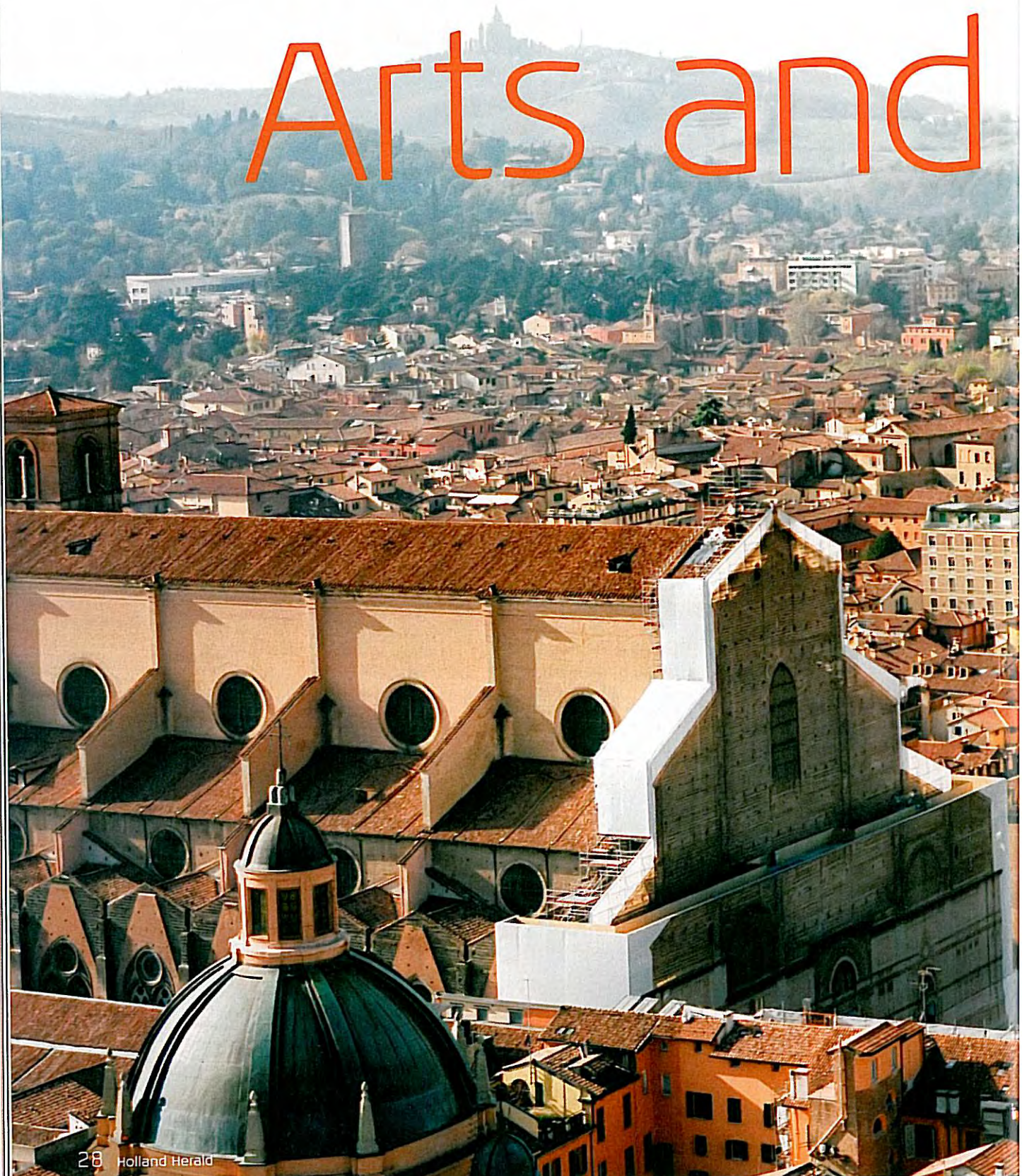


Arts and



Home to the oldest university in Europe, Bologna has benefited from hosting enquiring minds for more than 1,000 years, finds Mike MacEacheran

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARLEEN DANIELS

minds



Bologna from its tallest Medieval tower, the Torre degli Asinelli



ABOVE
A graduate in
a traditional
wreath of
fig leaves
and vines

RIGHT
The ubiquitous
Vespa



Graduation day rules in Bologna. On the red-brick piazzas and squares, the city's students cheer and dance, ensuring that everyone knows of their success no matter how relative the merits. Inside the Osteria del Sole, dressed with a traditional Julius Caesar wreath of fig leaves and vines, Paula Correlli celebrates passing her foreign languages exams. Surrounded by fellow graduates and epicurean plates of mortadella antipasti and Parmigiano, she is in a raucous mood, yet it is only 11am on a cold morning.

"Milan is so boring by comparison," she chirps. Originally from Bergamo, Paula was converted by the tastes and table manners of Bologna four years ago. "The *osterie* (cafes) are so old and traditional – we don't have these places anymore where I'm from." Dating from 1465, the *osteria* in question is like a modern take on a Raphael painting: crates are stacked high, a glass menagerie of broken clocks and brown bottles litter the counter, and the barman has the vacant look of a dazed bear waiting to be shot.

Before Paula stumbles back onto the streets with her entourage, she cordially offers a plate of untouched sandwiches. "You must be hungry," she says. "We can't let this go to waste. You must eat!" Her heels click-clack along

the cobbled mews, and the bells from the nearby Basilica San Petronio ring out above her head. In true Bolognese style, the city is hallmarked by hospitality and warmth.

Bologna is very much at odds with the rest of Italy. With tourism far down its list of priorities (compared to Venice, Rome and Florence), the city contains itself through self-sufficiency and a life dictated as much by intellectual debate as diet. While Italy tightens its belt due to the economy, the Bolognese are notching another hole in theirs, and appear to be almost recession proof. The city's twin nicknames – La Dotta (the learned one) and La Grassa (the fat) – have served it well.

The city's crumbling roofs and medieval spires look like they have had a plate of warm spaghetti dropped onto them by a ham-fisted waiter. The buildings radiate ragu-red in the sunshine and are stained in splodges of blood orange and sunburnt terracotta, the colour of a freshly made pasta sauce. At street level, perfectly formed porticos frame the projected upper floors of every trattoria restaurant and apartment in the city, like rivulets of dangling tagliatelle drizzling down to the drains below.

“The buildings radiate
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Couple in the sun
near Parco della
Montagnola
on the Via
dell'Indipendenza

“The city's crumbling roofs and medieval spires look like they have had a plate of warm spaghetti dropped onto them”



Classic car
beneath classic
Bolognese arches



ABOVE
Fontana del
Nettuno, in Piazza
Nettuno

RIGHT
The Quadrilatero
is known for its
colourful stalls and
delicious delis



►► Architecturally, Bologna is overwhelmed by a series of long, roofed walkways, which form a 37-kilometre-long medieval catwalk. Beneath these famed arcades and porches the Bolognese can be found at play, combining their twin obsessions of shopping and sustenance: the city's head may be ruled by the north, but its heart and stomach are very much of the south. "This city was built on pasta," rasps Emanuele Addone, proprietor of Drogheria Della Rosa, one of the city's most famous restaurants. "What would Italy be without Bologna's tortellini or tagliatelle? We built this country from our plate."

As the Italian capital of gastronomy, this is a city that actively encourages its visitors to indulge, and the mere whiff of food from the *enotecas* and delicatessens is infectious: the promenade surrounding Piazza Maggiore looks like a mosaic made from broken egg shells. "You may have a queen," boasts local tourist guide Giorgia Zabbini, "but we have San Maesta Il Nero!" When we later meet face to face, I admit to being a little underwhelmed: Bologna's reigning sovereign looks more like a parmesan than a Queen Beatrix or Elizabeth.

Beyond Piazza Maggiore's photogenic, ochre-red mandala, the modernised Jewish ghetto spreads north like an Umbrian hunter's snare. In its midst is Bologna's world-

famous 18th-century Teatro Comunale, a four-tier portico wedding cake-cum-auditorium worthy of the great Italian operas *La Bohème* and *La Traviata*. Outside, while flushed students cycle past to lectures, inside, the theatre feels like an alternative hall of learning.

"We must be quiet," whispers Stefano, Teatro Comunale's slick-haired caretaker, with a hint of melodrama. "The orchestra is in rehearsal for this evening's performance." Squeezing past a dull wooden door, I follow the caretaker into the rumbling belly of the theatre. Beneath a gigantic bottle-green curtain, strains of violins and cellos dramatise our steps as though we were part of a Puccini plot. It is a fitting entrance: as one of only three European UNESCO Cities of Music (the others being Seville and Glasgow) Bologna is in very fine pitch this morning. If any more praise was needed, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart studied within the leafy confines of the nearby Villa Pallavicini.

For the visitor, Bologna boasts a wealth of historic, artistic and religious attractions, and each encapsulates the mood of academia. Even the graffiti sprayed on the porticos throughout the city is of a decidedly high-brow nature. "Stay on the barricades for a better education," is one in particular that catches the eye. ►►



The art of tortellini

"Tortellini and lasagne are the kings and queens of the Italian kitchen," declares Simone Tufano, rolling out a deep yellow circle of freshly made pasta. "The key is to only use very fine flour and large eggs. No olive oil, no salt, nothing else." One of the teachers at La Vecchia Scuola, Bologna's premier pasta school, Simone teaches chefs from Japan, Australia and the US and novices from around the world. "This is the last school in Italy that teaches you to make pasta with a rolling pin by hand," he adds nostalgically, "but we still like to share our secret with the world." (+39 51 649 1576/lavecchiascuola.com)

LEFT
Trattoria La Montanara
serves typical
Bolognese
cuisine

▶▶ As a breeding ground for Italian talent, the University of Bologna's hallowed halls and cloisters have welcomed historical alumni including Nicolaus Copernicus, Dante Alighieri, Thomas Becket, Pope Nicholas V and Erasmus of Rotterdam. To this day, famous semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco remains president of the Scuola Superiore di Studi Umanistici. The medieval palazzos and the scholarly revival that the city's university once inspired act as a keystone to the backdrop of his famous novel *Il Nome Della Rosa* (*The Name of the Rose*).

Whether today's students seek inspiration from their alma mater or something else entirely, however, is questionable. Next to the Museo di Palazzo Poggi, originally set up in 1711 to house the Institute of Arts and Sciences, Vespas and scooters line up like dominoes, and the students seem more preoccupied by pints of Peroni than any periodic tables.

"Bologna has always been the number one city in Italy for students," explains Mary Dellantonio, a graduate from the American-run John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. "People from Naples, from Rome, they all come to study here," she says. "But only two or three out

of every ten students will graduate – it's such a famous party city. There is more discussion at 5am on the streets and in the squares than in the colleges."

Overlooking Bologna, perched like a gigantic pink parmesan, the Sanctuary of the Madonna di San Luca crowns the city. Serving as a destination for religious pilgrimages and Sunday morning strolls, it is one of Bologna's most celebrated symbols. For the unprepared, the mazy walk up to the sanctuary is the equivalent of hiking up the operatic scale of Luciano Pavarotti. The porticos and arcaded steps ramble like an elongated *Nessun Dorma* aria that constantly tugs at the heartstrings and clogged heart valves. Measuring nearly four-kilometres from eager first step to last panting breath, the Meloncello Arch links the church with the town below and is the longest covered walkway in the world.

Viewing Bologna from this papal high, the city could be a fresh pizza dissected by arterial tramways and bus routes. In the distance, the Apennines spread out in a patchwork quilt of mountain villages, and roads and forests wind to the Parco Regionale dei Sassi di Roccamalatina and the famous ▶▶



“The Apennines spread out in
a patchwork quilt of mountain villages,
forests and roads”

►► Ferrari factories of Maranello. Above, San Luca itself is a refreshing sight and seems reminiscent of the Italian monastic abbey from *The Name of the Rose*.

Sean Connery, the ageing star of the Hollywood adaptation, would have had a coronary if he'd had to climb up here today. One thing's for sure: I've certainly worked up an appetite.

The following day, amongst the dusty bookshelves of Il Palazzo dell'Archiginnasio, tourists diligently brush up on their biology. On the palace's first floor, the world-famous anatomy theatre creaks under the weight of history and the over-fed locals who stroll in after lunch. The room is an ornamental sonata of pinewood and sculpture. One of the world's great halls of learning, physicians once sliced and diced corpses under the watchful eyes of an unappreciative gallery of ecclesiastical statues. Yet old habits die hard: outside in the Mercato di Mezzo, like their forefathers before

them, Bolognese butchers take great delight in carving up sinewy slices. The pursuit of knowledge continues in the adjoining library, which is home to more than a million manuscripts and as many dusty-grey-haired professors.

At six o'clock every evening, Bologna slips into a relaxed mood, and the dull but hypnotic plonk of wine bottles being uncorked reverberates around Bologna's *enotecas*.

Beneath giant hanging hams tied to the rafters with frayed string knots, Tamburini is one of the city's most evocative delicatessen bars, the quintessential Bolognese dining experience. Spoiled with a bottle of Italian wine and a farmer's board of raw prosciutto, freshly sliced pork salami and pecorino cheese, it's more rustic than a scarecrow's picnic.

As Ippolito Nievo once said, "in Bologna you eat in one year what in Venice takes two, in Rome three, and in Genoa 20..." It feels devilish but that's why it's so good: I could easily begin an affair with this learned, fat city. ■

Bologna fact file

GETTING THERE

KLM operates three direct daily flights from Amsterdam Airport Schiphol to Bologna Guglielmo Marconi Airport.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Grand Majestic
Originally built as a bishop's seminary, the five-star Grand Majestic is the most luxurious retreat in the city, home to fresco-painted ceilings, wide staircases and an 18th-



century wine cellar (+39 51 225 445/duetorrihotels.com).

GOING OUT

Camera a Sud

The Jewish Quarter's Camera a Sud is a cross between a library and a wine bar: the bookshelves are made from empty wine crates, and novels are bound tight by used corks and string. Even the city's clandestine approach to la dolce vita can instantly make



a visitor feel more intelligent (+39 51 095 1448/cameraasud.net).

FURTHER AFIELD

A one-hour drive from Bologna, Ravenna is another of the region's UNESCO World

Heritage Sites. Famed for its mosaics, described by Dante as a symphony of colour, the Basilica di San Vitale is a kaleidoscope of Christian allegory and divine inspiration. (+39 54 435 755/turismo.ravenna.it).

