

Che grande

Verona Opera Festival isn't just for opera buffs. *Susanna Clark* challenges the standard summer sightseeing itinerary

Think warm, starlit nights, some of the world's finest musical performers and a genuine Roman amphitheatre – and you'll quickly understand why the Verona Opera Festival brings crowds in their hundreds of thousands each summer.

For 49 evenings from 21 June to 7 September, this open-air extravaganza marks a high point in the opera calendar with a host of legendary international artists,

such as Anna Netrebko and Yusif Eyvazov, while top billing this year goes to the world-famous tenor Plácido Domingo. He will be marking a career spanning 50 years with a number of special events, including singing the role of Giorgio Germont in Verdi's *La Traviata* on 1 August and performing selected parts from the Verdi operas *Nabucco*, *Macbeth* and *I Due Foscari* on 4 August.

Opera aside, the venue is truly fascinating. A genuine Roman arena from 30CE, it once housed more than 25,000 spectators and would have staged anything from gladiatorial battles to nerve-shredding horse races.

Today, the audience is limited to 15,000, but while the entertainment is less bloodthirsty, it is still an evocative experience to be surrounded by so much history. As one of the world's largest stages, it provides the performances with a huge space in which to display innovative and spectacular scenery, elaborate costumes and a large cast. Meanwhile, candles given to the

audience provide a sprinkling of tiny flickering lights as the events begin, much as they would have done in Roman times.

Even if you've never been to an opera before, you're bound to find something to enjoy. One option is Verdi's famous *Aida*. This grand opera has been performed in each of the 97 years of the Verona Opera Festival. The huge stage allows to splendour of ancient Egypt to add unique drama to this story of forbidden love between an enslaved Ethiopian princess and an Egyptian army commander.

Alternatively, choices include Puccini's *Tosca* (love, loss and murder), Bizet's *Carmen* (seduction and scandal), or the world's most popular opera, *La Traviata* (a courtesan finds love, with tragic consequences). ➤

Below: Verona's spellbinding Roman amphitheatre has a capacity of 15,000





With around 400,000 spectators per season, this is a festival that attracts a huge following from countries across the globe, including politicians and senior figures in the arts, sports and music, especially at the premiere on 21 June.

If you love history, it can seem exciting to choose a stone seat in the amphitheatre itself, but be warned: they are rather uncomfortable! Instead, the best tickets are for upholstered chairs in the level area in front of the stage, with the most luxurious priced at over €200 (US\$225). Here the dress code is classy – black ties and evening dresses will not look out of place, although more relaxed attire is acceptable in other areas. It's worth bringing a light jacket, even on very warm nights because the air often gets somewhat chilly by the end of the performance. If you're not sure

Top: Verona's Roman amphitheatre opens its doors to more than 400,000 people throughout the festival **Above: Plácido Domingo at the festival in 2014** **Right: Tosca, Carmen and La Traviata will be performed again in 2019**



of your summer itinerary, buy an open ticket as it means you can choose a performance and date when convenient. It also makes for a wonderful gift. Verona itself is

one of the world's most romantic cities, not least because it is the location of the story of Romeo and Juliet. It's possible to visit Juliet's balcony in a villa on the



Via Capello or see the house believed to belong to Romeo's family on Via Arche Scaligere. Other notable historic sites include the Piazza delle Erbe (originally the Roman forum) or the medieval castle Castelvécchio, but there's also a lot of charm in simply wandering the many old streets, home to a host of eclectic shops, including those of many Italian fashion designers.

Most performances start after 8.45pm, so there's ample time in the early evening to do like the Italians and take part in passeggiata, a gentle stroll through the city centre – very much a time to see and be seen.

If you've bought new purchases, now is the moment to show them off, while the many charming pavement cafes and bars provide the perfect place for a glass of wine or a cocktail while watching the rest of the world go by. *Verona is accessible from many airports, with Verona Boscomantico the closest at only eight kilometres outside the city. To book tickets for the Verona Opera Festival, visit: arena.it/arena/en* ■