

# La Dolce Vita

## *Sights, Tastes and Impressions of Italy*

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Ten days in Italy are not enough to truly savor every morsel of Italian culture, but 14 students in the doctoral education program — along with their faithful leader, Dr. Twyla Miranda — did their best to sample the tastes, sights and ideas of the country during a study abroad trip this summer.

The group, which were members of a Fort Worth Sister City delegation, visited three distinct communities in Italy, including Fort Worth's first sister city, Reggio Emilia.

### FIRST STOP, ROME

Architecture draws visitors to the heart of Rome, which is home to ancient ruins, majestic palaces, magnificent churches and distinguished museums. Art history abounds in Michelangelo's *Moses*, the Sistine Chapel, St. Peter's Basilica and the Pantheon.

Exploring ancient Rome thoroughly would take much more than a week, so, with only a day-and-a-half, we had to make a mad dash to take in all that we could. A guided walking tour helped us gain our bearings and learn a bit of history about the Coliseum, the Arch of Constantine, the Monument of Vittorio Emanuele, the Trevi Fountain and the Spanish Steps.

A highlight for some of us was attending Mass at the Vatican. We were surrounded by centuries' worth of artistic treasure and people from all over the world coming together to share a common faith.

### ON TO REGGIO EMILIA

The focus of the trip was to study the Reggio Emilia Approach to education developed by Loris Malaguzzi following World War II. Malaguzzi believed that children were a powerful social force. To date, the Reggio Emilia schools do not study or follow the progress of their children into upper grades; they consider the progress of early childhood to be an end in itself. Teachers put a high priority on documenting the time they spend with children and

reflecting on how they might better guide their learning next time they are together.

The Reggio Approach is a community-based model recognized around the world as an innovative design in early childhood education. It appeared on the global scene when former President Bill Clinton said the best preschool in the world was found there.

At the heart of the Reggio Emilia Approach is the idea that childhood is celebrated as a stage of life that has value all its own rather than a series of stages that lead to adulthood. Shortly after birth, newborns in Reggio Emilia even receive their very own library card, showing the community's commitment to literacy. The Reggio Approach is true community collaboration in which teachers, parents and children build close relationships and partner in the education process.

Our Sister City tour guide, Barbara Donnici, planned a packed itinerary that allowed us to meet and talk with early childhood through high school teachers, higher education faculty, the director of a youth hostel, summer camp leaders as well as the deputy mayor for Education, Schools and Youth.

We visited the Atelier Reggio di Luce, or the Ray of Light Studio, and had an absolutely wonderful time being guided



through the Emilia Approach as if we were preschoolers ourselves. Our group spent more than an hour trying to solve a problem regarding refraction and reflection of light in water, and we made a bee line for Google when we got home to find out whether we had it right.

We had no direct instruction, but our curiosity was sparked by generative questions posed through an interpreter, guided discovery, and heightened utilization of our senses. The Reggio Emilia Approach rejects

the dichotomies typically found in U.S. education — art versus science, language versus math — and it is certainly at odds with our standards-based, test-driven educational climate.

We had the opportunity to visit in small groups with a group of high school students who were leaving later that week for Fort Worth to attend the Sister Cities International Leadership Academy. We were impressed at how well-educated and how well-prepared for their futures the young men were. We found that everything they told us — overcrowding and discipline problems in schools, unmet needs of immigrant children, corruption in government — were all echoed by the university professors, teachers, and the community leaders with whom we met.

### A WORD ABOUT THE FOOD

Every region has its own variation of Italian cuisine, yet we found the pizza and gelato to be excellent everywhere we traveled. Dishes reflect the region and

are dictated by the season and local produce.

Local businessman and Hotel Posta owner Umberto Sidoli of Reggio Emilia hosted our group at his family's restaurant, Cavazzone, located on the mountainside about a 15-minute drive from Reggio Emilia. After a pasta-making lesson (provided by Chef Christian) during which we created our evening meal, Sidoli led us to his family's balsamic vinegar cellar.

On another day, a tour of a Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese factory enlightened each of our senses. From the smell of the cheese room stacked high to the ceiling with cheese wheels to the taste of the final product, we could not have enjoyed a finer tour — it was educational and delicious!



### OUR FINAL STOP WAS STRESA

Stresa is a small resort town nestled in the Alps along Lake Maggiore. Stresa is only an hour's train ride from Switzerland, and we found ourselves surrounded by a multitude of languages and nationalities. Stresa has a beautiful view of several resort islands.

The feel of Stresa was decidedly French, and we discovered why: Napoleon, too, appreciated the beauty of the place and vacationed there. We enjoyed a boat tour that included a stop at Isola Bella and a castle where the general spent some summer vacations.

Again we were surrounded by centuries of history shared through paintings, architecture and sculpture. At Stresa, we enjoyed the cool mountain air, shops packed with hand-crafted Italian ceramics, jewelry, scarves and shoes. We enjoyed a lively wine tasting and wished we had more room in our suitcases to pack the red, green and white pastas that were on display everywhere to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Italian flag. Some of us kept an eye out for George Clooney, who has a home in Stresa, but we didn't see him — not even from the gondola cars we rode to the top of the mountain.

Our trip awakened our senses of taste, smell, touch, sight and hearing. It

was a true sensory overload and we still find our minds drifting back to

the experiences we had over those 10 days. We encourage students to travel abroad to discover and appreciate the diversity of regions, develop tenacity and creativity, and discover different perspectives on community, culture and education.

Traveling abroad is experiential learning at its best. 🌟

