

# Wonderful RETREATS

## GETTING READY FOR ITALIA: ITALIAN CUSTOMS & TIPS

We'll be the first to admit that Italians have some bizarre customs and habits. What's strange to us is second nature to them. Here's a list of some of the fun customs you may encounter while in Italy!

**COFFEE:** Italians are very particular about their coffee, especially when and what to drink throughout the day so you may get some funny looks from the locals when you order. **Cappuccinos** are traditionally a breakfast drink so you won't often see an Italian ordering it after 11. **Espresso and macchiato** are also drunk in the morning but also throughout the day, even after lunch and dinner in decaf for to help aid digestion. You'll sometimes see them adding a little liquor (**caffè corretto**) as a post meal treat. Cafes and restaurants will of course serve you when you order a cappuccino after dinner for a sweet dessert but just be ready for an occasional funny look. Keep in mind too, it's cheaper to order and drink your beverage at the counter! If there's a table service involved, your coffee may be more expensive.

**ORDERING TO GO:** Ordering stuff to go is a very American concept but Italians are catching on! With the small size of the espresso and cappuccino, most Italians drink them right at the counter instead of getting them to go. Espresso means express for a reason! Same things go with food. Places will give you a to go box when you ask for one but lots of Italians don't bring home leftovers since the produce is so good and it's easy to whip up a delicious salad or pasta. Lots of pizza places will let you order a full pizza to go, which is great after a long day of train travel!

**ICE:** Traveling through Italy in the summer? Be ready to not see ice that often. Most places serve chilled water but don't expect a glass of ice with your soda. Italians aren't big on super chilled drinks, they really think so quick and drastic temperature changes to your body can get you sick. You'll see ice served more with cocktails but you might have to head to the touristy spots to find a chilled soda. Always feel free to ask for ice though if you'd like some to cool down and refresh!

**AIR-CONDITIONING:** Similar to the ice issue, you will have a hard time finding air-conditioning all over Italy. It's becoming more common now but it's incredibly hard to install unsightly AC units or even get permission to install one in historic buildings (where are you going to hide that ugly outdoor unit on a pretty facade?) They can be expensive to install and to run so lots of Italians opt not to even have one. Lots of the older buildings are incredibly well insulated since they're thick stone walls so you might not even feel the need for one in some villas. Italians also don't like the chilled air on their bare necks or skin. I've had friends wrap scarves around their necks when the AC was blowing in a restaurant on a hot summer day for fear of the *colpo d'aria* or "punch of air."

**SIESTA:** The afternoon siesta, or *la pausa*, happens daily usually between 1:00 pm and 4:00 pm when stores close for a few hours. Each store has different hours but they usually fall during that time. Traditionally, stores close at that time for folks to go home and have lunch with their families. Students at school typically go home and have lunch too. After lunch and a quick nap, stores open back up for the afternoon to evening shift before aperitivo...

**APERITIVO:** Aperitivo...aka Chelsea's favorite time of day :) In the late afternoon in Italy, bars will have what's called an aperitivo hour or appetizer hour! It's a quick drink and snack to wake up your appetite before heading to a late and lengthy dinner. Like an American Happy Hour, the bars serve up drinks. Better than Happy Hour is that the bars serve tasty snacks with the drinks! Sometimes it's a bowl of chips, peanuts and olives. Sometimes it's a full buffet of mini sandwiches, pastas, crudite and more! Each bar does it a little different...sometimes the buffet is included with the price of your drink (alcoholic or non-alcoholic) and other places will have a special price to partake. Places that charge a little more usually have a bigger spread and charge more because it can be a big enough (and delicious enough) spread to substitute as a small dinner!

**FERRAGOSTO:** If you're traveling through Italy throughout August, you might notice a lot places are closed up. August is typically the hottest time of the year so lots of Italians plan their vacations then. They'll ditch the hot temperatures along their city streets and head to the coast to cool down! In the bigger cities you'll still be able to find lots of open shops and restaurants (they love the summer tourist crowds!) but it may be quieter in the smaller towns where they get less foot traffic.

**LATE MEALS:** Oh Madonna...Italians like to eat late. While dinner in the states can start as early as 6:00 pm, Italians are usually just heading to Aperitivo at that time! When Chelsea worked in Italy, they didn't even serve dinner at the study abroad center until 7:30, and even that was early for Italian standards! Especially in the summer months, a dinner can start around 8:00. Which is lovely when you can dine outside! Then add a few courses and it's not unusual to stroll home until 10:00...that is, if you don't stop for a gelato along the way first!

**TIPPING:** While we in the states have the tradition of tipping, Italians don't! What you'll see instead at restaurants is called the **copperto**, like a cover charge. It's like a little fee for the bread and linens at your table for each person dining. At simple places, it can be €1.50-2.00. At more fancy places, it can be €2.50 or more! If you have an absolutely fabulous meal, of course feel free to leave a couple extra euro. Italians don't expect tips on the cappuccino you order though!

**WATER:** The water in Italy is delicious, even the main cities! Throughout the bustling streets of Rome you'll see little fountains running all the time that are pumping out chilled water from the springs below the city! It's cold and delicious. The water in our apartments and villa are perfect to drink too! You'll see water dispensers throughout Lucca to refill your water bottles throughout the day. There's even some fizzy water dispensers in Florence! YAY!

**BREAD:** Does the Tuscan bread taste funny to you? You're not alone in thinking they left out the salt! This is an old tradition throughout Tuscany to have basic table bread without salt. The tradition comes from an old battle between Tuscany and their southern neighbor Umbria. Umbria was withholding salt from them and out of spite, the Tuscans kept baking their bread without it! The tradition stuck and now we have saltless bread in Tuscany. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing...Italians use the bread more for helping scoop their pasta or even dipping in the extra pasta sauce, rather than eating a few slices before the meal even arrives. Don't worry though, the focaccia is usually sprinkled with salt across the top which makes it a delicious treat!

**TRASH & RECYCLING:** Italians are VERY particular about their recycling! **VERY**. Especially in the larger cities, there's usually a trash pick-up once or twice a day! We take care of the trash in your villa/apartment but you may see these rules when traveling in other places throughout Italy. Each place varies but most Italians break down recycling and trash into these categories, each in their own different bag/bins:

- **Organico:** Organic trash, or your food scraps. Usually picked up daily in the larger cities as they use biodegradable bags to keep their organic trash in! Paper towels and napkins are also acceptable.
- **Multi-materiale:** This is your plastic, aluminum and glass trash.
- **Carta:** Any other paper products like regular paper, cardboard (pizza boxes), toilet paper rolls, etc. Can be thrown away in a paper bag too!
- **Non-riciclabile:** Anything else that's not recyclable.

**CHURCH DRESS CODE:** When visiting a church in Italy, they have some customs to be aware of. While we might get hot in the summer and want to wear our cute sundresses, this isn't acceptable when entering a church! They're very conservative and like their guests to be respectful of this when entering for prayers or even just to observe the art! We LOVE the artwork in churches **and** our sundresses so we always keep a scarf on hand! In smaller churches, a scarf to cover your shoulders is usually enough. If you're in shorts, they may ask you to cover your thighs too. On our day trips to see the larger churches, we highly recommend you wear a longer skirt or shorts so as not to miss out on the gorgeous art and to stay comfortable during the day! Large churches like St. Peter's Basilica in Rome or St. Francis' Basilica in Assisi will sometimes have ponchos for purchase to cover up quickly. Be ready though, if they're out of ponchos they will turn people dressed inappropriately away!

**ATMs:** When getting money in Italy, it's good to know which banks are the sister banks of your banks back home. Sometimes you can get charged less (lower/no conversion fees or withdrawal fees) when pulling out money, but not always. You'll see random ATMs around the city streets at stores. **DO NOT USE THESE.** Stores can set their own conversion rates and you might get scammed or have your card skimmed! Find a real bank and use their connecting ATM machines, they'll have an English button! Some banks have their ATMs indoors and you'll need to enter your card into the slot to be let in and use the machines. We pull out the max amount every time so we don't get charged a withdrawal fee for every small withdrawal.

**SCIOPERO:** This is not a fun word to encounter...strike. Trains, buses, cabs and metros can go on strike anytime throughout the year. Usually we get a heads up ahead of time to plan accordingly and there's usually a couple routes that will still run so everyone can get to and from work in the mornings and evenings!