Verona plays host to opera on a grand scale

ANDREW BAIN

The Italian city of Verona is dominated by Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Crowds swarm the courtyard below the balcony of what's purported to be Juliet's house, Romeo's home is nearby, and Juliet's tomb lies inside a city monastery. But in summer, it's not the only classic tale in town.

Running each June through September, the Arena di Verona Opera Festival transforms the city's 2000-year-old Roman amphitheatre into the world's largest opera theatre. It's where Maria Callas debuted in 1947, and where 400,000 people now witness an opera every summer.

Although it stages multiple performances of up to eight operas, the festival's signature work is Aida. The Egyptian epic tale of love and war was the first opera staged at the festival in 1913 (and the only one performed for the first three years), and it has been sung here more than 700 times.

On a furiously hot summer evening I've come to the venue, which remains the nucleus of Verona's old town, for a performance of the signature show. Each night up to 15,000 people stack the stone steps that have served as seating since its inception in AD 30. I've arrived early and found a spot on the uppermost row, the only one with the luxury of a backrest. These are the hard-as-rock seats, so I've invested the best \in 3 (\$5) of my life and hired a cushion at the entrance — three hours of bones on stone demands it.

At 9pm, the clouds are aglow with sunset

<image><text>

as conductor Francesco Ivan Ciampa strides across the stage (at the performance a week later, Placido Domingo will conduct) and the opera begins.

The audience is attired in everything from formal suits and gowns in the first-sector stalls in the Poltronissima (the arena floor, directly in front of the stage) to shorts and bare feet on the stone steps.

Sitting around me are a number of families, and some of the young children are sound asleep by the last act.

Even though the arena is said to be the

world's largest open-air theatre, the performance seems to swell and fill the space, especially during Radames's triumphal march after the battle against the Ethiopians. A cast of hundreds of actors, horses and ballet dancers swarm across the stage, and the steps become part of the set as torch-wielding Egyptian soldiers stand on the highest pews.

Shortly after midnight, the opera concludes to a standing ovation and an endless procession of bows. Immediately outside the arena, Piazza Bra, one of Italy's largest squares, fills with thousands of people. It's Verona's Roman amphitheatre, home of the Opera Festival

IN THE KNOW

The 2020 Arena di Verona Opera Festival runs from June 13 to September 5. Hedonistic Hiking is running a nine-day Austria and Dolomites trip that ends in Verona on July 17; Aida is performed in the arena the following night. arena.it

hedonistichiking.com

like the end of a soccer match without the singing, chanting and scarves.

The experience doesn't end with the nightly curtain. By morning, Piazza Bra is stacked with the stage sets of all the festival's operas so Mark Knopfler can play the arena that night. I stroll among them to the Palazzo della Gran Guardia, a palace that took more than 200 years to construct. On its third floor, running for the duration of the festival, is an exhibition titled Waiting for the Opera, which traverses the event's 106-year history.

Each room is dedicated to a separate opera and its history in Verona. Elaborate costumes are on display, along with a collection of artworks, including the set-design sketches for the original 1913 Aida performance. Information panels also pay homage to past directors of the festival, including the famed Italian film director Franco Zeffirelli.

Andrew Bain was a guest of Hedonistic Hiking.



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