

I recently added “Teach my dog Italian” to my “Return to the States To-Do List.” Directly after “Eat large cheeseburger, French fries and vanilla milkshake,” and “Sign up for Pilates to shed layer of tortellini insulation and said cheeseburger,” encouraging my dog to be more like an Italian canine is my next priority. After three months in Florence I think we could all learn a little something from the Italians’ four-legged friends.

Across the city, the streets are coursing rivers of Italians, their casual confidence flowing faster than their whirring mopeds, their equally chic dogs trotting alongside them. Leashes seem unnecessary. These pets know the city like the backs of their paws, always exploring paths of their own making.

In my first weeks, I was happy to follow other Americans’ footprints, my tail tucked between my legs. But as weeks turned to months, I sniffed my way around the city and eventually shook off any tick of timidity.

I’ve decided to take it from the dogs: there’s something to their playful autonomy. It’s a big world to explore, and these *cani* have given me a new “leash” on life. Over the semester, I’ve compiled a list of lessons gained from Europe’s most stylish mutts.

1.) Even an old dog can learn new tricks: Desperate to alleviate the gruesome blisters created by my first days navigating Florence by foot, I considered my transportation options. A monthly bus pass required too large a percentage of my Italian shoe budget. Clinging to a gorgeous Italian boy on the back of a moped required a level of coolness I couldn’t dream of mustering. The solution was as clear as the little silver bell attached to the handlebar of my new (used) bicycle. Though I hadn’t ridden a bike since fourth grade, the first time I pedaled through the chaotic streets with the Italian wind whipping my face I knew my adventures were just beginning.

2.) Approach friendly strangers: My interactions with Italian locals have been entirely positive, despite pre-departure warnings of Europeans' anti-American sentiment. From the old woman at the sandwich shop who waits patiently as I trip over the Italian word for artichoke, to my eight-year-old host sister's dinnertime vocabulary lessons, I will forever be grateful to the Italian people who welcomed me with open arms.

3.) Take a bite: Embracing the Italian's passion for food and opening my mind to new tastes and experiences have been the easiest tricks of all. Allowing the world to stop while appreciating a fresh meal, surrounded by people you love and a glass of *vino* is a practice from which we could all benefit.

4.) Lap up the surroundings: While photos from weekends spent in all corners of Europe will fill more albums, it will be the afternoons spent people-watching along the Ponte Vecchio that will stick in my mind. I'll fondly recall hours I contemplated the veins in David's forearms and the Fridays reserved for gelato appreciation in the Piazza della Repubblica. By exploring Florence's nooks and crannies, and appreciating each cobblestone step, I feel transformed by a newfound sense of strength, maturity and independence.

Perhaps my dog isn't ready to take on the confident, cool characteristics of her Italian cousins. But hopefully I can pass along the wisdom I soaked up and, with a Milkbone as incentive, my dog will be able to "*siediti!*" in no time.

Burrowing nose-first into a completely foreign culture has given me the opportunity to see the world, and myself, with a fresh perspective. And that is the biggest treat of all.