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I will always remember my three months in Italy as a time of incredible personal and intellectual growth, a period where my understanding of the world was widened by a series of realized expectations. This process started the moment I stepped off the plane in Florence. Everything was as I had imagined: casual security guards, a stumbling conversation with a ripe smelling cab driver, a beautiful view of the Ponte Vecchio and the historic center of the city. I was greeted warmly by my Italian host family, a wine manufacturer and a fashion consultant, and fed an absurd amount of fresh cheese. I fell into a pecorino-induced coma, feeling as if I had arrived in a fairy tale land of wonderful Italian stereotypes.

This is the Florence the weekend traveler is likely to remember. Fabulous food, friendly chattering locals, and staggering art and architecture. But that is not *my* Florence. My Florence is a place where strict adherence to tradition (no cappuccini after noon) juxtaposes great artistic innovation and progressive thinking. It's a place where tourists are both a nuisance and a necessity, and fierce loyalty for friends and family pervades all aspects of life. It is a culture of moderation and spectacle, passivity and passion. No matter what Rick Steves says, it's not a place you can understand in three days.

Although any student returning from Italy will tell you they've had the time of their lives (and rightly so), I characterize my time in Florence less as a series of adventures of great magnitude, and more as a gradual thrill in overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers. Successfully explaining long division in Italian to my ten-year-old host sister was immensely gratifying. Explaining the similarities between challah and

pandoro (Italian Christmas cake) was a similar victory, as was articulating the meaning of the English word “awkward.” Defending the American custom of saying *spaghetti* but not *polpette* (“ma perchè gli americani dicono meat-BALLS?”) was less successful, but still highly amusing. I can honestly say now that I measure language ability in terms of one’s proficiency at witty banter, and by the end of my quarter I was indeed able to relay amusing stories at the dinner table and to joke about traffic (“che casino!”) with locals on the bus—great steps for someone who arrived in Italy with a handful of nouns and poorly conjugated verbs.

I am immensely grateful to have spent time in Florence, and I know I’ll look fondly back at those three months for the rest of my life. It was truly a gift to study art and music in such a profoundly historic city, and to live as a local within the many vibrant Florentine communities. I know with great certainty that returning to Florence is now one of my utmost goals in life.