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Mysteries Set in Italy (Secondo)**

Intrigued by Italy by **Gayle Wigglesworth** (Houston, Texas)

When I talk to people about my books and my writing, frequently I'm asked if I start with the plot or the location. Well with my third Claire Gulliver mystery I have to admit I had the plot in my head for a long time and when I eventually got around to writing it I had to find the right place for the setting. And because my husband and I had such a wonderful time in Northern Italy it didn't seem much of a stretch to decide to place the action there.

I asked my husband why we even decided to go to Italy. We were each apprehensive about it although unwilling to admit it to the other. We were warned about the crime, the pickpockets, the traffic and the expense. Someone told us not to even think about driving, recounting a story of a woman who was so traumatized, she abandoned her car in the middle of the street and fled rather than continue to struggle through the traffic.

I'm not sure if people just didn't want others to know how wonderful Italy is as a travel destination or if people really had such awful experiences they felt obligated to alert others of the danger.

Now, looking back, I don't even know what made us think we needed to go to Italy that first time unless it was because of the explosion of trendy Italian restaurants, with their brick pizza ovens, their wonderful light bread with crunchy crusts to dip in olive oil, and their delightful menu selections so different from the spaghetti and meatballs we were so familiar with. We fell in love with the ambiance, the colorful Italian pottery, the copper pans and the rustic country look they used to decorate. We loved the time we spent in these restaurants and perhaps that led to the need to go and experience the real Italy ourselves.

So even though we were experienced travelers, or perhaps because we were, we began to prepare. We went to travel lectures, watched TV travel shows, read books and even hired a trip planner to help us determine the best use of our time. We talked to friends who had been and compared attractions in the various cities we intended to visit. We thought we were clever by playing language tapes in both our cars for three months prior to leaving so our ears would become familiar with the sounds. You would have thought we were preparing for a visit to the most remote part of the planet.

When we landed in Milan, a huge city in the North, we timidly ventured out with all the warnings we had heard clamoring in our brains, careful to skirt crowds lest we fall victim to clever hands. We climbed the Duomo, visited La Scala, gazed in awe in the expensive shop windows and were shocked by the condition of the Last Supper painted on the convent wall. We felt foreign, and in spite of our preparation, we understood nothing of the language around us. We were both uneasy, wondering if we had made a wise choice in visiting Italy.

But then we boarded the train for Genoa and the transfer to La Spezia, and subsequently the little "Tooterville Trolley"-like train to the Cinque Terre. That half-day of travel transported us from all our concerns and worries to the Italy of

our dreams.

When we arrived in the village of Vernazza, perched on the cliffs at the edge of the sea, it was hard to accept that this little village was even more beautiful than the pictures we had seen. After three days of sitting in the piazza drinking coffee, walking the trails between the five little villages, sipping wine in the cantinas in the evenings with the locals, and nodding cordially at the other villagers and day-trippers, we were transformed. We were ready for rest of our vacation.

And it only got better. We had chosen to stay in the North of Italy, wisely realizing that 24 days was not enough to see all of Italy and still enjoy ourselves. We also decided to use the train whenever possible and so only rented a car for about four days to visit some of the out-of-the-way hill towns. On one of the trains we talked to a couple who were staying in Italy for several months and they chose to rent an apartment in one of the smaller towns, I believe Perugia, and then take small day or over-night trips to see the country. That seems the ideal way to do it and the next time I go back I'd like to do that.

In all our time in Italy, despite all the warnings and stories I've heard, the worse thing that happened to us was a pigeon dumping on my husband's head in Florence. To hear him talk it was on a par with getting mugged but in reality it was a minor problem.

We loved watching people and much of what we saw is recounted in my third Claire Gulliver Mystery, *Intrigue in Italics*. We noticed an unusually high number of arms encased in plaster throughout the trip. At first we just noticed; then we started asking why. We discussed whether it was a result of the shower spigots being in the middle of the bathroom floors in many of the hotels we stayed at, making the tile floors dangerously slippery. Or was it the feckless way people moved about the towns on bicycles, moped and motorcycles, three or four on a vehicle, zipping in and out? Spills or collisions could be responsible for many of the broken arms. Or were they simply a result of the notorious Mafia twisting a few arms?

We noticed how smartly the young people dressed and raised our eyebrows at the prices we saw on clothes in the shops. How did they do it, we wondered? We found the answer to that when we visited one of the weekly markets in a small town and found you could buy anything at a reasonable price. The shops were obviously for the tourists, who had more money than sense.

And we loved how families strolled in the evenings, sitting in the piazzas or on the shore of the lake with gelato (ice cream). We thought it was much too late for the children to be up but apparently not. The Italians don't seem to start their day as early as we do.

This trip to Italy was brightly polished gem, shining brightly out from our many travel experiences. We remember it with smiles on our faces. When it was time to go home we found ourselves reluctant. We would have liked to stay another week, another month, perhaps a year or so. So of course, I loved remembering it all again as I wrote *Intrigue in Italics*. I hope I was able to convey the delight of that country to my readers so they will feel, as I did, it was almost as good as being there.

Gayle Wigglesworth, writes adult cozy mysteries challenging for adults of any age. Her heroine, Claire Gulliver, librarian-turned-travel-bookstore-owner is a nice person who somehow, while traveling, becomes embroiled in situations that are not nice; in fact, sometimes these situations are downright terrifying. *Tea is for Terror*, 2004, *Washington Weirdos*~ 2005, and *Intrigue in Italics*, which is due out jfl 2006, are published by Koenisha Publishers.

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