

# Linguistic Learning

by Laura Powell

*After sharing her experience of a two-week stint studying Italian in Italy, the author offers tips on how to choose a study abroad program and make the most of it.*

Learning vacations are all the rage these days. And among those who can trace their genes to another country, a popular option is to learn the language at the roots of the family tree.

Fortunately for those of Italian heritage, the options for studying the language in the old country are abundant. In fact, perhaps the hardest part of studying Italian in Italy is making the decision of which school to attend.

After two weeks of studying Italian at *Cultura Italiana* in Bologna, the biggest lesson I learned was that in order to get the experience you expect, you need to know the right questions to ask prior to enrolling in a particular school. Before going into detail on the list of questions, let me briefly relate my own experience at *Cultura Italiana*.

## **Lost in translation**

It's funny how the 40-year-old brain doesn't process language quite as easily as the more nimble, less-cluttered teenage mind. While the ability to learn languages easily may be the province of the young, it is never too late to give the process a go.

As a once-fluent speaker of Spanish, I decided that a sister Romance language like Italian could

jumpstart the linguistic portion of my gray matter. After all, if one knows Spanish - or far that matter, French or Latin - how difficult could Italian be? After studying a bit at the local community college, I discovered the answer to the question was that while learning grammar was a breeze, the difficulty, dear Brutus, was in the oration.

Thus, I came to the conclusion that the only way to learn to speak properly was to go to school in Italy and become immersed in the language for several

weeks.

Making that decision was easy. Selecting a school from among the hundreds of choices was the challenge. After surfing the Internet, I found a virtual plethora of programs for everyone from the novice to the novelist. Name a place - Florence, Perugia, Rome, Milazzo, Salerno - and there was a school or two...or three. Given the choices, I turned to the Istituto Italiano di Cultura (IIC) in San Francisco, one of five such centers across the United States (<http://www.italculnny.org>). The cultural office of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the IIC offers an extensive scholarship program with the mission of promoting Italian culture and language. The IIC selects candidates for full and partial tuition scholarships offered by more than 50 schools.

As it turned out, I applied for and received a scholarship to *Cultura Italiana*, a 24-year-old school located in a former palazzo in Bologna (the program also has branches in Maremma and Arezzo). I was to study Italian in class for four hours a day, every weekday, for two weeks. Additionally, I would be placed in a home (or so I thought) where I could practice my Italian every night with a host family. My experience at the school was mixed. The instruction, provided in separate grammar and speaking classes, was excellent. The instructors molded the classes to the students' needs and led them with great humor and enthusiasm. Opportunities for socializing with other students outside of the classroom were limited as the school had no café and few common areas for gathering and for group study. The extracurricular activities offered during the week, such as tours of the local theater and lectures on classical Italian music, were not particularly conducive to social interaction. But when I signed up for this particular course, I didn't know the questions to ask that would have let me know the program's pros and cons in advance.

So, while after two weeks of study, I am not fluent enough to write this article in Italian, I did gain valuable knowledge. For I am quite fluent in the questions to ask in order to ensure you receive the educational/cultural/social experience desired during the course of studying Italian in Italy.

## **QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN CHOOSING A LANGUAGE PROGRAM**

The search for a school should begin with this Top Ten List of questions:

### **1. In what part of Italy do I want to spend time?**

Northern and Southern Italy provide two different types of experiences. Dialects, dishes, and the local culture will vary, depending on your location.

### **2. Do I want to study in a big city or a small town?**

Each has its advantages. A big city will allow vast (sometimes overwhelming) opportunities for after school sightseeing, while smaller towns may allow you to delve into a local community and its lifestyles and culture. A big city may provide

more convenient transportation options, like trains and buses, to visit nearby places. In a smaller town, you may be more isolated, but are given a more traditional slice of Italian life.

### **3. How much Italian do you want to learn?**

Do you want to become fluent, or do you merely want to learn enough Italian to get by while traveling through the country? Depending on your answer, consider the length of the program, the number of hours of daily formal study, class size and the opportunity for one-on-one instruction. If you want to get fluent fast, find a program that is at minimum three weeks; one that offers small classes and one-on-one tutoring; and one that offers family stays in the true sense of the term.

### **4. Is sightseeing a priority?**

If so, a stay in a tourist's city like Florence or Rome may be on point. Or you may want to star in a transportation hub like Bologna, which offers easy access to places as diverse as Venice, San Marino or Como.

### **5. Are you ready to work hard?**

If you are merely looking for a restful and relaxing vacation, do be aware that hours of study every day can lead to brain drain and a type of mental exhaustion not experienced since Finals Week in college. For those who want to combine vacation with vocabulary, study in a small town or in a resort area, or consider selecting a program in which language study is combined with a favourite interest, such as cooking or music.

### **6. Where do you want to live during your stay?**

Most schools help students with lodging arrangements that can range from stays at local pensiones to apartment-shares with other students. Another option, as previously mentioned, is the family stay. Before accepting this option, find out what you will be getting, as sometimes, this definition can be a misnomer. As mentioned, my "family stay" was limited to a confining room in the apartment of a single woman (with no kitchen privileges to boot). Had I known in advance, that this type of situation makes up the bulk of the family stay offerings in Bologna, I would have opted for another type of lodging experience.

### **7. What is the student body like?**

If the people with whom you are studying are important to you, ask about the demographic breakdown of the student population. One of the beauties of *Cultura Italiana* from my perspective was its international nature. It drew from nearly every country imaginable, with students from Scandinavia, Germany and Japan heavily represented. English speakers from the United Kingdom and the United States had a presence, but not a large one. One advantage of studying

in such a diverse setting is that students are less likely to lapse into their native languages (although, admittedly, English was the common language among the European polyglots with whom I attended class).

Age may be another matter of concern. Personally, I liked the diversity of my crowd, which ranged in age from 20 to 55 (and in profession from "student" to sports producer to scientist). The age range was especially large in Bologna, due to the appeal of this university town for younger people (Bologna is said to have the highest number per capita of nightclubs in Italy). However, *Cultura Italiana*'s Maremma and Arezzo campuses, located in smaller and quieter places, attract an older crowd, including retirees. There are also schools devoted to rapid immersion that tend to attract young and middle-aged professionals looking to work in Italy.

### **8. What is the method of teaching?**

At *Cultura Italiana*, students were separated according to their levels in grammar and speaking. The first two hours of the day were devoted to Italian grammar with others at a similar level of understanding. Then, in the speaking class, another group of students were peers in terms of oral ability. This structure worked very well, given that speaking and grammar skills can vary so dramatically. In addition to class structure, do ask how many students will be in each class. Particularly in the oral classes, smaller numbers are better. The fewer students involved, the more air time each receives.

### **9. What kind of facilities does the school have?**

The learning process will be enhanced if the school has a language lab with Italian CDs and access to local magazines and newspapers. Additionally, find out if there are communal areas at the school, such as a café; a cafeteria, or an outdoor picnic area. Such facilities will give you more of an opportunity to spend time, and to speak Italian, with your fellow students.

### **10. What extracurricular activities are offered?**

Extracurricular activities can be every bit as important in the learning process as the classroom experience. Many schools offer after-hours programming, including wine tastings, film viewings, and museum visits (ask to see if such programming costs extra). Not only are these extracurricular activities a good way to practice Italian and learn about Italian culture, but they also provide an informal setting with which to bond with your fellow students.

If your desire to learn Italian secondary to becoming immersed in cultural pursuits, you might consider enrolling in a course where you can combine other interests with-language study. For example, you can learn the art of mosaic-making in Ravenna, you can study painting in Perugia, or you can bake in Bologna, while learning Italian in the process.

With this Top Ten List in hand, go on-line, contact the schools you are interested in, and fire away. By getting the specifics, your Italian language learning

vacation can be everything you always dreamed it might be.

### **ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE TIPS**

- 1. Start the learning process at home.** A good basic knowledge of Italian will allow you to get more out of your classes in a shorter amount of time.
- 2. When in Italy, go to films and watch TV.** Because of the speed at which the dubbers have to speak (in order for those lengthy Italian sentences to match the on-screen action), it might be easier to watch programming with which you are already familiar. Another option is to watch the news in Italian, where no translation is involved and the pictures can help you put unfamiliar words in context.
- 3. Eavesdrop.** Sit in a café and pretend to read while listening to the conversation at the next table. If you are traveling via train, close your eyes and focus on nearby conversations or the telephone calls of your fellow travelers.
- 4. Take city tours, or guided tours of museums or tourist attractions, in Italian.** The milieu will make what is being said easier to understand.
- 5. Speak all the time and don't be intimidated, even if you stumble.** If you are trying, most Italians will be happy to accommodate you by working with you, speaking slowly, and helping you finish your sentences.

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