



My Kind of Place: Bologna

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Why Bologna?

Rome has the ancient history, Venice the canals and Florence the set-piece buildings. But step outside the traditional triangle and Bologna is surely the most beautiful Italian city as a coherent whole. The streets jumble incoherently in a mess inherited from medieval times, throwing up towers, redbrick palaces and elegant churches that are ablaze with frescoes once you stick your head inside.

The signature feature is the porticoes, the ubiquitous multiple-arched semi-arcades that line the city's streets. There are 45 kilometres of them if stacked end to end and at no point are they less than heart-winningly gorgeous.

Bologna doesn't just look good, though – it tastes and feels good. Gluttony is practically obligatory in the city that even other Italians recognise as the home of the country's richest, tastiest food. And without the tourist swarms of better known cities, the feisty, demonstrative, anti-authoritarian character of the local population shines through.

A comfortable bed

The Metropolitan (hotelmetropolitan.com; 0039 051 229 393) offers the best value in town. On a buzzy little side street, it goes for an arrestingly minimalist, all-white colour scheme. Doubles from €78 (Dh396).

If splashing out, the Grand Hotel Majestic (grandhotelmajestic.duetorrihotels.com; 0039 051 225 445) combines a sense of glitz with a rich history – curvy furniture, high ceilings plus lots of gorgeously peaceful hidey-holes and terraces make it Bologna's top dog. Doubles from €261 (Dh1,325).

Ask for one of the rooms with balconies at the Corona d'Oro (www.hco.it; 0039 051 745 7611), which has been a hotel since 1890 and has neatly integrated modern technology with heritage looks. Doubles from €155 (Dh787).

Find your feet

The two main squares, Piazza Nettuno and Piazza Maggiore, form the city's focal point, surrounded by imposing brick palace

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and the humungous Basilica of San Petronio. From there, weave through the maze of small streets and diet-wrecking food shops towards the Due Torri – two towers that symbolise the city. The leaning Torre Garisenda is closed to visitors, but it's worth hiking up the 498 wooden steps to the top of the 98-metre Torre degli Asinelli for imperious city views.

From there, head north-east into the university district, making a beeline for the Palazzo Poggi (www.museopalazzopoggi.unibo.it; 0039 051 209 9610), which houses the oldest university in Europe's fabulously weird museum collections. If you've ever wanted to see anatomical waxworks of flayed men and hundreds of ceramic wombs and brilliant 16th-century frescoes, this is your chance.

Meet the locals

On weekends, the whole city seems to come out to strut around aimlessly while street musicians attempt to pull off popular cover versions of songs with varying degrees of success. There's a remarkable – and hugely enjoyable – energy to the 48-hour communal milling around.

Book a table

Start the diet when you get home – this is a city in which to totally give in to gluttony. Standards are high across the board in traditional-looking pizzerias and trattorias, especially on pasta dishes, with the tortellini being the local speciality.

Pappagallo (www.alpappagallo.it; 0039 051 232 807) is an upmarket favourite under a gorgeous vaulted ceiling. Its €48 (Dh244) beef chateaubriand for two is especially notable.

The celebrity chef Cesare Marretti's boisterous E' Cucina Leopardi (www.cesaremarretti.com; 0039 051 275 0069) offers something different – herbs are grown in jars inside, paint-dipped hand-marks add childlike urban sass to the windows and guests sign their names on the walls. The €10 (Dh51) three-course meals are a steal, but the deal is that the chef chooses what you're eating.

Shopper's paradise

The main street, Via dell'Indipendenza, is the major shopping strip, with a good combination of international names, such as Zara and Bata, as well as lesser-known Italian designers. It's worth a detour to San Giuseppe, where local craftspeople sell jewellery, ceramics and knitwear from hastily erected market stalls.

Strada Maggiore has some fun options. Fabrica Features at 7/E offers giftware such as Subbuteo salt-and-pepper shakers and wall maps on which you can scratch off where you've been, while the chasm-like Corte Isolani complex contains numerous cafes and indie fashion stores.

What to avoid

To the rest of the world, spaghetti Bolognese may be Bologna's supposed signature dish, but if you see it on the menu of an otherwise promising-looking restaurant, run away as fast as you can – it's squarely aimed at undiscerning tourists.

Here, it's tagliatelle, not spaghetti, that they use, and the sauce is simply ragu.

Don't miss

Just out of the city itself (take bus 87 to Anzola Emilia), the Gelato Museum (www.gelatomuseum.com; 0039 051 650 5306) is found inside the headquarters of Carpigiani, the world biggest manufacturer of gelato-making machines. The museum traces 14,000 years of cold snacks, from primitive chilled drinks in Ancient Greece to flavoursome samples that you can plough through in the shop.

There's also an on-site "lab", where visitors can learn how to make their own sorbets and gelati and gain insights into the right proportions of sugar, fruit and water. Workshops cost from €20 (Dh102).

Getting there

Etihad (www.etihad.com; 02 599 0000) flies direct from Abu Dhabi to Milan, with returns costing from Dh3,935 including tax. Trains from Milan to Bologna take just over an hour. See www.trenitalia.com.

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