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VALEGGIO SUL MINCIO: A SCALIGERI FORTRESS, A FAIRY TALE RIVERSIDE VILLAGE AND ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PARKS IN EUROPE

Crossed by the Mincio River and located about 25 km southwest of Verona, Valeggio sul Mincio dates back to the Lombard period and despite its small size, there are at least 3 good reasons why you should pay a visit: a 13th-14th century castle, a picturesque riverside village and a gorgeous "parco-giardino" which was awarded the second prize for the most beautiful European garden in

2015.

Nestled in the **Mincio Valley**, about halfway between Lake Garda and **Mantua**, **Valeggio sul Mincio** can definitely be called a border village: gently crossed by a Lombard river, it is the last outpost of **Veneto** before you hit Lombardy and unavoidably represents a bridge between two regions, a confluence of two distinct cultures. The first thing that hits your eye when you get to Valeggio sul Mincio is the imposing **Scaligeri Fortress**, which was once incorporated into the massive fortification complex known as **Serraglio** and looms over Valeggio on one side and **Borghetto** to the other. Built between the 13th and the 14th century, the function of this castle was to control the "Borghetto ford", which provided the safest possible passage to travellers across the **Mincio River**, a natural barrier between Mantua and Verona. The tiny village of Borghetto – as picturesque as picturesque can be – was established in the Middle Ages close to this extremely important strategic point and, through the centuries, witnessed the passage of millions of **pilgrims** travelling to Jerusalem and Santiago de Compostela, the **Knights Templar**, the **Scaligeri**, the **Visconti**, the **Gonzaga**, the **Most Serene Republic of Venice**, the **French** and the **Austrian army**.

A Fairy Tale Riverside Village

Regarded as one of the most beautiful villages in Italy, **Borghetto** (meaning "*fortified settlement*") is a tiny hamlet of Valeggio sul Mincio consisting essentially of three old mills and a handful of houses that seem to spring from the Mincio River. Located within walking distance of the Scaliger Castle, as you stroll around this village you will feel as though you have stepped into a time machine and emerged right in the Middle Ages. As already mentioned above, Borghetto was one of the few fords across the Mincio; for this reason, it became a major bone of contention between powerful families and belligerent armies. The *Ponte Visconteo* – a fortified bridge, checkpoint and dam constructed by **Gian Galeazzo Visconti** in 1393 and once connected to the Scaligeri Fortress by two crenellated curtain walls – was erected to protect the eastern borders of the **Duchy of Milan** and today, with its 650 meters of length, is the iconic centrepiece of the village. Borghetto fell to the Venetians in 1405 and gradually lost its strategic role, becoming a **flourishing agricultural and grain milling centre** as well as a **silkworm trading market**. The charming water mills – now used as guest houses offering accommodation on a bed and breakfast basis – are the perfect place to spend the night after a delicious, romantic dinner by the river, often shrouded in fog. Last but not least, every third Tuesday in June, a super long table is set up on the *Ponte Visconteo* and more than 4.000 guests delight in the taste of the **"love knots"** or *Tortellini di Valeggio* on the occasion of the *Festa del Nodo d'Amore*.

Sigurtà Garden Park

The history of the **Parco Giardino Sigurtà** dates back to 1407, when **Gerolamo Nicolò Contarini** purchased the whole property, which was then used for agricultural purposes.

Originally a "*wooded knoll encircled by walls*", the estate also included a smallish garden adjacent to the main house. In 1436, the **Guarienti family** bought the estate and decided to sacrifice some of the agricultural potential of the land to increase the area dedicated to the garden; in 1626, the whole of

the property passed to the **Maffei family** who built a stately home and obtained the right to draw water from the Mincio River for irrigation purposes: towards the beginning of the 19th century the garden was enlarged and turned into a romantic English garden. In 1836, the **Nuvoloni family** took possession of the property and in 1859 – during the **Battle of Solferino** and **San Martino** – **Franz Joseph I of Austria** and **Napoleon III of France** stayed at the Villa. In 1902, the garden fell into a state of visible decay and some twenty years later, it was sold to the wife of the local doctor. It was **Giuseppe Carlo Sigurtà** who purchased the land in 1941 and began the great work of redeveloping and restoring the garden. After discovering by chance that he had the right to draw water from the Mincio (something long forgotten by his predecessors), he began re-irrigating the land, bringing the trees and the bushes back to verdant life. Thanks to the love and devotion of Giuseppe and his grandson **Enzo**, the historical 19th century garden of the Maffei family was returned to its original splendor and from its original 22 hectares, it was increased to its present size of 60 hectares.

The Sigurtà Garden Park opened to the public in 1978, Enzo's children – **Magda** and **Joseph** – continue to preserve this little piece of heaven on earth, which unsurprisingly won the first prize for the **Most Beautiful Park in Italy** in 2013 and the second prize for the **Most Beautiful Garden in Europe** in 2015. Regarded as an ecological oasis for its botanical variety, it boasts **one million tulips**, an avenue of **more than 30.000 rose bushes**, a labyrinth of **1.500 yew trees**, a **medicinal herb garden** and a **400-year-old oak tree**. Other amazing points of interest include the **Romeo and Juliet Horizontal Sundial**, a Neo-Gothic temple known as **Laura's Hermitage**, the **Castelletto**, the **Votive Grotto** and the **Children's Farm**. At the end of the **Avenue of the Roses** – outside the park walls – stands the fabulous Scaligeri Fortress which is mirrored in the **Water Gardens** (as beautiful as the paintings of the Impressionist painters); in the middle of the **Great Lawn** are the **Flowering Ponds** surrounded by a multitude of flowers and plants and home to some lively Koi carps, water lilies and swamp hibiscus.

The Sigurtà Garden Park is open daily from March to November; view the official website for further information.