

Expats living in Italy

by Julie R Butler

Italy is fine art and abundant culture, high fashion and fast cars, slow foods and great wines, and the time to enjoy the company of friends and family. And the dream of living la bella vita as an expat in Italy is alive and well. Those who visit this birthplace of Western culture, of Romulus and Remus, of the Republic and the Renaissance, of the Pantheon and the Pope, can't help but want to come back. Some even decide to live there.



Italy is one of the larger countries in Europe, with a number of geographic regions ranging from the high Alps in the north to the island of Sicily extending from the southern tip of the peninsula and including a number of other islands, large and small. The Apennine Mountains form the spine of Italy, and at the center of that spine, in the western foothills that undulate down to the Tyrrhenian Sea, is the agricultural region of Umbria. Tobacco, olive oil, and some of the country's best wines are produced in this region, while important industries include textiles and clothing as well as ceramics.

The Tiber (or Tevere) River Valley is the heart of Italy, with the Tiber River being the lifeblood of Rome, itself. Like the ancient Roman Via Flaminia that winds through the Umbrian landscape, the pace of life ambles along in Umbria, where farm holidays are a popular way to connect with the land and the farmers who produce the bounty of culinary delights that are at the heart of the Italian experience.

Jeff in Montone, Umbria

Montone is one of Umbria's hilltop towns. Dating back to medieval feudal times, it is a walled village overlooking the Upper Tiber Valley that has changed very little through the centuries. Today, Montane is noted for its peaceful atmosphere, its panoramic views, and the lush landscape surrounding it, all serving as a perfect backdrop for proud cultural and artistic traditions.

Jeff and Judith split their time between Montone and New York City, and Jeff offered up these responses to a few questions about the where's and why's and ups and downs of expat life in the heart of Italy.

EFAM: *Where do you come from originally?*

Jeff: I am a native NewYawka and my wife, although originally from PA and rural New Jersey, certainly considers herself, after almost 40 years in the city, as a New Yorker as well.

EFAM: *Why did you choose to live in Italy?*

Jeff: Having travelled extensively throughout Europe for our business (knitwear importers in another life), we got to explore quite a bit. Initially we had planned on buying something in Provence, and then discovered Umbria, and found it to be more 'simpatico' and to our liking. We loved the food and wine, and the people were most welcoming.

EFAM: *What do you like about it?*

Jeff: As mentioned above, we love the people, the food and the wine, and as we live in the historic center of a medieval hilltop town (Montone), we have become very involved, and have been embraced by all our neighbors. After 10 years we consider ourselves Montonese.

EFAM: *What do you dislike about it?*

Jeff: The Italian bureaucracy is absurd, and seemingly contra-business. If there is a way to make something difficult, the Italian government specializes in it!

EFAM: *What has been the most difficult thing about life in Italy for you to get used to?*

Jeff: Initially it was learning how to slow down and pace ourselves to the Italian lifestyle. Being New Yorkers, we have type A personalities, and need to get things done, whereas, here in Italy it is 'ha pazienza' and 'piano, piano'. Things get done, but at a slower pace.

EFAM: *Have there been any life lessons that you have learned from the Italian people?*

Jeff: As mentioned above, not to rush life, to take the time to enjoy our moments, whether it is eating, drinking, relaxing, biking, whatever. Take the time to enjoy 'la bella vita'.

EFAM: *After retirement from the apparel business, you and your wife created [AromaCucina.com](https://www.aromacucina.com), where you offer private chef services and cooking classes, along with the popular cooking blog, [Aroma Cucina](https://www.aromacucina.com) and a beautiful cookVook, which is a combination of digital book with video, called [Cooking Simply: The Italian Way!](https://www.aromacucina.com) Was this something you had been planning to do, or were you inspired by the time you were spending in Montone?*

Jeff: Although reinventing ourselves into the food world might automatically bring to mind doing a cookbook, it was actually living in Italy that inspired us to do our cookVook. The beauty of Italian cooking is in its simplicity, and letting the ingredients speak for themselves. Of course, you need to

start with good ingredients, and that is the easy part when you live in Italy. So yes, it was becoming expats and living La Dolce Vita that actually inspired us to do "Cooking Simply: The Italian Way!"

Susan in Umbertide, Umbria

Downriver from Montone, where the Reggia River meets the Tiber, lies the industrial town of Umbertide. It is home to an important regional market and its people are very proud to label it an "environmentally friendly city," with sustainable development being a priority of the municipal administration.



Susan is in the process of retiring to Umbertide. Her connections with Italy go back to her family and her youth. When asked a similar set of questions, her responses reiterated the core values that make Umbria such an attractive location.

My father was Italian. His family was from the Dolomites and my mother was southern from East Tennessee. When I was 14 years old my mother thought it would be good to broaden my experience, and so she arranged for me to go to Italy for the summer and stay with family in Florence. My encounter with my first Italian family created a deep and abiding love for Italy, the language, the food and the lifestyle. I continued to visit Italy for the next 50 years, but it was never my intention to retire there or buy property in Italy.

There were two occurrences that changed my mind about moving to Italy. The first was when my good friend Lorraine told me about the possibility of becoming an Italian citizen through my grandfather. I was intrigued with this idea and I found out that I did indeed qualify for citizenship. The second occurrence that caused me to readjust my thinking was that I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Although I was very fortunate in that my cancer was early stage and quite treatable, it did cause me to reflect about how I wanted to spend the rest of my life.

My husband put together a summary of our financial situation, and we realized that retiring to Italy was not only possible, but in our circumstances more affordable than living in our house in the Bay Area. We had travelled to Umbria many times and when an apartment became available in a small town that we knew, we jumped in feet first and bought it, knowing that restoring a building from 1602 would have some challenges. The purchase has been all that we hoped, and we are in process of now buying the apartment next door and combining the two apartments into a larger living space.

After being diagnosed with cancer, I gave serious thought about what made me happy. There are several things that always bring joy into my life. One is great food, another is wonderful music and the third is laughter and storytelling. I have found all of these things in joyous abundance in Umbria. The people are warm and welcoming, the food is honest and unpretentious and the people love to tell funny stories about themselves and others.

So far, the most difficult thing for me in retiring to Umbria is letting go of the work that I do here in the United States. I love my work, and the friendships that I have made through the work I do, and yet, I feel called to our little apartment above the piazza where I can watch with wonder and joy of an Italian way of life that was lost to this country many years ago.

Gary and I both struggle with our Italian but we make it a game and try to have fun with the mistakes that we make. We both find Italians so encouraging of our language attempts that it makes it easy to practice. I have an Italian teacher that I work with over Skype. She is very inventive and sends me TV programs, news clips and interviews from Italian TV. It has helped immensely.

Italians have taught me to be more suspicious about government and other institutions. I think that I, like many Americans, have been naive about the conduct of the United States throughout history. Italians through their history have seen powers come and go. They understand that nothing is forever and that ultimately it is family and friendships that sustain us. I have chosen to create a new sense of family with a group of people in Umbria. This is not something that most Italians understand, and yet they have welcomed my husband and me with open arms and encouragement. I love both the United States and Italy. My love of each country has afforded me a broader view of the other along with patience and understanding about their respective merits and shortcomings. For me, retirement will be a time of adventure, new friends and new experiences. I can hardly wait.

Susan has been blogging about her experience at [Americans In Umbria](#).

Donald in Florence

To the northwest of Umbria is Tuscany, a much larger region that is as famous for its villages, villas, and vineyards and the culinary traditions born of the Tuscan countryside as it is for the art and culture centers that gave birth to the Italian Renaissance: Arezzo, Siena, Lucca, Pisa, and, of course, Florence. While the region is dominated by hilly and mountainous landscapes, the fertile plains, particularly the Arno River Valley, served as the breadbasket of ancient Rome.



Florence can rightly be credited as the city that drove Europe's emergence from the Dark Ages and into the Age of Discovery with a combination of a strong currency, the *florin*, and its inspiring exchange of new ideas. The names Amerigo Vespucci, Galileo, the Medici Family, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and Botticelli are just a tiny fraction of the innovators that embody the Florentine spirit.

Donald is an expat who also had a connection early in life with Italians that would last a lifetime. Here is what he had to share about his expat experience in Florence, Italy.

Donald:

I'm originally from Vermont where the granite industry brought in many Italian stone sculptors and their families. Most recently I have been semi-retired in Miami Beach. I owned a corporate travel agency in Manhattan for quite a few years and have traveled around the world. I keep returning to Italy. It just speaks to my soul.

I have always wanted to live for a period of time outside of the US. Most people spend their lifetimes talking about traveling. What you need to do is just DO IT!

The Italian people are warm and friendly. The second time you enter their store you are a 'regular'.

I thought learning Italian would be fairly easy. I was wrong. I blame it on my age but younger learners have difficulty too. I usually figure out a response in Italian after the conversation has ended. It is very frustrating.

Italy is overrun with illegal immigrants. Unless you have all of your paperwork in order before leaving the US, you will quickly become one of them.

The Italians have a long history of city rivalry, for instance Florence (where I'm living) and Sienna. Although they may take it very seriously, I just find it comical.

The hardest thing about being an expat is the final realization that you will always be an expat. I am not Italian and living here for many years will not make me Italian. I can, however, appreciate everything that is Italian and perhaps more so than the natives themselves.

My blog has been a lifesaver. A friend asked me to start it so she could keep up with my travels in Italy. It has been a great outlet for me and a great way to stay connected to the folks back home. I never considered myself a photographer but I'm proud of the pictures that I've taken.

I have to return soon to the US to submit my permanent visa request to the Italian consulate. Whatever the outcome I'll have fulfilled one of my dreams of having lived under the Tuscan sun!

The blog is called [Donald in Florence](#), and if you do indeed follow the instructions where it says, "a-Why am I in Florence, Italy? (click here)." you might just have to drop whatever you are doing and find your way to this amazing living art museum, too.

Stephanie in Naples

Naples, one of Italy's largest cities, is on the west coast of Southern Italy. Its history traces back to the founding of a Greek colony called Parthenope, probably around 680 BC. Upon its decline, the new city of Neapolis was built. Throughout its long history, people have been drawn to the region of Campania and the Bay of Naples by its stunning natural beauty, gorgeous weather, and an immense cultural heritage that draws out all the passion for life that the Italians are known for, especially the *napoletanos*.



The Campania region enjoys the classic Mediterranean climate of mild winters that bring just enough rain and warm, dry summers that is perfect for the basil, tomatoes, and mozzarella that make up the light and sunny *insalata caprese*, or Capri Salad, named after the small island in the Bay of Naples. But the food most widely associated with the city of Naples is, of course, pizza. Also associated with Naples are Mount Vesuvius; the *Sirens* from the Greek epic poem, the *Odyssey*; the ancient Roman city of Pompeii; the largest historic city center in Europe; many centuries worth of art and architecture; a rich musical and literary heritage; and one of the world's busiest ports.

Stephanie's expat experience is as a Navy wife. The enormity of the culture of Naples comes through loud and clear in her description of her life there.

Stephanie:

I'm originally from the United States, and way back when, I came from Georgia. I've been married to my active duty military husband for 15 years, so in that time, we've lived all over the U.S. His job is what brought me to Naples, Italy, but it's long been a dream of ours to have an overseas duty station.

One of the things I love about living here is the chance to walk among ancient history in my daily life. On any given day, I can walk by a lake where the Roman fleet was headquartered, visit one of the Sybil caves, or snorkel over ruins of grand, Roman villas. Life takes on new meaning when we have the opportunity to see ourselves fitting into a fabric of history only studied about as young schoolchildren. And of course, I love the sheer access to travel throughout Italy and the rest of Europe.

For things I dislike, well... I do live in Naples. The reputation for trash and crime and crazy drivers is deserved, BUT, Naples has so much to offer that those things really do take a backseat. Living in a large city is a challenge for me in the U.S., so it's no different here. I find it very difficult when I see people throwing trash out of their car windows, and there seems to be little regard for the environment.

One of the most difficult things I've found about life here in Italy is the communication difficulty. I took an immersion course upon arriving in Naples, and while it has helped tremendously in my daily errands, I'm still not able to hold a real conversation. Add to that the heavy, Neapolitan dialect, and I find the language barrier to be vast. Simple things such as phoning a restaurant or a hotel for a reservation become huge, time consuming, challenging tasks, and as a result, there are definitely times that I just have to retreat and regroup. It can be exhausting.

I think one of the best life lessons I've learned in the last year has been the Neapolitan, "live for the moment" zest for life. Rather than worry so much about what tomorrow will bring, one must instead enjoy the pleasures and freedoms of today. Relax and enjoy.

As for blogging, I think my blog might have literally saved my sanity. It's my personal diary and my letters to friends and family. Every single blog entry is my way of connecting with my loved ones back home, with the added benefit of being able to share my Italian experience with a wider audience. And as I get older, I understand more and more how the passage of time dulls my memories. Life in a foreign country becomes so full of new experiences that I find it impossible to retain the memories and information. When every single day brings something new, both good and negative, my blog has become my way to process what I'm doing. I find that I more fully appreciate events as they're happening, too, because I'm constantly writing blog posts in my head and trying to ensure that I'm taking in everything, the sights, sounds, smells and my own reactions to them.

Stephanie's blog, [In Search of Gelato](#), is itself a treasure trove of photos and impressions of Naples and beyond, with a nice balance of descriptions of daily life and insightful information about the fabric of history that she continually discovers herself in every day.

About the author: *Julie R Butler is a traveler, blogger, writer, and editor who has authored several books, self-published as eBooks, including [Nine Months In Uruguay](#) and [No Stranger To Strange Lands](#) (click [here](#) for more info). Julie presently lives in the sunny wine country of Argentina, where she and husband, Jamie, edit [Expat Daily News](#) and [Expat Daily News Latin America](#).*

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