



What Happens When You Leave Italy To Move Back To The US

Chiara Basso (February 27, 2019)



Living the Italian Dream: Part V. You made it: you realized your dream of living in Italy, but for different reasons you also have to move back to the US. Often this experience can become a reverse culture shock. Especially if you didn't move abroad alone but with your entire family. Here the stories of Michelle, who moved to Spello with a husband, three kids and two cats, and Maria, who relocated to Como with her family of four children. The youngest was just a few weeks old when she moved to Italy.

Michelle Damiani: moving with a husband, three kids and two cats

It took a long time for **Michelle Damiani**, author of a [memoir and two books](#) [2] about Italy, to find her dimension back in the US after one year in Italy. "In 2012, my husband and I moved to Italy with



our three children—then aged 5, 10, and 14—and two cats” she says “In the year that we lived in Spello, the children attended Italian public schools and the cats took turns getting lost on the rooftops.”

They had saved money for five years before moving. In Italy Michelle’s husband worked remotely as a self-employed graphic designer, while she wrote a blog that she later turned into a memoir, *Il Bel Centro*, about their year abroad and how it transformed them individually and as a family. “Travel changes us. Fitting back in our old routines is complicated in a way I never imagined. I was asked during an interview a year after our return, **‘How long did it take to reacclimatize?’ My answer was, ‘Any day now.’** When I opened my eyes on our first morning back in the United States, I wondered if I’d hallucinated our entire Italian year. Which shouldn't have been surprising. It's called reverse culture shock for a reason. Not reverse culture gradual acclimation. I just hadn't anticipated that the previous year would feel like it never happened.”

“Over the course of that first week, I shoved down my creeping panic at the blaring stimulation all around me—Five Guys felt like a circus and I was overwhelmed by the movie theater’s textured walls and multimedia menu. All the while, I vacillated between feeling like I was walking through a dream and feeling like my Spello life was a fantasy concocted by my fevered-for-Europe brain. It was unsettling, I felt empty.”

“For the most part, five years later, I have gotten used to being back. **It helped to return to Spello two years after our departure and feel so instantly at home.** Spello doesn’t seem as far away when I know I can slide back in. I also know that this Charlottesville phase is just that. A phase. We are currently planning our next adventure, an around-the-world trip heavily skewed towards Italy, slated for 2020.”

Maria Eleni Sophocles, from doctor to tennis instructor and back

Maria Eleni Sophocles’ “reacclimatization” in the US was hard because after four years in Italy her medical license had expired and she had “to start all over again.” **“It was also hard to getting to use a car again because in Como I was using just my bicycle or we were taking the kids to school by boat.** We were using the car only for long trips whereas in the US we use it every day” she says.

Originally from Pennsylvania, Maria lives now in Princeton, New Jersey, where life is very different from the one she had in Italy, where she moved in 2001 with her four kids to follow her husband’s job. “We chose lake Como because it is beautiful and my husband could easily commute to Milan from there. Unfortunately I couldn’t work because the Italian government didn't recognize my credential, so I couldn’t practice medicine. **So I reinvented myself. I was playing a lot of tennis and the owner of the club and I decided to organize tennis lessons and English lessons together for Italian children.** I also got a job working for the travel company Fodors and I wrote their Italy guide for 2004. They didn’t pay me much but it was a lot of fun to travel all over Italy evaluating restaurants, hotel, and agriturismo.”

Maria’s husband spoke a little of Italian from college while she didn’t speak any when they moved to Italy, but she could learn the language there without problems: “The Italian government organizes a wonderful program whereby if you had a residency card you could have free classes. I learned a lot of Italian there. At first, my kids went to an international school but then I realized that they were not



learning Italian very well, so I took them out and put them into a Montessori school where everything was in Italian.” With all the family able to speak Italian: **“We mixed very easily with Italians.”**

Overall, Maria found that living in Italy as an expat was very easy because it was easy to learn a language, Italians were very welcoming and very encouraging in terms of helping her to try to progress with language skills: “I didn’t really miss much from the US. Maybe, what I really missed was the creamy peanut butter and maple syrup!”

What she loved in particular in Italy was “the concept of Ferragosto whereby Italians take an entire month off and by having that they can really enjoy quality time with family and friends or travel. I think that in America we take one week vacation and I don’t think this is really the same in terms of getting to really relax and being together.”

She was also impressed by the healthcare: “We were given a credit card with a microchip and if we needed to go to a hospital we just handed the card at the checkin and our entire medical history was in the chip. Medical appointments were very easy to get and was very easy to choose a doctor. Our pediatrician did our visits at home. So wonderful and convenient for my daughter who was just three weeks old when we moved to Italy. I would encourage anybody to move if they get an opportunity. We came to love the Italian way of life and everything about it.”

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