



Sam Houston State University
ARAMFO SUMMER FIELD EXPERIENCE IN ITALY: Summer 2017
Exploring Persephone's Island & the Birthplace of Western Civilization: An
Experience with Cultural Geography in Italy
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In Summer 2017 the Department of Geography and Geology offered a ARAMFO sponsored field-based course to a place that world travelers consider to be the one of the most fascinating destinations in the world: Italy, the birthplace of Western Civilization. Our travels included five days in Rome, a day-trip to Florence, as well as four days on the island of Sicily.



Known simply as the *Belpaese* ("Beautiful Country"), Italy proved to be one of the single greatest repositories of sensorial pleasures on Earth. Our experience there entailed an extraordinarily feast of heart-thumping, soul-stirring art, music, food and landscapes whose sensuality rivaled anywhere else that we've ever visited. In no other place we've experienced has art, history, food, drink and life intermingled so effortlessly. It is perhaps for these reasons that Italy is widely acknowledged as one of the world's best-loved travel destinations and why it is commonly referred to as the land of "*la dolce vita*" – meaning "the sweet life."

Including visits to the epicenter of the Roman Empire, the birthplace of the Renaissance, and cradles of European civilization, our experience literally reeked of cultural cachet. During our travels, we marveled as we stood in the presence of Michelangelo's *David*, the Sistine Chapel frescoes, Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*, and da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. As we explored Italy, we stood face-to-face with some of the world's most iconic images from its 2000-year history; the Colosseum of Ancient Rome, St. Peter's Basilica, the Temple of Juniper, and the Baroque exuberance of the Trevi Fountain. Our visit to Sicily, known as Persephone's Island and the eternal crossroad of the Mediterranean, exposed us to Phoenicians and Carthaginian ruins, Greek temples, a beautiful beach along the Tyrrhenian Sea, Arab domes and arches, Byzantine mosaics and Norman castles. Beyond the cultural riches Sicily had to offer, we also experienced a guided tour of Mount Etna, one of the most active volcanoes in the world. The island of Sicily's natural landscape, including that surrounding Mount Etna, truly represents one of Mother Nature's grandest masterpieces.



We quickly realized that Italy's physical diversity is matched by its equally diverse culinary culture. To be blunt, in Italy they add work and life to food and wine, as opposed to the other way around. For example, the Italian term for "pride of place" is *campanilismo*, but a more accurate word might be *formaggismo*; loyalty to the local cheese. In food and wine obsessed Italy, gastronomy is a major *raison d'être* and devouring regional specialties of both are essential requirements of any Italian sojourn. During our travels we learned and directly experienced how Italian culture incorporates locale fare not just simply as fuel for the body, but as nourishment for the body, mind and soul – and as critical expressions of place.



As a geographers who loves to explore the world, we highly recommend the ARAMFO trip to Italy. We will certainly be using their services again to assist in organizing future field courses, to Italy and other destinations.

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