



# ITALY

## AND THE ART

### *of doing nothing*

Words Annemarie Luck

Besides sightseeing and shopping, the best thing about the land of pizzas and piazzas is that it inspires you to slow down, take your time and live the good life



There's a scene in the movie *Eat, Pray, Love* where Julia Roberts is sitting in a barber shop in Rome and one of the customers turns to her and explains how Italians have mastered the art of doing nothing. This struck a chord in me - because it fascinates me that these days we cannot seem to find a balance between feeling stressed and bored: if we're rushing from A to B all the time then we're overwhelmed; but if we're not rushing then we're looking for something to fill our time. Simply, we've forgotten how to relax and that connecting with each other is an integral part of this. During the two weeks I spent in Italy, I saw evidence of its culture's 'art of doing nothing' everywhere - from the deli owner sitting at a table outside his store, waving happily at us, to the foreigners and locals soaking up the sun on the Spanish Steps. There's just something about the home of pizza and pasta that makes you want to stop, order a cappuccino (the best you'll ever taste, too) and watch the world go by...

## THE TOURIST

From the minute we land in Venice, I am reenacting scenes from *The Tourist* in my head. I am Angelina Jolie (although decidedly less glamorous in my black cotton jumpsuit and pumps) and my partner, Craig, is Johnny Depp (not his mathematician persona, of course, but the international man of mystery). We hop onto the airport transfer boat, the Alilaguna, and with the sun glistening off the water we're on our way into the heart of the city of romance. An hour later we arrive at the doorstep of our impressive hotel, the Hilton Molino Stucky, which is on the island of Guidecca and housed in a renovated 19th-century flourmill and granary. As I open the window of our bedroom and look out at the canal below, I'm a pouty, ballgown-wearing spy and Craig is my undercover admirer.

The only things missing from my little fantasy are speeding boats and chasing policemen. In fact, Venice is extraordinarily quiet and slow-moving.

There's no traffic - not even scooters - and surprisingly few vaporettos (water taxis) on the canals. Everyone walks, and take a turn off the main street and you'll find yourself in deserted, cobblestone lanes. Perhaps it's different in high season (we're here in spring) but I'm loving the subdued pace and the feeling that you can get lost in the labyrinth of canals and bridges.

### BEST SPOTS FOR DOING NOTHING

■ Venice's 3,2km-long Grand Canal that snakes from the suburb of San Marco to the Santa Lucia train station. ■ Piazza San Marco - visit the Basilica di San Marco cathedral, the Campanile and the Museum of the City. ■ The Lido - the beach. ■ On a gondola - be prepared to pay around R1 000 for a trip on one of these little love boats.

## FLORENCE + THE ART MACHINE

Our strategy for exploring each new city is to spend the first afternoon just wandering the streets sans guidebook. Italy's main cities are small enough that you can do this without worrying about going horribly off track, plus with the throng of tourists around, it's hard to lose your way. And this gives you a sense of what it might be like to live there, just going for an afternoon stroll, stopping off at your local coffee shop (you generally end up going back to the same one over and over because once you've found a good deal you want to stick to it - they're not lying when they say Italy is expensive).

So after finding our way from the train station to the Westin Excelsior hotel (which is the most beautiful, ornate building I've ever stayed in and set right alongside the Arno River), we step out to see what the city has to offer. The energy is immediately different to Venice's. I almost expect to see the ghost of Basquiat graffitiing the walls as we take in the artistic, edgy soul of the city. Everywhere you look there's art, whether it's Michelangelo's David or just an exquisite piece of Renaissance architecture; it's like the city is one big gallery. This doesn't mean that the city is behind the times, however, and I am ecstatic when we stumble upon Zara and H&M. The day ends with me swooning over my newly purchased nude pleated skirt while indulging in the chocolate-covered strawberries we find waiting for us in our hotel room. This moment will live forever as one of my favourites.

### BEST SPOTS FOR DOING NOTHING

■ Ponte Vecchio bridge. ■ The Uffizi gallery. ■ Duomo cathedral. ■ Piazza della Signoria, an open-air museum of sculpture filled with ancient and Renaissance statues. ■ Galleria dell'Accademia, where Michelangelo's David stands.

## LA DOLCE VITA

It's our first evening in Rome and we're sitting in front of the Trevi Fountain. If we could exist inside a bubble that didn't include school tour groups, hawkers trying to sell you camera stands and people asking you to move out the way so they can take a photo, then this could very well be one of the most transcendental moments of my life. The lights that so hauntingly accent the fountain's statue; the clear, turquoise water (how do they keep it so clean with all that money getting tossed in?); and the feeling that we're looking at something so preserved in its beauty and meaning - it's enough to send you into a hypnotic state of awe. Craig and I sit here, on our grey cement bench, for at least an hour, fascinated by the interplay between ancient art and modern life. Doing nothing has never been so rewarding.

### BEST SPOTS FOR DOING NOTHING

■ The hop-on hop-off bus - there is much more to see in Rome than in Venice and Florence and for R200 you get a 24-hour pass and easy access to all the major sights. ■ The Vatican - if you happen to be in Rome on a Wednesday, make a point of arriving early in the morning as the Pope often



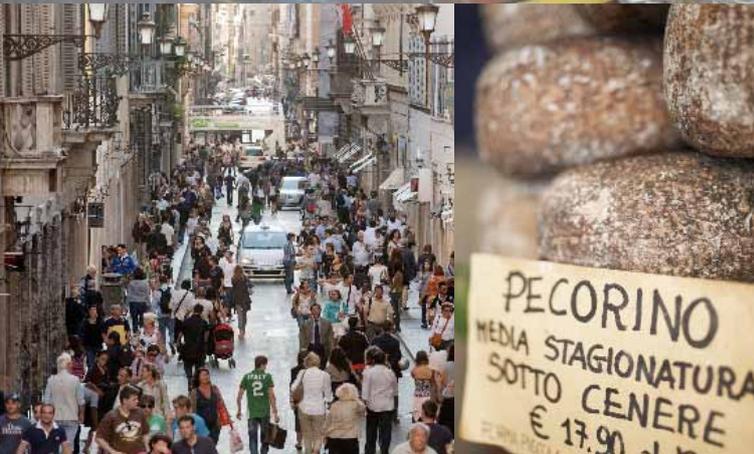
Clockwise from top left  
Florence has an edgy spirit; there's a pizzeria on every corner in Italy; make sure you indulge in Italy's delicious home-made gelato; Florence from above; Annemarie Luck in Venice.



*I almost expect to see the ghost of Basquiat graffitiing the walls as we take in the artistic, edgy soul of the city*



Clockwise from top left Positano, along the Amalfi coastline; gondolas in Venice; wall art in Venice; Annemarie in Venice; visit a deli for crusty breads and delicious cheese; Via Condotti in Rome is renowned for its luxury shopping.



makes a public appearance (we just missed him). ■ The Colosseum – go to the Roman Forum (Ancient Rome) first and buy a ticket there for R110 as this will get you into both sights and you'll avoid the queue at the Colosseum. ■ The Spanish Steps – a good spot for eating *gelato*.

## CIAO AMALFI!

A three-hour train ride from Rome (after a two-hour delay) to the coastal town of Salerno, an hour's bus ride to Amalfi, and a half-hour bus ride up the mountain to Ravello. It's been a long day of travelling but the view that awaits us from our Garden Ravello hotel room makes it utterly worth it. We step out onto our balcony and feel like the luckiest people in the world. We're looking at folds of mountain dropping into the ocean, high above one of the most famous and beautiful coastlines in the world.

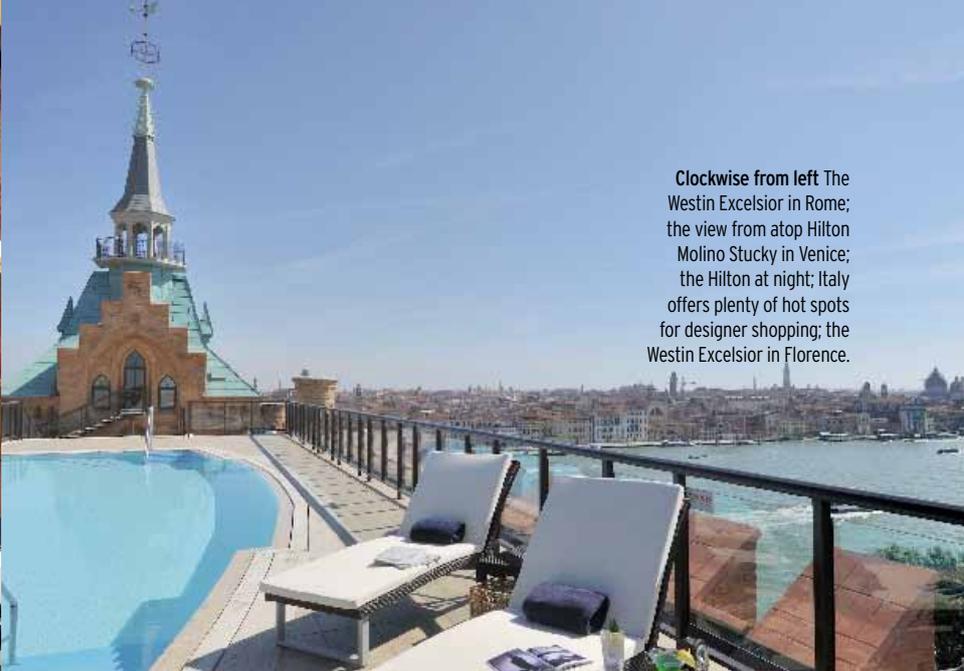
We chose to stay in the mountain village of Ravello because it was more affordable than Amalfi, but after a few hours spent exploring the town, we realize that we couldn't have picked a better place. The main square is just a short walk from our hotel and people converge here throughout the day for café lattes and conversation. There are a few restaurants just off the square and the food is fresh, home-made and served with friendly banter (none of that 'Europeans hate foreigners' stereotype). We walk past a shop called Wine & Drugs and are invited in for a free wine tasting by the Czechoslovakian owner Stella. She's lived in Italy for 15 years, she tells us, and proceeds to open at least five bottles of excellent Italian wine for us to taste. She recommends a restaurant down the road for dinner and there we meet Enzo, a local who serves us his own speciality pizza – salami, onion and fresh, unpitted olives – and gives us a discount on the price. When we see Enzo and Stella the next day, they wave at us like we've known them for years.

To explore the rest of the coastline, we hire a scooter and spend a day navigating the curves that stretch from Amalfi to the impossibly pretty town of Positano. Here we buy delicious pizza slices (a bargain at only R11,50 each – we paid up to R40 per slice in Venice) and amble down to the charcoal-coloured beach sand to enjoy our takeaways and make fun of the foreigners who are sunning themselves fully clothed. Of course we realize we're foreigners too, but for some reason we feel more at home here than anywhere else in Italy. It could be the beach, which reminds us of Clifton's coves in Cape Town; it could be that after two weeks we just feel more comfortable in the Italian culture. But I'm pretty certain it's all about that feeling you can only get after doing nothing becomes a regular activity: contentment.

### BEST SPOTS FOR DOING NOTHING

■ Ravello's main square – we once spent more than three hours just sitting here, our feet in the sun and a waiter serving us coffee and treats. ■ The beach – there are plenty of little beaches along the coast but Amalfi's and Positano's are two of the most popular. ■ A boat excursion to the Isle of Capri. **mc**





Clockwise from left The Westin Excelsior in Rome; the view from atop Hilton Molino Stucky in Venice; the Hilton at night; Italy offers plenty of hot spots for designer shopping; the Westin Excelsior in Florence.

marie claire  
travel  
guide

## Top tips for a perfect holiday in Italy

### HOW TO GET THERE

We flew on Swiss International Air Lines from Jo'burg to Venice (via Zurich, which is a great city for a stopover if you have extra time on your hands). Buy a ticket for the Alilaguna transfer boat at the airport for about R200. We returned from Rome to Jo'burg, also via Zurich. Call 0860-040-506 or visit Swiss.com.

### WHERE TO SHOP

- **Venice** In San Marco you'll find Armani, Gucci, Max Mara, Missoni, Prada, Trussardi, Valentino, Versace and more.
- **Florence** Via Tornabuoni, Via della Vigna Nuova, and Via dei Calzaiuoli.
- **Rome** Via del Corso: for top designer stores, including Diesel and Benetton, and department stores like Zara and COIN.

### TRAVEL TIPS

- When in Venice, buy your vaporetto ticket either before you get on the boat or as you step on board. If you don't have a ticket when the conductor comes around you'll be fined 49 euros (R530) without exception (I speak from unfortunate experience).
- Try to book your holiday before the summer crowds arrive - we were there late March/early April and many of the locals told us it was the best time for avoiding the rush and for pleasant weather (also, the canals in Venice can become unpleasantly smelly during summer). In August Italians celebrate Ferragosto - everyone goes on holiday so you're unlikely to find any trading stores during this month.
- For the best food, avoid the touristy restaurants in the city centres and ask the locals where they hang out. Also be aware that most restaurants charge about 2 euros (R22) *coperto* ('cover charge') - which basically means you're being charged to sit at a table. If you're just stopping for coffee, save yourself the extra charge by drinking it standing up at the coffee bar - this is how the locals do it.
- If you're travelling between cities, book your train tickets in advance at Raileurope.co.za. This will save you time and frustration - trying to decipher Italian train timetables is not easy.

### WHERE TO STAY

- **Venice** Hilton Molino Stucky - for the best views. Molinostuckyhilton.com
- **Florence** Westin Excelsior - for the best décor. Westinflorence.com
- **Rome** Westin Excelsior - for the best location. Westinrome.com
- **Amalfi/Ravello** Hotel Garden Ravello - for the best 'at home' feeling. Gardenravello.com



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