



MANTUA

Space does not allow us more than a very short history of Mantua:

Already inhabited by primitive tribes, Mantua developed into a town under the Etruscans in the VII - VI century BC. They started to recover vast areas of marshy land destined, with the passing of centuries, to become one of the most fertile regions in the whole of Italy. The zone became a flourishing agricultural market and thanks to the Mincio river which, at that time, flowed directly into the sea, Mantua also became an important commercial port. The populations that followed, the Gauls and the Romans, did not destroy things but continued the land recovery and increased the crops so the city maintained its identity. A period of devastating invasions and brief dominations followed and in the second half of the X century, the city became part of the immense Canossa feud until 1115 when, with the death of Mathilda, the last and most worthy member of the family, Mantua became a Free Commune. Internal struggles and wars with neighbouring cities gradually created a situation that favoured the ascent of the Gonzaga family who, to gain power, had no scruples in betraying the Bonacolsi family who, until then, had been lords of the city and benefactors of the Gonzaga family itself. This was in 1328 and the Gonzagas remained in power until 1627, when no family heirs were forthcoming. These were centuries of artistic and cultural splendour when the greatest artists in Europe flocked to the Duke's Palace to leave the indelible mark of their exceptional art which can still be admired today.

The death of the last Gonzaga, Vincenzo II, was followed by years of strife during which power was contended by two branches of second generation. The Austrians arrived in 1707 and remained until 1866, apart from a short period when Mantua was under French rule. In 1866 Mantua was annexed to the Kingdom of Italy.

One of the most illustrious persons born in Mantua, we have to mention Virgil, author of the epic poem *Eneide* (Mantua, 70-Brindisi, 19 BC.).

This itinerary will take you through the many city squares to discover the splendour of the Commune period, with its palaces and churches embellished with precious works of art.

Our path starts at [Piazza Sordello](#), a huge rectangular square lined with some of the most important monuments in the city. The first to capture your gaze will surely be the [Duomo](#) for its imposing height and the three distinct architectural works of which it is composed: the



Romanesque bell tower, the Gothic right wing and the Baroque façade resulting from the various renovations made to its structure. Inside there are five naves, the main one divided from the others by a series of Corinthian columns. A number of communicating chapels contain paintings and sculptures among which we have to mention *San Martino* by Paolo Farinati, *Santa Margherita* by Domenico Brusasorci and *La Gloria del Paradiso* by Ippolito Andreasi, known as Andreasino who frescoed the dome.

The most prestigious building in the square is the vast complex on the left when the Duomo is behind you: this is [Palazzo Ducale](#), the Gonzagas' official residence. Its austere façade and walls hide a city within a city, with roads, squares and buildings dating from various ages, covering an area of about 34,000 square metres.



One of the most imposing structures in Europe, during the times of the Gonzaga family it became the centre of city politics and economy. During the long period under family rule, each member added rooms or salons and in its present state, no less than 500 rooms have been counted in the palace. The Gonzagas were great art enthusiasts and surrounded themselves with some of the most esteemed artists of those times:

Mantegna, Pisanello, Giulio Romano, Domenico Fetti, Rubens and others, transforming their residence into a gallery of unequalled works. One of the rooms particularly worth visiting is the [Camera degli Sposi](#), important for its extraordinary beauty. You will find it in the nearby Castello di San Giorgio which you can enter from Palazzo Ducale. This room was decorated by Mantegna between 1465 and 1474.

(h. 8.45-19.15; closed on Mondays; latest entry time h. 18,30; from June to September, open Saturday evenings, h. 21.00-23.00)

From Piazza Sordello, along via Broletto to Piazza delle Erbe, where life continues to bustle on the fruit and vegetable stalls and where you can admire important buildings such as Palazzo del Podestà and Palazzo della Ragione, both dating from the XIII century. Lower down, in the same square, you will find [Rotonda di San Lorenzo](#), a beautiful small round Romanesque church commissioned by Mathilda of Canossa in 1082. Inside you



can see the Longobard paintings dating from the XI and XII century which came to light during restoration in the early 20th century when the church was returned to its ancient splendour.

Adjoining Piazza delle Erbe is Piazza Mantegna with its magnificent [Basilica di Sant'Andrea](#), perhaps the church dearest to Mantuans because its history has always been linked with the relic *Sangue di Gesù* conserved within. Construction began in 1472 and ended only three hundred years later when Filippo Juvara designed and constructed the enormous dome, probably not foreseen by the original plans. A centuries-old legend tells that Longino, a Roman soldier who had witnessed the crucifixion, brought to Mantua some earth from Calvary soaked with the blood of Jesus Christ; the relic was placed in an urn and buried. The basilica stands over the place of discovery. The church has a single nave and was decorated by important artists of that period such as Mantegna, whose body also rests in this church. Through the grids in the marble floor, you can see into the crypt below where the relic is conserved.

From Piazza Mantegna along Via Verdi, stop a moment in beautiful Piazza Canossa, where the whole left side is taken up by Palazzo Canossa, unfortunately not open to the public; then along Via Ferinelli to Piazza d'Arco where you can visit [Palazzo d'Arco](#), a late XVIII century building, originally a 16th century family home.

This was the residence of the patrician d'Arco family. The last descendant died without heirs and left his home and its contents to a cultural association so it could become a museum. You can visit the exhibition by walking through the rooms where furniture and household objects are still arranged as though the house were lived in. The kitchen is still equipped with pots and pans and the dining room seems ready for imminent guests. Take a special look at the *Sala dello Zodiaco*, a room dating from 1520 with works by Falconetto and the *Sala di Alessandro Magno*, conserving seven big canvases by Giuseppe Bazzani.

(from 2/11 to 28/2, Saturday, Sunday and public holidays, h. 10.00-12.30/14.00-17.00; from 1/03 to 1/11, from Tuesday to Sunday and public holidays, h. 10.00-12.30/14.30-17.30; closed on Mondays, Easter Day, 1st May and 15th August).

From Piazza d'Arco, cross the nearby Piazza S. Giovanni and follow Via Cocastelli up to the corner of Via Trento. Here, turn right to reach [Piazza Virgiliana](#), an immense green space that is more of a huge Italian garden than a square. At the far end stands a statue of Virgil, the city's tribute to its great forefather.

Among the palaces facing the square, you will find the Augustian Convent of St. Agnes housing the [Museo Diocesano Francesco Gonzaga](#), where you can admire



a collection of paintings, sculptures, tapestries, illuminated manuscripts, jewellery and many other works of art coming from deconsecrated churches or collections forgotten in some attic. Of particular interest among these precious treasures are the *Roman Missal belonging to Barbara of Brandenburg*, a richly illuminated manuscript from the 15th century,

the *Ebony Urn* that sparkles with 488 quartz gems, the *Jewel with the Monogram of Christ*, created in the 16th century with huge diamonds. (open: 9.30-12.00/14.30-17.00; from November to mid-March, only on Sundays; from mid-March to June and the months of September and October, every day except Monday; July and August, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays)

From Piazza Virgiliana, along Via F.lli Cairoli to return to Piazza Sordello.

This itinerary forms a circular tour and does not include some important monuments without which the description of the city would not be complete. We mention them below so you can include them in your visit if you wish.

➤ [TEATRO SCIENTIFICO BIBIENA](#) - Via Accademia 47

Built in 1769 by Antonio Galli Bibiena, this theatre is a gem of fine Baroque architecture with a small stalls area surrounded by Corinthian columns and niches containing statues of famous Mantuan characters. Finely ornated balconies nest on the high walls. The theatre was inaugurated in 1770 and to mark the occasion they called a highly talented thirteen-year-old musician: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

(h. 9.30-12.30/15.00-18.00; closed on Mondays)

➤ [PALAZZO TE](#) - Viale Te

The Tea Palace is outside the historical centre and you will need the car to get there (follow the road signs).

This was the Gonzaga residence for *ozi e piaceri* (idleness and pleasure) and the house where Federico II, who commissioned the work, used to retire with his court to while away the hours. Its location was chosen on the edge of the city

where the family stables were built on the island once rising in the middle of a fourth lake.

The villa was designed by Giulio Pippi, known as "il Romano". It took him about ten years to complete this residence of great artistic value with its series of splendid rooms and frescoes of perfect perspective, and a big garden in the centre. Sala di Psiche, Camera del Sole, Cortile d'Onore, Sala dei Cavalli are only some of the rooms where il Romano's creative spirit is expressed in all its fantastic originality, the same extravagant inspiration that caused him to be outlawed from Rome by the Pope in person since he did not appreciate the *sinful* images.

However, the most representative room is Sala dei Giganti, with the mythical figure of a furious Jove creates panic among the Giants guilty of attempting to subtract his power.

(from Tuesday to Sunday: 9.00-18.00; Mondays, 13.00-18.00; latest entry time 17.30)

➤ I LAGHI DI MANTOVA

For those wishing to combine an encounter with art and an excursion into the midst of nature, something odd so close to a city, then you can here by exploring the three lakes that embrace Mantua on three sides.

The Mincio river flows out of Lake Garda, crossing the Mantuan plains until reaching the Po. During its course, on a level with Mantua, it widens and its placid waters form the three lakes of Mantua: Lago Superiore, Lago di Mezzo and Lago Inferiore. This is a protected area, part of the Mincio Natural Park and the home of herons, cormorants and water fowl generally as well as many other bird species. The waters are all afloat with water lilies. Its shores are ideal for biking and walking along the special paths created between the Mincio and the grassy meadows where you can stop for a picnic.



If you prefer, you can take a trip on one of the Andes motorboats which take you on a tour of the surroundings. *(for information, call 0376 322875 - 0376 360870 - www.motonaviandes.it - andes@motonaviandes.it)*

Ristorante AQUILA NIGRA

Vicolo Bonacolsi 4 / tel. 0376 327180

(average cost, excluding wine: € 40.00 - closed on Sundays and Mondays; in April and May, September and October, open Sundays at lunchtime)

In a palace of the 1400s, Casa degli Uberti, in one of the most evocative spots in Mantua, owners Giorgio and Vera Bini wait to welcome guests. This is one of the most elegant restaurants in the city, with its precious frescos, lacunar ceilings, and exquisitely laid tables. The kitchen is governed by Vera who began her experience at the age of fourteen when she helped her parents in the "Al Ducale" trattoria; her passion for cooking has continued to grow and, with her husband, she opened a restaurant all of her own, the Aquila Nigra, mentioned in the best gourmet guides.

An enormous selection of starters are followed by first courses that include pumpkin ravioli in butter sauce, risotto with pumpkin flowers, duck ravioli in butter sauce with Grana cheese. Just some of the mouth-watering second courses: eel fillets marinated in balsamic vinegar, pigeon in a honey, balsamic vinegar and grape sauce, mullet with lard stuffing in breadcrumbs.

The beautiful old cellars offer a wide range of wines.



testi e impaginazione: Orietta Gaspari - cartografia e foto: Flavio Vallenari
contatti: oriettagaspari@libero.it - vflav@libero.it
realizzato per LOCANDA SAN VIGILIO, giugno 2003