

House&Home

Villa Foscari; the main floor with frescoes by Michelangelo's Roman school and a sculpture by Zaha Hadid, photographed by Matteo de Mayda for the FT
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A vision of la dolce vita

Guided tour | Take a look inside a Venetian villa and beau-monde destination whose fragile beauty is threatened by rising tides. By *Rachel Sanderson*

Beside a bend in a waterway, flowing across the marshy flatlands outside Venice, sits a villa that British art historian Kenneth Clark called "the most beautiful home in the world".

Dating from 1555 and designed by Andrea Palladio for descendants of Francesco Foscari, the Venetian Republic's most fearsome doge, Villa Foscari, or La Malcontenta, rises ghostly white across the lowlands, a perfectly proportioned cube. At night it is illuminated by 250 candles.

"We are the second biggest client of Venice's oldest candlemaker after St Mark's Basilica," says Ferigo Foscari, 46, scion of the 1,000-year old dynasty.



Ferigo Foscari, villa owner

Such high romance seems fitting for a home that has formed a backdrop for appointments with history. The villa played host to Henry II on his journey from Poland to become king of France. Literary experts have suggested it was Shakespeare's inspiration for Belmont, the home of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. Later, Cole Porter, Cecil Beaton, Le Corbusier and the beau-monde beauty Catherine D'Erlanger were visitors. Photos from its archives show Marcello Mastroianni, the actor of Italy's *La Dolce Vita* cinematographic heyday, lying catlike on its staircase. Sir Winston Churchill stayed here in the 1920s and Peggy Guggenheim tried – and failed – to buy it in the 1960s.



Interiors in this image have been curated by the John Lewis & Partners Home Stylist team

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The perfectly proportioned spaces of Villa Foscari (Andrea Palladio, 1555)

Today the villa has another story to tell. At a time of climate change, a visit to La Malcontenta is not only a journey deep into Europe's history – it is also a glimpse into its fragile future.

"Scientists in reconstructions have suggested that this could one day be underwater too," says its current owner, Ferigo, on a tour of the villa shortly before Italy was locked down in mid-February in response to the coronavirus outbreak, and as high tides threatened the city and its hinterlands.

The pandemic has lent a greater urgency to the question of the sustainability of Venice, Ferigo says in a follow-up telephone call. Last weekend, he opened the villa to visitors again for the first time in five months.

Lockdown has turned Venice's waterways azure as cruise ships stay away, but the hit to the city's economy has been devastating. Yet Ferigo, a lawyer who lives in the lagoon city with his wife and children, says signs of life are returning. "It's good news," he says.

The villa's name stems from its wateriness: the Italian *malcontenta* is a reference to the nearby Brenta river being liable to burst its banks and flood. Later apocryphal embellishments suggested it was also a reference to Elisabetta Foscari, a supposedly unhappy wife who was imprisoned in the villa, having failed in her conjugal duty.

Inside the entrance sits the bust of Francesco Foscari, doge for 34 years until his death in 1457. He inspired Lord Byron's tragedy *The Two Foscari* and, in turn, Verdi's opera *I due Foscari*. The bust is a copy of the monument to Foscari at the entrance of the Doge's Palace; the original did not survive Napoleon's invasion of the city in 1797.

"The first thing Napoleon did when he took Venice was to destroy the symbols of the republic, including having the head cut off the statue of Francesco Foscari," says Ferigo.

Palladio built the house 100 years after the doge's death. "Only in a peaceful environment can you conceive of a house that is open on all sides, with no defences. That is why the culture of

Venetian villas is a specific one, born of an environment of peace," says Ferigo.

In fact, it is two homes, as Palladio built two apartments in the perfectly proportioned spaces, with the *piano nobile*, or main floor, linked by a soaring central salon. As Palladio wanted to prove that great architecture could enoble even poor materials, the outside columns are made from brick faced with plaster and the floors are terracotta.

There is no marble because Palladio's first thought, says Ferigo, was to leave the walls unadorned, unlike at the Villa Barbaro, with its frescoes by Paolo Veronese. "Palladio thought with frescoes you lose the perspective of the space," he says. But he gave in.

On the main floor the walls are covered with scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* painted by pupils of Michelangelo's Roman school. In the low light, the colours of the walls change from amber to rose-pink.

With the fall of the Venetian Republic in 1797, the Foscari dynasty was bankrupt and lost ownership of the villa. They did not return to the house for almost two centuries.

In 1924, Albert "Bertie" Clinton Landsberg found La Malcontenta in near ruin, its staircase and chimneys fallen in, while on a Grand Tour trip along the Brenta. Bewitched, he bought it. Thus began the villa's second life as a destination for the inter-war beau monde. Beneath its frescoes, Landsberg and his muse Catherine D'Erlanger threw fabulous parties. Landsberg fled during the second world war but when he returned, so did the parties.

Landsberg passed the house to the English architect Claud Phillimore, 4th Baron of Phillimore. In 1973, Phillimore returned La Malcontenta to Antonio Foscari, Ferigo's father, and they agreed the villa should continue to use little electric lighting and that there should be no structural alterations or changes to its interior.

"My father lived not far from here during the war. It was always the dream of his life to come back and that dream was made possible because Lord Phillimore was extraordinary," Ferigo says.



"There are all good ghosts here," says Ferigo Foscari, who grew up in 'the most beautiful home in the world' — Matteo Magliola/Contrasto



Given the inhabitants, I ask if there are ghosts. "There are all good ghosts here. This is a good, solid house," he says. Ferigo spent his childhood here and recalls how he and his sister would hear their parents, both architects, negotiating with art dealers and museums to try to reclaim bits of frescoes that had been torn from the walls during the years when the villa lay abandoned.

The family ate around a small wooden table in the austere kitchen in the basement. A tiny window gives a ground view of a quiet avenue of plane trees, a landscape unchanged for centuries. On one wall hangs a painting of Henry II.

Ferigo and his family spend weekends at La Malcontenta in the summer. Until the pandemic, it was open to visitors from April until October. He moved with his wife Claudia and two young daughters to Venice from Milan three years ago. The benefits are obvious: the endless beauty, no cars, the return to family roots. But living in the watery city is not all upbeat. Ferigo says one of his daughters woke one morning and said, "I do not want to live in a place that is dying."

He is philosophical. "All Venetians I know dream of returning to live their last days in Venice. It is such a unique place. But the problem is not dying

in Venice, it is living in Venice," he says. "We are in a fragile building here. We try to avoid having mass tourism. We have to keep it carefully, we have to allow about 50 people in the house at a time."

Venice, too, should limit the number of visitors to the city at any one time, he says. "No other place in the world has 50,000 residents and 30m tourists a year."

Floods are the greater challenge. High tides that left much of the city underwater late last year was "a horrible experience". "It is clear it is not going to be a one-off event," he says.

"The waters have been rising over a long period. At a certain point you are going to have to wall off the sea."

The enormity of that task, he says, is bigger than politicians can handle.

"Everyone thinks in terms of their lifespan... There is a real risk of the death of Venice," he says.

Ferigo says Venice should be relaunched as a city for think-tanks and foundations, with tax breaks for those seeking solutions to climate change and rising sea levels, problems

'At a certain point you are going to have to wall off the sea. There is a real risk of the death of Venice'

that affect other sea-facing cities such as New York and Miami.

What about the responsibility of looking after La Malcontenta?

"We have already lost the house once. It is good that things go up and down, it lets you know that you are not indispensable," Ferigo says.

"But I know this house must be here when I am dead or when my children are not here. We are not keeping it for us. We are keeping it for humanity. Venice has to be kept for humanity too."

Tours of Villa Malcontenta for limited numbers can be booked at malcontenta.com/



Bust of the doge Foscari



Ferigo Foscari and his wife Claudia in the grounds of the villa



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