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THE OLD COUNTRY REVISITED...

A JOURNEY HOME

By Patrizia Cinquini Cerruti

"There is no place more beautiful. The Creator made Italy from designs by Michaelangelo." – Mark Twain

I often tell travelers that even if Italy were not the cradle of the Renaissance and Christianity and the center for art, culture, incredible cuisine and wine, history, design and so much more, she would still be an incredible, "must see" destination for her breathtaking natural beauty. But, for Italian-Americans, Italy is more than a destination. Italy provides the connection to their past where they can trace their family trees. Italy gives Italian-Americans the authentic experience that many feel has been lost in the assimilation process, and can provide the gift of understanding where they came from.

Returning from a trip to Italy, an Italian-American man asked his grandfather, "Nonno, how could you leave a country that is so beautiful?" The grandfather answered without hesitation, "You saw it with your belly full."



The early immigrants often never returned to Italy because they understood there was little future for them there. The second generation worked hard to assimilate and to become American, so it is generally the third or fourth generation Italian-American who travels to Italy in search of family roots. In recent decades, genealogy has exploded among Americans, and in Italy at one family gathering it is often possible to fill in the entire family tree.

A recent Harris Poll named Italy the number one destination in the world for Americans, but for Italian-Americans the journey can also be one of self discovery. Many studies document the importance of ethnicity in the development of identity. A third generation Italian-American man told me that he never felt like he fit into American culture. Neither his looks nor his conduct was typically American. He felt like an outsider in his home country. As an adult, he traveled to his ancestral village in Southern Italy. He arrived late at night and was taken, in the dark, to the home of his great-grandfather. In the morning when he awoke, he opened the shutters and looked out over the village. He was stunned to see that there were small retaining walls everywhere. He had built similar retaining walls since he was a young boy never understanding his compulsion to do so. During his stay in the village he learned that all generations of his family had built retaining walls. That day he walked in the village and saw many faces like his. This visit to his ancestral village was one of the most important events of his life. It gave him self understanding and self acceptance.

How fortunate that the place of our Italian American roots is also the top destination for art, culture, cuisine, history, fashion, beautiful coastline and beaches, mountains, and priceless ancient monuments. Italy has more UNESCO world heritage sites than any other country.

There was little opportunity in Italy during the diaspora, the large scale migration of Italians away from Italy, but today Italy is a modern, wealthy country which attracts immigrants from around the world. Amidst its antiquity and priceless monuments, Italy is a modern country, and a world leader not only in fashion and design, but in technology. Italy is number three, behind only the USA and Russia in Space Technology, and is the first country to send a woman to the International Space Station, and the first country to design an espresso machine to serve the International Space Station!

While modern Italy is not the same country the early immigrant left behind, it is here that the Italian American can connect with the homeland of his ancestors. For the Italian American visiting Italy first hand is bringing the immigration story full circle.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR FOR A SPECIAL TRAVEL TALK ON ITALY!

VISITING ITALY with Patrizia Cinquini Cerruti

Sunday, April 19 at 2:00 pm • Admission \$10 • At the Italian Center, Carmichael