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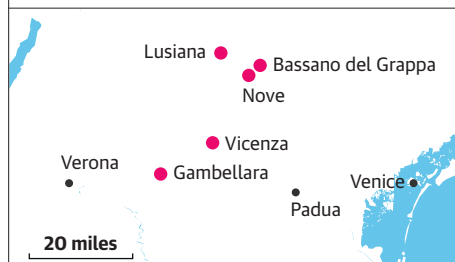
Travel

Italy's 'antidote to overtourism': exploring unexpected delights in Vicenza and beyond

Vicenza

A new 'antidote to overtourism' app makes a great guide to Palladio country

Words: Liz Boulter



I may have nodded off in double geography once or twice, but I never thought I'd deliberately sleep in a school. However, La Scuola, in Lusiana, in the foothills of the Dolomites, is very different from an English comp. The former village school, closed in the 1960s, has been converted by Valeria Carfora and her husband, Marco, into a charming and unexpected B&B (doubles from €95).

Its bedrooms are named after school subjects - maths, geography, literature, science - and the whole place is furnished with period desks, books, abacuses and more. The breakfast room has a huge blackboard showing the Italian alphabet in curly script: under it we take our time over homemade pastries and fruit, plus cheese and yoghurt from the lush Asiago plateau. A timeline of satchels - from wooden to leather to mid-century nylon - hang on pegs beneath old school photos. A 1940s report book donated by a woman in the village shows she had good marks for sewing but "must do better" in arithmetic and "fascist cultural subjects".

In summer, tables are laid out in the playground, with views over the belltower towards Venice.

La Scuola is the sort of bolthole that's hard to find even with online resources (it's not on booking sites). But our trip to Vicenza province is one unlooked-for delight after another, thanks to a startup that makes the unexpected its business.

Elisabetta Faggiana used to work in the music industry in London and in 2017 set up Unexpected London with her now husband, Savio Losito, offering small group walking tours.

They have expanded their 'Unexpected Italy' app - launched today and visit away from Instagram likes. The antidote to overtourism is a local experts to show known gems and crowd the san favourite statistic tourists to Italy. Covering, so far, Venice and the territories in Vicenza, it offers pre-trip tips once you're there individual interest.

Vicenza is an antitouristy city that offers better value and a quieter pace than the other V's of northern Italy (Verona and Venice). It was the home of architect Andrea

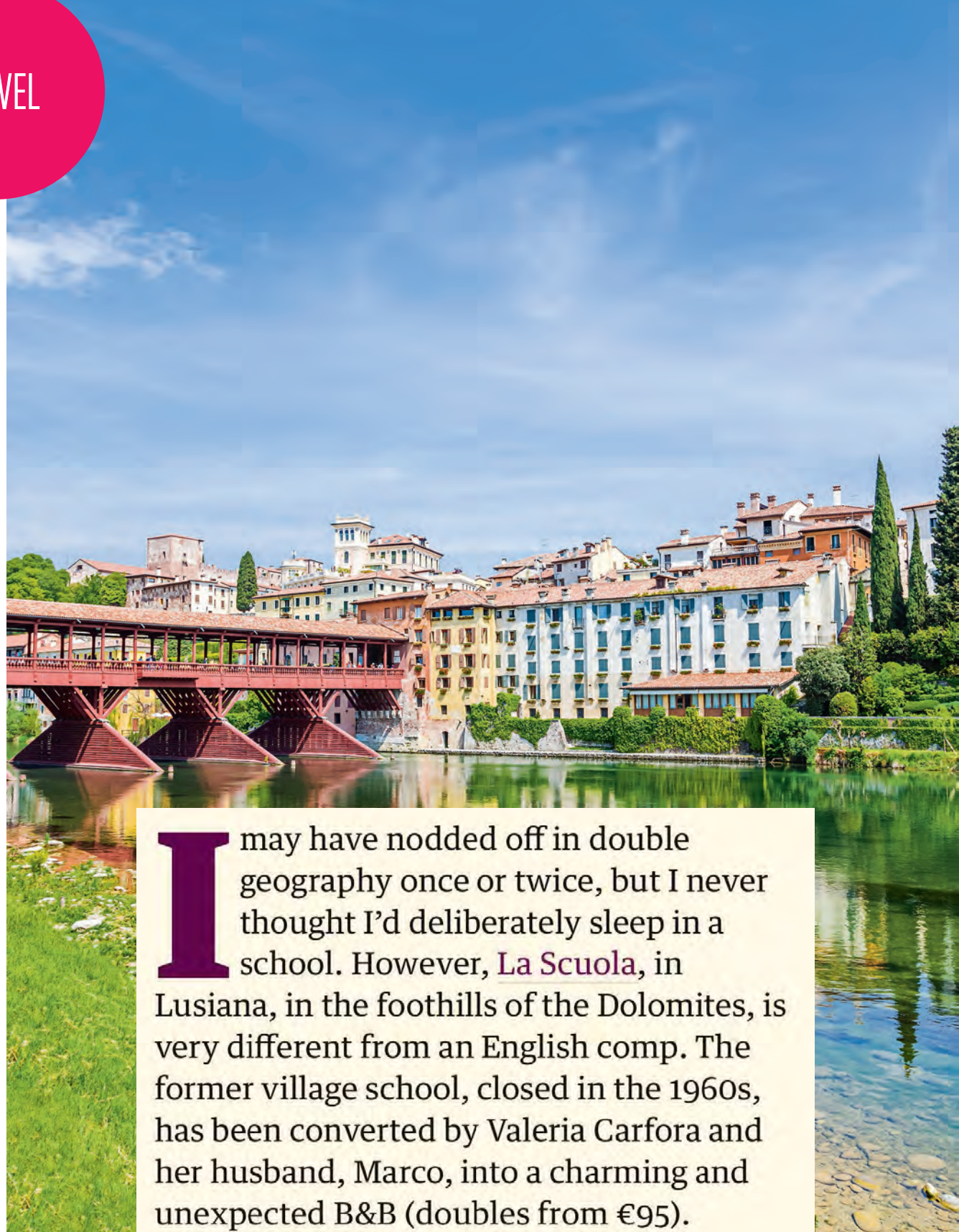
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rescued walls.

An unexpected delight nearby is the Busato print shop, where Giancarlo, the city's last traditional

aperitif pizza at €2.50, and tapas-like *tartine* - bread topped with, say, truffle, egg, tuna or prawns (€1.50 each). Even more amazing is Osteria





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to Italy's
oldest grappa maker.

Distilleria Nardini has been at the bridge's eastern end since 1779, when the first of that family descended from the mountains with his mobile still. A museum of distilling downstairs tells its history of floods, wars and more. Upstairs, a plaque on the barrel-lined bar says *Quei che alla vita tiene beva giusto e beve bene*, an 18th-century equivalent of "please drink responsibly". Heeding this, we settle for one chilled glass each of pleasantly bitter Mezzomezzo aperitif.

When not propping up bars, the people of Bassano clearly like supporting independent retailers. We enjoy Tassotti, a gorgeous stationer whose pretty cards, notebooks and gift wrap are all made in town, a bookshop over three floors of a 17th-century palace, and herbalist Inedito Lab, which is like a smart Holland & Barrett except that the remedies, teas and essential oils are house-made, from mostly local plants.

Few tourists would think to visit an insurance office, but Costenaro Assicurazioni in Bassano has a wholly unexpected feature. Boss Ivano Costenaro is a complete ceramics buff: the top floor of the building is a museum of hundreds of works by prominent contemporary ceramicists (free guided tours Saturday 11am). Downstairs, there are ceramic owls over reception, and figurative panels by the filing cabinets.

Our taste for this art now piqued, we head south to Nove, a town on the Brenta River with a 300-year history of clay expertise. Today it's a hotbed of



contemporary ceramic art, with open studios in September, and renowned artists to visit, including Robi Renzi.

Inspiring in a different way is Conca d'Oro farm, a social enterprise near Bassano that offers work and dignity to special-needs adults, growing organic fruit, veg, wheat and olives. "Trainees" also serve in the onsite restaurant and shop. Simple housemade maccheroni with chilli and romanesco is one of the best dishes on a trip of generally excellent meals.

Wines at Conca d'Oro come from a vineyard officially called La Biancara, but always referred to as Maule, after Angiolino Maule, pioneer of the area's natural wine movement. Natural winemaking goes way beyond organic (which permits dozens of additives, some sulfites plus yeast, egg white and animal enzymes). Angiolino has



written a book called *How to Make Wine Just With Grapes*. We hear how, for example, "gross lees", the chunky slurry from the bottom of a fermenting vat, has naturally occurring yeasts and bacteria that make it an excellent antioxidant for the wines, including a spicy, light tai rosso.

Touring this and other wineries around the village of Gambellara makes an enjoyable, and pleasantly vinous, half day. We diligently taste and compare many natural wines, and learn next day that no additives means no hangover. Which is just as well as there are lots more places on the app we want to check out.

The trip was provided by Unexpected Italy, with accommodation by Palazzo Valmarana Braga, Locanda la Scuola, and Le 33

More tales of unexpected

tral Vicenza, **Il** looks like a deli, lining room in the at Roman cellars specialities such *oli* (fat spaghetti) duck, dried cod l ways, local i called *soppressa*, irello sparkling sharper and r than prosecco). **Capr'Allegra** (the goat) is a rant-with-rooms (€90) high on the plateau, run by iad Stefano o. Meals are local delicious (lots of e), and there's a school and goat n site, plus hikes cing all around.

ink

natural winery **Menti** lets sheep browse the vineyards to keep weeds down and soil fertilised, though the animals do try to climb on one another's backs to reach the juicy grapes. Its sparkling wines, with crown cap, not cork, get their fizz by fermenting naturally: its Roncaie white looks cloudy but is crisply fizzy, and light at just 10-11%. Tastings from €10pp.

High on a hill, ultra-modern **Volcanalia** was set up by Rossella Mastrotto with an all-female team. Her natural wines include Ambarabà, a fizz with a delicious bitter note and Patapum, a slightly sparkling "amber" wine great with pork or fish. As well as tours and tastings (from €20), she offers four swish, modern rooms (from €200 B&B), a new pool, and homemade lunches on a south-facing terrace.

Stay

In a riverside palace in Bassano, stylish **B&B Le 33** (doubles from €150) is run by Frenchwoman Julie Foulon, a keen cook who serves copious breakfasts at a long table.