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Marjorie Shaw: An Insider's View of Italy

An interview with the founder and owner of New-York-based "Marjorie Shaw's Insider's Italy"

Italian Hours

by Lucy Gordan



Marjorie, Dolomites, Alto Adige (Ph. Robert Stark)

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"My grandfather was Algernon Ashburner Osborne, an economist from Chicago; my grandmother, Marjorie Adams Osborne,

was from New Jersey. They met around 1917. They came to Italy in 1919 because he was offered a job thanks to my grandmother's fortuitous purchase of a newspaper," Marjorie says. And about Rome, where she was born in 1962 and grew up: "I think I loved Rome as a child just as much as my mother did for much the same reasons."

I chose as my first interviewee for my new column "Italian Hours" Marjorie Shaw, the founder and owner of New-York-based "**Marjorie Shaw's Insider's Italy**", not only because she's been my close friend for over 25 years, but because I know no other born-in-Rome American ex-pat, whose mother and whose daughter were also born in Rome.

We're nearing the 100th anniversary of your grandparents' arrival in Italy. What were their names? When did they come and why?

"My grandfather was Algernon Ashburner Osborne, an economist from Chicago; my grandmother, Marjorie Adams Osborne, was from New Jersey. They met around 1917. They came to Italy in 1919 because he was offered a job thanks to my grandmother's fortuitous purchase of a newspaper. Its Help Wanted pages included the job offer of commercial attaché at the US Rome Embassy. They found themselves soon the parents of three children; the eldest is my mother."

Your mother, Aunt Chrissy, and Uncle Louis were all born in Rome. Where did they live and for how long?

"My mother Isabel Osborne Shaw was born in 1921; my uncle in '23 and my aunt in '25. They lived on *Corso d'Italia*, which was not yet paved."



Algernon Osborne

What Rome was like when they were children?

"My mother still recalls fondly the *transumanza*, the passage of sheep, in those days through Rome, twice a year to and from winter and summer pastures. Winters near Rome, summers in the *abruzzesi* mountains. My grandfather worked at the Embassy, which was not yet *Palazzo Margherita* on *Via Veneto*, but was on *Via XX Settembre*. *Palazzo Margherita* was purchased by the Americans in 1946."

So they always lived on *Corso d'Italia*?

“No, they moved to the *Nomentana*, to *Via G.B. de Rossi*, for more space. If they hadn’t left for Madrid in 1933, they’d have moved again to a brand-new villa, which was being built for them. My mother and Uncle Louis watched the workers building its foundations. They kept digging up archeological finds, now in the American Academy of Rome’s collection. Among them was a skull with teeth you could put in and take out and the funerary inscription of a little girl who’d died at age 9, which my mother would weep over.”



From the left: Chrissy, Isabel, and Louis Osborne

What did they like and dislike about Rome?

“Their early memories relate to bicycling under the umbrella pines in Villa Borghese and moving around Rome in carriages before there were cars as well as to stopping at *Palombi* to pick up a brioche before going to school. They attended two different schools. One was a French school called Saint Catherine, which was in *Largo Santa Susanna*. The other, which touched them all hugely, was “The Shaw School”, run by the highly enlightened Miss Ruth Faison Shaw, the first person to trademark finger-painting. Her school was on *Piazza Barberini*. Rome’s elite sent their children there as did American Embassy families. There’s a lot about Miss Shaw on the Internet. She was like a Rudolf Steiner teacher, and a quite progressive, determined woman. My Aunt Chrissy once tore off her shoe buckles. Miss Shaw could have that sort of an effect on children.

I’ve never heard my mother, uncle, or aunt mention a single dislike about their Roman childhoods. What they loved most was being in the kitchen with the maid and the pastry chef, who were living in sin together in the basement. After my family left Rome, the pastry chef became a butler to King Vittorio Emanuele III. He made the best profiteroles in the world, which my mother loved to gobble.

All three of them loved living in Rome because they spent so much time with these marvelous Roman helpers. They learned Roman dialect and how to make wonderful pastries. They had a series of nursemaids too. One of them, called Amelia, had lost her only brother in the First World War and took them regularly to weep at his tomb.

They truly loved Rome so that, when my grandfather was transferred to Madrid, they were all three utterly heart-broken and refused to learn Spanish. The one puzzling thing is that they seem to have been totally unaware of Mussolini’s, you might say, urban destruction or urban expansion ie. Fascist architecture. For examples, the excavations at *Largo Argentina* or the construction of *Via dei Fori Imperiali*.”

After World War II your mother returned to Rome. Why?

“She was frantic to come back to Rome because she’d left her heart here. On arrival in 1949 she was overjoyed to discover that so many of the people she’d met in her childhood were still here—the *fruttivendolo* on *Via Sardegna*, the *vini e olio* on *Corso d’Italia*, who remembered her parents. So picked up her Roman childhood where she’d left it.”

How and when did she meet your father?

“She met my father Howard Shaw who was a diplomat/novelist here in Rome in 1958. His best-known book is *The Crime of Giovanni Venturi*. He’d been stationed in Rome since 1955 perhaps. He was returning from home leave and was bereft having left his first wife and two infant children after a divorce. My mother insisted that he dance with her and they developed a very nice friendship. She already knew about Howard Shaw. His reputation preceded him. An American diplomat herself, she too was returning from home leave. Believe it or not, they were on your beloved SS Saturnia.

At the time my father was living out on the *Via Cassia* in a castle called “*La Spizzichina*”, which my mother pronounced early on as “much too draughty”, although she did humor him for some time there. Instead, she and my grandmother, who’d come to join her, had a huge, sunny apartment with terraces on *Via Bruno Buozzi*. Ingrid Bergman and Roberto Rossellini were their neighbors. My grandmother moved out when my parents got married in 1960.

A little backtrack: My mother lived in Milan before this. As I’ve mentioned, she came back to Italy in 1949 and lived in Rome for two years, working at the American Embassy. Then she was transferred to Milan for two years. She gave her nice Milanese boss one Negroni too many and this resulted in a transfer back to Rome in 1956. She had extraordinary adventures, thanks to her Morris Minor, with her Embassy and FAO friends. For example, once she went with a dear Embassy friend to see a famous Pinturicchio in the town of Trevi. The mayor, who was fast asleep, was awakened to show these two pretty American Embassy girls the Pinturicchio. He said he’d give it to them if they could arrange through the Embassy—this was in 1951—a new bus for his townspeople to connect them to and from the new station, far below the town (the Germans had bombed the old one much closer by). So they held the Pinturicchio in their hands and briefly considered whether or not they could find the necessary funds.”

You too were born and grew up in Rome; where have you lived?

“We lived in the same apartment on *Via Bruno Buozzi* until 1967. All my childhood memories are set there including an incredible snowstorm when I was two. It’s still talked about in Rome as “the great snowstorm of the 20th century”. ”

What are your likes and dislikes?

“I think I loved Rome as a child just as much as my mother did for much the same reasons. I loved how adults took such interest in small children. I loved bicycling in *Villa Borghese*; I loved the smell of *pizza bianca*; I loved my summers on the terraces; I loved our excursions to wonderful sandy beaches near Rome; I loved going to archeological sites as a small child.

I was 5 when we left Rome for Washington, but we came back when I was 12, after my parents separated, because my mother was so eager to have my childhood continue in Rome and her own heart was still here.”

You went to college in the US; why did you return to Italy rather than stay there?

“I felt unanchored in the United States. All my childhood and young adult memories related to Rome. I was eager also to use the art history that I’d studied at Bryn Mawr.”



Robert, Marjorie's husband, in Rovereto

You left again twice once, to New Haven, Connecticut, and Brooklyn Heights, and once to London, why did you keep returning?

"I left Rome when I was 29 to start my business. I lived in New Haven and Brooklyn Heights until I was 36, between 1989 and 1996. Then I moved to London until 2001 to pursue a Masters of Wine degree. You're right I came back three times: between the ages of 12 and 18, again between the ages of 22 and 29, and then at age 40 with a husband and a baby. I have no intention of leaving ever again unless we move to Finland!"

So you don't regret those decisions now?

"No, they were very much choices not just of the heart, but also of the intellect. I returned because I find life in Italy is much sweeter, much more varied, and much simpler than it would be in the United States. I celebrate the variety which living in Italy gives."

You are the founder and the owner of New-York-based "Marjorie Shaw's Insider's Italy", can you tell *La Voce's* readers exactly what you do and where to find out more about you and your business?

"When I returned to Rome, I continued to do what I'd done as a teenager—running specialized walking tours. Initially they were gastronomic walking tours but it quickly became apparent that people needed a lot more help than simply gastronomically. In 1989 pre-internet, pre-FAX machine, there were very few resources for people who wanted to make eclectic trips in depth to anywhere. So I envisaged a company, which would help people organize specialized trips to Italy based on their own interests and budgets. That's essentially what I still do. Mine are bespoke trips for small groups, friends, families, couples, who want to take trips that are entirely tailor-made to destinations of their interests and who want assistance with very special hotels, villas,

restaurants, and transportation planning, and most of all wonderful itineraries. The company is now 28 years old.”

What is your clients’ most popular destination?

“Rome by a long shot, but it’s also the most difficult because it’s so easy to do Rome badly. Rome is by far the most complex city we plan for. After London, I think it’s the most visited city in Europe. You can have a wonderful time in Rome, but you can have a terrible time in Rome. We want to make sure it’s the former. After Rome, our specialties are small towns and country locations in Tuscany and Umbria, the Amalfi Coast, Sicily, the Veneto, Florence, Venice, and the Dolomites.”



Marjorie, Santa Rosa, Amalfi

Why do your clients choose Italy over other European destinations?

“In size Italy is somewhere between Arizona and New Mexico, but offers inexhaustible variety in its geography, architecture, gastronomy, wines, history, culture, artisan production, climate, and dialects. A classic two-week trip to Italy might include Venice, Sicily and Umbria, each one of which is a country in itself. A trip to Italy seems like numerous trips. Even France, twice Italy’s size, cannot offer such a remarkable variety on so many levels.”

What percent come for the art?

“Some clients say that they’re coming specifically for the art, but then what most moves them is Italy’s inimitable landscape or a personal experience with a winemaker or an artisan, or with one of our guides. A fifth of our trips have an art theme – for examples, Piero della Francesca, Michelangelo or (and these we love to plan) introducing kids to the Renaissance or to Roman architecture. Once we planned a trip for children to castles in three regions – Puglia, Tuscany and Alto Adige; that was exciting to develop!”

What percent come for the food?

“Everyone comes for the food, and especially Slow Food. We try to include almost exclusively restaurants where local and seasonal traditions and foods are celebrated. We build into almost all countryside trips visits to local and traditional food producers. Everyone spends much more time at the table than they expect! Occasionally we plan a trip that is entirely gastronomic – for example in Emilia Romagna. In between meals and visits to Parmesan dairies, prosciutto producers, vineyards and balsamic vinegar makers, clients can also admire art and architecture, and try to work up their appetites for the next feast!

One trip we planned was for two couples who were vegetarians and adored legumes; we had them visiting Tuscany, Campania and Puglia and each day they tried a different restaurant with bean specialties, each one completely different from the other in terms of shapes, colors, flavors and preparation. Many of the varieties they sampled are at risk of extinction, and so it was for them compelling, besides being delicious, to sample and purchase the legumes on site, and learn about how and where they grow.

One meal, near Salerno, included *fauciariello*, *lardariello*, *suscella* and *minichella* beans, names as musical as the flavors!”

Franceschini, Italy's Minister of Culture and Tourism, has declared 2018 the year of “gastronomic tourism”; which region's food is the most popular with your clients?

“Everyone seems to think that the last region they visited had the best food! I think that for many clients, the coasts offer the greatest joy at the table because of vegetables for 12 months of the year, plus local fish with flavors and preparations that are specific to the place.

As the concept of diversity is central to Francheschi's declaration, I enthusiastically support it by actively promoting Italy's unparalleled culinary variety.”

What percent come to get married?

“We've planned Tuscan and Amalfi weddings twice, once intimately and once with a large family group, but also and more often, we've organized engagement celebrations, including surprise ones. These are wonderful fun. During the last one we planned, in the square of St. Peter's in Rome, the groom surprised his amazed bride by kneeling before her with a ring. She was sightseeing with her family and didn't even know that her fiancé was in Italy. We then planned four days of special celebrations.”

Do travelers ever come only to eat a certain seasonal food like white truffles in Piemonte or soft-shell crabs (*moeche*) in Venice?

“Yes. We recently planned a late September trip for a Canadian client, its theme being the flavors of the figs of his childhood (he grew up in the Mediterranean). He and his wife spent a week on the Amalfi Coast with our special guide Giocondo and sampled and foraged for magnificent figs of 12 different varieties, all the while, of course, also walking among the lemon groves, swimming, exploring Paestum and Oplontis, and trekking in the mountains. We've planned truffle trips and, a favorite, new-season olive oil trips (picking olives, making oil and tasting).”

What about for festivals like Spoleto, jazz in Perugia, Rossini in Pesaro or carnival in Venice or Viareggio?

“Yes, clients have come to participate in festivals including the *Black Celery* in Trevi, the *Gaite* or medieval market in Bevagna and the *Palio* in Siena. We've planned trips for travelers who've joined the *Transumanza*, the sight my mother loved as a child. We often join in too; it's one of the greatest walks in the world!”

Have you sent clients to every region of Italy?

“Yes, with one exception, Valle d'Aosta, the only Italian region I haven't yet visited.”

I'd be curious to know if someone has chosen Basilicata, Calabria, or the Marches, and if yes, why?

“For the very reasons you and I love to explore these off-the-beaten-track regions! So much of Italy is over-touristy and environmentally fragile. I think immediately of areas like Venice, Positano and Cinque Terre. We suggest that travelers visit these more obvious areas of Italy – including all major cities, and Cinque Terre – only between November and Easter. Venice, for example, is a dream during December and January. And in between Easter and October, we suggest focusing on regions that are off-the-beaten-track and that offer, when travels are well-planned, tremendous rewards. However, you don’t necessarily have to go so far afield as the Abruzzi and Marches when Viterbo is an example, just outside of Rome, of an unknown destination. The town’s medieval walls are superb, some of the best preserved in Italy, and the towers are tall and dramatic. Viterbo’s *San Pellegrino* district is one of the best places in Italy to get the feel of the Middle Ages, seeing how daily life is carried on in an architectural setting that is remarkably unchanged over the centuries. During the period when towns in Tuscany of comparable interest are over-run by tourists, here you can wander from one atmospheric square to the next, each one of a different shape and size, and each with a church, a fountain and one important palace. And no one is there.”

What percent of your clients return?

“About 50%. The business is almost exclusively word-of-mouth because we haven’t advertised since 1996.”

What has been your most outlandish client request?

“To close St. Mark’s Square so he could propose to his girl friend. That was impossible to achieve because a doge in the 1600s prohibited the closing of St. Mark’s Square for any occasion.”

What has been your most rewarding client request?

“I think I burst with pride with every trip. It’s a business which is hugely gratifying because clients start as clients and then invariably become friends. For example, when we married, half of our guests were clients. The nature of travel planning requires an intimacy and a sharing which is very valuable in both directions.”



Isabel at the Ducal Palace in Urbino (Ph. Robert Stark)

If you were your client where would you choose to go? Destination? Museum? Hotel? Restaurant?

“Sardinia because I’ve hardly ever been there and Marcella Hazan always piqued my curiosity in an wonderful interview once about its food. As for a museum, that’s a difficult one, but I think the Palazzo Davanzati in Florence; it’s the Museum of the

Florentine House. My favorite restaurant would be a small, family-run restaurant well-off-the-beaten-track. It has to combine passion with wonderful food and much of what they serve must be produced by them. I can think of about 80 that I love. One that could epitomize them might be in Trevi, “*La Vecchia Posta*”. As for hotels, the *Belmond Grand Hotel Timeo* in Taormina, which I’ve stayed in and I recommend. It represents everything which is great about Italian hotels: warm, sincere service; marvelous old-fashioned rooms but with exceptional practical comforts; old-fashioned touches like outstanding fruit in the room to greet you; sheets of the best-quality linen, soaps with the smells you dream of.”

You have lived in Rome almost all your life; all of us long-term residents know how it’s changed for the worse: garbage, potholes, broken sidewalks, crime increase, unreliable public transport, no subway for such a large city, but have there been any changes for the better?

“Lots. A variety of museums are open for longer hours even into the evening or during the evening. Although very few people may agree, I think you eat better than 15 years ago. In our neighborhood, there is a growing number of delicious and varied good stores easily accessible on foot. There is considerably more talking about food production, much more consciousness of food traditions that must be cherished and maintained. There’s such more access to organic and biodynamic ingredients. I think there is a real sense of the necessity to eat superbly to make sure we don’t lose these traditions. This is certainly true of Rome. I’m talking here only about Italian foods that you can cook because I don’t cook anything else. There’s much more conversation about food and access to ingredients than when I was a child.”

Do you think then that the Romans are more open about other topics?

“No, I think they are as stubborn and as provincial as they ever were. And they would say the same about themselves.”



Nathan (Ph. Robert Stark)

Your husband Robert is also American, but, as an adult, has lived in Poland, Latvia, Sweden, and The Netherlands, before your marriage; if not Rome, where in Italy would you like to live and why? If not Italy, where?

“I think we’d like to live in Lucca or in Rovereto. If not in Italy, NO PLACE.”

You have two teenage children, Nathan and Isabel, how American or how Italian do they feel?

“They call themselves, “Americani di Roma”. The only full-blooded Italian in our household is Teddy, our beloved *lagotto*.”

[Lucy Gordan](#)

Lucy Gordan

Italian Hours

Former editor at the American Academy in Rome and at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, with journalistic accreditation in Italy and the Vatican, I'm culture editor of the US monthly Inside the Vatican; European... [\[More\]](#)

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Isabella Di Valbranca

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isabelladivalbranca.com
isabella@isabelladivalbranca.com



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