



THE CITY AT THE END ON THE RIGHT

Long written off as a Habsburgian backwater, Trieste is now a Somewhere again. It's also become the launch pad for some of the biggest names in fashion.
Lee Marshall reports

Photography by *Camilla Glorioso*

W *e triestini* always used to tell ourselves that Trieste was *la città in fondo a destra*, 'the city at the end on the right,' says Barbara Franchin. "Now we're starting to wake up to the fact that we're slap-bang in the middle of things." Franchin is the president and artistic director of ITS Foundation – International Talent Support, a Trieste-based foundation known principally for its annual ITS Contest, first held in 2002. A global competition for young fashion, accessories and jewellery designers that culminates in a starry gala, the prize has established itself as a major scouting platform for emerging talents: previous finalists include two of the fashion world's hottest creative directors, Bottega Veneta's Matthieu Blazy and Demna at Balenciaga.

But ITS is now broadening its horizons, helped along by funding from Friuli-Venezia Giulia, the north-eastern Italian border region of which Trieste is capital. In April, the foundation will open the ITS Arcademy, Museum of Art in Fashion on the fourth floor of a grand late-19th-century former bank HQ in central Trieste.

That extra "R" in the name is no typo: in Franchin's words, this new space will act variously as "academy, ark and archive". It will also give visitors to Trieste one more reason to visit a city that is having a bit of a moment more than a century on from its high-water mark as the Habsburg Empire's maritime gateway to the world.

In its 20-year existence, ITS has received more than 14,000 portfolios from fashion, design and photography school students – in folders, in suitcases, in a box made of ice, even inside a balloon. All have been preserved – as have the prototype garments, accessories and photo projects that the finalists (688 to date) produced for the award show. Olivier Saillard, former director of the Palais Galliera fashion museum in Paris, has been tasked with mining the storerooms to create an exhibition.

Vistors should not come expecting the usual display of togs down the ages. Saillard characterises the space he has curated as "the first fashion museum entirely dedicated to the most contemporary forms and expressions of our time," and Franchin likes to stress the

The seafront of Trieste at sunset, looking towards the Stazione Marittima. Left: Palazzo Gopcevič near the harbour

“Art” part of the new museum’s name. “I’m not a fashion victim, I don’t go to the Milan shows, I don’t follow models,” she states. “What interests me is creativity, and the way people use clothes to tell stories.”

Some of these stories are sketched out near the start of the visitor’s route, in a library lined from floor to ceiling with folders containing portfolios sent by hopeful candidates each year. At its centre a selection of past finalists’ projects are displayed. Tomohiro Sato, a Japanese finalist from 2013, imagined an entire theme park designed to soothe the soul of his grandfather, who died in pain. A 2020 project by Israeli finalist Aharon Israel Genish explores his personal experience of being sexually abused by a rabbi in the ultra-Orthodox community. Touring the ITS museum, you’re constantly reminded that clothes, unlike paintings or video art, touch our skin.

Through its connection to emerging young global creatives, the new Trieste institution (which has a strong educational remit) is also in the business of “detecting possible futures”, as Franchin puts it – futures which are charted in ITS’s online magazine *The Seismographer*. 2020, she tells me, was full of entries that referenced masks or protective wear; 2021 was what she calls the “whatever I can find in my house” year, while around four out of 10 finalists in 2022 referenced grandparents in some way, a development Franchin associates both with the risk of losing them and the fact that “in a world that parents have messed up, grandparents become the heroes.”

It seems appropriate that a cultural space that’s all about using fashion to construct narratives should be opening in a city that Italian poet and Nobel Prize winner Eugenio Montale once referred to as “the sole Italian city that derived its glory from its writers”.



James Joyce lived in Trieste on and off between 1904 and 1915, scraping a living teaching English while working on *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*; one of his students was Italo Svevo, author of the shapeshifting confessional novel *Zeno’s Conscience*. Next door to the school and Joyce’s cramped family apartment, Umberto Saba, one of Italy’s greatest inter-war poets, ran an antiquarian bookshop, which still exists. Back then, Trieste was a thriving ethnic, financial and cultural crossroads. Joyce described it as “Europiccola” – all of Europe in one small package. After the second world war, however, Trieste found itself at the end of a narrow land corridor surrounded by Yugoslav territory. As viewed from Rome, it became “*la città in fondo a destra*”, and although it continued to turn out writers – such as Claudio Magris, author of the epic literary travelogue *Danube* – its cultural and multicultural golden age felt like a thing of the past. By the time I first visited in 2002, the year when Jan Morris’s book *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* consecrated the city as a one-



Above: Barbara Franchin, president and artistic director of ITS, in the ITS library. Left: an alleyway in the Cavana district. Far left: a bartender at work at the Caffè San Marco

stop existential ennui shop, even the glorious Viennese-style Caffè San Marco, which had counted Joyce and Svevo among its *habitués*, was reduced to showing live Serie A football matches on a giant screen.

Soon afterwards, however, Trieste started to feel like a Somewhere again. Slovenia’s induction into the European Union in 2004 restored some of its old breathing space, and tourism began to pick up. Fabio Accurso, a classical lute player I met while taking in a gig by a French-Croatian drum and synthesiser duo in a downtown café and music venue called Knulp (all very Trieste) confided that “20 years back, you’d often emerge from the train at Trieste station and it would be just you or maybe a couple of others, because everyone else had got off in Venice... now you’re one of dozens.” Barbara Franchin concurs: “all you hear these days is the sound of suitcase trolley wheels.”

Though it’s still behind the curve, the city’s hotel scene is slowly getting up to speed. Hotelier Guido Guidi of upcoming Italian group The Begin Hotels took over the running of The Modernist and two other Trieste four-stars in the summer of 2021. Guidi believes that Trieste is currently well placed to attract investments “in all kinds of fields... it’s international, it’s a melting pot, it’s smart and innovative, it can be elegant or rock ‘n’ roll according to your mood.” International hospitality players have also been circling: in 2025, Ennismore is set to open a 160-room Trieste 25hours hotel (their tagline: “A 25hours hotel in every cool city”) in a huge late-19th-century pile formerly owned by Italy’s state railways.

Even Trieste’s grandest old-style grand hotel, the venerable Duchi d’Aosta in Piazza Unità d’Italia, has pulled its socks up, refreshing its interiors and drafting in a pair of young chefs, Matteo Metullio and Davide De Pra, who led the hotel’s gourmet restaurant Harry’s Piccolo to two Michelin stars – a first for the city.

Harry’s Piccolo and the oh-so-Viennese Caffè degli Specchi on the other side of Piazza Unità d’Italia are today the twin pillars of Trieste’s upscale dining and lounging scene. But the city’s most famous open space is too staid – and vast – to host an evening *movida*. For that, you need to head a couple of blocks south-west to Cavana, an ancient district laid out in the Middle Ages. The narrow lanes leading off pedestrianised Via di Cavana, or winding up the hill from here to the city’s

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rather aloof cathedral, are full of artisanal shops, bars and osterias like the engaging Cemüt, which specialises in wines and snacks from Friuli.

The Cavana scene is currently pushing ever further south-west towards the great wharves of the city’s thriving commercial port (where you’ll see Stazione Rogers, a cute petrol station designed in the early ‘50s by pioneering modernist architect Ernesto Nathan Rogers, which has been restored and repurposed as a café and events space). Visitors to Trieste are unlikely to have a reason to go inside the port itself – and yet this sprawl of warehouses, railways sidings and huge cranes, lying little more than a hawser toss away from city-centre attractions like the Museo Revoltella, is one of the big reasons Trieste is so vibrant right now.

Well-liked by most *triestini* as well as his business peers, port president Zeno D’Agostino was unanimously elected president of the European Sea Ports Authority in November 2022. A pragmatist with a dry sense of humour, he received a visit from the then US ambassador to Italy Lewis M Eisenberg in December 2019, just after D’Agostino had come back from signing a memorandum of understanding in Shanghai. The US diplomat wanted to know what China could possibly bring to Trieste. “The American ambassador,” D’Agostino shot back. Under his watch, the port has proven to be able at navigating today’s choppy geopolitical waters. Pandemic-fuelled phenomena such as nearshoring (finding a closer source of what you need) and dual-sourcing (putting a fallback supply in place) mean Trieste is well-placed to benefit from Mediterranean container traffic that doesn’t need to pass through the Suez Canal. Turkey, for example, had taken over some of the Far East’s manufacturing clout – and just prior to the earthquake D’Agostino estimated that 70 per cent

How to spend it in Trieste

STAY

THE MODERNIST The cool contemporary bedrooms (below) come with literary quotes stencilled on the ceiling, but it's the street-level Bistrò that's the heart of this central four-star. themodernisthotel.it



GRAND HOTEL DUCHI

D'AOSTA A 2021 refurb lightened up this venerable five-star on Trieste's sea-facing Piazza Unità d'Italia (below) – but Rubelli and Bevilacqua fabrics and lashings of marble keep the luxe cachet intact. [Duchidaosta.com](http://duchidaosta.com)



EAT & DRINK

HARRY'S PICCOLO

Attached to the Duchi d'Aosta, this hushed sanctuary for serious foodies is the ne plus ultra of Triestine dining experiences: two young chefs, eight tables, no more than 24 covers. harrystrieste.it



CAFFÈ SAN MARCO One of Europe's great literary cafés (above), with a jewel-box interior and a busy schedule of events. The own-brand coffee ain't half bad either. caffesanmarco.com

CHIMERA DI BACCO With its elegant French-touch decor, this friendly, family-run seafood restaurant in the old Jewish ghetto hits the

perfect balance between tasty and refined. chimeradibacco.com

BUFFET DA PEPI Since 1897 this city-centre stalwart has been one of the upholders of Trieste's bollito misto (boiled meat) tradition. Tuck in that napkin and tuck in. buffetdapepi.it

CEMÛT Where the Cavana district starts to climb to the lofty old city, this young and simpatico wine bar (below) specialises in artisanal producers from Friuli. facebook.com/cemuttrieste



GIOVINOTO A good quick-lunch fallback, this deli and wine bar in the Borgo Teresiano district serves a selection of simple fresh dishes in mason jars. giovinoto.easy-delivery.it

LA BOMBONIERA Trieste's Austro-Hungarian heritage comes through in this exquisite historic café and cake shop with its ornate interior in carved and inlaid wood. *Via Trenta Ottobre 3, +39040-632752*

CULTURE AND CURIOS

MUSEO REVOLTELLA A 19th-century baron founded this fascinating art museum, which extends from his own neo-Renaissance palazzo to a newer wing with a rooftop gallery designed by Carlo Scarpa. museorevoltella.it

ITS ARCADEMY, MUSEUM OF ART IN FASHION itsweb.org

MUSEO DELLA BORA The passion project of copywriter Rino Lombardi, this delightful space is packed full of art, facts and artefacts relating to Trieste's north-easterly wind, *la bora*. Among its charms is a cupboardful of bottled winds from all over the world. museobora.org



“TRIESTE IS BECOMING A TRUE MULTICULTURAL CITY AGAIN”

of all Turkish goods coming into Europe currently passed through Trieste. How the disaster will affect that figure remains to be seen.

Trieste's rapport with the sea comes through as well in the Barcolana, a colourful October regatta that is one of the most crowded in the world. It's there in locals' love of their *bagni* – urban bathing establishments like the famous El Pedocin, which still has a wall on the beach separating its men's and women's sections (calls to remove it have so far been resisted – especially by women). As *triestina* film director Laura Samani points out, “in summer, people come out of their offices already wearing flip flops, and head straight for the beach.”

Samani, whose ravishing debut feature *Small Body* recently won the European Discovery prize at the 2022 European Film Awards, has been living in Rome for 10 years, but can't get her hometown out of her system – so much so that her next film, a coming-of-age drama currently in development, “will see Trieste become very much a character in its own right”.

She advises visitors to look beyond the pomp and circumstance of its grand monumental buildings and explore instead the Karst plateau behind the city, steeped in an Italo-Slovene rural culture that is a world (but only 20 minutes' drive) away from central Trieste; or to check out the city's vibrant street art and grassroots theatre and music scene, which thrives in repurposed urban spaces like Hangar Teatri, not far from the University.

The University is just one small part of the mosaic of over 30 Italian and international educational and research institutions that have earned Trieste the title of “City of Science”, and the distinction of being the European city with the highest proportion of researchers per head. Among them are SISSA – a kind of elite university for mathematicians, physicists and neuroscientists – and the Abdus Salam International Centre for Theoretical Physics, located near the Habsburg-era Miramare Castle Park north-west of the city. It was set up in 1964 by Nobel Prize-winning Pakistani physicist Abdus Salam – one of many global creative minds who've felt at home in this border city with its long experience of cultural coexistence.

You've only to look at the doorbells to realise that Trieste, which has a substantial Slovenian-speaking minority, is not your average Italian city. For most of the last century, in among the Rossis, Fondas, Vascottos and



Top: film director Laura Samani on the seafront – blown about by “la bora” wind. Above: the Serbian orthodox church the Santissima Trinità

Degrassis, you'd see a sprinkle of Cosloviches, a Poropat, perhaps a Hirsch or a Steiner. Today, they're joined by Chens and Diops, Smiths, Duponts and Bensaïds. “Trieste is becoming a true multicultural city once more,” says Nicoletta Romeo, artistic director of the Trieste Film Festival – a January event which itself has long promoted cross-border love, with its focus on Central and Eastern European cinema and well-attended “When East Meets West” forum for producers and industry professionals.

On Laura Samani's advice, I decide to give the Caffè San Marco another try, 20 years on from my last visit. It's a complete joy. The interior, created in 1914 in the Vienna Secession style, has been restored, down to the smallest leaf on the coffee-plant frieze that runs around the perimeter. One wing is now a bookshop where talks, readings and concerts take place. They even make and sell their own brand of coffee, buying green beans from family-owned importer Sandalj (a legend among serious baristas). The change is down to Alexandros Delithanassis, a triestino publisher of Greek origins who reopened the historic café in 2013 after a year of closure. “Alexandros has returned the San Marco to its origins as a salon,” says Samani, who grew up just across the road. “And he's brilliant at connecting people.”

“What's interesting about Trieste right now,” Barbara Franchin confides over a soul-warming plate of chitarra pasta in crab and tomato sauce at ever-popular Cavana dining fixture Chimera di Bacco, “is that a lot of people have come here to live and do interesting things without bothering too much about the city's so-called difference. Trieste is no longer an exception. It's just a very good place to live and be creative.” ■HTSI