

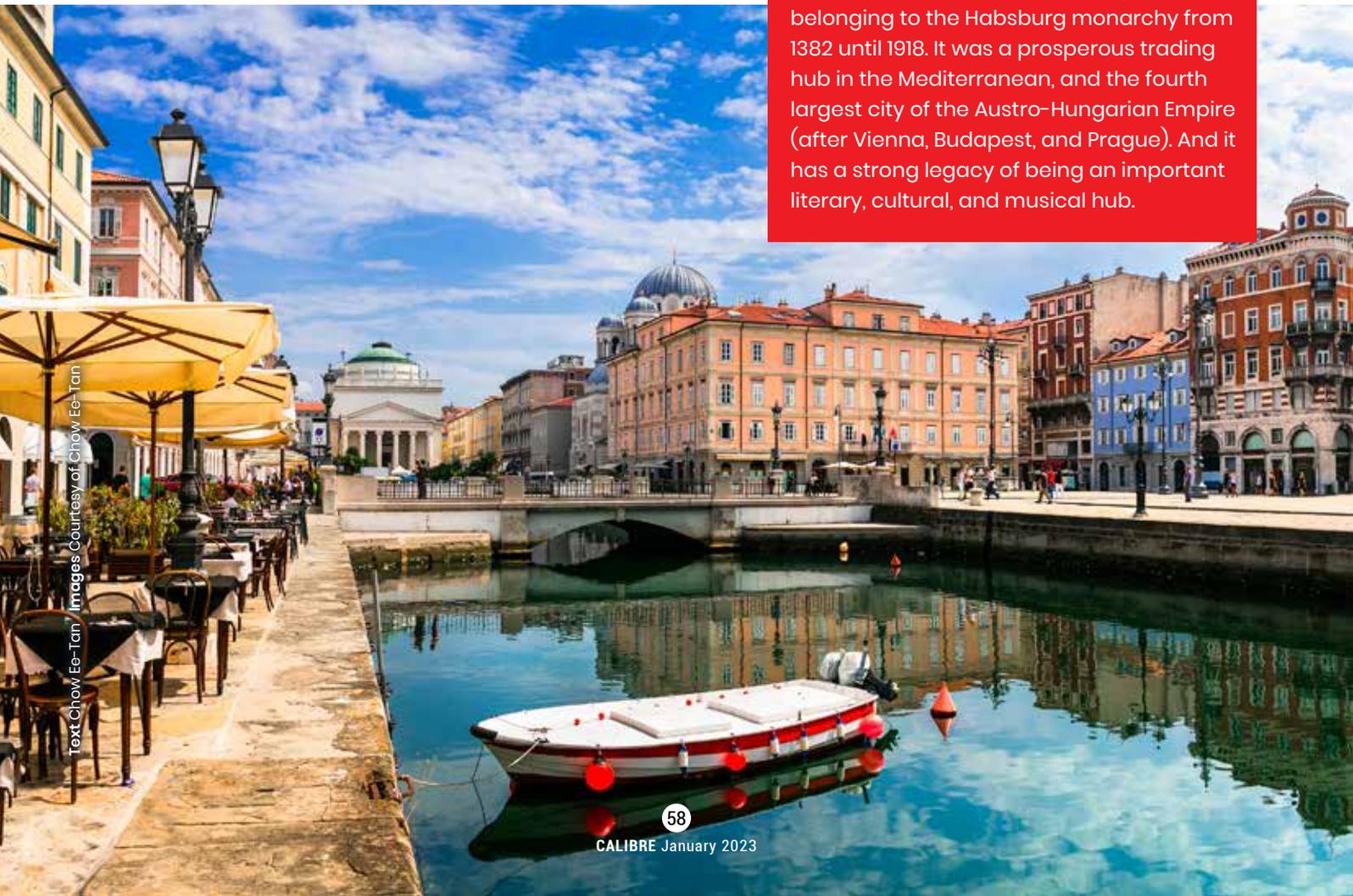
ITALY'S ECLECTIC MELTING POT

Sharing a border with Slovenia and Croatia, Italy's northern seaport city of Trieste has a strong cultural heritage influenced by her European neighbours while also possessing her own unique vibe.

I arrived in Trieste, the north-eastern city of Italy on an early sunny October afternoon, ready to commence my three-week Italian language course. Arriving on road from Venice International Airport which was about one-and-a-half hours away, I was greeted with a long, beautiful stretch of beaches and blue seas before entering the *centro storico* (historical centre) of Trieste.

The largest city of the autonomous region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, Trieste has a long coastline lying on a narrow strip of Italian territory between the Adriatic Sea and Slovenia. Slovenia is only 8km east of Trieste while Croatia is about 30km south of the city.

For centuries Trieste was at the crossroads, under different rules and influences that made it a peculiar cosmopolitan city of Italy. Trieste was only included in the Federation of Italy after belonging to the Habsburg monarchy from 1382 until 1918. It was a prosperous trading hub in the Mediterranean, and the fourth largest city of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (after Vienna, Budapest, and Prague). And it has a strong legacy of being an important literary, cultural, and musical hub.





Sail boats lining up the sea front of Trieste for Barcolana.



The Barcolana regatta in the gulf of Trieste.



Sail boats starting the race in the morning.

The school had arranged a studio-apartment for me during my stay there to study Italian. I was pleased to find out it was a mere 4-minute walk to the school that was located in the old town itself, with many pedestrian walks and piazza (squares) laced with shops, restaurants, and cafés just around the corner.

From the school, you only need to walk down the street to reach Trieste's vast *lungomare* (sea front) that screams space and freedom. Almost instantly, I had fallen in love with this charming city that has so much to offer—from its historical past and rich culture and grand architecture to its quaint colourful buildings flanked by the sea and hills.

HOST OF THE LARGEST REGATTA RACE

When you speak with the locals

(Triestini in Italian), you will find out that Trieste is known for its particularities when it comes to naming places, for instance *Città della Barcolana* (city of Barcolana) and *Città della Bora* (city of Bora - the northern wind)

Barcolana is the largest and most crowded sailing regatta race held annually on the second Sunday of October in Trieste. The event began in 1969 with just 51 participating boats and has grown up to 2,500 boats jostling at the starting line. The Barcolana is, in reality, a 10-day sailing spectacle.

I had no idea I had arrived in Trieste during Barcolana 54 (the 54th instalment of the race) and was curious to see the city abuzz with a carnival-like atmosphere when I arrived. The week leading to the Barcolana saw Tristes attracting locals, Italians from

around the country, and foreign tourists.

Its squares were filled with stalls promoting the regatta and stalls selling food and drinks to serve the public that thronged the streets. The most happening places would be along the *lungomare*, and from there, you could see the many sail boats at the vicinity, ready for the grand boat race.

On the morning of the race, a few friends and I braved the crowds and went to the Audace Pier to witness the departures of boats from its base. I had never seen so many sail boats at one place! And there were countless more on the horizon where my sight could not reach. The sea front and other parts of Trieste, especially those on higher grounds, were filled to the brink with enthusiastic crowds.

As Trieste's *Bora* (the fiercest north wind) did not make its appearance, most of the boats completed the race and returned within two hours. For the first time in Barcolana's history, a woman—Wendy Schmidt of the sail boat *DEEP BLUE*—won the race by cutting the finish line in less than an hour! She became the talk of the town and was saluted by the Italian media.

ROMAN TRIESTE AND A FAMED AUTHOR

The school organised various activities for us, and once a week,

there were walks to explore the historical and cultural sites of Trieste. I joined 'The Roman Trieste' walk where we were taken by a local guide on a tour to explore the Roman remnants in Trieste.

The most ancient traces of the urban settlement of Trieste are the remains of the Roman colony of Tergeste, founded in the middle of the 1st century B.C. and extending to the northwestern slope of the hill of San Giusto, overlooking the Adriatic Sea.

The relics of an ancient amphitheatre are some of the main historical sites. They used to

be hidden beneath the buildings of Trieste's Jewish ghetto until just before World War II, when the Fascist regime started demolishing houses and shops belonging to the Jewish community on the pretext of revealing the ruins of ancient Roman buildings. In 33-32 B.C., the city was enclosed by walls, which soon lost their defensive function and served for containment and terracing of the slope. We saw some relics of ancient bricks still intact beneath a church.

The theatre's decorations, sculptures, and excavation chronicle are displayed in the Lapidario Tergestino, shown inside San Giusto's Castle, a building that is dedicated to the illustration of Tergeste's urban planning and ancient Roman architecture.

It was evening, and darkness fell when we hiked up the hill with cobblestone path ways that led to San Giusto's Cathedral and saw the imposing boulder of white Istrian rock guarding the Cathedral's entrance. Then we finally reached the site of the



A statue of James Joyce at the Grand Canal.



Relics from the Roman era.



The Passage of James Joyce at the Short Bridge.



The remains of the Roman Amphitheatre.

imposing San Giusto's Castle atop the hill, and whose grounds offered a panoramic view of the Gulf of Trieste.

One of the places I consider prettiest—a mix of nature and architecture—is the Canale Grande (Grand Canal). There may be no gondolas on Trieste's Grand Canal, but it is arguably the most defining and iconic view in this Italy's jewel of the Adriatic.

On another walking tour of Trieste with the school, we learned that there were three bridges over the canal—Ponte Bianco, Ponte Rosso, and Ponte Verde—which used to swing open to allow boats to enter. Only the Ponte Rosso (Red Bridge) remains. In recent years, a pedestrian footbridge, Passaggio James Joyce, was created and is known as the Ponte Corto (Short Bridge) after an alleged error in the measurement of the canal's width, which was commemorated with a mock tug-of-war to pull the canal banks closer.

A bronze statue of the famous Irish author and poet, James Joyce, was placed on Ponte Rosso in 2004 to remember the centenary of his arrival in Trieste. Joyce, who had also lived in other European cities, had the strongest ties with Trieste, his favourite city where he voyaged for over 15 years. He was well known here and revered by Triestini. In Trieste, Joyce experienced literary setbacks as well as growing number of successes later. He did many things and contributed his literary legacy as teacher, lecturer, journalist, translator and more. It was in Trieste that he developed



Palazzo del Lloyd Triestino- a grand building at Piazza Unita.



The waterless fountain in Piazza dell'Unita.

and honed his craft of different facets of writing.

In Trieste today, there is also a James Joyce Caffè and a James Joyce Hotel in remembrance of the author.

OF PIAZZAS, MUSEUMS, PALACES, AND CASTLES

A short five-minute-walk from the Grand Canal will take you to the largest piazza in Italy. Piazza dell'Unità d'Italia (Unity Square) is prominently located in the heart of the city near the sea. This vast



Piazza dell'Unita after dark.

public space is lined on three sides by grand historical *palazzi* (palaces), including Palazzo del Municipio, Trieste's 19th-century city hall. One side is directly open to the sea. There is a curious dry *fontana* (fountain) in the Piazza that has become a convenient meeting point. Our guide explained that water in the fountain created havoc when Trieste was visited by *Bora*, and the municipal decided not to have water in it. Piazza Unita is also the place for a drink with several well-known and popular caffes surrounding it, from which you can steal a look at the large and small vessels on the horizon.

It is a wonder that a medium-size city like Trieste has dozens of museums, from the bigger names that house art pieces and



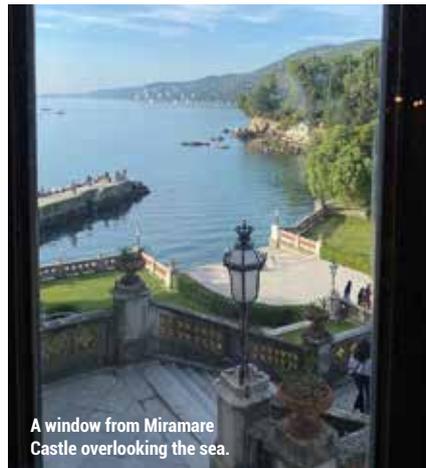
Miramare Castle by the sea.

sculptures to the more specialised including the likes of Museum of Theatre, Museum of Oriental Art, Museum of Coffee and even a museum dedicated to Bora.

I visited one of the most well-known and important museums in Trieste. Civico Museo Revoltella was once the home of wealthy Triestini merchant, Baron Pasquale Revoltella. It is now a splendid modern art gallery. Revoltella spent much of his money supporting contemporary Trestini artists and thus amassed the enormous collection of the late 19th and 20th century art pieces.

You need at least a couple of hours to browse the great collections, that include standout portraits and some unusual sculptures by Italian and foreign artists. The exhibitions are connected to the Baron's private apartments, ceremonial rooms, anterooms and galleries, as well as bedrooms featuring period furniture, paintings, and neoclassical sculptures.

What impressed me besides the stunning collections and lofty



A window from Miramare Castle overlooking the sea.

interior of the museum was its rooftop terrace that doubles as a tea house during the summer. When I walked farther up the terraces, I saw a breath-taking panoramic view of Piazza Venezia and the sea horizon.

Besides the imposing historical San Giusto Castle on the hilltop of Trieste oldtown, sitting on a rocky pier perched on the sea is Castello di Miramare (Miramare Castle), just 7km from the city centre.

I decided to visit this famous castle, as advised by a few locals, on a beautiful sunny Saturday afternoon. I took a 20-minute bus

ride followed by a 15-minute walk on a pathway along the seafront to reach the enchanting castle by the sea.

Miramera Castle was the neo-Gothic home of the Archduke Maximilian of Austria, and its décor reflects the owner's wanderlust and obsessions of the imperial age. The interior of the castle is as fascinating as its ambience—with opulent, rich colours and motif, ornate orientalist salons, and a red silk-lined throne room. A close view of the sea can be seen through large glass doors and small windows in some rooms.

The castle has a huge 22 hectares of landscaped garden that consists of blooming, colourful flowers and exotic trees. It reflects Maximilian's passion as a botanist and there are also exhibitions featuring some of the most intricate and colourful drawings of fauna and flora.

TRISTINE CUISINE AND HISTORICAL CAFFES

There is so much to see, explore and experience in Trieste. As I

learned more about this city, I became more awed by what lies within it. Besides the cultural and historical sites, the city also boasts a wide array of restaurants offering a variety of cuisine beyond Italian. You can easily find restaurants that serve non-Italian dishes such as authentic Greek, Slovenian, Austrian, Middle Eastern, and even Asian food.

Different nationalities and ethnicities have migrated to Trieste since the 18th century, resulting in a unique mix of flavours and tastes that beautifully combine Mediterranean and Central European cuisines. The original flavours of the region had mixed and merged with those brought by neighbouring Slovenians, Austrians, Hungarians, flavours from the Middle East and Asia Minor, and influences from Istrian, Dalmatian, Greek and Jewish dishes. After the region was annexed to Italy in 1918, a preponderance of Mediterranean flavours and traditions such as pasta and pizza became staples.

For me, I stuck mainly to local Italian cuisine, and had some of the best pizzas ever as well as the freshest fried seafood in a few random restaurants in Trieste.

And I was pleasantly surprised when I discovered some cafés in town such as the historical café Caffè degli Specchi (Café of Mirrors) served non-Italian breakfast! I enjoyed the sumptuous English breakfast so rarely found in other Italian cities and there were also breakfasts from other countries.

The café, with its strategic location in Piazza Unità, gets even more packed in the evening with both locals and tourists enjoying Aperitivo—with glasses of Aperol Spritz, Prosecco, or other cocktails served with potato chips and cured meat.

Other well-known historical cafés in Trieste that date back more than a century or two include names like Café Tommaseo, Café San Marco, Café Torinese, and Café Stella Polare. From their interior

decoration to their menus and their waiter's uniforms, these ancient cafés take you back to the European glory of yesteryears.

Since the 18th century, the Adriatic seaport has been the Mediterranean's main coffee harbour, where the green beans arrive from around the world. Trieste also serves as a global hub for the coffee roasting industry, with many small but globally known local coffee roasting businesses. The world famous Triestine coffee company, Illy, is one example.

Indeed, Trieste has a huge coffee culture that is inextricably globally linked, just like many other facets of its colourful culture and particular heritage. ☑



Locals and tourists having an aperitivo at Caffè degli Specchi.



Aperol Spritz and aperitivo at Caffè degli Specchi.



Delicious fried seafood.