

Being sandwiched between the gorgeous grandeur of Venice to the east and the sophistication of Milan to the west, the city of Verona is often overlooked. Famed for its stunning Roman relics and as the backdrop to Shakespeare's most infamous play *Romeo & Juliet*, its many annual festivals have helped draw culture vultures, thrill seekers and glamorous guests from around the world, finds **JING ZHANG**.

9am

Start off from your home away from home, the rustic, eclectic, *Hotell Gabbia d' Oro Verona*. Rooms are homely and unique and breakfast on the rooftop terrace is the ultimate way to start your Verona exploration. *Corso Porta Borsari 4/a 37121, Tel: +39 045 8003060, www.hotelgabbiaodoro.it*

10am

Verona is well known for being easily walkable, fun, laid back and extremely friendly. Head towards the historical city centre, and the spectacular Roman amphitheater. Completed in 30AD, The Arena is a spectacular setting rivaled only by Rome's Colosseum and once sat 30,000 spectators who came to view the 'ludi' or 'games'. The venue still hosts some of the world's most famous composers and opera singers in regular headliner events.

11.30am

Drop by the Basilica of St. Zeno Maggiore (*San Zeno Maggiore*) to see this great example of stunning theological artwork and Roman-



esque architecture. Originally started in the 4th century and dedicated to St. Zeno of Verona, whose tomb is enclosed in the vaulted crypt below, this cathedral is famed for being mentioned in Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

1pm

Head towards the Piazza delle Erbe for some people watching and lunch on the square. The fountain, 14th century Gardello Tower and touristy market in the piazza offer daytime distractions, but the square still serves as a social centre for Veronese locals, especially during the evening. Try Caffè Filippini, one of Verona's oldest café's, for lunch. It's famed for both its antipasto platters and its vistas across this bustling Roman square. *Lazza Erbe, 26, Tel: +39 45 8004549, www.caffefilippini.it*

3pm

After lunch, if you're a sucker for love stories, then head to 'Juliet's House' on via Cappello. Based on Shakespeare's fictional play, there is a balcony, and a 'Letters to Juliet' room inspired by the re-

cent Amanda Seyfried movie, but it is generally packed wall to wall with tourist groups and teenagers, many of whom are rubbing the breast of the Juliet statue for luck.

Alternatively climb the 15th century Lamberti Tower from the northern corner of this piazza before passing beneath the famous Arch della Costa through to the Piazza dei Signori, where Dante's statue stands at the centre of a small square, once used for important public rulings.

4pm

By now you've earned a delicious Italian gelato from the countless roadside stalls, and a stroll down Via Manzini, Verona's chicest shopping street. Even major Italian fashion label stores are packed into small boutique type buildings on this street. For fabulous footwear with a bit of local history, head to Fratelli Rossetti for amazing Italian leather brogues.

5pm

Castelvecchio, the lovely 14th-century, red brick castle on the banks of the river Adige has

a gorgeous courtyard and the main castle buildings house the city's art museum. Built by the Scaligeri family, it is now packed with a rich collection of medieval sculptures, archeological finds and Renaissance paintings. The extensive castle walls and grounds are also great for exploring and offer some fantastic views of the river.

7pm

Time for aperitivos, one of our favourite parts of Italian living. It's the almost daily pre-dinner cocktails where people all gather into bars and cafes to gossip and celebrate. Take one of the great wines of the region or even better, the local Italian Spritz, sparkling white wine mixed with Aperol and a splash of seltzer water. Head for Rivamancina; perched on the banks of the Adige, this is a Veronese favourite for an afternoon tittle. *Vicolo Quadrelli 1, Tel: +39 45 594 976.*

8pm

Just off Via Manzini is an absolute corker of a restaurant for dinner. Touted as the first ever wine

bar in the whole of Europe, the Osteria Sottoriva has a mind boggling 85,000 bottles of wine on offer from very reasonably priced local drops to champagnes and vintages over a hundred years old. This spot is perfect for gastro geeks and still serves a large proportion of locals. Be sure to get your hotel to book ahead. *Via Sottoriva, 9, Tel: +39 45 8014323, www.sottorivaitalia.com*

10pm

Piazza Bra lies at the end of Via Mazzini, opposite the Arena, and is a buzzing scene in summer, with plenty of small but colourful bars and restaurants. It might be a little touristy but it's a perfect place to bar hop with the locals.

9am

For a peaceful end to the trip, grab a take away coffee and some fresh local pastries and head northeast to Giardino Giusti, a stunning renaissance garden designed in 1570 by Agostino Giusti. Here beautifully manicured hedges, flowers and grottos make for a wonderful, refreshing start to the day.



Left, top; Dante's statue in the Piazza dei Signori; Left, The Arena; above, traditional houses.