Travelogue #6 – Pistoia, Mantova, Cremona, Treviso, and Castelfranco

The next week was spent a day or three in each of several cities in northeastern Italy, some new, and some familiar old haunts.

Pistoia

Pistoia is not featured on the front page of many travel guides to Italy, and we were not familiar with it until this, our first visit. The small town of 90,000 is a short drive from Florence, where we bid goodbye to our hiking companions and collected a rental car. Pistoia has a rich and fascinating history. It was an Etruscan settlement, a Roman colony the 6th century, and in 1177 declared itself to be a free commune. According to one theory, Pistoia lent its name to the pistol, which started to be manufactured in the city during the 16th century.

The main square of Pistoia with the Basilica of San Zeno, the Baptistry, and the Bishop's Palace

We checked into a comfortable small hotel just off the main square and had a nice lunch in the hotel’s restaurant. Later we walked about the town and found it to be a lively place with various street entertainments and a number of promising gelateria, one of which we, of course, sampled. As we walked through the Piazza Duomo, a wedding party (seen in the foreground of the picture above) had just emerged from the town hall. A man on stilts, a pair of flamenco dancers, and a guy sending up clouds of soap bubbles made for a very festive Saturday afternoon.
This busker fascinated the bambini with his balloons.

The town center and surrounding area had an interesting medieval character, which invited exploration. We would like to become more familiar with Pistoia on a future trip; but we had planned only a short overnight here on the way to the more celebrated town of Montova.

The town center of Pistoia had a medieval character.

**Mantova**

We departed Pistoia after breakfast and drove the 125 miles to the city of Mantova, where we stayed for three days. Montova, which is also spelled Mantua, is a city of about 50,000 inhabitants that is surrounded by three large artificial lakes with big excursion boats that would look at home on San
Francisco Bay. While many medieval Italian cities built protective walls, and the Romans probably built one here, the Mantovani, as the residents are known, eventually built lakes. They were created during the 12th century as part of the city's defense system.

Celebrated Mantovani include the composer Monteverdi and the Roman poet Virgil, who was commemorated by a large statue near our apartment. (Nostalgia for those of a certain age: The famous sons do not include Annunzio Montavani, whose “easy listening” was popular in U.S. in the 50’s and 60’s.)

A lone fisherman tries his luck on Largo Superiore, one of the three lakes surrounding the city of Montava.

The street where we rented an apartment was laid out in an earlier era and was barely wide enough for one car with its side mirrors retracted. We were only a ten-minute walk from the historic center and soon found a grocery for breakfast provisions. Montava is known for its architecture, particularly an imposing Ducal Palace built by the Gonzagas who ruled during the Renaissance. It is also known for food, and in 2017, the city was the named the European Capital of Gastronomy. We soon set off on foot to investigate both.
The colonnaded front of the Ducal Palace faces the Cattedrale di San Pietro.

We have visited many magnificent Roman Catholic churches in Italy and are not easily impressed. Buildings such as Saint Peter’s in the Vatican City or the Basilica di San Francesco d’Asisi come to mind, but Mantova’s Basilica of Saint’Andrea was totally unexpected. The dimensions of the huge interior spaces were especially memorable. Construction was begun in 1472 when Mantova was ruled by Ludovico II Gonzaga but took over 300 years to complete.
We did not neglect food, the other aspects for which the town is famous. Nicola, the proprietor of the neighborhood bar where we had been enjoying our preprandial prosecchi, recommended the Osteria Piazza Sordello run by his friend. We had a great lunch and returned in two days for an equally wonderful dinner. As repeat customers, our wine was comped!

**Cremona**

While staying in Mantova, we made a day trip to nearby Cremona, where we took a guided tour of the city and its Museo del Violino. The large modern museum is best known for its collection of stringed instruments including violins, violas, cellos and double basses made by renowned luthiers: Antonio Stradivari, and various members of the Amati and Guarneri families. The museum staff kindly opened various drawers and cupboards to show us some of the actual tools and templates used by these famous masters. Only 650 of the instruments made by Stradivari (1644-1737) are known to survive. The museum’s instruments are played regularly to keep them in good condition. This performance was not given during our visit, giving us a good reason to come back another day. While Cremona is famous for its violins, the best bows are made elsewhere. Another curious fact: the finger boards, which are today made from ebony, were originally made of other woods and painted black.

![One of the most famous and valuable violins made by Stradivari](image)
A current on-line listing of Cremona Luthiers has about 150 makers. We spent a fascinating hour with Katharina Abbühl, a Cremona luthier, in her tiny workshop discussing wood, tools, and the steps involved in violin-making. We learned, for example, that the length of a violin is standardized, but the width is variable according to the desired depth of tone. Katharina offered to play a duet with Jim, but his flute was back in Mantova. She promised to visit us when she comes to service several of her instruments that are in San Francisco.

Cremona, a modern city of 71,000 residents, with an attractive central area, is worth visiting independent of its violin-making traditions. We also visited the Gelateria Pierot and can vouch for the excellent quality of its product.
Our last three days of this week on the road were spent in Treviso, another favorite place from previous visits, most recently with hiking friends in 2012. We find canal-laced Treviso at least equally charming as its much more heavily touristed neighbor, Venice. Only 3000 of Treviso’s 80,000 inhabitants live within the walls of its historical center, which is covered by a network of wide, fast-flowing and narrower, more leisurely waterways.
Among its claims to fame, Treviso is known as the place where Prosecco was first produced and is thought to have been the origin of Tiramisù, two products with singular appeal to us. The spicy and bitter leafy vegetable, radicchio, which can be quite nice when grilled, is also associated with Treviso.

Roggio, one of Treviso’s smaller canals just around the corner from our apartment

We rented an apartment in boutique hotel called Domus Dotti in what was once a 12th-century convent. Located on what may be one of the city’s narrowest lanes, cars are only allowed for dropping off passengers, and if one is stopped, it is difficult to squeeze by on foot.

Our home for three days was on the left.
Our time in Treviso was spent leisurely strolling about the old center and exploring some of the many canals. Among other things, we briefly visited the Duomo, where a funeral was in progress; walked to the Piazza dei Signorini and the nearby Piazza Aldo Moro; crossed the Canale Buranelli; admired the Mulini di San Leonardo water wheel; walked through the Porta di San Tomaso and climbed atop the adjacent walls; and looked into the Chiesa di San Francesco and its cloister. We ate a nice deli-style lunch and found time for gelato on the way back to the hotel for a nap.

A typical street in Treviso’s old town center.

Simple but imposing, the 13th-century Chiesa di San Francesco is based on a Latin cross and bears the marks of the transitional period from the Romanesque to the Gothic style.
With this many confessionals in Treviso’s Chiesa di San Francesco, sinners rarely had to wait long for forgiveness.

We ate well in Treviso including two particularly nice dinners at the Antico Portico, a small place near our hotel with only a few tables, where we enjoyed gnocchi di patate con seppia al nero tra zucchini e mentuccia, and ravioli di parmigiana con spuma di bufala e basilico. Cesare, the congenial maître d’ shared his extensive knowledge of local wines and told us about his honeymoon in San Francisco.

We made a day trip to nearby Castelfranco, where a large open-air market was in full swing. Such markets are held on a regular schedule in different towns. The vendors set up shop for the morning, some under elaborate large awnings. Some of the stalls were essentially rolling versions of well-stocked cheese, bread, meat, and vegetable supermarket departments.

A well-stocked mobile cheese store, one of several mobile food vendors at Castelfranco’s large open-air market

After this short, pleasant three-day stay in Treviso, we checked out, retrieved our car from the parking lot a few blocks away, and headed to Bologna, stopping for lunch in Padova.