

THE AUSTRALIAN

# TRAVEL+ LUXURY

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10

TASTES OF THE  
TWEED RIVER  
REGION

## DOWN THE GARDEN PATHS

A grand tour of Italy's botanical treasures

### VANTAGE POINTS

Pros and cons of airline  
loyalty programs

### SILENT NIGHT

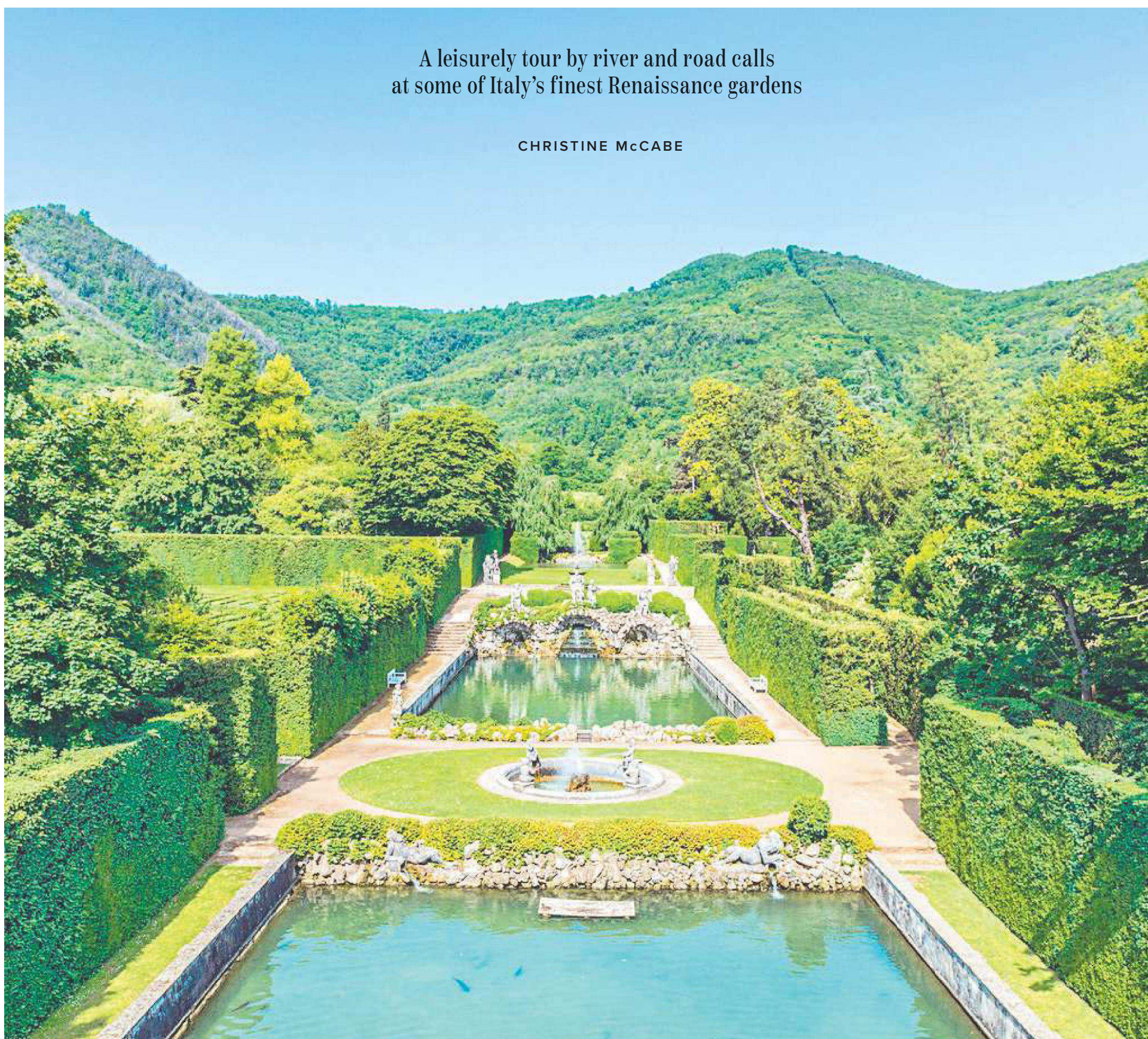
The quiet contemplation  
during Bali's Nyepi festival

COVER STORY

# THE GREEN MILES

A leisurely tour by river and road calls  
at some of Italy's finest Renaissance gardens

CHRISTINE McCABE



**O**ur elegant host, Marie Adelaide, is passing around aperitivi in the gardens of her 18th-century hunting lodge hidden among tall trees in the heart of Italy's Po River Delta. With an avenue of gnarled poplars and peeling green shutters, the russet-coloured villa might be a Merchant Ivory set piece.

It enjoys a special situation. "Here birds fly and fish swim side by side," says Adelaide. Low-lying Ca' Zen was built on the old riverbed when waters were diverted south in the early 17th century to prevent the silting of the Venice lagoon. But this isn't the most interesting thing about her villa.

In 1829, Lord Byron's young and beautiful mistress Countess Teresa Gamba was sequestered here by her jealous 60-year-old husband Alessandro Guiccioli, far from the madding crowd and, he wrongly imagined, the clutches of libidinous poets. Byron followed Teresa to Ca' Zen and subsequently penned several stanzas to the Po.

Ca' Zen remains well off the beaten track, and we have arrived by boat to enjoy a private visit as part of a Botanica World Discoveries tour of Italian Renaissance Gardens. It caps off a heady day that included a visit to the world's oldest botanical garden, still in its original location at the university city of Padua, and the sighting of a large flock of flamingos on a rain-drenched delta.

Flamingo sightings are a special treat, madding crowds not so much, and these days Italy and madding crowds go hand in hand. The most remarkable aspect of this 10-day journey is that we manage to avoid the throngs. Instead we chug along empty canals, wander ancient gardens beneath cerulean skies where the scent of lemon blossom is carried on a breeze and the greatest responsibility of the day is remembering a hat. On the agenda are ancient grottos and sunken pleasure gardens, grandiose fountains conceived by Napoleon's sister, and a singularly romantic water garden made by a mysterious princess in the hills above Florence overlooking the farmhouse where Michelangelo lived as a child.

It begins rather splendidly in Venice, where I'm zooming at breakneck speed from the airport towards the city in a sleek mahogany speedboat. It will be the fastest I travel for more than a week, nipping through a labyrinth of watery streets hemmed in by palazzos and buildings that are a Farrow & Ball paint chart of mustards and rose pinks, ducking my head under low bridges. I'm to meet a little group of garden lovers and our botanist guide author, Jac Semmler, aboard La Bella Vita, a vintage retrofitted barge. Our destination on this floating portion of our trip is Mantua, in the northern region of Lombardy.

Captain Rudy and cruise director Ludovica greet us with Aperol spritzes before we begin our gentle voyage away from Venice's bustling Piazza San Marco towards the uncrowded Lido, a sun-drenched strip of grand summer houses, for a stroll and a gelato before sailing for Sant'Erasmus.

I'm quick to fall for La Bella Vita. She makes no claim to being sleek, given her matronly barge proportions, and unlike modern riverboats we don't have floor-to-ceiling windows or French balconies in the 10 cabins. The decor is demode. But we are in the hands of the loveliest crew afloat and there's an immediate sense of warm camaraderie.

Our first dinner sets the tone, with chef Andrea dishing up sensational food such as whipped monkfish with monk's beard (a samphire-like green), and sous-vide duck Modenese style, followed by peanut semifreddo with raspberries. We begin a ritual that becomes a group favourite – the presentation of the selected wines, with charming sommelier Francesca providing a riveting commentary and newbie sidekick Luca pointing to the region on a map. By the end of the cruise, I have decided to adopt Luca. He is everywhere, serving dinner, whipping up spritzes and making my morning cappuccino the moment I pop my head upstairs.

Because our group is small, only a dozen or so, every evening is a dinner party. Every morning we gather on sofas near the wi-fi modem (patchy) and watch Italy drift by while attending to our socials. All the while Emma is tidying our cosy cabins and folding my pyjamas with the precision of Marie Kondo.

The first evening we dock at Sant'Erasmus, the largest island in the north lagoon. This is Venice's vegetable garden, a patchwork of fields stuffed with tomatoes, damsons, peppers and aubergines, prettily stitched together with wild poppies. We alight to the scent of jasmine and cut grass and the grumble of an ancient tractor.



Giardino di Valsanzibio, main;  
Giardino Torrigiani, above;  
Bagnoli estate; La Bella Vita  
in Mantua, below left

CHRISTINE MCCABE

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After our farmer-guide Carlo turns up on a rusted bicycle, we spend a delightful couple of hours exploring the island, famous for an artichoke found only here, the *carciofo violetto*. Once beloved by the city's doges, the first small buds, or *castraures*, are still highly prized, eaten raw and available for only two weeks in April.

Then we're backtracking to the island of San Giorgio Maggiore to traverse the Borge Labyrinth, a 1km-long garden maze in the grounds of a historic monastery. With no one lost, it's then south for Pellestrina, cruising past little islands topped with small churches. The following morning, our group is decanted on to a little red fishing boat to motor past locals pulling in mussel pots, our ebullient captain ringing bells and playing dance music. Our destination is Chioggia, or "Little Venice", dating from Byzantine times and growing in popularity as a less-crowded alternative to its more glamorous sister. We're here to visit the fish market in the old town before boarding vans for Padua.

Since 1545, the UNESCO-listed Padua Botanical Garden has been amassing plants from across the world, and some specimens are incredibly old. Threatening to mount a Triffid-style breakout from its specially constructed glasshouse, the enormous Goethe's Palm was planted in 1585. Everywhere, plants and herbarium specimens are displayed with incredible artistry; this is the gardener's Santiago de Compostela, a place of serious pilgrimage.

The following morning we join the Bianco Canal, cruising by riverbanks spilling with white roses and elderflowers. Slender egrets are draped like handkerchiefs over low-hanging branches; herons take to the sky. No wonder the Po River Delta is Italy's birding hotspot.

Afternoons on board are spent on the sundeck with its inflatable jacuzzi (the entire top deck needs to be packed away when we pass under low bridges). There's absolutely zero river traffic; sometimes a car passes on a canal side road, but otherwise, it's us and the birds.

On to Adria, the ancient Etruscan town, for a visit to the small but riveting National Archaeological Museum, which houses incredible treasures, including a stunning collection of Roman glass objects that is famous internationally and still appears so modern to 21st century eyes.

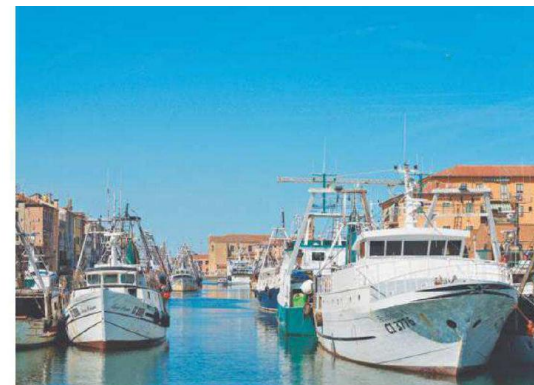
The day progresses with an afternoon wine tasting at the impressive Bagnoli estate, with its lovely villa and allees of venerable polar and linden trees. In the orchard, grape vines scramble up peach, pear and apricot trees. The granaries are the size of football fields, with impressive ceilings designed by Gustave Eiffel. Ancient wheat seeds found in cracks in the stone floor were sent to Padua to be cultivated and now this heirloom variety is grown for flour and baked into bread, which we eat with our wine.

Every day seems to be more memorable than the last, but few days equal the magic of our visit to Giardino di Valsanzibio, 30 minutes from Padua, built between 1665 and 1696 and unchanged since. The garden is one of Italy's most important, folded into forested mountains that provide a lush backdrop to every compelling allegorical vista. The 400-year-old boxwood maze is thought to be one of the oldest in the world. Another rare survivor is a rabbit island (terrifying to this Australian gardener) but symbolising the confines of space and time, and a handy food source for the 17th-century owners. The present custodian lives in the garden's lovely peach-coloured villa, approached by a staircase inscribed with sonnets, and he's often found clipping the 5m-high, 300-year-old box hedges.

Our cruise ends in the incredibly beautiful Mantua, where an art historian escorts us around the monumental Ducale palace, with its 1000 rooms and wondrous frescoes and tapestries.

Then it's a tearful *arrivederci* to La Bella Vita and we are on the road, dealing with the shock of traffic and tourists. Following an epic *tortellini* lunch in Bologna,

**Boboli Gardens in the centre of Florence, above left; fishing boats at Chioggia, above right**



## IN THE KNOW

Travelling Venice to Florence, the Renaissance Gardens of Italy by Canal Boat & Tuscan Landscapes is a 10-day, all-inclusive journey, catering to a maximum 20 guests, including a six-night river and canal cruise. From \$19,995 a person, twin-share.

[botanicatours.com](http://botanicatours.com)

we make bivouac in a smart hotel on the outskirts of Florence where my room has a large balcony and an armoire so tall I can barely reach the coat hangers.

A day in Florence begins with a rare treat, a visit to the largest privately owned garden within city boundaries in Europe, an astonishing 7ha in the heart of Florence and owned by the same family since the 16th century. We are met at Giardino Torrigiani's impressive gates by Tommaso and his little dog, Nero. A man on a rickety bike pedals out on to the road, waving a greeting. "My cousin," explains Tommaso with a sigh. "More than 50 members of my family live in this compound – it's catastrophic." But I suspect also wonderful.

Tommaso's family bought the land from the Medici in the 1500s but were later forced to sell off large tracts to cover gambling debts. I would imagine the vast family compound of the 21st century helps to cover costs. The present garden dates from 1812, is English in style and incredibly romantic, studded with follies and gnarled trees, including Italy's largest ginkgo. A moat-like sward of green unfurls between the garden's castellated 16th-century bastion and the city's 13th-century walls. There are tunnels linked to a city network, and a spooky grotto once used for some weird Masonic rite of passage.

Outside Tommaso's gates the madding crowds find us. It's the first day of summer and Florence is heaving. We escape the worst of the crush in the wonderful Boboli Gardens before visiting a gelateria where Botanica has cleverly arranged to circumvent the queues.

Our final day is jam-packed as we make for Lucca and the ravishing Villa Torrigiani (apparently there's a familial connection with the aforementioned garden of the same name) with its enchanting Renaissance-era Flora Garden and magical, fragile grotto. The romantic villa, still used as a summer house by its owners, is adorned with garden-themed frescoes; even the mower shed has a mural. At Villa Reale di Marlia, once home to Princess Elisa Baciocchi, Napoleon's sister, we admire several theatrical fountains and a vast garden of potted lemons heavy with fragrance.

After visiting Italy in 1903, American author Edith Wharton (*The Age of Innocence*) wrote: "The traveller returning from Italy, with his eyes and imagination full of the ineffable Italian garden-magic, knows vaguely that the enchantment exists; that he has been under its spell..."

It's a spell that is difficult to break. Back in the wintry Adelaide Hills, when the sun shines briefly, I can for a moment imagine the waft of lemon blossom and see in a shady corner of my garden an ancient grotto and wonder if my old hedges can survive a couple more centuries and how many more gardeners must follow me to keep that garden-magic alive. Or perhaps I'll just pop back to Italy.

*Christine McCabe was a guest of Botanica World Discoveries.*

## PICK OF THE BUNCH

American author Edith Wharton wrote of Villa Gamberaia and its garden: "Probably the most perfect example of the art of producing a great effect on a small scale..." Renowned British horticulturalist Monty Don loves it. The early 20th-century artistic crowd hung out here. Of all the magical gardens we visit on this tour, Gamberaia is perhaps the most evocative. Nestled in hills overlooking Florence, it has a famous *parterre d'eau* (water parterre) created by mysterious Romanian princess Ghyka, who devoted her life to the garden but was rarely seen during daylight hours. She lived at Gamberaia with American artist Florence Blood, a friend of American novelist, playwright and art collector Gertrude Stein, and the romance of those heady early 19th-century days when artists flocked to Florence can still be felt in this bewitching garden. It's the perfect way to end our tour.

