



10 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW BEFORE TRAVELING IN ITALY

Warren Schirtzinger

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DRIVING IN ITALY IS ORGANIZED CHAOS...THAT WORKS!

Everyone in Italy appears to be on island time and Italians are never in a hurry...**until** they get behind the wheel of a car. Then, look out!

Driving in Italy is best described as "collective madness." Scooters, bicycles and motorcycles share the road with cars and trucks in a frenzied, there-are-no-rules kind of way. It seems that something is always zipping by on your left and right, even on one-lane roads.

Italians combine fast driving with just the right amount of passive-aggressive behavior. You'll notice the car flying past you at 200 kilometers per hour (120 mph) is the same one you had seen two minutes ago, creeping onto the on-ramp and being passed by a three-wheeler. Thankfully, most Italian drivers also tend to be highly skilled and have experience driving at high speeds in chaotic environments.

It's actually quite remarkable that buses, cars, bicycles, garbage trucks, street sweepers, three-wheelers, motorcycles and scooters can all peacefully coexist in such a free-for-all environment.

So if you must drive in Italy, here are the rules of the road:

1. Always drive at the highest possible speed
2. Pedestrians will move out of your way
3. If it's bigger than you, it has the right of way
4. Drivers approaching from a side street only *pretend* they are going to hit you. They actually do stop...at the last possible second
5. Stop signs, one-way signs, traffic lanes, speed limits and other rules are just a "suggestion" and therefore optional
6. Be mindful of farmers on tractors, parked cars, or even restaurants (!) in the right lane
7. A legitimate parking spot is wherever you stop your car and get out. Sidewalks and the middle of the street are all fair game.

It's a crazy system that you'll start to appreciate in a fairly short period of time. And you'll soon understand why driving in Italy is **infinitely** less frustrating than driving in the U.S.

"If everything seems under control, you're just not going fast enough."

Mario Andretti



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HOTEL ROOMS ARE LIKE A BOX OF CHOCOLATES; YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO GET

One of the interesting things about Italy is there is very little mass production. With the exception of motor vehicles, almost everything made in Italy is one of a kind. And that includes hotel rooms.

You'll find that most hotels in Italy look like a collection of rooms, gathered from other buildings. Each room will probably look very different than any other room.

Plus there are more surprises waiting for you inside the hotel! These include:

- It's common practice to make two twin or single beds look like a double bed. In a so-called double room, you will find your "double bed" is actually two beds pushed together.
- Don't expect to see a washcloth at any time during your visit to Italy. Even in so-called full service hotels, the concept of a washcloth is completely foreign to an Italian.
- Hotels will often charge per person, instead of per room. Don't be surprised if this causes your hotel bill to be much higher than you expected.
- Hotel owners are required by law to register every guest with the police. Therefore travelers are required to present their passport upon check-in at all accommodations. Your passport will be given back to you a few hours later or during check out.

- In warmer areas your hotel room might be air conditioned, but the A/C will only run when you stick your room key in the wall. When you leave, the air shuts off and you can look forward to returning to a hot room.
- Some hotels require a deposit to hold your reservation. But Italian law says the hotel does **not** have to give you your deposit back if you cancel your reservation. So be **very** careful about finalizing your reservation.



Two twin beds masquerading as a double bed

3

FORGET EVERYTHING YOU THINK YOU'VE LEARNED ABOUT ITALIAN FOOD AT OLIVE GARDEN

Food is **very** important to the average Italian. And the thing that makes Italian food so appealing, both to those who eat it and those who prepare it, is the focus on high-quality ingredients and simplicity of the recipes.

It has been said that every great Italian dish has only three ingredients. And while that may not be universally true, you won't find complicated dishes in the restaurants of Italy. Instead of complex flavors or mixtures, Italians always use the best fresh ingredients they can find - **only what's in season and available locally** - and they refuse to cover them up by adding a bunch of extras.

It's simply not realistic for profit-driven corporate restaurants, such as Olive Garden, to prepare food the same way it is done in Italy. Chain restaurants focus on efficiency, which means their food is usually shipped **frozen** from a distant supplier and their sauces come in a sealed pouch of freeze-dried ingredients. Plus they serve food no one in Italy has ever heard of. (see list)



In addition to false claims about “authentic Italian food,” there are several common myths that surround Italian food in most U.S. restaurants and grocery stores:

- there is no such thing in Italy as “Alfredo Sauce”
- the word *Prego* has a multitude of meanings in the Italian language, none of which have anything to do with spaghetti sauce
- there is no such thing as “Italian Dressing.” Salad dressing is oil and vinegar and that's it
- Italians **do not** use a lot of garlic
- Fettuccini Alfredo, Caesar's Salad, Chicken Parmesan, Pasta Primavera and Tetrazzini are foreign inventions that do not exist in Italy
- *Manicotti* refers to a tube-like structure used in construction, like a sewer pipe. Tube-shaped pasta filled with spinach and ricotta cheese is called *Cannelloni*

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THE WORD *TOMORROW* REALLY MEANS SOMETIME IN THE NEAR FUTURE

There is a different rhythm to life in Italy and to enjoy your visit you have to accept it. It's slower, more relaxing and gives you time to enjoy life.

In Italy happiness comes from taking time to stop and enjoy the small moments of life. Sit down. Enjoy a snack. Take comfort in the rain. Soak up the vista. Don't stress that the boat is late. If you don't do it today, you can do it tomorrow. Have a coffee. Don't worry about it.

Recently, people in Italy celebrated “world slow day.” Pedestrians thought to be walking **too fast** were given citations encouraging them to slow down and enjoy their surroundings. The Art of Living Slowly association founded world slow day two years ago, saying it was an opportunity to enjoy one's lifestyle and environment.

Slow is simply the way of life in Italy. Italians do not multitask, they take 42 vacation days a year, and the Italian postal service always places last in work-speed studies.

“Do it tomorrow” really means “when I get around to it.” So when you hear the word tomorrow (*domani*) you are being told sometime in the near future. And when you hear someone say the day after tomorrow, it means sometime in the **distant** future.

The sooner you learn to accept this part of Italian culture, the more fun you'll have.



5

NEVER DRINK WINE AT AN ITALIAN WINE BAR

Italy is one of the oldest wine producing regions in the world and wine production was believed to have started around 4000BC. Ever since then Italian wine has been designed as a **compliment to food**. It was never intended to be a “drink.” In fact Italian wine is intended to go with food that is grown in the same soil as the wine grapes. Most Italians know this and will only consume wine with food or during a meal.

In contrast, wines from the United States, Australia and South Africa taste good by themselves because they are designed to stand alone as a beverage. But they also cover up or destroy the taste of food.

This is why the concept of a wine bar, where patrons go just to drink wine, is very much out of place in Italy. In fact the phrase “Italian wine bar” is a bit of an oxymoron. Anyone who truly understands Italian wine would never go inside.

You will see wine bars in some cities, but what you won't find inside are Italian customers. Wine bars in Italy were created just for tourists. And the wine they serve doesn't taste spectacular unless consumed with local food.



Always eat local food with Italian wine

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ITALIAN BATHROOMS ARE AN ADVENTURE

You will find the bathrooms of Italy are an adventure. It seems that every area, town, or even building has its own system of fixtures, knobs, buttons, doors, chains, and water flow.

Some bathrooms are ridiculously small and some are absolutely huge. Others are oddly shaped to accommodate very old architecture.

Water faucets and sinks never operate the same way from one bathroom to the next. It could be a pedal on the floor or pull-down chain up above. You never know. You just have to figure it out when you get there.

But it's the tub/shower arrangement that most often requires a sense of humor. Little half-doors are used for tub-showers, and sometimes containing the spray seems hopeless. Tubs can be very narrow, and shower stalls can be so small that it's nearly impossible to squeeze inside. Some showers have no walls at all, so the whole bathroom is designed as the drain.

Then there are the toilets, each of which seems to use a different system of plumbing. Figuring out how to flush some of them is part of the adventure.

You need to be able to laugh about these peculiarities, or they will drive you nuts.



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THE WAY YOU DRESS, DETERMINES HOW YOU WILL BE TREATED

Clothes represent personality and social status in Italy so people wear nice clothing almost all the time. It's one of the reasons you'll see janitors and maids wearing shoes that cost well over 200 Euros.

Italians seeing you for the first time will judge you by your appearance, and will respond accordingly. So if you dress or look like a tourist, you'll be treated like one.

For a number of reasons you are better off looking like a local citizen rather than a standard American tourist. This is a controversial subject but the fact is tourists are the target of scam artists, pickpockets, thieves and terrorists. And the best way to avoid problems is to blend in and look like a local (as best you can).

The clothes worn by most American tourists announce them as Americans better than any billboard ever could. To avoid being an American billboard you should remember that Italians hate sloppy or oversized clothing. Plus don't ever wear any of the following: white socks, shorts, floral patterns, Hawaiian shirts, fanny packs or clothing printed with the names of cities, beaches, islands, or other famous landmarks.

Conversely, Italians appreciate people who are well-dressed and give them more respect and attention. Dark neutrals such as black, gray, and brown will help you blend in.

Black slacks work great when combined with comfortable, yet classy shoes. For women, a scarf and good leather purse help you look like a local.

Two more tips for blending in: dress-up before going out for the evening. Daywear is not considered appropriate at nighttime. And purple is the color of lent and is considered bad luck. Avoid wearing anything that is dark purple.



A typical American tourist wearing baggy shorts, white socks and a Hawaiian shirt

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TRAVELERS HAVE MORE FUN THAN TOURISTS

Let's face it. Rick Steves has ruined large parts of Italy by pointing the way for tens-of-thousands of tourists. Not too long ago the Cinque Terre was an undiscovered gem. Now, it's overrun by American tourists carrying copies of *Europe Through the Back Door*.

With the help of a conventional guidebook, the stereotypical *tourist* follows a checklist of "famous places to see" and in the process misses the flavor and beauty of what's right in front of them. Plus if you only visit places such as Venice, Florence, Sienna, (or now the Cinque Terre) Italy can feel like one big tourist trap with shockingly high prices.

However, if you *travel* through the Italian countryside and visit remote places you've never heard of, your trip will be much more rewarding. *Travelers* attempt to experience life from within the Italian culture, rather than from the point of view of a temporary visitor. The traveler leaves his home environment at home, bringing only himself and a desire to become part of the culture he visits.

I recommend you avoid acting like a tourist and stay away from the tourist traps so many Americans flock to. You'll find your greatest enjoyment won't be waiting in line at the Coliseum or trying to see the Statue of David over the heads of a hundred other tourists. It will be an afternoon spent in a small-town cafe where you can soak up the local ambience.

Visiting monuments might be memorable, but your best memories will come from immersing yourself in the easy rhythms of a land preoccupied with the art of living.



Tourists standing in line with other tourists

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THERE IS NO STARBUCKS HERE

Starbucks has been tremendously successful around the world because they provide not just coffee, but a charming, neighborhood experience. As it turns out, the whole Starbucks phenomenon was inspired by the Italian coffee tradition, which means you might expect to find Starbucks stores in Italy.

Despite being inspired by the Italian culture, the Starbucks model does not work in Italy because it is structured around American society. The coffee experience for Italians is much more personal and intimate than anything a Starbucks store is able to offer.

Italians would never drink coffee from a paper cup, nor would they take coffee “to go” and drink it while walking or driving. Coffee is part of the Italian slow food culture.

Forget for a minute that Starbucks espresso is a watery, pale, tasteless imitation of the real thing, or that there is no such thing as Frappuccino. In Italy, coffee is not a fast-food item, and Starbucks treats coffee like a fast food.

So you won't find a Starbucks store anywhere in Italy. Not a single one! Duncan Donuts failed in Italy for all of the same reasons.



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DON'T TOUCH THE PRODUCE

Touching produce, such as fruit and vegetables, is considered very rude in Italy. The shopper must never, *ever* handle the produce, unless given permission to do so. It's best to just ask the person at the counter to help you.

This cultural norm is especially difficult for Americans to understand because we are accustomed to self service. But given the revered status of food in Italy, it should not come as a big surprise. Vendors want to wait on you, because they are proud of the food they are providing, and they don't want you spoiling anything with your unwashed hands.

Most people visiting Italy find out about this the hard way. Old ladies start yelling at you when you touch something you're not supposed to.

There are also slight variations on this rule, depending on the type of store you are in:

In an outdoor market, the seller will pick out the best produce for you. Don't try to indicate which piece of fruit you want -- picking out produce is a point of honor for the seller, and rejecting his/her choice is an insult.

In a small grocery, wait until an employee comes to help you. Indicate your choices and the employee will pick the produce and put it in a bag.

In large supermarkets you will be provided with plastic gloves so you can pick your own fruits and vegetables. Weigh each bag and punch a button for that particular item. A machine will print a sticker that you place onto the bag.



Non Toccare! (do not touch)

About the author



Warren Schirtzinger has been traveling the back roads of Italy since 1974 and has developed extensive, first-hand knowledge of Italy and the Italian lifestyle.

He is the creator of ***The Vespa Diaries***, a popular on-line travel guide that uses video to capture and explain the essence of the Italian lifestyle. He has also published numerous articles about the Italian culture and people.

When not traveling in Italy, Warren runs a consulting firm that provides corporate strategy, marketing and communications services for emerging high-tech companies.

To learn more about Warren, please visit:

personal web site:: <http://warrenschirtzinger.com>

video blog:: <http://www.vespadiaries.com>

published articles:: <http://italy.culturaltravel.net>