

An insider's guide to Bologna: endless arcades of counter-culture

From clumsy policemen to secondhand boutiques, open air cinema to radical novelists, Bologna is far more than Italy's capital of gastronomy

Francesca Barca

Monday 5 October 2015 12.08 BST

In five words

University, towers, red, tortellini, arches.

Sound of the city

If you're ever in the city centre at 6pm, you may well hear a song by a singer-songwriter originally considered to be the pride of Bologna. Lucio Dalla's music is streamed every day at that time from the apartment in Via D'Azeglio where the singer lived before his death in 2012.

Everyone's tuning into ...

Most people in Bologna listen to Radio Città del Capo. Launched in 1987 it is good for news, music and a smattering of culture. One of their programmes from the last decade, Maps (less to do with geography and more to do with being the word 'spam' backwards), runs from Tuesday to Friday providing a selection of music, live concerts, cultural events and artist interviews.

Best venue?

On Via Mascarella, lies Modo Infoshop, an independent bookstore and publisher specialising in street art and comics. As much a cultural hub as a bookshop, it's open till midnight making it perfect to lounge and browse books. It's even better if you can grab a beer in one of the two bars next door and sit on the crates outside. A well-stocked section of anarchist books and authors is also worth a look.

Who's top of the playlist?

C'mon Tigre is an anonymous collective of musicians who work in and around Bologna. They debuted their mix of electric funk, afrobeat, jazz and the blues with a debut album in October 2014. In February they performed a '9+1 show' in Teatro Polivalente Occupato in Bologna. The show consisted of nine musicians on the stage, with a live painting performance by Croatian illustrator Danijel Žeželj, who shot their last video.

Best local artist

Wu Ming is a collective of writers from Bologna who have written award-winning novels collaboratively. As a 2009 Guardian interview with the band says, Wu Ming "draws a lot of its energy from its roots in Bologna's radical counterculture". The founding concept

was to produce “homeopathic counter-information” to show, among other things, how mainstream media fabricates and manipulates news.

Their most famous novel is *Q*, written when the collective went by the name of footballer Luther Blissett. It is a thriller about the religious wars of 16th century Europe, and has been translated in more than 11 different languages. Today Wu Ming has taken a fresh direction and is most known for running *Giap*, a politics and literature blog.

What’s the look on the street?

Bologna’s streets are famous for *umarells* (little old men in English), a term from bolognese dialect that has had new life breathed into it by the young writer and blogger Danilo Masotti. An *umarell* is a retired person who spends their time hanging out on the street, mostly in public yards, shouting their opinions to the workers who are passing by. Their look is largely made up of a shirt, jacket and sandals, often topped off with a hat.

The secondhand tradition is also worth mentioning. From the famous open air market at the Montagnola park, to the many shops and ateliers in the city, Bologna offers different choices for this kind of style. Among them *La Friperie*, co-owned by former stylist Elisa Tagliavini (pictured above), is a place where you can find unique, restored pieces.

Best cultural Instagram

Potentedifuoco is an account by a Bologna-based artist, Ericailcane, who is also known for his human-looking beast creations.

Everyone’s talking about ...

No beer in the street. The left wing mayor Virginio Merola ruled that between 13 July and 15 October 15 all the stores in the university district must close at 9pm. During this period, even when the shops are open, no-one can sell cold beer or other alcohol. Why? To fight the decay of the university zone, which means “no people drinking alcohol in the street”. The idea is that only bars, restaurants and terraces with tables outside can serve alcohol.

What Bologna does better than anywhere else ...

Comics and illustrations from the 70s onwards, thanks to artists like Andrea Pazienza. Bologna is known for its Comics Festival, *BilBOLBul*, while the Academy of Fine Arts offers courses in comics and illustration.

ZOOO is one of the most interesting collectives of illustrators who print their own books in Bologna and who regularly invite other artists to collaborate with them.

Comedy gold

Set in Bologna, *L’ispettore Coliando* is a television series written by Carlo Luccarelli (a Bologna-based thriller writer) and directed by Manetti Bro. Coliandro (played by Giampaolo Morelli) is a police inspector who works “out of the box”. He is clumsy and unconventional, with his aviator sunglasses and leather jacket, though he usually finishes each episode as a winner.

Moment from history

Every year the Cineteca of Bologna organises a film festival in the central square and

2015 was the 29th edition of the open air Sotto le Stelle del Cinema in Piazza Maggiore. It featured a unique selection called Il Cinema Ritrovato dedicated to restored classics, cult films, documentaries and silent films with live scores.

On 2 July, in commemoration of the Armenian Genocide, an original and unpublished documentary about Armenian refugees in 1923 was shown in the square.

Best street art

Blu's gigantic mural is splattered on the walls of Ex Mercato 24 (via Fioravanti 24), a squat behind Bologna central station.

The piece represents a battle between two cities: the first is rich, avid and violent, as represented by the authorities, police and bourgeois; the other represents social movements, which fight for justice and social rights.

Blu and Erica il cane are two of the major artists who consolidated their careers when they burst onto the scene in Bologna in early 2000. While neither of the two were born and bred here, both are adopted sons of the city, living and working here. They have given licence for a whole range of fascinating artists to converge such as Andreco, Bastrardilla from Bolivia, Tellas, Hitness and Dem.

If you are really lucky, things like this can happen on a night in Bologna night ...

From me

Francesca Barca lives between Paris and Emilia-Romagna, having spent years studying and living in Bologna. She loves broccoli, pizza - at any time of the day - and taking pictures. She is the editor in chief of AgoraVox Italia and tweets @at23_23.

Five to Follow

Original Cultures

Crudo

Squadro Edizioni Grafiche

Kinodromo

Anonima Impressori

Topics

Insider's cultural guides

Italy

Bologna holidays

Europe

Europe holidays