

Asolo



"Marca Trevigiana's pearl" is a town dating back to pre-Roman times, located in a magnificent spot above a hill overlooking the plain.

Asolo has a charm that few other towns possess, starting with its glorious and unusual history. Famous figures such as the English poet Robert Browning, the actress Eleonora Duse and the explorer Freya Stark all lived here. At the end of the 1400's it was also home and prison to the Queen of Cyprus, Caterina Cornaro, to

whom Venice offered the symbolic dominion of the town in exchange for rule over the Cypriot kingdom.

Worth seeing: Asolo offers a vast artistic heritage. The centrally located Piazza Garibaldi offers a unique scenario: at the centre is a fountain powered by an antique Roman aqueduct, while all around, it is crowned by elegant buildings with the **Queen Cornaro's castle** (open to the public) dominating the scene from above. The **Cathedral** is worth a visit. Built in 1747, it houses a masterpiece by Lorenzo Lotto (1506). Next to the cathedral you will find the "Loggia della Ragione" once the centre of the city's political life, nowadays home to an interesting **City Museum**. If you walk along the colonnade of via Browning you come to Villa Freya, home to the Stark family.



The Queens Castle

Today the castle is an old massive construction, which has been altered many times. Its typical tower (Torre Reata) is original. Now, the Eleonora Duse Theatre is located inside. Of The Asolo Castle there remains only the Clock Tower, one wing, the remains of the Reata Tower, & the walls.

An interesting fact: In 1930 Mister Ringling of the American Circus family bought the dismantled parts of the Castle and rebuilt in

Sarasota, Florida, & it bears the name of "Asolo Theatre".

We walked on the part that was left, and there is a wonderful view as well as pretty gardens. The Castle has many names: Queen's Castle, Cornaro Castle, Asolo Castle.

The origin the castle is unknown. It's cited for the 1st time in the year 969. The first domination by the Venetians was 1329. That domination was interrupted by the invasion of the Hungarians who devastated the territory. After final Venetian victory, the Castle was the permanent seat of the Podesta and its Council.

The most interesting history of the Castle pertains to Caterina Cornaro, Queen of Cyprus. She was born in Venice but went as a young bride to James II, King of Cyprus. Some say that Venice had its eye on the island & used her to get control. Rumor also says that she poisoned her husband, & for her safety, Venice sent ships & soldiers to Cyprus to defend her.

The Venetian government finally convinced her to abandon the kingdom in exchange for going to Asolo. That was quite an honor because, at the time, Asolo was second in size & wealth to Treviso. She never became Queen of Asolo because Venice continued to nominate the Podesta & to govern the territory.

Caterina enjoyed a handsome annuity & kept a magnificent court. She brought men of letters & science to Asolo. Her idyllic life came to an abrupt halt when the troops of the League of Cambrai occupied Asolo territory, & Caterina took refuge in Venice where she died (she was unable to live long enough to see the Venetian victory & repossession of Asolo).

Cathedral

Just down a few steps from Piazza Garibaldi in the Cathedral Square stands a modest, ancient church. This Cathedral is dedicated to Santa Maria Assunta. Many Popes throughout history have favored this little church because of its location and simple elegance.

A visit to the Cathedral is made easy because of the captions placed alongside the works of art. The most beautiful, I think, is the basin of the Baptismal Font, which was a gift from Caterina Cornaro. It is embossed with Queen Cornaro's Coat of Arms as well as images of the Madonna and Child.



Another beautiful piece of art was Lorenzo Lotto's "Our Lady of the Assumption" with its gold gilded and embossed framework.

The Cathedral's present facade (1889) rests against the ancient Romanesque one (probably to reinforce its structure). The architecture is Romanesque, which has withstood a fire and the 1695 earthquake. The most ancient portion, the Cappella del Santissimo is from the 15th Century.



Piazza Garibaldi

Piazza Garibaldi (former Piazza Maggiore) is in the heart of the tiny town and is symbolized by the large fountain of a winged lion. From this fountain, the water that gushes out is still the same cool water that flows along the Roman Aqueduct, which has supplied it for nearly two thousand years!

Of course, the fountain has been modified over time, but its central part is still ancient (like the section of a Roman column and the coat of arms and name of the "Podesta Giovanni Pisani" and the date of 1575 when it was restored.

A pine cone towered over the column for a century and then was replaced by the lion to represent St. Mark, symbol of the Venetian Republic

. While we were there, they were doing renovation on the statue, so the photograph is not mine (didn't think a covered scaffold would be too attractive).

Start from the main square, look at the elegant 1400's **Palazzo della Ragione**, with remains of ancient frescoes on the external walls of its loggia.

You might also want to visit the **Town Museum** housed in the Palazzo, featuring noteworthy paintings of renaissance artists, and some archaeological remains found in the area.

Walk forward to Robert Browning street, and dip into a blaze of ancient houses with arcades. Have a look at the **Robert Browning house** before getting to the fork, where lies the **Fontanella Zen** (Zen Small Fountain) dating back to 1572.

Just in front of it you will see the **Freya Stark house**.

The big park behind the Freya Stark house, a romantic and timeless landscaped garden (or english garden) planned by the english writer herself, also contains the remains of a roman theatre.

Unfortunately, currently both the house and the park are being remodeled, probably until late 2011, thus it is not allowed to visit it



You might also want to walk forward to the house of the late venetian composer **Malipiero**.

Go back to the square and head for the opposite direction, to via Canova, toward Borgo Santa Caterina, for a 15 minutes walk. You'll keep enjoying the view of rows of typical ancient houses with arcades. You will pass the **Eleonora Duse** (1858-1924) house. She was a very famous italian actress of the

past, partner of the writer, poet and fascist military Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863-1938).

After the beautiful Hotel Villa Cipriani, with its park from where you can enjoy a stunning view over the Colli Asolani, go on as far as the ancient Convent of Nuns and the **Church of Sant'Anna**. In the nearby cemetery were buried Freya Stark and Eleonora Duse.

On your way have a look at the impressive and iconic **Villa Contarini Degli Armeni** which stands up on the top of the opposite hill.

Go back to the Piazza Maggiore and walk up to the old Castle, the **Palace of Caterina Cornaro**, with its characteric tower.

