

# Learning Italian in Florence

## Immersion Language Study Includes Frustrations as Well as Rewards

By Kathryn Casey

**Y**ou're not Italian, are you?" a young Florentine woman leaned into me and asked. "No, I'm not," I answered. "But how did you know?"

I was taken aback at the thought that I could be so obviously foreign. I was six weeks into my 8-week language program at the Istituto Galileo Galilei and I thought I was masquerading as a Florentine pretty well. I'd ducked into a neighborhood wine bar and had just sat down with my glass when the woman turned to me.

"I could tell by the way you walked in," she said. "You walked directly to the bar and looked straight ahead of you. Italian women look around to see who's looking at them."

I was glad for the conversation. My life in Florence had been lonely. I'd arrived at my small apartment in the Via di Tripoli to find that I was a bit cut off from the world because I didn't have a TV (which would have been enormously helpful in learning the language) and was unable to dial out from my phone. I warded off lonesomeness by staying in contact with friends via email from one of Florence's many Internet cafes.

My first challenge, linguistically speaking, was to wallpaper over years of Spanish, trading *essers* and *sabers* for *esseres* and *saperes*. For the first two weeks, when called upon to speak, I delivered a polyglot pastiche.

I woke to the bells of Santa Croce. Come mid-April, I would also wake throughout the night to the sound of mosquitoes buzzing in my ears. The Arno is a mosquito incubator; come sundown, the creatures get in through the cracks of old apartment buildings. Bug-killing products fail to stop the pests that make sleep a torment throughout the summer.

*Journal entry, March 27: My tongue is locked inside my head. I understand the lessons well enough, but the route from the brain to the mouth is a tortuous one. The Italians open their mouths wide when they speak. I realize that I shouldn't feel self-conscious about pronouncing elaborately.*

*Went to Venice this weekend, and was favored with Californian co-travelers who never tired of calling Bologna "baloney." I left my passport in Florence for safekeeping, forgetting that you need one to register at any hotel in Italy. At the Hotel Colombina, I got the last room, thanks to the fact that they still had my passport on record from five months ago. I checked in and went to see my friend Andrea.*

In Italy, being married puts a damper on one's dating life, but doesn't annihilate it. Italians are not extremists. Over a refreshing *spremuta*, Andrea swore that now that he was married, he only had two or three lovers per year.

*Journal entry, March 28: I took a guided tour today, sponsored by the Istituto, of my own neighborhood's Basilica di Santa Croce, beloved of Michelangelo. Our guide drew our attention in particular to Donatello's statue of the Annunciation of*

*Mary, in which Mary's body is curved in a way that expresses her simultaneous willingness and reluctance to assume the burden asked of her.*

Florence is filled with Annunciations. Annunciations and mosquitoes. The Florentines once considered the moment of Mary's acceptance of her role as the mother of the savior to be the beginning of history. Counting nine months' backward from December 25, then, they assigned March 25 as the date of that beginning. March 25 was, for centuries, the beginning of the Florentine calendar, which has made it difficult for historians to identify birthdates and trace documents.

*Journal entry, March 30: Two interesting things happen when one is learning a language somewhat quickly. 1. The lessons take about two days to sink in. 2. What was hard becomes easy when one has to move on. It's as if the mind decides it's time*

## Make the Most of an Intensive Language Course

By Nicole Rosenleaf Ritter

**T**aking several intensive language courses has taught me some simple ways to make the most of the experience—whether it's two weeks in Paris or two months in Guatemala:

- **Decide what you want.** If you have a specific goal, like learning Japanese to communicate with clients, you'll probably want to choose a school that caters to business learners. If you're taking survival Italian for fun, you can take a more relaxed approach.

- **Research your accommodations options.** Most schools offer housing with a family to intensify the language-learning experience. Homestays vary, and if you have specific linguistic needs, it's best to talk to your school before your arrival. The organizers should know which families have an English speaker to assist beginners, for example. If you prefer more privacy, opt for another housing option.

- **Know your learning style before you go.** I'm a visual learner, so I know to bring plenty of index cards to make homemade flashcards. Other students might bring small tape recorders to aid in their learning process.

- **Take the placement test.** It's best to be in the level that works for you, whether it's high-

er or lower than you had originally imagined. And don't be afraid to ask to be moved to a different level.

- **Speak up—in and out of class.** The only way to learn is to participate, regardless of how intimidated you might feel. If you don't try, you'll never improve. It's especially important to force yourself to speak outside the classroom. The risk is greater, but so are the rewards.

- **Get cultural.** Most schools offer films, trips, lectures, and nonacademic lessons (like cooking, dance, or music) to complement language courses. Don't pass up the chance to be involved—it will teach you about the real-world usage of the language.

- **Do your homework.** Sure it's a drag to pull out your Portuguese notebook on the beach in Rio, but if you don't study, you'll end up wasting your time and that of your teacher and classmates.

- **Make time for sleep.** Learning a foreign language in an immersion setting is hard work and you will be tired. Don't hesitate to supplement your nightly rest with some cat naps—preferably outside the classroom.

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to stop struggling with what was new info two days ago in order to make room for more today. For this reason, it really is productive to move the student along, even while she is less than master of the information already covered.

My second instructor, Elena, told me that I spoke Italian well and shouldn't be afraid to speak. She'd noticed I reverted to English under duress. I told her that shopkeepers sometimes answered me in English. She assured me this was due less to a desire to humble me than to an assumption that I would prefer to speak English, reminding me that Florence relied on tourism.

*Journal entry, April 1: I sat at Giubba Rosa ruminating on how much light is shed on one's own language, on its etymology, by learning a language so close to Latin. And how, from false cognates (or false friends, as the Italians call them), original meanings become clear and shed light on societal changes.*

When the waiter roused me from my reverie, I became flustered and couldn't remember the words for ice or on the rocks, so I tried "sulle pietre grandi," or "on the big stones." Fortunately, he had a sense of humor. He asked me if I'd like to order something to eat, and I panicked. As far as I could judge, I'd answered that I wasn't particularly famous, though I knew his cousin was very brief, but thanks, anyway. Bemused, he retired with a simple "Prego," no doubt to consider more closely my observations about his bloodline. I left a big tip and went to buy another pair of shoes.

*Journal entry, April 3: The pronoun form "ne" almost made me cry today. That, combined with the future perfect and direct and indirect object changes and transitive and intransitive verbs, nearly undid me. To say nothing of polite verb forms and pronouns. I have now forgotten present tense and 90 percent of my already limited Italian vocabulary. Mistakes I wouldn't have made two weeks ago in the past perfect tense I am now making with regularity. Verb forms and reflexive pronouns are adrift in my mind.*

*Sexuality is rampant here. A plethora of ads features variations on a not-very-subtle "come-hither" theme: Men and women are shown topless or almost so with hands headed down their pants. One mannequin even saw fit to have her fly provocatively unzipped. And since, being a mannequin, she had a good figure (let's call her "she"), the Italian men no doubt exercised themselves on the subject of how best to elicit a response from her.*

My instructor told me that women in their fifties came to Italy for sexual adventures, sometimes even to pay the

"gigoli" who hang around the Duomo. She said that Italian men are newly intimidated because women now want quality sex, whereas before they expected little.

*Journal entry, April 19: The unification of Italy is a fallacy along the lines of the idea of a United States that is somehow homogeneous. The folks at the Istituto told me they considered a trip to the South—to Sicily or Calabria, for example—to be a trip to a foreign country. Milan is regarded less as an Italian city than as a European one along the lines of Zurich. My newest and third instructor, Silvia, complains, moreover, that since the Tuscan dialect is the Italian language, she's at a disadvantage when traveling to other regions of Italy. The people of Naples could be saying disparaging things about her in the Neapolitan dialect, but she'd have no way of knowing.*

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Italians are very competitive within regions, and many feel superior to the southerners, although they'll admit that the Napolitani have a great sense of humor, albeit with a sadness beneath it, and that the Sicilians are very warm when they're not criminals. The Florentines in particular enjoy a superiority complex, believing they've cornered the market on the *bella figura*. Silvia made it clear that public behavior and language in Florence are a cut above that of the rest of Italy. And she, like others, believed that Florentines have a keen aesthetic sense from living in a city that's host to much of the Western world's greatest art and that boasts a kind of understated and timeless urban beauty.

For Florentine women, that aesthetic sense translates into an obsession with one's "line." An ad on the backs of commuter buses could be loosely translated, "You don't kid around about your line." They're not kidding. The size labeled "grande" was three sizes too small for me in Florence. Cellulite and weight loss creams and breast perker-uppers with names like "Seno al Top" litter the city's

*erboristerie and farmacie. Italian designers will discuss your "line" with a frankness unheard in the States, as did my friend Ianni, a leather designer who doggedly talked me out of short jackets that failed to cover my derriere.*

*Journal entry, April 21: The ground has given way. I read the paper and speak well. I gather clips of conversation on the street. I've finally realized that "ne" is, in one of its incarnations, the equivalent of "of it" or "for it." The realization no doubt would have come sooner if Silvia spoke a word of English. Today I used "ne" twice in conversation, and Silvia noticed both times. What's more, both times the bells of the Duomo rang. Of course, it also happens to be Holy Thursday.*

Silvia's landscape was rich with characters, stories of whom she related during the *pausa*, the 30-minute break during which we'd go for coffee and a more social chat: the elderly woman from Los Angeles who was deaf and yelled bad Italian at her; the French woman who droned in a monotone that made Silvia nod off; the rich Chinese woman who wore big hats around which Silvia had to duck to ask if she understood the pronouns; the Japanese student who, after three years, spoke virtually no Italian. She didn't know exactly why he was there because she still couldn't understand him; she did know that his version of carbonara called for adding the egg to the boiling water while the spaghetti was cooking.

*Journal entry, May 3: Today, Silvia told me she was really sorry I was leaving. That I was teetering on the edge of speaking well, and that now it was just a matter of practice to attain facility. She told me that if I wanted to, I probably could find work here as a writer, doing opinion pieces for fashion magazines and the like.*

*I made the mistake of asking about the impersonal verb form which I'd seen in my reading but hadn't covered in my instruction, the use of the reflexive "si" with the third person verb form. I had to ask! Nevertheless, I take heart in knowing that comprehension will come in two days.*

Moreover, I knew that I'd learned more than the language, more than to go to Hemingways for hot chocolate, Vivoli for gelato, or Procacci for tiny truffle sandwiches that are nirvana. And I knew that I'd be back.

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