

TRAVEL

MARIA HARDING takes a river cruise along Italy's Po river and lives like the locals



■ La Bella Vita sailing past St Mark's Square, Venice

NOW here's a top tip for your next dinner party. Gather up a heap of acacia flowers and deep fry them in a light tempura batter.

Add salt and herbs to the batter and you'll create delicious and most unusual fritters to serve with aperitifs. Add a little spiced sugar, on the other hand, and you'll have a delicious dessert which, served piping hot with vanilla ice cream and a drizzle of honey, is a guaranteed show-stopper.

You may have spotted by now that there is a small snag to this recipe.

First, you must find your acacia flowers.

But take a lazy cruise along Italy's meandering River Po aboard a locally owned river barge called La Bella Vita and you'll find them, quite literally, growing on trees.

We tucked into the savoury version of acacia fritters, washed down with chilled Prosecco, while basking in the Italian sunshine on La Bella Vita's top deck as she nosed her way back to Venice from Chioggia, a pretty seaside town which, with a rich history and its own bridged canals, gives its celebrated neighbour a run for its money.

As well as Roman, Etruscan and Byzantine ruins and those picturesque canals, Chioggia boasts a well-stocked fish market which both we and our chef Andrea had visited that day – us to take in the bustle, and he to gather freshly caught Adriatic cod and cuttlefish.

Our sun-soaked alfresco lunch was just one highlight of our trip from Mantua to Venice along the Po – Italy's longest river, which cuts, like a saucy garter, across the 'thigh' of Italy from the Western Alps to the Adriatic.

Some of the Italy's most spectacular Renaissance towns and cities have sprung up on or near the Po's banks, in a region known La Bassa Padana which is famous as much for its cuisine as for the architectural glories of Mantua, Cremona, Piacenza and Ferrara.

Balsamic vinegar, Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese and Parma ham all come from here, and the local shops are rich in goodies like Langhiarano ham, Mantovan garlic salami and pastel-tinted local pasta, all of which

All aboard for the good life in Italy

make great souvenirs for foodies to take home.

But the best grub was to be had onboard our boat.

Andrea, a dab hand at his native cuisine, dished up an impressive parade of regional delights such as Borlotti bean stew, Baccala Mantecato (salted Atlantic codfish) and Sarde in Saor (fried sardines served with raisins and pine nuts). For pud, we feasted on creamy trifles, soft almond cakes and pungent local cheeses, served with aplomb by Daniella, the boat's unflappable Maitre d'.

They were accompanied by local wines served by friendly sommelier Giovanni, who would point out each wine's region of origin on a wall map.

And that, in a nutshell, is the joy of travelling on this little boat.

A converted former sand barge with room for only 20 passengers, La Bella Vita is not as luxurious as some river cruisers offering tours from Venice.

Owned and run by a local Venetian family, it is decked out in local Italian style, with dark blue walls, maroon leather furniture, and rather old-fashioned artwork. Cabins are fairly basic, and bedding, towels and hairdryers could do with being upgraded.

But if you're a 'real' traveller looking for an authentic truly Italian experience, La Bella Vita cannot be bettered as, being much smaller than most riverboats, it can reach parts of the Po that larger vessels can't.

So, between touring outstanding cities like Mantua – a remarkably unspoiled 'mini Florence' with a memorable domed and turreted skyline and a magnificent Ducal palace, and medieval Ferrera, which

combines striking Renaissance architecture with lively, unusual shops and bars – we got to visit more offbeat places.

I'd recommend the pretty fishing village of San Pietro in Volta. We also got to experience aspects of the Po region most travellers simply don't see.

We spent several sunny hours out on the top deck, binoculars at the ready, as our boat glided effortlessly past the pale blonde beaches and sleepy, tree-laden islands of the Po Delta nature park, a vast and verdant region which, fed by six branches of the Po and home to heron, tern, black-necked grebe and even the occasional flamingo, is one of Europe's most important wetland areas.

Another bright day found us at Il Dominio di Bagnoli, an ancient wine estate. We sampled its wines and then strolled around lovely gardens, where life-sized statues of characters from Italy's Commedia del Arte peeped out at us from an avenue of blossoming acacia trees.

And the treats didn't end there. That night, we dined by candlelight at the Villa Ca'Zen, an imposing 17th-century riverside mansion which once played host to Lord Byron. And, on another evening, dinner was enlivened by a group of classical singers, who came onboard to perform operatic arias.

Such magical experiences, and the chance to enjoy them in a small and friendly group, do not come cheap. But then, a trip along the River Po is one of the world's greatest and most unusual experiences – something really worth writing home about.



■ Mantua is a 'mini Florence'

NEED TO KNOW

■ MARIA HARDING sailed the Po as a guest of European Waterways. Prices for a six-night cruise aboard La Bella Vita start at £2,290 per person sharing a twin or double cabin, including

all meals, wines, an open bar, excursions and local transfers. Flights are not included. Full boat charters are also available. ■ 01753 598555 or click www.gobarging.com



■ Chioggia gives Venice a run for its money

» St Andrew's Church tower in Chioggia houses a clock dating from 1386 – possibly the oldest of its type in the world