



Italy: three historic cities, three great hotels

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Paul Spike *samples the sumptuous charm of grand hotels in Florence, Bologna and Verona*

The small, award-winning hotel chain Duetorrihotels SPA, based in Milan, offers the discerning traveller a chance to experience its unique fusion of tasteful extravagance and meticulous attention to detail in a limited number of Italian cities – but what cities! What could be better than taking a week's holiday in the historic centres of Florence, Bologna and Verona, cossetted in luxury, with the magnificent architecture and art of the Renaissance literally on your doorstep?

Without exaggeration, simply the best. The standard of service goes beyond five stars. Your room will offer you the in the most exclusive hotels. If this sounds like I'm raving, it's because my recent visit to three hotels in these cities



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The **Hotel Bernini Palace** is in the heart of Florence, a few moments stroll from the Piazza della Signoria where Michelangelo's statue of David stands in the shadow of the Uffizi Gallery. There are larger 'grand' hotels in Florence, but they cannot match the intimate charm you'll find at the Bernini Palace, with its best suites and rooms evoking a Tuscan wood-beamed history dating back to the 15th century.



Do not hesitate to ask the wonderful concierges for their help in booking you a table in an undiscovered local restaurant; in directing you to the finest shops in Florence; in arranging a private cultural excursion. Florence can be exhausting at any time of year, but especially crowded and sweltering hot in summer. The Bernini Palace is an air-conditioned oasis, with a plush lounge and bar waiting just inside its discreet doorway – only a step away from the teeming crowds.

You can, of course, take breakfast in your room but it would be a shame to miss a buffet breakfast downstairs that is as generous and delicious as you can find anywhere in Italy. And when you are ready to move on, have the concierge secure you a first-class rail ticket to Bologna, which is only 35 minutes away. There's no need to rent a car on this Italian Duettori holiday!

On my arrival in Bologna, I took a taxi straight to the **Grand Hotel Majestic**, which is the only five-star luxury hotel in the city. Located on the central via Indipendenza, directly across from the old cathedral, without a doubt this is finest possible location from which to explore one of Italy's most important but least touristy Renaissance cities.



The Grand Hotel Majestic occupies a palatial 18th-century former seminary and its bravura suites have, over the past decades, hosted many of the world's most famous politicians and celebrities, from Callas to Sinatra to Princess Diana. (Check out the many photographs of legendary former guests on the walls of the hotel's bar.) Inside, the hotel is furnished with sumptuous fabrics and glistening marbles, antique furniture and original paintings, while its exterior façade presents a traditional Bolognese solidity, replete with arched portico. Its restaurant, named after the great Renaissance artistic brothers Carracci, preserves some of their frescoes on its walls, while serving up rich, delicious Bolognese cuisine, both traditional and modern. Naturally the hotel prides itself on its extensive wine cellars and can arrange private tastings.

It was difficult to avoid feeling a bit exceptional as I relaxed into the aristocratic dream lifestyle of this hotel. I can only imagine how that delusion would be magnified if I had been lucky enough to occupy its Art Deco roof-top suite with its sprawling terrace offering incredible city views in every direction. Of all the three luxury Duetorri hotels that I visited, the Majestic was the most opulent and the most extraordinary.

But my favourite was still to come, in Verona, when I arrived at the **Due Torri Hotel** near the riverside, in the oldest part of the city. Once again, this location is perfectly central, a short stroll from the city's many historic sites, but discreetly out of the hustling and bustling tourist circus in the Piazza Bra. Although its foundations date back to the 14th century, it became a fine hotel in the 18th century and its historic guests included Mozart and Goethe. Afterwards, the hotel went through a dormant period until the early 20th century when new owners transformed it into a luxury hotel. Finally, in 2010, the Duetorrihotels Group purchased the property and set about both restoring and modernizing this historic gem.

My room was comfortable though not opulent, the Biedermeier furniture and Murano light fixtures less remarkable than what I'd experienced in Bologna's operatic Majestic, and the Due Torri's central lobby was a bit dark and cavernous, but what made my stay here so memorable was the gracious warmth of the staff. Everyone I encountered was eager to help, charming, and generous. Another outstanding feature of my visit was catching the cooling late afternoon breezes while sipping a perfect Negroni in the rooftop bar. You can also dine on the roof, enjoying excellent Veronese cuisine while watching the fairy tale lights of Shakespeare's favourite Italian city (he set two plays there) twinkle in your own midsummer's night dream.



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