

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Perfect moments

From a Vespa tour of Rome to rowing in Venice, The Dedicca Anthology group offer luxury plus in the iconic Italian cities, finds **Emma Newlands**

Soundtracked by the vibrant hubbub of the traffic, our group makes for quite a sight as we weave through the streets of Rome on three Vespas complete with sidecar – one in white, another in red, and mine in vivid green that sparkles in the early afternoon sunlight.

Our tricolore procession contrasts brightly with the greys and browns of the city's famous historical architecture, and complete with a highly entertaining audio guide from our leader it makes for an unconventionally thrilling arrival to the Eternal City.

The journey – a nod to Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck in the classic film *Roman Holiday* – is just one of many memorable add-ons we experience with The Dedicca Anthology.

The hotel brand has an expanding group of high-end properties in select European locations, and it aims to offer immersive and authentic experiences. Additionally, it takes its name from the Latin verb 'dedicare' meaning to dedicate one's time to a particular purpose or task, or to

assign a work of art in someone's honour, and the anthology refers to the collection of unique stories represented by its hotels and guests.

The group is also led by Stephen Alden, whose previous roles include helming the group behind Claridge's and The Connaught in London.

We stay at two of Dedicca's Italian properties during this trip, including the Palazzo Naiadi in Rome, housed in the neoclassical crescent that forms Piazza della Repubblica, and built over the ancient Diocletian Thermal Baths complex.

The 238-room hotel is a temple of opulent elegance, with my room making me feel like I'm a guest in an extremely well-appointed stately home – with high ceilings, antique furniture and a vast mirror on one wall – and a spectacular view of Rutelli's Fountain of the Naiads.

The hotel is also proud of its luxury spa facilities – and our pampering kicks off with an invigorating

I feel like I'm a guest in an extremely well-appointed stately home



A Venice canal, main; the pool at the Palazzo Naiadi in Rome, above

massage, well and truly loosening the many knots in my shoulders, before I retire to my room for a relaxing marine magnesium bath.

That's followed by having my hair and make-up done in my room – I could really get used to this lifestyle – then heading for some drinks on the hotel's excellently named Posh Terrace on the rooftop, providing a wonderful panoramic view as the sun sets over landmarks including the Vatican.

Also visible is the dome of the nearby Teatro dell'Opera, our destination for the evening for a contemporary production of the ever-relevant Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.

I have never been to the opera before, and admire the gold paintwork surrounding rows of plush boxes above, as well as the captivating beautifully painted interior of the

dome as we wait for the curtain to rise.

After the final curtain drops and the applause subsides, we make our way back to the hotel, and seat ourselves in the splendour of the Lobby Bar, in view of immaculate traditional costumes on display from a previous *Don Giovanni* production.

The theatrics don't end there – we're treated to 'live tiramisù' made in front of us, and petits fours including macarons served with a dramatic surprise flourish.

We had arrived in Rome from Venice by train – in the high comfort and spotless surroundings (ScotRail, please take note), of Frecciarossa, a high-speed line that can reach up to 300km an hour, and travels the length and breadth of Italy.

It's an understandably popular option with tourists, and the journey sees us fly through the Italian countryside past an ever-evolving series of landscapes that look like paintings.

While in Venice we had stayed at the Grand Hotel dei Dogi, and this was also a journey we did in style – heading from the airport in a 'private water limousine', as the terracotta rooftops of the city came into view across the turquoise-coloured water.

We were then welcomed to the hotel with freshly made Bellinis –

that winning combo of white peach and dry prosecco – and then asked to choose one of three Acqua di Parma fragrances, with our individual selection then used to scent our room.

The hotel has a very different character to its Roman counterpart, much more bijoux at 64 rooms and located in the beautifully tranquil Cannaregio residential area.

It was built in the 16th century by the Patarol family, later a private home for the Rizzo family, and other pre-hotel incarnations include monastery, French embassy, and then convent.

This is my first trip to Venice, and it exceeds even my high expectations – with every single vista picture postcard worthy, every corner and alleyway providing a new picturesque perspective – and I can see why it's a key wedding destination, chosen by the likes of George and Amal Clooney.

I'm also thrilled that one of our activities is a walking and cicchetti (Venetian tapas) tour of Hidden Venice hosted by a charming local, who tells us about playing football in its courtyards as a child and explaining that Venice is made up of more than 100 islands with about 400 bridges, and a population of some 50,000.

We stop off at a famous osteria – I see from photos on the wall that previous visitors have included Hugh Hefner – and tuck into a splendid spread of cicchetti, including bruschetta-style snacks topped with, say, artichokes and olives, or tapenade with blue cheese.

The sun sets during the course of the tour, and I'm intrigued to see that the city has a very different, intriguing feel at night, the constantly undulating bluey-green water seen in the daytime becoming almost black and so still it has a glassy appearance.

Glass in fact plays a key role for the two Dedicca hotels, with both displaying highly elaborate chandeliers made by the glassblowers of Murano. The hotel offers a shuttle to the island of Murano, the oldest site of artistic glass production in the world where the tradition dates back to 1291 – it was moved out of Venice due to fire concerns.

We see the island the following morning when we head out onto the water after an 'energising' breakfast – which includes an eggwhite omelette

with lagoon herbs. Our rowing class sees us try and master the technique, which makes for a surprisingly demanding full-body workout but satisfying once we start to make progress.

On arriving back at the hotel we tuck into a well-deserved lunch in the stunning surroundings of its 'Il Giardino Segreto' – one of the largest private gardens in Venice – which started out as a scientific botanical collection but was later remodelled to be more suitable for leisure.

Our meal includes a hearty Venetian-style pasta and bean soup, and stewed cuttlefish with loose-textured polenta, and it feels like a world away from the busy more touristic areas of the city.

That afternoon we're treated to a tour of the garden courtesy of Wigwam Club Giardini Storici Venezia, a non-profit association created to safeguard the heritage of historic gardens in Venice.

It ends with a drawing class, a highly therapeutic experience where we learn key techniques to draw a rose, and I try and capture the dark-edged petals using sanguine, a reddish-brown chalk that was apparently favoured by Renaissance artists.

I then take a quick meander through the Venetian streets, past boutiques selling a variety of traditional masks, and armed with my trusty Dedicca Insider Secret Map (this is also available in the Palazzo hotel). That evening we eat in the new La Voga Bar – with voga meaning 'rowing' – with the venue having been remodelled with a nautical theme and making me feel as if I'm on a luxury ocean liner. We sample more ultra local seafood and I head up to my room where awaiting treats include specially blended herbal infusions to help me doze off.

Fast forward to the end of the trip, and it is with a heavy heart that I prepare to head home and again anchor myself in the mundane reality of my own life. ■

The Dedicca Anthology (www.dahotels.com, +800 8099 8099) offers rooms at Palazzo Naiadi from £267 a night based on two sharing a double room with breakfast. Rooms at the Grand Hotel dei Dogi cost from £134 per night on the same deal. Experiences incur an additional cost.



A bedroom at the Grand Hotel dei Dogi in Venice

STAYCATION



A walk on the wild side

Llamas are beautiful and calming company, discovers Bernadette Fallon on a trip to Surrey

There's a llama nuzzling my chin. Her beautiful brown eyes stare into mine, eyelashes I would kill for fluttering delicately. This is Truffle, she's 16-months-old and I'm about to take her for a walk.

Or rather, I'm about to spend a few hours tempting her out of the hedges with handfuls of carrots, rattling a 'snack box' (containing more carrots) to tempt her along – literally, dangling a carrot in her face. Llamas love to eat, they spend 16 hours a day doing it and have three stomachs to fill.

But once she is walking, she moves along beautifully through the paths and hedgerows out the back of The Merry Harriers inn in Surrey. I just have to keep her attention away from those tempting bushes and ferns, not to mention the nettles. Yes, they eat nettles too – three stomachs to fill and all that.

Llama treks are the latest thing in the wellbeing world – a new form of meditation and a novel way to de-stress. They are gentle animals, very curious and friendly and very calming company. And they are beautiful – the sort of animals you could look at for hours in viral videos. Kittens? So over!

The Merry Harriers has ten llamas in total and offers a variety of

different treks, from simple walks lasting an hour and a half to luxury champagne picnic expeditions. Prices start from £55.20 per adult and £27.60 for children.

Fi, who is leading the trek and walking with Mungo, takes people out regularly – treks run almost every day in summer – and says it's the best job in the world. The treks are suitable for anyone over the age of eight and llamas are known to have a particularly calming effect on children with special needs or anyone suffering from anxiety. One of Fi's regular walkers is a young child on the autistic spectrum who is greatly benefiting from his time with the llamas.

You can opt for a B&B trek – £384 for two or £425 if you stay in a shepherd's hut – and spend the night at The Merry Harriers, with a three-course dinner in the pub. The pub is a 16th century village inn with the landlord's names, dating back to the early 1700s, written on the walls.

There's a blazing fire in the cosy bar, which serves local ales and beers and is very popular with the neighbours, judging by the number of people who are known by name to the bar staff on the busy Friday evening we visit. There's a separate dining area to the side, serving hearty options like

sausages from the local butchers served with mash and green veg or chunky baked hake in crab chowder. Breakfast is all sourced locally as a blackboard on the buffet table tells me – bacon from nearby Hookley Farm, eggs from Hallgate, jams from Sunfield House and herbs from the garden. Behind the bar, another small dining area has gorgeous views of the garden and play area out the back and beyond it, the field with the llamas.

Accommodation is in a choice of garden huts, rooms over the pub or – for a bit of a treat – in one of the aforementioned shepherd's huts, set up in a field across the road. Five huts are grouped around a fishpond

Behind the bar, another dining area has gorgeous views of the garden

with a water feature, surrounded by mature trees. If this is a shepherd's life sign me up now for a flock and crook.

Like a little doll's house, with Shaker-style wooden walls and floors, there are snugly fur throws on the chairs and a wood-burning stove in the corner. The bed is surrounded by windows with views out to the pond and dressed with cosy cushions and woolly blankets. The bathroom is fully kitted out with walk-in shower and toiletries, there

Clockwise from main: one of the llamas; Bernadette Fallon feels the love; The Merry Harriers

are soft towelling robes hanging on the door (so soft my partner wishes he could 'borrow' his to bring home). And there are llamas everywhere – embroidered on cushions, sitting on the ledge at the end of the bed and brightening up the shelves around the little kitchen sink (which are also stocked with a kettle, teas, coffees, hot chocolates and crisps).

Wander up the road through a tree-filled landscape, past pretty cottages, and you'll eventually come to Hambleton village green with pond, park benches and the village shop, which also doubles as the local café. Here you can buy all sorts of wonderful local goodies, including asparagus, beer, cheese, eggs, gin, honey, ice-cream, jam, maps, wine, meat, water, own brand sweets and even frozen meals. The area is picture postcard pretty – well, it is in the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty after all, designated since 1958. It's definitely a great place to take a llama for a walk. ■

The Merry Harriers, Hambleton Road, Surrey GU8 4DR (www.merryharriers.com). Inn rooms from £115 per night, garden rooms £110, shepherd's huts £195. B&B. Bernadette Fallon is a travel writer and publishes her stories on Travellingwell.net

48 HOURS IN

Jimbaran, Bali

Friday, midday

Check into the lavish Four Seasons Resort Bali at Jimbaran Bay (villas from £375, www.fourseasons.com), a Jimbaran icon that enjoys an unbeatable position on a bluff overlooking the sweeping sands. Take in the view from your villa's pool.

1pm

Take it easy with a light lunch by the pool overlooking the famous sands.

3pm

If you're after superb ceramics that will create a splash at your next dinner party Jenggala Keramik Bali Ceramics is the place to visit.

7pm

Dine on Modern Asian cuisine at Sundara. Don't miss the award-winning Samurai dessert, a chocoholic's dream.

Saturday, 8am

Take a stroll along Jimbaran beach appreciating its beauty before everyone else arrives. It will probably be just you and the odd fisherman.

10am

Check out the wee local market. Along with the tourist tat there are some great souvenirs including well-made crafts. The sweep of exotic fruit and vegetables will fire the senses too.

Midday

Pop into the sleepy wee temple just across the road. All are welcome unless it's bustling with a ceremony.

1pm

Back at the Four Seasons enjoy Balinese cuisine with real

BARGAIN BREAKS

Beal me in

Head for The Lindisfarne Inn at Beal, close to Holy Island in Northumberland, where a two-night getaway costs from £60pp, including bed and breakfast, dinner (up to the value of £22pp) and a bottle of house wine. Based on two people sharing a double or twin room, this offer is available until 31 March with a £20 supplement for Saturday night bookings. Single occupancy supplement of £30 applies. Offer not available to purchase online. Call 0191 580 3610 or see www.lindisfarneinn.co.uk

Catalan adventure

Fly from Glasgow to Barcelona on 5 March and have three nights' bed



authenticity at the Jala, which also houses its own cooking school.

2pm

If Jimbaran Beach is not quiet enough for you ease around to Tegal Wangi Beach to the south. If there is anyone in the cove just head to the next one.

6pm

It's time for a sundowner back on the Jimbaran sands with a slew of venues at the other end of the beach.

7pm

A Jimbaran seafood feast is a must. Dozens of restaurants – from informal shacks to proper dining rooms – fill the night air with smoky seafood aromas as the island's finest catch is cooked as simply as possible.

Sunday, 10am

The Four Seasons' spa has just been revamped. Their two hour Adreno Selamat treatment soothes tired limbs. ■

Robin McKelvie

Finnair (www.finnair.com) fly to Bali from Edinburgh via Helsinki and Singapore. The tourist office is at www.indonesia.travel

and breakfast at the four-star Front Maritim Hotel all from £289pp based on two sharing and including a 22kg baggage allowance. Call 0800 408 5594 or see www.jet2holidays.com

Romance in Madrid

Valentine's Day falls on a Friday, so take a long weekend in Madrid. To celebrate, Bless Hotel Madrid is offering a Bless Your Love package, from £274.89, which includes a Deluxe Double hotel room, breakfast, six roses, a bottle of champagne, an aromatic candle, essential oils and chocolate-covered strawberries for two. Available throughout February. Call 00800 1010 1111 or see www.lhw.com