

*Dear, President Lee and Rotarians.*

I have been in Italy a month now and I can say with confidence that every day I have been here I have said “wow” at least 3 times! I’m so shocked by how much I have experienced in just a month. However, as expected the first month has involved many “firsts” for me, many of which came with a shock. My first shocking moment arrived well over 30 hours after leaving a hot 40 degree Saturday in Sydney when I arrived in Milan airport where the temperature was a similar figure to number of words I understood from the Italian lady at the airport desk. However, the sight of my host Mum, Dad and host brother and his girlfriend waiting for me in the airport arrivals gate was enough to warm me back up. After much nodding and smiling we all piled into two cars and drove from the airport in Milan to the family home in Lecco, which was about a 40 minute drive. By this point in time I had said “wow” far too many times to count and it was lucky for me that a word like wow is somewhat universal. One of the most breath taking sights I experienced was when we were driving out of the misty grey outskirts of Milan to be met by the enormous snow capped pre-alps (which I am assured are not mountains by their standards). We arrived at home where I was warmly welcomed by the whole extended family and a mountain of food (by anyone’s standards).

### **Venice**

Within days of arriving in Lecco various generous people began to fill my schedule with dates to travel to every corner of Italy. To give you a rough idea of how quickly things piled on, by the second week it was arranged for me to go to Sicily, Rome once with my host family and another time with the Rotary exchange students, Florence, Bormio, Cremona and Venice. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of February I got on a train with the two other Rotary exchange students to go to Milan where we met other exchange students in the same Rotary district (2040) and then to Venice with two Rotarians. The Venice trip was, beyond a doubt, one of the most amazing things I’ve done here as the weekend we went to Venice the country was celebrating the holiday of Carnevale, which is the holiday before Lent. During Carnevale people dress up in elaborate costumes and go to the piazza to be part of the many parades in the city centre. In particular masks are worn during Carnevale and the most famous mask shops are found in Venice. The other exchange students and I had such a great time being part of the festival. On a side note, I don’t think I have ever taken more photos with absolute strangers in my life! For lunch we were taken to a little restaurant in a tiny side street where we all sat down for a lunch of red wine and “Spaghetti neri” which is a typical Venetian pasta made with squid ink. The spaghetti itself didn’t look particularly appetising however it tasted great and the funniest part of it all was our black lips and teeth after we had polished off 20 plates of spaghetti.

## **Bormio**

I have been fortunate enough to go to Bormio twice with my host family, which is a skiing town in the Italian Alps near the Swiss border. Although I have not yet been skiing I have experienced up-hill mountain walking/hiking, which was very scenic but very challenging. In the end the steep snowy incline was all worth it as I found out that we were walking up the mountain to a restaurant at the top. The view of the Alps and Bormio at the top was pretty incredible and the food was just as great.

The second trip to Bormio was much more relaxing. I went with my host mum and host brother to a hot springs spa in the mountains where we relaxed all day in the many saunas and spas out amongst the deep snow. It was amazing to be outside in a spa while it was snowing. The most incredible hot spring spa was one where, when you put your head under the water you can hear classical music as you look out into the mountains with the snow coming down around you.

## **La Scala**

Around a week ago I went with my school to Milan where we were lucky enough to see a rehearsal of the Philharmonic Orchestra of La Scala. La Scala is the most famous opera house in Milan. I and two other exchange students and our Italian host club counsellor were pretty pleased to find ourselves in a stall where we could see and hear perfectly the whole orchestra. The conductor was particularly interesting, as he would explain to the orchestra how to improve in Russian, Italian and English.

When I asked my host counsellor whether Pavarotti sang here often, she laughed and said. "Of course Pavarotti sang here, he was more at home here than anywhere else!"

## **Sport; Calcio (soccer/football), Pallacanestro (basketball)**

My host family is very involved in sport as most Italian families are. My first impression of sport in Italy is that endurance sports are very popular. Running, cycling, rowing, mountain hiking and snow hiking seem to be extremely popular. In fact, my host brother is training for a marathon in the Sahara later this year and my host mother, father and brother have run the New York Marathon and various others closer to Italy. Also very popular is basketball for boys, volleyball for girls and of course soccer (football, calcio), which takes precedence over most aspects of life. I am in the local basketball team, which is a lot of fun. However, interesting is that to train for basketball we play indoor soccer most of the time. Also an interesting difference is that basketball training starts at 9:30pm and finishes at 11:00pm which means a coffee before I leave for training.

I have been with my host Dad plenty of times now to watch my host brother play basketball and I've found it incredible at the coaches ability to yell at the referee, the opposition, their own players and, on the odd occasion, at the crowd. (It also seems that the mark of a good Italian basketball coach is how well he can vigorously wave his arms and hands around in the air and how frequently he can slap his forehead and shake his head.)

In short, sport in Italy is a complex matter.

### **School**

I've been attending school for the past 3 weeks now and it's definitely been very challenging. School in Italy is completely different to school in Australia. For example each school specialises in a particular area of study. For example, one of my host brothers goes to a school specialising in science while my other brother goes to a classics school where he studies subjects including, philosophy, Latin, ancient Greek and English literature. I go to a linguistic school which is very close to our home. The school is roughly 95% girls which also is a nice change from my all boys school Australia. School in Italy is 6 days a week, however, it finished around 1:30 every day so students can go home for lunch with the family. Although there is school on Saturday, in my opinion Italian students have a pretty good deal because their summer holiday is around 3 months long. At school I've chosen to study; Italian, German, Spanish, English literature, Art history, philosophy, Science and Physical Education. All in all school is a lot of fun and I'm really looking forward to going to Sicily with the archaeology class.

### **Milan**

I have not yet been around Milan with my host family but I did go for one day with two other exchange students. The other two exchange students who had been to Milan before showed me around, taking me to Il Duomo which is the enormous gothic cathedral in the centre of Milan. When I walked out of the train station and saw Il Duomo I was absolutely stunned at the sheer size of the building and then as we walked closer I was further amazed at how intricate the building was. This building was completely covered in religious sculptures and incredible gargoyles. Along with the shops and delicious food, in my opinion, this building is reason enough to come to Milan. The inside was just as amazing with more sculptures and enormous paintings, mosaics and frescos covering every wall and corner of the cathedral. After Il Duomo we did the ritualistic window-shopping walk through the streets of Milan. Although I wasn't so interested in the fashion and didn't exactly know all the names of these "large price tag" designers, I was stunned by the cars parked outside of the shops. The streets were dominated by Bentleys, Masaratis, Aston Martins, Ferraris, big Mercedes, Audis and BMWs and the odd Limousine.

### **Running with host family**

I thought it would be funny to add that I've been attempting to keep up with my host family on their weekend marathon training sessions. Lucky for me we've only run a quarter-marathon so far, which is a bit over 10 kms. My favourite part of the morning run however is the coffee and brioche at the café after. Also funny is that while my host Mum, Dad and I drive to the running site my host brother runs there, adding an extra 15kms both ways onto his morning run.

## **Oscar Pistorious**

Prior coming to Italy I had never heard of the South African, gold medal-winning paraolympian, Osar Pistorious however he is very famous in Italy and it seemed especially so in Lecco. A few weeks ago I went with my host brother and host cousin to listen to a talk by Oscar Pistorious and a panel of Italian sporting celebrities. Hearing about Oscar Pistorious experiences was fantastic however the really funny part was that there was a translator who was translating what Oscar was saying from English to Italian and unfortunately she wasn't translating any of the really funny jokes he was adding into his speech. So as a result my host cousin (who can understand English pretty fluently) and I were laughing at the jokes and everyone around us couldn't understand why we were laughing because the translator wasn't translating the jokes.

## **Food**

While some may think, that it is a difficult feat to sum up the events and experiences of one month in Italy in one word, I disagree. My first month in Italy has been (in a word) delicious! Food in Italy has been so great! Days when there might not be anything particularly exciting on I am at least always looking forward to my next meal. The pizza, pasta, risottos, soups and cold meats in Italy are an experience in itself. However, I think one of the most challenging things to become used to, is the eating times. In comparison to Australia, people in Italy do things a lot later in the day. For example, lunch everyday is around 2:00pm and dinner about 8:45/9:00pm. The biggest meal of the day is lunch followed by dinner and for breakfast it's common to have coffee (short black/espresso), a tea and a few biscuits or a brioche.

On the first morning I was asked if I would like some tea for breakfast. Pleased with myself that I understood what I was asked, I said, " Yes please". Then, I was asked what sort of tea I would like. Again I was so happy that I understood the question however, I couldn't remember how to say any another type except lemon and I wanted to continue my short conversation in Italian. So I said "limone per favore". The next morning I woke up and there was a big cup of lemon tea waiting for me. Every morning for the past month I've had a cup of lemon tea for breakfast and the funny thing is that at first I didn't particularly like lemon tea but now I love it.

All in all, food in Italy is fantastic and I'm excited to be going to one of my teacher's houses in the next week or so with the other exchange student to learn her pizza recipe.

The Rotary Club of Lecco meet on a monthly basis and so I haven't been to a meeting yet, however I was taken to a piano recital organised by Rotary where I met the President and a few Rotarians. My first Rotary meeting is coming up soon and I am eager to introduce myself to the club and so I will take the Caringbah Rotary banner to exchange.

Finally, thank you all again for giving me this great opportunity! I am having a fantastic time and if anyone has any questions about where I'm staying my email address is [benxouris@hotmail.com](mailto:benxouris@hotmail.com) and will do my best to answer them.