

— *Under the Tuscan Sun* —
an Americans Perception of Italy

1. When Frances first arrives in Italy, Audrey Wells wastes no time illustrating a stereotypical American perception of the country. As the tour bus rolls through sunflower-covered hills and winding roads, Tuscany is set as a surreal and picturesque region under blue skies. When the tour bus arrives in Cortona, the open market is bustling with people. Cinematically, Wells has people walking in front of the main subject of a frame which increases the depth of focus and gives this “busy” feel.

Among the dried fruit, mushrooms and fresh fruit sold at the market, characters specifically interact with three staples of Italian cuisine: olives, garlic and grapes. The people selling this produce seemed extremely friendly and encouraged the tourists to try the food before purchasing it. When the tourist group got back on the bus, they seemed to have “absorbed” the chaos outside and enjoyed drinking wine. As Frances explained, “Italians know how to have fun more than we do”.

Although there are open markets in Italy, they are certainly not as chaotic as the one depicted in *Under the Tuscan Sun*. Therefore, the scene is exaggerated.

2. A running theme throughout the entire movie is the fact that *anything* can happen in Italy. Wells depicts the region as some magical place that one can use as a refreshing solution to any problem. For example, the scene in which Frances instinctively buys a villa is completely unrealistic. Again, Wells illustrates a crazy old women who apparently believes in things that are “meant to be”. The old women justifies her decision after a bird poops on Frances’ head. The old women speaks only in Italian and represents a stereotype of a closed minded, easily irritated and determined women.

Aside from the fact that Frances bought a villa on the spot, the depiction of the old woman is somewhat true based on my past experiences. My Italian grandmother was a very kind women, but she was certainly set in her ways and was determined to see her way out. My grandmother was also very attached to her family and would most likely react similarly given the situation of selling her house.

With all of that said, Wells incorrectly illustrates Italy as a place in which anything can happen. Don’t get me wrong, Italy is fantastic, but when it comes down to it, the locals living here are just living normal lives. Sure there is fresh food, great weather and stunning landscapes, but tourists’ perception of the region are certainly skewed.

3. When Marcello and Frances were on the beach during their first weekend together in Positano, both of them exchange an extremely stereotypical conversation. This dialogue was certainly included in the script as a comic relief for the viewing audience – after all, they both did admit that what they said was stereotypical. Even still, the fact that Wells includes this scene reinforces the generalized message the director is trying to create.

Marcello’s character development is actually rather shallow, but what *is* developed is a handsome, well-dressed, sexy man that frequently hooks up with American women. While these characters *do* exist in Italy, there are likely these characters in many foreign

countries that attempt to take advantage of tourists. Furthermore, these characters are certainly not the norm – the majority of the locals live their own lives without needing to interact with tourists. In fact, I would imagine that they are somewhat annoyed by them. In addition, in most cases, the tourist is not as naive to trust these foreign men, or at the very least, they are expecting what comes next.

4. Wells includes many religious – specifically Catholic – references throughout the movie. When Frances first arrives in Italy, there are three nuns that walk past the foreground eating gelato. Although these nuns are not the main focus, they are explicitly apparent and appear in many other scenes throughout the movie. There is also a figure that seems to represent a priest buying food from the local market.

During Christmastime in the square, Martini gives Frances a gift while a children's choir is singing religious carols in the background. The gift was a small statue of a saint – the patron saint of books. Frances seems to be influenced by the religious presence in Italy as she hangs a painting of a saint above her head.

Finally, when Frances' neighbor's young daughter and one of the Polish workers at the house, Pawel, agree to get married, Wells makes it clear that the girl's parents are uncomfortable with the fact that Pawel is not an Italian Catholic.

From my experiences, religion is certainly present in Italy, but it's not overwhelming. I did notice an increase in priests and nuns walking around when I visited the Vatican City; however, their presence in Tuscany is certainly more subdued.

5. After they meet, Marcello drives Frances to Rome for an unnecessary trip to his cousin's antique store. Marcello drives a nice car, but he does not seem to adhere to the traffic laws or lines on the road. Furthermore, when somebody cuts him off on the road (actually, he more-or-less cut them off), he exclaims something in Italian and uses a hand gesture to protest. The fact that Marcello drives fast is most likely a theatrical addition included to stimulate viewer interest; however, I found it to be quite familiar.

When I was picked up from the airport a few weeks ago, the taxi driver was speeding down the road without giving really any thought to where he was going. If anything the road lines were merely suggestions. Over the past several weeks, I've realized that driving is certainly more lenient than in America. I have yet to see any car actually "pulled over" by the police. Most cars are preoccupied trying to avoid hitting people who are forced to share the street with vehicles due to the narrow or nonexistent sidewalks.

In the event that two vehicles clash, I have also witnessed the exchange of hand gestures and Italian exclamations similar to Marcello on multiple occasions. Again, my observations simply validate the fact that Wells' scene is *possible* – it most definitely not the norm.