



Bling it on: Italy's gold heart

Carla Caruso checks out historic Vicenza, the centre of Italy's jewellery trade.

I WAS learning fast that it was the little things in life that let you know that you were on the opposite side of the world.

Like, the direction the water gurgled down the sink, how the taps worked and unlocking recalcitrant bathroom doors.

My temporary confines? A tiny, cubicle in an old mansion within the Vicenza Oro fairgrounds, where an international jewellery trade show is held three times a year in Italy's Veneto region.

Giving up on the door lock, I fumbled through my handbag for my mobile phone and tried to call my husband, who had wandered outside to stretch his legs.

Alas, I had forgotten the international dialling code.

What now? Well, what any self-respecting 20-something woman would do in my situation: I banged on the door, desperately called out my husband's name, and finally came bustling and hurtling out the door.

An Italian woman, elegantly draped in a fur, was powdering her nose at the basin as I flew out.

With barely a glance, she muttered into the mirror: "Classico". Foreigners were obviously prone to making fools of themselves in her presence. (And I thought wearing cubic zirconia earrings was embarrassing enough.)

I was impressed with the trade show, despite barely knowing the difference between a carat and the stuff Bugs Bunny enjoys.

Sapphires, emeralds, rubies, beryl, rubellite, peridot and topaz — it was a bling candy store.



Jewellery madly deeply: Models at the Vicenza trade fair; top, the beautiful streets of Vicenza, such as Corso Palladio, are encrusted with major fashion labels; left, a mime artist lures visitors to a jewellery stand at the fair

Buyers from all around the world trip in thrice-yearly to see what Italy's gold producers, and beyond, have to offer.

Brand names from Damiani to Pianegonda jostle for attention from the jewellery stands.

However, you don't have to be a visitor to the trade show to comprehend Vicenza's proud status as Italy's centre for gold jewellery production.

Indeed, the Veneto province imports more gold than the

rest of the country put together. Wandering the narrow, cobblestone streets in the historic city centre, the wealth of modern-day Vicentines is evident by the swank shops lining the streets.

All of the major Italian fashion names have stores along the main strip, the Corso Palladio.

And the jewellery stores wink at you from under the arches of the Basilica Palladiana, built by Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio — widely considered the

most influential person in the history of Western architecture. Palladio is yet another of Vicenza's precious gems.

As well as his bigger-than-life Basilica in the main square, the back streets running directly off Corso Palladio are filled with palazzi (or palaces) built by him for the local Vicentine nobility.

His other impressive works include the Villa Rotonda, Teatro Olimpico and Villa Godi. A private walking tour is available to

provide an overview. At the Basilica I chose to dig deep and give in to the urge. A pair of Italian-made, white-gold diamond earrings later and I was on my way.

The next day at the trade show, I visit the mansion's convenience once again. I have mastered the lock. My cubic zirconias, on the other hand, are given the royal flush. After all, when in Vicenza...

www.vicenzaoro.org and follow the links to English site.