

Tranquillity on a hotel barge in Italy's Po Valley

By Emilie C. Harting
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"Oh, yes, a river cruise," exclaimed my friend when I said we were going on a trip through Italy's Po Valley on a hotel barge.

"No, no," I insisted. "Hotel barges are very different from river cruises." I told her that they were just as luxurious, but had far fewer passengers, averaging only eight to 10, while river cruises typically carry more than 100, and sometimes as many as 200.

"I like hotel barges because of the tranquillity they offer," I said. "They usually travel on canals, and can get into areas where larger boats cannot go. You see not only the remote countryside, but also visit small cities, castles, villas, and wineries. In fact, you vacation the way royalty did several centuries ago."

Europe has had a canal system since the 12th century and until the 20th century it was the chief route for transporting cargo. Now most barges are recreational.

As dusk approached on the first night aboard the hotel barge La Bella Vita, we were on the deck sipping franciacorta, a sparkling white wine. A few hundred feet away, Mantua Castle overwhelmed the view. Lake Maggiore was still, and we feverishly took pictures before the light disappeared. We had just settled in for a trip through the Po Valley on the Bianca Canal, going southeast from Mantua, and then heading up to Venice. Since hotel barges do not travel at night, we began moving shortly after eight in the morning.

Our weeklong journey on La Bella Vita proved to be the perfect way to explore the valley with its small Renaissance cities, remote countryside, wineries, markets, and villas. The barge had capacity for 20 passengers — it was larger than most — and we were cruising early in the season. We had 13 passengers, a small enough group that we ate at one long table. The boat was accompanied by a minibus and guide, who transported us to sites for half of the day. During the other



PHOTOS BY EMILIE C. HARTING FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Chioggia is called "Little Venice" for its canals and architecture. Castello Estense (below), surrounded by a moat, dominates the town square in Ferrara, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

half we relaxed on the boat.

That first night we met the chef, Eros, aptly the name of the Greek god of love and creativity. Our dinner was a preview of the week to come: pumpkin tortelli with amaretto, Mantua salami, roast veal and romano potatoes, various cheeses from Mantua, white wine from Verona, and red wine from Trentino.

At each meal Eros gave delightful and informative mini-lectures on the particular dishes, most of which were from Northern Italy and paired with wines and cheeses from the nearby Lombardy, Emilia Romagna, and Veneto regions. All our lunches and dinners had courses of meat, pasta, fish, cheese, wine, and dessert. During the week we sampled a multitude of specialties such as salmon tartare, ventaglio of scallops, aubergine parmigiana, saffron-flavored couscous, garlic and paprika zucchini, kiwi marinated in grappa, pineapple in thyme and balsamic vinegar, and carpaccio salad. For the three of us who did not eat red meat, there were tasty alterna-



tives such as vegetable tortes and seafood salads and pastas.

"Italians call this the 'land of the sun,'" said our captain, Rudy, as we entered the Po Delta, where large farmhouses dotted the horizon. We were cutting through some of the richest farmland in Italy. When someone asked why we weren't seeing animals, Rudy explained that cows and pigs are kept inside to control their food intake. They are

fed a diet of corn and medicinal herbs, which helps develop milk and meat of high quality.

Mantua, our first stop, was known as Virgil's city in Roman times. As we walked from square to square, our guide pointed out the layers of Byzantine, medieval, and Renaissance architecture in the buildings. The Romanesque cathedral with Baroque embellishments has elaborate trompe l'oeil columns and numerous oil paintings by Renaissance masters.

In Ferrara, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, we walked through Schifanoia Palace, whose walls and ceilings are covered with 15th-century frescoes. Castello Estense, which dominates the huge square at the center of town, still has a moat, with water, and the city itself is encircled by a high Renaissance wall with bike and walking paths on the outside. Winding streets lead down into the medieval section where the town had its beginnings.

At the vineyard Dominio di Bagnoli, once a monastery where

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Prices for a **six-night cruise** in 2011 aboard hotel barge La Bella Vita, from \$3,490 **per person** in a twin-double cabin, including all meals, wines, an open bar, excursions, local transfers. **Full boat charters** also available from \$57,000.

Travelers on the **Mantua to Venice** trip are usually met at the **Laguna Palace Hotel**, a modern glass marina complex close to Venice's Marco Polo Airport and train stations. nhlagunapalace.hotelinvenice.com

On the **Venice to Mantua** trip, travelers usually meet at the **Papadopoli Hotel**, close to churches and museums with famous art. www.accorhotels.com/gb/hotel-1313-hotel-papadopoli-venezia/index.shtml

monks perfected the art of wine-making, we toured the fields to see how the grapes grow. We wound through gardens with lemon trees, a maze of smaller gardens with statues, and into the huge arbors, where one of the staff spent considerable time explaining how the grapes were cultivated. The noted 17th-century architect Longhena designed the present buildings, including a theater the family built so the famous Venetian playwright Goldoni could put on performances. The original frescoes are still visible on the walls.

In the heart of the Po Valley we spent an evening at the 17th-century villa Ca'Zen, set in a five-acre park. Lord Byron is said to have written his best poetry there while having an affair with Countess Guiccioli. After wine on the expansive patio, we had a tour of the long, rose-colored house, and dinner, our only meal off the boat, in the formal dining room as warm breezes wafted in.

Chioggia, one of the largest fishing towns in Italy, is sometimes called "Little Venice" because of its canals and architecture. Originally an area of salt flats, Chioggia emerged in the 1400s when the barbarians were driving the Lombardians east into the swamplands that would become Venice. After a guided tour through the canals and town square, we stopped at the large outdoor fish market, where we helped pick out mussels and sea

bass for that night's dinner.

Chioggia was where we entered the canal that runs north and south inside the Venice Lagoon. We passed a number of small islands with fishing huts, and later the Lido with its multi-colored houses. Soon we were approaching, head on, the classic travel poster view of Venice with St. Mark's Byzantine domes at the end of the square. A local guide gave an excellent initiation to St. Mark's Square, with its many entrances and exits. She also took us on a tour of the massive Doge's Palace, where marble staircases lead up into the seemingly endless number of rooms whose walls and ceilings are decorated with gold framed oil paintings by Tintoretto and Veronese.

On the last night, after a seven-course captain's dinner, La Bella Vita moored in the quiet basin of the walled-in Arsenal, where, until the late 1700s, Venice's ships were built. The next day we said our farewells and began exploring Venice on our own.

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