

# Italy stable

Italy remains a popular destination for short-term recreational language courses, but visa regulations are hampering growth of the long-term study market, as GILLIAN EVANS reports.

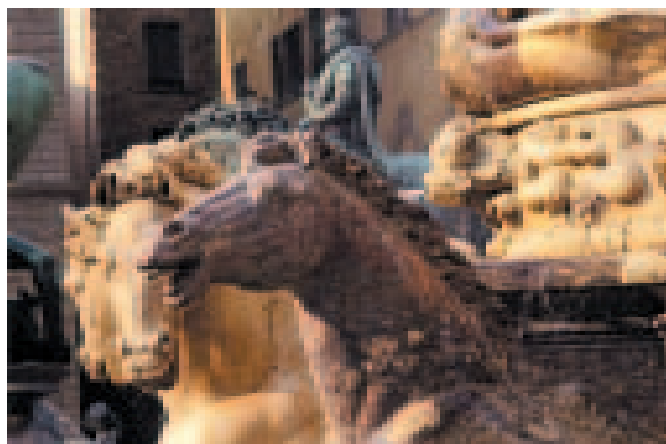
Italian remains one of the few languages that attracts a majority of learners who want to learn the language for pleasure only. In last year's Italy Feedback survey (see *Language Travel Magazine*, October 2002, pages 14-15), 56 per cent of students surveyed were learning Italian for pleasure only.

"The Italian language is tremendously trendy in the world," comments Sabina Fusaro of Centro di Lingua e Cultura Italiana Mediterraneo (CLCIM) in Rome. "I have very rich American students who attend our [short-term] courses only to show off their Italian at parties in the USA. A phrase like *'Per me un bicchiere di vino bianco, per favore'*, told at a party in front of friends, has the same value as an Armani dress!"

Interest in Italian art, opera, wine and cooking is also fuelling demand for Italian language courses, and schools around the country continue to seize upon this trend by developing enticing language and culture combinations. "We have produced a special programme, Breda, Wine and Language, offering Italian language lessons in the morning and guided wine tasting, cooking lessons and excursions to Tuscan wineries in the afternoons and during the weekends," reports Andrea Moradei of Centro Koinè in Florence.

Aimed at the tourist market, CLCIM has developed a "Pocket Italian" course, which comprises only six hours of language tuition, specifically aimed at clients who want to travel around Italy. "They can dedicate a very short time to the study of the language [as] they just need to grasp a little Italian in order to survive during their stay in Italy," explains Fusaro.

The trend towards recreational language travel has had an



effect on the average age of the students at many schools. "The average age of our students is much higher than in the past," reports Christa Kernberger, Director of Comitato Linguistico in Perugia. "In the last two years we have had many people over 50, [who] learn Italian for personal interest [only]."

This trend has also affected the length of stay, with many schools reporting a drop among their students. Kernberger reports that fewer students now stay at their school for more than a month, while Moradei says their European students stay for an average of three to four weeks, North Americans for two to three weeks and Japanese students for up to seven weeks.

Despite the demand for Italian culture courses, the Italian language teaching market stagnated in 2002, with some of the best performing schools reporting just marginal increases in student numbers. Many admit that the first quarter of 2002 was tough, with numbers remaining low following the terrorist attacks in the USA. "After September 11 [2001], we registered a decrease in the number of students who traditionally would spend months, even a year, studying in our school – Japanese and Koreans.

Fortunately this loss was compensated for by an increase in the number of European Union citizens, and by an increase in students already located in Rome for professional or study reasons," reports Fusaro.

Bruno Fabbri, Director of Centro Linguistico I Malatesta in Rimini, attributes their poor student numbers in 2002 to the introduction of the euro, which he says, caused prices to increase.

But at Centro Koinè, Moradei paints a brighter picture, saying their student numbers had picked up again by mid-2002. "We had a general increase in the number of students at our centres [in 2002]. After the first terrible three months of 2002, we had an increase [of] US and Japanese students coming [due to] our Internet marketing," he says.

CLCIM also received a welcome boost to its marketing when it was recommended in a piece in the *New York Times*. According to Fusaro, "this has been fuelling growth of US students".

Generally, the USA and Japan remain the most important markets for many schools (see right), although some report increases from Central and Eastern Europe. Fabbri believes this will continue as many countries gear up for European Union membership.

## Nationality trends

Changes to visa regulations have made it more difficult for some students to gain entry to Italy for a study stay of more than three months. Previously, students were able to apply for a study visa for a year, even if they were enrolled on a shorter course, and could extend their permit of stay whilst in Italy. Now, however, study visas and permits of stay are only issued for the duration of the language course, and can only be extended by the student in his or her country of origin. In addition, to obtain a study visa, students must be able to show previous knowledge of the Italian language.

The new regulations have affected Italy's developing student markets in particular. "I had students from the Philippines, India, Algeria and the Ukraine, whose requests for visas were refused," bemoans Sabina Fusaro of Centro di Lingua e Cultura Italiana Mediterraneo in Rome. Bruno Fabbri of Centro Linguistico I Malatesta in Rimini, says they lost many students from Africa, China, Russia and the Ukraine because of problems with visa issuance.

Instead, Italian language providers have been concentrating on the short-term market, and looking to Europe, Japan and the USA in particular for growth. Andrea Moradei of Centro Koinè in Florence, says, "From 1980, when we opened the school in Florence, until last year, the top nationalities were European, especially German-mother tongue countries. Now the top nationalities are US and Japanese."

However, at Atrium Italian Language Institute in Cagliari, Donna Galletta says fewer Japanese enrolled at their school last year. "For the past few years, the Japanese have held first place for numbers in our school. However, in 2002, this trend changed. We had a high percentage of students from the Netherlands, Northern Europe in general and Korea," she says.