

FAIR VERONA:  
SHAKESPEARE SET  
ROMEO AND JULIET IN  
THE CITY AND IT MIGHT  
STILL BE A PLACE FOR  
STAR-CROSSED LOVERS

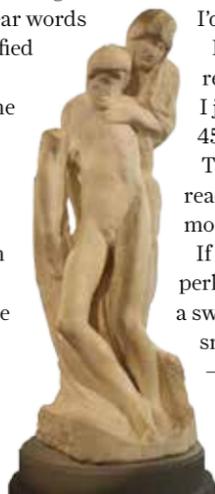


A trip to Milan — home to the works of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo  
— and to Verona sets the scene for a look into Italy's gay history

## PAST-A MASTERS

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Italy is a country ingrained in my upbringing. Not because the blood of the Romans flows through my veins, but because my dear old mother ended up in Rome at the impressionable age of 19, and she stayed for five years. This meant I grew up knowing as many Italian swear words as English ones and being mortified when mum would have one too many red wines, commandeer the microphone and start singing in Italian at a school fete. We were — and still are — the only house in our town to have our “Beware of the Dog” sign written in Italian; to ward off the more erudite potential burglar. Despite feeling so connected to the land, I’d never visited the country so when the opportunity came to go on a press trip with Quiiky Gay and Lesbian Tours, to Milan and Verona, I was quick



to accept. Touching down safely at Milan Malpensa airport, my first experience of Italy was of a torrential downpour.

In a particularly British manner I immediately felt cheated, not to mention robbed of all the sunny Facebook selfies I’d been planning.

However, recognising that no man can realistically hold nature accountable, I jumped on to a bus and began the 45-minute journey into the city centre. Things began to look up when I reached my hotel. The LaGare was modern and in a great location.

If you live for enrapturing views then perhaps it’s not up your street — I had a sweepingly grand panorama of the smokers on the balconies opposite — but the room was luxurious, the service friendly, and it’s a short cab ride from the local gay scene. Handy should you make a new Italian friend. And most guys on Grindr

seemed to know where it was. Our first port of call was to a gay bar/restaurant called Lecco Milano, which had t-shirts for sale on the saffron-tinted walls, light bulbs that weaved above our heads in an intriguing tapestry of design, and a buffet that didn’t particularly scream gastronomic delight, but kept hunger at bay.

As fate would have it, the night we arrived, the Italian government voted to recognise same-sex civil unions. Although we had high hopes of a Pride-like party atmosphere, sadly, none of the Campari-sipping Milanese seemed too fussed.

The next day was the cultural part of the tour: Milan’s Sforza Castle, the beautiful art of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, and a couple of tour guides who had seemingly been prepped beforehand to “make it gay.” While some of the tour necessarily had to focus on Italy’s rich and colourful Catholic history of the persecution of homosexuals, it was invigorating to learn about how

carefree da Vinci himself was with his scandalous gay ways. And viewing *The Last Supper* up close, at the Convent of Santa Maria della Grazie, and discovering its secrets whispered by our guide Cesare, was a wonderful experience.

After pizzas and beer for lunch (what else?), we finished our romp around Milan’s cultural tapestry with a swing into La Scala, one of the grandest opera houses in the world, where Maria Callas once sang. Also, we learnt, that its highest and darkest seats where were Milan’s local homosexuals would congregate to pleasure one another to the backdrop of an aria.

For our last Milan evening we ate in an enticing garden cafe called Mint, dining under exotic plants.

Stirred up by our meal’s wine and negroni cocktails, we marched into The Elephant, a gay bar where we discovered a drink by the name of the Bin Laden! Luckily, it seemed the concoction robbed everyone of their memory the next morning, when we staggered bleary-eyed, ashtray-mouthed and late into a waiting mini-van to Bardolino.



Yes, it was goodbye to Milan, and hello to the Aqualux Spa Suite. An extensive hotel complex just off the east coast of Lake Garda, it boasted Ferraris in the basement car park and a matrix of inter-linking heated spa pools on the ground floor, both indoors and out. Following a day of relaxing in the spas, it was off to a local winery for dinner and a tasting, courtesy of the gorgeous, black-dressed vamp Viviana, and Cesari Wines.

After we all, including Viviana, pretended to be interested in the obligatory vineyard and cellar tour, we all, including Viviana, did what we really went there for and necked the wine.

Cue a heady evening of delicious delicacies, charming cheeses and a lot of convincing ourselves that we really could taste that note of gooseberries in the Chardonnay, which got easier in direct relation to how many glasses we emptied down our gullets.

Blazing sunshine greeted us the next day and finally it felt like we were in the Italy of films and travel brochures. Sunglasses out, we were whisked away to “fair Verona, where we lay our scene”, which provided the setting for *Romeo and Juliet*.

Lovely and smiling Polish tour guide Giovanna took us on a well-executed tale of her adopted city, ensuring we saw all kinds of phalluses and effeminate

Saint Sebastians, as well as the famous statue of Juliet. Supposedly anyone who touches her right breast is blessed with good luck. None of the gays bothered to give it a go.

Giovanna’s own love story, told to us over a lunch of a local horse-meat stew, was as entrancing as the tales which were the official part of the tour.

She was whisked off her feet by a handsome Italian man when she was in her twenties, and has now lived in Verona for 25



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years. After her second glass of vino, she also had some strong words to divulge to us about the Catholic Church. Finally we sank back into

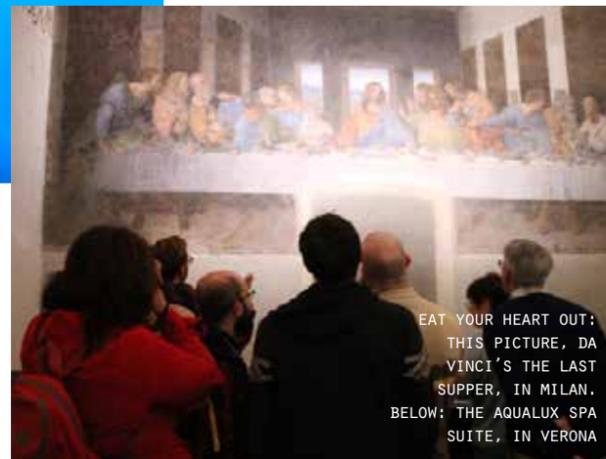
the sumptuous upstairs smoking bar of Aqualux in the evening to watch two unbeatable wonders of European culture: one, a golden and dazzling sunset over the rolling Italian hills; the second, the Eurovision Song Contest!

As we nursed Aqualux’s signature olive-oil cocktails, and the Berlin journalists hid their faces as Germany’s entrant came out dressed as some kind of Licorice Allsort, I thought: “I could get used to this Italian lark. Now I see why mum liked it so much.”

Italy may not have the best reputation in Europe for LGBT rights and its long grip in the palm of the Church hasn’t helped, but it is changing.

Everyone was welcoming and effusive, the Quiiky tour was always fun and frequently fascinating, and the country itself can only be described as quite spectacular.

Further information, visit [en.quiiky.com](http://en.quiiky.com)



EAT YOUR HEART OUT: THIS PICTURE, DA VINCI'S THE LAST SUPPER, IN MILAN. BELOW: THE AQUALUX SPA SUITE, IN VERONA

