

English people try to maintain a polite restrained decorum when it comes to looking at other people. People watching is mostly done from afar, and discreetly.

In Abruzzo and Italy in general, people watching is a sport. Watching tourists is considered super premium fun and foreigners are studied with the most attentive fascination possible. People watching and openly staring is perfectly acceptable, nay it is expected.

Italian culture is engineered around this staring concept and everyone tends to play up to and dress up for people watching. The "passagiata" or evening walk is the prime opportunity for this and you will see people swaggering around showing off the "bella figura" They swank around like peacocks displaying elegant outfits and designer labels. And don't even get me started about beach life in Abruzzo. That is like an open air fashion show.

At first it can take a while for Brits to get used to this. We feel decidedly uncomfortable with being microscopically studied. British city life has become cold and distant and people make great effort NOT to look at other people. They avoid eye contact at any cost. So what is the answer? The answer is simply to "STARE RIGHT BACK" To really get into the swing of things. This means doing something that is outrageously non British, coming right out of our comfort zone and being a little bit more Italian. If you are not able to do this you will find yourself a little bit freaked out by it all.

Before I arrived in Italy, my husband warned me about this type of behaviour but I was not prepared for quite how obvious the staring would be. In fact my first visit to Italy was Milan – the fashion capital of the world where people literally live to stare at each other. Every street is a cat walk and simply going out in public wearing half decent clothes means you are fair game for staring. Well one fair day we were waiting for a train on the subway platform. A well dressed middle aged Italian lady had her eye on me. She came up to me, without a word to a distance of about a metre. She meticulously studied my outfit from top to toe. In fact she walked round me circling me like a hunter. Clearly I was outraged by this and felt most uncomfortable. During this intrusive examination my husband smiled sympathetically and sweetly and could clearly tell that I was digging deep down within myself to resist the British urge to punch her!! However in her eyes she was paying me a compliment.

Some friends of our came over and visited Puglia, they went to a restaurant in the middle of nowhere that was full of rural local Italians. The mother of the family is 100% Indian with stunning dark skin and beautiful Asian features. Her kids are of white and Asian mix and are all blessed with bedazzling beauty. She complained to me that all the people were staring because they are Indian, I took the time to educate her that Italian people just stare for fun and it is socially acceptable. I also informed her that if we had walked into that restaurant we would also have been stared at with equal curiosity and fascination.

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