticated north, the food and shopping are first class. Of course, there's all that Juliet stuff, so let's get that out of the way first.

Wherefore Art Thou . . . ?

Whether or not Shakespeare ever actually went to Verona is unknown, but he surely started something. There are those two gentlemen, of course, but Verona has become the location for lovers. Every year, hordes of tourists from all over the world come to get their fill of those star-crossed teenagers, *Romeo e Giulietta*.

In fact, since 2009, the government has allowed couples to get married right under Juliet's balcony (for a very steep fee). Visitors take photos under the balcony (even though it was reputedly added to the house in the 1920s); they travel to the Capuchin monastery to see where the young lovers supposedly committed suicide; they scrawl love notes to amore on the walls of Juliet's house and even rub the right breast of the bronze statue of poor Juliet (another 20th-century addition) to ensure that love comes to them.

So, go if you must, and get it out of your system before seeing the real Verona. First, there's *Casa di Giulietta* (Juliet's House), just off *Piazza delle Erbe*. The building, saved by the city in 1905, was actually believed to have once been a house of ill repute. Leave your notes to Juliet outside, then take a tour inside to see what a 13th-century residence looked like. A 15-minute walk brings you to *La*

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Tomba di Giulietta on the grounds of the medieval cloisters of the Capuchin monastery of *San Francesco al Corso* on *Via Cappello*, just southeast of the *piazza*.

Three Main Squares

I love the energy of the Italian piazza. Lovers, young and old, strolling arm in arm at the end of the day. . . window shopping in stores where the fashion seems to be made only for stick figures . . . the lively *al fresco* caffès, offering everything from birra to espresso to gelato . . . young people hurrying from here to there. The thing about Verona is that there are three main piazzas and each is unique in its own way.

Piazza delle Erbe (the square of the herbs) is on the site of the old Roman Forum and, as it has for centuries, functions as a bustling outdoor market. The aromas of earthy vegetables, fresh fruit and pungent spices fill your nostrils Monday through Saturday, all day. But since it's become a little touristy, watch out for pickpockets!

To reach the *Piazza dei Signori* (also called *Piazza Dante*), walk under the whalebone and move away from the commercial and into the contemplative. Wondering what a whalebone is doing in the middle of Verona? Well, here's the story...

The *Arco della Costa* (arch of the rib) was allegedly placed here 1,000 years ago after an excavation on the site. Either this area was under water at one time or that whale was way off course. So what's all the fuss? Well, local legend has it that the rib will fall on the first person to pass beneath it who has never, ever told a lie. Funny, nobody even bothers to quicken their pace as they walk under . . .

Of course the poet Dante's statue stands in his namesake square as a reminder that he once found refuge in the city - political exile, actually, fleeing from Florence - thanks to the largesse of *Cangrande I*.

This piazza is also famous for the the Scaglieri's 13th- century home and the 15th-century *Loggia del Consiglio* (portico of the counsel), a true Renaissance masterpiece. Don't miss the 12th-century Romanesque *Palazzo della Ragione* for its fine courtyard and Gothic staircase. And be sure to leave time to watch the world go by at the *Antico Caffè Dante*, Verona's oldest caffè in its loveliest square. But stay outside; it's expensive inside where the food is served.

Walk a little way down *Via Mazzini* to find *Piazza Brà*, my favorite of the three. Here you'll find the *Arena di Verona*, the best-preserved Roman amphitheater in the world, dating from roughly 100 A.D. It's incredible acoustics make it a perfect venue for live concerts, and if you're lucky enough to be there in season, do try to attend one. Verona's opera season runs from late June through August. Imagine experiencing *Aida* (outside, without microphones) on the Arena's stone steps? Check www.arena.it for details.

Because of the opera and other ongoing entertainment at the Arena, Piazza Brà is laden with late-night caffès and trattorias for your dining and relaxing pleasure. Also close to the Piazza Brà is the Museo *Castelvecchio*, one of the most formidable buildings in the city. On the banks of the Adige River, the "old castle" was commissioned in 1354 by Cangrande II to be both a military fortress and a residence. Largely destroyed in World War II, the building was restored and then reopened in 1964. Today, visitors can tour the architecturally significant rooms that also happen to house some of the masterworks of 14th through 18th century painters, including *Bellini*, *Tintoretti*, *Veronese* and *Pisanello*, Verona's native son.

On the other side of the river, you'll find several points of interest, including the *Basilica di San Zeno Maggiore* (dedicated to the city's patron saint) and across town, just over the *Ponte Pietra* bridge, the *Teatro Romano* (dating from the time of Augustus, when Verona was a formidable Roman outpost) and the small *Museo Archeologico*. You get a stunning view of the city from this highest point and can really appreciate what a compelling place Verona has been for all these centuries.

--Linda Dini Jenkins

Linda Dini Jenkins is the author of the book [Up at the Villa: Travels with My Husband](#) and blogs weekly about travel and travel writing at www.travelthewriteway.com

Photo by Elin B, flickr.com



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 **Jim Zurer** 4 months ago

Nice piece on Verona.....but one clarification.

>>On the other side of the river, you'll find several points of interest, including the Basilica di San Zeno Maggiore (dedicated to the city's patron saint)<<

In fact, the Basilica San Zeno is not across the river at all but on the same side as the Museo and Piazza Bra. We stayed in the San Zeno neighborhood for a week last Spring and found it convenient, congenial and surprisingly multicultural.

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