

GOING PLACES

JOHN COONEY



IRRESISTIBLE ITALY

Travel. We Kiwis do it for all kinds of reasons. To eyeball famous sites ... sample way-out cultures ... swot-up ancient history ... or soak-up stunning scenes. But there are some places where the best thing to do is find a shady umbrella, order a cappuccino, and, well ... just SIT. Sit and watch. Sit and listen. Sit and feel the magic as the world goes by around you.

My favourite place for sitting-watching-listening-feeling is ITALY. That long, skinny, boot-shaped land has hung down into the Mediterranean for ... well, forever. And it's attracted wanderers and wayfarers for nearly as long.

It's not hard to see why. I mean, those laid-back Italians have it all!

If you enjoy sniffing around Very Old Stuff, they've got the Eternal City of Rome, with its Colosseum and Trevi Fountain and St Peters Basilica. If you like goosebumpy ancient ruins, they've got the buried city of Pompeii. If you're into grapes and olives, the Italians have been growing them for yonks under the Tuscan sun. If you prefer canals, gondolas, music and romance, they have all that and more in enchanting Venice. And if you're after *la dolce vita* (the sweet life) with fine wine, food and conversation – hey, take your pick!



ROME: It's hard to know where to start with Italy's dusty, musty capital. I mean, Rome was once the hub of history, the cornerstone of the Roman Empire, the beating heart of Christianity. This is where a she-wolf raised Romulus and Remus ... where Brutus back-stabbed

Julius Caesar ... where lions and gladiators died ... where Popes were elected, basilicas got built, and Da Vinci came up with his secret code (if you believe Dan Brown).

With its bumper-to-bumper traffic and layer-upon-layer of history, this city is simply staggering – a non-stop clash of old and new that wants to reach out and grab you somehow.

You should do what the Romans do – and let it!



POMPEII: I get a real buzz when I'm poking around Dusty-Old-Sites. And Italy's best grab-your-camera excavation can be found at the foot of Mt Vesuvius ...

On August 24 in the year 79AD, Vesuvius erupted – and Pompeii, a well-to-do Roman town of 20,000, was buried deep under volcanic mud. Which is where it remained, entombed and forgotten, for 17 long centuries, until a local farmer unearthed some petrified bits-and-pieces.

Pompeii today offers a window on a long-gone civilisation, with villas, shop-fronts, theatres and residents(!) all frozen in time the day the mountain blew up.

If that's not on your bucket list, how come?

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TUSCANY: Next time you find yourself surrounded by vineyards, olive groves, cypress trees, and medieval hilltop towns, you may well be in Tuscany. And be warned: this region will steal your heart! Although it's hard to explain why.

In part it's those endless dreamy landscapes ... the pastas, cheeses, oils and wines ... the old stone houses perched on narrow, windy lanes. In part it's the stunning old forts and towers and mansions and monasteries that drip with atmosphere.

But it's also Tuscany's relaxed, unhurried, been-around-for-hundreds-of-years mood. It makes you want to put down roots and hang about.



VENICE: Getting lost in a big city is not normally a good idea. But this is one place where it doesn't hurt to forget your map. In fact, the nicest thing you can do in Venice is go wandering, meandering, sauntering and strolling – down cobblestoned streets, over tiny stone bridges, across tranquil waterways, wherever the urge takes you.

Marco Polo dreamed dreams here, Wagner composed here, Byron wrote here, Galileo tested his telescope here, Shakespeare set the 'Merchant of Venice' here, and Elvis Presley crooned "It's now or never!" from here. (Well, maybe he didn't – but who cares?)

Venice ... unique in all the world! It rises each morning from the lagoon like a mirage.

LA DOLCE VITA: The sapphire-blue waters of the ooh-aah-gorgeous *Costiera Amalitana* (Amalfi Coast) were once, according to Roman legend, the abode of sirens – naughty mermaids who lured seamen to their death with sweet songs. Ulysses resisted their call (the legend claims) by stuffing the ears of his crew with wax and tying himself to the mast of his ship!

Now, I never saw or heard any mermaids (although my wife had the wax ready, just in case). But I was totally seduced by 'the sweet life' in spectacular Sorrento-town – with its bougainvillea and zigzagging roads and head-spinning drops and picture-postcard villas clinging to the vertical cliff-face.

We sampled the region's *limoncello* (a delicious lemon-flavoured liqueur), then

sat in a shady *piazza* where we ate the largest, yummiest, cheesiest pizza ever ... nibbled on *tiramisu* (a to-die-for dessert) ... sipped wine a-la-go-go ... and wished we had longer in this irresistible corner of the world. ☘



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