

A willing seduction: my travels in Italy

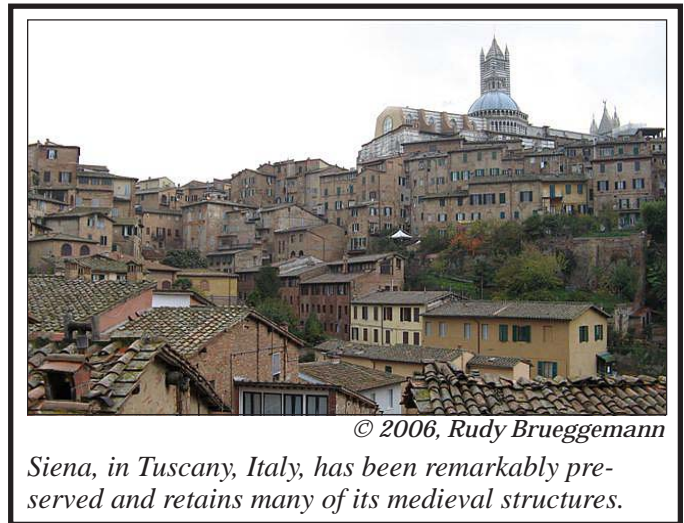
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Best cup of coffee in the world? Just about any cappuccino, anywhere in Italy. How about mouthwatering deserts that melt in your mouth called gelato? Everywhere, in Italy. Fresh food, two-hour meals, and an appreciation of art and family and cultural identity? That's 100 percent pure Italy. Beautiful people who seem to exude fashion sense as easily as breathing? Only in, yes, Italy. A violent and powerful Roman legacy that shaped the world and a Catholic city state that controls the very private lives of nearly a billion people while possessing unimaginable wealth. Yes, both sprang from the soil of Italy. How about language? No Western language can top Italian's pure musicality and feeling. None even come close.

So it comes as no surprise that Italy remains one of the world's most popular tourist destinations. Rome was perhaps the first international capital city I have ever visited where the sight of visitors studying street maps was not an oddity, but the norm. However, Italy, like the rest of Europe, has seen a flood of immigrants, mostly from Africa. They too can be seen everywhere in Italy, trying to make a living in the southern European nation and bringing about cultural conflicts that Italians like other Europeans are grappling with. The immigrants and Italians clearly are on a collision course, as is much of Europe and North America for those who dream of the wealth and opportunities found in both continents. Racial divisions and immigration remain white hot issues in Italy.

Social issues aside, it is hard to have a bad day in Italy. You start your day with a brioche and eye-pleasing, mouthwatering cappuccino, nearly always prepared to perfection at the dozens of cafes and tabacarias and bars. Il pranzo, the two hour lunch that is the national pastime, comes next. Follow that by a late dinner at an outdoor café for hours into the night, with plenty of wine and conversation. If you just have that for a week, you would have a perfect holiday in Italy. But there is so much more. There are Rome's crumbling Roman ruins that still capture the modern imagination. The Vatican City's absolutely overwhelming collection of art and material wealth should frighten, dazzle, and disgust anyone who is familiar with Christian doctrine. You can only truly grasp the Catholic Church's power by coming to its epicenter, within Rome. Then there are scores of fabulous medieval and historic cities such as Assisi and Siena in Umbria, Tuscany, and other provinces. Don't forget Italy's coastline, which for me sparkled brilliantly at Cinque Terra, on the Italian Riviera.



While traveling from Assisi to Arezzo, I wrote down the following things that I loved about the people of Italy in my notebook:

1. The women look great, even with blonde-dyed hair.
2. Italians are friendly; they will be helpful to strangers without any attitude.
3. They care about what they eat. The quality of the food eaten by Italians is among the best I have seen or tasted anywhere in the world.
4. Italians appreciate the importance of small things. For example, a cappuccino should not just taste good, it should look good.
5. Italians are a confident people. Just knowing that Rome once ruled the Western world seems to give even the most ordinary Italian a sense of greatness.
6. Italians make great gelati and coffee, and do I need to elaborate on the importance of either to the enjoyment of life?

Most of all I enjoyed getting to know the Italian people. They took kindly to my efforts to learn and speak their beautiful language. I could write a book of poetry praising the Italian women I saw, despite their unhealthy obsession with hair dyes. I never had a bad meal. I found great accommodations at monasteries in Rome, Sienna, and Cinque Terra, further strengthening my theory that monasteries represent the best tradition of Christianity if just for their simplicity and beauty and location, location, location. I never once stayed in a hotel; why should I, when monasteries were cheaper, and often in the most historic, scenic sections of cities and hill towns. So to anyone planning a trip, learn some Italian, do not worry about the reservations, and just go. Ciao ciao.