

Defending the Florentines

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Why they do the things they do: observations by an American. I think after a year I have finally begun to understand them (oh no, does that mean once you 'get' them, you've gotten just like them?)

Florentines have a bad reputation all over, and I think it's about time that someone takes a stance and sticks up for them! I have frequently heard the two same complaints among American students about these infamous Florentines—their supposed blatant unfriendliness and responding back in English after you've tried speaking in Italian. As an outsider, I've been able to observe the native Florentines and discover the reasons behind their personalities. And I think after a year I have finally begun to understand them (oh no, does that mean once you 'get' them, you've gotten just like them?)



1. Their unfriendliness

Though this may have a grain of truth to it, I think most people exaggerate their supposed 'unfriendliness' anyway. At first, I have to admit, Florentines may seem a bit cold—they may not smile and cheer for you (as some tourists expect, I suppose) when you walk into a restaurant or store. They usually will acknowledge you with a non-emotional "Buona sera" or "Buon giorno." Their intent is not to scare you or intimidate you, nor are they conscientiously trying to be rude. They have this cold exterior at first because they're hesitant in trusting people, but after a couple of encounters, they'll warm up to you and give you that smile and pleasant demeanor that you're looking for. Hey, they might even give you a hello on the street when they see you pass by—that is, if you get to know them well enough and engage in some banter every once in a while!

This demeanor exists for almost all Florentines, not just shopkeepers. Take me for instance. For me to establish myself within a solid group of Florentine friends, it took more than once of hanging out with them for them to really accept me as a friend. Before that, I felt like a blob of oil on a sponge: sure, they acknowledged my presence and said hello, even occasionally asking me something, but I sorta was just there and didn't feel like I clicked with them so much. It takes time to earn their respect and friendship, and they test you out in many ways in a kind of hazing. One of those ways is by teasing you—sometimes a bit too much, I agree. If you're American, for example, they'll tease you about your accent or your culture. But the trick is not to get offended! They're trying to see how well you can mold in their group. Florentines love making fun of each other and joking around. If it's one thing they like to do, it's laughing within their group of friends, especially if it's at another person's expense. I know this sounds weird, but consider it a compliment when they tease you; it means they're starting to warm up to you. The best thing to do in that situation is to laugh with them.

Florentines, however, are mainly reacting the exact same way that you're acting. Not only are they going to react that way, but they're going to multiple what you show them and take it to the extreme. For instance, if you're outgoing and bubbly, they'll be twice as outgoing and friendly; if you're being rude, they're going to give that rudeness right back to you and then some. It all depends on the kind of person you are and the way you treat others. So let's say you've had a rough day, and you go into a store, you don't smile or say hello and you ask for a bus ticket at a tabacchi (a local drugstore). They're not going to say hello either, nor will they greet you with a smile. Instead, they may be borderline rude and simply place the ticket on the counter, barking the price at you.

Let's take a real life example that perfectly illustrates this. I was in the car with two Florentines and one had parked on the side of the road to get out and buy cigarettes. In the meantime a woman politely asked if we could move our car because she was trying to get past to get to the street that we were partially blocking. My friend said no problem, got out from the passenger side, and moved the car a bit forward. Only moments later, another woman in an SUV came up to the car and scolded us about how idiotic we were to choose a parking spot like that when we were blocking a roadway, not to mention that it was illegal. Well, this behavior caused a scene: my friend erupted and got out of the car and shouted even louder right back at her. And the shouting didn't stop even after she was able to get around our vehicle: my friend continued to scream and curse at her for about thirty seconds after the incident, saying that he didn't like "la gente maleducata" ("rude people"). It just goes to show you that this is how Florentines are—they will respond to you the way that you're treating them. So therefore: if you're polite, they'll be very cordial and friendly; but if you're rude, they will certainly let you know that they don't appreciate it!

2. "Ugh, they constantly answer in English!"

OK, so it's no secret: you're not from Florence, you're American or from some other country. Don't be offended that a Florentine has spotted you for a tourist—because essentially, you are one, right? They've picked up that your accent is not Florentine and that you're not even Italian. So why do they answer back in English when you've tried so hard putting together a grammatically correct Italian sentence and managed to spit it out with an accent you felt was flawless?



a) They're in a rush

Let's imagine you're in a supermarket where there's a tremendous line for coldcuts and cheeses, when finally it's your turn. You ask the worker for a panino with mortadella, she acknowledges your Italian and quickly grabs a roll—and you start celebrating in your head that you've spoken such great Italian! But you've celebrated prematurely, since she spits back a question at you in Italian, which you have no idea what she just said. "Come?" ("What?"), you ask. Instead of repeating what she just said in Italian, she asks you in English: "With or without pistachios?" (the mortadella, she means, since it comes in two varieties). Sheepishly, you mumble "without."

So, let's break down what happened in that example. The Florentine worker has, first of all, dealt with tourists all day, and her patience is running low. Whether it be in a restaurant, gelateria, supermarket, etc., the Florentine workers have to get all those tourists served and they don't have time to be your personal Italian teacher. So they answer in English to make it easier for both parties, to save time, and (to be blunt) because they simply don't feel like dealing with you and repeating the question more than once. Maybe your Italian really is good, but you just didn't hear her. Even still, they don't realize that and their main goal is to be in and out of situations; they don't want to linger. So they just want you to understand their question as quickly as possible.

b) Their own English needs work

As I've said before, they've spotted you're American, they know you have an American accent. They will answer you back in English because they want to practice their own English. Rather than paying for a foreign language class, the Florentines can practice during their jobs with the plethora of tourists that come into Florence. After all, practice makes perfect!

c) They're trying to help you out

Let's face it: your Italian is no way near perfect and you've struggled in trying to ask a question at a store. The Florentine worker will make it easier for you by speaking back in English to make you more comfortable. No need to fumble through Italian. I've seen this happen several times in stores: sometimes they'll politely ask "You speak English?" or simply respond in English. Either way, remember that they're only trying to help.

d) They want to show off

There's showing off happening at two different levels: the obvious one being that they're trying to show you how great their English is. This usually is the typical scenario with university students or people who simply pride themselves on having studied English. There's showing off at another level too: they're also showing off their skills at spotting tourists, even when you think you look and act the part of being Florentine. They're essentially telling you "yes, I've spotted you're not Florentine, you don't dress like us, you don't talk like us, so I will address you in your own language, since you're an outsider."

Keep in mind—answering in English doesn't mean that your Italian is terrible! There is no need to get angry or frustrated.

3. Some final thoughts and advice for tourists in Florence

Be aware that if you approach anyone in Florence in Italian, they will appreciate it and treat you better. So at least try speaking in Italian—even if they answer back in English!

Don't like being spoken to in English? Just politely ask if it would be OK to speak in Italian. I'm sure they'd be delighted to help you, if they're not too busy (see number 2, letter a above).

(In restaurants only) A good way to bond with Florentines is to compliment them on how fabulous your meal was. They'll warm up to you really quickly after that! Florentines take great pride in their cuisine and the hard work that goes into it!

Another way to bond is saying that you're from New York City (don't lie about it though!), since all Italians love New York. They will want to know everything about it, especially what it's like living there.



Remember: be as cheerful and outgoing as possible (see number 1); you'll get treated a lot better!

Florence is one of the most beautiful cities in the world with some of the greatest people...once you can appreciate the way they are, at least.

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