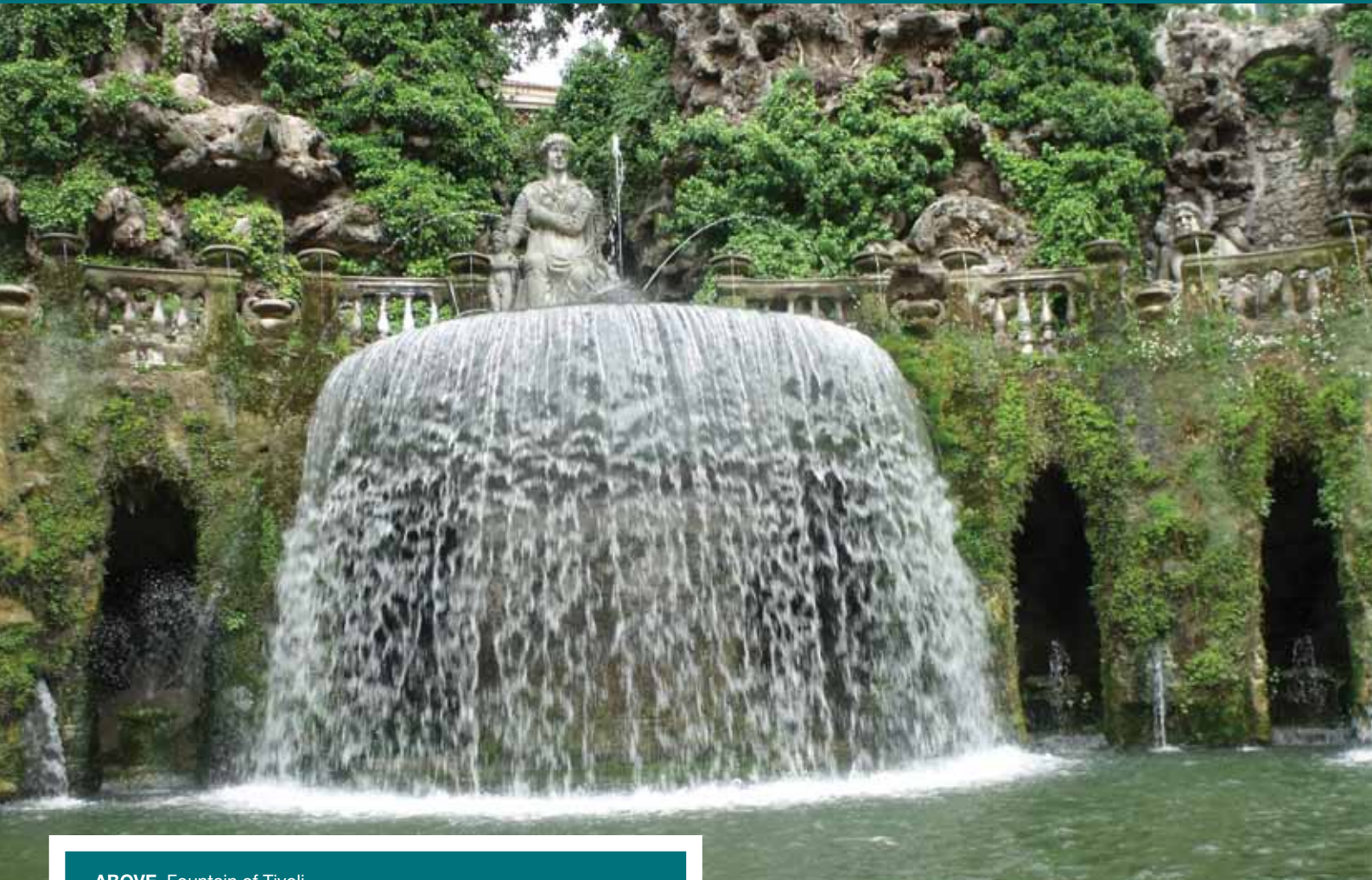


VILLA D'ESTE AT TIVOLI

STORY AND PICS: SANDHYA SUNIL MAILDM

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ABOVE. Fountain of Tivoli.

BELOW. Fountain of Leda and Tripod looking over the garden and views beyond.



My Italian trip plan began with an idea for an adventure – that I could occupy the same air spaces that Julius Caesar, Michelangelo and Galileo breathed in, and explore the monuments we learned about in school history lessons, the art and architecture studied at the School of Architecture, and the Italian gardens included in horticultural studies at Ryde TAFE. These gardens Rowena McMahon showed us were luscious - the exuberance of Renaissance and Baroque made me long to visit them. The gardens of Italy are the precursors to so many later date gardens and have been a source of great inspiration to landscape architects and designers.

GARDENS OF HIGH RENAISSANCE

From the mid 16th century came the construction of magnificent gardens by wealthy families and individuals that followed the principles of Alberti and Bramante. They were usually sited on a hilltop or the slopes of a mountain. They had a series of symmetrical terraces, along a central axis with the house overlooking the garden and landscape beyond, with the house in turn visible from the bottom of the garden.

Statues recalled the grandeur of Ancient Rome, while developments in hydrology meant that the gardens were equipped with increasingly elaborate and majestic cascades and fountains.

I settled on three gardens to visit: two were at Tivoli, 34 km east of Rome, and the third in Settignano outside Florence. Here I will take you on tour through one of the Tivoli gardens, Villa d'Este.

Villa d'Este [Inscribed as UNESCO world heritage in 2001]

Villa d'Este is easily reached from Rome by train and bus. First stop is the villa itself with lovely frescoes, but I was here to see the garden. Walking out onto the terrace I took the advice of Monty Don in his Great Gardens of Italy series. Don't look left nor right but head straight to the bottom of the garden to explore it as it was meant to - by the old road from Rome.

The Villa d'Este was commissioned by Cardinal Ippolito d'Este. Pirro Ligorio worked for seventeen years designing the garden in the 1550s. The villa's gardens are not visited for the plantings - one goes to be awed by the splendour of the fountains. The glory of the Villa d'Este was the system of fountains, fed by two aqueducts that Ligorio constructed from the River Aniene. This is a garden for water, by water and of water. There are about 50 fountains and the symphony between stone and water is phenomenal. Water is manipulated in myriad ways- gargoyles, spouts, channels, ponds, fountains, grottos. I was left wondering whether water was manipulated or was it the other way round?

The steepness of the terrain meant enormous earth-moving works were undertaken in order to create alternating terraces and slopes. The garden stretches over two steep slopes, and is divided by a central axis known as The Avenue of Perspectives, in line with the loggia of the villa at one end and the Rotunda of the Cypresses



TOP RIGHT. Avenue of Perspectives.
CENTRE RIGHT. Water thundering through the Peschiere.
BOTTOM RIGHT. The Fountain of Dragons.



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at the other. This is traversed by five main transversal axes, each terminating in one of the main fountains of the garden. The journey begins very fittingly with the fountain of Diana of Ephesus the pre-Hellenic Goddess of Fertility.

The first of the transverse axes, along the flat part of the garden, is the Peschiere comprising three large fish ponds. East of these is the Fontana dell' Organ (Fountain of the Organ). This is where all the action is – it's the biggest and most impressive of all the fountains. Water is channeled using natural pressure (this is at the topmost part of the terrace) and is forced through pipes to produce wondrous music every two hours. Water gushes, roars and thunders down to the level of the fish ponds.

Climbing up the central axis is the Fontana dei Draghi (Fountain of the Dragons) where four winged dragons lean back while water cascades over them. Going round this fountain are curved stairs with the balustrade a gurgling channel, like a slippery silvery rope.

The next terrace up has is the piece de resistance of the garden - The Cento Fontane (One Hundred Fountains). By far the most exquisite gesture of the garden, the water runs for 130m connecting the Fountain of Tivoli to the Fountain of Rometta. It comprises three tiers - the top tier spouting small jets of water to the middle tier; the middle spurting water to the gargoyles of the third tier and the gargoyles disgorging water to a waist high trough. This fountain is reported to have taken five years to construct.

The second tier is carved with now blurred and ivy-covered scenes from Ovid's Metamorphoses. There are symbolisms, covert and overt, in all the fountains. For example, the Rometta is supposed to represent Rome in miniature; thus signifying the power of the papacy here in Tivoli.

Finally sated, I arrived at the loggia with wisteria covered pergolas affording stunning views of the Roman countryside, with perfectly manicured box-hedged parterres on the other side. Back at the villa, I turn to see the garden laid out over the brow of the Fountain of Leda and Tripod. The great Gianlorenzo Bernini is supposed to have worked on the design of this fountain. **LD**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT. The wisteria draped loggia; Perfectly manicured box-hedged parterres; Fountain of Rometta; One Hundred Fountains – spanning 130m connecting the Fountain of Tivoli to the Fountain of Rometta.