

Going the Way of an Italian Language Immersion Program: A Testimonial

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I'm an Italian language junkie. I admit it freely. Private lessons, group lessons, online resources, Rosetta Stone, CDs for my car, workbooks galore... You name it, I've signed up for it and have paid a pretty penny for it over the last several years. But it's been well-worth it. My goal in life—professionally and personally—is to become totally fluent before I pass from this earth, which makes me a tad nervous since I'm not quite there yet on conjugating irregular verbs without a second thought and the clock is relentlessly ticking away....

That being said, I became lots closer to this singular ambition of mine after attending a month-long immersion program at Ovit-Milano in Milan, Italy in November 2009. I cannot say enough about an immersion course or this school. There's no substitution for daily interaction in class, participating in extra-curricular school activities and conducting everyday, mundane functions like going to the grocery store and mingling with the natives. For example, take buying food here in the U.S. at your local Safeway or Superfresh. It's a no-brainer, right? About the only thing that's important is making sure you don't stumble into the Express Line if you have more than 15 items or risk the righteous wrath of everyone behind you. Grocery shopping in another language where the locals don't speak yours can be a challenge. But you learn fast and you learn well, like never forgetting again to weigh your produce and getting that all-critical price sticker before you show up at the cash register. Or remembering to bring your plastic bags back with you to avoid the extra charge (a great concept in economics and recycling).

Ovit-Milano is a small, private school for foreigners in the heart of Milan, owned by its small teaching staff. But don't let its smallness deter you. In fact, I was blessed by choosing this type of school and attending during a time period of the year when it was less busy (I lucked out—I signed up for group lessons, but wound up being the only student for my class level. Private lessons for the price of group lessons—you can't beat that!).

I took lessons Monday through Friday, 9 am to 1 pm, with a brief break half-way through. The program was set up to provide two hours with one teacher on nailing down the often-tricky grammar rules with the other two hours with another teacher on practicing and reinforcing what you'd learned via conversation and literature. And we're not talking about boring topics here either for culture, cuisine and customs. As a professional tour director who often takes American passengers to Italy on escorted tours, the information I gleaned from my daily practicum was rich in history, highly informative and absolutely essential to understanding this fascinating country. After classes, I returned in the late afternoon for the ever-changing extra-curricular portion—watching a movie, going on a cultural excursion in the city, attending a seminar by an outside speaker, etc. Except for the nominal price of the attractions, these activities were included in the program price.

What really made the month successful for me was the incredible patience, knowledge and commitment on the part of Ovit-Milano's teachers—Sabrina, Serena and Filippo. Such passion and kindness in teaching their language and ensuring it was a "bellissima esperienza" for me. And then there was Giorgio, the school's administrative assistant. The man was a genius in finding suitable and cost-effective lodging accommodations nearby (not an easy task in Milan), providing assistance in visiting locales outside of Milan and even researching the best way to open up a bank account in Italy, now that I possess dual citizenship.

Bravissimo, Ovit-Milano!

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