

Allowance
John Hacking

I spent my third Italian weekend in Venice. When my girlfriend and I first arrived on the island, we took in our initial sights of the city. Then, we immediately decided to make our way to the bed and breakfast at which we were going to stay. I pulled out my phone, opened the Google Maps application, and searched the address of the hotel. We began making our way to the hotel, guided by the phone. I spent the majority of the walk looking down at the words and maps on the small screen rather than looking at the beauty that is Venice. I was looking at the next turn to make rather than the canals, bridges, alleyways, and piazzas that were barely in my periphery.

After we had checked into where we were staying the evening, it approached dinner time. I decided that I had stared at my phone long enough, always planning out the next step. Rather, that night, I decided to leave my phone in our room. Instead of leaving the bed and breakfast with a specific plan and looking up directions, we would hope to stumble into a restaurant. I did not want to be dependent on my phone anymore. I only wanted to be dependent on my eyes, ears, and legs. We had no idea where we were going, but we did not care, and there was a beauty in that. Eventually we found a small trattoria far from San Marco, and approached the first server we could find. He was a small, very flamboyant man named Sergio, and you could tell immediately that he loved people. He seated us, gave his best suggestions as to wine and food, and gave us time to think. The trattoria was small, cramped, and loud. He suggested a cuttlefish pasta dish. I decided to take his suggestion and ordered the dish. When it came out, to be completely honest, I immediately regretted my decision, as the sauce was completely black, unlike any I had eaten before. However, after my first bite, I was incredibly thankful for his suggestion. It was one of the best pasta dishes I have had in all of Italy.

After we finished our meals, Sergio came over to our table and asked if we would like dessert, and as we ate the tiramisu that we ordered, Sergio sat with us and we practiced our Italian as he practiced his English. It was a small moment, but incredibly meaningful. He told us his story of growing up in Maestra, and going to work at the restaurant which his family had owned for years. He asked us where we were from, and as I was speaking about Philadelphia, my hometown, I noticed an American couple at the table next to us, looking at their phones rather than each other, and it reminded me of earlier that day. By choosing to look at Facebook, Twitter, and Google Maps, we choose to look at names on a screen rather than looking into the eyes of the person in front of us. We choose to see the pictures from other people rather than looking at the pictures in front of our faces. When we left the restaurant, both my girlfriend and I gave Sergio the standard Italian double cheek kiss, which was admittedly the first time I'd ever kissed a man before in any capacity, other than my father. We strolled back to our bed and breakfast along the winding canals, looking at the reflections on the water, and just being thankful to be in that moment.

That one day, our first day in Venice, was the most important of my time abroad, not because of what I did, but because of what that day taught me. Italy is not a place of destinations. It is not a place of directions or addresses. Italy is a place of looking up. It is a place of beautiful ceilings, piazzas, and people, if only one remembers to look at them, rather than their pictures and names on a digitized screen. Italy is a place of incredible food, no matter the look (don't get me started on Pâté). It is a proud country of proud people who are much more than just names and pictures. They are stories, experiences, and individuals who have so much to teach if only one is willing to listen. It is a country in which the small, cramped, and loud places are the best, most authentic places in the world. Italy is the one country in the world which gets more and more beautiful, if only one allows themselves to get lost.