



Veronica

from Brampton

to

Italy

“Italy is exactly where I am meant to be”

I always knew that I wanted to travel the world and experience different cultures. But for some reason, when I had imagined my life and the places I wanted to travel, Italy was never one of them. Ironically it was always the number one tourist destination on almost everybody else's list. My whole life, whenever I would ask someone where they dreamed of travelling to, the answer always was -- Italy. Perhaps the reason I decided I did not want to go to Italy was out of spite, or maybe to be different from what everyone else wanted, or maybe it was just because I was simply ignorant. But when I had opened the envelope on country announcement day and read aloud “Italy” to my family, friends, and a few strangers - I knew it was exactly where I was meant to be.

Right now, as I am sitting here, in this charming cafe overlooking the beautiful lake, near to a small town I now call my home, after a day I just spent with people who I can now call my very best friends, soon to arrive to people I call my family. I can assure you, Italy is exactly where I am meant to be.

I was just a carefree 16 year old with no plan or idea of what I wanted to do with my life. All I knew was that whatever plan I came up with, it wouldn't be like everyone else's. Most young people I know have pretty much the same formula scripted for their life. Finish 4 years of high school, get accepted to university, graduate and start a career. For me, this never seemed ideal.

I always knew that I wanted something more from this world. I didn't want to follow the path everyone was expecting me to. To tell the average teenager that I would be leaving my family, school and friends behind and putting my future into strangers' hands, they would tell me I am crazy. But as I began packing my bags and booking a flight to Venice, a place I never thought I would go, I knew I had made the right choice. The most uncomfortable choice

When you reach this point in your life, it is a real struggle to determine the path you want to take. It seems as if the path you choose right now will change the course of your whole entire life. As a 16 year old, you may think you know what you want or what you like. But honestly, you have no idea. That's exactly when you decide it's time to pack up and move away from everything you've ever known.

Almost six months after country announcement day, here I was, ready to get onto a plane alone for the first time, my whole life packed into a couple suitcases and only eight hours in the air separating me from a brand new life. I barely had any idea where Caprino Veronese, Verona was, let alone where it would take me.

But from the moment I hopped off the plane I felt at home here. Even in my most uncomfortable of scenarios, I still felt at home. I would love to tell you that my first week in Italy was magical and full of fulfillment but a bug I must've caught on the plane took care of that. It was more along the lines of google searching "why have I thrown up 14 times in the last hour". Basically, combined with spending 48 hours running on just two hours of sleep, the stress of flying, and the change of water/climate/food my body essentially just gave up. Who knew that those sleepless 48 hours would result in the next 120 hours of my life to leave me feeling very sick. I didn't allow that to stop me though. I spent that first week experiencing many new things. I explored my town and many towns near by, I went pear picking, attended a rice festival, went for many walks along the lake, met many kind people, obtained my Permesso di Soggiorno and of course ate lots of pasta and gelato.

One of the best things about where I am living is that it is quite near to Verona, the city of love. Known for being the setting of the famous Shakespearean play Romeo & Julieta, you may have heard of it. I have visited Verona many times now and have really gotten to know it well. It's a city full of surprises, every time I visit it amazes me with something new. I could never get sick of it. I can really feel all the luck from all four times I have touched Julieta's boob.



After my first week in Italy came to a close, when I started to feel a bit settled in, it was time for a new adventure. I left my home in Caprino to spend a week exploring a new city called Cremona, located about an hour and a half away. I was visiting a good friend who I had met through exchange.



During that week the two of us had many adventures together, one of them being a 502- step climb up a historic tower. The travel up was quite challenging, but it was well worth it because when we reached the top of the tower, we were greeted by the most spectacular view of the beautiful city below.

Later we biked around through the city, swam at a local sport's club, attended a Medieval Festival, played lots of briscola, went to a market, and of course -- ate lots of gelato. I also rode on the back of a motorbike (sorry mom), saw a beautiful castle and sampled lots of delicious local food. This is where I tried a piadina and had my first authentic Italian pizza – the first of many.

Apart from touring and exploring, my friend and I were on a cooking mission. We decided to make as many Canadian and Italian food specialties as possible. We made poutine, Canadian pancakes, butter tarts, tiramisu, lasagna, and cookies. We shared the food with my friend's family who enjoyed everything we made. I am so thankful for this incredible week and the amazing experiences and memories I have gained from it.

Unfortunately, after two weeks filled with new experiences and exciting adventures, it was time for me to start school. I haven't been nervous for the first day of school since I was a little kid, but as you can imagine, this scenario was much different now. I walked into my new school, my hands shaky, and my face red. I was almost crying as I was walking up to the classroom. Luckily, I was met with two friendly faces who gave me a tour of the school before the class began.

From there it is all history. My classmates are amazing, and I have made many incredible friends who I have already made many memories with. One of them even sowed a Canadian flag patch onto their backpack.

I have never enjoyed an English class more in my life than I did on that first day of school. And I still do. My teacher often asks me to explain definitions or tell stories to the class. Schooling here is very hard and stressful for the students, which makes me happy that I don't understand what's going on. It all makes me appreciate my Canadian school much more.

In the beginning of October, I travelled south throughout Italy to 10 famous cities. With each new city I visited, I gained more and more appreciation for this beautiful country. I fell in love in Venice, I felt at home in Verona, I danced in Pisa, I cried in Florence, I laughed in Rome, I was mesmerized in the Vatican, I felt alive in Naples, I grew in Pompeii, and I became one with Sorrento.

With each stop of the bus, I learnt a little bit more about Italy and a little bit about myself as well. I felt myself grow as a person and was able to see this country through my own lens. During this trip I made many lifelong friends from all over the world. I never laughed as hard in my life as I did while touring the streets of Italy with a flock of exchange students by my side. I would have never imagined that people who at one point in time were just strangers, would now bring me so much joy, or that spending countless hours on a hot, crammed bus would be something I looked forward to.



During the Tour of Italy I was able to improve my language skills as well as my epicure skills with every new restaurant I ordered in, and with every new dish I tried. I am so grateful for how this trip shaped me as a person and allowed me to see the famous cites many people only dream of visiting. Beginning my exchange by getting to know so many parts of the country I would be living in for the next year was just perfect for us.

But it's back to reality now. As time goes on, I notice my language skills improving everyday. Some days I wake up and feel like I have been speaking Italian my whole life, and other days it's a struggle to even just say hello. Back at home, I have often heard people say "I can't speak the language, but I can understand it". I could never really comprehend what this meant, but I finally understand what that really means.

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My Italian is pretty decent now. And it's not like my language skills developed slowly overtime, but rather, one day things kind of clicked inside my brain. Suddenly I could understand when people were talking to me, it's like having a super power in a way. I have reached the point where I am no longer speaking any English and most of the time when I need to say something, I am able to say it in Italian. The problem is when I *want* to say something, things are a little different. But I still have a long journey ahead of me.

I can hardly believe that it has been almost three months since that day when I first arrived in Italy. So many things have changed in my life in such a short amount of time that I hardly know what to make of it. I would never have known the great things this world had to offer if I didn't take the leap and move halfway across the globe. This wonderful experience has given me opportunities I never even knew existed and has shown me my ambition that was never truly unlocked.

Thank you to Rotary for opening my eyes. I am forever grateful for all of the work you do so kids like me can build bridges in this beautiful world. I am only on day 84 and I couldn't imagine my life in any different way.

Con affetto,

Veronica