



remained open, with its outdoor heating and couples smoking cigarettes in the fading February light. It was the biggest gathering of people I had seen. "We'll close when they come here and tell us to close," one waiter told me, defiantly setting down two Aperol spritzes.

Meanwhile, forlorn Deliveroo cyclists huffed away as they pedalled the streets amid the most intense shift of their lives.

Tourism had gone and those left behind faltered between hiding behind closed doors and going out into the night, determined not to give in to the panic.

But as the week went on, ordinary Italians became less afraid and moved to occupy the spaces left behind, as Giuseppe Conte, the prime minister, told Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* that it was "time to turn down the tone, we need to stop panic".

I read that the air in Milan city centre, which had previously been reported as having one of the worst levels of atmospheric pollution in Europe, was cleaner thanks to the shutdown. It certainly seemed crisp, a world away from the grime of Victoria in London, my usual workplace. My skin felt noticeably cleaner.

While tourist attractions such as Castello Sforzesco remained closed, the odd person could be caught wandering around its 15th-century courtyard, while white blossoms fell from the trees in the Parco Sempione. For the few tourists who had remained and ventured outdoors their holiday snaps featured just them and the citadel,

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not countless strangers trying to capture the same image.

By Thursday the sun shone brightly and the parks began to fill with Milanese. With universities closed, groups of friends played music in the sunshine. Professionals had swapped their nine-to-fives, told instead to "smart work" - which seemed to include reading in the open air and jogging with friends. With no other customers to compete with, espressos were served at coffee bars in record time. In the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II there were no queues for gelato. Children could stand and sample - with separate spoons of course - the coffee and walnut and berry ices.

The metro was empty, but who needed it? I could walk from one end of the city to the other, entirely uninterrupted. The quiet roads were lined with flowers and pink stone walls - no one on scooters and no wheelchair cases.

I explored the book shops and pretty restaurants lining the canal in Navigli, then sat beside the water with a book and a cappuccino as men fished. I tried to imagine it in the height of summer, a cosmos of families and friends sharing pizza with messy hands.

One evening I took a moment to sit and watch the sun hitting the spires of the Duomo di Milano. No one tried to sell me a souvenir, and there wasn't a busker in sight.

But by the end of my extended stay the city was slowly returning to its usual self. "You can see it is a lot better today, the attitude is changing," Roberta Perandini, a tour guide for Open Tour Milan, told me as we watched a large group of visitors taking pictures in front of the Duomo. "Milan is Milano. It is the train of Italy."

The chaos is not over, especially for those infected or who are at risk of losing their business, but there was a sense of light at the end of the tunnel. At the airport, finally, I overheard an employee: "I look forward to it being finished - I want to sneeze normally again."

The view from New York

It's business as usual in New York City. The gourmet market Zabar's, an Upper West Side institution at 80th and Broadway, experienced its usual crowds as locals queued at the deli counter. New Yorkers continue to use public transit, because as a native said, "How are people going to get around"? The MTA plans to sanitise train cars every few days, so the NYC subway may be cleaner than ever before. Tracy Kaler



In Lombardy, approaching one of the 11 towns on lockdown offered a stark contrast. Locked school gates, empty car parks, shuttered shops. No people, just shadows - a washing line filled with clothes, a dog hiding in an archway. And yet, there was something oddly serene about the deserted streets lined with homes painted in rusty pinks, oranges and yellows.

I called a restaurant nearby to ask if it was open. Google had been struggling to keep up with the road closures - which meant a five-minute drive became 30 minutes, then 35 - let alone the changing hours of restaurants, bars and hotels. "Only for the brave," laughed the woman down the phone.

Back in the city, chaos prevailed. Supermarkets were emptied as families stockpiled, battering down the hatches for a storm they could not see. Pharmacies had makeshift signs: "No gel and no masks". Face masks had caught on at an alarming rate. Yes, their effectiveness is doubted, and a few Italians were snubbing them - but why not try?

Empty tour buses slipped through the streets like ghost trains. Waiters stood outside restaurants twiddling their thumbs. I saw one venue spraying disinfectant on the hands of customers before permitting them entry.

Most bars, cafés and bakeries were closed by 6pm. Boutiques recently filled with the overspill of Milan Fashion Week now sat empty; their shop-floor workers looked bored.

Then a warm orange light and the sound of chatter: a single bar in a graveyard of others had

Milan is one of Europe's busiest cities, a bustling hub of tourists, bankers and fashionistas. But not when the coronavirus is in town. I arrived two weeks ago to cover the continent's biggest Covid-19 outbreak, and found there's something bittersweet about a break in an empty metropolis. Yes, there's a sense of fear and foreboding. But also no queues, no crowds, empty piazzas, and world-class attractions all to myself. At first I found the sight of masked passengers on board my flight amusing, but as we were

herded for temperature checks upon landing, this changed to alarm.

I was travelling from London, which at the time had no confirmed cases of the virus, and with my temperature confirmed fine, I was waved through.

Driving in Italy is notoriously bad at the best of times, with its scooters, trams and confusing roundabouts. Weaving a hire car through the onslaught of a mass exodus was worse. Traffic stood still, cars cut across one another, and horns rang out like church bells as the entire city seemed to evacuate. It was hard to push the word "apocalyptic" from my mind.



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