



INSIDE:
 Italy in America 3
 My Favorite Venetian 4
 Rome's Hotel Restaurants 6
 Mount Etna Awakes 8
 News, Tips, Deals and
 Events 10

DREAM OF ITALY

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Bargains Abound at the Prada and Gucci Outlets

The build-up is intense. First you have to find the elusive *Prada Outlet* (officially called *Space*) among the nondescript buildings in the town of Montevarchi, 45 minutes from Florence. Prada doesn't put any sign on the warehouse where it houses its outlet, and the directions it gives out aren't much help either. Luckily, any good citizen of Montevarchi knows the place and has probably been asked about it a thousand times already.

Then there's the whole issue of taking a number. Prada allows only 100 shoppers inside at one time and averages about 1,000 visitors a day. So it employs a rather space age looking computerized counter to allot numbers to those shoppers raring to get inside. The wait time can be just a few minutes or a matter of hours.

Again, by shrewd planning on the part of Prada, there's a café on-site for you to patronize while you wait. In addition to the very good food, the café serves up some fine people watching. Many of the customers, Asians, Americans, Brits and Italians alike, are dressed in their Prada best and some look like they are about to walk down the runway. But then there's also the usual tourists in shorts

and sneakers. And don't worry, as you eat, you can stare longingly at the monitor, indicating the number of the next group to go inside, willing it to move faster.

Once inside, it's hard to choose which section to attack first. As you enter, shoes are directly in front of you, with



The Details



Prada Outlet



LOCATION: Levanella Spacceo, Strada Statale 69, Montevarchi
 Phone: (39) 055 978-94-81
HOURS: Monday - Saturday, 9:30 a.m. - 7:00 p.m. and Sunday, 2:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.

DRIVING: From the A1 motorway, take the exit marked Baldano. Follow the signs for Arezzo and then for Montevarchi. You will pass through a series of traffic lights and there will be a warehouse/factory on your left. That's Prada. There is no sign on the building; just follow the people. **TRAIN:** Take the train from Florence's Santa Maria Novella Station to Montevarchi (1 hour) and continue by taxi (about 20 minutes) to the outlet.



Gucci Outlet

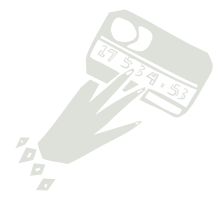


LOCATION: Via Europa 8, Leccio, Reggello 50060 Phone: (39) 055 865-77-75
HOURS: Monday - Saturday, 10 a.m. - 7:00 p.m. and Sunday, 3:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.

DRIVING: From the A1 motorway, take the exit marked Incisa. Stay on the right towards Pontassieve until reaching Leccio. Soon after passing the center of Leccio, The Mall will be on the left. **TRAIN:** Take the train from Florence's Santa Maria Novella Station to Rignano sull'Arno and continue by taxi (about 5 minutes) to Leccio. **SHUTTLE BUS:** There's a daily service from Florence to and from The Mall. Call (39) 055 865-77-75 for more information.

"Was it in short, ever well to be elsewhere when one might be in Italy?" — Edith Wharton

Prada/Gucci *continued from page 1*



handbags, accessories and collection pieces to the right and skin care, sunglasses and sportswear to the left. And the prices are to die for...

During a recent summer sale (20% off the already deep discounts), small classic Prada handbags were offered at the equivalent of \$70 each, leather key holders at \$30, beautiful women's moccasins (similar to J.P. Tod's) at \$50.

These were the best bargains and prices went up from there. So you could still spend several hundred dollars on a purse, but that's likely to be half of its original price. Then there's the fact that if you spend over 185 euros (essentially \$185 at the current exchange rate), you get the value-added tax (VAT) back when you leave the country. That's 20.6%. And how can

you not spend several hundred dollars, stocking up on gifts for the folks at home and presents for yourself.



International shopping guru Suzy Gershman says outlet shopping is the smartest way to shop in Italy these days. "I feel that with the euro, and now the much weaker dollar, Italian outlets are the only way to go," notes Gershman, author of *Suzy Gershman's Born to Shop: Italy* (Frommer's, 2001). "The savings and quality are great," she adds.



As with American outlets, Italian outlets, including Prada, are the final stops for last season's merchandise. So you will find the fluorescent green flats that didn't sell or the shirt with the shredded look that fashionistas wouldn't be caught dead in.

Yet, Gershman cautions that there can be some real finds in the mix as well. "Old merchandise can be classical

enough to not matter," she says. Keep in mind that all of the merchandise came from Italian or European stores, so you could still out-fashion your neighbor by buying pieces that may have never been sold in the United States.

The outlet carries all of Prada's lines including *Miu Miu*, *Helmut Lang*, *Jil Sander* and *Church's* shoes. The staff is incredibly helpful and free of the attitude you will find at many of the label's stores throughout the world.

Next stop, Gucci. The *Gucci Outlet* is only about a half-hour's drive from

Prada. It's housed in an elegant strip mall, called *The Mall*, along with *Bottega Veneta*, *Giorgio Armani*, *Loro Piana*, *Sergio Rossi* and *Yves Saint Laurent* outlets.

Thankfully, there's no numbers system or waiting to get in, although the outlet can get crowded. Gucci's décor exudes more elegance than Prada's and items are carefully displayed on glass shelves. Handbags, shoes, accessories, men's clothing and women's clothing each has a separate salon.



Gucci seems to have a better selection of classic pieces than Prada. You can snap up a beautiful black leather wallet for \$75. The best find of a summer shopping spree: a small, leather purse for \$45. Men's ties were also about \$45. As with Prada, Gucci will give you a cloth drawstring bag for each of your items.

"At Gucci, I got such bargains, I am still drooling, such as a blue silk sports jacket for my singer-songwriter son, for \$125," Gershman boasts.

Again, factor in the VAT refund if you spend enough.

If dropping cash makes you hungry, try the café called *Café* at the entrance of *The Mall*. It keeps with the shopping-theme by continuously playing fashion videos on screens around the restaurant.

Start saving, the outlets are waiting. ♦

"Open my heart and you will see/ Grave

Patsy's in New York City



As a magnet for so many Italian immigrants over the years, New York City is home to an enormous number of Italian restaurants. On almost every block throughout the five boroughs you will find a northern or southern Italian-inspired restaurant or a pizza joint. One among them has catapulted to great fame and stayed there: *Patsy's* has been a midtown Manhattan landmark since 1944.



the founder's Neapolitan roots. For dessert, there's *cannoli* and *tiramisu*.

Another attraction — Patsy's is still a family affair and their devotion to the restaurant is endless. Patsy, who dressed in a gray busboy jacket so customers wouldn't be intimidated to ask him for another glass of water, set the tone. When Patsy's daughter Anna was getting married, he told her, "You better pick a day when the restaurant is closed, or most of the family won't be able to come to your wedding. I'm not going to close the restaurant." Today, Patsy's son is likely to seat you, his daughter and daughter-in-law sit at the register and his grandson oversees the kitchen.

In addition to the food and atmosphere, Patsy's has something else, what you could call "star quality." Every since it opened its doors, Patsy's has been a favorite haunt for generations of showbiz celebrities. A glance at the restaurant's *Wall of Fame* shows

framed photographs with salutations from the likes of Jackie Gleason and James Cagney and contemporary stars such as Tom Hanks and George Clooney.

Yet, Patsy's most loyal and most famous patron was *Frank Sinatra*. Patsy's was his home away from

home and he loved the *Clams Posillipo*, *Chicken Picatta*, *Veal Milanese* and *Pasticciotto* (a lemon custard tart topped with vanilla ice cream) for dessert. The Scognamillos are still honoring their favorite patron, who died in 1998. Every year on his birthday, December

12th, they serve one of his favorite desserts to every guest in the restaurant.

Despite the reverential treatment he gave to Sinatra, there is one order Patsy wouldn't fill for the superstar. When Sinatra asked Patsy to open a branch near his Palm Springs home, Patsy said, "Can't do it. To be good we have to be at one restaurant, we have to watch every little thing, and we can't do that in two places." The family has remained true to the founder's vision and maintains just one location — the original one. ♦

For more on Patsy's, read *Patsy's Cookbook: Classic Italian Recipes from a New York City Landmark Restaurant* (Clarkson Potter, 2002) by Sal Scognamillo.

Pasquale and Concetta Scognamillo, who emigrated from Naples in the early 1920s, started Patsy's. Ultimately, the immigration officials at Ellis Island are responsible for the restaurant's name, since they shortened "Pasquale" to "Patsy." While Patsy has since passed on, his legacy lives on in a second and third generation of *Scognamillos* who now run the restaurant.

Why do people keep coming back to Patsy's, decade after decade? For one, the food hasn't changed. Patsy's still offers the same authentic Southern Italian dishes it always did. The words "nouveau" and "fusion" have probably never been spoken inside this restaurant.

On the menu: *Eggplant Parmigiana*; *Mussels Arreganta*; *stuffed mushrooms*; *Minestrone Soup*. Current co-owner Sal Scognamillo says he's been serving "red-sauce dishes," such as *Penne*

Bolognese and *Linguine Napolitano*, even when they went out of style. You can taste tradition in every bite. Patsy's *Fettucine Alfredo* is made the old-fashioned Neapolitan way with egg yolks. The seafood — *Cassuola di Calamari*, *Shrimp Scampi* — also pay homage to

Visit:
Patsy's Italian Restaurant
236 West 56th Street
New York, NY 10019
(212) 247-3491
Open Sunday through Thursday,
noon to 10:00 p.m. and
Friday & Saturday,
noon to 11:15 p.m.
www.patsys.com

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d inside it, 'Italy.'” —Robert Browning

My Favorite Venice

I went to Venice with my husband and our blended family, but found myself drawn to another man, a man I met

almost as soon as I set foot in Venice. From that moment on, the handsome, immaculately groomed and well-dressed gentleman was always there for me. He anticipated my every need. He responded to me warmly and was attentive no matter how many other people competed for his attention. He was thoughtful and knowledgeable. We spoke of art, culture and shopping.

Where did I find a man like this? Behind the concierge desk at the Hotel Saturnia.

Andrea Scarpa makes quite an impression. He is a tall man with dark, wavy hair, clean-shaven fair skin and perfect posture. The hotel and Andrea complement each other in their distinctive elegance. Andrea is responsible for guest relations at the 95-room, four-star Hotel Saturnia, which is run by members of the 3rd and 4th generations of the Serandrei family. They have operated this 14th century renaissance palazzo as a hotel since 1908. Located on the Calle Larga XXII Marzo, just a few minutes' walk from the Correr Museum side of St. Mark's Square, the hotel is ideally situated on a prime shopping street.

As concierges do, Andrea sets the tone at the front desk. He greets every guest

and is a non-stop source of both substantial and trivial information. Andrea stores the nuances of Venice in his



Andrea Scarpa, concierge extraordinaire of the Saturnia Hotel in Venice and author Ann Cochran.

head. I never saw him look anything up. I was surprised at how often I conferred with him, since I had been to Venice twice before and had diligently read up before this trip.

My husband and I and all of our four kids, ranging in age from 16 to 28, frequently counted on Andrea to weigh our options for us. His recommendations always made sense, before and afterward. He knew the right time to drop into ultra-pricey Harry's Bar for dessert or a drink is 5

ongoing Vivaldi performances are touristy and directed us to hear the Orchestra Collegium Ducale play Mozart and Bach in the sanctuary of the Santa Maria Formosa Church.

We weren't interested in snagging seats in the hottest restaurants, so Andrea used his gastronomic knowledge to direct us to places that met the description we gave for our mood and preferences each day. For casual meals, it was *Vino Vino*, a popular wine bar where the handlebar mustachioed man in charge was reminiscent of Seinfeld's Soup Nazi. He refused us service one night because he couldn't handle a party of six. He didn't say come back later, or I'm sorry. It was just "no." The place intrigued us enough to return. When we did, our table was laden with inexpensive, delicious dishes —

roasted chicken, grilled salmon, pasta with peas and sausage and interesting variations of lasagna. This boisterous, two-room eatery has the atmosphere of a neighborhood hangout despite frequent guidebook mentions.

For a dressier occasion, noting that our four males were more meat than fish eaters, Andrea sent us to Ai Gondolieri, which also provides the food for the Peggy Guggenheim Museum's well-regarded café where we had enjoyed mouth-watering homemade pastas and panini the day before.

Going above and beyond is nothing unusual for Andrea, but I especially appreciated the way he threw in extra advice. He kept a thick pad of maps on his desk, and always marked them with his recommendations and directions. As he worked on each one, he would say something like, "on your way to Il Cantinone wine store, make sure you look to your left after this little bridge and you will see our most active gondola yard, Squero di San Trovaso." No walk was ever Point A to Point B.

Andrea encouraged us to bargain, always, except in the well-known, designer shops. With a flourish, he said, "They'll give you a discount if you pay cash, they'll give you a discount if you buy more, they'll give you a discount if there's no shipping, and then they'll give you a gift as you walk out the door."

On our last full day in Venice, we turned to Andrea for help with a major dilemma. We had to choose between the Naval Museum, which sounded interesting, and Torcello, the first Venetian lagoon island to be inhabited as people fled the Huns in the 5th cen-

"Time flows when you rest your arms on the ledges of

etian



tury. The downside: it is an hour boat ride away. "No choice," Andrea insisted, "You go to Torcello. Amazing. So different. No one goes there...such a shame."

He was absolutely right. It was an other-worldly, touching experience to visit this almost deserted island. It has only 18 year-round residents, three restaurants, one museum and two churches. Its Byzantine cathedral, founded in 639, has incredible mosaics. Walking up the ramps of the nearby bell tower is tiring, but the panorama is exhilarating.

Judging from our experience utilizing Andrea's skills, concierges can do much more than procure hard-to-get tickets and tables. According to the international association Les Clefs d'Or, which represents more than 3,000 concierges at the best international hotels, concierges are supposed to be living guidebooks of their cities. They should be approachable and warm, not intimidating.

Among their ranks, it is not unusual to encounter incredible linguistic ability. Andrea speaks 5 languages; he told us he speaks Japanese only halfway. Andrea wore the distinctive lapel pin of Les Clefs d'Or, two crossed keys. It takes a minimum two years of experience as a concierge and referrals from two Clef D'Or members to be considered for membership in the association.

Although every concierge should have a wealth of knowledge, Andrea had so much to offer about Venice that it was

no surprise to find out he is a native. When I asked him to tell me about working at the Saturnia, he said that there is very low turnover; many employees start there and retire there, because they find it "a pleasure to work for the family." Many current staff members have been there 20 years or more. Although his English is almost perfect, Andrea still uses the occasional odd wording that makes you smile. For example, he said "There are no standards" at the Saturnia. When I asked him to explain, he said, "They let you work in your best way, not only one standard way." That was a relief.

As a travel writer, I have known and heard about a few great concierges, but I personally have never heard of anyone choosing a hotel based on the concierge's reputation for service, nor did I ever do so. This trip changed my mind. I checked out some other hotels during my visit. The Monaco and Grand Canal Hotel, for one, is undergoing a jaw-dropping renovation funded by the Benetton family owners, but my heart belongs to the Saturnia...as long as Andrea mans the front desk.

He is worth coming back to, as much as the paintings by Tintoretto and Canaletto and the famous vaparetto that transport lucky resident and tourist passengers all the way up and down the majestic Grand Canal. ♦

— Ann Cochran

Ann Cochran is a travel, health and medical writer whose heart and soul spring to life in Italy, especially when her family comes along.

Visit:
Hotel Saturnia & International Venezia
 Via XXII Marzo 2398
 San Marco, Venice
www.hotelsaturnia.it
 Prices: 146 to 477 euros per room, per night
 (39) 041 520-7131

A Concierge's Venice

Pasticceria Marchini is a bakery where they not only bake, they make their own chocolate, right before your eyes. Location: Off Campo San Zulian on Spadaria, 676 San Marco; www.golosessi.com

Visit **Coin** department store for unusual bargains on commonplace items made in Italy and designer copies. Location: On the Merceria, the long shopping street that connects St. Mark's Square with the Rialto Bridge.

The Venice **Benetton** is huge, dramatically lit at night, and a must if you have teenagers with you. Location: Merceria 2 Aprile

Vino Vino is a good wine bar for a quick and inexpensive meal. Location: 2007 Calle Sartor, San Marco

Try **Ai Gondolieri** for fine dining at one of the few Venetian restaurants that does not serve fish. Location: Dorsoduro 366, San Vio, Ponte del Formager; www.aigoldolieri.com

To buy wine, visit **Il Cantinone**. Location: San Trovaso 992, Dorsoduro

You must see **Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari Church**, a breathtaking mid-15th century church, filled with Titians and enough other masterpieces to qualify as a museum. Location: Campo dei Frari, San Polo

Campo Santa Margherita is wonderful for people watching. Venetian families gather here, children and dogs run around, students eat pizza. Try the gelato and pastries at Causin. Location: Dorsoduro

Shop at **Genninger Studio** for unusual glass jewelry made by a wise American who settled in Venice. Location: Calle de Traghetto, Dorsoduro, next to Ca'Rezzonico; www.genningerstudio.com

Visit **Livio de Marchi** for sculpted wood objects, from tiny books and teddy bears to life-size cars. Location: San Samuele 3157, San Marco; www.liviodemarchi.com

Shop at **La Calle**, for Santa Maria Novella perfume, body lotions and soaps. Location: Campo Santa Maria del Giglio, San Marco

Venetian windows." —Henry James

Rome's *Finest* Hotel

As a rule, hotels generally aren't the best places to experience innovative, world-renowned cuisine. But that's been changing over the last decade. More and more, the best dining throughout the world's capitals can be found inside hotels. Rome is the perfect example. The city's 4- and 5-star hotels have ushered in a renaissance in hotel dining.

While by no means a comprehensive list, here are some of Rome's top hotel restaurants:

La Terrazza

La Terrazza d'Hotel Eden is like a fine recipe — all of the ingredients create more than a sum of their parts. Take a stunning view of Rome's monuments, add a healthy dose of world-famous cuisine, mix in romantic ambiance and exquisite but unpretentious service and for good measure, finish off with a Michelin star.



Executive Chef Enrico Derflinger, once the personal chef to Charles and Diana, the Prince and Princess of Wales, is the mastermind behind La Terrazza, on the sixth floor of the luxurious Hotel Eden. He's been with the restaurant since it opened in 1994.

None of the tables has a bad view although it doesn't hurt to ask for one right next to the window. Few pleasures are more enjoyable than savoring every bite of Derflinger's creations while watching the sun set over the Eternal City.



The a la carte menu changes completely twice a year and is updated at least once every season. If zucchini flowers stuffed with ricotta and olives are on the menu during your visit, you must order them. It's impossible to go wrong with any dish. Even the simple penne with tomato and mozzarella is unlike any you have ever had.

The staff makes sure to please your every whim and will help with selecting from the 300 labels on the restaurant's wine list.

If you can't bear to leave after your scrumptious dinner, walk just a few feet into the hotel's piano bar on an open deck overlooking the city. The intimate setting provides the perfect place for an after dinner drink under the stars. It was also a favorite haunt of Italian director Federico Fellini who



insisted on holding interviews here. Jacket and tie required.

Prices: Entrees begin at 22 euros; four courses, excluding wine, runs about 150 euros per person. Open for breakfast, lunch and dinner daily. Reservations: (39) 06 478-121

Café Romano

When you've had one too many plates of pasta or pieces of pizza, head for the delightful, quirky Café Romano at the Hotel d'Inghilterra. The international menu is refreshingly eclectic and unlike at other restaurants that try to do too much, the chef here indeed seems to have mastered many culinary traditions of the world. The entrees include such diverse offerings as Chicken Tikka, Weiner Schnitzel, Lamb

Chops Aux Herbes and Chicago Rib Eye Steak. In deference to Italian cuisine, there are also six spaghetti dishes on the menu. A range of desserts await to satisfy any craving, including Apfelstrudel and New York Cheesecake.



Café Romano's location in the heart of the city's Via Condotti shopping district makes it the perfect stop for refueling during a hectic day of shopping. The street side tables allow you to check out what other shoppers are carrying by day and dine on a quiet street in the evening. Café Romano is the least formal of the four restaurants featured here.

Prices: Entrees start at 20 euros, desserts at 10 euros. Open for late (English) breakfast, lunch and dinner everyday. Reservations: (39) 06 699-81-500

Hassler Rooftop Restaurant

Rome has more than a few elegant rooftop restaurants, but the one on the sixth floor of the Hotel Hassler was the original, opening in the 1950s. Almost everything that can be said about Hassler, the hotel, can be said about the rooftop restaurant: world-class; star-studded; a once-in-a-lifetime experience; unforgettable.

As with other restaurants, the Hassler's menu changes with the seasons, but some of the perennial favorites include artichoke salad, pate, baby octopus



“Rome is a city of shadows...But the greatest

Dining

and pumpkin ravioli. Hassler's in-house bakery produces fine breads and elaborate desserts. Liz Taylor is said to be a fan of the milk chocolate turtles.

Sunday brunch on the Rooftop is a Roman institution. The selection includes fruit juices, salmon and cold cuts, meats sliced to order, omelets, sal-

ads, cakes, elaborate desserts and fresh fruit. Jacket and tie required.

Prices: *A meal runs about 100 euros per person, without drinks. Brunch is a fixed price, 55 euros, without drinks. Open for lunch (or brunch on Sunday) and dinner daily.* Reservations: (39) 06 699-340



La Pergola

La Pergola at the Cavalieri Hilton is arguably the best restaurant in Rome and it's frequently lauded as one of the best in all of Italy. Interesting then, that it owes its success to a young German chef, Heinz Beck.

Everything at La Pergola is of the highest standard. The dinnerware is Benardau and the glasses are made by Reidel. The magnificent maitre d', Umberto Giraudou, once worked for Alain Ducasse in Paris. The serving staff, dressed in black tie, move like a finely choreographed ballet.

And the food... Michelin has awarded La Pergola two stars. Does that tell you anything? Here's a sampling: tomato terrine with deep-fried anchovies; marinated mackerel with tomato; guinea fowl with black olives; fillet of sole with fine herbs; pigeon breast with wild strawberries.

True gourmands order the 5- or 7-course tasting menu and savor every single bite. 1,300 wine labels, 12 coffees and 31 teas complement each course.

Since the Hilton is in the hills above Rome, the setting and view is as stupendous as the food. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, as the price indicates.

Prices: *7-course tasting menu is 130 euros per person, and 5-course menu is 115 euros, excluding wine. A la carte entrees start at 30 euros. Open for dinner Tuesday-Saturday. Closed for 2 weeks in January and 2 weeks in August.* Reservations: (39) 06 350-92-211 ♦

Eat & Stay...

The best thing about staying where you want to eat — preference for a hard-to-get reservation.

HOTEL EDEN

Via Ludovisi 49,
00187 Rome
(800) 543-4300 (in the U.S.)
(39) 06 478-121
www.hotel-eden.it

Prices: Rooms start at
550 euros per night.

This hotel is a favorite of young Hollywood, including Gwyneth Paltrow. The décor exudes understated elegance. The hilltop location ensures stunning views from almost every spacious guestroom.

HOTEL D'INGHILTERRA

Via Bocca di Leone 14,
00187 Rome
(39) 06 69-981
www.charminghotels.it/inghilterra/

Prices: Rooms start at
250 euros per night.

The Inghilterra is one of Rome's hottest hotels right now. The rooms are filled with antique furniture as well as modern conveniences. For shopaholics, the location can't be beat.

1 euro = \$1.04 at press time

HASSLER VILLA MEDICI

Piazza Trinita dei Monti 6,
00187 Rome,
(39) 06 699-340
www.hotelhasslerroma.com

Prices: 625 euros per night
for a deluxe double room.

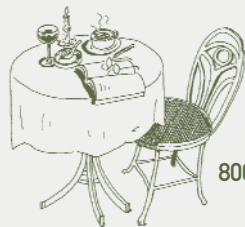
The only privately owned five-star hotel in Rome, the Hassler is one of the most famous hotels in the world. Everyone from Madonna to Prince Ranier has stayed here. It doesn't get much better than this.

CAVALIERI HILTON

Via Cadlolo 101,
00136 Rome
800 445 8667 (from the U.S.)
(39) 06 35091
www.cavalieri-hilton.it/

Prices: 390 euros per night for a
standard room during the summer.

Set in 15 acres of hills above Rome, the Cavalieri is more resort than hotel. The amenities include a business center, clay tennis courts, a swimming pool, fitness center and jogging paths. There's a free shuttle bus for the 15-minute ride to the center of Rome. Each room has a balcony.



Waking the Giant

My decision to make a pilgrimage to Mount Etna was rather last minute. My parents and I were in Giardini Naxos, Sicily's first Greek colony and the last stop on our week-long Italiatour, "Magnificent Sicily." Our guide was taking names — we could spend the final day of the tour completely at our leisure, or take an optional excursion to *Mount Etna*, Europe's highest and most active volcano. The prospect of an unscheduled day was enticing. But when would I next find myself so near a volcano? As it happened, I would be one of the last souls to tread on Etna's backside before she awoke again. The volcano would erupt just two weeks later, depositing ash as far as Libya, 400 miles to its south.

Getting to the north face of Etna (Etna nord) was relatively easy. From *Giardini Naxos*, we (three Australians and I) took a bus to *Taormina*, a popular Mediterranean resort town, where we picked up additional passengers. The bus full of Germans, British, Americans and Australians climbed tree-lined switchbacks as our polyglot guide provided facts and history about Mount Etna.

We stopped in the ski town of *Linguaglossa* (translation: "big tongue of lava"), halfway into the hour's drive to where we would ascend the volcano. Our guide pointed out the streets, the town's gates and foundations of buildings and houses made of basalt (lava) in this typical volcano-side town. There is a true love-hate relationship between the unpredictable Mount Etna and those who inhabit her slopes. The lava makes for rich soil, perfect for growing hazelnuts, grapes, olives, oranges and lemons. Skiing and tourism generate substantial revenue.

But all could be lost with one volcanic cough. Lava flows move slowly, allowing time to pack up portable worldly possessions. Houses, schools and businesses cannot be moved, of course, and neither can a sense of place. Mount Etna does not often take human lives, however. The Web site boris.vulcanoetna.com states that 77 deaths can be attributed to her eruptions.

The volcano's mercurial nature earned its reputation among Sicilians as a spoiled child, doing what it wants, when it wants. Etna is monitored by 120 seismic activity stations and is under constant satellite surveillance, and the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology, based in *Catania* in eastern Sicily, studies the behavior patterns of Mount Etna and other volcanoes. While seismic data and statistical calculations offer clues, it is impossible to accurately forecast Etna's next move. In the past 350 years, Etna has erupted about 70 times, approximately once every five years. The entire city of Catania was destroyed in 1669 in a blast that lasted 122 days. There was a major explosion in 1992, in the summer of 2001 and most recently at the end of October 2002. (The last eruption continues as of this writing.)

We disembarked in *Piano Provenzana*, a tiny, souvenir-laden skiing outpost where jeeps were gathered to take curious tourists up the volcano. Waiting for the next jeep departure, a shop owner explained that the temperature would drop with each foot of elevation. I rented a bright orange parka from him for the surprisingly reasonable price of 2 euros.

After a wild 20-minute ride over undulating terrain, the jeep let us out at the highest point we could legally go —

9,300 feet elevation. (It is not safe to go to Etna's summit at 11,000 feet; as of December 2002, it is also forbidden.) The fog was thick and the air a chilly 33 degrees Fahrenheit. Visibility was so poor that the jeep vanished from sight just as I made my way up an incline. Freezing rain had started to fall during our 4-wheel trek. I pulled my rented parka tightly around me, grateful for its warmth and fluorescence.

Patches of yellow lichen (moss-like plant) were the only signs of life on the ashen landscape. Large lava chunks poked through the mist. I joined a group of passengers walking around an observatory which was closed to visitors. After some awkward photo shoots, we boarded the jeep to view one of Etna's craters (not one of the four live craters at the summit). It looked like a bowl of dry ice. The fog had put a damper on things. Our driver attempted to make one more stop, but the crowd was audibly disappointed and frustrated by the anti-climactic tour. The driver called it a day and headed down "the mountain," as locals, called *Etnei*, refer to the volcano. On the ride back, he gestured to two jeep drivers ascending the volcano to turn around.

I returned my parka, looked at lava souvenirs and enjoyed a cup of the most amazing hot chocolate I have ever tasted at *La Provenzana* restaurant. I sat discussing the adventure with my Australian friend. We didn't get to view breathtaking vistas or awe-inspiring craters, but we both agreed the adventure was well worth the 67 euros we paid. At least we could say we had walked on a volcano. Two weeks later, we would realize we were two of the last tourists to sit in the quaint town musing about our volcano outing. *Piano Provenzana* was decimated by an

"Sicilians build as if they'll live forever"

Visiting the Volcano

Since Etna is still active and unpredictable, contact the Italian Embassy (phone: (202) 612-4400, www.italyemb.org) or Italian Government Tourist Board (phone: NY- (212) 245-5618, Chicago- (312) 644-0996 or Los Angeles- (310) 820-1898, www.italiantourism.com) for the latest information.

There are two approaches to Mount Etna:

NORTH FACE: Via Taormina to Linguaglossa — ascend by jeep.

SOUTH FACE: Via Catania to Nicolosi to Rifugio Sapienza — ascend by cable-car.

AROUND THE BASE: See Etna from all sides on the *Circumetnea* railway, which runs along the base from

Giarre-Riposto to Catania. Stops at towns along the way. The entire trip takes five hours. Contact the Italian State Railways, Ferrovie dello Stato (FS), for information phone: (39) 147-888088 or www.fs-on-line.com

BUS: Several bus tour options are available. The Sicilian Airbus Travel Group (SAT) offers a good variety. For information, visit www.sat-group.it

ON FOOT: It is highly recommended to go on a guided excursion. Bring warm clothing, good shoes or boots

and glasses to protect your eyes from the glare and flying debris.

NEARBY TOWNS:

TAORMINA — Popular seaside resort with beaches, medieval streets and myriad curio-filled shops (Hint: All of the stores sell the same items; spend time at the beach or people watch in the piazzas instead.)

GIARDINI NAXOS — Less expensive than Taormina with better and less-crowded beaches. Buses run to Taormina every half-hour.

CATANIA — Sicily's second largest city after Palermo, built entirely of lava. Walk down Via Etna, visit the open-air market and see the Elephant Fountain, the symbol of the city. Offers many lodging options.

earthquake and swallowed by a river of lava on October 27, 2002. All of the souvenir shops and ski huts were leveled. *La Provenzana* restaurant, the only structure left standing, later collapsed in a blazing fire.

The late October blast was preceded by more than 100 earthquakes measuring 3.5 to 3.6 on the Richter Scale. The intense seismic activity caused fissures and vents to open on Etna's southern flank. Lava flows destroyed tourist complexes, power lines and parts of ski resorts in the towns of *Rifugio Sapienza* and *Nicolosi* on Etna's southern slope. Ash rained down on Catania, causing the airport to close and auto and motorcycle traffic to cease; the layer of ash created slick road conditions. The heat of the lava caused forest fires to break out across the mountain. Water-carrying planes tried to dampen hot lava flows. Bulldozers and explosives were used in an attempt to divert Etna's far-reaching fury. The people of *Linguaglossa* marched through the streets with a statue of their patron

saint — Sant'Egidio — to stem the lava flow that loomed just five miles away. The lava stopped due to cooling magma, though *Linguaglossa* townspeople would argue otherwise. It is believed that the patron saint also rescued the town in 1923.

The eruption and its secondary effects continue today, in early 2003. Lava emissions have slowed for the time being, but showers of ash persist, often causing planes to be re-routed to Palermo and strangling tourist traffic into Catania. Foul-smelling sulfur still lingers in the region. The eruptions resulted in dozens of injuries and explosions, many caused by the heat of the lava and its contact with power lines.

Officials have begun to calculate the damage caused by Etna's protracted episode. Farmers suffered financial blows — an estimated loss of 140 million euros — and the tourism industry has been virtually shut down as a result of the volcano's wrath. The

newspaper *La Sicilia* reported that losses from the eruption total over 831 million euros, thus far. The Italian government postponed until the spring taxes due at the end of 2002 as a way to offer some economic relief to the affected areas.

Back in the States, I read stories about Etna's erratic behavior, and cringed at the devastation she had wrought. I could not believe I had just walked on land now covered by a blanket of lava, driven through forests now charred and enjoyed hot chocolate in a town now erased. I thought about the reverential relationship between the Etnei and the volcano. While I only spent one afternoon in the presence of this powerful lady, I felt I understood in some small way the fleeting nature of life in Etna's shadow. ♦

— Karina M. Halvorsen

Karina M. Halvorsen is a proud one-quarter Sicilian. Her mother's maiden name, Randazzo, is also the name of a medieval town dangerously close to Mount Etna's summit.

r, yet live each day as if it's their last."

News, Tips, Deals

EDITOR'S PICK

Too Much Tuscan Sun

EDITOR'S PICK

The day I received Dario Castagno's book in the mail had been a long one. I was getting sick and wanted to get some work done before going to bed early...but I couldn't. I thought I would take a quick peak at *Too Much Tuscan Sun: Confessions of a Chianti Tour Guide* and leave it for another day. That was the plan at least. I stayed up until nearly 2 a.m. voraciously reading and laughing myself into tears. The dog looked at me like I was nuts, but I was having too much fun to stop reading.

Dario Castagno tells the other side of Frances Mayes' famous tale, *Under the Tuscan Sun*. What's it really like to witness an American invasion of Tuscany each summer? According to Dario, sometimes it isn't too pretty. All I can say about Dario's encounters with Americans is "God bless him." He seems to have the patience of a saint.

Some of his close encounters: There's the 25-year-old trophy bride who treats her 40-something stepson like a 4-year-old and asks Dario to physically demonstrate the

proper use of a bidet. Then there's one Mr. Franklin, whose jogging suit matches that of his wife, who says, "Dario, I'm sorry but in Italy you just don't know how to cook Italian food. You get the best genuine Italian food in America, so if you don't mind, we'd prefer to eat over there." The Franklins then take Dario to McDonald's. And of course, who can forget the woman who tells Dario that she can't believe all of the sculptures and paintings in Italy were created by one family. Perplexed, Dario asks her what family is that? "The Circa family," she

replies, i.e. a painting labeled, "Circa 1645."

Although he shares his most outrageous adventures with American tourists, Dario balances out the book by detailing some of his most enjoyable experiences with American clients turned friends. He also gives a vivid picture of the sights, sounds, history and culture that make Chianti so unique.

Dario has sold 3,000 copies of his book through word of mouth. Although he has a lit-

erary agent in New York City,



he hasn't had too much luck. I can't believe an American publisher hasn't snapped this book up. Watch out Frances

Mayes!

If you are interested in getting a copy of *Too Much Tuscan Sun*, e-mail Dario at rasna@dada.it with your mailing address. You can also send him a fax at (39) 0577 322-534. He will send the book via priority mail along with a bill for \$18 per copy.

1 euro = \$1.04 at press time

From the Flight Deck

On May 1, American will launch new daily seasonal service between New York's Kennedy Airport and Rome. The flights, using 767 aircraft, end October 24.

Flying to multiple cities in Italy? Getting to the Continent on United, Lufthansa, Austrian Airlines or S.A.S?

Consider buying a Visit Italy Pass from Air One, which flies to 20 Italian cities. Simply buy one coupon for each one-way flight you plan to take. Only the first flight coupon must be reserved at the same time as your

international ticket is issued; other flight coupons may be booked any time. You must buy a minimum of 2 flight coupons (\$43 each).

You can get 3 flight coupons for less than \$39 each and 4 or more for less than \$35 each.

The coupons must be purchased prior to departure, as they are not available in Italy, and can only

be issued in conjunction with a Star Alliance Partner (United, Lufthansa, Austrian Airlines or S.A.S) international ticket to Italy. For more information: www.flyairone.it/en



ARTS Calendar

MILAN: *Napoleone e la Repubblica Italiana 1802-1805*

This exhibit of paintings, drawings and sculptures documents the creation of the first Italian Republic in 1802 by Napoleon, focusing on the historical, social and cultural transformation of Northern Italy. Now through February 28, 2003. Tickets: 6.50 euros. Rotonda della Besana, Via Besana. Closed Monday. For more information: (39) 02 54-55-047.

ROME: *Lucia di Lammermoor*

Rome's Teatro dell'Opera presents Gaetano Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*, a tale of tempestuous love and family honor, based on Sir Walter Scott's classic novel, *The Bride of Lammermoor*. Lucia is one of opera's most memorable heroines, whose love for her family's sworn enemy drives her to madness. Performances will be held February 21, 22, 23, 25 and 27 and March 1, 2 and 4, 2003. Ticket prices range from 8 to 119 euros. Teatro dell'Opera, Piazza Beniamino Gigli 1. For more information: (39) 06 481-60; www.operaroma.it

After 56 years in exile, the Italian royal family (the Savoys) re

and Events



An Italian Wine Education

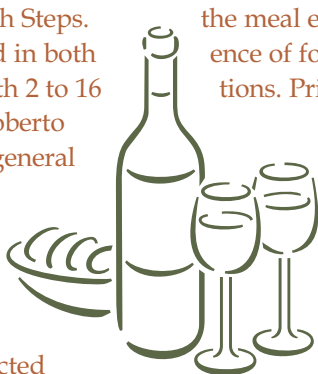
The International Wine Academy of Rome is now open in an historic palazzo



Academy's restaurant or in the garden. The sommelier guides participants through

INTERNATIONAL WINE ACADEMY OF ROMA

overlooking the Spanish Steps. Various classes are held in both Italian and English, with 2 to 16 students per course. Roberto Wirth, proprietor and general manager of the famed Hotel Hassler, is the founder and chairman of the Academy. Steven Spurrier, one of the world's most respected authorities on wine education, has designed the curriculum.



the meal explaining the art and science of food and wine combinations. Price: 195 euros per person.

The Academy also offers a three-day course, which includes two days of classroom instruction with students spending the third day touring

vineyards and wine cellars in Lazio, Umbria or Tuscany. In addition, a number of multi-week intermediate and advanced classes are available. Price: starts at 485 euros per person.

The half-day course teaches beginners about Italian wine regions, grape varieties, tasting techniques and how to store and

serve wine. The course includes two hours of instruction and lunch or dinner in a private room of the



For more information: (39) 06 699 0878; www.wineacademyroma.com

Noteworthy Travels

While famed historian Stephen Ambrose passed away last year, his legacy lives on in his writing and in his tour company, **Stephen Ambrose Historical Tours**. *The Italian Campaign* is a twelve-day tour led by Ambrose protégé, author and former Marine, Capt. Ron Drez. Drez will take 25-40 participants to the World War II landing site at Anzio, war museums and cemeteries. The tour, which takes place from April 12 -23, 2003, includes stops in Sorrento and Florence and participants will spend Easter in Rome. Judy Appel of Stephen Ambrose Tours says there is "enough Italy" in the tour for those who might not be quite as World War II-oriented as their traveling companions. This is the 2nd year the tour has run and guests will stay in 4-star properties with most breakfasts and dinners included. Price: \$3,200 per person, based on double occupancy, not including airfare. For more information: (888) 903-3329; www.stephenambrosetours.com

Mary Ann Esposito, host of the longest running Italian cooking show on public television, *Ciao Italia*, is leading a 10-day tour of the Emilia-Romagna region with tour company *Caravella Italia*. Mary Ann will conduct three

cooking lessons sharing her favorite regional recipes. She will join the group in visiting dairy and wine producers in the countryside and city tours of Parma, Modena, Bologna, Ferrara, and Ravenna. As with all Caravella adventures, no more than 12 participants can join the May 7 - 17, 2003 tour. Price: \$ 3,950 per person, land only. For more information: (888) 665-2112; www.caravella.com

Calling all writers! *The Spoleto Writers' Workshop* enters its ninth year this summer with two weeks of writing exercises in the heart of Umbria. The faculty includes Rosellen Brown, James Magnuson, and Marie Howe, all highly regarded writers and teachers. The workshop, intended for serious writers, focuses on new practices, methods and strategies for creating productive prose. This year's dates are July 19 - August 1, 2003. In addition to writing classes, participants can opt for Italian language classes. They may also choose to stay in the 16th century convent, The Istituto Bambin' Gesù. Price: \$2,400 plus, for accommodations and some meals. For more information: (212) 663-4440; www.spoletoarts.com

Window on Italian Life

In a country where 97% of the population is Catholic and probably just as many carry a cell phone, this was bound to happen sometime. Italy's largest mobile phone operator, TIM, is now offering customers text messages with the prayer of the day, saint of the day or gospel of the day. The service costs a few cents for each message.

Coming up in the March/April issue of

Dream of Italy:

Summer 2003
Events Guide

turned to Italy for a December visit.

1 euro = \$1.04 at press time

John Keahey on Venice

John Keahey, a veteran newspaper reporter for The Salt Lake Tribune in Salt Lake City, Utah, spent two months in Venice during early 2000 documenting the city's growing struggle with high water. His book, *Venice Against the Sea: A City Besieged* (Thomas Dunne Books), was published in 2002. He has been traveling to Italy since 1986, and published his first book in 2000. It is a travel narrative entitled *A Sweet and Glorious Land: Revisiting the Ionian Sea* (St. Martin's Press). That book retraces, 100 years later, the 1898 journey through southern Italy of English Victorian writer George Gissing. Gissing described his trip in the classic travel narrative, *By the Ionian Sea: Notes on a Ramble in Southern Italy*. Keahey is at work on another book about Italy. Dream of Italy spoke to Keahey about the state of Venice today.



DOI: We've all heard that Venice is sinking and flooding is increasing. Why? How?

JK: Since the first human habitation of the lagoon, Venice over the centuries has been naturally, albeit very slowly, sinking and sea level has gradually risen. The early Venetians dealt with it by demolishing buildings and raising the foundations. Modern Venetians don't do that. Everything is historic and will not be demolished. The sea keeps rising because of global warming and a variety of issues around changing climate.

When the city was first established in the 9th century, sea level was about six feet lower than it is today. When the lagoon was created 6000 years ago, sea level was about 60 feet lower than it is today. Another way to illustrate this is that in 1900, St. Mark's Square, the lowest point in Venice, was flooded seven times a year and now it is closer to 100 times. The floods are more frequent and are higher. Everything has accelerated.

DOI: What is being done to solve the problem?

JK: The national government has authorized an initial outlay of \$450 mil-

lion to begin building works in preparation for eventually building a gates project which we refer to as Mose (pronounced Mow-zay). Those preliminary projects include: reducing the depth of the middle channel to the lagoon; building a navigation lock to allow ships to enter and leave while the gates are being installed; and building a barrier reef at one of the three entrances which will deflect storm-driven high tides away from the entrances. The gates and complementary projects will take eight to ten years to build.

DOI: How bad is the flooding during the winter?

JK: This is the worst time. It does not happen every day, usually several times a week. The worst floods usually coincide with a full- or near-full-moon tide combining with a low-pressure system. This low-pressure, or storm, system pulls sea water into a dome that then is pushed by sirocco winds up the Adriatic while, at the same time, the dome is riding on top of the high tide.

Flooding usually occurs from October to April. It is not a reason to stay out of Venice. Most of the floods are lower than your knee and your hotels will give you boots. There are walk-ways set up and there are dams in front of

buildings. The only crisis is when there is a really high flood. On November 16, 2002, one came in at 1.47 meters. That is chest high on a 5'8" person.

DOI: In your book, you write about extensive international efforts to save Venice, but how do Venetians feel?

JK: They have a saying, "the water goes up, it goes down, so what's the problem?" Venetians have been living with periodic high water and have adapted to it. It has become more frequent and it's irritating. Venetians who stay have adapted quite well. They are not sure something needs to be done.

DOI: Are Venetians leaving?

JK: There are 60,000 residents today, down two-thirds from the 1950s. A few thousand leave each year. Increasing high water is one of the lesser reasons. The city is more and more taken over by tourism. There were 12 million tourists last year. The corner markets, the places where locals went to buy sustenance are being sold and becoming mask and tourist trinket shops. Venetians who run the shops leave for the mainland and commute back in. ♦

For more on John Keahey, visit his Web site, www.johnkeahey.com.

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