



# A LOCAL INSIGHT IN ITALY

On a recent journey through Northern Italy's most historic cities, **ANDREW COLES** is reminded that five-star travel means more than marble staircases to the time-poor journeyer looking for that something extra.

'In the restaurant, just remember to look up at the ceiling every so often', the concierge enthused upon hearing my dinner plans.

I was checking in at Due Torri's Grand Hotel Majestic in Bologna - and, as typical, I'd arrived with little idea as to what treasures the city held. We'd come from the City of Gastronomy Festival in Parma via a quintessentially Italian long lunch at the Cleto Chiarli winery outside of Modena, and the hour just spent on the Autostrada was dedicated to that rarefied holiday treat - the afternoon nap.

Located about as far as you could throw a mortadella from the central Piazza Maggiore, home to the 453-year-old Fountain of Neptune, the Grand Hotel Majestic carries its name with no sense of irony; it was converted from villa to hotel in 1912, and

its Michelin 'Three Forks' award-winning I Carracci Ristorante punctuates its five-star rating. Above the tables is an elaborate 15th-century fresco painted by Giovanna Luigi Valesio, depicting the mythological Fall of Phaeton, and the walk to the bathroom skirts the foundations of a Roman road.

In between about the fifth or sixth course, I ask the Maître d' if he has any suggestions as to a route for my morning run. An ignorant request, perhaps, but it was past 11pm and with the chances of any meaningful research diminishing with every sip of wine, I wanted to see something of Bologna.

'You must leave early and follow the path to Sanctuary of the Madonna di San Luca!'

The 17th-century porticoed arcade stretches 3.8 miles and





thousands of steps from the centre of Bologna to a church at the top of Guardia Hill. The route is popular with activewear-clad locals and guidebook-toting tourists, but I depart at sunrise, so arrive at the summit blissfully alone – albeit breathless and dripping with sweat. The 180-degree view spans the entire city and beyond; from here I can see the landmark Asinelli and Garisenda towers near the medieval town gate. It's so peaceful.

The first half of my return trip is solitary, but soon the arcade is clogged with foot traffic and I am the only one heading downhill. As I weave in and out of tour groups and nearly trip on an errant walking pole, I make a mental note to thank the staff at the Grand Hotel Majestic for my smug satisfaction at such an enjoyable start to the day. I feel as if I am reaping the benefits of those five stars.

We then travelled to Florence, and later that night, after a delightfully lengthy dinner at Hotel Bernini Palace's La Chiostrina Ristorante, our small group is blindly following an immaculately dressed man down narrow cobbled alleys. It was almost midnight and we could only guess at where we were being led, but the knowing grin of the concierge when we'd asked for a

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late-night bar recommendation had secured our trust. After all, a group of Londoners knows not where the best bars in Florence are hidden.

We arrive to a wine bar named Locale Firenze. We're led inside, past an ancient wine cellar – the arched doorway of which is said to date from around 30 BC – and incredulously sip whiskey sours inside this 16th-century Medici palace. Our eventual amble back to Hotel Bernini Palace brings another highlight: its location, within sight of the Palazzo Vecchio, prompts one of our group to suggest a slight detour via Piazza della Signoria; after all, a private viewing of several Michelangelo sculptures and the Medici Lions is a rare treat. Other than a lone Texan backpacker practising his sketching, our group of four has the world-famous attraction entirely to ourselves, and it is less than a minute's walk back to our beds. These special moments are rarely found on your own.

The tour continues unabated the following day; a guided walk points out the finer facts that we'd missed the previous night, and another long lunch in the sun at Ristorante Frescobaldi is as enjoyable as it is indulgent. With seaside Genoa as our destination, we catch frames of the glimmering blue Mediterranean as we speed along the Italian Riviera, staving off another lunch-induced afternoon nap. That night we dine on freshly caught seafood and local pesto at Hotel Bristol Palace, whose oblong spiral staircase allegedly won over Alfred Hitchcock when he stayed during the filming of *The Pleasure Garden* in 1925.

Genoa's history as a strategic trading port has made it a centre of commerce and wealth for centuries; its Bank of St George was founded in 1407 and funded the expeditions of Christopher Columbus, a native Geonese. The city is not a pastiche of days gone by; hurried locals carry on about their business, seemingly ignorant of the medieval relics that frequently dot the sloping landscape.

My final port of call is Verona; wary of pastiche, I try my hardest to avoid Juliet's balcony. Once we're checked in at the five-star Hotel Due Torri the decision regarding a location for an apéritif is a tough one: do I have it leaning on the windowsill of my room, overlooking the adjacent Sant'Anastasia church? Or on Due Torri's rooftop terrace? It was an unnervingly difficult decision, but the terrace with its 360-degree city views and the lure of a sunset Aperol Spritz won.

When discussing hotels, five stars mean different things to different people, but for me it's about making a fleeting visit as memorable as possible. When time is in short supply, choosing an exquisite hotel is an investment in this most limited of resources.

*Grand Hotel Majestic and Ristorante I Carracci, Bologna:*  
[grandhotelmajestic.duetorrihotels.com](http://grandhotelmajestic.duetorrihotels.com)

*Hotel Bernini Palace and Ristorante La Chiostrina, Florence:*  
[www.hotelbernini.duetorrihotels.com](http://www.hotelbernini.duetorrihotels.com)

*Ristorante Frescobaldi Firenze:*  
[www.frescobaldifirenze.it](http://www.frescobaldifirenze.it)

*Hotel Bristol Palace and Ristorante Giotto, Genoa:*  
[www.hotelbristolpalace.it/en](http://www.hotelbristolpalace.it/en)

*Due Torri Hotel and Due Torri Panoramic Terrace Restaurant, Verona:*  
[www.hotelduetorri.duetorrihotels.com](http://www.hotelduetorri.duetorrihotels.com)