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## Vacationing In A Second Language

**For some travelers, brushing up - or even immersing themselves - in a foreign language is all part of the experience.**

By JANET K. KEELER, Times Staff Writer  
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[Times photos: Keri Wiginton]

Roberto Alvarez counts to 30 with his Italian-language class held at Bellini Restaurant in Dunedin. Alvarez, who teaches his students phrases they can use when traveling, also teaches Spanish at Castellano & Pizzo in Tampa.

DUNEDIN - If it's Wednesday, it must be Italian class at Bellini Restaurant.

Between bites of chicken marsala and sips of red wine, the language of love tumbles willingly, if not always expertly, from the mouths of a couple-dozen adult students.

"Sono Americano," booms teacher Roberto Alvarez. In unison, his charges repeat.

And there's more.



Paula Harvey takes notes while she drinks a glass of wine during Roberto Alvarez's Italian class. Harvey, a first-grade teacher from Safety Harbor, is taking the class with her husband, David. They are making their fourth trip to Italy next month

"Sono turista." Repeat.

"Sono Perso." Repeat.

I am American. I am a tourist. I am lost. Perhaps a circuitous way of getting to the point, but a lesson in conjugation and gender-specific translations nonetheless. (A woman should say "Sono Americana.")

When in Rome, it is nice to do as the Romans do, but if you don't speak a lick of Italian that won't be easy. The same holds true for French, Japanese or Spanish. For some people, picking up a bit of the local language before a trip makes the journey more satisfying and comfortable.

Phrase books, audiotapes and classes at community colleges or from private tutors (tip: middle and high school language teachers welcome additional income) are excellent ways to learn essential phrases before traveling abroad.

There is also growing interest in immersion courses, where the vacation itself is all about learning a language. Dorlene Kaplan of ShawGuides Inc., which publishes online guides to recreational and educational travel programs worldwide, says listings for immersion courses have increased 30 percent in five years. The most popular are in Spanish, English and Italian.

For instance, at Academia Hispanica in Cordoba, Spain, vacationers can attend weeklong classes in Spanish, English, French and German. Language Studies Abroad in Carson City, Nev., arranges language classes from Ecuador to France, from Japan to Austria. Millenium Language School in Carcavelos, Portugal, offers instruction in more than 20 languages including Vietnamese, Estonian, Hebrew and Arabic. (For more information, see the accompanying box.)

The price to learn a foreign language varies from less than \$20 for a book to \$2,000 or more for a weeklong package that includes room and board, but not air fare. Roberto Alvarez's five-session series is \$185. And for that you get dinner and materials.

Paula and David Harvey of Safety Harbor are among the would-be Italian speakers at Bellini on a recent Wednesday. She's a first-grade teacher, and he's in insurance sales. They are making their fourth trip to Italy next month and want to communicate better with the people they meet.

"It's a very humbling experience when you see how many languages they (Italians) speak," Paula Harvey says. "I think it's a sign of respect to try to speak their language."

She says that while she and her husband have been able to get along on past trips, they felt "stupid" more than they'd like.

"When people visit the U.S., they make such an effort to speak English," she says. "I think we should do the same."

Alvarez, who also teaches Spanish with a side of dinner at Castellano & Pizzo in Tampa, hopes to get his students past the feeling-silly phase by teaching phrases they can use when traveling. In his lessons, he gets goofy, and that helps quell uneasiness.

"E facile means 'that's easy,' " he tells the class. "What you don't want to say is sono facile. In one of my classes a lady said that and all the men dropped their pants."

The students laugh because they know from a previous lesson that the woman said, "I am easy." In just a few hours, they gain confidence and the ability to order a meal. It's a bonus to get the joke.

Alvarez's classes draw people planning trips and also those wanting to learn more about their heritage. Lisa Martino, a massage therapist in Tarpon Springs, is doing both: Her father was born in Naples, and she hopes to make her first trip to Italy in May.

"I think planning is 90 percent of the excitement," she says.

It makes sense to teach language over food, Alvarez says, because some terms are already known and that helps with pronunciation.

"Il vino e buono," he says to the class. "La pasta e buona. Buena is Spanish and that's the Thursday night class."

Yes, the wine and pasta are good.

Rick Steves, host of the long-running PBS series *Europe Through the Back Door*, applauds any effort to speak to locals in their language, but hopes the lack of fluency doesn't stop anyone from travel.

"I've traveled happily for four months a year for the last 25 years in countries that don't speak my language," Steves says by phone from his base in Seattle. "I hope people don't limit where they travel by where they can communicate."

English is now the common denominator in the European Union, he says. "It's the language of commerce, travel and the Internet."

On a recent trip to Amsterdam, Steves noticed that the only signs in Dutch at the airport were at first-aid stations. The other signs were in English.

Sometimes, nonverbal communication succeeds as well as words, he says. Flapping your arms like bird wings and saying "tweet, tweet, tweet" at a post office will let the clerk know you want airmail stamps. Afraid you'll look nutty? Get over yourself, he says.

"If you're a bumpkin American traveler, which most of us are, and you go to Prague or Madrid, you'll stand out like a sore thumb anyway," he says.

"Don't try to be cool. Try to be honest, eager and wide-eyed, and happy that you are experiencing a new culture."

But if you are communicating in English, speak slowly and enunciate clearly, he advises. Don't use slang or contractions. "Howzit goin'?" may be lost on the the ticket clerk at Munich's crowded hauptbahnhof.

If you are attempting a foreign language, Steves adds, get Neanderthal. Speak in short, clipped sentences with only the essential words.

"I must sound like a caveman sometimes," Steves says.

Start sentences with por favor, bitte, sumi masen - whatever is appropriate. A polite "please" or "excuse me" goes a long way in Mexico City, Berlin or Tokyo, even if those are the only words you know, Steves says.

Europeans are charmed by laid-back Americans, says this budget traveler's guru, so there's no reason for the language-challenged to be nervous.

"We are like puppies there," he says. "However, it's still polite to assume they don't speak English."

That's Alvarez's theory, too.

"The idea is to be able to say something more than 'mmmmm' to the waiter," he tells his students. "The idea is to speak."

Janet K. Keeler can be reached at 727 893-8586 or [krieta@sptimes.com](mailto:krieta@sptimes.com)

### **LEARNING LANGUAGES**

For more information on Roberto Alvarez's Italian classes, call him at 727.492.6653 or visit [www.learnitalian.us](http://www.learnitalian.us)