

Pesaro

When on the Italian opera trail, **Marian McGuinness** says, be sure to leave some room for Rossini's birthplace with its pasta, pizzas and world-class festival dedicated to the portly master of the *bel canto*

If music be the food of love, play on... It might sound as if I'm channelling Shakespeare as I sweep southeast by train, skirting majestic hilltop towns en route from Milan in Italy's north to Pesaro on the Adriatic coast, but no – actually I have a hot date with Rossini.

The recurring motif of food and music at each train station is quite serendipitous. First stop, Parma – home of Parmesan cheese and birthplace of Verdi and Toscanini. Second stop, Modena – famous for balsamic vinegar and for producing Luciano Pavarotti. Third stop, Bologna – namesake of the Bolognese sauce we toss our spaghetti in. It also happens to be the birthplace of Respighi.

As my journey is only three-and-a-half hours, I dally in Bologna, leaving my luggage in a locker at the train station. Bologna is a UNESCO City of Music where Claudio Abbado was artistic director of the Orchestra Mozart until his death in 2014. There is another attraction a short taxi ride away – in the heart of Bologna's historic centre is the magnificent multi-storeyed music museum.

After a couple of hours of musical bliss I'm back on the train weaving towards the Adriatic coast. Soon, the turquoise seascape out my window plays like the opening of a 1950s Italian film while the train's orchestration provides the soundtrack. After a brief stop at the resort town of Rimini, we reach Pesaro, birthplace of Gioachino Rossini and home of the Rossini Opera Festival.

The waft of sea air invigorates me as I alight with families of excited holidaymakers. They are not the only passengers. From the foreign phrases within earshot, I'm going to share Pesaro with music enthusiasts from all over the world who have come to savour the annual Rossini Opera Festival (ROF).

Pesaro is in the region of Le Marche, one of Italy's lesser-known provinces. As well as Rossini, Pesaro begat the great 19th-century author, Giacomo Leopardi and visionary educator, Maria Montessori. It was also the summer residence of Luciano Pavarotti.

With its 'coastal hills to the sea' topography, Pesaro is surprisingly flat, making it excellent to explore on foot. It doesn't take long to familiarise myself with its layout. At its heart lies the café-rimmed main square, Piazza del Popolo, with its sea-themed fountain and 15th-century Palazzo Ducale (Ducal Palace).

Close by, within the Palazzo Olivieri, is a part of the official Rossini trail: the Tempietto Rossiniano (marble temple) is the seat of the Rossini Foundation. Harboured within its Pompeian-motifed ceilings are the manuscripts of Rossini's operas first staged in Naples, as well as letters and collected mementos.

Radiating outwards from Piazza del Popolo, the broad avenues of Viale Giuseppe Verdi and Viale Pietro Mascagni, lead to the sea. I wander past florid, elegant villas that evolved during the era of the Grand Tour, their pastel facades adorned with seashells,



TRAVEL INFO**Average Temperatures:**

Winter: 6°C – Summer: 25°C

Currency: Euro (AU\$1=EUR0.69)**Best time to visit:** If you are an Italian opera lover you would be 'pazzo' not to come for the Rossini Festival, August 10-22.**TOURIST INFORMATION**www.comune.pesaro.pu.it

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Piazza del Popolo with fountain and Palazzo Ducale



cornhusks and bowers of fruit while lush gardens tendril through wrought-iron gates.

I turn into Via Rossini, where crumbling 14th-century palazzi lead to the humble house at number 34, where on February 29, 1792, Gioachino Rossini was born. "Give me a laundry-list and I'll set it to music," reads the quip on a bookmark I pick up in the foyer as I pay to enter. It sets the tone for the

"GIVE ME A LAUNDRY-LIST AND I'LL SET IT TO MUSIC, READS THE QUIP ON A BOOKMARK"

composer's visual biography within the three floors of this shrine where you can ponder the cornucopia of prints, engravings, letters, caricatures and manuscripts. Under the window on the first floor is the spinet, used by Rossini while studying in Bologna.

Rossini never forgot his birthplace. He named Pesaro heir to his estate with the aim of creating an institute for the study of music. Pesaro embraced its benefactor and is now indeed Rossini-town. The maestro's hooded, humorous eyes follow you everywhere. Shop windows are festooned with Rossini-themed goods such as chocolates, pottery opera sets, figurines and children's clothing embroidered with "I love Rossini".

There's a symbiotic relationship between beach and music as the swimsuit-clad and smartly-dressed peruse the Rossini literature at pop-up bookstalls. Many music shops specialise in Rossini scores less expensive than elsewhere. Food and music come into play again in Pesaro. Anecdotes abound of Rossini's gastronomic palate and many 'alla Rossini' recipes are on offer including Pizza Rossini, a plain Margherita topped with sliced

boiled eggs plus a stave and treble clef of lemon mayonnaise.

With its seven kilometres of beach, Pesaro is the set of its own opera. Dressed only in Euro-style bathers, men of all physical geographies ride past on rickety, rusty bikes. Bronzed holidaymakers gather in Piazza della Libertà next to the Palla di Pomodoro, the giant metallic sphere

(below). Lit by the sun and reflecting the sea, the sculpture pivots in line with the horizon. Nicknamed "The Big Tomato", after its creator Arnaldo Pomodoro, it has siblings in the Vatican, Trinity College, the Kremlin and UN Headquarters. You can walk in ankle-deep water along the beach passing ranks of sun lounges wedged under bright umbrellas while watching volleyball and tennis being played in the shallows.

But I'm off to take my seat in the gilded wedding cake of Teatro Rossini to see *Il Viaggio a Reims*, Rossini's last Italian opera that premiered in Paris in 1825. The score was lost for nearly 150 years and now it features each year in the festival. And it's

hilarious. It's *Seinfeld* meets *Big Brother* that collides with *Murphy's Law* as 14 well-to-do people of different nationalities gather at a spa hotel to travel to Reims for the coronation of King Charles X.

In the audience I recognise several of the nut-brown bathers, now in crisp shirts and jackets. They are making the most of their R & R – Relaxation & Rossini. The ROF has an impressive litany of past conductors from Abbado, Chailly, Jurowski and Norrington to several of our own Sydney Symphony chief conductors: Mackerras, Gelmetti, Ashkenazy and Robertson. In 2013, our home-grown maestro, Daniel Smith, conducted here. After the performance I'm introduced to Alberto Zedda, the 86-year-old artistic director of the ROF. He is music personified. Nicknamed "Master Yoda" for his stature and wisdom, Zedda deserves his own story in the Rossini revival. In *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, as with other scores, Zedda's life's work of sourcing, interpreting and revising has produced scores faithful to Rossini's autograph.

After a night of comic entertainment, I head back to my hotel along the sea-fronted Viale Trieste. Opera has morphed into disco. Each grandiose hotel I pass has an outdoor dance floor gyrating with white-flared patrons. Mirror balls twirl to the rhythms of *The Nutbush*, *The Hustle* and *Macarena*. Pesaro knows how to party, whether it's *Puttin' on the Ritz* or Rossini. ●



Rossini Opera Festival

Each year between the 10th and 22nd of August, the summer season of the ROF takes place in Pesaro. Established in 1980, it is the only international opera festival wholly devoted to the music of Rossini (Germany's Wildbad festival honours Rossini among other composers of *bel canto*). The ROF has a reputation for innovative, and sometimes controversial, productions where it juxtaposes

re-discovered and revised masterpieces alongside familiar favourites. The 2015 festival, in its three spectacular venues, will feature: *La Gazza Ladra* (The Thieving Magpie), *La Gazzetta* (The Newspaper), *L'Inganno Felice* (The Fortunate Deception) and *Il Viaggio a Reims* (The Journey to Reims). And if you're up for a moonlit dip in the tepid waters of the Adriatic in the early morning hours, you might just bump into some of the cast.