

A MONTH OF

# ITALY

REDISCOVERING THE ART OF VACATION

“Simply a pleasure to read...this book is a charming vacation itself!”

– Stephen Palmer, *New York Times*  
Best-Selling Author of *Uncommon Sense: A Common Citizen's Guide to Rebuilding America*

NEW YORK TIMES, WALL STREET JOURNAL, AND USA TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

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## INTRODUCTION

*“I know of your dedication to the work of God,” said Martin Bucer. “It is unrivaled. But human nature has that weakness by which it cannot always concentrate on grave and serious matters. There must also be provision made for certain relaxations from work and useful studies and a certain recreation of the strength both of the spirit and of the body in play and games.”*

– Spoken to John Calvin in *The Betrayal* by Douglas Bond

“Where are you from?” the man at the wine shop asked in broken English. He was impeccably dressed, like the manicured gardens of the old castle in which he worked, itself the centerpiece of seven thousand acres of prim vineyards.

“Florida, in the United States,” I replied, looking past him through the window at the marvelous landscape beyond.

“Where are you staying?” he asked.

“Near Cortona.”

“Oh, so beautiful. How long are you here?” he asked.

“A month.”

At this answer, he raised his eyebrows. “Unusual for an American,” he said, packing our *Salsa Etrusca* into a gift sack as though it were fine jewelry. “Usually just a week,” he continued. Then he shrugged his shoulders before continuing, “or maybe two,” he said apologetically with a wave of his hand.

From behind me in line chimed someone from California, “Yeah, we’re only here for one week, and it’s not enough.”

Americans, I am beginning to feel, have lost the art of vacationing. For a land known internationally for its prosperity and luxury, this is strange. Apparently time to enjoy the fruits of our labor is not as important to us as the luxuries we are accused of worshipping. I read recently that the United States is near the bottom of the list of countries when it comes to the amount of vacation time taken by the average person in a year. The statistics on annual average hours worked are similar. Even worse is the picture that emerges when cell phone statistics and staying in touch with work through the Internet are considered. It seems that in the land of prosperity, we are working harder at it than ever. In one gut-wrenching statistic, it was estimated that American fathers spend an average of thirty-seven seconds per day in meaningful contact with their children. Modern telecommunication has put us so in touch with each other that perhaps we’ve lost touch with ourselves. We can be interrupted at any second by anyone for any reason. The American dream has begun to look like an American spiral

of overwork and high stress.

It hasn't always been this way. Teddy Roosevelt, for instance, was famous for his vacations. He took African safaris, steamboat trips, and long sojourns to his ranch in the Wild West. Winston Churchill made a habit of secluding himself, even at the highest moments of his intense responsibilities, to paint landscapes. Going all the way back to ancient times, honeymoons among the wealthy were often months long, and sometimes as long as a year or two. Aristocrats from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries used to embark on something called a Grand Tour: a year or two trek through Europe's main attractions. This was both an educational trip and a coming-of-age ritual. Nor were these privileges reserved merely for the well-to-do. The Count of Orlando in 1220 donated a forest called La Verna to St. Francis of Assisi, a man we'll meet later in these pages, for his annual retreat. This was necessary because, according to author Robert Clark, "Francis needed to be alone merely to pray, to feel himself in the company of Lady Poverty, to become once more a holy fool, God's juggler, his clown." In later years Vasari, the not-so-great artist but great chronicler of those who were, would take annual retreats with the monks at Camaldoli. This single month off each year was the only punctuation to a frenzied, busy life. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, important ambassadors for the infant United States, took a several month romp through Europe to tour its many scenic gardens. And in the gospels, we see Jesus sequester Himself from the crowds to be alone in prayer or in private with his closest disciples. In the creation account, we are told that God Himself rested on the seventh day, thereby demonstrating what we would need ourselves.

So it seems the concept of a little downtime to intentionally bolster the uptime has long been with us. We are not machines. Just as we must sleep for a period each day, so must we also take a little time out between intense periods of work.

Don't get me wrong. I've been a proponent of hard work and achievement since I was old enough to understand the concepts. I deplore laziness and the wasting of one's gifts and blessings. I have often said our privileges are not merely for our pleasure but rather for our purpose. A life of ease is a wasted life. It is probably significant that God rested on the seventh day, *after* doing the work.

With these disclaimers, then, I think it might be time to consider getting reacquainted with the concept of going slow for a period in order to go fast. If one never takes the time to sharpen the saw, as Stephen Covey has termed it, then the cutting becomes more burdensome and less effective at the same time. This, in fact, is one of the inspirations for this book. I feel strongly the need to demonstrate that an effective vacation will not only provide nice time off, great photos, and some lasting memories, but when done correctly can more importantly be

restorative and an overall enhancement to the quality and productivity of life. A proper holiday, as the Europeans call it, can be an invaluable source of personal growth and life expansion, and very well should be. Sometimes this may even mean getting away from ourselves as much as anything else. Joy Sterling, CEO of Iron Horse Vineyards, said this about her annual vacation with her husband: “We love to be in a completely different environment. . . . Our main desire is to take a break from talking about ourselves.”

Usually, when I begin expressing thoughts about extended vacations or sabbaticals, I have no trouble finding people who agree with the overall concept. Heads nod and affirmations flow from all around. Then the *yes, buts* start. “Yes, but I can’t get the time off work.” “Yes, but I can’t afford it.” “Yes, but you don’t understand the problems I’m facing right now.” And concepts like sharpening the saw get relegated to the “someday” category where they die from neglect.

The other reaction I get is disapproval. In some quarters, it seems we’ve elevated *workaholicism* to a badge of courage. If one isn’t running full speed all the time, or at least creating that impression, one’s commitment and dedication is called into question. Or, there is a belief that in the competitive upward climb, taking a restorative break will be too costly in the race of life—heaven forbid someone could pass you! But even the fastest racecars still come in for a pit stop in an orderly, well-timed, and calculated fashion. Without such stops, the cars and their drivers, no matter how committed, would not finish the race. And so it is with vacations. Properly engineered breaks can be the difference between finishing or crashing into the wall or, less dramatically, racing well or limping along, belching smoke.

I have long been convinced that the best way to *tell* someone something is to *show* them. The most effective way to help you understand the need for a restorative break in your life is to give you a colorful example of one to which you can relate. And the best way to build the desire necessary to empower you to clear whatever obstacles might be holding you back is to appeal to something deeper than logic. Simply saying “you need to do it” is no more effective than your mother telling you to eat your vegetables.

Therefore, this book is a travel narrative with a twist—its purpose is to get you to launch out on your *own* adventure, *despite* the obstacles and the thousands of reasons you could find *not* to go. In order to accomplish this, this book will empower you by building your dream to do so. Carl Sandburg said, “Nothing happens without first a dream,” and this applies to vacations, as well. To live it, you’ve first got to conceive it; you’ve got to dream it.

Dreams are important in life. They can propel us to heights of great accomplishment and give direction to wayward souls. They can also be a ton of fun. When it comes to dreams and fun—and I am by no means alone in this opin-

ion—no place can pack such a wallop in both categories as Italy. Long sought as a favored destination since before the days of the aristocratic Grand Tours, Italy has more charms than an island of Sirens calling saucily to Odysseus. It can be even more seductive than its wonderful coastline, more intoxicating than its splendid panoramic views, and more inviting than its sunny piazzas. It is the land of the Caesars and the Etruscans, the birthplace of the Renaissance, and it houses a huge chunk of the world's art. It is also the land of food, some of the most famous and succulent in the world. It was the Italians, after all, who taught the French how to cook. Italy is also a beautiful topographical piece of wonder all by itself, with mountains and forests and rugged coastline and sweeping valleys and beautiful lakes. And let's not forget sports cars, designer clothes, music, opera, poetry, law, leather goods, silk, olives, olive woods, porcini, truffles, and a hundred other things that either had their birth, were radically propelled forward, or found their highest point of development in Italy.

Most books about Italy carry the enormous risk of making you sick, however. One reason for this is that they are written in such flowery, dreamy prose one feels as if he's reading Dante describing *Paradiso*. "The elegant fauna shimmered in the bright sun as I wondered about the beauty that had descended on this place like a velvet blanket put down by the downy fingers of the angels themselves," or "Italy arrests your senses in such a way as to transport you to another planet; one you have never seen nor visited but know immediately in an intimate way, as an old friend, fully authentic and entirely itself."

Please.

Which leads to the other reason books about Italy have the ability to put one's stomach in knots faster than the airplane food served on the flight over there: one can't help thinking the whole time the author is rubbing it in the reader's face. "Ha, ha, I'm the lucky one actually living over here, so allow me to tell you all about what I'm enjoying and you're missing and will never, ever, ever be able to do. Moo ha ha ha!"

Here's the normal plot. Author finds self at a crossroads in life. Deep ponderings and meaning-of-life questions ensue. Suddenly, abroad and wandering, author realizes a little stone building perched on a hill is the exact sort of fixer-upper for which his inner soul has been longing. Little songbirds land on his shoulders, and flower pedals float gingerly onto his path as he crafts his new home into something to make Martha Stewart envious. And of course, he lives happily ever after, sipping wine and gorging himself on pasta.

Let's face it. This isn't the real world for most of us mere mortals. We're lucky if we get to see Italy in a hurried gaze from the deck of a cruise ship or, more likely, painted on the wall of a greasy spoon downtown called Mario's. Buying an Italian villa, learning the language, and settling down to a life of rural

serenity is not going to appear on the menu of the average person any time soon. Most of us have pesky little things like jobs, kids, bills, goldfish, and in-laws, in no particular order of peskiness.

What if, however, someone were to “do Italy” in a more reasonable way? What if a crafty author came along and showed how almost anyone could drink from the cup of “The Italian Experience” without first having to chuck one’s entire life into the Tiber River?

Well, that would certainly be nice. But while we are all waiting for such a thing, perhaps this little book will suffice. It represents the experience of a normal family of six who somehow made their way into the *bel paese* (beautiful country) without leaving their former lives behind, going bankrupt, buying an abandoned monastery, falling in love with a local Fabio, or even figuring out what people were saying most of the time. And even without any of that, we had the time of our lives.

What follows is a travel narrative that opens doors for others to follow. While not everyone can become an expat living off royalties, almost anyone *can* take a trip like that described in these pages. After all, it’s just one month. Nothing can be that expensive in thirty days, and almost anyone can figure out, sooner or later, how to finagle that much time out of his or her normal life in order to drink from the cup of a place so intoxicating even normal people start thinking like expats.

So come along with us.

As we live out our adventure in these pages, we will continually invite you to begin *yours*. Herein, we provide helpful tips, sarcastic remarks, and honest advice. (It’s up to the reader to decipher which is which.) As our journey unfolds, I am certain you will come to two conclusions: first, you will definitely want to take a trip of your own and, second, you will definitely *not* want to do so with us!

Read along and rediscover the lost art of vacation through our radical sabbatical, so that you can begin planning your own. As we convince you that you should, you’ll start knowing that you can.

You *know* you want to.

Even if only once.

