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Pursuing Palladio in a flame-red Alfa



Mamma takes the wheel as Alice Bianchi-Clark tours Northern Italy's architectural masterpieces

VILLA Foscari – or, as the locals know it, La Malcontenta – stands inconsolable, guarded by weeping willows like something from a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm. Legend has it that La Malcontenta ('the unhappy one') got its name after an aristocratic lady was confined there to be cured of the adulterous and gaming inclinations brought on by life in Venice.

My mother and I are in Northern Italy's Veneto region to mark the quincentenary of the birth of 16th Century Italian architect Andrea Palladio, on the trail of his extraordinary villas, churches and palaces.

Born Andrea di Pietro della Gondola, he was a miller's son who became a stone-cutter in Padua. He moved to Vicenza where his talents were recognised by scholars, first Trissino (who named him Palladio) and later the Barbaro brothers. They won Palladio numerous commissions and sent him to Rome for education and inspiration.

My understanding of architecture would be limited to the building blocks of Legoland if it had not been for my mother. She taught me how to read it, dissect it, appreciate it and digest it.

And she is not the only architect to have been inspired by Palladio. The designers of the White House in Washington and Banqueting House, Chiswick House and Marble Hill in London have all fallen under his spell.

'What I love about Palladio is his appreciation of nature, of space,' says Mamma. 'Beauty never comes at the expense of structure and functionality. What is the good of a building if it can't stand or be useful? Beauty is the topping. And where do you think he got that from? Rome, of course.'

I think back to my childhood in Rome, to growing up with the Pantheon, Colosseum, Forum and Baths that shaped Palladio's architecture.

'They are not just dusty ruins, you know,' butts in Mamma, telepathically. 'Palladio reinterprets classical and essentially pagan elements, such as temple fronts,

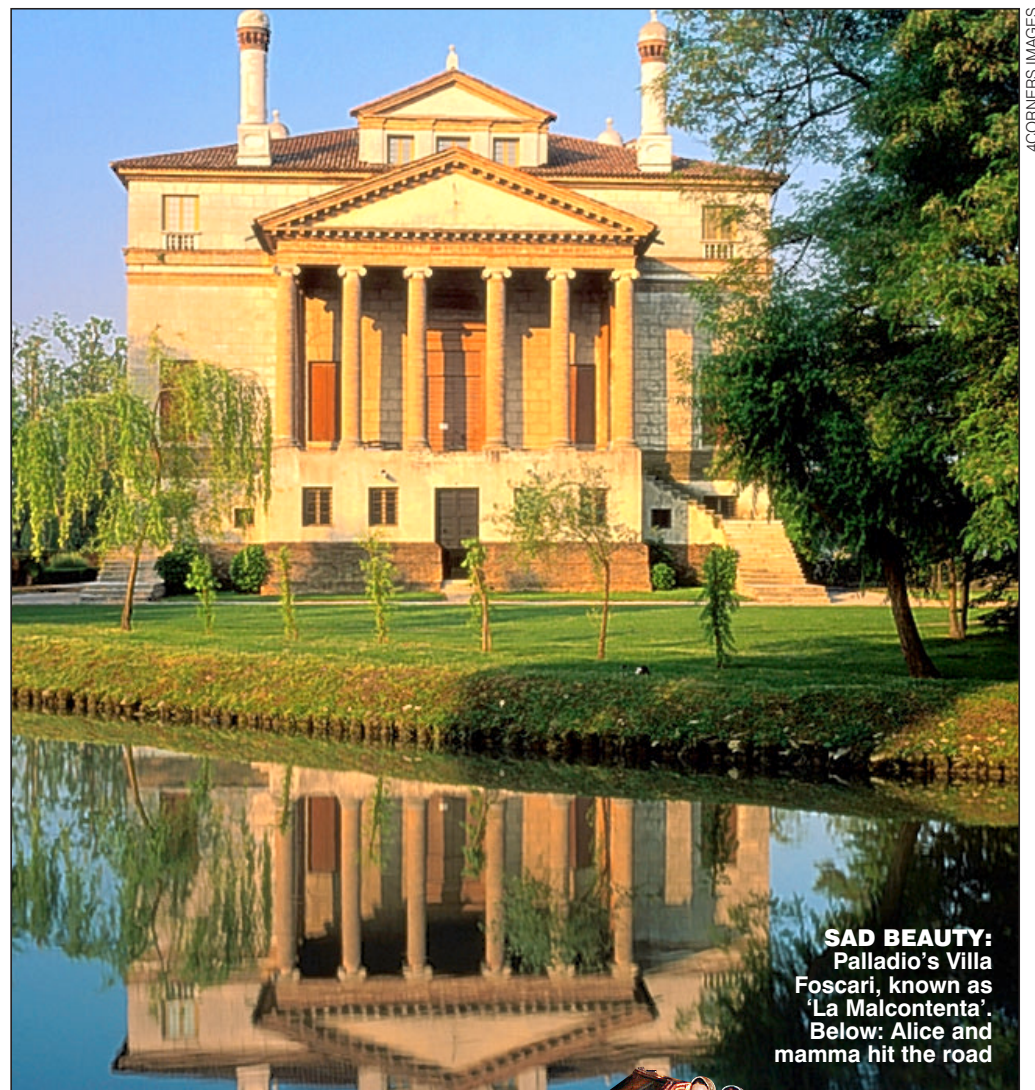
coffered domes, thermal windows and centralised plans, and introduces them in his villas and churches. You'll see.'

Setting off from Venice in our hire car – a flame-red Alfa Romeo, which makes all heads turn – we follow the curvaceous Riviera del Brenta, the waterway linking Venice and Padua, passing the picturesque locks at Oriago, Dolo and Mira and the canalside holiday villas of the 16th Century.

The countryside is impregnated with a pastoral nostalgia. Fields are tilled for maize to make the staple polenta and streaked in the granite-red local delicacy, radicchio.

After a brief stop in dainty Castelfranco Veneto for a passeggiata, or promenade, we reach our destination.

Villa Barbaro at Maser splays out like a seagull. The central temple-fronted body is flanked by arched wings whose tips are intended as dovescotes. Inside are Paolo Veronese's playful fres-



SAD BEAUTY: Palladio's Villa Foscari, known as 'La Malcontenta'. Below: Alice and mamma hit the road

GETTING THERE

Plan your Palladian itinerary (and check villa opening hours) at www.palladio2008.info; www.vicenzae.org/eng/eventi.php; www.marcatreviso.it and www.turismovenetia.it.

Alfa Romeo Spider (1974) rental starts from £340 for two days – although four are recommended. See www.sprintage.it.

Citalia (0871 664 0253, www.citalia.com) offers three nights' B&B at the five-star **Hotel Gritti Palace** on the Grand Canal from £379



per person, with flights to Venice available from £130 from Gatwick. Double rooms at the **Hotel Michelangelo**, a converted 18th Century villa near Vicenza, which has the grace of a stately country home and garden, start at €120 (£103) per night. See www.hotelvillamichelangelo.com.

coes of seasons, constellations, monkeys, parrots, balustrades, curtains and allegories.

The villa's owner, Vittorio dalle Ore, welcomes us personally. 'Living here is marvellous,' he beams. We walk among the gardens, taking in the calming panorama. Vivaldi's Spring whistles to mind.

THE villa hosts open-air classical concerts in the summer but is still an 'azienda agricola' – a working farm. We are in the heart of the Prosecco region and this year, other than producing its own olive oil and wine, Villa Barbaro released Palladio 500, an extra dry Prosecco with hints of green apple as its own quincentenary tribute to Palladio.

If we had had more time, we would have spent the night in medieval Asolo and the following day exploring the wine route from Valdobbiadene to Follina. Instead, we veer towards

Vicenza via Bassano del Grappa. On Bassano Bridge, designed by Palladio to stand firm against the kind of floods that had destroyed previous bridges, is Nardini's. First opened in 1779, this heartily traditional and family-run distillery is still the favourite meeting place of the grappa-loving locals.

Outside Vicenza, we find Villa Capra La Rotonda (the round one) – my mother's favourite work by Palladio. This Pantheon-inspired villa sits lightly on top of a hill, like a hot-air balloon.

After a whistle-stop walking tour of Vicenza's Palazzo Chiericati and other civic works by Palladio within the picturesque city centre, we journey back to Venice via Costozza, with its idyllic grottos and steep blackberry-lined paths.

La Chiesa del Redentore on Venice's Canale della Giudecca has the majesty of a grand finale. It is airy and bright, with embracing curves like welcoming arms.

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