

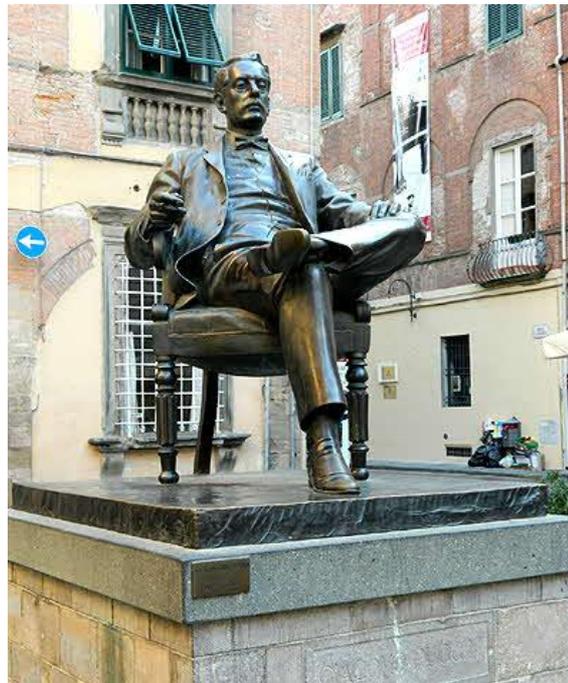
The Arts

LuxuryWeb Magazine

dedicated to the art of living well.

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Puccini Disharmonic the land, the lore, and the music

My trip to Lucca, Italy, for the 58th annual Puccini Festival reflected Puccini's mastery of music and life and his enduring presence in the city. This medieval walled city decided ten years ago to accommodate tourists in small groups rather than large crowds, leaving a dearth of luxurious accommodations, large hotels, or new construction. Everything must compliment the city's ancient ambience. One can forgo spa services and book a four or five star small hotel inside the walls to enjoy all of Lucca on foot. Or, if pampering is high on ones list, one can book a luxury villa outside the city. Visit www.villavacations.com for a selection of ultra-luxurious properties that can accommodate large parties and provide a complete concierge services.



As a solo traveler, I opted for a B&B that unfortunately did not understand the second "B" stands for "breakfast". The first morning, I stumbled around, jet-lagged and disharmonic searching for coffee. A mood-altering discovery was the coffee bar of my Italian dreams. The 1846 Belle Epoch_styled Antico Caffé di Simo (Via Fillungo 47) not only serves great cappuccino and fresh pastries; it also served Puccini and literary luminaries such as Ezra Pound. I broke my fast staring at a piano replacing the piano Puccini played for friends and patrons. The café also serves lunch and is a popular wine bar in the evenings. I had come to Lucca to meet Puccini, and already we were having breakfast together!

An early morning tramp-around Lucca revealed the importance of Puccini to the townsfolk. The bronze statue in a piazza was not a surprise, but the politically incorrect cigarette in his hand was. Where is the fig leaf that covers inconvenient parts of classical statues? I later learned that Puccini smoked eighty cigarettes and five cigars a day before dying of throat cancer at age 66. Another surprise was the 12th Century church of San Giovanni and Reparta where Puccini was baptized. It is built on the ruins of an early Christian church that was built on the ruins of a Roman bath. Here, Puccini concerts are held every day of the year at 7 p.m. (no smoking), but sometimes Verdi and other classical composers are honored instead. Even Puccini needs a break.



Puccini's house, a lovingly restored mid-19th Century apartment, opened as a museum in 2011 and showcases a piano that Puccini played when he was a boy. On display is Turandot's elaborate, original costume. Manuscripts, letters, opera scores, and other memorabilia are stored in archival drawers, and walls are covered with paintings of ancestors, photographs, and a Puccini family tree. The family dates back to the 1700s, and the Puccini's were a musical family from the beginning. Echoing the finales of his tragic operas, the last Puccini leaves no progeny.

Ristorantes Puccini

After a day of Puccini sightings and the concert at San Giovanni and Reparta, dinner at the Ristorante Puccini in front of his house seemed obligatory. A friend suggested an outdoor table facing a piano, so I expected music. What I did not expect was the nature of "*Buonasera Puccini*" written on a chalkboard. I thought it was the house wine or a special entree. But while I was enjoying lavender-flavored panna cotta with candied gooseberries, a young woman in a turn-of-the-century gown sat at an outdoor table near the piano. She was joined by a dapper Puccini with the ubiquitous cigarette in hand. They performed a skit that strung together several of Puccini's arias.



In the hush following the final aria, I recalled that Springfield, Illinois, has sites celebrating its native son, Abe Lincoln, but his presence is not as pervasive as Puccini in Lucca. Culturally, this is understandable. Lincoln only wrote the "Gettysburg Address", while Puccini wrote *Tosca*. On a gastronomic note, Springfield's idea of haute cuisine is the horseshoe sandwich, while Lucca's chefs turn fresh, local ingredients into culinary masterpieces such as turbot flan with a prawn center served with a sauce of cherry tomatoes, fresh basil, and locally grown olives.

The next day, I headed to the countryside expecting to find echoes of Puccini in the hamlet of Celle in Pescaglia, so high in the hills you can smell the green. His ancestral home was already old when the Puccini progenitor, Jacopo, was born here in 1712. Original furnishings and artifacts are displayed, including Puccini's crib and christening gown, the bed with a corn-husk mattress where he allegedly was conceived, and a gramophone from Thomas Edison. I heard more than an echo; I heard the only recording of Puccini's voice, but whatever he said in 1907 is in Italian. Celle's main street is two blocks long, but supports a small restaurant (another Ristorante Puccini) that serves delicious rustic Tuscan food. Puccini's house and the restaurant overlook a valley of such green beauty it could inspire the dullest to a majestic moment.

Theaters small and large:

I drove on to a hamlet near Vetriano. An 1889 theater, affectionately called "Teatrino," was constructed in a barn and is the world's smallest historic theater still in use. The entrance and tiny ticket window face a cobblestone street. To reach the two tiers of balconies, one enters through the roof. The diminutive playhouse retains the character of the original in every detail including the seats, which are padded kitchen chairs. The townsfolk who built the theater brought their own chairs to performances. The theater seats 99. To accommodate one more, fire safety features would need to be installed, spoiling the meticulous renovation.



Despite its size, performances include classical plays and concerts. Patrons and friends can sponsor "chairs", and for a certain level of funding, a brass plaque is affixed to a chair. The Kennedy Family chair is in the front row and proudly shown to every visitor. Members of the Kennedy Family have attended performances. The theater has a Puccini story, too. When he attended a play, the townsfolk were so honored they sang to him. The maestro said, "If I had known you were going to sing, I would have brought my rifle."

Puccini's dream was to hear one of his operas performed outdoors at Torre del Lago on Lake Massaciucco, inspiration for much of his work and the site of the villa he purchased after he became famous. In 1930, several years after his death, *La Boheme* was performed on a stage built on piles in the lake. My dream was to experience *Madam Butterfly* in the open-air theater seating 3,000, built on the site in 1966. It was an extraordinary experience to arrive by boat, imagining the composer's ears tuned to the lap of water, the birdsong, and the rushing wind. The stage setting is minimalist with a large boulder suggestive of nearby quarries and a low, white Japanese-style table where Madam Butterfly erects her shrine to her faithless lover. The lake and hazy mountains that change to a starry sky make a perfect backdrop to the pathos of Madam Butterfly's transformation from rapture to grief. The music was glorious, and an unforgettable reminder of why Lucca so passionately honors its native genius.

The Maestro and Michelangelo:

Pietrasanta, meaning "Sacred Stone" was my last stop and surpassed my expectations. This medieval city is dedicated to the arts, particularly sculpture. A decorous plaque on ancient brick explains that Michelangelo lived here while selecting marble from the nearby Carrara quarries, mined since ancient Rome. Today, the town exhibits the work of contemporary sculptures in its main square and in the Church of Sant' Agostino, built in the 14th Century and deconsecrated during a Napoleonic invasion.



Instead of drifting into stony dreams of Renaissance sculpture, I was amused by the bronze absurdities of Botero. His squat, fat figures hold down the square like asteroids, and the display continues through Sant'Agostino whose ancient altars form a backdrop to the modern

artistic vision. A supersized Leda is gleefully raped by a portly swan in front of a religious painting in need of restoration and blindfolds for the dusty saints. A lamp glows on the altar signifying the presence of God, perhaps Bacchus, the god of wine and mirth.

I imagine Michelangelo standing in the square, eyes on the bald Carrara Hills, soul full of images of the Pieta, oblivious to the bronze naked fat lady lounging on a rotund bull. Then Puccini strolls into the piazza, his arm around his latest mistress. He laughs and lights a cigarette, waiting until a small, admiring group forms. He exhales a cloud of smoke and proclaims, "If I'd brought my rifle, I would shoot it."

Note: Summer 2013 will be a great time to attend the Puccini Festival as it coincides with Lucca's celebration of the 500th Anniversary of its walls. Book your Lucca hotel room – or nearby luxury villa – early!

Thanks to Lucca Promos for a fantastic Puccini experience and to Doorways, Ltd (www.villavacations.com) for an indulgent week at Villa Buonvisi near Lucca.

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