

Prato is a special place for me

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Prato is a special place for me, and in ways I never expected when I first visited as a young Art History student back in the 1980s. I was on a research trip to Florence and came to Prato briefly to see the church of Santa Maria delle Carceri because I was fascinated by Renaissance architecture. In the mid-1990s, back in Florence again and trying to learn Italian through conversation

exchanges with local students, I met my wife. She is from Prato, and when we married in 1998, as destiny would have it, the ceremony was held inside the church of Santa Maria delle Carceri.

Prato had accidentally become my new home, though for many years I continued to commute to Florence from our apartment in piazza Duomo, finding work as an Art





History instructor and an administrator at various institutions, including the British Institute of Florence, and some North American university programs. So, while I loved the city of Prato, up till then it was simply where I lived.

But in 2012 things changed when the president of the University of New Haven invited me to set up a campus for his students in Prato. This signalled the start of a new relationship with the city, one which has allowed me to help many others to discover, as I did, how special this city really is. When the president first visited to meet local officials, he immediately saw its potential as a place for 'study abroad'. The centre has the feeling of a small town and the services of a city; it is well-connected by rail and served by good airports; it's conveniently close to its famous neighbour Florence; it's neither overrun by tourists

nor accustomed to an international student presence; it's a city with a modern and forward-looking industrial identity, but also with an enviable cultural history spanning from the Etruscans to the contemporary glories of Museo Pecci (with the Renaissance in between).

Things moved fast. In August 2012, just a few busy months after the university invited me to be involved, our first group of 35 students arrived in Prato. Since then, during 7 operative pre-Covid years, well over 1000 of our students came to Prato. The campus began inside Palazzo Vestri in piazza Duomo, but since 2014 occupies part of the ex-convent of San Francesco, which houses our classrooms, offices, and even a dormitory. It's a great location in a vibrant area of the city where students enjoy access to a range of services, shops, and restaurants.

As I approach 30 years in Prato, and 10 years running the campus, I often ask myself what our students have actually found in this city, and what effect it has had upon them. Before I offer some answers, maybe it would be useful to define 'study abroad' as it's understood in the English-speaking world, because it does not translate well. The closest thing in Italian culture is the European Erasmus programme, a temporary spell at another university within the EU. However, North American students normally enrol into English-speaking programs, not local universities, with courses, housing and extra-curricular activities designed exclusively for them.

Many of those programmes are satellite campuses which means they are managed, like New Haven in Prato, by the 'home' campus. This tradition has seen phenomenal growth in the last 10 years. Until Covid hit, almost 350,000 US students were studying abroad every year, Italy hosting almost 40,000 annually.

Bringing large numbers of students to the Prato Campus is not just a numbers game, or simply a business. It would be unwise and unethical to 'impose' a program on a city without first establishing a reciprocally beneficial relationship through dialogue, collaboration, and mutual respect. New Haven, like the neighbouring Monash campus, have in some part stimulated tourism and international education in a city whose traditional economic backbone is a powerful textile industry. Consequently, the civic authorities have always encouraged and helped us.

Study abroad is not just for fun, and nor is it merely cultural tourism. It can be transformational. While they are here, our

students develop so much that parents and instructors note major differences on their return. They grow in maturity, independence, and resilience; they become more tolerant of difference, a concept sorely required in today's divided societies; they develop a more sophisticated, international view of things they previously took for granted as 'the ways things are done'; and they develop their communication skills as they navigate their new home, many of them with no prior knowledge of Italian language or culture.

To aid them in this process we organise opportunities for engagement with the local community: courses that compare and contrast US and Italian professional practices and traditions; eye-opening field trips inside Prato courthouse, prisons, galleries, museums, factories, churches, hospitals, and refugee centres: mandatory Italian language classes every morning; weekly conversation exchange with local high school students; Family Dinners offered by locals who take our students into their homes for an evening of conversation around the table; internships and local voluntary opportunities like assisting English language teachers in schools, or helping at charities, family shelters, and the Pubblica Assistenza. Even the campus meal plan, which we prefer to a university canteen, is designed to help students eat well, make local friends, engage with the city, and practice their language. Their meal vouchers can be used at over 30 restaurants and cafes in Prato and Florence, and so you'll find our students all over the city. In recent years the number of restaurants in Prato has grown, perhaps in some part because of New Haven and Monash. It was



not easy to recruit many of them to the plan at first, but as people got used to the presence of students in the city centre, the system grew. Some even warmed to little US traditions, like 'boxing' unfinished food to take home, and while the campus was closed because of the pandemic it was clear that some restaurants which had become firm favourites for the students suffered a double blow.

It is inspiring to see what students think of Prato when they arrive here every semester, and it helps me to relive my own 'arrival' in the 1980s. I'm happy to say they see it invariably in a positive light.

Students are struck by the beauty of the city and the many human connections they make here. After a few days, returning from a busy day in crowded Florence, they are often heard to remark that "It's nice to be home" as their train pulls into Prato Porta al Serraglio. And it is thrilling to hear them tell me, at the end of the semester, after they have visited Barcelona, Paris, and London, that the best thing about the whole experience was Prato! Some of our students have come back to study here again, one of them married and stayed, and one of our US-based instructors recently bought a holiday home right in the city centre. One of the students even left Prato with the latitude and longitude of Prato tattooed on his leg! How many locals would do that?

Now that over 1000 students, as well as their teachers, families, and friends, have come to Prato and spread roots, I can say that Prato is a special place for a lot of people from the USA.

That's something I never expected, but I'm not surprised.