

Pursuing Happiness in Italy

BY DAVID VOGLER

Are Italians happier than Americans? More than two centuries after the U.S. Declaration of Independence guaranteed the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, many Americans go to Italy pursuing happiness. There are other reasons for sure—the art and architecture, the food, the hospitality of the people, the natural beauty and tangible history. But most would agree with Stendhal’s observation that in Italy, “the art of life is more favorable to happiness” than in other lands.

Alexis de Tocqueville, a French contemporary of Stendhal, found the opposite to be true in the United States. He said in *Democracy in America* that even though Americans lived in conditions “the happiest to be found in the world,” they seemed “serious, and almost sad even in their pleasures.” He contrasted the “feverish ardor” with which Americans pursued prosperity with the serenity and jovial spirits he had seen in less prosperous European towns. Five years before his journey to the United States, Tocqueville had spent several months traveling in Italy.

Frances Mayes’ 1996 book, *Under the Tuscan Sun* (over 1 million copies sold), and her two more recent books on Italian life illustrate the continuing allure of Italy to Americans. “How to quantify happiness?” Mayes asks at the beginning of *Bella Tuscany: The Sweet Life in Italy*. And it is indeed happiness—that “divine and banal word”—that is the leitmotif of the book. The pursuit of *la dolce vita* is worth the effort, she declares, because “Italian life is still sweet.”

But how sweet does life in Italy seem to Italians? Do the pleasures of daily life make their hearts sing as they do for visitors from abroad? Some recent attempts to answer that question have produced mixed results. For example, a poll published at the end of last year in the Italian psychology magazine *Risa psicosomatica* reported that a majority of Italians polled said they felt lost or insecure, while only one in ten described themselves as happy. About one-third of the respondents said they were depressed or wished for a change in their life. The results of a poll released in April 2002 paint a different picture; nearly one-half of those polled said they were happy and another third said they were moderately happy. Fewer than one-fifth of those polled described themselves as unhappy.

Social scientists have been studying happiness in nations for more than 30 years. How do Italians compare with others in these national surveys of happiness? Not as well as books extolling *la dolce vita* would suggest. Two polls from the 1990s show that Italy ranked 26 among 43

nations in happiness (the United States ranked 11) and 11 among 29 nations in life satisfaction (the United States ranked 6). The happiest nations, according to these surveys, are Denmark, Ireland, Iceland and the Netherlands.

Does this mean that Americans in Italy have missed the mark? Should their pursuit of happiness be directed more to the north? Not necessarily. Research in this area seeks to answer two distinct questions: Are some societies happier than others? and Who are the happiest people? Comparative studies between nations (the first question) and of individuals within nations (the second) suggest some reasons why the art of life in Italy may indeed be more favorable to happiness than in other lands.

The first is the relative wealth of the country. The happiest nations are also those where the per capita income is above a certain minimum level. Second, wealthy nations also share a commitment to human rights, freedom and equality—all of which are linked with happiness. Third, selective well-being is generally higher in individualistic societies than in collectivist societies, where the community is more important than the individual. And fourth, countries with cultural norms that are supportive of expressing positive emotions report higher levels of happiness.

What matters most in determining individual happiness, these studies show, happen to be some of the distinctive characteristics of Italian society and culture today: the social supports of family and a broad network of friends; a temperament of optimism, self-esteem and extroversion; and an ability to adapt to difficult or changing situations. Italy is a country in which the number of mobile phone lines (used primarily to keep in touch with family and friends) will outnumber people by nearly three million in three years. Where the values of *la bella figura* and *arrangiarsi* still hold sway. Where time is an enduring historical value shared by the community rather than a raw material for individual use. It is also a country where what really counts are those things that surveys do not contemplate. As sociologist Domenico De Masi pointed out in an editorial last year, quality-of-

life surveys overlook the happiness and sense of well-being one gets from walking among the “churches by Borromini, buildings by Michelangelo and fountains by Bernini.”

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