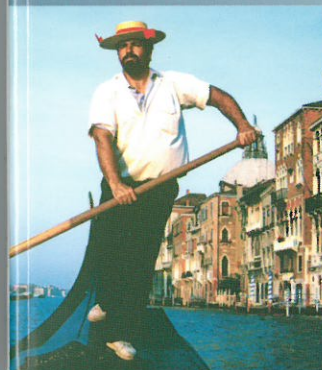
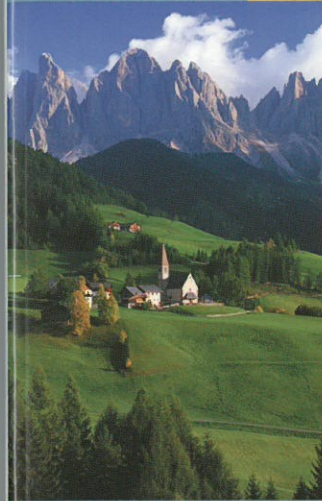




30 DAYS IN ITALY

TRUE STORIES OF
ESCAPE TO THE GOOD LIFE



EDITED BY JAMES O'REILLY,
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“How terrible,” I say, mirroring her shaking head, giving the bill a cursory check, and signing before handing over the credit card slip. “Well, thank you for explaining. Goodbye.”

“*Arrivederci*. Please come back, signora. I hope we will see you again.”

We are all the way down the hill, past Monte San Savino and almost to the entrance to the *autostrada* before the enchantment begins to wear off, and I ask myself: Is the priest *pazzo*, crazy, himself, bringing a lunatic to conduct an ear-splitting fit at a hotel? And are he and the girl both out of their respective minds, to think it would be a tragedy to send an insane person to an insane institution?

I decide that this could never happen in the United States and, if it did, the hotel guests would be demanding their money back and deserting the place in an exodus. Yet, I have to admit, I am more charmed than outraged, more beguiled than affronted. I wonder if the Count knows, and decide that he probably does. If I had the opportunity to ask him, I think he would say that all of them, the mad person and the blond and the priest, are part of the real life he meant to nurture at Gargonza.



Francesca De Stefano, who lives in San Francisco with her husband and son, is writing a book of travel essays set in Italy. She credits her love of travel to one of her first childhood memories, standing at the dock in New York, holding one end of some streamers, her grandparents holding the other, as their boat left the dock for a visit home to Italy.

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ANNE CALCAGNO

KICKED INTO THE MEDITERRANEAN

The world of things Italian is both international and very very local.

MY SISTER AND I LEFT HOME IN ITALY IN THE 1980S TO ATTEND universities in the U.S., freed of our parents. We didn't give them much more than cursory thought until, at our separate locations, we received the same bizarre packet of photos. At the center of each photo was a fissured gray storeroom barricaded by a splintered slab of wood. In front of this blight came a picture of mom smiling, then dad smiling, then the two of them smiling. The telltale caption read: “Our new home on the sea!” My sister and I were on the phone instantly, in clear agreement that their mental proclivities were in rapid decline, brought on by our cruel abandon.

Of course, we were wrong. I soon learned that when you give your heart to Sicily, as they had done, you choose passion over logic. Yet how few of Sicily's fans are Americans, despite the fact that the largest portion of

Italian-Americans descends from Italy's poor south and poorer Sicily. Most tourists to Italy never reach Sicily. It remains the soccer ball Italy boots into the deep blue sea. Gorgeous triangle, lemon-laden. Invaded, restored, ignored, plundered. Left repeatedly to rot, socially, economically, and politically. Ripe territory for neorealist filmmakers. For the great writers such as Giovanni di Lampedusa, Dacia Maraini, Giovanni Verga, Elio Vittorini. Splashed by a Mediterranean so ultramarine it hurts the eye. Yet always and again desperate for water. For jobs. For Mt. Etna to keep her temper at bay. For the west coast to contain its Mafia.

In truth, it wasn't mainland Sicily that unlocked my parents' "storeroom of dreams." They'd headed west of Sicily's west coast—leaving behind the gold Greek amphitheater of Segesta, the high medieval town of Erice, Trapani's wide salt flats and bustling port—to board a ferry to the Egadi Islands: Favignana, Levanzo, and Marettimo, three rocky shores as unfrequented as they are distant.

Though such isolation was, for centuries, untrue.

Human habitation on these lands goes back 11,000 years. Some say farther. In Levanzo's Grotta del Genovese paleolithic graffiti depict human figures and, most importantly, tuna, long the mainstay of these islands.

Around the eighth century B.C. the Phoenicians used Favignana as a port of call named Katria. The Romans would rename her Aegusa, and brought their Punic Wars upon her. Legend has it that Favignana's most gorgeous *super*-turquoise bay was once red with the blood of defeated Carthaginians. Hence today's anachronistic name: Cala Rossa (Red Bay). Islanders claim that Favignana shipwrecked Odysseus and offered him troublesome Calypso. Saracens built lookout towers on Favignana and Marettimo. Normans, corsairs, pirates, Spaniards, Bourbons left inscriptions and hideouts carved deep into the islands' sandstone.

Why? Location, location, location. Kicked into the middle of the Mediterranean, nothing interrupts the view. What better lookout posts? Plus, every single one of the eight winds of the windrose (Tramontana, Grecale, Levante, Libeccio, Ostro, Scirocco, Ponente, Maestrale) beats upon these shores. Varied and shifting, the preponderance of differing winds makes these

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islands perfect rest stops for seafarers. Today, tourists purchase guidebooks advising which beaches match the day's wind direction. It's one way, even during a short stay, that you cannot but explore the islands' different beaches. The advantages offered by such complex challenging wind conditions were not lost on the 2005 America's Cup. Dramatic race trials were held off Trapani in October. A children's sailing school has sprung up on Favignana, along with scuba diving, fishing excursions with pasta lunches, and an increasing number of art shops and local events.

Yet the essential simplicity of these islands—rocky sunbeaten land skimming pristine waters casually rich with fish—has changed little in the twenty years since my parents began restoring their fisherman's storage area, one in a string of sweet, cramped, white-washed storerooms to become tiny homes facing the indigo sea. The Egadis pause in time, a brilliant caesura. I have traveled back to Italy, north and center, to cities and countryside, many, many times. And I cannot cite such a time-freeze

about much of modern Italy. For the Egadis' lack of acceleration, I will always point my way south, ready for the long plane ride, the cab, then the hydrofoil, into the searing North African heat, where nothing is more important than every single day.

Daily life used to be at the center of Italian existence. Now who has the time?

As little girls growing up in Milan, we were tacked onto Mom's daily routine to the baker, fruit monger, butcher, deli vendor, milkman, tobacconist (for stamps, salt, matches), and wine seller. Each store was an encounter, a visit to familiar faces, neighbors and merchants alike, some of whom we invented stories about, fed by local gossip or our own eager imaginations. The daily journey infuriated my young mother eager to be about her life which she didn't much posit in grocery shopping. But these days, my sister, mom, and I head together into Favignana's small old center, over the large shiny gray paving stones, smelling bread and fish and espresso and ice cream. If the Thursday and Saturday *mercatini* (little markets) aren't setting up until *domani*, we visit the farmer for fresh ricotta, then we cover the stores one by one, religiously; we buy piping hot rolls from the vast family of redheads; capers, watermelon, prickly pears, tomatoes, lemons from the tiny widow who always clenches my mom's hand at length in affectionate greeting. Always, you can choose *bottarga* (dried tuna eggs, a specialty, truffle-like, grated onto pasta) or carefully packed local tuna. Tuna that once was the islands' greatest wealth.

Large schools of *Thunnus Thynnus* have for thousands of years pressed through the Egadi on their run from the Atlantic to mate in the Mediterranean's warmer waters. Every May, the *mattanza* is still conducted, a gruesome, if theatrical, trapping and harpooning of a dense rush of enormous tuna. In years past a particular delicacy famous throughout Italy, this tuna no longer supports

an active economy but there's still plenty of it to savor, along with squid, urchin, octopus, and any other catch of the day.

In Favignana, they stuff ice cream into sweet rolls for breakfast. Or, in the evening, you can join long rows of ice-cream eaters planted like theatergoers in plastic chairs along the narrow street, watching the town *passeggiata*. And, of course, the tourists, bearing tattoos and skimpy new fashions. Rare among them any Americans.

My parents, now retired and in their seventies, are less enamored by the daily shopping rigamarole, which is a labor of love. But they can't (though they could) seem to leave. Yes, habit kills fascination. And I don't live here. Yet every time I return, I am mostly a young girl about the business of her day, buying the basics for those I love. I retrieve my past; here very present. I get something utterly simple, but rarely available—each fig, squid, slice of warm *focaccia* (salty flatbread that tastes in Sicily like nowhere else) born to be relinquished just on this day, the day I'm living. I enter a journey much bigger than mine, conscious of this swirling earth, precious because temporary, newborn, so intensely delicious.

Favignana is the largest and most habitable of the Egadis, and so remains the one with most stories. The Italian painter, Salvatore Fiume, painted her as *La Farfalla Sul Mare* (Butterfly on the Sea) noting her distinctive shape—a narrow waistline is topped by a mountain from which two wide spreads of dry land unfold—and the name has stuck. Sicily's more famous and glamour-craving Aeolian Islands, north and east of the Egadis, have volcanic origins. But the Egadis originate in glaciated deposits, residues that built layer upon layer of *tuffo* (sandstone) of superior quality. For centuries the Egusei, as the islanders are named, quarried *tuffo*, backbreaking work chiseling large square blocks with picks. This source of construction material was the second principal economy of the island until the advent of reinforced concrete,

post-World War II. Today, you can take the local sandstone home in the form of local outdoor sculptures.

One leaves town—bicycles a preferred method of transport—past waist-high walls of craggy sandstone, their interstices as narrow as mosaic work. I love to stop to look *down* these walls at the *tufo* houses. Many are built ten, fifteen meters below street level, some out of abandoned *tufo* quarries, but all chosen as viable locations because tunneling into the sandstone offers coolness and shade. Caper bushes spill down the walls to where chickens scrabble, cats stretch, and grape arbors amble crookedly along. Stairways are famous here, down to homes, up to rooftop terraces, up and down to the fresh cold sapphire sea. They curve around the craggy coasts that sport secret caves everywhere, shade spots, lunch spots. These are islands carved by sea and man.

Where now the limited and frail principal economy is tourism. Not that I'm inviting.



Anne Calcagno has written travel pieces for The New York Times and the Chicago Tribune, and is the editor of Travelers' Tales Italy.

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DEBORAH J. SMITH

IF I WERE POPE

Don't miss this stairway to heaven.

MY SECOND TIME IN ROME, I DIDN'T WANT TO MISS CLIMBING the Dome of Saint Peter's. Last trip, the temperature was 104 degrees—too hot to go up in an enclosed space. But now it was early spring, and I was lined up with my five euros and my digital camera, ready to hop on the elevator and walk out into the eerie magnificence of Michelangelo's masterpiece.

The elevator drops you at the first stop: a walkway around the interior cupola of the basilica. An iron grid protects the tourists above from falling down to the tourists below, but you still get a good look—or some good snapshots—of the church interior. Then it's upward to all those stairs.

Along the way heavenward, Saint Peter's is designed with small windows and angular air spaces that give a keyhole view of the city. At times, ledges appear so you can sit, look out, and wonder if the dome is moving or it's your own vertigo from too many close turns round and round the steps. As you climb, the walkway and the