

Quiet beauty
The hilltown of Agnone is in Molise, Italy's least-known province



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Language learning Italy

An immersive course in Italian gives *Claire Armistead* a glimpse of life and culture in a little-known part of the country - and the confidence to *parlare* away with the locals



'Eccoci qua!" announces Fernando, pulling the minibus into the side of the road. Ahead of us, the hilltop town we have driven nearly three hours from Rome to reach shimmers in the late afternoon sun. Agnone is a picturesque settlement of some 5,000 inhabitants, all of whom - starting with Fernando, a local dairy farmer and occasional chauffeur - appear to have been sworn not to speak English to us.

This isn't hard, because the town is in Italy's least-known province, Molise - a region so "undiscovered" that even the Italians have a standing joke, *Il Molise non esiste*. There are 10 of us - nine women and a man, from Australia, the US, the UK and France - and we are here for a total immersion language course called Live and Learn Italian.

As its founder and director Jenifer Landor emphasises at our first evening together in an open-air pizzeria, it is not so much about the classes as the experience (lesson one: Italians think it's weird to drink wine with pizza). Over the course of a week, this approach will take us up a mountain with artisanal baker Mercede and her devoted farm dog, and down into a 600-year-old wine cellar to sample Carlo's wines, that are deemed so sensitive they are unable to travel beyond their home town (though he pours so generously that this is unlikely to be put to the test). We will make (and eat) ravioli in the kitchen of retired shoe-seller Maria, who has become a celebrated home cook, and meet up with the latest generation of the Di Nucci family, who forsook centuries of migratory shepherding - the *transumanza* - to set up a thriving cheese factory.

We're split into three groups on the basis

of a written test and an interview with the three young teachers who will take charge of classroom tuition. It's a little bit daunting but, as Landor says, it is to ensure nobody finds themselves bored or out of their depth. Complete beginners are discouraged from signing up, as they would miss out on the interaction with local people.

Lessons take place each morning in an elegant former convent converted into a library and museum - its polished corridors flanked by rooms full of yellowing books. Only towards the end of the week do we discover a shuttered chamber containing a replica of the region's most venerable artefact: La Tavola Osca. By now we are well-versed in the classical history of the area, having spent an afternoon being shown around an ancient amphitheatre carved into the hillside of a neighbouring settlement evocatively named Pietrabbondante.

The original Osca (as it is affectionately

called) is in the British Museum and is a small bronze tablet inscribed from right to left with the laws of the Samnite people, who ruled this part of Italy from the sixth century BC until the Roman empire took over. Their five tribes traded with Greece and worshipped Ulysses - and remains of their civilisation are still being dug out of the Molise hillsides. It is astonishing to sit on stone amphitheatre benches that Samnite stonemasons, chiselling away two centuries before Christ, smoothed into curves designed to mirror and support the human back - Italy's first ergonomic seating, we are told.

There is another copy of the Osca in the B&B where four of us are staying - the family home of artist Tonina. Though she lives in a flat nearby, the four-storey house is full of her craftwork and her memories. She greets us each morning at a table groaning with breakfast delicacies - mounds of ricotta drizzled with a local

liqueur, plates piled with cakes and bread, waiting to be slathered in homemade apricot and cherry jams. With the food comes the first of the day's Italian conversation, for which we are sometimes joined by Tonina's maths teacher sister: this isn't a course for people with a limited appetite for carbs and chat any more than it's for those who find walking a drag, though at least some of the breakfast calories are burned off by frequent yomps up and down Agnone's cobbled streets.

Nor is it a course for those with an aversion to being summoned by bells: Agnone is a town of 14 churches, most of them equipped with the massive clangers that are its claim to a niche sort of fame. The Marinelli bell foundry in the centre of town is said to be Italy's oldest family business. Since the 14th century, the Marinellis have been sending their *campane* to churches and monasteries throughout the Catholic world, from Africa to South America. A video in its museum shows a succession of popes blessing the soon-to-be bells as sluice gates are opened to let molten bronze surge infernally along channels in the foundry floor. It still makes 30 or more bells to order each year.

In the past, the town rang to the sound of gold-, iron- and coppersmiths, though almost all of the workshops are closed now - testament to the depopulation that recently led to Molise offering €700 a month for three years to anyone willing to live and set up a business in one of its smaller towns.

Most people sign up to the course for two weeks, but by the end of just one I'm surprised to find myself chatting away a *caffica*, unabashed by my all-too-frequent *errori* - not least when I loudly mistake a fertility symbol carved into the amphitheatre for a bird that has lost a wing. (Without missing a beat, our guide finds a simpler synonym for phallus.)

By the time we have rattled back to Rome in the minibus, several of us have come to an agreement: we'll be back, but first we have to work off all those breakfasts. *Arrividerci*, Agnone.

● *The course was provided by Live and Learn Italian (liveandlearnitalian.com), which has a week in a shared room from €1,325pp, including breakfast and six dinners, activities, excursions and transfers from Rome. Flights were provided by British Airways. London to Rome by train takes from 15 hours, changing in Paris and Turin or Milan and costs from about £159*



Smiley culture
The course fully embraces local life, and (left) a bell tower in the old town

