

ITALY IN WINTER

**Christmas Markets and Roasted Chestnuts,
Cultural Events and No Crowds**

By Lynette Hinings-Marshall



I fell in love with Italy when I saw Fellini's "La Dolce Vita" and have visited several times in summer since. I have fond memories of sipping chianti accompanied by antipasti of local salamis and crostini, but as there were also long queues and shoulder to shoulder crowds I decided to discover what Italy was like in winter.

Teatro La Scala in Milan was the starting point because here the opera season opens December 7, the feast day of Saint Ambrogio. Some older Milanese still call themselves Ambrogians and the Basilica Saint Ambrogio, built in A.D. 379, and named after this patron saint of Milan, was on our must-see list. I had secured excellent box seats via La Scala's online booking and I particularly wanted to see the 35-year-old British conductor Daniel Harding because reviews about him are so mixed. After experiencing his interpretation of Stravinsky I am definitely a fan.

What is Italy without cathedrals? My favorite was the Milan Duomo, the third largest church in the world. It's mixture of styles from the first level baroque to the neo-Gothic windows and spires have come about because it was started in 1386, consecrated in 1418 but not completed until Napoleon was crowned King of Italy in the 19th century. We walked through the entrance immediately upon arrival and after viewing the beautiful nativity scene followed the guide book's directions through this magnificent edifice to the vault above the choir. Here, a red light

marks the location of a nail from Christ's cross that has been kept safely in this spot since 1461.

The Duomo is only one highlight of the Piazza del Duomo and on the left perimeter is the elegant Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II. This iron and glass-domed atrium houses elegant arcades of cafes, shops and the famous Milanese restaurant, Savini. We started one evening with a Campari at Zucca in the Galleria where this Italian cocktail was created in the late 1800s. Directly opposite the Duomo is Teatro La Scala and we spent some evenings, rugged up against the cold, just gazing upon these three magnificent architectural monuments. The Duomo in particular when brilliantly lit against the deep blue night sky is radiant and resplendent.

Milan is a small city and one day we started at the medieval Castello Sforzesco, walked to Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper (tickets need to be booked well in advance) then on to Saint Ambrogio. As we were now in the fashionable Navigli district we stopped frequently at attractive bars and restaurants. It was here I learned that Italians stand at counters to drink their espresso because sitting at a table incurs a €2 surcharge. The pedestrian quarter of Brera is the other main entertainment district. Mid-afternoon we visited Pinacoteca di Brera art gallery to view the masters including Raphael and Caravaggio so that we could remain in the Brera district for dinner. Many restaurants in this pedestrian quarter lure patrons

with an American-style happy hour offering two-for-one drinks and large platters of complimentary food but we chose Trattoria Il Molo that specializes in seafood and has occupied the same premises for more than 70 years. We did drop into the Jamaica café in Brera for a drink and salad one day and after attending the performance at La Scala went to the Victoria Café. After a few days sightseeing and dining it was time for fashion.

I had visited Prada in the Galleria but no woman could leave Milan without visiting the famous fashion street of Via Montenapoleone. We started at the crowded counter in the historic Cova for our un caffè and un cornetto then ventured into Versace, Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana and several other designer boutiques. After experiencing serious sticker shock my husband was visibly relieved when I told him I was only checking the prices because the Serravalle designer outlet stores offer the major designers' products at substantial discounts. Getting to Serravalle was easy because their coach departs daily from downtown Milan and is worth a visit if you have a day to spare and enjoy brand-name shopping.

We took advantage of travelling off season by renting via the online site www.homelidays.co.uk a large two-storey, two-bedroom apartment in the heart of the city for the same cost as a tiny hotel room dur-

ing tourist season. The owner welcomed us with a bottle of Italian champagne and a beautifully packaged Panettone. My favorite legend about the origin of Panettone is how Ughetta, a young nun celebrated Christmas by adding sugar, butter, candied fruit and raisins (in Milanese dialect the word for raisin happens to be ughetta) to the dough, then made the sign of the cross on the top to bless it. The owner of our apartment had also booked both Christmas Eve dinner and Christmas Day luncheon for us as we wanted somewhere traditional and authentic. When we arrived the apartment owner patiently explained how to get to both Lake Como and Bergamo by public transport and even helped with taxi bookings to the restaurants. The Christmas day luncheon was the highlight of our trip even though the local families who did not speak English stared at us as if unaccustomed to strangers at their annual ritual. But they made us feel welcome and the memory of the Sardinian style mouth-watering food and delicious wines that kept appearing on our table for more than four hours still lingers.

Bergamo, the sixth century town at the foothills of the Alps, was our first full day excursion and we visited during the Saint Lucia Fair which is a family event. Following the crowd along the Sentierone, we ate polenta taragna (polenta sprinkled with grated Bitto cheese and covered with melted butter) and our first roasted chestnuts. The traditional Christmas market in Lower Bergamo was tempting as so many of the items, particularly the wooden toys and puppets, were hand-made. We next visited Donizetti's house then took the funicular to Upper Bergamo. When we hopped off at the Piazza Mercato delle Scarpe we were immediately immersed in a magical atmosphere. Pastry shop windows filled with gingerbread houses, fashionable wine bars, several tavola caldas (cafeteria-style restaurants) with a huge variety of both savory and sweet snacks lined the cobblestone medieval alleyways, but kept walking to ensure enough time at the Monastery of Saint Agostine and Colleoni Chapel. Our lunch of Risotto alla Milanese (risotto made with chopped onion flavored with saffron and grated Parmesan cheese) was at a restaurant that clung to the side of the mountain and this magnificent view of Bergamo, along with excellent food made it difficult to leave. We ended our day at the Palazzo della Ragione and finally the San Vigilio Castle before heading back down to the train station at Lower Bergamo for our one hour journey back to Milan.

The Lakes District is also only an hour from Milan and we had decided upon Lake Como. After we passed through several tunnels the bright sunlight sparkled on the snow-capped mountains and the lake seemed larger without a flurry of boats and people, the summer scene I remembered. We arrived at Varenna and took a ferry to Bellagio which was quiet and shuttered for the winter. We found a pleasant café for lunch then caught the local bus to Como.



Milan offers a spectacular shopping experience, Versace, and so much more.



The elegant Galleria Vittoria Emmanuele II. This iron and glass-domed atrium houses elegant arcades of cafes and shops.

This bus ride for less than €2 was a highlight because the route took us within meters of the lake for the entire journey. The main streets of the villages en route were barely wider than the bus, which stopped for passengers, who obviously used the service for their daily needs. After sightseeing in Como we had an interesting dinner of rabbit stew and pumpkin flowers before boarding the train back to Milan.

It was time to head south and as we had now learned that Italian trains are well below par by most Western standards we booked a Euro Star high-speed service to take us to Florence. Our plan was to set up a base in Florence and visit Tuscany. Because every site in Florence is accessible by walking and trains and buses are frequent within Tuscany we preferred not to hire a car. Drizzling rain fell during our first day in Florence so we visited the Palazzo Vecchio where the copy of Michelangelo's David stands. Around the corner we visited the Uffizi, the oldest gallery in the world and spent hours awestruck by the art by Titan, Botticelli, Michelangelo and the famous Piero della Francesca's panels, recognized as the first true Renaissance portraits. Friends suggested a visit to the Pitti Gola e Cantinia wine bar and as the village of Montepulciano was not on our itinerary it was at this bar that we first sampled Vino Nobile wines. These were accompanied by a dish of ravioli with pecorino and pears and crostini which we later walked off starting at the Ponte Vecchio. It was fun to window shop all the jewelers that line the bridge

but I was more interested in Via de' Tornabuoni's designer stores with an emphasis on shoes as this is the site of Ferragamo's Shoe Museum. We spent the remainder of the afternoon walking through the area of town that houses the church of San Lorenzo, the Medici's Tombs, the Duomo and the Baptistery.

Next day, with a promise of sun, we boarded the train to Siena. Having previously experienced the dense and jostling summer crowds in Siena it was a welcome relief to stroll with space on the cobblestone streets to sightsee and window shop. On our way to Piazza del Campo we stopped to buy coffee beans from Café A. Naninni where we enjoyed un caffè and of course the famous torta garfagnana (tarts and cakes). Close by the Piazza del Campo we enjoyed a lunch of salt cod soup and another bottle of Vino Nobile di Montepulciano before walking to the Duomo. We then climbed the tower around the corner to view the Piazza del Campo from above and photographed a magnificent 360 degree view of Siena and the surrounding countryside before boarding a bus to San Gimignano.

San Gimignano is known as "the city of beautiful towers" and is one of the best-preserved medieval towns in Tuscany. The towers that welcomed pilgrims as far back as the 13th century still stand today. The Piazza del Duomo was our starting point and as we had by now visited many cathedrals, galleries and medieval towers we chose to just enjoy the small shops and sights until darkness fell and we settled

into a cozy restaurant we had booked in advance. Against all my instincts, I was pleased that I tried the pasta and pigeon sauce served on creamy mushrooms.

Our Italian winter holiday was drawing to a close and I spent an entire day walking the markets of Florence shopping for souvenirs and buying shoes along Via del Corso while my husband took a recommended tour of Renaissance Florence. On our final day we took the train to Western Tuscany to see the iconic Leaning Tower of Pisa. There were people milling about the grounds but fortunately no queues to enter it, so we were able to tour immediately. We then boarded another train to Northern Tuscany to visit the popular beach resort of Viareggio which is famous for its Art Nouveau villas and hotels of the 1920s. We strolled along Viareggio's promenade and then enjoyed a leisurely Sunday lunch at Da Oliviera so we could try their Cacciucco alla Viareggina (seafood stew). This bright sunny Sunday was the perfect arrivederci to Italy and next day we flew home happy and relaxed.

We had been able to see so much more during this visit as we never had to wait in line, and we spent more time strolling because we weren't constantly buffeted by tourists along the narrow streets. It was also less expensive than previous trips because accommodations and meals were considerably less than during tourist season. Winter touring is not for everybody but it worked well for us and if you are prepared for a little inclement weather it can work well for you too.

Lynette Hinings-Marshall has travelled abroad every year since her 19th birthday and has lived for long periods in Australia, Cyprus, Puerto Rico, Korea, the United States, Mexico and Malaysia. She has a Diploma in Professional Writing and Editing and is currently writing a textbook for the tour guiding profession.



One of the many wonders of Western Tuscany is the Leaning Tower of Pisa.



The sky above Siena's Piazza del Campo brings the warm tones of the skyline into a sharp focus.