

# ALTRE VOCI

O T H E R V O I C E S

May / June 2001

Volume 20 no. 3

Newsletter of the Italian Cultural Society

## *Il Bel Paese : Italy Re-discovered*

*by Patrizia Cinquini Cerruti*

Everyone I meet is either planning a trip to Italy, just returning or at least dreaming of going to Italy. Of course, my work for the Italian Cultural Society and the fact that I teach classes like: "Planning Your Italian Vacation," and "Italian for Travelers," and write and consult about Italian travel, put me in contact with many travelers heading to the *Bel Paese*. But my observation is not like the doctor who says, "Everyone I meet is sick." The numbers speak clearly that this is a real phenomenon. In the year 2000 the number of Americans visiting Italy DOUBLED!

Almost every popular travel magazine features at least one Italian city in every issue. I have been stunned to see the familiar faces of friends from Lucca, Firenze and Venezia staring back at me from the pages of *Gourmet* and *Bon Appétit Magazine*. Italian foods, culture and art are visible in every medium. Italian music, film and language are making a strong presence world wide, whereas *La Cucina e La Moda Italiana* (Italian Cooking and Fashion) have always remained world favorites. There are hundreds of Italian language and cooking classes being offered in Italy, and the better ones are often fully booked months in advance. The same holds true for Italian hotels and also plane flights to Italy. Ten years ago, one could be certain to find a room in a favorite Italian *albergo*, and an open seat on flights to Italy during the "off-season." Today many hotels in Italy's favorite cities and many flights to Italy are booked year round. In 1999, Alitalia, the Italian national airlines, saw an increase of 10.4% in the passenger sector and 2000 balance sheets show even greater gains in passengers.

Italy has long been a favorite destination. Pilgrims, kings, writers, students, artist, and lovers have been lured for ages by Italy's many charms. My friend Pierluigi, in the United states only 7 months teases: "*Siamo molto di moda.*" To which I respond, "*Ha sì, andiamo a ruba.*" (We are very much in fashion." "Oh yes, 'we're going like hot cakes'.") Italy and things Italian have indeed become very popular.

Italy is a traveler's paradise. Experts estimate that more than 60% of the world's art treasures are housed in Italy. Italy is a living, breathing museum. When asked what it is like to be the Minister of Cultural Heritage and Activities in Italy, Minister Giovanna Melandri answers, "It is rather like being the minister of petroleum in Saudi Arabia." The wealth of art and culture in Italy is truly miraculous. But what truly stuns travelers, is that all these incredible treasures are found in a country which is brimming with breathtaking natural beauty, an ideal climate and warm gracious people who have been welcoming travelers for millenniums.

As befits a gracious host, Italy has responded well to the recent increase in visitors. New, faster, modern trains and several new lines have been added to facilitate transport. Some cities have used innovative techniques for transporting the extra people. Naples has started a single passenger taxi service which is provided by motor-scooters. Malpensa and Fiumicino Airports, along with some of the smaller airports, have had major remodeling and expansion. Italians have long understand the awesome responsibly of being the care takers for so much of the world's patrimony of art, archeology and architecture. Restoration and preservation is at an all time high, and the museums and churches are becoming increasingly user friendly. In the summer of 2000 over 80 museums remained open until late evening giving visitors greater opportunities to visit them. This summer Pisa will re-open the famous "*Torre Pendente*" (Leaning Tower) after more than a decade of closure. Italy's art and archeological treasures are more accessible than ever.

At the risk of sounding "*montata*" (stuck-up) Italy also houses another treasure...Italians. *La dolce vita, il dolce far niente*- at least the ideals and in many parts - the reality of a slower, sweeter life still exist in Italy. The human touch is still a large part of the love affair travelers have with Italy. American writer and archeologist, and incisive observer Ann Cornelisen said it best, 'Italy is the only place where one wakes up feeling truly ALIVE!' I see this played out again and again. Many Americans returning from Italy describe the sense of joy and happiness they feel in Italy. Italian Americans talk about the awesome experience of "going home" to a country they have never been to. They describe seeing face after face of faces like those of aunts, uncles, grandparents, and parents. Perhaps most striking-- these faces look like the one in the mirror. Many travelers to Italy are indeed Italian Americans making the trip back to rediscover who they are by coming face to face with their cultural heritage.

When I go to Italy I am both returning home and going away. Italian by birth and heritage, I now live in America. I have made the trans-Atlantic trip home over 50 times. One might think that the boot held few surprises for me. But nothing could be further from the truth. Italy is a country so rich that one lifetime is not enough to know her. And all those who have loved her long to be back in her embrace.



*Italian American kids in Rapallo-Italian Riviera.*