

## **A Girl and Her Bicycle: Udine**

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This is the first in a series of *A Girl and Her Bicycle*. This adventure will take us through the city of Udine in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Italy. The story follows the daily adventures of a girl blending in with the locals to explore and live in the city she calls home. Through her point of view, your imagination should be active as you picture the sights described here in your own mind. Let's begin.

Starting her morning early, the girl enjoys her espresso and croissant at the local café newly opened on the roundabout of via Chiusaforte. Locals in Udine start their day early in order to finish their work and errands in time for lunch; following their lead, our protagonist pays for her coffee and hops onto her bike into town. Avoiding the traffic of the hospital in the morning, the girl decides to pedal down via Freschi to take the bike path southbound on via del Cotonificio. She pedals alongside the traffic passing by the old cotton factory, that which lent its name to the street, out of commission for years like so many other production firms in the town. Now, merging onto via Martignacco, she passes by one of the many canals in the city, which add to the Venetian vibe that still resounds to this day in Udine. The sunlight, at this time in the morning, shines between the trees lining the length of the canal as the freshly baked pastry smell wafts in the air from Carlet. Our protagonist must abstain from her urge to have a second breakfast and continue pedalling on. Approaching the roundabout, cyclists must yield to oncoming traffic for their own safety. Once the coast is clear, the girl gains speed and makes her way back onto the cycling path on via Moro. She waves to the gentleman who owns Cuor di Panna, her favourite *gelateria* in town. She will most likely come back in the evening

to take a litre of the heavenly chocolate flavour home. Via Moro merges with via Mantica and our protagonist stops and parks her bike in front of the university building. As she walks into Mantica, she is greeted by the reception staff and the throngs of student smokers outside of the grand wooden doors.

Entering the building our protagonist attends her class of the day. A couple hours later she makes her way into the courtyard connecting Mantica to Palazzo Antonini. The gardens are lush green today and many students have decided to sit and read or socialize on the benches. She stops for a moment to admire the main foyer of the *palazzo*, the wooden beams stretching across the ceiling and the blue, white and red shield of Udine atop the left doorframe. To her it almost mimics the PepsiCo logo. Continuing through Palazzo Antonini, she finds herself famished and decides to enjoy a student favourite for lunch. Grateful that she wore comfortable sneakers today, since walking in the city centre would be uncomfortable without proper support, she makes her way down the narrow sidewalk of via Gemona to Piadina Mia. The students crowd the popular lunch spot and the girl is greeted by the friendly owners and orders her *rotolo* to go. Walking back to her bike she munches on the *rotolo* and greets a few colleagues sitting in the piazza in front of Palazzo Antonini. The *piazza* has a simple bubbling fountain with an older stone arch now used as an entryway for a garage. The contrast between the old and the new in this city is ever present.

Hopping back on her bike the protagonist leaves the smooth paved roads from this morning and starts her way further into the city centre on the beautiful but sometimes painful cobblestones. She learned from her first week that shock absorbers and a seat cushion would be a necessity. Biking down via Bartolini one could stop by the canal and

take a faux-Venice photo, as many tourists seem to do in that spot. Or just a few steps further is the town library. With three sections in the three different buildings one could walk into Palazzo Bartolini and admire the busts and archives on display for the public. The stairs inside the *palazzo* are grandiose, giving the students the sense of true academic importance as they make their way into the building to study.

Today the girl decides that she will walk her bike along the historic via Mercatovecchio after passing the library. This street has limited traffic, allowing other cyclists the privilege to bike down the wide cobblestone street only keeping an eye out for busses or pedestrians. Taking a stroll down this street, one may notice the beauty of the shops with their high-end fashion displays and the archway which they are situated under, but very rarely does anyone let their gaze wander upwards to admire the buildings themselves. With worn out frescoes decorating the buildings and many houses now boarded up and vacant, the city is silently calling for a restoration project. In fact, many of the arcades and pillars in the city centre have traces of frescoes and ornamented designs, some become replaced, some still there underappreciated by the population always on the go. Another contrast of new and old, fashion fades, but beauty is forever and that has never been a truer statement for via Mercatovecchio.

Finally, the girl arrives to Piazza Libert . la Loggia del Lionello. Its columns and pointed arches are what have remained from the Venetian Rule of the city; the rose-coloured stone against the white give it a warm and welcoming aura. This structure is part of city hall; it has been merged to the new part of the building which again contrasts the new against the old. Inside La Loggia one might come across tango classes, public readings, wedding shows or even recently: pop music videos. Now turning

towards the hill the girl parks her bike against the railing leading up to the castle. The castle, which is now home to the archeology museum, is situated on the only hill in the whole city. The myth goes as follows: Attila the Hun ordered his soldiers to fill their helmets with dirt to construct a hill in order to watch neighbouring Aquileia burn.

As she approaches the gate, on top of the entrance she notices the winged lion of San Marco, symbol of Venice. On the ground is the shield of Udine. Taking the stairs up to the top our protagonist finds herself out of breath, but not from the physical task itself, rather from the outstanding views on a clear day from the top. From any side of the hill one can admire the beauty of the region, the Alps that surround the city, the red clay rooftops of the town and the fountain of Piazza Primo Maggio down below. The bar on the lawn of the castle is usually filled at this hour; many businesswomen and men have a seat outside and enjoy their *spritz aperol* or *ugo*. No student would ever be found up here with a drink in hand as they would opt for a less expensive option down in Piazza San Giacomo.

Our protagonist now walks back down the ramp and finds a hidden bubbling fountain on the side of the castle walls; she cannot help but wonder what types of magical stories have happened in this very spot. Walking down the ramp she notices in the arcade some young adolescent romances, some newly arrived immigrants and some elderly men, all sitting on various benches. These scenes in front of her capture the essence of Udine in this century. The clock strikes two pm now and the girl looks up to admire the buttocks of the two bronze statues that ring the bell. A running joke between her classmates is to achieve that perfect gluteus form, which was an aesthetics admired centuries ago and now

has made its return to the current generation. Once more the girl thinks about the contrast of the new and the old.

The girl now unlocks her bicycle and makes her way to Piazza San Giacomo, a square surrounded by bars and cafés. Children swarm the fountain in the middle during the day and young adults cozy up there after the sun sets. It was recently host to a scene in a recent Italian film titled *Un Bacio*. Walking around this square is as uncomfortable as biking across it, not only because of the number of people present, but also because of the round stones that make up the pathways. The locals will normally sit at a bar in the sunlight. Therefore, depending on the rotation of the sun throughout the day, the bar owners will either turn a profit or be left hanging. It's quite amusing to walk through the *piazza* at different times of the day to see where the crowd has shifted. The houses above the bars are rumoured to cost hundreds of thousand Euros, some even millions depending on the recent restoration done to the interior. But their façades is what makes for the ideal backdrop to have a glass of wine.

The girl and her bicycle do not find any of her friends so she starts her round at the bars outside of the square. La Bicietta, known for its addictive fries, La Polse, where one can order a bruschetta and wine for just one euro, and Glass, where they infamously 'lose' a few glasses every week, are the normal hotspots for students. By contrast you can usually find the older generations enjoying a Sicilian treat at Dusci, usually after they've walked out of mass from San Pietro Martire, a slightly easy to miss but grandiose church in the heart of the city centre.

Aside from the one Austrian tour group there aren't usually tourists flooding the city and our protagonist fell in love with the city for that reason. She had the opportunity to live an authentic local experience and in contrast to neighbouring Venice or Trieste, which are flogged by tourists. In Udine, she can stop and admire the city when she stumbles upon a new angle of beauty without having to say 'no' to selfie sticks or be trampled over by tour groups. Occasionally on weekends, non-city dwellers come into town, but they add to the life rather than take away from it.

Our protagonist realizes her lunch break has gone on long enough and decides to bike to the nearest Despar to buy some groceries. Loading up her bicycle's basket, she rides off away from Piazzale Osoppo and the traffic back home to study. She passes her first apartment on via Forni di Sotto in the city where she created fond memories, and learned to block out the ever-present ambulance sirens. She smiles while gazing up. Someone honks at her as if telling her to pay attention. She comes back to reality and decides tomorrow at lunch to visit the Duomo to admire the frescoes in the bell tower once more. But today, we leave her as she rides off home.