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Papal Pleasures at the Grand Hotel Majestic in Bologna, Italy

BY MIKE DUNPHY ON NOVEMBER 24, 2016

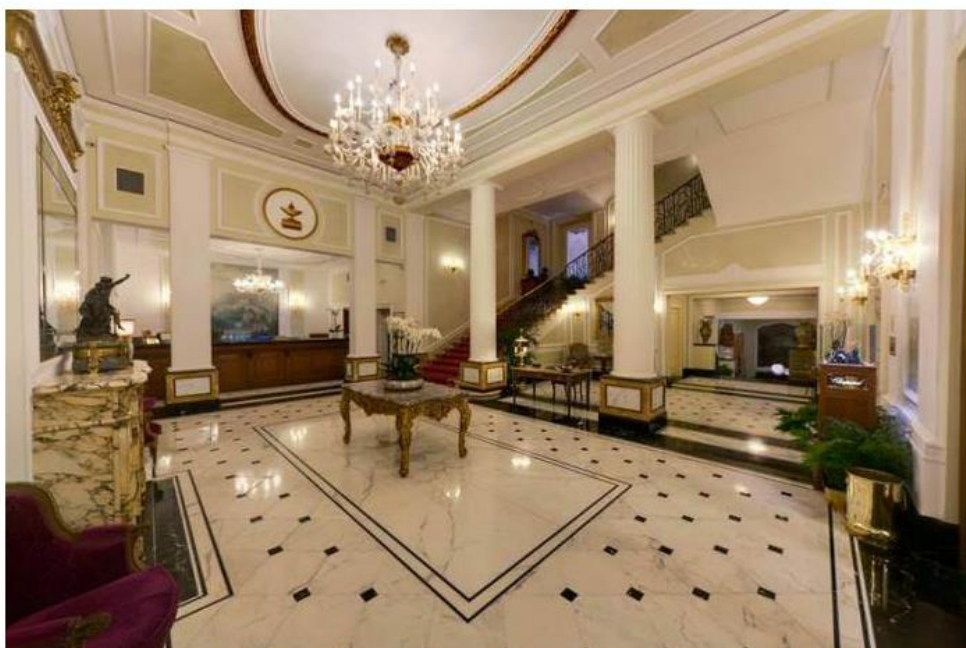


La dotta, la rossa, la grassa—the learned, the red, the fat—Bologna's nicknames say much about the pleasures of the city. Equally revealing, however, is that nothing is noted for the rich and famous. Indeed, compared to Milan, Venice, and Rome, the star power of Bologna amounts to little more than a flicker, which partly accounts for the lack of luxurious properties of royal virtue, or at least Hollywood celebrity. The one exception is the [Grand Hotel Majestic già Baglioni](#).

Throughout 104 years of operation, the hotel's elegant but demure front doors along Via dell'Indipendenza (blink and you'll miss them) have swung open for Clark Gable, Ava Gardner, Frank Sinatra, the Dalai Lama, Princess Diana, Paul McCartney, and Jennifer Lopez, (who reportedly booked a second room just for her shoes). This October, they parted—with a muffled snicker—for me.



Although Bologna is filled with palazzos, few can claim the pedigree of the Hotel Majestic, originally commissioned as a seminary in the early 1700s by Cardinal Prospero Lambertini, the future Pope Benedict XIV. Clearly not pursuing the mendicant ideals of St. Francis, the seminary incorporated parts of three existing aristocratic manors into the fabric, particularly rich 16th-century frescoes attributed to the Carracci brothers, now visible inside the Camerino d'Europa meeting room and the hotel's restaurant.



To the right the reception desk straight ahead, a red-carpeted, double-wide grand staircase elegantly rises and turns, disappearing to the upper floors. In the space below, an even wider passageway steps down to the equally marble, but heavily amber, [Cafè Marinetti](#).



The designers who fashioned the space into a luxury hotel in the early 1900s undoubtedly felt the same. It starts in the creamy white and ebony black marble-coated lobby spruced further with Baroque furniture, Murano chandeliers, pillars, pilaster-framed wall panels painted with romantic landscapes, bronze figurines, and the odd fern.



A few steps more, and you'll reach the Majestic's dining centerpiece, the Three-Fork Michelin rated **I Carracci**, named after the brothers responsible for 16th-century frescoes of mythical scenes in the ceiling above. A classical philosophy also informs the menu. Don't expect any radical departures from the traditional regional dishes, just exquisite versions of them like Buffalo ricotta cheese tortelloni, Sea bass fillet with crunchy fennel salad, and sautéed veal kidney. If there's any criticism to level here, it's in the quantity and richness, which, soaked in wine, makes for a difficult night of sleep.



Afterwards, if you can carry your overstuffed belly beyond the walls of the hotel, burn off as much as possible on a late night walk a few blocks south through the Piazza Maggiore and "quadrilatero," which buzzes with activity much of the night, particularly on weekends.



Option two is get up early and head to the **small but high quality gym** (you may need to ask directions as it's a bit tucked away) for a spin on the handful of cardio machines. A more passive and pleasant approach is to sweat it out in the wet and dry saunas. Just make sure to call ahead of time to get them turned on.



More likely, however, you'll merely crawl up to your **room or suite** and lie on the bed like a beached whale. The good news is that it's a supremely comfortable one with equally comforting surroundings. Like most of the rooms, 401, a junior suite (starting at \$930 a night), looks like a cross between a jewelry box and a the dollhouse of an heiress, with brocade silk walls, Murano chandeliers, baroque wood furniture, a crosshatched parquet, heavy sweeping curtains, a crown-tipped bed actually fit for a king (or a JLo). It's an exceptionally lush landscape, which admittedly could turn off anyone seeking a more minimalist, modern sensibility or a sense of luxury.



The ace card of the room is the long attached balcony looking down onto the boulevard below and across the street to the handsome terracotta-colored façade of the 18th-century Cattedrale Metropolitana di San Pietro and similarly shaded roofs beyond. Retractable awnings make the balcony usable rain or shine, and the Wi-Fi is strong enough to use out there, making for an excellent outdoor office in the heart of the city.



In fact, the balcony is the only place in the hotel I also really wish I had scheduled more time for. As comfortable, convenient, and luxurious the rest of the hotel is, the delights of Bologna will keep you away from them most of the day, raising the question of whether it's worth it to sink that kind of cash into a room you'll most likely spend little time in, at least if budgets are a concern. Certainly it's worth it for the less expensive rooms (starting at \$295 per night). Whatever you choose, though, the Grand Majestic works hard to make the investment worth it and succeeds in all aspects.

See more information [at the hotel website](#) and book online at [Hotels.com](#) or [Expedia](#).

Mike Dunphy stayed as a guest of the The Grand Hotel Majestic "già Baglioni"

Lobby photo by The Grand Hotel Majestic "già Baglioni". All other photos by Mike Dunphy

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