



HOW THE WORLD HAS CHANGED

In 2019, my husband and I walked the cobbled streets of Rome and Florence, transfixed by the ancient beauty and deep-rooted culture. We meandered through the shops and restaurants in the city, inhaling the warm notes of coffee and pastries in the morning and hot pizza and pasta in the evenings. It was everything you read in books and saw in movies: the little old men in their suits and hats standing outside of their shops with their cigarettes beckoning you to come in to shop their wares, tourists in backpacks and cameras following behind a local guide holding a flag to introduce them to another amazing treasure the city holds. Italy is the birthplace to many who have changed history, Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Machiavelli, and Florence was the birthplace of the Renaissance. It was easy to get swept up in the grandeur of it all and left us wanting more and yearning to go back.

Three years later, we did just that, and the world it seems to have completely changed and turned upside down. Italy was once the world's oculus to the ravaging destruction of the Covid-19 virus. While tucked away in our homes we saw the immense pressure and toll that the pandemic took on this country's economy, medical system, and people. The scars of the pandemic are still very apparent in the city of Rome with



advertised sidewalk rapid tests for €15, and KN95 masks stocked next to trinkets and leather goods. We were required to present either the Super Green Pass (Italy's digital vaccination record) or CDC vaccination cards to go inside of any restaurant or museum.

We had the opportunity to meet and chat with Gloria, a local guide that over lunch in the hills of Tuscany, and she opened up about what she experienced during the past 3 years. Gloria is a

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tour guide and a Sommelier, so 100% of her income comes from tourists and tips in what was to be a record travel year ahead of the pandemic. She found herself with a brand-new baby, searching for toilet paper and odd outages like canola oil, just like us.

With that storm weathered, she finds herself on the brink of another disaster: the rising costs on just about everything, and the threat of global warfare that will keep the pent-up demand for tourists further and further away. And yet, she is hopeful because to think of any other outcome for her and her family, in her words, "is not an option."

When we travelled to Europe this March, news outlets swirled with the threat of nuclear retaliation by the Russian military, which only added to the heightened sense of uncertainty. We met another merchant, Michelangelo, while shopping in Florence who was a wonderful host not only into his shop, but into his insight into the crisis in Ukraine. His biggest concern is the cost to feed his family. Much of the raw grain that is used for the famous sauce laden noodles of Italy comes from the breadbasket of Ukraine. For so long, the government of Italy has found it to be cheaper to import from there than invest in farming and harvesting energy from their own country. The natural gas that keeps his house warm is from Russia, and a replacement source for that is months, if not years, away from being readily available. He admitted he watches the news a bit more these days but is hopeful that some resolution will be made – because just like Gloria said, "it just has to". Much of Europe sits back speechless as they wait to see what all happens in this senseless invasion. In Italy, on the side of Cathedral, you see a Co-Op calling for the donations. In Italian under HELP, it reads "Non abblamo piu parole" - We are speechless. Throughout the country you see strong support of Ukraine and the denunciation of any act of war or aggression. Everything from Graffiti tags to Ukrainian flags alongside the Italian flag and calls for refugee help. But just like Gloria and Michelangelo hold on to hope that things have to get better, I hope so too.



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