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If you are interested in becoming a foreign correspondent for future semesters contact Catherine Orr corr@richmond.edu

Learning to Slow Down October 18, 2006

As a girl who thrives on structure and efficiency, sometimes I wonder why I chose to spend a semester living in Italy. The country has a reputation as a place where people slow down and savor life, but it wasn't until I got here that I realized just how much this slowness permeates every aspect of life (except driving, that is).

This difference in pace was demonstrated to me – quite literally – last weekend, when my roommate's cousins came to visit. As we showed them around Ferrara's classically Italian cobblestone streets and colorful buildings, I continually found myself walking far ahead of the group. Everyone was strolling at a leisurely pace, while I couldn't help walking like an American: fast and with a purpose.

Here, slow is built into the details. I recently noticed, for instance, that the elevator in my apartment building has no *doors close* button. Even when I'm in a hurry, I'm at the mercy of the elevator. There's no speeding it up or shutting out other riders in an attempt to get going four seconds sooner.

This patience and this relaxed pace are entirely foreign to me. I'm finding it hard to strike a balance between slow and stopped. At Richmond, I'm accustomed to going nonstop during the week and then losing all motivation on weekends and breaks; there's no middle ground. The Italians, though, seem to have mastered the art of productive slowness. My Italian classmates take furious notes during class, but don't hesitate to take a cigarette break halfway through. They do a fraction of the homework that we do at Richmond, yet they seem to grasp the subject material just as well. They walk slowly and eat slowly because there's no reason not to.

Italy doesn't let you decide whether you want to live the slow life: it forces you to. The country leaves you no choice but to slow down, take a break, drink an espresso, leave things open-ended. And despite my doubts, I'm starting to (ahem) slowly get used to this leisurely lifestyle. Maybe life doesn't have to be rushed to be meaningful.

Call Me Lance October 28, 2006



This morning I looked out my apartment window to see...well, nothing. The air was opaque with fog, a startling sight for a newcomer like me. Our Italian teacher, a local, told us that Ferrara is notorious for *la nebbia*: a thick, gray fog that rises up from the Po River and swallows the city. It's mysterious and romantic and frustrating all at once, but at the least the fog is distinctly Ferrarese.

The fog, I've been told, demands the use of something else that is distinctly Ferrarese: a bike. Apparently, it's much easier to navigate the dense fog on a bike than in a car. Before I got to Ferrara, I hadn't ridden a bike since I was about 13. In most American cities, cars are simply easier, and the hills on Richmond's campus make biking a less-than-ideal means of transportation.

Ferrara, though, is a city of bicycles. Locked bikes fill every corner, wall and bike rack on every street in the city. Getting a bike made me feel more Italian, and it certainly sped up my commute. Now I'm quite obsessed with riding around the city, and I'm fascinated by Ferrara's overall biking culture. Kids as young as four learn to ride without training wheels. Parents strap their toddlers into child seats on the handle bars, and teenagers double-up with one person sitting on the back tire. Seventy-year-old women ride home with their groceries, and younger women in pencil skirts and stilettos pedal effortlessly. I still haven't gotten over the novelty of seeing men in business suits riding around on rusty bikes, their briefcases firmly strapped on in the back.

Just as Americans have learned to eat and do their makeup while driving, the Ferrarese can get quite a lot accomplished on a bike. I have seen people walk their dogs, hold their umbrellas, pull their suitcases, read their books, and, of course, talk on their cell phones. My roommate once saw a woman on a bike carrying her baby, sans child seat. (Perhaps not the safest way to go.) My personal favorite is the boy I saw riding while text messaging. With both hands.

In Ferrara, bikes tend to rule the road. Bicyclists barrel fearlessly into roundabouts; cars are forced to ride slowly behind bikes on narrow roads; and bikes weave across streets, leaving drivers no choice but to wait. I ride my bike to school, to run errands, and to go out at night. My bike basket is my backpack and my bike is the closest thing to a pet that I have here. I love my "bike man," Andrea, and get to visit him frequently as there always seems to be something wrong with my tires.

If my attachment to biking is too strong to shake, you'll recognize me next semester as *that* girl, walking her bike up the hills and flying through the Commons, talking on my cell phone like a true Ferrarese.

Southern Hospitality November 7, 2006



Last summer, I spent approximately six very nervous minutes in the Naples train station, en route to Pompeii. My Rick Steves guidebook told me that Naples is full of pickpockets, and that I should wear a money belt at all times and book a hotel an hour away, in Sorrento. I may not have had a money belt, but I clutched my bag close to my body and made sure to get out of the city as quickly as possible, without so much as stepping outside the station.

Last weekend, I made a second trip to Naples. This time, there was a group of ten Italians waiting at the station to pick me up and protect me from the thieves. With this group to defend me, I ventured outside and saw Naples for the first time.

My roommate Julie's father was born in Naples, and my ten bodyguards were his first cousins and their children. My roommates and I were invited to spend a weekend with the cousins, and because I am not living with a family in Ferrara, I was excited to get a taste of Italian family life.

Four days in Naples showed me that the city has more to offer than a train station full of thieves. It's a fascinating place. Naples maintains a dignity and grandeur all its own, but it is gritty and real – qualities that are hard to find in some other tourist-laden Italian cities. Along with impressive monuments, palaces, and castles, the streets are filled with beggars, stray dogs, and crowded apartment buildings. Vesuvius looms in the background, and from the gorgeous Bay of Naples, Capri is just a stone's throw away.

It was the people I met, though, who truly made an impression on me. With blondish hair and - about an extra foot of height on everyone in the family, I was a blatant outsider, yet Julie's family welcomed me as one of their own (even if it meant standing on a chair to kiss me, as one cousin did). Each day we met new relatives who were so excited to meet us, talk to us, and feed us. We did not stop eating all weekend, and every meal was a big affair. As is normal in southern Italy, the family we stayed with had breakfast, lunch, and dinner together. Both lunch and dinner were several-course meals, and any time a relative came over more food was put on the table. I experienced a whole new level of being full.

This weekend showed me what it would be like to have a real Italian family. For a moment I had one loveably annoying younger brother and another quiet, responsible one. I had a mother who wouldn't let me stop eating and a father who worked weekends to make sure I had what I needed. My older cousins showed me around and asked me to translate English songs, and my aunts bought me gifts and cried when I left.

It's a shame that more people don't get over their fear of Naples long enough to actually enjoy the city and the people. The Neapolitans I met live in houses protected by iron gates and bars over the windows, but they are refreshingly unguarded. Their lives are a testament to the things that really matter: good food and family. I could get used to that kind of life.

