

## LIVING THE DREAM

# Savouring the Romance of *La Dolce Vita*

### “This is the Best Time of Our Life, We Are Free To Do What We Like”

Names: David and Sharyn Collins

Ages: 63 and 60

From: Melbourne, Australia

Living in: Sulmona, Italy

On a trip to the central Italian region of Abruzzo in late autumn David and Sharyn Collins stumbled upon their new home. “We stopped in Sulmona and fell in love with it. It is one of Italy’s best-kept secrets. Sulmona is right in the centre of a valley with lots of beautiful towns, unspoiled villages, castles and wineries scattered all around it in the mountains,” they say.

Quintessentially Italian, Sulmona offers everything you would expect in *Bel Paese* (a poetic name for Italy translated as “beautiful country”): history, good food and wine, friendly locals and a slow pace of life. “The church at the end of our street has a glass floor where you can see Roman ruins and beautiful mosaics. You have that feeling of history in the town and we love that,” says David. And it is only a two-hour drive from the Italian capital, Rome.

“This is the best time of our life, we are free to do what we like and Sulmona in Abruzzo is a wonderful place to be”, says the couple, who spend six months a year here. “We spend spring and summer in Italy and get the best of the seasons in both countries.”

The couple’s house is almost 300 years old, with lovely vaulted ceilings and some original features. David and Sharyn bought it renovated as taking on a big job was not part of their plan. They love being based in the old historic part of town and having a bit of movement and life about them. “The size of Sulmona is perfect, not too big, not too small. You have all the facilities and you can walk everywhere,” says Sharyn.

“It is a completely different way of living from Australia. It is much more about community living and we have terrific neighbours,” adds David. The couple have made many friends with locals and expats from different countries and feel that that

they are surrounded by like-minded people. “Overwhelmingly all of them are very positive about their life in Sulmona, some of them have been around Italy many times but have chosen this town to settle down,” says David.

Both agree that life in Sulmona is very affordable. “Food and restaurants are no more than two thirds of what it costs in Australia, so it is a big discount on the cost of living. It is nice when you go to the supermarket and carry a lot of stuff out without having paid much.” A large meal in a local restaurant can cost as little as \$50 although in some fancier places you might pay about \$90 in total.

### “It’s more about community here.”

Renting a car costs only about \$30 per day and gives David and Sharyn the freedom to discover Abruzzo and beyond. “We often go up to one of the towns in the mountains, have a light lunch there, pasta with a glass of wine. Or we might go to the coast, within an hour from us. Our favourite ristorante is Aldebaran in San Vito Chietino. Fantastic spot. We usually have the degustation menu—around 12 dishes that are each of good size for \$62 per person. The variety of fish and crustaceans from the Adriatic is incredible, and all excellent. And sometimes we have the whole restaurant to ourselves. It is a delight!” says Sharyn.

Sharyn and David, as pensioners and homeowners, have an elective residency visa (given to those who can afford to reside in the country without working) in Italy. They admit that it took them numerous trips to the police station to get it sorted but they persevered. The couple took out a travel medical insurance and are very happy with the local healthcare system. “We both have had small health issues and never had any trouble accessing doctors. In Melbourne, you are just a number, in Sulmona you are a person,” says David.

The couple do their best to learn Italian. They attend an Italian language school in Melbourne and use the [Babbel app](#). “Neither of us is very adept at Italian but it keeps you on your toes trying to speak. It is a completely different world here and that is what we find very stimulating in our old age, it keeps us going; we always look forward to arriving in Sulmona. As we drive down from Rome and see the town, it makes our hearts lift and brings a smile to our face,” says David.—*Anna Lebedeva*.

### “I Love the Ritual of Going to the Market”

Name: Rosemarie Scavo

Age: 30-something

From: Sydney, Australia

Living in: Turin, Italy

Eight years ago, Sydney native Rosemarie Scavo stepped out of a train station and saw the city of Turin in northern Italy. She was struck by its beauty and grand architecture. “I remember arriving at Porta Nuova station. It was late November and the weather was overcast, but the grey skies did nothing to diminish the beauty of the city’s centre, which features some fine examples of Baroque, Rococo, Neo-Classical and Art Nouveau architecture. In my heart, I knew that I had found the right city to move to.

“My intention was to stay for a year but I fell under the spell of a local man (now my husband!) and the city. I found there was so much to see and do. I liked how everything I needed was just a short walk or public transport ride away,” says Rosemarie.

Rosemarie has never regretted her decision. “Turin is a frontier city to me. Because it is on the border with France, it has a strong French influence in food and architecture. There are several former Savoy royal family residences in and around the city, modern and contemporary art galleries, excellent museums and regal art nouveau cafés,” says Rosemarie.

One of her newly acquired Italian habits is grocery shopping at farmers’ markets and now, like many of the locals, she has a trusted butcher and favourite vendors in her neighbourhood. Turin’s markets are among the best in Italy with their high-quality seasonal produce, delicious local cheeses and charcuterie, all reasonably priced. A weekly bill for market-fresh fruit and vegetables comes to around \$40. Rosemarie says, “I love the ritual of going



A major Turin landmark and the tallest museum in the world, Mole Antonelliano, stands out among the baroque style buildings of the city.

to the market. I feel it is a microcosm of the Italian culture. You'll find yourself looking on in admiration at the locals' bargaining skills with the vendors."

Rosemarie has no car, which is never a problem as Turin has good public transport. "I live five to six kilometres out of the city centre along the sole metro line, so I can get to the centre in 10 minutes. A one-way trip costs €1.50 (\$2.30) but I generally buy a weekly, €12.50 (\$19.40), or a monthly pass, €38 (\$59), as I use public transport to get around a lot."

Rosemarie admits that she would not be able to live in Sydney again. She appreciates the slower pace of life. "People are not in a hurry here compared to Sydney."

Teaching English in an international French school means that Rosemarie meets many expats. "I've been surrounded by expats since I came here. There is a big expat community here and there are many groups and associations such as the English Church of Turin, English Theatre Torino and the International Women's Club. In my experience, it's very easy to make friends."

**"It's nice to observe the changes of each season."**

The climate in Turin is very different from Australia, with hot summers and some snow in winter. "Italians love complaining about the weather but I don't mind the climate here. It's nice to observe the changes that occur with each season."

In recent years, Turin has become a foodie destination and Rosemarie loves discovering the city's culinary traditions, trying local dishes and experimenting with recipes in the kitchen. To share her

discoveries and stories about Italian life, she started writing a blog called [Turin Mamma](#). She says, "I enjoy writing about food and cooking. I love the cuisine of my adopted region and thoroughly enjoy recipe-hunting and researching the origins of Piedmontese and other regional dishes."—*Anna Lebedeva*.

### **"Idyllic Days Walking the Mountain Trails"**

Names: Carl Gardner and Sylvie Pierce

Ages: Both 67

From: London, U.K.

Living in: Sicily, Italy

We were drawn to Sicily the first time we visited. We love its rich history and architectural legacy, the friendliness of the people, the wildness of its mountains and the authentic food and wine. Sicily has a grittiness about it too—it is less manicured than much of central and northern Italy...

In 2004 we were on a walking holiday in the Madonia Mountains in northern Sicily and stayed near the lovely historic town of Polizzi Generosa. We thought it was perfect, with lots of trees, fabulous flowers, access to hiking trails, wonderful views and a plentiful water supply. Three months later we bought what became Casa Serena for €90,000 (\$139,880). It was just an abandoned brick and concrete shell, perched on a scenic hillside. It sat on 1.5 hectares of former agricultural land, including some 40 neglected olive trees.

From our home we have an almost 180-degree vista of rolling hills, mountain cliffs and the town of Polizzi Generosa sitting on its precipitous ridge. With the help of an architect, we re-designed the interior spaces. We also paid two Sicilian friends to project manage the job...and the local *geometra* (surveyor) was also an enormous help. It isn't large—the original

floor area was only about 100 square metres which we enlarged to about 120 square metres, to create three upstairs bedrooms and an open-plan ground floor. The form is fairly conventional; white-painted concrete with a traditional pitched tile roof, with large sliding glass doors to the terrace. But the level of traditional craftsmanship—ironwork, carpentry, tiling, stone-built terraces—is admirable. However, the construction was not cheap—as ever with these things we spent more than we intended—probably around €300,000 (\$466,322).

The purchase, bureaucratic planning process and construction took three more years. Because the house is within the Madonia regional park boundaries, planning rules are strict and all aspects of the design needed permissions from three authorities.

Living costs are low—local property taxes are minimal (€250 or \$390 per year). The wonderful food, including meat, vegetables, bread, cakes and other produce, is some 25% to 30% cheaper than back home (and more delicious). Eating in a traditional country restaurant will rarely cost you more than €20 (\$30) with wine (for example, great vegetable antipasti, a simple meat or fish dish, plus incomparable Sicilian ice-cream).

Healthcare is surprisingly good, with a large hospital some 20 kilometres away and a daily clinic in the town, and we do have reciprocal free healthcare arrangements.

Our experience of living at Casa Serena for half the year, since we retired in 2013, has been entirely positive. It is a wonderful, relaxing place to live and with local help, Sylvie has developed a lovely garden and orchard. The neighbours and townspeople are friendly and generous—for example our local supermarket owner gave us a house-warming present, and people frequently offer baskets of fruit, vegetables or pots of homemade salsa and jam.

And we have made many friends, mainly through meeting people in shops and cafés or on the streets—Sicilians are fascinated by foreigners and where they come from. It helps to speak some Italian (we have since learned the language, through regular classes in London and once a week while we are here).

Probably our best experiences have been idyllic days walking the mountain trails—the display of wild flowers in spring is simply unbelievable, the animal and bird life prolific and the views across Sicily are staggering.—*Carl Gardner*. ■