

Long Term Language Study Overseas

by

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Studying a foreign language is a great way to spend a two-week vacation, but for the traveler who wants to spend some serious time immersed in language study it can pose a number of unique challenges.

If you are willing to make the commitment of time, money and effort you will be amply rewarded in any number of ways: learning the language of course, but learning it with native speakers is probably the best way to learn. Yet beyond that just think of the people you will meet, the things you will see as you spend week after week living among the culture you have chosen to understand is indeed one of the biggest rewards you could ever hope for.

In June of 1999 my wife and I spent two weeks in Siena studying Italian and had a great time – but considered it more of a lark than a serious effort at learning to communicate. Since then our affection for Italy has deepened with each trip we make and in 2004 we decided to take the plunge and spend eight weeks in an intensive immersion course to develop our language skills.

We knew we wanted to return to Siena, thus limiting our choices of schools. Since we had had such a wonderful experience in Siena in 1999 at the Dante Alighieri school, we decided to return there in February of 2005. Moreover, their prices were very competitive and their intensive program fit our schedule perfectly.

In making the right decision about a long-term language study program you might want to consider the following questions.

Why do you want to study the language? Is it for personal growth or do you hope it will enhance your marketability? For us it was largely a matter of personal growth.

How much time and money can you spend? While the costs of the school might be pretty reasonable (say less than 1000 euros for a 160-hour, 8-week course) living expenses are another matter altogether. The least expensive option would be to arrange through the school to live with a family near the city. We were looking for something a bit more private and opted to stay in

the same apartment we rented in 1999 but the cost was higher. As for the time we planned this trip months in advance.

How flexible and adaptable can you be? Spending two or three months in another culture demands a willingness to change and adapt to the circumstances unique to that culture. One needs to always be prepared to reject any preconceived notions about how things should be and strive to accept how things are. Since we had already traveled to Italy before we had a fairly clear idea of what we were getting into and thus experienced few unpleasant culture shocks after we arrived.

Can you accept frustration and learn from your mistakes easily and quickly? This can be very hard, believe me. The key is to remember that from recognizing our mistakes comes understanding.

So you have decided you feel confident and secure enough to live for an extended time overseas, now what?

First, where would you like to study? There are language programs throughout Italy to appeal to every traveler whether in a big city (for example, Rome or Venice), the Tuscan hills towns (Siena or Montepulciano) or the beach (Taormina or San Remo). For us this was probably the most important criterion since we wanted to return to Siena to study Italian. As for school type note that most college programs, or college-affiliated programs are designed for and populated largely by college students. At a language school such as Dante Alighieri you are more likely to find a much broader mix of students, from all backgrounds, age groups and experiences.

Second, how long do you want to study? Most programs have two-week minimums although some can be found for less than that, while you can study for up to 6 months and longer at many schools, particularly the larger ones such as Dante Alighieri, Leonardo da Vinci, Università per Stranieri (University for Foreign Study).

No matter which program you decide on plan to spend at least every morning Monday through Friday in class, and certainly more if you are in intensive program (9:00-12:30 and 9:00-1:30 respectively). You might even opt for additional one-on-one lessons, which can further intensify the experience. We knew we wanted to spend at least eight weeks of intensive study and Dante Alighieri had just the right program for our schedule.

Going to class is only a part of the study. Most schools offer extracurricular activities such as movies, lectures, tours of local sites, dinners, etc., all in the study of language, of course, and all designed to further push your communication skills. Utilize these resources as much as possible.

Just as important is to spend time talking with people. One of our most difficult challenges has been to speak as often as possible with the Italians in Siena. As one of our instructors says over and over again: “parlare, parlare, parlare”, “speak, speak, speak”.

Third, how much money do you want to spend? As of early 2005, the cost for a 160-hour program lasting 8 weeks at a school in Siena was less than 1000 euros. Università per Stranieri (in Siena) is probably going to be the least expensive although it is also the most traditional in its methods and of course consists largely of college-age students. Higher tuition costs tend to be at the smaller schools, which usually offer smaller class size and perhaps a more specialized course of study. In any case, if you have answered the first two questions the issue of cost should probably fall right into place. On the other hand if you have a very tight budget then this might be the most important determining factor in where and how long you study.

Spending one or two or three months or longer abroad studying a language can occasionally be frustrating, certainly challenging but always and intensely rewarding. To help you find your own path to this most unique form of self-discovery, check out the resources listed below.

For schools:

<http://www.dantealighieri.com/indexa.htm>

<http://www.culturaitaliana.it/newhome/index.asp>

<http://www.ilsasso.com/homeing.htm>

http://www.babilonia.it/italian_language_school/

<http://www.scuolaleonardo.com/siena.html>

<http://www.linguaviva.it/florence/school/courses/19.html>

<http://www.lipservice.it/>

http://www.porta-doriente.com/italian_language_school/index.htm

<http://www.saenaiulia.it/>

<http://www.unistrasi.it/>

<http://www.solemar-sicilia.it/>

http://www.linguait.it/en_home.html

For general information:

http://www.centerforstudyabroad.com/italian_in_siena.asp - courses

http://www.studyabroad.com/simplehtml/languages/head/Italian_other_lah.html

<http://www.worldwide.edu/>

And if you would like to share your experiences, particularly on studying in Italy or if you have any questions or suggestions please feel free to drop me a line at steve@sienaitaly.com.