

# Inside the Big Red Gates

**M**y first day at school was about sixty years ago, and I cannot remember if I skipped out of the house with joy, eager to learn. I did my time at school and managed to get several certificates and achievements for further education and work-related schooling along the way, into my late 50s.

However, last week I cycled from my home up to some big red school gates with little voices loudly ringing in my head. *What on earth are you doing this for? Why put yourself through it? Go home and turn on Netflix and get your kicks from that.*

When I was young and living in Australia, I started my education at the local primary school. And now that I am living in Tuscany, I am further continuing my education at one of the local elementary schools just outside my cosy walled village of Lucca.

But why, I hear you ask? Living in Australia, we assumed most of the educated world spoke English also. On our several trips to Italy over the years, we soon found out that Italians might certainly know some English; however, they were more than likely to speak to the 'English' in their own language. Which is fair enough!

As a tourist, one learns the minimal words because it is a bit of a novelty asking for a coffee in the local lingo. Though I did want to learn Italian properly, it all seemed too hard, and adding learning a new language to my extra-curricular activities was too overwhelming while I was still working.

However, now that I am retired and living here on a temporary visa, I thought it was high time to take up the challenge and get serious about it. I looked at having private lessons or going to a private school, but decided to make enquiries as to the public schooling on offer. I found out that as part of our stay in Italy, the requirements included a certain level of Italian language in order to stay longer. So we began! *Should have started lessons years ago*, I kept telling myself, as I pawed through a myriad of paperwork on the subject of attending classes.

Anyway, it came to this – me walking through the big red gates on a frosty Monday afternoon, parking my bicycle and striding through the door with a pencil and notebook in hand. Nothing else. Mind you, I wore a fake smile, hiding my trepidation. I was greeted by two lovely ladies, about twenty years younger than me. They were both exchanging pleasantries – in Italian of course. However, I knew the gist of what was being said, so I greeted them back. They received my application form and directed me to my elementary classroom.



I quickly found a seat among my fellow pupils, who also made the familiar Italian *buon giorno* greetings as I took my seat. *Friendly bunch*, I thought, quickly looking around. The Italian alphabet was promptly pinned to the board before me. *Wow! This is very elementary.* There were also various charts, maps and notices spread around the room, reminding me of my granddaughter's classroom back in Melbourne. A map of the world looked familiar, as well as a huge poster with pictures of grandparents, parents, children, cousins etc. *Mmmm – family!*

Just then a very handsome, softly spoken Italian man strode into the classroom with a smile and a *Buon giorno*, to which we all responded in verse. Then off he started, so calmly, hands clasped together, walking across the room in even strides, talking ever so eloquently in ITALIAN.

I didn't have a clue as to what he was saying, but he was gesturing with his hands and smiling as he spoke. Suddenly, I started to panic and looked around at my fellow pupils who were fixed on his every word. I managed to grasp one or two words here and there, and my little voice inside my head kept saying, *Netflix would be the go, not all this gibberish you don't understand.*

But my sensible self said back to the little voice, *Listen to what he has to say and don't freeze until he actually asks you a question. Maybe he will forget you because you are the only white-haired, sixty-plus, female sitting in his classroom, OR, he will see you like a shining beacon straight off...*

And he did.... He looked directly at me and pointed at the board where the pictures of the Italian family were pinned. He began pointing and reciting, *il padre, la madre, la famiglia.*

I looked at his smile and listened to his confident voice as he spoke to me, and then I thought to myself with confidence, *I can do this. I am going to do this and I am going to enjoy it.*

I hope!

– by Sue Perry

*My school is the local public school in Lucca at Via Don Giovanni Minzoni, 9. The phone number for information is 0583 419187 – details on their website [www.cpialucca.gov.it](http://www.cpialucca.gov.it)*

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