Learn the lingo on holiday

**The course:** on the first morning I’m somewhat fazed to find all the teachers speaking Italian at me. They seem like nice people, but I can’t understand what they are saying. I grin back at them, absentmindedly. Then we head off with our teacher, Carina, for a brief tour of the town — in Italian. I understand from her pointing that river must be fiume and church must be chiesa, but that’s about it. We file shily into a trattoria, where Loddo, the owner, says buongiorno; into the butcher’s for a ciao from Frederico, and so on. It’s lovely how friendly everyone is, but hearing only Italian makes me feel disoriented, as though it’s wartime and we’re evacuee children being introduced to our new home.

Maybe the afternoon will be better? It isn’t. We watch Paneto Lupitani on video and there are no subtitles. It’s something about a housewife who goes to the markets and talks to a fishmonger. I wonder how long it would take me to hitchhike to Venice. On morning two we are split into three groups — Sonia, Lucas, Lauret and I are the least able. Teacher Greta gives us some grammar. She’s busy explaining the conjugation of the verb to teach when my frustration boils over. Coldly, and in English, I explain that I don’t speak Italian and therefore don’t understand what is going on. Greta smiles sweetly and then relays my points back to the other students, in Italian. Fune.

Day three and our excursion to Gubbio is aborted when Barbara explains that the man who was taking us has injured himself falling off a donkey. Instead, she offers to take us to see Urbino’s famous Ducal Palace. Lucio kindly translates this into English for me and off we go. Barbara used to be a tour guide here and, like all the teachers, speaks slowly and properly. Apparently, the FC inscribed on the lower balcony refers to Federico’s period as a count, while the large FD above signifies that this part of the building dates from after 1474, when he was made duke. The painter Raphael was born in the city, although he left when still a child. And the duke wasn’t a handsome man, mainly through not having a bridge to his nose — apparently either chipped during a duel, or self-inflicted to enable him better to see approaching assassins while lying in bed.

The course goes on and on. I’m understanding everything. I’ve no idea how, but I am. Barbara catches my eye and winks at me. This epiphany changes everything. I spend the next two days soaking up more vocab and grammar. I’m enjoying every minute.

By the end of the week, I feel confident enough to approach anyone and blurt out my newly learnt language. It’s rough and awkward, and strewn with dreadful gaffes, but I’ve come a long way in just a few days.

**School’s out:** I drive through the picturesque countryside and visit the nearby hilltop villages of Peglio and Sasscorvoro. The fields glow peach-coloured in the sunset, and I return to Urbana to eat. In one restaurant I’m humbly prevailed upon to change my order of a beer, the waitress explaining that I must have meant wine.

**The following evening:** a waiter sits at my table and we drink into the night, while talking about European enlargement, Iraq and kids driving too fast over the cobbles.

**The verdict:** The teachers’ sunny dispositions and spectacul- lar patience win out in the end; they knew they would. Another week would have been good.

**The details:** Scuola Italia (00 39-0722 317982, www.scuola-italia.com) offers a one-week course for £205pp (£275 for two weeks), and arranges stays with local families from about £70 a week, B&B. The best hotel option by far is Parco Ducale (340 622 7688, www. ilparcoducal.it; doubles from £49, B&B), a 15-minute walk from the school. Ryanair (0871 246 0000, www.ryanair.com) flies from Stansted to Ancona, a 90-minute drive away, from £25.


**Three months on... still improving?** The course gave me a solid base in a way that Linguaphone and my lover’s lessons never did. Ever since, I’ve been gravitating towards Italians in bars and restaurants — gate-crashing their conversations with what must seem like freakish familiarity. And then there’s the night when my Italian saved my life. I was in a cab in Casablanca and the driver’s high-speed tailgating was scaring me silly. He spoke no English, so, in desperation, I blurted out in Italian that I’d been in a terrible car crash as a child. He apologised profusely. He’d studied in Milan, you see, and we talked about sensible driving for the rest of the ride.

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