TRAVEL

The Walled City of Lucca

Italy's Medieval Masterpiece.

By Richard Levy

Lucca, Italy's most magnificent medieval, completely walled city is just an hour away from Florence, the birthplace of the Renaissance. Yet amazingly, though millions of travelers from all over the world visit Florence every year, very few ever go to Lucca. When they do, it's usually just for a "day-trip" as recommended by a travel guidebook. They should be ashamed of themselves because Lucca is one of the most captivating cities you'll ever visit, anywhere. In fact, after spending a very memorable week in Lucca last year, my girlfriend and I seriously talked about packing up and moving to Lucca; it's that special. Great peaceful vibes, stress free: once inside the womb of Lucca, you've left civilization outside.

Spending just one day in Lucca is like going back in a time machine, yet at the same time, Lucca has all the modern amenities you'd ever want, making it the perfect place to escape and maybe never leave. Just imagine how safe you'd feel safely hidden away in a beautiful medieval city protected by a 40" tall wall while feasting upon world-famous Tuscan food and wine. The wall was built during the 14th and 15th centuries and since 1480, it has protected Lucca from aggressive neighbors and invading armies.

Church of San Frediano Photo Courtesy of Italian National Tourist Board

Orrido di Botri Lucca Photo Courtesy of Italian National Tourist Board

One of the very first things you to do in Lucca after exploring the twisting and winding narrow streets of this quaint, medieval city is to take a slow, lovely walk around the "ramparts" or top of the wall which has been turned into a lovely park with fabulous vistas of the entire Tuscan countryside around Lucca. The distance around the wall is two and half miles. It's also very mind-cleansing to cycle or take a morning jog around the ramparts of this massive medieval wall.

Lucca was the first Italian city to accept Christianity, thus it's 99 churches; one more amazing than the next. The two most historic and beautiful sights of Lucca are San Michelle Church with it's medieval façade and the San Martino Cathedral which is next to the very impressive 13th Century bell tower, the Casa dell' Opera del Duomo, built where the original Roman Forum once stood.

My favorite hotel in Lucca is the classic, charming and affordable Universo Hotel, even though "Rick Steves" says it's "old, tired and worn"; that's what makes it so special! The Universo is a lot like The Grand Budapest Hotel, with a grand lobby, lovely large rooms, delicious breakfasts included, great service and it is located in a beautiful square; a short walk everywhere in Lucca. There's a fabulous outdoor restaurant right downstairs and just one block away is the historic San Giovanni Church, offering one hour "Puccini Concerts" every night, April to October. Whether performed by a few local opera singers or a group of local musicians, the concerts are always

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wonderful as Puccini is Italy's foremost composer and he was also known to be quite a dashing ladies man. Concerts are only 20 Euros, so try to see a few of them.

Other places to consider staying in Lucca are the pricey San Luca Palace Hotel and the L'Antiga Bifore charming B&B; there many other places to choose from, as well. The delicious food of Lucca has been heavily influenced by the ancient Etruscans who favored cooking with an abundance of fresh herbs like Rosemary, Sage and Thyme, as in the famous by the Simon & Garfunkel song. Meat is favored more often than fish in Tuscany. Their "Bistecca Florentina", a thick T-Bone steak is legendary; as is their wild boar or "Cinghiale" – a deliciously, rich Ragu. Roast kid or "Capretto" with herbs and rabbit stew with olives are other traditional dishes. There' a very popular long, thick spaghetti called "Pici you must try and don't miss the popular local dish: meat filled ravioli served in a meat sauce" - usually a recipe passed down from grandma. The best restaurant in Lucca is he colorful Buca di Sant' San Antonio, turning out authentic, delicious Tuscan fare ever since 1782. My other favorite restaurants are Il Giglio and Trottoria Do Leo.

Lucca has many unique shops and fashionable boutiques, with prices lower than you'll find in Florence and without all those annoying "tourists". Search out Gelateria Veneta and try their "fresh frozen fruit filled with a creamy filling". Stop into a bakery and pick up Lucca's famous "Buccellati" cake, a large wreath shaped cake filled with raisins and laced with anise: "Molto delizioso." You'll be sure to keep noshing this cake as you wander all through this small and very captivating city. Stop at a café in one of Lucca's many historic squares or piazzas and enjoy a special Lucca cappuccino. (And keep nibbling on your cake.)

Lucca Porta San Gervase Photo Courtesy of Italian National Tourist Board

Carnivale Via Reggio Photo Courtesy of Italian National Tourist Board

Visit the house Puccini lived in, which is now a museum. Have lunch in the square nearby which is filled with outdoor restaurants. Right at the end of the square there's a small handbag store (don't remember the name) with Lucca's best selection and prices of high quality leather handbags and wallets. Then check out the Guinigi Tower, with trees growing on top, overlooking all of Lucca. The largest square is Piazza Napoleon, named after his sister who lived there during the French occupation.

Of course, you can't leave Italy without seeing the famous "Leaning Tower of Pisa" only a fifteen-minute train ride away. Yes, it *is* spectacular and worth seeing. You can walk to the top and enjoy the panorama below. Have lunch in the outdoor restaurant across from the tower; the view is so memorable you won't remember what you ate. (Take a "Selfie" while you are leaning at the same angle as the tower.)

Viareggio is another charming town worth venturing to, from Lucca, just a 10-minute train ride away and located on the Italian Riviera. Surprisingly, the Guide books never mention Viareggio. Stroll along Viareggio's promenade that runs along the beach filled with shops, cafes and restaurants. My favorite restaurant was Da Giorgio: order their amazing mixed seafood appetizers and Frito Misto -- a huge platter of super-fresh, lightly fried local fish and shellfish; plenty for two people. Walk along the long lovely beach and visit the home of the famous poet Shelly who, sadly, drowned nearby in 1892. Or just hang out in a café taking in the all the vibes of this Tuscan seaside town.

Now let's get back to Lucca. If you're into cycling, take the "Bicycle Tour of Wine County" from Lucca: about 10 miles each way. But don't worry, you'll be stopping off to taste fantastic Tuscan wines along the way, so on your way back you'll be much more "relaxed. Tickets for the bike tour are available at the Bike store in Lucca. If you're a wine nut like me, you will enjoy the one-day "Guided Tasting Tour of Chianti "; information is available the tourist office in Lucca, not far from the bus station. Bike rentals in Lucca by the day are 12 Euros and 2.50 Euros an hour; a great way to see Lucca and the neighboring countryside.

Now that I've hopefully enticed you to make Lucca your next vacation destination, let me advise you about the best way to get there. I suggest flying from NY to Rome, because there are many flights and it's less expensive than flying into Florence. Stay overnight, perhaps at Fellini Hotel; my favorite boutique hotel located just two blocks from the old historic section and the Fontana de Trevi. Have breakfast on their rooftop garden overlooking the rooftops of Rome.

Early the next day, take a taxi to the main train station and catch an express train to Florence; a two-hour scenic trip. In Florence, stay at the old world, charming Pendini Hotel located in the historic Piazza Della Repubblica. This beautiful hotel is located on the top floors of a 17th century spectacular historical building. You'll want a room "facing the square" for the great view of street musicians and lovely cafes all around the square; cost is about 175 -200 Euros with breakfast and worth every Lira, I mean Euro. (info@pendini-hotel.it) The hotel is centrally located and you can walk just about everywhere. When you come out of the hotel, make a left onto the Piazza Della Repubblica and just down the street check out the street market of stalls overflowing with fabulous, authentic Italian leather goods at super-affordable prices. In fact, a gorgeous leather handbag is roughly half of what you'd pay in most Florence leather shops. They might not be brand name, crème de la crème handbags, but they are still beautifully crafted from

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The Pendini Hotel is two blocks from the magnificent "Duomo" Cathedral, the breathtaking and most famous medieval building in Florence. Wait on line and when you walk around inside, you will wonder how they could have built this huge dome when they did. Be sure to light a candle and say a short prayer, no matter your faith; it's good luck.

Treat your self to a hot waffle smothered in fresh strawberries and whipped crème at the tiny store across the street. Have lunch in one of the out door restaurants across from the Duomo and you'll be hypnotized by its beauty. Walk over to the outdoor market a few blocks away for all sorts of leather bargains and stop into the huge food market. Have lunch nearby at Trottoria Za Za.

If you have just one full day in Florence you must see Michelangelo's statue of "David" at the Accademia and you will be awed by this magnificent work of art. Then, head over to the Uffizi Gallery, housing the world's largest collection of Italian renaissance art. Once inside, ask the guard to direct you to the Botticelli painting of the "Birth of Venus". Prepare to be mesmerized by just how beautiful and radiant Venus looks with her long hair flowing down her naked body as she ascends a huge clamshell. Check out the other paintings on the floor. If you are not rushed for time, get lost in the Uffizi for about an hour. Be sure to make reservations in advance for your Accademia and Uffizi Gallery admission tickets, as this allows you to go to "the front of the line". (Folks waiting on line will glare at you.) Decide what date and time you'd like to go and call 011-39-055-294-883; or make reservations online.

Stroll over the famous 14th Century Ponte Vecchio for super views of the Arno River. For dinner you must eat at the Golden View Open Bar Restaurant for the fabulous view of the Ponte Vecchio and Arno River from your table.

For Florence's most fashionable leather jackets and handbags the place to go, is Casini Firenzi, They're expensive but worth it, because of the high quality leather and third generation craftsmanship of their factory. (casinifirenzi.it).

After one or two days in Florence it's time to start your fabulous vacation in Lucca. Take an early train it's only an hour's ride. Then a short walk or taxi to Lucca, which is not far from the station. The Universo Hotel is not far from Lucca's wall entrance. Then after your very unforgettable week in Lucca buy a ticket for an early train to Florence with a connecting express train to Rome, it takes about 5 hours.

After checking into your hotel in Rome, drop your luggage and take a taxi to "Trastevere" the historic and colorful "Old Jewish section" established by the Romans in 1555, terrorized by the Nazis in 1944 and now a very trendy Roman neighborhood; not to be missed. Have a delicious dinner. Be sure to order the local specialty of fried smashed baby artichokes and sautéed cheese stuffed zucchini blossoms. Ask the hotel reserve a taxi to the airport for you in the morning (30 Euros) to catch your AM flight back to New York. You'll need 10 days, but 12-14 days is much better, especially if you'd like another day in Florence or Rome, or one more day in Lucca for "doing absolutely nothing". Yes, in Lucca, even doing nothing is special and very memorable. Buon viaggio!!!

Editors Note:

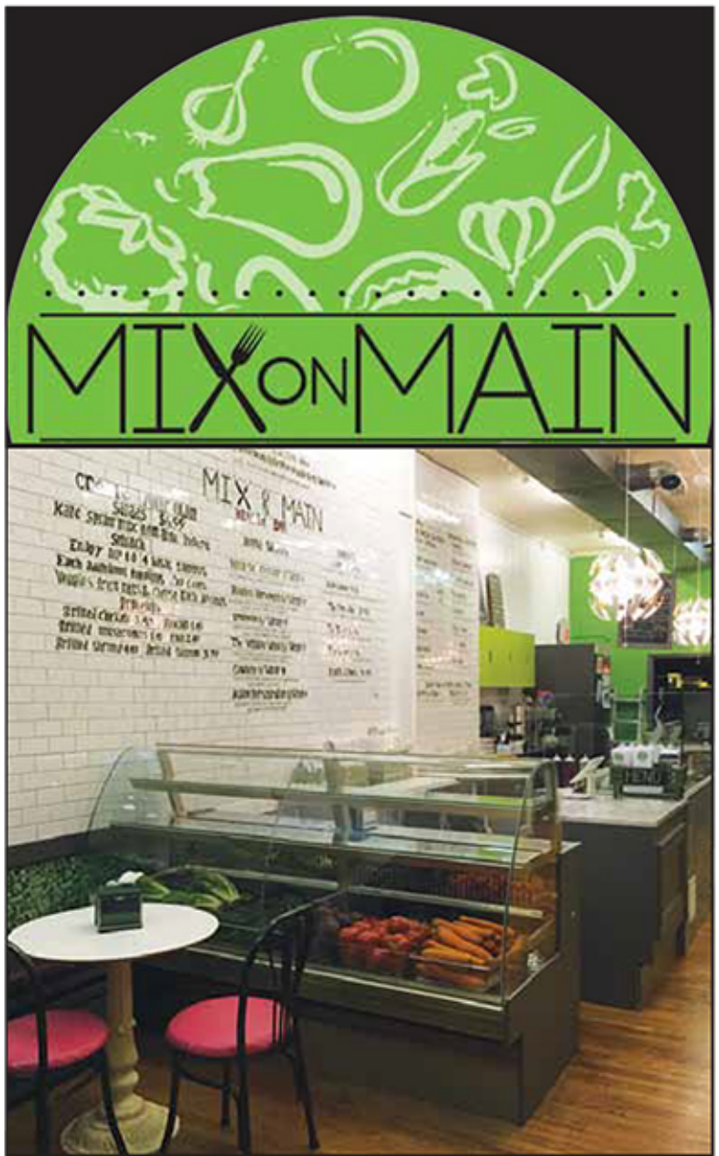
Photos of Lake Worth Beach, Lakeworth Downtown Art, Lake Worth Shops and Lake Worth Downton Street Art in our Jan. 22, 2015 story about Lake Worth are courtesy of the The Tourism Marketing Corporation for Palm Beach County. We regret this omission from last week's issue. For further information about Lake Worth visit: www.PalmBeachFl.Com

Yonkers Philarmonic Orchestra Concert

Sunday February 1, 2015 at 3PM
Saunders High School, Yonkers
Admission is FREE

On Sunday, February 1, 2015 The Yonkers Philharmonic Orchestra will present a free concert at Saunders High School, 183 Palmer Ave. in Yonkers. The concert begins at 3PM.

Guest Conductor Ariel Rudiakov will lead the orchestra in a program of Slavic Music, including Dvorak's Carnival Overture, Op. 92., Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar by Pantcho Vladigerov for violin solo and orchestra and ending with Tchaikovsky Symphony #2 (the little Russian). The program includes Joana Genova, solo violinist.



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