

# Spring in Sunny Italy & Summer in the Sunny Okanagan

Story & Photos by Christine Pilgrim

Who's heard of the Ninfa Gardens or its neighbour, Sermoneta? Prince Charles, for one! He took his young bride, Diana, there on honeymoon. Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother was another regular guest.

We lesser mortals are only allowed to wander through Ninfa's ancient ruins, festooned with florabundance, the first weekend and third Sunday of each month between April and October.

**But it's worth the wait!** It's worth flying to Rome in April when the Okanagan still hasn't quite stepped into spring. And it's worth taking a day or two to explore Rome's spectacular fountains, piazzas, monuments and churches before setting off to Ninfa, Sermoneta and Fondi in the Lazio Region, 80 kilometers to the south.

If you're a history buff, take time to visit the Palazzos Caetani and Colonna as well. Both families had strong historic ties to the Lazio Region.

The road south includes parts of the ancient Appian Way, while the longer coastal route offers pretty beaches, virtually deserted at that time of year. Bear in mind that Italian racing drivers aren't top of their league for nothing. It's worth practising a few choice phrases in the language, in case getting out of their way becomes a problem!

A more relaxing and cheaper alternative is to take the train to Latina Scalo, hire a cab or bicycle or even a car and ride, push or speed up the mountainside to the Medieval cobbled streets of Sermoneta.

This entire area was once owned and governed by the Caetani Family.

That same Caetani Family, in the person of Leone Caetani, Duke of Sermoneta, who inherited the enormous Caetani estate, settled in Vernon in the 1920s. When his only daughter, renowned artist Sveva Caetani, died in 1994, she left the family house and gardens to the City of Vernon. They have since

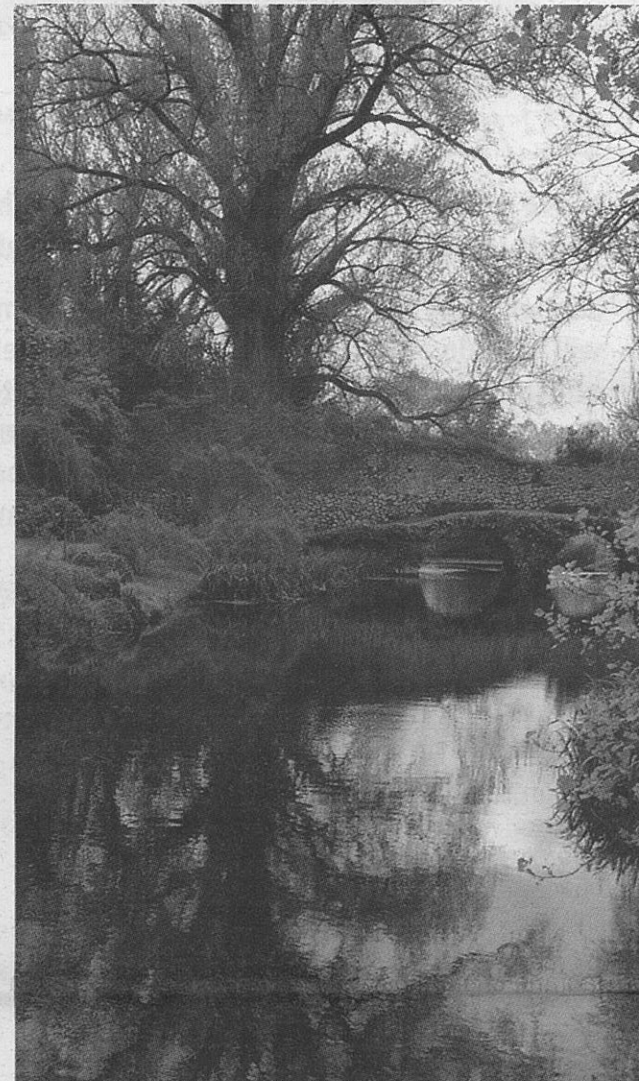
been transformed to accommodate studios and apartments for artists of various disciplines and now boast the title, the Caetani Cultural Centre (See side bar for details of summer events and website).

The Vernon gardens reflect those in Ninfa - with a Canadian flavour. Ninfa's gardens are in the English Picturesque style, emanating an almost haphazard

cont'd on pg 19



# Home



Left, Caetani Cardens, Vernon. Above: Ninfa Gardens, Italy. Below: Christine Pilgrim at Ninfa. Opposite page: Ruins of Medieval City of Ninfa, transformed to spectacular gardens by three of the Caetani women.



# and Away

quality. Trees, vines, roses and shrubs ramble the ruins of what was once a thriving Roman city. There's an air of spirituality, so often linked with nature. The Vernon gardens' slightly more formal layout uses local rocks to provide a background for more recently planted roses, trees, annuals and shrubs.

In Sermoneta, the Medieval city adjacent to Ninfa, tours of the still intact Caetani Castle offer spectacular views of the Pontine Plains from its ramparts. Inside, elaborate frescoes and furniture, portraits, busts, and the Caetani Coat of Arms are displayed. A faded-brocade-draped, four-poster bed might make a comfy couch for the ghosts that must haunt the vaulted rooms and corridors. Vernon's Caetani House is also said to be haunted.

In typical Italian style, the guide of Sermoneta's castle refuses to budge for fewer than three or four visitors, so if travelling alone, consider inviting a couple of strangers to 'join your party!'

Emerging from the castle, via the drawbridge, complete with portcullis - which hasn't actually dropped for centuries but is a gruesome reminder of barbaric security systems used in times past - you'll step into streets just wide enough to accommodate one Smart Car or equivalent. Each corner reveals a restaurant, church, bakery or gift shop. There's even a small monument to Mussolini, still respected by many locals for his reclamation of this swampland region, before he joined forces with Hitler. Leone Caetani was not among Mussolini's admirers - one of the reasons he emigrated to Canada.

His powerful family, dating back to the 13th Century,

had already reclaimed much of the land before Mussolini took over.

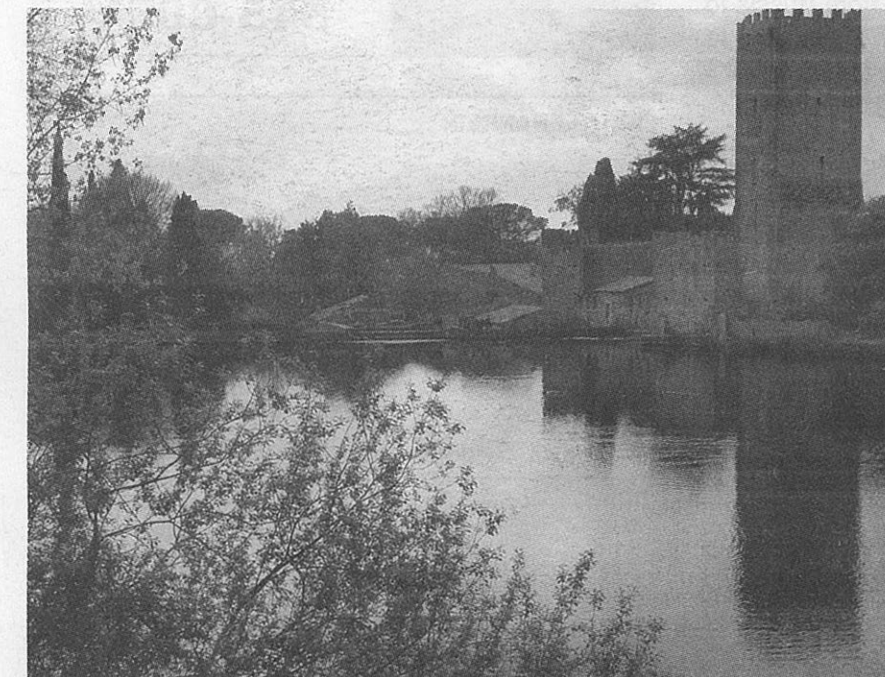
Sermoneta's romantic setting attracts artists and dreamers, and the altitude and wind conditions provide perfect launching for hang gliders. Oranges deck the trees, and flowers abound.

Explicit graffiti directions to the men's public washroom remind the visitor that Italy is the home of graffiti. Translated from the Italian, the word means "to scratch." Prisoners of the Roman Empire used to scratch their names and case histories on the walls of the catacombs beneath the city and somehow the habit stuck!

Having digested local history: it's time to visit the famous Ninfa Gardens!

They were created by Leone Caetani's mother, Ada, an Englishwoman, in the early 1900s. The town of Ninfa had lain in ruins after it had been sacked by the Borgias (Remember Lucrezia?), beset by malaria, and suffered at the hands of various marauders. Ada's work was continued by her American daughter-in-law, Margaritte, and then her grand daughter, Lelia. They're now managed by the Caetani Foundation and the World Wildlife Fund, under the dedicated eye of Lauro Marchetti. Everything is grown organically, abundantly and fastidiously. And it shows.

Only guided tours are available to the general public and they're usually conducted in Italian. But language hardly matters in the midst of such beauty. Every ruined castle wall, stream, waterfall, blossom-laden tree offers a perfect photo opportunity.



But don't take my word for it. Check it out for yourself, or visit the gardens at the Caetani Cultural Centre in Vernon. "Gossip in the Garden" theatrical tours and discourses are offered every Wednesday, Thursday and Friday at 7pm throughout August. Entrance by donation at the gate: 3401 Pleasant Valley Road.

Summer events at the Caetani Cultural Centre include Midsummer Eve of the Arts, a jazz picnic, garden art fair, children's craft workshops and theatrical garden tours and discourses. School programs will be offered in September. Check [www.caetaniculturalcentre.org](http://www.caetaniculturalcentre.org) for more information.