

FEATURES

Europe's secret cities

You've seen Seville, you're bored with Bruges and you're over Verona, so pick somewhere less obvious for your next weekend away

The Sunday Times Published: 30 September 2012

Trieste

Why go?

For the appealing weirdness of it. Trieste is basically Vienna-on-Sea, which is far better than it sounds. Once the Austro-Hungarian empire's Adriatic outpost, then a cold-war border town, the place is a cultural car crash: its citizens ride Vespas and gesticulate like the Italians they nominally are, but laugh, eat sauerkraut and drink beer like Bavarians. (Although some are Slovenian. It's complicated.) Chuck in splendid art and architecture, hearty food and a glittering waterfront, and you've got a cracking weekend.

By day

When the Hapsburgs wanted some coastline, they took the best. To appreciate Trieste's bewitching position, take the rattly 110-year-old Opicina tram from Piazza Oberdan (90p), rising steeply through pines above the rooftops, to the obelisk atop the carso, the limestone ridge behind the town. The view's spectacular. That's Slovenia a few miles along the dramatic Istrian coastline, and Croatia just beyond.

Back down for a fortifying espresso at Caffè Tommaseo (Rive Tre November 5; £1.60), the doyenne of Trieste's historic coffee houses. The matronly propriety of the place is rather at odds with the fruity art on the walls, but James Joyce, who supposedly wrote some of Ulysses's more indecent ramblings here, would approve.

Trieste has a thing for museums. There are dozens. The most visited is Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian's bonkers 19th-century fantasy castle at Miramare, a few miles up the coast, but the Revoltella (Via Diaz 27; £5.50), in town, is more satisfying: a jumble of minimalist modernity and Hapsburg opulence, with a collection of art and design that could soak up a whole day.

Lunch? You could stop at Da Pepi (Cassa di Risparmio 3), the classic Trieste buffet, as the city's many German-style restaurants call themselves. A plate of sausage, tongue, cheek, bacon and other porky delights costs £6.40. It's more scenic, however, to take the little ferry (£5.50 return) to Muggia, a pretty fishing village around the bay. The ride's a treat, past barnacled old freighters and busy orange tugs, to the cute Venetian harbour, where you'll find the Ittiturismo restaurant, on Molo Colombo. Terrible name, but this co-operative, set up by local fishermen, is better at seafood than marketing: the morning's catch, with contorni, prosecco, coffee and a grappa, costs about £16. Get there early — it fills up.

Trieste isn't for shopaholics, but there's an engaging huddle of quirky stores on Via Felice Venezian — check out Boogaloo, for vintage dresses, and Stranomavero, for clothes and accessories by local designers. But what you really need now is a swim: take the free launch from Molo Audace to Isola La Diga, a long breakwater out in the bay, where locals sprawl and splash with a majestic view of the Hapsburg palaces on the waterfront.

By night

Stay on La Diga till dusk, then sail back to the heart of town for a Mitteleuropean dinner at Siora Rosa (Piazza Hortis 3; about £25, including wine) — have the pork sausage with horseradish — or seafood at the tiny Buffet Da Angelina (Via Cadorna 14; about £16, including wine). Take a passeggiata through the lively alleys of Cavana, pausing for spritz at the sophisticated Life (Piazza Cavana; £2) or a beer at the no-name open-air DJ bar on Piazzetta Urban (£1.60).

The hotel

The Savoia Excelsior Palace (Riva del Mandracchio 4, 00 39-040 77941, starhotels.com, doubles from £135, B&B) is a newly refurbished 1912 pile on the front with five-star trappings — and great sunset views. L'Albero Nascosto (040 300188, alberonascosto.it, doubles from £75, B&B), in a 300-year-old former merchant's house, is sweet, central and endearing.

The flights

Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com) flies to Trieste from Stansted and Birmingham.
Stephen Bleach

Stephen Bleach stayed as a guest of the Savoia Excelsior Palace