Travel and Adventure: Bologna, more than great food

by Joan Scobey

BOLOGNA, Italy - Bologna the Fat. Bologna the Learned. Bologna the Red.

Three nicknames for this northern Italian city that go a long way to describe it.

THE CENTER OF IT ALL - The Piazza Maggiore is Bologna's main square. It's a central gathering place for worship, concerts, demonstrations and strolls. Photo by Joan Scobey.

MARKET AREA - Trattorias and houseware shops are all part of the market area off the Piazza Maggiore in Bologna. Photo by Joan Scobey. BOLOGNA LANDMARK - Neptune Fountain is an oversize baroque statue of the sea god atop a dolphin-carrying putti and water maidens. It's a favorite place to congregate in front of the Palazzo Communale. Photo by Joan Scobey. MARKET FRESH - Narrow market streets just off the Piazza Maggiore are filled with produce of the Bolgona region. CNS Photo by Joan Scobey. Bologna the Fat is easy. Bolognese food has been famous for so long that when the American writer Herman Melville came to the city, he wrote in his journal entry of March 3, 1857: "First thing at Bologna tried Bologna sausage on the principle that at Rome you go first to St. Peter's."

Bologna the Learned honors its university, founded in 1088 and the oldest in the world. Its reknowned faculties bring 90,000 students to a city of less than 400,000 people, one reason why the municipal calendar is filled with concerts, opera, ballet and theater, why there seems to be a bookstore on every block, and why you hear street musicians play in the arcades.

Ah, the arcades.

Bologna the Red is a nod, not to its left-leaning politics, but to its ruddy arcades, 23 miles of them, lining the streets of central Bologna. They flank wide boulevards, narrow alleys, plazas and squares. Some have tall,

Gothic arches, others are Romanesque and a few are simple wooden medieval beams. Their origins go back nine centuries, when medieval buildings were first cantilevered over the street to gain extra room for students at the new university.

First-time visitors should head to the main square, Piazza Maggiore, the heart of the city. Everyone else does. Here the Bolognesi congregate at all times and for all reasons. They gather for political demonstrations and for concerts at the Palazzo Communale, the Town Hall. They worship at the Basilica of San Petronio, and stop for gelati and espresso at a cafe. Rain or shine, elegant yuppies stroll along the arcades, pushing baby carriages. Scruffy students with backpacks hang out at the Neptune Fountain, an oversize Baroque statue of the sea god atop dolphin-carrying putti and water maidens.

Grand buildings of earlier times surround this open plaza - 13th century palaces with crenelated roofs, a 14th century church and Renaissance council offices. They are all so carefully restored that the Piazza Maggiore looks like a medieval set where you could stage "Everyman" without adding a prop.

The enormous Basilica of San Petronio, with its curiously half-finished facade, dominates one side. Started in 1390, funds were diverted to a new university before the pink and white marble sheathing was completed. Inside, a long strip of brass set into the floor at a particular angle marks the spring equinox when a ray of sunlight hits it through a hole in the roof.

Alongside the basilica is one of the city's historic treasures, the Palazzo dell'Archiginnasio, an original university building and now the city library. Largely destroyed in a World War II bombing, it was reconstructed with all its opulent heraldic decorations and famous wood-paneled Anatomical Theatre. This small arena around a dissection table has an elaborate professor's rostrum supported by two wooden male figures stripped down to their musculature.

Bologna's cardinals used to live in the Palazzo Communale, on another side of the square. They rode upstairs to their extravagant apartments in horse-drawn carriages that mounted two long flights of wide, shallow, ramp-like steps, known as the "staircase of the horses." Two museums now occupy the state apartments - one displays the municipal art collection, the other paintings by Bologna's favorite artist son, Giorgio Morandi - with spectacular views over the Piazza Maggiore.

Behind the arcades opposite the Palazzo Communale is where the marketplace of ancient Roman times stood. It is still where greengrocers, cheese merchants, butchers and bakers set up shop next to artisans and cafes. Its narrow streets identify the ancient shopkeepers - via Caprarie, literally "goatherds," for butcher shops, via Drapperie for fabric dealers - and even today there are jewelers on via Orefici and fishmongers on via Pescherie Vecchie. Wedges of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese and bags of tortellini and tortelloni fill shop windows, Parma hams hang above different kinds of sausages, and platters of prepared Bolognese specialties crowd the counters. An outdoor cafe there is a fine place for lunch.

The square stone medieval tower that rises over the Piazza Maggiore is one of 20 that remain of perhaps 100. The best known of them is a pair of 12th century leaning towers nearby that have become the symbol of the city. One is more than 300 feet high, and more than 3 feet off plumb; the other, half its height, tilts much more precipitously. They have been that way for about 800 years.

"The medieval nobles built towers just for pure swank, to see who should have the tallest," wrote DH Lawrence, "till a town like Bologna must have bristled like a porcupine in a rage."

Actually, DH Lawrence was half right. The towers did give social status to their owners, but they were built for defense and not living quarters.

Bologna, the strategically situated capital of the fertile agricultural province of Emilia-Romagna, was an attractive prize for predators since Etruscan and Roman times, when a small colony settled around what is now the Piazza Maggiore. It was successively occupied by the Huns, Goths and Lombards, and became a free commune in the 12th century. In the major political struggle of the Middle Ages, it was a stronghold for the Guelphs, who favored local independence, against the Ghibellines, who supported the Holy Roman Emperor. After fierce political rivalry among the city's noble families, Bologna eventually came under three centuries of papal rule in 1506, and 250 years later joined the Kingdom of Italy.

The marvel is that after centuries of wars and internal fighting, the city still has so much of its historic character. Gothic and Romanesque churches, Renaissance palazzos, Baroque fountains, medieval towers and, yes, those enchanting arcades.

IF YOU GO

WHERE TO STAY

These hotels are centrally located, rooms are air-conditioned and rates include breakfast.

Grand Hotel Baglioni, Via dell'Indipendenza 8, 800-745-8883, www.baglionihotels.com/bologna-hotel. This Leading Hotel of the World has 122 rooms, Venetian glass chandeliers, silk brocaded walls and linen sheets, plus a stretch of Roman foundation and 16th century Carracci frescoes on the dining room ceiling; doubles from about $325.

Corona d'Oro, Via Oberdan 12, 011-39-051-745-7611, coronaoro.hotelsbologna.it. A 35-room charmer in a refurbished historic building; doubles from about $300.

Art Hotel Commercianti, Via dei Pignattari 11, 011-39-051-745-7511, www.art-hotel-commercianti.it. A 34-room, stylishly furnished boutique hotel; doubles from about $285.

WHERE TO EAT

Trattoria Battibecco, via Battibecco 4, 051-223-298, www.battibecco.com. Despite it name, this is an

elegant, stylish Michelin-starred restaurant specializing in superb seafood.

Osteria de' Poeti, via De' Poeti 1, 051-236-166, www.osteriadepoeti.com. An atmospheric 400-year-old wine cellar whose Bolognesi specialties include tortellini in broth, green lasagna and tortelloni with guinea fowl and artichokes.

Divinis, via Battibecco 4, 051-2961 502, www.divinis.it. A smart modern wine bar off the Piazza Maggiore, and the place to sample a variety of Bologna's famous hams and salamis plus cheeses from all over the world served with jams, honeys, candied olives and balsamic vinegar.

Trattoria Anna Maria, via Belle Arti 17, 051-266-894. Fresh pastas are the specialty, a favorite of singers from the nearby opera house.

Tamburini's Bistrot, via Caprarie 1, 051-234 726. The city's best-known food hall where you can fill a sampler plate with hams, cheeses, pastas and other Bolognese specialties, and take it to a back dining room.

For more information, contact the Italian Government Tourist Board at 212-245-4822, or visit www.italiantourism.com. In Bologna, the information centers at Piazza Maggiore 6 and the train station have maps and brochures.

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