

In a Quiet Corner of Italy ... Trieste



Late afternoon soccer in the Piazza dell'Unità d'Italia, Trieste's central square.

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A MEDIUM-SIZE seaport teetering on the edge of what we recognize as Italy, Trieste is a mysterious and puzzling place. Its iconic central square, the Piazza dell'Unità d'Italia, bounded on three sides by comically pompous 18th- and 19th-century buildings, most of them decorated like big, boxy wedding cakes, is wide open to the Adriatic, as though the ever-changing seascape were an entertainment staged for the city's benefit. This vast, glorious piazza promises all sorts of civic delights, but in fact it's one of the few immediately gratifying spots in Trieste. The rest takes time — exactly what most of us are unwilling to give up.

With a convoluted history of serial conquest, culminating in a century-long tug-of-war between Italy and Austria, a melting-pot population, a street plan that ranges from serenely rational to bewilderingly crooked and steep, and a forbidding limestone plateau crowding it down to the waterfront, Trieste is like a modernist novel — complex, layered, ambiguous. It makes you dig for significance. But don't worry, the story has a happy ending: the patient visitor will go away well satisfied (and wonderfully well fed), rewarded by an experience unavailable to those looking for a quick and easy foreign fix.

Trieste had been misunderstood and unfairly neglected by guidebooks (perhaps inevitably, with the distraction of glittering Venice just 70 miles down the coast), but it has nevertheless found a cult following; among its notable enthusiasts is the travel writer Jan Morris, who decided to devote her final book to a meditation on this “enclave sui generis.” Trieste's greatest native writer, Italo Svevo, whose early career was marked by failure, has acquired a similarly ardent following. His comic masterpiece, once known as “The Confessions of Zeno” (1923) and recently retranslated as “Zeno's Conscience,” a tender, devastating, hilarious portrait of modern man's absurd delusions, is now safely established as a classic of Italian literature; the critic Paul Bailey went so far as to declare it “arguably the greatest comic novel of the 20th century.”

Svevo's most famous sound bite comes from the mouth of Zeno Cosini, the charmingly unreliable hero of "Zeno's Conscience," who blurts out, "Life is neither ugly nor beautiful, but it's original!" A life-size statue of Svevo stands on a Trieste sidewalk near the public library in the pleasant, leafy Piazza Hortis. There's no pedestal, so the bronzed author mingles with the passersby, an immobilized pedestrian, with his character's equivocal, highly quotable insight inscribed on a plaque at his feet: "La vita non è né brutta né bella, ma è originale!" Consider it a usefully compact judgment on Trieste, which certainly isn't ugly, often fails to be beautiful and is proudly unlike any other city in Italy.

Svevo was born in 1861, when Trieste, whose port provided the Austro-Hungarian empire with its gateway to the wide world, was a teeming center of international commerce ruled by Hapsburg monarchs. Though populated by Italians (and Slavs and Greeks), the city was shaped by imperial Austrian design and flavored by a spirit of religious tolerance that allowed for a thriving Jewish community (Svevo's father's family was German Jewish and his mother's Italian Jewish). When Hapsburg grandeur rubs up against a more relaxed Italian style and a higgledy-piggledy mix of ethnic elements joins the fray, the result — as Svevo would say — is original.

Trieste's singularity should be savored slowly, at a relaxed tempo; Jan Morris called it "a loitering kind of place." Other Italian cities at times give the impression that they're preening, putting on a show of architectural splendor; even in the dead of winter they're in a hurry to seduce crowds of chilly tourists. In Trieste, in the off-season, there are few tourists, which means that as you loiter you get the impression that what you're seeing is entirely authentic — a town going about its business as it did yesterday and will again tomorrow.

A gentle stroll through the pedestrianized streets of the Borgo Teresiano, a calming symmetrical arrangement of city blocks bequeathed by the Teutonic sensibilities of 18th-century Austrians, will lead you past dozens of proud neo-Classical facades, some of them tarted up in the course of the 19th century with decorative touches borrowed from the Baroque. Elegant and flamboyant architecture, clean, well-planned thoroughfares, no cars — the setting combines Italian flair with a Germanic regard for well-ordered urban space. But the comingling of national traits makes the city itself somehow resistant to national stereotype, so that even if you find yourself playing the game of teasing out Italian and Austrian elements, you'll end up shrugging your shoulders and agreeing that the ambience is originale.

If it's the hour of the passeggiata, the unmistakably Italian moment between the end of the workday and dinnertime, when the streets are crowded with locals coolly eyeing one another or exchanging effusive greetings in Triestino (the local dialect still in wide use), you'll want to sit for a while at one of the numerous cafes and soak up the daily drama. You'll find that the residents' pride in the excellence of their coffee is entirely warranted, and that the pastry has a Viennese accent — try the strudel if you're feeling peckish. On a pleasant evening it will seem as though the entire population is passing in front of your cafe, traveling at widely divergent speeds, on foot and on bicycle. The elderly make slow, halting progress, as do the proud young couples pushing baby carriages, while the busy professionals hurry along, overtaking the dog walkers and the last-minute shoppers. Is the scene less chaotic than it would be in Naples or Rome or even Florence? Are the Triestines more placid and content, a touch less theatrical than their compatriots? Order a glass of prosecco while you ponder the question and you'll be distracted by the

preposterously generous assortment of nibbles that comes with your drink; in a few days you'll be taking this generosity for granted, a sure sign that Trieste's odd magic is at work.

Triestines are quietly pleased with their city, eager to explain it and to offer advice to curious visitors, which means that it won't be long before you've had several restaurants recommended to you. With any luck, you'll end up in one of the several remaining old-style osterias, cozy little establishments with half a dozen tables crammed with cheerful regulars eating sumptuous plates of pasta cooked up in a tiny kitchen and served by the chef's husband or daughter. Like the population, the local cuisine is a jumble: You might start with a fish tartare, fresh and light as though you were in Sicily, not five miles from the Slovenian border; then try a hearty pork and sauerkraut soup called jota, which can hardly disguise its Central European origins.

IT'S thoroughly appropriate that the career of Trieste's greatest writer was transformed by a foreigner's influence, fortuitous contact with a writer from an entirely different culture: When Svevo at last came to the attention of the critics who proclaimed his genius, it was thanks to James Joyce, who wrote most of "Dubliners," all of "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," and portions of "Ulysses" during the 10 years he lived in Trieste. A statue of Joyce (also life-size, also without a pedestal) stands on a bridge over the Canal Grande, a short walk from the statue of Svevo — a matching pair. It's tempting to imagine that they were bronzed simultaneously, in mid-passeggiata, on their way home from an animated literary conversation in the nearby Caffè San Marco.

They came together by chance, an odd twist in Svevo's already peculiar career. For nearly 20 years, he worked unhappily as a correspondence clerk in the Trieste offices of a Viennese bank. During this time he wrote his first two novels, "A Life" (1892) and "As a Man Grows Older" (1898), both published at his own expense and both politely ignored by the Italian literati. Dismayed, he renounced the writing life, noting in his diary, "I have at this point and definitively eliminated from my life that ridiculous and harmful thing called literature." He joined his wife's parents' thriving family business, which manufactured anti-corrosive marine paint, and became a successful industrialist. He resigned himself to a comfortable bourgeois existence, fashioning stories and fables for his own amusement. He liked to say, "Write one must; what one needn't do is publish."

But into his life strolled James Joyce, a penniless young Irish writer, unpublished yet convinced all the same of his own genius. Having left Dublin in the fall of 1904, Joyce landed in Trieste by accident. He had hoped to get a position teaching English at the Zurich Berlitz school, but in Zurich he had been advised to try Trieste — which is how it came to pass that "Professor Zois" (as he jokingly referred to himself for the benefit of students unable to pronounce Joyce), became Italo Svevo's private tutor, tasked with the job of sprucing up this rich businessman's English.

They liked each other right away, and soon settled into a waltz of sincere mutual admiration — with exceptionally beneficial results for both. Sitting on the terrace of Svevo's villa on the outskirts of the city, Joyce would read aloud the stories that would eventually be collected in "Dubliners." (After listening to "The Dead," Svevo's wife, profoundly moved, cut flowers from her garden so she could present the author with a bouquet.) In time, Svevo revealed that he, too, had literary aspirations, and gave the younger man his two unheralded books. Joyce read them with delight, and promptly declared that his student

was a “neglected writer,” a judgment that encouraged Svevo to write — and publish — “Zeno’s Conscience.” More important, when Italian critics greeted the new novel with yet another collective shrug, Joyce turned the tide by energetically championing what he promptly recognized as Svevo’s best book. Thanks to the Irishman’s intervention, Svevo experienced, at age 65, what he called the literary equivalent of “the resurrection of Lazarus.”

“Zeno’s Conscience” purports to be an autobiography (composed at the request of Zeno’s psychoanalyst), the self-portrait of a middle-aged bourgeois living in Trieste at the beginning of the 20th century. Zeno is a remarkable creation, at once reprehensible and adorable. A philosophically inclined dilettantish eccentric who barely knows himself yet somehow stumbles on eternal truths, a hypochondriac chain smoker forever vowing to quit, a rampantly unfaithful husband helplessly in love with his wife, an incompetent businessman who succeeds willy-nilly — he’s infuriating and absurd and perfectly believable, a comical Everyman who unexpectedly transcends the conflicted consciousness he can’t help monitoring like a doting parent.

Zeno walks all around Trieste (he’s always rushing off, resolved upon a course of action he will reverse when he gets where he’s going), but Svevo writes barely a line of descriptive prose. That’s because his hero is busy fretting about his own hapless misbehavior and unconsummated good intentions, his health, his marriage, his mistress. He never notices his hometown; it’s the invisible backdrop to his farcical psychodrama.

Maybe he has a point — organized sightseeing is not really what you want to do in Trieste. It’s the kind of place where an itinerary, a checklist of monuments, is of little use. Better to be surprised by sights stumbled on serendipitously. Perched up above the old town, for example, next to a large, taciturn fortified castle, is the 14th-century Cathedral of San Giusto, with a sweetly simple facade and a squat Romanesque campanile. Inside the church are pretty Byzantine mosaics carefully restored. Nearby are the scattered remains of the town’s Roman forum. Here at the top of the hill — the colle di San Giusto — the atmosphere is recognizably Italian; there’s even a typically ugly memorial honoring the dead of World War I. The views of the city below and out over the Adriatic are pleasing, but tourists bent on tourism, conditioned by the splendors of Siena, Florence and Rome, will be disappointed.

The most satisfactory tourist attraction in Trieste, other than the Piazza Unità, is the brilliantly situated Castle Miramare, completed in 1860, the princely residence of the Archduke Maximilian, younger brother of the Hapsburg emperor. A gleaming white fairy tale vision, it floats just above the waves on a promontory five miles from the city center — you can see it from the waterfront, looking impossibly romantic, if you’re that way inclined. (Skeptics might mistake it for a pile of crenelated sugar cubes.) The interior is sumptuously appointed, but there are no great artworks, nothing to elevate the pointless acres of paneling, plush and gilt. Miramare has a melancholy history that its brave white dazzle can’t erase: the Archduke had barely finished building his castle when he was shipped across the ocean to become Maximilian I of Mexico, a brief adventure that ended in execution by firing squad.

Trieste has no museum to compare with the great galleries of other Italian cities — no Uffizi, no Accademia. Instead, you’ll find a scattering of Frick-like grand mansions where the 19th-century furnishings have been lovingly preserved, so that an opulent lifestyle is on display alongside the art. There are very few masterpieces on view, but there aren’t any

crowds either, not even at the height of summer, and your admission ticket is good for the whole day, not just an appointed hour. Wandering from one museum to another — and back again after a leisurely lunch (there are a half-dozen restaurants in the immediate neighborhood) — is an unusual and agreeable alternative to the forced march past serried ranks of old masters mobbed by gawping tourists.

A tour of the Museo Revoltella, on Via Diaz, begins with the splendid digs of the Baron Pasquale Revoltella, who grew fabulously rich through the diligent pursuit of classic Triestine enterprises (import-export, insurance) and who enjoyed a standard of living that rivaled the unhappy Maximilian's. Rooms dedicated to the baron's conspicuous consumption — a dining room, for example, that seems to have been spray-painted with 24-karat gold — alternate with more conventional galleries. Don't miss the room that houses a dozen canvases by Giuseppe Tominz (1780-1866), who worked in Trieste for some 25 years and painted canny, meticulously realistic portraits of the local worthies.

A few hundred yards up the hill from the Museo Revoltella is the Museo Sartorio, where again the artworks compete with a family's deluxe domestic furnishings. In this case, however, the art wins hands down. Shut away in a darkened, climate-controlled room on the second floor is the *Trittico di Santa Chiara*, a fabulous 14th-century altarpiece. Up on the third floor is a suite of rooms housing a stunning collection of 254 drawings by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770). Some of the drawings are actually on the wall; the rest are available for inspection in stacks of wide metal drawers. Buried down in the basement, unadvertised, is a newly installed collection of religious art, paintings from the Byzantine to the Baroque plucked from churches in the surrounding countryside.

UNPLANNED, unhurried, uncrowded — tourism in Trieste should be like the epic rambles around town enjoyed by both Svevo and Joyce. From his letters home we know that Joyce at first didn't like Trieste much, yet he lingered for a decade and left only reluctantly, after the outbreak of World War I. I mentioned earlier that Joyce and Svevo's mutual admiration was mutually beneficial — so what did the older man do for his tutor, aside from providing encouragement and much-needed loans? When Joyce conceived of the central character of "Ulysses," the peripatetic Leopold Bloom, Svevo supplied him not only with a hoard of information about Jews and Jewish practices, but also with a live model — himself. Joyce drew on other sources as well, and shaped his material with a novelist's free hand, yet clear glimpses of Svevo remain.

How like Trieste to have nurtured one neglected author, thrown him together with a second author — unpublished and in voluntary exile — and concocted, thanks to this modernist moment, two of the 20th century's cherished classics.