



Language program participants stroll through the grounds of the Hotel Abbazia in Tuscany.

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Speaking Freely

Language-immersion travel offers distinct ways for native English speakers to experience Europe

BY RINA RAPUANO

When a friend called me from England on a dreary January day to propose that we meet in Italy that March to help Italians improve their conversational English, I didn't need much convincing. Who wouldn't jump at the chance to unplug for eight days and meet new people in a charming, ancient farmhouse in southern Italy?

I was excited to delve deeper into my father's native country; thrilled for the opportunity to eat and drink my way through Puglia, a region in the heel of Italy's geographical boot; and, of course, happy to experience a dose of adventure. (The fact that I would experience all of this while only needing to pay the price of transportation to Bari, Italy, and home again was an added bonus.) Despite these admittedly high expectations, the experience still managed to deliver so much more than I had hoped.

"A lot of people are very emotional coming out of it, and that's kind of surprised us," says Joe Lang, operations manager for Speak, the company that runs this English-immersion program. "It's very much about human interaction. It literally changes the way you see people

and the world."

The eight-day agenda kicks off with the native English speakers (aka, Anglos) meeting the Speak staff for an evening aperitif in a city near where the program will take place, which might be a former abbey in Tuscany, a farm in Puglia or a hotel built on the ruins of a castle in Piedmont. There's a welcome breakfast for both the Anglos and Italians the next morning, and then everyone boards a bus to the spectacular home-base location.

"There were always new spots to discover, and it was a very relaxing environment where >

the group felt very welcome, comfortable and extremely well looked-after,” says Jude Evans, a Londoner who works in the wine industry, recalling her stay at the Abbazia di Spineto in Tuscany. “The artworks in every room, and early-morning encounters with deer, were some personal highlights — and that’s before mentioning the amazing food that was served.”

For Anglos, it’s a pretty sweet deal. But free room, board and excursions do come with a trade-off: You’ll only have two group excursions off property, and much of your time will be spent talking one-on-one with Italians and participating in group activities — after all, the Italians are paying to improve their English. “It’s not work, but it’s an investment of their time,” Lang says of the Anglo side of things. “It’s an amazing experience, and everyone at the end appreciates it.”

In truth, some might find it frustrating that much of their time is accounted for, from breakfast through dinner, with a few hours each day to spend as they wish. But during the one-on-one conversations that last about an hour each, participants are free to do whatever they like — as long as they’re speaking English while doing it.

The experience allows those from different backgrounds, who might not have met otherwise, to form a distinct bond.

As the program progresses, conversations held over a cappuccino or while wandering through an olive grove naturally turn from the typical “where are you from?” and “what are your hobbies?” to deeper talks about life. It taps into that long-lost, magical feeling of the first week of college, offering a chance to connect with strangers in a way we don’t often do in our adult lives.

Lang paraphrases an Italian participant’s comment that sums it up well: “It’s the first time in my adult life that I really felt like me,” he recalls her saying. “The Speak

program sort of stripped away (the) shell around her in her everyday life. She wasn’t a mother, an employee — she was just free to be herself and interact with people.”

The experience allows those from different backgrounds, who might not have met otherwise, to form a distinct bond. For instance, the Italians hail from all over the country with careers that might include human resources managers, university employees and pediatric brain surgeons. You’ll also meet Anglos from around the world, such as South Africa, Cyprus and Hong Kong, in addition to the U.S. and Great Britain. Regardless of where you’re from, you’re all in the same boat once you disembark from the bus, and that unites the group.

“The program is a really big leveler,” observes Lang. “They may enter the program as an important lawyer, but when they get there and their English is under pressure and everyone is in the same position, people are just themselves.”

Anglo couples are welcome to apply, but because the company only runs about 10 programs per year with about 15 Anglos needed per session, it’s already tough to land a spot. “Hopefully, in the future we can accept more people,” says



Speak participants visit the Palazzo Pubblico, a palace in Siena, Tuscany.

Lang. “It’s not that we don’t want them. It’s just a supply-and-demand situation.”

For those interested in the experience, though, it’s worth the wait. As Lang points out, most Italians aren’t impressed with just visiting a small town in Tuscany, so Speak finds off-the-beaten-path attractions. During my visit, we spent a few hours in the nearby town of Ostuni, marveling at the famed whitewashed buildings in the old town; participating in a team scavenger hunt; quaffing aperitivi at a local bar; and eventually heading off to another town, Ceglie Messapica, for a wonderful meal at

Cibus. The restaurant, which is listed in the Michelin Guide, is known for its cheese cave and wine list — and I’ll never forget the truffled burrata appetizer that showed off the very best of what is perhaps Puglia’s most famous cheese.

We stayed at Masseria Montenapoleone, a gorgeous farmhouse-turned-inn, and breakfast was an unbelievable spread of freshly made tarts and pastries along with meat, cheese, fruit, yogurt and an espresso bar. The grounds were in full spring bloom, and spending my free time reading in a secluded nook under a warm sun was just the

kind of “me time” that this harried mom needed. Lunches and dinners were three-course affairs that highlighted the best of the region and the season. Local wines were poured in abundance.

Naturally, after bonding over meals, activities and conversations, Anglos quickly become invested in the success of their Italian counterparts, resulting in a sense of accomplishment and personal satisfaction.

“The group all made significant progress over a short period of time and, importantly, enjoyed doing so,” says Evans. “I felt proud of what they had all achieved.” ■



YEARNING FOR EUROPE

Speak has a waiting list for English-speaking participants, so you might not get accepted right away. If you have some flexibility on where you go — or you just can’t wait — try your luck with similar programs taking place around Europe:

► **Diverbo:** This company runs English-immersion programs in both Spain and Germany, as well as three-, four- and eight-day Spanish-immersion programs for English speakers aiming to improve their Spanish. diverbo.com

► **VaughanTown:** Sign up to speak English for six days in Spain; there’s also a special program for those 18–24 years old. grupovaughan.com

► **Estación Inglesa:** Running multi-day programs out of locations that include El Barco de Ávila and Biar in Spain, this company caters both to teens and adults. estacioninglesa.es

► **Angloville:** With locations that include Poland, Hungary, Romania, Czech Republic, Ireland, England and Malta, there’s more variety for these one- to eight-week stints, plus there’s an option of free TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) training. angloville.com