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Untapped Italy

Recently, I visited Italy for the first time, the birthplace of my parents. My passion for business, tends to lead me to look at most things in a business context. And let's face it, a country is a business. And so, poor Italy was about to cop my take on how it all works, what's right, what's wrong, etc. Yes, yes, I know, how can I possibly judge a country over 5 weeks, especially as a tourist sunning himself on the beautiful beaches of Positano, Riomaggiore and sunny Sicily...well guess what, I'm going to give it a go. I'm sure there are many of you out there who know Italy better than I do and I would love to get your thoughts on this beautiful country.

Potential: Brand "Italian" is massive. Look at the relatively underdeveloped areas of Sicily, Calabria, the southern east and west coastlines, the climate and of course its vast history and on-going tourism potential. It has a large manufacturing base, global brands across a number of industries. Italians are inventive, polite and very service driven. "Prego" (your welcome) or "grazie a voi" (thanks to you) are responses you'll hear at just about every encounter – be it an enquiry, window shopping or an actual purchase. Small gestures, but nonetheless, delivered genuinely, they are quite powerful. In relative terms, the cost of living seems to be on the low side compared to Australia. There is a zest for life and companionship, constantly on display in cafes, sidewalks, and piazzas, at all hours, weekday or weekend – of course, the climate helps. And it yet, it seems to be constantly swimming in a pool of massive debt. I read a report recently which stated it had only grown 4.6%, total, since it joined the Eurozone 16 years ago.

Corruption: A dirty word and no one wants to talk about it. And yes, a lot of countries and organisations have it, but it seems poor old Italy has it in truckloads and has had it for a very long time. To say it is now part of the fabric of society is maybe stretching it too far and would be admitting defeat but it is awfully close to the truth. Everyone points the finger in this direction but yet it seems there is very little political courage to do anything about it. True leadership is not only missing, the sad part is that very few Italians believes it's ever possible.

Complacency: Unfortunately, you can understand how this trait sets in and it's a travesty. There are seat belt rules, but very few comply. In fact, patiently waiting at the edge of a pedestrian crossing for a break in the traffic, a quick survey revealed only 30% were wearing seat belts. In fact, at first I was admonished by my host for my automatic reaction to fasten my seat belt. "Don't worry about the belt, don't waste your time, there is very little enforcement" was the reason given. And yes, by the 2nd week my automatic reaction of grabbing the seatbelt had waned to a faint memory. There is a lot to be said about the Australian government sponsored health campaigns such as "Click-Clack Front & Back", "Quit Smoking" and "Skin Cancer"...they may be expensive, intrusive and somewhat sickening to see, but, with consistent follow through, they do change habits and attitudes and ultimately save lives and a positive outcome to the national budget. On my observation, this is missing in Italy.

Discipline & Leadership: When I recounted the near miss of being run over by a 20 tonne lorry at a pedestrian crossing or side swiped by cars overtaking me at over 100km/hr on a 50km/hr stretch of winding mountain road I got the "what's the big deal" shrug of the shoulders signifying that the rules are there but little to no enforcement. Small examples of what seems to be the culture of the political will within Italy. At this stage, Italy may have bigger problems on its plate, but these issues all point to where the problem lies – leadership – strong political leadership to make this cultural shift. Some say this is the attraction of Italy, this is what defines Italians and the Italian lifestyle, the "laissez-faire" attitude, the antithesis of German or Swiss rigidity....maybe so, but who says you can't have both. Yes, it's a massive mountain to climb but with the right leadership....wow...watch Italy go then.

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