

my journey.



Head Over Heel

SEDUCED BY A SOUTHERN ITALIAN

When Australian journalist Chris Harrison fell for an Italian bella with eyes “the colour of Guinness”, the challenges were many, and a sense of humour – *essenziale!*



Above left: Fitting right in on the road to Andrano Porto. Centre: Andrano's Castello Spinola-Carracciolo. Above right: Salento's rugged coastline.



IT WAS THE craziest decision I have ever made. I would make it a million times again. She gave me no choice. She intoxicated me. Her liquorice eyes. Her Mediterranean skin. Even the sound of her name was like a summons to all my foolish blood.

Daniela – one ‘L’, smile as you say it to pronounce it correctly – was on her second trip to Australia in six months, far too infrequently for both our liking. So I responded with ease in that Sydney hotel, when she stood naked by the window, after distractedly interrupting what I had been hoping would last forever, and without turning from the view, she said softly and without intonation: “Come to live with me in Italy.”

I would do many things for that captivating woman; reason was not one of them.

Several years ago I put my steady life in a flimsy bag and followed my heart to the ‘heel’ of the Italian boot. Twenty-something, one-way ticket in my jeans, I was gambling on love and looking for adventure when I should have been pursuing a journalism career. But there were thousands of journalists out there, and only one Daniela.

Though she lived in Puglia, Daniela was half Sicilian – that eccentric island where they say eternal love lasts two years. It was an inauspicious beginning to my flight of fancy. Worse still, the paperback I read on the flight to Brindisi (the southernmost airport on the heel of the boot) also hinted that our romance was heading for disaster.

From the very beginning of *The Italians*, a book many critics consider

the definitive portrait of Italy, its author cast doubts on my trip to his homeland. Luigi Barzini disparaged what he saw as futile lust for Italian women by foreign men, who were ‘fascinated by the girls to the point where they often lose all powers of coherent speech and judgement... bewitched by a signorina’s shapely legs, pert face, overbearing breasts and harmonious behind like a double mandolin.’ For Barzini, Italian women are provocative creatures with whom the doted foreigner ‘can scarcely talk and who would possibly discredit them if she became their wife.’ I almost asked the captain to turn the plane around!

While I considered my judgement coherent, Barzini had a point when it came to my speech. Language is the tallest hurdle when you fall for a foreigner. The only Italian phrase I knew when I arrived in Andrano – Daniela’s sun-drenched fishing village – would have earned me a slap had I been foolish enough to use it. Fortunately her English had improved dramatically since our chance meeting in Ireland. She was having a few problems with the past tense, but I was only interested in her future.

Of course, you can resort to other forms of communication when words are at a premium. Easier said than done in Catholic southern Italy, particularly when your lover still lives with her parents.

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Had 29-year-old Daniela been Australian I might have been alarmed. But it’s *normale* for Italians to live at home until marriage. And be pampered in the process. Indeed, one famous expression goes: ‘Jesus Christ must have been Italian because he lived at home ‘til he was 30 and his mother told him he was God’.

We were kids again. Conspiratorial. Shoving cotton wool in the bedsprings. Though not for long, fortunately, as Daniela was a precocious ‘child’ and banished mamma and papà to their holiday house in Sicily for the duration of the summer. Despite packed local

beaches, our coast was clear. But the remainder of sinful Italy was stealing kisses where it could: among olive groves, on a Vespa, in the shadows of the piazza...

Sexually strict Italian parents oblige their children to satisfy private curiosities in public. Indeed, for many Italian adolescents erogenous zones are located in Fiats. On our way to a restaurant towards the end of my first summer in the village, we passed a car park which Daniela claimed would later be packed with people sitting closer than handbrakes normally allow. I thought she meant one or two, but on our way home around midnight both cars and occupants were bumper to bumper.

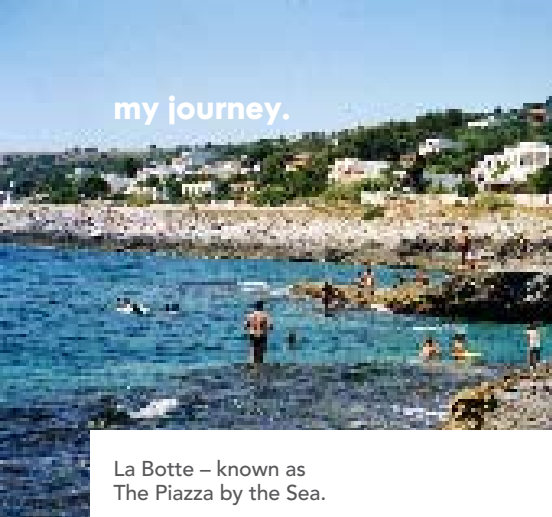
Young couples in Naples don’t even bother with lovers’ lanes, they simply park on any street and paste the windows with newspaper. A daughter with an encyclopaedic knowledge of current affairs is not something a Neapolitan father brags about.

When the sun set on summer, Daniela and I left Andrano and moved north to misty Milan, where we rented a matchbox apartment and lived together from the start. There was no alternative: the distance between her world and mine demanded all or nothing. Dating would have been next to impossible, though good for my Frequent Flyer points.

Daniela taught at a primary school and I worked for an advertising agency before



Chris and Daniela swimming in the sea.



La Botte – known as The Piazza by the Sea.

tiring of unreliable corporate Italy and also turning to teaching. The libidinous students at my inner-city English school were more gifted at propositions than prepositions. One strawberry-blond *studentessa* made me translate her love songs into English, then sang them to me. She failed the final exam.

Though physically and emotionally close, Daniela and I were worlds apart and had different attitudes to love. Having dated Italian boys she expected

MY LOVER, TEACHER, INTERPRETER AND FRIEND KNEW IMMEDIATELY WHEN I HADN'T UNDERSTOOD SOMETHING...

me to be jealous. Dangerously so. On one otherwise sleepy Italian weekend, three women were murdered by jilted lovers who then disposed of themselves, one with a screwdriver apparently – the Italian version of DIY. In Italy, Jim (or Giovanni) will do anything but fix it.

In the past eight years, over 900 lovers have met their maker this way. Italian beaux obsess over their belles. When the government proposed an electronic locator bracelet for prisoners under house arrest, less interest was shown by prison authorities than by jealous boyfriends, who saw it as a superior measure to the mobile phone which could be switched off or ignored when 'otherwise engaged'.

I didn't need to be jealous, if only because Daniela was herself protective. She spoilt me with affection without smothering me, and made our relationship possible through her self-denying patience. It was a struggle for us to do things most normal couples do. Due to the language gap a two-hour film took us double that time to watch. My lover, teacher, interpreter and friend knew immediately when I hadn't understood something and stopped the film on cue. In the cinema she leant across and

whispered a translation. I was far too busy trying to understand the film to even contemplate popcorn or kissing her.

Daniela appreciated my Australian attitude toward women. Having grown up on a peninsula of renowned bottom-pinchers, she was used to being ogled by cordons of Casanovas who had grown up watching the abundance of breasts on Italian TV. In my company, at least, she was safe from wolf-whistles, although I sometimes watched TV when she wasn't around.

After eight months in charmless Milan, urban tails between rural legs, we scarpers back to Daniela's whitewashed village, where our second summer proved even more hedonistic than the first. But it wasn't all sun, sea, sex and spaghetti – anywhere's paradise if that's your itinerary. There were, of course, testing times born of conflicting cultures and contrasting minds.

Daniela disliked my precision and I her imprecision. I was punctual. She was late. I was organised. She was scatterbrained. My language was direct. Hers was decorative. She accused me of impatience and being set in my ways. I accused her of failing to understand the loneliness of linguistic isolation and just how much I had compromised to start a new life in her country. "There's nobody who is forcing you," was her clumsy comeback, said with such a cute accent that I rather felt she was.

Our principal cause of tension was Daniela's loose respect for the truth. Her lips were alive with polite little lies – transparent and effectively harmless, yet lies all the same, causing confusion if nothing else. One afternoon, during that first summer in Andrano, she proposed a walk from Acquaviva to Castro – two seaside locations a few kilometres apart. Believing such a walk to only be possible along the thin and twisted coast road, dangerous to drive let alone walk, I declined the offer and suggested a swim instead. "E dai," pleaded Daniela. "There's a footpath." So off we went. But I soon discovered that she had invented the footpath to convince me

to come on the walk. She had done so for my benefit, you understand; apparently I needed some exercise.

What was illogical to me was logical to Daniela, who can say she is coming when she is in fact going. She once called me at home saying "arrivo" only to turn up over an hour later. "I was heading home," she protested when she finally showed up. "I just had to do some shopping and feed Anna's cat on the way." But once I realised liberties were never taken with vital truths, I found it fascinating rather than frustrating to live with a woman capable of the delicate logic behind "I didn't forget, I just didn't remember." It wasn't my birthday she was referring to, so what the hell. When it did come around, she came home with a parcel in which I showed interest. "Go away," she discouraged. "There's nothing in here for you except something."

Despite those differences, we had already made it further than Luigi Barzini predicted. Initially, I admit, I had lusted after a stylish girl with whom I could barely communicate. But then I fell in love with a sensitive woman who realised our bond was complicated and so nurtured it like the *basilico* growing in our back garden; stray cats pissed on it from time to time but that merely added flavour.

I soon realised if I was going to prove Barzini wrong and forge a lasting relationship with Daniela, then I needed to master her language. Italian is, after all, renowned as the language of love. King Charles V of Spain once quipped:

"When I'm talking to my horse
I speak German,
When I'm talking to diplomats
I speak French,
When I'm talking to God
I speak Spanish,
But when I'm talking to women
I speak Italian".

Between classes at a language school and hours of home study, my Italian began to dramatically improve. Italian sentences are like symphonies and I fell in love with the harmony in even humdrum words which massage the mouth of the speaker and serenade the ear of the listener. Saying the word *stuzzicadenti* (toothpick), for example, will do more for your mouth than actually using one. I began talking so much I almost got stretch marks on my tongue. I did, however, make several howling gaffes,

including asking the local butcher for a 'kilometre' of sausages, and a man on a beach if I could hire a 'paedophile' for an hour rather than a 'pedal-boat'.

I consoled myself with the fact it's not just beginners who make mistakes. Even experts make Freudian slips. While playing mixed-doubles tennis, a fire broke out nearby with smoke wafting over our court. When sirens finally sounded an Italian friend declared: "Here come the blow-jobs" (*pompini*) rather than: "Here come the firemen" (*pompieri*).

After a while I was even conversing in the village dialect: haggling over the price of a watermelon at the market, informing the mayor what I thought of Andrano's ramshackle streets. As I approached fluency, Daniela's and my relationship became more meaningful, its foundations more solid. Each new word was a key that unlocked a door to her personality. Stunted English had been enough to reveal her as whimsical and kind-hearted. Effortless Italian showed her to be quirky, illogical, intellectual and brave. If I had loved her in English, I adored her in Italian. She was as beautiful as her language, and I couldn't get enough of either.

I spent two madcap years in Andrano, enjoying Daniela, squabbling with her mamma and living one comical adventure after the next. Where olive groves slope to the coast and the aromas of cooking wander cobblestone lanes, I met a cast of curious characters who showed me generosity, friendship, affection and, above all, the real Italy. There was a policeman who rearranged crimes to suit the necessary forms, a doctor who prescribed patients his homemade lemon liqueur, a driving instructor who sat exams for his pupils and a Fascist vet whose practice was a shrine to Mussolini...

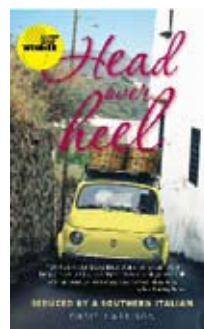
The unexpected price of moving to Italy was the feeling of alienation I felt from my former home and friends. The way of life I had known before Italy now felt foreign to me, but so too did the Italian way of life. So instead of feeling like a citizen of two countries, I felt like a nomad belonging to neither. A foreigner both at home and abroad, lost in a hybrid reality between Italy and Australia.

What's in a name? An identity. Chris the Sydney-sider and Crris (with the rolled 'r') the resident of Andrano were two intrinsically different people.

Their names were pronounced differently, they spoke different languages with different accents, had different dress sense, a different sense of humour, ate different foods at different times, feared different things and enjoyed different pastimes. Chris the pilot and surfer, lover of the outdoors, deplored the smell of cigarette smoke, while Crris the café junkie and conversationalist sometimes smoked 10 a day. Crris raised his voice to speak, something Chris' friends found irritating. And Chris disliked people who interrupted, something Crris found the key to survival. They were two separate people who probably wouldn't have gotten along. Indeed, the only thing they had in common was their love of the same woman.

Rather than eliminate the distance between our two worlds, Daniela's and my love actually highlighted it. Even if we could forge a common future we would never be complete at the same

time. In Australia, Daniella – pronounced very differently from Daniela – suffered the same schizophrenia Crris endured in Italy. For the two of us to be together, one had to sacrifice their true identity. But love is worth it, which is why, despite the challenges that lay ahead, Daniela's allure kept me in Italy, that country of contradictions, where eternal love lasts two years, but I fell in love with the same woman every two minutes. ■



An edited extract from Chris Harrison's award-winning book *Head Over Heel*, Murdoch Books, 2008, \$29.95. Learn more about the author at his website, www.chrisharrisonwriting.com.

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