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Travel Writing—The Cagli Project
Travel Article

I spent my summer studying and living in a small Italian town called Cagli; a ten thousand resident community nestled in the Marche Region's Apennine Mountains. At least three hours from any main city, Cagli is not isolated, but happily secluded. Here I experienced Italian culture perhaps for what it is, rather than the Italian culture that is offered to tourists in any of the big cities. No one here speaks more than passing English, the post takes twice as long as in bigger cities, and residents know each other by name, face, and family history.

This tight knit-community opens itself and welcomes a group of 40 Americans every summer. I have come to firmly believe that if you are to appreciate and understand another culture's way of thinking, you simply must immerse yourself in that culture.

I see my experience of Italy as more complete than most. I've toured, I've visited, and I've lived. Every step of this journey, I've made discoveries. Someone once said that one only finds what one is looking for when one is not actively looking for it; after two months in Italy, I hold this to be true.

Cagli is the most idiosyncratic town I have ever encountered. Every toilet flushes differently, every door opens in a different manner, every store has different, apparently arbitrary hours of operation. Every citizen, or Cagliesi carries an identical plaid umbrella, but when I needed to purchase one, the only store in town that sells umbrellas did not have that model for sale.

The Cagliesi are offended if you drink too much or eat too little, and the two main café owners express concern and a little hurt if they haven't seen you in a few days.

They also know your favorite gelato flavors within a week, and express surprise if you deviate from your normal order. The men in town check out the girls shamelessly, but the women check you in greater detail, though for different reasons.

The whole town is an extended “Cheers” episode; everyone truly does know your name. Living in this foreign country, with little linguistic similarity and narcissus-scented air, Cagli will offer you a temporary home. I feel that should I return in 20 years, aged and with a husband and kid or two, I will be welcomed and remembered, and Jake at Café D’Italia will promptly offer me a cono with mezza pistachio, mezza crema.

There are discoveries around every corner in Cagli, but they are harder to find. Coming over to this immersion program, I had the thought that teasing out the secrets of Cagli life would be as easy as sitting in the piazza and cafes, keeping my eyes and ears open, and observing. This was not the case. Sure, you learn something while simply watching and learning, but I think if you are actually ‘looking’ for discoveries, you won’t find them. It was through talking to the people, trying my best to communicate, wandering through the streets and stores, and forgetting that I was in an ‘immersion program’ that I started to learn some truths about this town. It takes a bit of letting go of self-awareness, and just throwing oneself into the life of a town.

This philosophy on discovery was reinforced as I traveled throughout Italy on the weekends. On the second Saturday of the program, a motley assortment of sleep deprived grad assistants and overworked students wrenched themselves out of the warmth of their comforters to catch the 8:30 bus to Urbino. It was drearily drizzling outside; not the most auspicious conditions with which to commence an adventure into the nearby ancient town.

The bus wound its way upwards towards Urbino; but the magnificent mountain views we whizzed by were mostly obscured by a mist that clung to the Apennines like a stratospherical hula-hoop. Our contingency finally arrived, slightly queasy, and we were greeted by a cobble stoned hill that seemed to stretch from the bus station right up into the clouds. Urbino surpasses its nickname as “The City on a Hill”... the city is a hill!

We head off in search of the “Palazzo di Duce”, or the Duke’s Palace, which now houses an important collection of Renaissance artwork. As we arrive, we are delighted to learn that we are visiting during some type of cultural awareness week, and therefore our entrance into the museum is free! We shed our umbrellas and backpacks at the security checkpoint and climb a grand staircase to the exhibits.

We learn that the Duke in question, Ferdinand, in whose former palace we are now standing, was actually the father of the Renaissance, offering patronage to such artists as Raphael. The high points of the collection are two original Raphael’s, including a breathtaking portrait of the Madonna.

After we’ve finished with the Museum we venture out for lunch. The main Piazza seems limited to a selection of over priced tourist traps, so we set off in search of a friendly Trattoria. In our attempts to follow the arbitrarily posted signs, we find ourselves faced with a cobblestone road, which seems to be built at exactly a 90-degree angle.

We arrive at the top of the hill 10 minutes later, thinking fondly of the time immediately before we decided to climb the hill. All of us near coronaries, we finally spot the welcoming Trattoria, and indulge in a luxurious meal of pizza and salads.

When we finish, it is still La Pausa (the daily 4 hour break Italians feel is necessary for the consumption and digestion of lunch), and therefore we cannot do our part to bolster the Italian economy with our shopping habits. We decide to embark on one last culturally enriching quest: it is the Casa Natale di Raphael that we seek: the birth house of Raphael.

Finding another helpful sign with an arrow pointing up, we are dismayed to learn that we are once again faced with prospect of climbing Mount Frightfully Steep. But culture is culture, and we again grit our teeth and commence the lung-bursting hike. We reach the top, and nearly pass out at the map of the town. It turns out that some ill-tempered graffiti artists has decorated the map and obscured the location of Raphael's house. Determined nonetheless, we ask a local obliging shopkeeper for directions. We attempt to follow his directions, but find ourselves again stymied. So we ask yet another Urbino-ite, who tells us we must venture down the hill.

Groaning at life's cruel ironies, we set forth again down the hill, and upon our arrival, learn that it is, in fact, slightly up the hill. Exasperated, we finally find someone who speaks a bit of English, who informs us that actually, Raphael's house is ON the hill! Not directly off of it, as we had been led to believe, but ON the hill!!! Giddy with too much climbing, we again mount the hill, and finally locate Raphael's house. It is marked by a tiny plaque. We have passed it by about 6 times.

There is a lesson in our bumbings. We as Americans expect our history to be roped off, behind glass, set apart from the everyday experience. But in Italy, there is simply so much human experience, so much history, that it is impossible to set it apart. It

coexists within the frame of modernity; it is woven into the tapestry of modern Italy. Italy is entrenched in its own ever-growing history, every cobblestone tells a tale.

A few weeks later, our group took another trip to Florence. Half way through Tuscany we stopped in the medieval city of Sienna for lunch. After we'd gorged ourselves at the Sienna McDonalds, four of us decided to embark on a cultural expedition to the Duomo and Cathedrale. After a hilly and cobble stoned trek through the quaint town, we arrived at the marble staircase leading to the center of town.

We appropriately ooh-ed and aah-ed over the architecture, took the obligatory pictures, felt the requisite wonder of mans 'creations in homage to God, and dodged the omnipresent pigeons (also purportedly created by God, but I doubt it). This finished, we were promptly bored.

Our erstwhile guide once more consulted her book and informed us that Saint Catherine, naturally of the Saint Catherine of Sienna variety, has a shrine and basilica right there in Sienna. We were not immediately impressed. She read on and told us that the head of Saint Catherine is preserved within its walls and available for viewing. That got our attention.

After many an inadvertent detour, many more cobblestones and many more uphill climbs (miraculously, all of the hills in Sienna only lead up; perhaps this is the direct intercession of our beloved Catherine), we arrived at the Basilica.

It was an unassuming, rather squat edifice made of stucco like substance, the color of which lends its name to Crayola's useless 'sienna' crayon. The whole compound was only two or three stories high, with little detail work in the stone, but various sundry papal busts scattered about a dusty courtyard. We had actually passed it by a good three

times before somebody finally noticed the microscopic sign. Apparently Saint Catherine prefers that only the most pentecostally devoted followers locate and worship at her shrine.

We entered the building, and I immediately noticed a small, unassuming map that appeared to give the layout of the building. I suggested we stop and examine it, but my companions insisted we press onward, having caught a glimpse within the drab beige walls of an enticingly dark and glowing side room.

We entered the room, and it was magnificent. All the walls and the ceilings were covered in wooden paneling, gilding, and painted fresco work. An eerie glow emanated from the front altar, and as we walked along the creaking floorboards we saw that the alter was faced in glass. Here, surely was the head of Saint Catherine.

At our destination at last, we morbidly leered into the glass encasement. And there... dangling from a golden chain... was.... The most disappointing thing I have ever seen. It was a bucket.

Oh sure, it was a golden bucket. And I'm sure as far as buckets go, it was a rather fetching one. But it was a flipping bucket. We had hiked all this way to see... a bucket. Naturally we assumed the head was contained in the bucket. My aspirations of decaying flesh and pirate like skulls causing visitors to swoon vanished. Dejected, we retired to the gift shop, bought prayer cards for our grannies, and departed to rejoin the larger group at the bus.

We heard our professor and his wife talking animatedly about the head, so I asked them to clarify. Turns out, they had no clue what the bucket was. The saintly skull was indeed there, in all of its visible, mummified glory... one floor above the gilded chapel.

And they said it was fantastic, everything I could have asked or hoped for in a decapitated head.

What was in the bucket? I may never know. Perhaps those saintly remains not fit for public viewing, perhaps the cloth and Windex used for routinely sanitizing the head, perhaps the office bingo pool for the nuns and gift shop workers.

Traveling is for the tenacious only, and if one wants to see anything even remotely more interesting than the normal tourist traps, one must work for it. One must not be so easily deterred by apparently obvious answers; one must probe for the truth of a place. If not? One winds up with a bucket.

After we left Sienna and Florence, we returned to Cagli, which somehow was starting to feel like home. I took out my well-creased map of Florence and crossed off every site we had visited. I had felt pretty proud of myself, until I saw that I had barely made a dent in what Florence has to offer! I felt, for the first time in my life, how immensely, unconquerably enormous this world is. I could spend the rest of my breathing days traveling, and still not see everything in the world. This is so daunting, but at the same time... so refreshing. The world is replete with possibilities, new beginnings, unexplored horizons.

I've learned this trip that the best way to explore is with no expectations, no preconceived notions, and little to no itinerary. Following a guidebook aimlessly around a city will give you the highlights, sure, but it won't tell you how to find the depth of a city. You have to discover that for yourself. Let go of your inhibitions, wander around a city lost, and let the cobblestones lead you where they will.