

Living La Dolce Vita

By following a beautiful Italian girl to her homeland, journalist **Chris Harrison** encountered first hand the charms and chaos of a country like no other and wrote a book about it



It was on a holiday trip to Dublin that the life of journalist Chris Harrison changed forever. It was there that the Australian met his future wife, Daniela, an intoxicating southern Italian belle who persuaded him to relocate to her sensuous native land. Not one to resist such temptation, Chris soon became immersed in a world where every meal is a banquet and even the simplest of interactions, a struggle. It was certainly a steep learning curve for the smitten

Australian but whether it was the local language, fashion or



hospitality, Chris soaked up Italian life with the largest appetite he could muster...

What was the biggest moment of culture shock for you in Italy?

CH Harrison: The biggest moment of culture shock was the mistakes I made with the language! The linguistic lapses made me realise the giant step I'd taken and how big a fish I was out of water, basically. Just silly mistakes like asking the butcher for a kilometre of sausages rather than a kilogram. And asking a Sicilian man on a beach if I could hire a paedophile for half an hour rather than a pedal boat.

Were there challenges of fitting into Italian society?

CH: Oh definitely. And even today, five years later when I've become an Italian citizen, there still are challenges. It's just a different approach to doing things. Being precise and trying to do something on a timeline, for example – I do find it difficult to fit in to their way of doing things because it is very relaxed and very laid back and so there is that challenge of becoming one of them because if you swim upstream in Italy, you will just get tired and go nowhere.

Your greatest faux pas?

CH: It was more feeling out of my depth in situations. Right at the beginning of the book for instance, I'm setting up my documents to get my residency visa, and I go for a medical and I'm expecting things to go a certain way. So I turn up to my medical expecting this doctor to examine me, and he doesn't: he sits me down at a dinner table and makes me drink a bottle of his homemade *limoncello* and I end up speaking to his parrot – who spoke better Italian than I did at that stage. And so I think that's the challenge: you have pre-conceived ideas about how things would go in your country and so you go along to them

and they don't go anything like how you'd expect them to go. And that can be a challenge, adapting to that, because if you're an inelastic kind of person, if you don't adapt to change well, then you would get angry in a place like Italy because you would shake your fist and say "Why aren't you doing this in the 'normal' way?" They don't do normal. That's why I wrote the book because I was so amazed at what their 'normal' was.

What do Italians appreciate when dealing with foreigners?

CH: They're incredibly welcoming and they like to put on a show – usually culinary in nature. They like to showcase their everything to you. They like to showcase their part of the world and each particular

region is unique. And so each different place I went to, each person I met in that place, basically tried to showcase me that part of Italy and talk it up and give me their food, give me their culture, give me their history and almost make me one of them really.

How would you compare the Italian women to Australian ones?

CH: Oh goodness! Well, from my own personal experience, Italian women are very protective. I've only had one experience with an Italian woman whereas there were several experiences with Australian women. I think Italian women are very much willing to do anything to please. Daniela has been amazingly protective but not in a jealous

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sense. They look after you well – they look after you incredibly well! They smother you and that's why we call it seduce because it's not only a sexual thing, it's seduced in so many senses like, as I say, looked after and made to feel special.

Do you think Italian men approach romantic relationships the same as men in Australia?

CH: No, I think Italian men have grown up watching Italian television and Italian women on television are not treated how

What was the most unforgettable meal that you indulged in?

CH: Probably a meal I had in Sicily: the first time I had to eat horsemeat. I was reluctant at first to try the horsemeat and Antonio said to me: "Eat quickly, it was a racehorse." I don't know why, but I probably would never have eaten it. In Sicily, you cannot say no, particularly in terms of food. Sicilians were the most generous people I've ever met but they were also the most insistent. I had probably a 10-course meal and one of



Did you find yourself reconsidering your wardrobe when faced with the Italians' fondness for fashion?

CH: I didn't find myself considering it, I found Daniela considering it (laughs). I actually make the point in the book – it's a question of fitting in. After a couple of years in a place you have to buy new clothes, the old ones give out. You can't buy stobbies or thongs in Italy – they don't exist. You have to buy the stuff that's available and the stuff that's available is very high quality. Even the equivalent of the cheap chain shops in Italy is incredibly up-market. So I ended up wearing what my Australian mates considered fancy gear. And so when I came home, I was wearing this stuff around them and they were all kind of sniffing around me like dogs around a dustbin really.

Your festival experiences sounded intriguing. What were the memorable festivals you enjoyed?

CH: The food festivals – particularly in Puglia, which is the heel of the boot. Particularly there, during the month of August there's just one food festival after the next. Each town has its own festival. One town has the festival of the pizza, one has the festival of the home-made pasta, one has the watermelon festival, one has a snail festival – which is an

acquired taste.

But a dinner at a friend's house is also a food festival in Italy, because there's so much food – it's an excess. It's what I would consider a food festival compared to a bite to eat that I was used to before I lived in Italy. In Australia I ate to live and in Italy I lived to eat. Because every meal was a food festival. When I first moved to Italy I was actually photographing the food that Daniela put in front of me. She'd just knock up something she'd consider completely run-of-the-mill and I was so amazed by it, I was taking photographs of it.

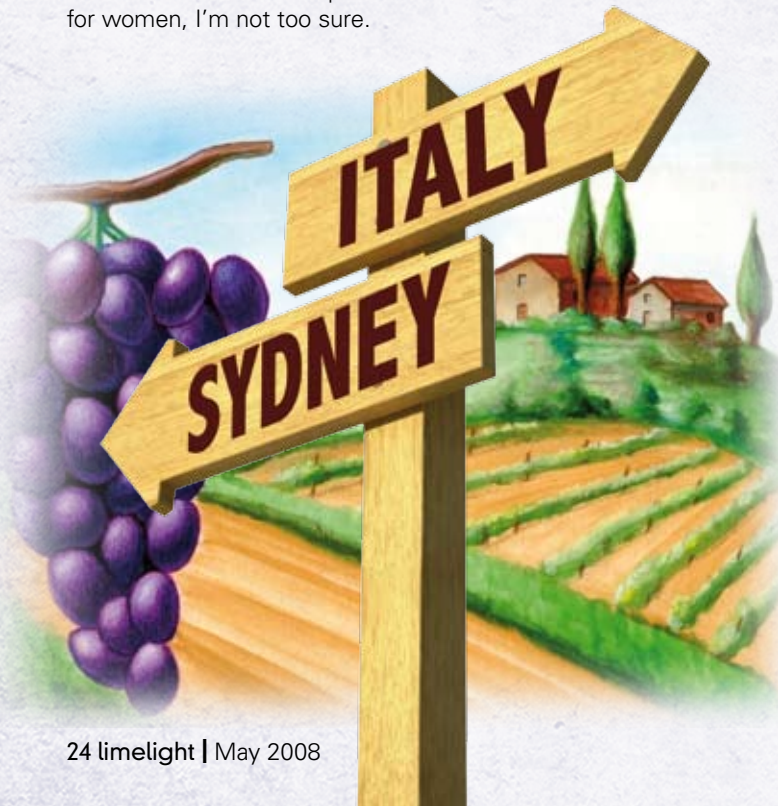
What do you think is most misunderstood about the Italian people?

CH: I think the Italian people have different priorities. They are in love with speaking their language, regardless of whether they get to their point or not. Their priorities are humanity first and satisfaction of the self first and working out the detail later. And that translates into every realm really: politics, economics – they'd rather think about themselves and hedonism. In Australia we really strive for perfection in lots of areas. I've been struck coming back to Sydney about the rules and regulations that I'm seeing everywhere. Signs saying "Don't do this, don't do that. Don't speak on your mobile phone, you'll get a demerit point." Italians have different priorities. They're more interested in the satisfaction of the self. Humanism came from Italy and that's why. ♦

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Australian society would consider terribly fairly – they're renowned bottom pinchers. There's a different standard in Italy: women are adored, rather than respected I think. I think Italian men idolise women – everybody says that food is the most important thing in Italy; I think women for men, are more important than food. Food comes second for Italian men. But whether that is a respect for women, I'm not too sure.

those courses was horsemeat. I found it actually incredibly tasty, slightly stringy but incredibly tasty. Also, this uncle of Daniela's had collected oysters from a cave by the beach that morning and they were just the most horrendous looking oysters I've ever seen – they looked incredibly sickly. But no was not an option, so that meal was probably the most memorable.



Head Over Heel: Seduced by a Southern Italian by Chris Harrison is out now through Murdoch Books, RRP \$29.95