

# Italy helped me make peace with my weight and shape

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People sunbath and swim on a beach in the Italian Dolomites on July 21, 2020.

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In April, 2019 I moved to Italy for a year, or so I thought. As a consultant, I had the flexibility to work remotely (before that became the pandemic status quo) and, personally, I needed a change.

It's hard to articulate how omnipresent negative thoughts about yourself can be. By the time I left for Italy, negative thoughts about my weight, my appearance and what other people thought about my weight and appearance, ran like a news ticker in my brain. On repeat. Sometimes negative self-talk and self-consciousness was bumped up to the lead story, delivered by an eviscerating anchor (me) but even when it wasn't, those thoughts were always in the periphery.

Italy had captured my imagination since adolescence – it was a country I didn't want to visit just for a week or two. At a time when I was close to my heaviest weight, I secured a one-year visa and left Canada. In the land of pizza, pasta and tiny, high-fashion sample sizes, I somehow learned to tune out the negative self-talk. My body image drastically shifted, too.

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My first six months in Italy were nomadic. I crossed the country in my rental car with Chutney, my mini Aussie shepherd who came over with me from Toronto. I explored and worked remotely for my marketing clients from home bases in Bologna, Tuscany, Sicily, Puglia and then Rome. I learned the corresponding pasta shapes and flavours for each of those locations (respectively: tortellini in brodo, ragu, spaghetti con bottarga, orecchiette and carbonara). I can point you toward my favourite gelateria in each town and during that 40 C summer. They were visited many, many times.

I ate well. I always ordered multiple courses at restaurants but I lost weight that summer as I began to adjust to the rhythms of Italian life. Unlike city life in Toronto – taking public transit and Uber for even short distances – I began to walk everywhere. But the weight loss wasn't as meaningful as the experiences I was having and in a country bordered by so much water, I forged an important new relationship that would radically change the one I had with my body: a relationship with the sea.

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In June, 2019 I went swimming in Italy for the first time, in a coastal area of Tuscany called Grosseto. I was covered up and well accessorized over my one-piece swimsuit. A beribboned visor, a lacy tunic and bright lipstick were my typical attempts to distract myself from my insecurities and divert others from my body. I approached the beach like a vacationer, planning a Saturday day out and lazing on a rented lounge between dips.

No one gave me a second look. In Italy no one stares at the (theoretical, societally defined) “good” bodies and no one is looking at the “bad” ones. Everyone is just swimming.

So that summer I cast off my ideas about fussy accessories and went searching for every rocky spot along Puglia’s Adriatic shore and the sandy ones on the Ionian side. Soon, I was pulling up to swimming spots wearing nothing but a swimsuit. I would park by the side of the road, spread a thin towel over whatever rocky or sandy situation I found and took a daily dip for an hour or two before going back to work. My entire schedule, wardrobe and outlook had changed. The sea

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wasn't there for a special day out. It became a daily pleasure.

Despite a pandemic weight fluctuation (hint: I gained), by the following June my tentativeness had all but evaporated. I learned the sea was a way of life in Italy, it's a pinnacle of summer in a culture that revolves around community and pleasure. Why would I deprive myself of the relief from the heat (I had no air conditioning) and enjoyment of the water?



Tourists walk across the medieval square of Piazza del Campo on Aug. 15, 2019, in Siena, a day before the historical Italian horse race "Palio di Siena".

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I knew I wanted to share this freedom from the stress and worry about body size with other women, in the place where I learned it. Negative conditioning about your body shouldn't be an impediment to enjoying the sea, your vacation or Italy.

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Last year I started a business – Stellavision Travel – which creates small group trips for women that offer a taste of the freedom I experienced. We share behind-the-scenes spots that are hard to reach independently and help travellers experience an authentic Italy with plenty of experiential perks (such as the professional photographer that accompanies every tour). We welcomed guests from all over North America.

In the summer of 2022, our first body-neutral, size-inclusive tour is running – since your shape shouldn't be a barrier to enjoying your vacation. In Italy, all bodies are beach bodies and we want to provide travellers a reason to celebrate themselves. We are creating an itinerary that explores different sensory experiences to share alongside travel companions that can relate or are on a similar journey toward body positivity or body neutrality. There will be cheese-tasting in the woods outside Altamura with experts whose passion and expertise change the experience of eating and tasting hyperlocal products. We'll be jumping off a private boat and swimming into limestone caves. And so much

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We'll be jumping off a private boat and swimming into limestone caves. And so much more is planned.

Moving to Italy helped me get over hang-ups about my body but it's a process. I experience backslides and living in Italy doesn't always help either. There's no question that shopping for plus-size clothing here is far behind the inclusive improvements made in Canada in the past few years. The Italian habit of directness can cross a line we learned to respect decades ago when it comes to mentioning someone else's appearance. But for the first time in my life, amidst Italy's culture of food and the sea, I have learned to prioritize an experience over negative self-thought – and just go swimming.

*Zoe Shapiro lives in Rome. She's the founder of Stellavision Travel, [stellavisiontravel.com](http://stellavisiontravel.com)*

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