

Trieste as you might, this place is unreal

Jenny Woolf visits the Italian town with a difference. Drenched in history, there are plenty of extraordinary things to witness, which are fascinating yet unexplained...



FACTFILE

□ Jenny Woolf stayed at the Hotel Continentale, in the centre of town: www.continentalehotel.com/
□ Trieste tourist information: www.turismofvg.it
□ Email: info.trieste@turismo.fvg.it
□ Or contact the Italian State Tourist Board, 16 Princes Street, WIB 2AY. Tel: 020-7408 1254

TRIESTE is sometimes called “the capital of Nowhere,” and Jan Morris and James Joyce are among many who have noticed the slightly dislocated feel of this north-east Italian town, a place “suspended in unreality” as the playwright Hermann Bahr once remarked – I often disagree with sweeping observations like this, but soon even I fell under Trieste’s curious spell.

Its richly decorated buildings and vast waterfront square look important, almost Venetian; yet they seem oddly empty. In spite of the buzzing vespas, fluttering tricolores and elegant shop windows, it doesn’t seem properly Italian, either, for some of the pavement cafes offer schnitzel and sauerkraut, and the label of the local beer flaunts an Austrian flag.

The reason for this lies in the fact that, for centuries, Trieste wasn’t Italian at all. As the chief port of the Austro-Hungarian empire, it looked to Vienna, and old photographs show a bustling city of the Belle Epoque, with a harbour crammed with ships.

All that collapsed along with Austria-Hungary, and after the First World War, Trieste became Italian. The Vienna days must have seemed a golden dream as Trieste struggled through years of rough treatment from Fascists, Nazis and Communists, then became an independent city-state administered by a military government. And then, it found itself literally on the road to nowhere after the Iron Curtain slammed down just kilometres away.

Now, in happier times, it seems like an apparently prosperous, relaxing, and very slightly peculiar place. I lost count of the Sicilian icecream parlours and coffee shops, full of groups of friends watching the world go by. I enjoyed joining the locals as they promenaded on fine evenings along the long waterfront, or strolling down the breakwaters after dark and seeing

how the city’s lights spectacularly turned the water to silver and gold.

And there seemed to be lots going on, although nobody seemed to know what some of it actually was. One lazy afternoon down by the marina, an extraordinarily, unearthly singing filled the sky, as two tugs slowly approached from a distant, cloud-streaked horizon. Half a mile offshore, one boat started to spray enormous jets of water from either side, curving like gigantic birds’ wings. The singing continued for a while, then the tugs began circling gracefully in the water, and departed, leaving a baffled but entranced crowd on the quayside.

Another day, a seemingly endless crowd of brightly dressed children passed by on bicycles, as though following some cycling Pied Piper; once more, no explanations were to hand. Alongside the banks of the canal, a summer market sold bizarrely delicious food: vast cheeses the size of car wheels, fine artichoke preserves, Serbian sausages and goezy Nutella fritters.

These market stalls were all securely anchored to heavy concrete blocks, and I discovered why when I found a temporary museum of the city’s famous wind, the Bora. Occasionally, but very memorably in wintertime, this freak of climatology shoots snow and ice over Trieste at up to two hundred kilometres an hour.

The museum was full of fascinating pictures and movies; my favourite showed local monks laughing as their wildly flapping

beards slapped their own faces.

The Bora museum hopes to find a permanent home in the city, joining several other unusual attractions, such as the mansion of Baron Revoltella, director of the Suez Canal Company, where an arty concrete extension contrasts most oddly with the Baron’s gorgeously painted interiors and astonishing gold-and-white dining room.

Miramare Castle, wonderfully situated on the coast, is another place with cultural schizophrenia. Designed as a retreat for the Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian and his wife, its interior is all carved wood, antlers and spears, all no doubt de rigueur in 1860s Saxe-Coburg but at odds with the surrounding blue-green Adriatic.

Yet the garden could only be Italian, with romantic colonnades, statues and terraces set into a wooded hillside. Further up the coast, dramatic Castel Duino overlooks an almost Arthurian sea-battered ruin, a favourite spot of the German poet Rilke.

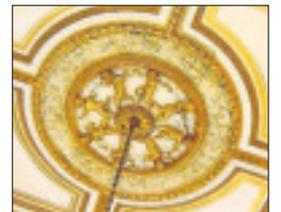
Trieste and its coast is overshadowed by a steeply rising hill which leads to the Carso, a tangled limestone maquis where smoke trees flare scarlet in the autumn.

On my last day, I took a trip up on the antique Opicene tram, which trundles through the city streets, attaches itself to a funicular and quickly climbs to a countrified region of small roads, trees and panoramic views. Once in the Carso, you can seek bunches of green branches hung on home-made signposts. These indicate that you’re near an osmiza, a temporary inn serving home-grown produce for a few days a year.

But unless you know where the osmizza are, and which days they are open, you probably won’t find them. Unobtrusively hidden down tiny lanes, they are unique, unusual, and here today, gone tomorrow – an appropriate speciality for kaleidoscopic Trieste.



Unique ... clockwise from top left, the boat shooting water – an art event in Trieste harbour; the lights of Trieste from the harbour breakwater; a chic pavement cafe; local Theresiana beer, showing the Austrian flag; golden ceiling in the mansion of Baron Revoltella; signposts to osmizza in the Carso outside Trieste.



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