

Amber Road Tours

Small group journeys through the best bits of Italy

Life In Italy

May newsletter 2010



Tour Calendar 2010

Tuscany/Umbria
Oct 7-19

Sicily
Oct 25-Nov 5

Amalfi/Apulia
Oct 8-20

2011

Sicily
April 7-18
May 5-16
Oct 6-17
Oct 20-31

Week In Tuscany
May 29-June 4
July 3-9
Sept 4-10

Tuscany/Umbria
May 5-17
May 19-31
Sept 8-20
Sept 22-Oct 4
Oct 6-18

Tuscany/Liguria
May 11-19
June 8-16
Sept 14-22
Oct 5-13

Amalfi/Apulia
May 20-June 1
Sept 9-21
Sept 23-Oct 5

Leaving winter

What's it like to live in a small, medieval hamlet of 72 inhabitants in the winter? Well, it rains, snows and the wind blows hard from the first of December until the middle of April. On occasional days when the sun shines through there is the inevitable fog. Fortunately we live at 600 meters (2,000 ft.) above sea level keeping us above it *most* of the time. The photo is of the Spoleto-Assisi valley taken from our vantage point - we call it *il lago di nebbia*, fog lake.



A characteristic of small towns and villages in winter throughout Italy is that people leave their homes as little as possible. We rarely see anyone about. One wet day in March I was crossing the lane from our house to our office when I encountered a neighbor who joked, "Oh, the other resident!"

So what do we do when we've had our fill of tranquility and solitude? We head for the crowds, confusion and pollution of our favorite Italian city.

Napoli - la vita è sempre bella

Naples' twofold reputation is of a place where the locals will steal your watch off your wrist in broad daylight and where the country's most beautiful women originate. The first part is truly undeserved. In terms of safety it's no different than any other big city in the world. Be aware, that's all. Yes, there is organized crime - the Camorra - but they're not interested in your wrist watch. What you will find there are the most warm and colorful people in all of Italy. Outside of their cars (the traffic is insane) people take life easy and are very generous with their time and attention.

The area is rich in natural beauty - set on the sparkling gulf of Naples with Mt. Vesuvius as a backdrop. The rebel gladiator Spartacus used the crater as an encampment for his army in 73 B.C. A hundred years later in 79 A.D. there was the massive eruption that left us with the fabulous history lesson that is called Pompeii. There have been more than 43 eruptions since, the last in 1944. Take a look now at all the optimists who've built their homes on the slopes halfway up to the crater.

Naples has a rich and complex history. It was founded by the Greeks in the 8th century B.C. and later made a colony of Rome. The summer villas of wealthy Romans once lined the whole coast. After the Fall it was subsequently dominated by Goths, Byzantines, Lombards, Normans, French and Spanish. It was the only Italian city in WWII to liberate itself from Nazi forces (Sept 1943) without allied help.



What to do

Naples is just one hour by train from Rome. It is best experienced if you have three days or more. There is so much to see - UNESCO named it "the largest open-air museum in the world".

If you have just one day then take your time and absorb the city. Walk up the pedestrian lanes of Via Chiaia and Via Toledo and admire the grand architecture, elegant shops and animated natives. Visit the Naples National Archeological Museum where most of the objects unearthed from ancient Pompeii are on display. (Be sure to rent an audio guide from the ticket office.) Take the funicular up to Certosa di San Martino where you'll find the best views of the gulf.

If you have two days make a visit to the Capodimonte art museum. Wander through the Decumano maggiore, the ancient Greek part of the city.

If you have three days walk the Spaccanapoli (*photo*), the narrow ancient Roman road that splits the city in two and where the sun never shines. Visit the Museo del Tesoro di San Gennaro and the Capella Sansevero.

Places to visit from Naples:

Take the train to Pompeii and Herculaneum, boats to Sorrento, Capri and Amalfi or a taxi to Vesuvio.



Cuisine

Abundant seafood, exquisite vegetable dishes and, of course, pizza.

Try traditional street food like *timpani* or *sformati* (pies made with pasta, tomato and other ingredients), also *scagliozzi* (fried polenta), *mangiamaccheroni* (maccheroni you eat with your hands), *octopus soup*, and *zeppole* (fried or baked sweets).

Recommended restaurant: the **Trattoria San Ferdinando** where they serve traditional neapolitan dishes, located just off the Via Chiaia.

Two hotels - one family

The **Chiaja Hotel de Charme** is a late 19th century structure that has been in the Fusella family for generations. Previously a *sartoria* (tailor's shop), it was converted into a lovely hotel in 2000. Located on the Via Chiaia, a long pedestrian lane with shops and bars where you can partake in a lively *passaggiata*. The hotel was recently enlarged with the purchase of the adjacent building that was once a famous brothel (closed in 1950) called "La Suprema". Ask Pietro, the owner, to show you the back balcony where the girls were admired by their prospective customers below.

The **Decumani Hotel de Charme** is a spacious and elegant 18th century palazzo that once belonged to Cardinal Sisto Riario Sforza, the last Bishop of the Bourbon Kingdom of Naples. The ancient twisting lanes and quaint shops in the surrounding Decumani will transport you back in time. The owner is Domenico Fusella,

Pietro's uncle. Guided walking tours of the city can be arranged from either of the hotels.

Asparagus thieves

Umbria is rich in many wild foods, most famously truffles and porcini mushrooms. Truffles are foraged using trained dogs. Porcini hunters wear high boots and use a stout stick. *Why the stick?* Because mice also like porcini. *Ok, but why would you need a stick to fend off a mouse?* Vipers, the only poisonous reptiles in Italy, eat mice. They lay in wait next to the porcini. *Clever little devils.* Risky business to reach down and pick that mushroom without batting about with the stick first.



When the spring rains stop you find lots of folks out foraging for another local product - wild asparagus. You don't need a dog or a stick, just a plastic bag. If you don't want to pick your own then you can find it at every restaurant and at local markets (expensive). Wild asparagus is so highly valued that foragers will risk trespassing on your property and steal yours. We've had to run them off a few times. Most of our neighbors don't have this problem as they own dogs. Our cats just yawn as they pass through but they do keep our property viper-free.

The photo is of our simpatico neighbor Benedetto with an honestly gathered bunch of asparagus.

Wild asparagus is native to most of Europe, North Africa and western Asia. This recipe works equally well with cultivated varieties.

Risotto agli asparagi

recipe for 4 persons

Ingredients

360 grams white rice
2 bunches of asparagus
parmigiano cheese

40 grams China black rice
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup extra virgin olive oil
salt and pepper

1 large onion
1 glass white wine

Snap off the asparagus heads and the tender parts of the stalks.
Put the heads aside for later. Finely chop the stalks and the onion.
Heat the olive oil in a pan. Boil water in a kettle.
Add the onion and stalks, cook 5 minutes or until onions begin turning brown.
Toss in the rice and let cook dry for 2 minutes.
Add wine and cook until absorbed. Set timer for 20 minutes.
Add just enough boiling water to cover the rice. Add salt.
Maintain the water at this level throughout the process, stirring occasionally.
Throw in the heads when the timer reaches 10 minutes.
When rice is fully cooked add pepper and parmigiano.
Cover the pan; turn off heat and let sit for 5 minutes.

Buon appetito!



A presto!
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