

## **Part 6: Socializing, Michael and the Pool Party**

Fleace made it known over and over that socializing with the Italians was a big part of Roman Holiday. As black women, particularly, African American women, she said we were considered unique given there are so few of us in Italy and the rest of Europe. Fleace highly encouraged the group to go out and meet people, especially in bars and clubs. However being introverted, I didn't easily talk to people, although I noticed men would talk to me and the other Bellas, albeit in a creative way. In most foreign social situations it's not easy to just go up and talk to people, and I think even the Italians feel the same way in their own country. So, even if it's slyly asking someone to take a picture of us, or making a point that someone is using our towel at a pool party, it gets a conversation going. These were tricks the Italians used, and I found myself taking the bait for fun.

I always stayed an introvert over this trip. I think the difference was as time went on, I allowed myself to be open to other people, as opposed to being closed off. Simply making the intention to be open, no matter our personality, can open opportunities for people to enter our lives.

At one of the parties I made it my particular intention to go out and have fun. That night I danced with friends, drank wine and enjoyed the music, which was an upbeat techno mix. At the end of the night, one of the Bellas danced with an Italian, who a little later saw me and gave me a kiss. It wasn't the authentic Italian kiss I would get later on, just what I would consider a smooch. Still, it was certainly a taste of the "in your face" mentality Italian men have when it comes to women, but also what opportunities can open up when we have an open mind—for better and at times, for worse. From my Italian experience I noticed when men want someone, they tend to have an easier time going for it than women. As women, we have to set our boundary of how far men can go with us. Otherwise, we could go from a kiss at a club to sex in a bed within a span of a few hours. At times I saw how this boundary could be tested given how Italian men tend to be persistent in their flirtations, but I wasn't going to Italy for the sole purpose of hooking up...and regretting it later.

Fleace took the group to a popular pool party outside of Rome that featured DJs from across the world. It was a fun social experience that featured mostly Italians, particularly Romans and people from other countries as well. The Bellas and I spent most our time in the pool dancing, throwing a beach ball around and getting splashed with water from people having their own fun. During the party, I had a relatively short conversation with an Italian from Napoli, in part because I didn't speak much Italian,



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he didn't speak much English, and I didn't care to have a drink with him. The next Italian I spoke with "snuck up" by surprise as I was sitting on a towel with my friend. He was asking me if I realized my friend was lying next to his towel. I said no and apologized, which was when he started to have an extended conversation with me. As it turned out, that wasn't his towel at all. He just used the story to talk to me. Moments later we left my friend and the towel to get something to drink. Go figure. I'll call him Michael.

What I learned right away was Michael was Roman and spoke English very well, which was because he'd been living in England the past several years for school. He was studying English, Spanish and Japanese. Michael was only in Rome to visit before he went back to England. He told me he was particularly interested in Japanese culture, as I could tell by the Japanese art tattoo that covered his entire back. One day, he told me, he intended to live in Japan, which was funny because I studied some Japanese in college.

Michael was very similar to me in that he loved traveling because he wanted to see the world, and it gave him an open mind about culture and people. He told me however, while he was living in Rome, people doubted his beliefs about traveling and questioned why he would try to leave Italy. Michael said he felt he was accountable for his actions, and he didn't want to be around the negativity he was getting at home, which was in part why he left. He said eventually he'd come back to Rome and have a family, which I found interesting since I thought most Italians these days didn't think of marriage or family. I remember Fleace said earlier on the trip most Italians don't venture outside their hometowns, much less the country, so I was fascinated to meet someone who not only was living outside of Italy, but didn't intend to come back to live there for awhile. Michael seemed to be an independent soul like myself too, mostly traveling alone to different places and doing things most people wouldn't normally do.



Even with the interesting conversation I was having, and by this time he'd gotten me a drink, I could sense that he intended to kiss me. First he kissed my shoulder and complimented my skin color, which I didn't mind, but it wasn't long before he went right for my lips, particularly my upper lip. After that I was engulfed and not sure what to make of the kiss, except a lot of lip and tongue that I wasn't expecting. There were moments where I thought he was literally trying to bite my lip! It reminded me of the passion people associate with Italian kisses, and it wasn't an exaggeration. Michael seemed to give me everything in that kiss, but he thought I didn't like it. I said it was fine, but I was surprised in the force and passion of the kiss, so I didn't know how to respond. I

would feel that kiss, especially on my upper lip, for the rest of the day. I told Michael it was my first Italian kiss, and I didn't realize what it was going to be like. Shortly after he kissed me again, one of the Bellas found me, and it was time to go. Actually, I had to be notified by the Bella twice because Michael tried to keep me and kiss again. He got a little dramatic when I told him I had to go, saying he'd never

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see me again. I thought maybe we'd exchange Facebook information, but even that didn't happen. So, I said good-bye and I left. It was an abrupt ending to an otherwise interesting experience getting to know someone from Italy, but maybe we weren't meant to keep in touch.

Looking back on that time, what I liked about the conversation with Michael was we seemed to be similar. We were both traveling to see the world and be part of the world, but also were looking to find a bigger meaning of life outside our home: the U.S. and Italy. For those of us who enjoy it, the experience of traveling—meeting new people, engaging in culture and being ourselves fulfills our spirits. It's a chance to discover our best selves, though not necessarily being someone else because we're outside our home country. I think Michael saw in me part of the traveling experience: meeting someone new, exotic and from a different culture. However, even though I could listen to him in regards to his travel experiences and love for all things Japanese, I could not give him entirely what he wanted: intimacy, more conversation and whatever else was lingering when I departed. In some ways this was a typical experience with an Italian man; in other ways, it was a learning experience. Other people in the world had qualities and interests like me, and they were also looking for more out of life than just being some place different. However, not all these people, as was the case with Michael, prove to be lasting relationships.

I think all this happened as part of my openness to being myself in Rome. I was taking in the social experiences, and I finally started being mindful of one of my favorite travel staples, the food.

