

Chelmsford U3A Travel Group

On 1st June 2014 thirty-six U3A members (this included eleven from other Essex U3A groups) travelled to Lake Garda in Italy for a trip that included visits to Venice, Verona and the Dolomites. As the organiser of the trip I was understandably a bit anxious as to how it would turn out, but my worries were unfounded – everybody had a wonderful time!

Lake Garda



This is the largest of the three major lakes in northern Italy, stretching thirty five miles from north to south and around fifteen miles west to east at its widest point. We stayed in the attractive town of Riva del Garda, at the Lake's northernmost extremity. On our first full day we travelled by coach down the eastern side of the Lake (very slowly, as it was a bank holiday in Italy and the traffic was awful!), stopping at the little town of Garda en route. Our destination was Sirmione, a town dominated by a 13th Century castle (the Rocca Scaligera) and formerly the home of the opera singer, Maria Callas. Here we set off by boat across the lake to Gardone, a pretty town dominated by stately villas and grand hotels. In nearby Salo, Mussolini declared a Fascist republic in 1943, and he was to remain there until captured and executed two years later.

Venice



Our visit to this iconic city was undoubtedly a highlight of the trip. Not surprisingly, around the most famous sites (St Mark's Square, the Doge's Palace and the Rialto Bridge) it was extremely crowded, but it was not difficult to lose the throngs by exploring the back alleys. No vehicles are allowed in Venice – there are no roads! – everything has to be brought in by boat. The city made its fortune from trade and in the Middle Ages its influence spread throughout the Mediterranean and beyond (for example Marco Polo who visited China). Shakespeare never visited Venice, but learnt sufficient about it from Venetian traders visiting London to be able to write some of his most well-known plays (The Merchant of Venice, Othello).

The Dolomites

Mountains in this range climb to over 10,000 feet above sea level and even in June there was still plenty of snow on the summits! The architecture of the houses reflects that we were close to the Austrian border, and here German is as widely spoken as Italian. Indeed the region (Trentino Alto) only became part of Italy in 1918, up to then having been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Verona



Another city with a rich history, Verona's centre is dominated by the Roman Arena (Latin for sand). This is now where the world famous operatic performances are staged. The city is also the setting for Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Although a work of fiction, it appears that Montagus and Capulets did actually live the city and a 14th century house (Via Cappello 23) was designated as Casa Capuleti. A balcony overlooking the inner courtyard was added in 1940 and this has now become one of the city's most iconic locations, even if its connection with fact is at best very flimsy!

Future Dates

Full meeting – Thursday, 28th August 2014 (Christ Church, New London Road, Chelmsford);
Berlin, Colditz and Dresden – 11th September 2014;
Madeira – 18th to 25th February 2015; and 25th February to 4th March 2015.

Plans for 2015 include a UK walking holiday, an overseas river cruise and another trip to Italy.

If you are interested in joining the Travel Group or have any questions about the proposed trips, please contact David Gout, Group Convenor on davidagout@outlook.com or telephone 01245 268923.