

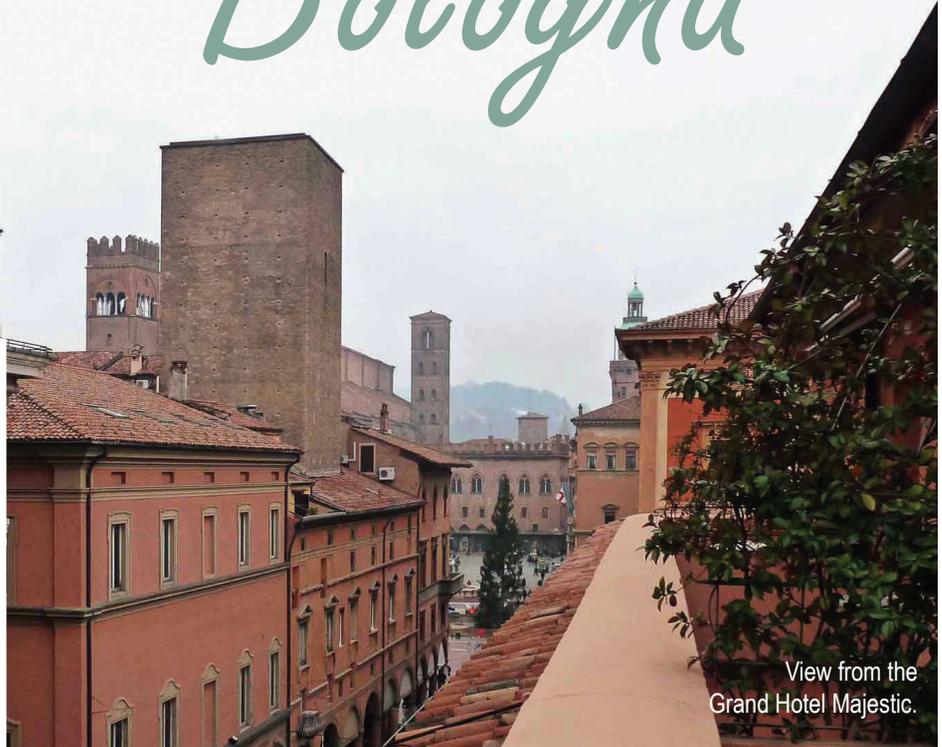


Beneath the Porticoes of *Bologna*



Bologna's porticoes.

Bologna can be very, very cold in the winter months, but we are fortunate this second week in January with a mild yet invigorating chill that is just right for strolling beneath the porticoes of Bologna. Tourists are few but the streets are bustling with both social and commercial activity. The winter sales are in full swing and shop windows are dressed for the occasion, pleasing the eye like a gallery of paintings reflecting life in the 21st century. Everyone seems to be out and about.



View from the Grand Hotel Majestic.

Groups of school children wiggle in formation in front of churches and museums. In the vast piazzas, beneath the covered walkways, and in wine bars everywhere, university students, full of energy and enthusiasm exchange fashion ideas, political views and more importantly their cell phone numbers. Young moms manoeuvre strollers over the cobbles and old friends, now in their senior years, stroll arm in arm, window-shopping, examining the fashion trends of a century still new and somewhat alien to them.

I witness these social exchanges at the same time that I admire the arches and vaulted domes of the porticoes, many adorned with frescoes or intricate gesso work, supported by columns of stone or brick and topped with sculpted capitols of endless designs. The historic centre of Bologna boasts nearly 40 kilometres of porticoes,

many of the earliest ones built in the Middle Ages. With great economic development and increasing population in the cities, porticoes began to characterise the urban architecture of that time. Because Bologna was an extraordinary university city, there was a great demand for housing from the students that came to the city from all over Europe. To answer this need, dwellings for students were made available on the upper floors, while businesses and artisans' workshops were located on the ground floor. With little regulation by the authorities between the 11th and 12th centuries, a great number of porticoes were constructed in public areas, allowing private use of public space, a practice that was widespread throughout many European cities. In an effort to bring this practice under control, further building of this nature was



Piazza Maggiore.

prohibited and some of the existing structures demolished. In Bologna, by a law decree of 1288, porticoes were considered essential for all the streets where they were defined as useful to the public, thus preserving their continued use and protection to this day. Thanks to a law passed nearly a 1,000 years ago, the artisans continued to work in the open air, and the populace then, as now, were able to walk on the street, sheltered from both sun and storm.

The earliest pillars were made of wood, but by 1363, it was prohibited to use wood in their construction and two centuries later, it was ordered that these earlier wooden pillars be replaced or covered with brick. A few examples of the medieval wooden pillars are still preserved. There are also structural porticoes incorporated into the architecture of both gothic and renaissance design and examples of 19th century porticoes featuring the urban architecture of the middle classes.

Overall, the city's architecture is dressed in a pleasing palette of terracotta and burnt orange, soft apricot and autumn squash, adding a feeling of warmth even on frosty winter days. The pavement that has withstood the unceasing pedestrian traffic for centuries is as noteworthy as the rest of the architecture. Made of terrazzo stone, the muted colours of the walkways wear their worn patina with pride.

We are staying at the Grand Hotel Majestic, the oldest and most renowned hotel in Bologna. It has recently celebrated its 100-year anniversary. Its history as a palace dates back



Due Torri.

to 1732 when the Bolognese Cardinal Lambertini ordered the construction of a new Archdiocesan Seminary in front of the Cathedral of San Pietro. The architecture was connected to that of the elegant 15th century Palazzo Fava Ghisilardi. Its location on the important via dell'Indipendenza sets its foundation above the archaeological remains of the ancient Roman road system, part of which has been left exposed in the basement level of the hotel. Perhaps its beginning as a seminary has blessed this building in some special



The Neptune Fountain.

way, as staying here feels very much like a blessing.

The interior is one of sophisticated elegance where ornate fixtures, rich brocades and gilded furnishings are balanced by spacious, airy simplicity. The intimate courtyard extends its garden-like atmosphere by the clever use of some of the finest trompe l'oeil painting I have ever seen. Our room, with balcony, looks out on the façade of the Cathedral of St. Peter and to our right, we have a generous view of towers and rooftops and more importantly, the famous Piazza Maggiore and the Neptune Fountain. Guests are 'gifted' with the hotel's rich artistic heritage in the 15th century frescoed ceilings of the Camerino di Europa executed by the well-known Carracci brothers. Also of note are the grotesque-style paintings that adorn the ceilings of I Carracci Restaurant, attributed to the same school. All of this is part of the 'blessing' when combined with its over-all peaceful atmosphere and flawless service.

There are many reasons to visit Bologna, but without a doubt, one of the biggest attractions is its renowned culinary tradition. Situated in the fertile Po River Valley, Bologna offers a cuisine that is rich, depending heavily on meats and cheeses. The Bolognese take their cuisine so seriously that its

chamber of commerce preserves the recipes of centuries ago. The production of cured pork meats such as prosciutto, mortadella and salami is an important part of the local food industry and to see this for oneself, all that is needed is to stroll through the Mercato delle Erbe behind Piazza Maggiore, where all these tempting meats are displayed and sold. Fresh pasta shops are also plentiful, offering an array of delicately formed tortellini and tagliatelle, the favorite of the handmade pastas of the city. Tortellini, those wonderful little pouches filled with cheese, were invented in Emilia-Romagna, but are known and appreciated all over the world. Tortelloni, their big brother, are stuffed with cheese and sometimes with meat. Of course, you will find all the specialties of the region: Parmigiano cheese and Parma ham from the Parma region and from Modena the incomparable balsamic vinegars aged from 12 to 50 years in wooden casks made from acacia, chestnut, oak, or mulberry woods. That is something to think about the next time this dark, thick syrup is drizzled artistically on your dinner plate!

Mortadella, a cured sausage resembling bologna, has been produced in Bologna for centuries, according to records dating as far back as the 14th century. It is not

to be confused with 'baloney' as it is known in the United States. It is made with pork that has been ground and mashed into a paste. Studded with fat taken from the throat of the pig, and spiced with cracked peppercorns and pistachios, it is cooked for several hours at a low temperature with low humidity. After baking, it must be refrigerated but can keep for up to eight months. It is estimated that 160,000 tons of mortadella are consumed each year in Italy!

So where does one go to sample these specialties? We decide to lunch right where we are – the hotel's renowned restaurant, I Carracci. It would be difficult to single out the most praiseworthy aspect of dining here – the dome of its lovely ceiling, the soft-green brocaded walls with oil paintings and gilded mirrors, the tables set to please and ready diners for a leisurely, flavourful journey at the hands of master Chef Giacomo Galeazzi. Our departure begins with a sformato di parmigiano topped with tiny wild strawberries and aged balsamic vinegar, accompanied by a gem-like white wine from the very local Umberto Cesari vineyards. A plate of thinly sliced culatella ham, arranged like a flower, follows and whets our appetites for the Cucina Bolognese that is about to begin in earnest with none other than tagliatelle al ragù and baked green lasagne alla Bolognese, served in a rivulet of Parmesan sauce. The courses, paired with select wines from the region, continue and we do not let guilt slip into any opening between the chef's specialties. This is food that nourishes the body, but satisfies the soul. One can taste the passion. Did I mention that the city's nickname is 'La Grassa' which means 'the Fat One'? I'm in trouble!

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A typical street in Bologna.

WHERE TO STAY:

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