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October 24, 2009

48 Hours In: Bologna

Culture, history, architecture and fine bolognese fare are high on the agenda in this medieval Italian city. Mary Novakovich picks her way through the porticoes

Click here for 48Hours [http://www.independent.co.uk/multimedia/archive/00254/bologna_48hrs_254689a.pdf]
In...Bologna map

Travel essentials

Why go now?

The bustling capital of Emilia-Romagna is, in common with several other Italian cities, hosting the sixth annual Day of Urban Trekking next Saturday. These guided city hikes are designed to get tourists off the "bite-and-run" treadmill of cramming in the sights quickly; instead, you get into the nooks and crannies of the city you might not otherwise discover.

Bologna's three nicknames - La Dotta (learned), La Rossa (red) and La Grassa (fat) - are apt in this agreeable city of erudite, left-leaning foodies. Next month gives gourmets another excuse to visit: the fifth annual Cioccoshow takes place 18-22 November. Piazza Maggiore (1) - the large central square flanked by handsome and imposing architecture, with cafés spilling out into the open space - will be filled with chocolate artisans offering free tastings.

Touch down

British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com) flies to Bologna three times a day from Gatwick. Ryanair (0871 246 0000; ryanair.com) flies daily from Stansted. Bologna's Guglielmo Marconi airport is 6km north-west of the city centre.

A bus runs to the main railway station (2) every 15 minutes from 7.30am-9.15pm, and less frequently outside those hours. Tickets can be bought on board and cost €5 each way for the 20-minute journey. Taxis cost about €20 each way.

Get your bearings

Bologna overflows with medieval and Renaissance architecture, much of which is within walking distance of the central Piazza Maggiore (1). The most central tourist office is located here (00 39 051 239660; bolognaturismo.info), open daily 9am-7pm, except major public holidays. Because much of the old town is covered by 40km of porticoes exploring is a pleasure in all weathers. It's home to Europe's oldest university (founded in 1088), giving it a buzzing atmosphere and a lively social scene.

Check in

The five-star Grand Hotel Baglioni (3) at Via dell'Indipendenza 8 (00 39 051 225445; baglionihotels.com) offers a piece of Roman history along with luxurious rooms and relaxed atmosphere. Within this 18th-century palazzo near Piazza Maggiore is a section of a Roman road beside the breakfast room. The hotel also offers pasta-making classes

in the atmospheric wine vaults. Doubles from €241 per night including breakfast.

Hotel Touring (4) is tucked away on a side street, Via de' Mattuiani, about 10 minutes' walk south of Piazza Maggiore (00 39 051 584305; hoteltouring.it). As well as its comfortable rooms, the three-star hotel has a rooftop terrace with a Jacuzzi and attractive views of the red-tiled roofs of Bologna. Doubles, including breakfast, from €99 in low season.

In the centre of Bologna's medieval quarter is the Albergo delle Drapperie (5) at Via delle Drapperie 5 (00 39 051 223955; albergodrapperie.com). Rooms are small but charming, many with frescoed ceilings. Doubles start at €75 in low season, with breakfast an extra €5 per person. Prices jump during Bologna's trade fairs. Check the calendar on bolognafiere.it.

Day one

Take a hike

Start in Piazza Maggiore (1). The enormous San Petronio basilica dominates the square, but it vies for attention with the 13th-century Palazzo d'Accursio, which is now the town hall, and a huge fountain with its 16th-century bronze statue of Neptune. Then there are two adjoining medieval palaces, the Palazzo di Re Enzo (6) and Palazzo del Podestà, the latter featuring a whispering gallery under what looks like an arched crossroads in the central arcade. It really works. Stand in one corner and have a friend whisper to you in the diagonally opposite one. Eerie and entertaining at the same time.

The streets off Piazza Maggiore are packed with history, art and great food. The pedestrianised Via d'Azeglio is a pleasing combination of shops and bars, while Via dell'Archiginnasio contains the archaeological museum (7) and the Palazzo dell'Archiginnasio (8) where early dissections were performed in the anatomical theatre within. North of Via Rizzoli is the Jewish Ghetto, an atmospheric warren of narrow streets and medieval arcades. Head east along Via Zamboni to the university district and some of the city's museums. The 16th-century Palazzo Poggi (9) at number 33 (museopalazzopoggi.unibo.it [<http://www.museopalazzopoggi.unibo.it>]; open Monday-Friday, 10am-1pm and 2-4pm; weekends, 10am-1.30pm and 2.30-5.30pm, admission free) is the opulent seat of the university and houses a complex of collections that shows off Bologna's history of scholarship.

Lunch on the run

Stop off at the Ristorante Al Voltone (00 39 051 236743) in the 13th-century surroundings of the Palazzo di Re Enzo (6) in Piazza Re Enzo. There, the impressive displays of cured meats immediately grab your attention, while Bolognese specialities such as tortellini and lasagne (€9) are served under the arches, in warmer months at least.

Window shopping

Immerse yourself in Bologna's food culture by wandering through the Mercato di Mezzo (10), the narrow medieval streets housing tiny shops selling everything from fresh fish to handmade tortellini. Stylish shoppers head to Via Farini (11) where they can browse the designer shops such as Louis Vuitton and Armani under the shelter of the porticoes. Head to Via dell'Indipendenza, the city's main boulevard north of Piazza Maggiore, for more affordable high-street shops.

Take a view

Only two of Bologna's 300-odd medieval towers remain, and the Due Torri (12) loom imposingly - if rather crookedly - over the Piazza di Porta Ravegnana. The Torre degli Asinelli is open 9am-5pm, admission €3, for those who can tackle the narrow wooden stairs that wind their way up 97 metres. Up at the breezy top are far-reaching views of the historic city as well as the surrounding Apennine mountains; it's definitely worth the precipitous climb.

Cultural afternoon

Every Saturday until 31 January 2010, the tourist office is hosting a two-hour free guided tour (in English) of four of Bologna's museums. Starting at 2pm, the tour takes in the city's medieval, archaeological, and art and Morandi museums - though it's as much of a walk around the centre as it is a look inside these institutions.

Suitably, for such a student city, one of Bologna's finest museums is in the heart of the university district. The Pinacoteca Nazionale (13) in Via Belle Arti (00 39 051 4209411; pinacotecabologna.it [<http://www.pinacotecabologna.it>]; open 9am-7pm daily except Monday, admission €4), holds paintings originally taken by Napoleon and returned after the emperor's fall, including works by Giotto, Raphael, Vasari and Vitale da Bologna.

An aperitif

Nowadays you can expect much more than crisps and nuts with your aperitivo. Many bars offer a full-blown buffet of finger food between 5pm and 8pm. The Caffè Zanarini (14) in Piazza Galvani is one of the city's more sophisticated haunts and has lots of tasty free food to go with the rather expensive drinks.

For those who don't want to spend €9 on a glass of prosecco, Tony's Bar (15) in Via d'Azeglio is a cheaper option: drinks are at least half the price compared to Zanarini's and the "nibbles" are substantial enough for an evening meal.

Dine with the locals

It's hard to eat badly in Bologna, home of tortelloni, tortellini and lasagne - but not spaghetti bolognese. The classic ragù sauce is served with tagliatelle. Ristorante Biagi (16) on Via Savenella (00 30 051 4070049) has been serving up plates of tagliatelle al ragù (€7) and other handmade pasta in a convivial atmosphere since 1937.

The family-run Caminetto d'Oro (17) on Via de'Falegnami (00 39 051 263494) does wonderful things with rabbit along with the more traditional bolognese dishes. Mains from about €10.

Day two

Sunday morning: go to church

You get not one but four churches at Santo Stefano (18), an enchanting collection dating from the fifth century. Originally there were seven interlocking structures connected by Benedictine cloisters, but the surviving basilica and chapels are beautiful in their medieval simplicity. Open 9am-noon and 3.30-6.30pm daily.

Out to brunch

Re-enter the 21st century at Ex Forno (00 39 051 6493896; mambo-bologna.org), the funky restaurant attached to the Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna (Mambo) (19). A four-course Sunday brunch costs €20 a head and runs from 12.30-3pm - a civilised way to take a break from strolling through the gallery admiring works from young Italian artists. Open 10am-6pm daily except Mondays, till 10pm Thursdays, admission free.

A walk in the park

Giardini Margherita, the elegant gardens created in 1875, are where many Bolognese head out most Sundays to relax by the lake, hire a pedalo or play tennis. You can grab a bite to eat at the lakeside chalet (20), which converts to a nightclub every evening with the exception of Monday.

The icing on the cake

If you're feeling fit, walk the 3.6km of 666 porticoes that lead from the Porta Saragozza (21) up to the sanctuary of Madonna di San Luca (22). This, the longest series of arcades in the world, winds up to the 18th-century church from where you can take in views of the city and the Apennine mountains. If you can't face the walk, take a bus there and walk - downhill - back. Bus 20 goes from the city centre to the Villa Spada (for €1), from which you take the minibus to the sanctuary (€2.50). During exam time you'll notice a stream of students making the pilgrimage, convinced that doing so will guarantee them good results.

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