

Students in Piazza

Alfredo Valentini (October 23, 2008)



IACE's Summer Program has partnered with Progetto Scuole in organizing a contest among American students of Italian. The students wrote articles about the "Italian Piazza". The winners were awarded with a trip to Italy and had a 'real' taste of its piazzas.

Since the summer of 2000, I have had the privilege of accompanying well over 100 [IACE](#) [2] scholarship winners to various places in Italy. This year the program split its base with a week in Florence, followed by another week in [Lignano](#) [3] (a resort near Venice). The group had the assignment to reflect on the piazza as a part of Italian life.

In Italian history, piazzas grew out of the necessity for space for large public gatherings, not unlike the Roman concept of the forum. In our little corner of Florence at the Istituto Maschile Antoniano, each evening the terrace in front of the villa which housed us became a piazza in almost every sense. IACE students represented the millions of tourists filling the monumental squares of Italy. The other residents, a real microcosm of what Italy has become: native Italians, foreign-born nationals, illegal aliens, and some who were using Italian soil as a springboard to another place where they could establish roots and a new, successful life. At first, the American students were wary of the residents but through the sports of soccer, volleyball and hide and seek, barriers crumbled and real communication took place. Eventually, social interaction, political discussions, flirting, and recreation



took place upon this stage.

IACE students learned how four 16-year-old boys had left what remained of their families in war-torn Kosovo to try to find work. They met a 15-year-old boy who was taken off an illegal Egyptian fishing boat. Americans learned that although the residents liked them, they did not always have a favorable opinion of the decisions and policies of the American government in their homelands. Political differences aside, everyone got along beautifully.

The students saw Piazza della Signoria in Florence and its wonderful art. They noted that it was a political square and the art was chosen to represent the strength and ideals of the city-state. Cosimo de' Medici is portrayed in an equestrian statue like a Roman emperor. Judith cuts off Holofernes's head to save her people. David is sizing up his enemy. Hercules defeats his enemies Cacus and Nesus. Perseus holds up Medusa's bloody head. It was cool!

IACE students saw many of the "Vu comprà," ["Wanna Buy?"] or African and Asian street vendors who sell handcrafts and other merchandise on blankets spread on the piazza's pavement. They asked why there was a ruckus between a female vendor and another one on Ponte Vecchio. They hadn't seen that the former had been chased away by a police officer from the original place where she had set up and she was now on someone else's turf. Unfortunately, the students learned a few choice words that day that are better left unsaid!

A realization was being reinforced and confirmed through their observations of the Italian piazzas: Italy has become a nation of immigrants like the US. Most of the IACE students had come to Italy expecting to find a country "locked into" a particular cultural reference; they now realized that the face of Italy is evolving as the world becomes a global society.

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