

# THE HILLS OF BOLOGNA

## A trip outside the walls in a pair of **RUNNING SHOES**

by Jon Rosen

After my first few weeks in Bologna, following numerous slogs around the traffic-infested *viale* and through the winding streets of the *centro storico*, I was almost ready to give up on running in this town. The air was thick, the motorists unforgiving, the terrain uneven and—in some cases—plagued with less than desirable offerings of the local canine population. Committed, nonetheless, to combat the deleterious effects of pre-term microeconomics with the relaxation of a daily run, I began to contemplate what would bring about my end first: Speeding *motorini*? Or wayward dog—in local slang, *bestia*?

One evening, in the mood for some exploring, I decided to head south from my apartment, into what before then I had not known existed: the *colline*, or hills, of Bologna. Just ten minutes of running southeast of the city walls, and I was already in what felt like the heart of the countryside: on a winding, mountain road, flanked by vineyards, country manors, and striking views of Bologna and its environs. Over the course of the year, for myself and a handful of similarly-inclined SAIS Bologna students, these hills, and the small villages they unveiled, would become an integral part of our *bolognese* existence.

While the *bolognese* hills are full of hidden gems, the crown jewel is undoubtedly the Sanctuary of the *Madonna di San Luca*, the 18th century basilica atop *Monte della Guardia*, 300 meters above Bologna and accessible by road or by a walk—or run—up its winding porticoed stairway.

“My introduction to the hills was running up to San Luca,” says Megan Sheehan (BC08, U.S.), who completed two marathons and four half-marathons while living in Bologna. “At first I tried running through the city, but I felt a little out of place passing by outdoor cafés in my spandex and visor. Then I tried the *Giardini Margherita* (the park at the edge of town), but got bored just running laps.” When she finally tried San Luca, she says the view from the top made her realize there was a lot more to be explored. “So I returned,” she explains, “and kept going further—taking new turns, past fields and farmhouses, and following road signs through ‘towns’ that are really just a couple of houses. It’s a great way to breathe some fresh air.”

According to Anna Cavina, adjunct professor of Italian Art History at the Bologna Center, local runners, cyclists, trekkers, and others who enjoy Bologna’s hillsides owe a debt of gratitude to the Communist party that came to power in Bologna at the end of World War II. In order to preserve both the *centro storico* and the nearby hills, the government, with the backing of local architects and intellectuals, implemented a set of rigid construction guidelines that restricted local development. In the center, city government mandated that any buildings to be restored

had to be done so in their original style, and in the hills, new homes could only be constructed on plots of land greater than 20 hectares. Since most plots were smaller than this, this effectively acted as a ban on new construction.

“Bologna was the first Italian town to systematically preserve its hillsides,” Cavina says. “Today, by contrast, the entire hills of Naples are filled with houses.” Lacking the traditional nobility of cities like Florence or Venice, the villas that dot the *bolognese* hillsides tend to be smaller, and less extravagant, than their Tuscan or Venetian counterparts. Still, Cavina admits, “it’s a great privilege to be just outside of town and be in such a preserved area. Few other cities can demonstrate such exemplar preservation.”

Yet, despite their unquestionable beauty—and marked contrast to the fast-paced city center—the hills aren’t for all of those inclined to run while in Bologna. Josh Ruhl (BC08, U.S.), for one, prefers to unwind from a stressful day at school by running a loop of the *viale*, the septagonal boulevard that encircles Bologna’s historical center. “Every other night, around midnight, I run one loop around the city,” Ruhl explains. “By that time, the traffic is light, and it’s actually kind of peaceful. I guess I just like the consistency of it. I know how far and how fast I am going every time.” ■

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View of the Sanctuary of the *Madonna di San Luca* from Bologna’s surrounding hills