

ABOUT CONTACT ADVERTISE

Celebration Traveler

Travel Experiences | Celebration Trips | Day-by-day Guides

The Magazine of Good Times Around the Globe
Home of Celebration Traveler Guides

BEST PLACES TO STAY

CITY ATTRACTIONS

FOOD & WINE

NATURE

SPA & SPORT

TRAVEL & CULTURE

TRIPS OF A LIFETIME

ITALY: PUCCINI'S LUCCA

BORNEO: ORANGUTANS

FIJI: BLUE LAGOON

EASTER ISLAND: INTRIGUING RAPANUI

You are here: [Home](#) / [City Attractions](#) / Italy: Puccini's Lucca

Italy: Puccini's Lucca

[Summer 2014](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

The promise of moving stories and beautiful voices brings thousands each summer to the Grand Teatro Puccini outside Lucca. Puccini's operas have outlived music trends. His haunts in Lucca province hold keys to the maestro's timeless appeal.

by Donna Peck



No one listens to "O mio babbino caro," *Turandot's* "Nessun dorma" or *Tosca's* "Vissi d'Arte" without reliving a piercing heartache. Giacomo Puccini infused music with intense emotion. The promise of moving stories and impassioned voices draws thousands each summer to Torre del Lago where *Edgar*, *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madame Butterfly*, *La Fanciulla del West*, and *Turandot* play to a spell-bound audience.



These opera classics are gifts from Giacomo Puccini who famously stated, "Art is an illness," an enigmatic quote from a composer whose operas have garnered legions of admirers. Puccini's haunts in Lucca province shed light on the incendiary roots of his statement.

Celle: Puccini Museum

The family's village home, now the [Celle Puccini Museum](#), preserves the first part of the tale. In contrast to his opera locations—Japan, China, Paris, Rome, California—Puccini lived his entire life in Lucca province. In childhood, he resided within Lucca's medieval walls or in the hilltop village of Celle. As pleasant an excursion for opera fans as it was for the child Giacomo, Celle resembles the village in *Edgar*, Puccini's first opera.

Opera scores composed by his grandfather and father line bookcases, evidence of the musical dynasty established by Puccini's great-great grandfather.

Giacomo perhaps listened at the doorway to these accomplished adults. In the upstairs bedroom, his music stand and harmonium, a small wooden keyboard operated by a bellows, were put into daily practice. Glass cases in the dining room display drafts of *Le Villi* and *Edgar*, his first successful operas which provided funds for him to regain ownership of this ancestral home.

SUMMER TRAVEL

Search this website...

SEARCH

CELEBRATION TRAVELERS ARE TALKING ABOUT...

A TN ...



Lucca: San Martino Cathedral, San Paulino Church, Puccini Museum, Caffè di Simo, Teatro di Giglio, Ristorante Puccini.

Celebration Traveler
Like 49

For glimpses of Giacomo as a schoolboy and young man, visit Lucca's cathedral, Puccini's house and his beloved cafe. *Tosca* evokes Puccini's music training at [San Martino Cathedral](#) (Piazza Antelminelli) where he took part in religious festivals as a soloist, chorister, and later as assistant organist. Like his forefathers, Puccini played the organ at the Church of San

Paulino (Via San Paulino). His boyhood home, [Puccini Museum](#) (Corte San Lorenzo, 9) immerses you in Puccini's world. As Puccini's heroines sing in the background, peruse his letters, notes, original music scores, photographs, family portraits, awards and Steinway grand piano.

A new opera caused a sensation, for the music as well as the elaborate sets and costumes. In *Turandot's* 1926 premiere performance, Princess Turandot beguiled her suitors in a regal headpiece and silk velvet cape coiled with embroidered dragons. It stands in a glass case next to one containing Puccini's wool overcoat and black fedora that he wore at a rakish angle.



A bronze statue of Puccini in the adjacent plaza shows the maestro in his prime, seated and taking his pleasure, a Toscana cigarette in hand. At [Caffè di Simo](#) (Via Fillungo, 58) Puccini's

voice could be heard among the poets, painters, philosophers and musicians that gathered in the wood-paneled interior. Such a scene recalls *La Bohème* Act II. "I lived that Bohème," said Puccini, "when there wasn't yet any thought stirring in my brain of seeking the theme of an opera."



During his impoverished student days at the Milan Conservatory, he wrote that he pawned his possessions to pay the rent. In *La Bohème*

Act VI the friends sell earrings and an overcoat to buy medicine for the ailing Mimi. Continue to [Teatro di Giglio](#) where a revised version of the opera *Edgar* met with success in 1891. In the Piazza del Giglio under a century-old sycamore tree, a painter dabbed with his brush at Puccini's eyes, capturing his sensual heavy-lidded gaze.

While writing an opera, Puccini often fell in love with a woman akin to his protagonist. He called these fleeting affairs his "little gardens." At [Ristorante Puccini](#) (Corte San Lorenzo, 1) the Buonasera players enact a skit of Puccini on the hunt for a new muse. Entwined with his creative process were *amourettes*, little flings he had with numerous women. In 1884, he began an affair with his piano student who was the wife of a prominent Luccesi businessman. He pursued Elvira relentlessly. Discussing his next opera *Manon Lescaut* with his music publisher, Puccini declared, "I shall feel it as an Italian, with desperate passion." Ardent declarations of love make for stirring music. "Vissi d'Arte," the well-known song from *Tosca* expresses Puccini's two great driving forces: love and art. Tosca sings, "I gave my song to the stars, to heaven, which smiled with more beauty."

Torre del Lago: Villa Museo Puccini, Puccini Opera Festival



He and Elvira attempted to live openly in Lucca, but the Luccesi shamed them into fleeing to the outskirts. Puccini lived most of his adult life and wrote all his major operas at his Torre del Lago villa, 12 miles from Lucca. Photos on the walls at [Villa Museo Puccini](#) show the maestro behind the wheel of a glossy black Packard. In 1903, his chauffeur drove the family car off the road. Puccini's leg was fractured so severely that he limped for

the rest of his life.

He completed *Madame Butterfly* during the long convalescence, boasting that pain would not stop him.

Puccini's study at the villa displays his gun collection. When Elvira's husband died, Puccini in 1904 became a married man. He hunted ducks in the reeds of Lake Massaciuccoli in the morning then drove to a cafe in Lucca or Viareggio.

He may have done so to escape domestic squabbling. In 1909, the jealous Elvira tormented the maid to suicide, a sad incident not unlike the tragic end of his heroines in *Madame Butterfly*, *Tosca*, and *Turandot*.

Elvira was not far off the mark. It came to light in 2007 in letters written from 1908 to 1922 that Puccini had fallen for the maid's cousin, Giulia Manfredi whose father owned Chalet de Emilio (now Ristorante Chalet del Lago) across from Villa Puccini. In appearance and mannerisms, she was Minnie in *La Fanciulla del West*.



All this legwork sharpened my anticipation of *Madame Butterfly* at the [Puccini Opera Festival](#). On the grand outdoor stage on Lake Massaciuccoli, Coco San plunged a sword into her breast, singing of unbearable pain as if to make the heavens weep. We exited the theater with tear-streaked faces. I imagine the heroine lingering on stage in her creator's embrace.



Farewell death arias were Puccini's forte but upon his death in 1924 from throat cancer, he wrote bluntly, "Poor Elvira, this is the end." The world mourned. The Milan cathedral echoed with the funeral procession in *Edgar* Act III. In the opera, *Filelia* sings, "Addio, mio dolce amor," bidding farewell to her sweet love and beseeching him to wait for her in heaven. Her pleading falls on an empty casket holding Edgar's armor.

The Villa Puccini chapel contains Puccini's bones but come evening when his heroine takes the stage, he issues from the ghostly otherworld and joins her. —text and photography by Donna Peck

Share this: [Email](#) [Print](#) [Facebook](#) [Digg](#) [Share](#)



magazine section: [City Attractions](#) travel experiences: [anniversary](#), [birthday](#), [luxury travel](#), [music dance theater](#), [romantic travel](#), [special occasions](#), [summer travel](#)

Tell us about your travel experiences

Name *

Email *

Website