

Dress Like an Italian

A Mini-Guide to Italian Style

BY RICK ZULLO

rickzullo.com

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all of those who have been victims of fashion. Including me.

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Introduction

As the poet André Suarès once wrote, “Fashion is the best form of farce, though nobody laughs because everyone participates.” Nowhere is this truer than in Italy.

For anyone visiting Italy, glance around any random *piazza* and it’s easy enough to distinguish the tourists from the locals. The tourists are impossible to miss in any case, with the massive cameras around their necks and the city map that they’re struggling to decipher in the middle of the street. Even if the iconic fanny pack is slowly fading in popularity (thank goodness) nobody has ever mistaken an insurance salesman from Hoboken for Marcello Mastroianni.



However, the flipside of the phenomenon is no less fascinating. Since living in Rome for a while, I can now easily pick out the Italians in any crowd for the exact opposite reason—they always strive to look their best, to “*fare una bella figura*” (make a beautiful figure). This cultural trait is even more obvious when travelling abroad. If I’m in London, Paris, or New York and I see somebody wearing a big pair of designer sunglasses, regardless of the weather or time of day, I’m pretty confident that he or she is Italian. And then there is the combination of tight clothes, tanned skin, dark hair, and the leather shoes that are just a little more stylish than the occasion calls for.

Yes, Italians have a natural, inborn sense of style and good taste when it comes to fashion, clothing, and personal grooming. But “making a beautiful figure” is often mistranslated into “making a good impression,” and they are not exactly the same thing. Making a good impression also implies some positive character qualities, while making a beautiful figure is all about appearance. Even social graces and polite deeds are more about conspicuous displays of manners than virtuous behavior. Don’t trouble yourself further with the subtleties of this translation because the underlying meaning is clear enough: *appearing* beautiful is more important than *being* good when it comes to attracting attention.

However, appearance itself is more complicated than just looks. The ultimate aim is to impress, to shine, to be over and above the average guy on the street. You must be recognized and recognizable at any given time—even in a foreign country. Your way of moving, your manners, your gestures—they’re all important ingredients in making yourself appear exceptional.

This means that while a tourist or a foreigner might be able to capture “the look,” he or she cannot possibly hope to duplicate the entire aura. He or she doesn’t move the same, doesn’t act the same, and does not have the precise blend of [all the necessary qualities to fare una bella figura](#). It’s a complicated formula for those of us from other countries, but to the Italians it comes oh-so naturally.

Keep these larger themes in mind as we discuss dressing like an Italian. Yes, the clothes and accessories are the most visible signs to the watchful public, but they don’t tell the whole story. I can give you some advice on how to dress, but that certain “*non-so-che*,” or what the French call “*je ne sais quoi*,” you’ll have to figure out on your own.

Let’s start with some fundamentals, and then build from there. It will be helpful to have a few basic rules for reference at the outset for anyone who would like to spend some time in Italy without being the spottable Waldo in the room.

Three Basic Rules

“To dress badly you don’t *need* to follow fashion—but it helps.” - Ottavio Missoni.

As I’ve already implied, the delicate nuances will take a little longer to figure out, but if we start with three basic criteria, you’ll be well on your way to dressing with all the relaxed style and elegance of our Italian friends.

Rule 1: Keep it simple. This applies to both men and women. This means that you might have all the most exclusive Italian labels in your wardrobe, but if you throw it all together without taste and criteria, people might actually wonder if you casually rolled yourself in the closet with the lights off, and then reemerged with whatever remained attached to you. This is, unfortunately, a common mistake. Remember, you want to look like a Michelangelo painting, not a Jackson Pollack.

The general rule is as follows: if you have a stunning outfit with a colorful pattern or a prized blouse with a peculiar cut, or any other piece of clothing that attracts attention, please do not add heavy jewelry, big watches, fluorescent ties, or shiny, eccentric shoes. Finding a balance between clothing and accessories is fundamental. Vice versa, you can play as much as you like with accessories, jewelry, make-up, and shoes if the dress or suit is elegant and plain; unicolor and with a classical cut. In this case, the appropriately matched accessories will only add further value to your outfit and will show your personality. Don’t exaggerate, but have some fun with it.



It’s the same with colors, and we’ll go more into that topic later. But as it relates to our rule of simplicity, just remember that we should only incorporate a maximum of three colors into any outfit. This philosophy permeates many areas of Italian culture, including food and cooking, for example. Notice that most Italian recipes contain only three or four ingredients, and they are all easily distinguished, both visually and taste-wise. And so it goes with clothes, as well—too many “ingredients” spoil the overall flavor.

From this philosophy, several secondary rules emerge. For example, men should always match their belt with their shoes. You might be able to bend this rule on rare occasions when your outfit is plain and simple, and therefore some bold shoes or a funky belt might be the appropriate dash of personality in an otherwise “bland” outfit. Similarly for the ladies, you should always match your handbag and shoes. But again, this rule can be broken under specific circumstances that call for a certain degree of fashion risk.

However, for the non-Italian neophyte, it would be best to stick to the strictest interpretations of the rules for quite some time before venturing into these advanced techniques. To do so before you’re properly indoctrinated is fraught with peril. You jeopardize becoming a victim of fashion instead of its master. At that point you’re no longer wearing the clothes—the clothes are now wearing you.

Rule 2: Respect your body shape. This should seem obvious enough, but judging by the groups of tragically clad tourists in Piazza Navona, it’s not. Would you ever buy shoes that don’t fit you perfectly? Of course not! So why do women squeeze themselves into mini-dresses that are ready to explode? Or why would men wear over-stuffed shirts whose buttons are straining to contain the keg of beer inside an inflated belly? Clothes shouldn’t be too tight, but nor should they be too loose as if you’re concealing something, perhaps an entire other person, inside your outfit. Your apparel should lightly skim the body, as if just hovering a millimeter or two above your skin. Choosing not only the right size, but also the right cut of an item of clothing are two fundamental steps that insure we not only look good in our outfit, but also feel comfortable and relaxed, even during formal occasions.

So, are you the full-figured, hourglass type of woman? Avoid low waist trousers and add value to your shape with high-waist dresses. Opt for high heels for a long-legged, sophisticated look, and choose colors for your clothing that compliment your eyes and hair. Blonde women look good in light blue and army green. Brunettes do well with warmer hues, as well as brown. They can also wear blue or green, depending on their eyes. Redheads are particularly attractive in white and pale pink.

Knowing what colors highlight (or totally destroy) your skin tone and any other feature of your body is the most erudite trick that most women could benefit from. Bear in mind that the

smallest detail has a huge impact on the final look (we'll talk more about this in the "Accessories" chapter.)

And what if you're thin and you'd like to add some curves? You have a wide range of bubble skirts, pin-up fluffy skirts or soft fabric trousers to choose from (cashmere, silk, mohair etc.). All these items stress your thin waist and give some volume to your hips in a natural and glamorous way.

What should the men pay attention to regarding the proper fit? Well, Italian gentlemen teach us that the trick is in the right sleeve-length of the shirt (the sleeve should come out of the jacket approximately 2.5 cm) and in picking a shirt with the right neck size so that adequate respiration won't be challenged. A well-fitted shirt makes all the difference in your outfit. A good test is to tuck your shirt into your pants and have a look in a full-length mirror. If excess fabric gathers on the back or if there is material hanging loosely off the front, you have to get the next size down. If you are a slim man, look for the tapered-cut shirts that most manufacturers offer to eliminate this issue.



As for pants, nothing is more unsightly than a sloppy break. Current trends say that pants should barely touch the top of your shoe. For a more conservative look, have your pants hemmed a little longer to just hang a little past your ankle. You can't go wrong with that look.

To make sure that their clothes are just the right size, many Italians from all walks of life employ the services of a trusted tailor. They are very common in Italy, as the proper fit is paramount to good fashion sense.

Always remember that Italians follow the latest styles only when it adds value to their own figure and highlights their personality and points of strength. In the words of Gianni Versace, "Don't be into trends. Don't make fashion own you, but you decide what you are, what you want to express by the way you dress and the way to live."

Rule 3: A dress for the occasion. Italians don't tolerate clothing failures in everyday life, let alone when there's a formal event or a fancy pre-dinner drink (the so-called "*aperitivo*"). As day fades into night, you have to step-up your wardrobe accordingly. In other words, the later the hour, the more "formal" you should dress. Don't even think about going out for dinner wearing the exact same clothes you wore to work. If necessary, some women will carry a pair of high heels to the office if they have a social engagement immediately after work—a plain *tailleur* can be transformed in a cocktail outfit with different shoes and added jewelry, although this is somewhat uncommon. Italians are reluctant to make social plans immediately after work. Most would prefer to set the appointment for a later hour, giving everybody a chance to go home and freshen up. It's a matter of comfort, not to mention hygiene. It's outside the scope of this little guide to expound upon the many joys and benefits of the *bidet* (a.k.a. butt sink), but suffice it to say that this would be the perfect time of day to put this handy innovation of modern plumbing into good use.

If you are a woman, you'd probably want to switch to a smaller purse, more elegant shoes and an evening dress; possibly black, because you can never go wrong with that. Italian women wear more black and way fewer flashy items than American or British women. They also understand that bright colors like yellow and orange should be used sparingly, especially as you get older. Those colors look great on cute little *signorine*, but less so on elegant *signore*.

Now, if you like the androgynous Greta Garbo look, you can put aside the more traditional skirts and evening dresses and surprise everybody with a pair of tailored trousers and a matching jacket with soft silk foulard around your neck: the final look will be enriched by high heels and you can be sure that everybody in the room will notice your presence. This last type of look can be easily shown-off during winter because it gives the possibility to play with precious fabrics that not only make you look fabulous but will also keep you warm and comfortable.



For men, you can leave the same pants and shoes on, but change your shirt and tie for the evening. Speaking of ties, avoid hypnotic patterns or any kitschy prints displaying images of consumer products (tabasco sauce, beer brands), cartoon characters (Bugs Bunny, Spiderman), sports teams, or scenes from the Sistine

Chapel. You don't want to embarrass your friends/partners and honestly, you're the only one who finds them funny. And in Italy, they might even prevent you from getting accepted in many fancy restaurants, hip nightclubs or upscale cocktail bars. Oh, by the way, no sandals or shorts for men at night...ever!

These are the three basic rules to get us started, and everything else will build on these. At a first glance they may look overly simple, but actually it takes a little while to understand what is "too much," and to understand how to look good and feel comfortable in our own, stylish way.

How to Match Colors and Clothes

Let's build on the idea of simplicity. This is especially important when finding the right color match (*abbinamento*). For some reason, the seemingly simple chore of matching colors is possibly the most challenging idea for the average foreigner to grasp. Not everyone was blessed with a natural instinct to guide him/her in this delicate task. But it's crucial, because Italians are really fussy about what's the correct "*abbinamento*" and will wrinkle their noses at badly matched clothes. Some things just go well together and some things don't. [This goes for food](#), too. I mean, you wouldn't sprinkle cheese on seafood, would you? (Well, maybe *you* would, but an Italian would never.)

First of all, when matching colors it is necessary to remember that we have two main options (which is quite reassuring, isn't it?). We can choose one color and play with its different nuances (so called "*tono su tono*"), or we can create more bold looks by picking complementary colors and working with contrasting shades. Now, I can imagine the confused expression on your face when I tell you to match contrasting colors, but don't panic. I'll explain what it means in a bit. The most important thing to remember is that, in both cases, you can match up to three colors or shades, but no more! Do not fall into temptation—adding any extra color if you are not an Italian fashion expert will make you look like an "*Arlecchino*" (which is a fashionable look only during the "*Carnevale*").



So if you are a classic gentlemen and you love blue, you might choose a dark blue suit matched with a lighter blue shirt and a metallic, dark blue tie (also, combining different fabrics will add a final touch to your look), following the "*tono su tono*" criteria. Beware the *total* black/blue/white/ look unless you're a secret service agent (black), policeman (blue), or cabana boy (white). For the rest of us, the "total" look only fits certain occasions (i.e. if you are repainting your house, you are allowed to wear full white; all-black is appropriate only for funerals).



On the other hand, you might also enjoy a more colorful look by matching complementary or contrasting colors such as pink and purple, blue and orange, or grey and yellow. A pretty lady could, for example, wear a simple dark purple dress and spice it up with a subtle, pale pink purse and high-heel shoes. I would suggest such a look for an elegant *signorina*; it's a fresh and light summery look that is easy to pull off during the day, perhaps while sipping a Campari and Soda at a café table or browsing the beautiful “*vetrine*” (window displays) on Via Condotti in Rome.

Again, don't be too bold. If you are picking contrasting colors make sure that one of the two is light whilst the other is slightly stronger. Avoid the “paintball effect.” Colors and shades should be carefully chosen and should not give the impression that you just got caught in the crossfire of a random paintball fight.

But what about black and white? Yes, sure, these colors can never go out of fashion and almost every other color can be matched with either black or white. The exceptions are black and brown (forbidden!) and black and dark blue (allowed only if you are a soccer fan watching an Inter match at the *Stadio Delle Alpi* in Milan).

Black items can be worn even in the summer, as long as you add a splash of color with it. When in Italy, you might try to discover “the color of the season,” whether it's lavender or lime green or whatever, and then you can buy a small accessory item at a market in this new “hot color” to pair with the black item that you already have. A colorful scarf or pair of socks would be perfect. Same goes for white, of course, although don't go overboard with white during the colder months. Instead, you can wear “butter white” in the winter if you must.

This attention to colors, typical of the peculiar Italian taste, in matching nuances derives from a tradition of discriminating eyes educated by Italian fine art; from the love for classic paintings of the “*Rinascimento*,” (Renaissance) to the balanced sobriety of the neo-classical Roman statues. All of these cultural elements sink in, deep into the collective taste and popular knowledge, and get translated into everyday contemporary lifestyle. So my ultimate suggestion is to spend as

much time as you can strolling around the most beautiful Italian cities and getting caught up in this sophisticated culture, absorbing the fashion hints spread into every corner of this country. It's not "just" the clothes—this eye for esthetic detail is everywhere you look. And the more you observe it, the more you'll understand this intuitive ability.

Pants can be seen in all sorts of bright colors, such as green, pink, or red. Yes, even the men in Italy seem at ease wearing red pants. I don't suggest that you should attempt this look. You shouldn't. But notice the degree of confidence with which an Italian man wears red pants. Incredible.



Also know that it's not *only* colors. Matching the right pieces of clothing with regards to shapes and textures can make the difference between an elegant individual and a confused one. What I mean is that some items are explicitly conceived for specific purposes. Let's take gentlemen's V-neck pull-over sweaters versus round-neck varieties. How many times have you witnessed a man disregarding fashion's basic assumptions by wearing a round-neck pull-over sweater and a tie? (Aging college U.S. literature professors at universities in New England seem determined to promote this look.) Instead, V-neck pull-overs fit the purpose precisely. They allow the tie to properly peek out without giving the impressions that you have just swallowed a lemon.

As for the women, another common misconception regards leggings versus trousers. Too many times we come across women who don't really understand the differences between these two items. Leggings are complementary to short dresses worn during the day, or they can be matched to those soft, maxi tops which are usually cinched around your waist with a small chain-belt. Any other use should be banned from the streets! (The city of Milan is currently enacting legislation to prohibit this practice in public.) Leggings are not trousers, in the same way in that underwear is not beachwear. You wouldn't go swimming in your panties, would you? (It was a rhetorical question.)

Casual versus Formal

While buzzing through the *Bel Paese* on your two week holiday romp, you'll likely encounter Italians dressed in two different modes (even if you can't yet make out the difference). We could



say casual or formal, and that would be fairly accurate. But to the Italians, they don't really consciously make this distinction in terms of fashion. And in any case, there might be plenty of overlap between the two styles, depending on the season and time of day. Rather, they will dress themselves according to their tasks for that day,

considering carefully (although more or less unconsciously) all the people and situations that they might encounter along the way.

Unless it's a Sunday or holiday, you'll spot some folks who are going to work, and those who are only enjoying some free time buying the newspaper or walking the dog. Can you tell the difference between them? Please take a look around when you're on the Metro. You might notice that women headed towards their offices will wear below-the-knee skirts and dark jackets, whilst men will wear impeccable suits and polished shoes. An elegant mid-sized purse for the ladies and a sharp briefcase for the men. But what about those folks strolling the park or lingering for a while at the café? Yes, they too look very well put together, but notice that perhaps their clothes are a little more comfortable. Not in the American baggy jeans and XXL sweatshirt sense, but there's something more relaxed in their style. It's understated, but it's there.

The truth is that Italians learn at an early age the difference between casual and formal outfits. In fact, Italian schoolchildren are not required to wear a school uniform (this practice would never go over in Italy), and their parents are particularly keen on teaching them what is and isn't appropriate to wear in both formal and informal circumstances. Especially for the more mature generations, the way you decide to present yourself in public is your "*biglietto da visita*" (business card), and people will form their first impressions based on it. And I promise that this is true. There is a proverb in Italy that says, "*L'abito non fa il monaco*" which literally means "the frock doesn't make a monk" (translation: don't judge a book by its cover). But many

people, when talking about fashion, reverse this into, “*L’abito FA il Monaco.*” In other words, the outfit *does*, indeed, make the person. Don’t ever just “throw something on” because you’re “only” going to the grocery store. Who knows who you might run into, right?

Consequently it’s important to understand the environment for which you are dressing for and, if there is any confusion, don’t be afraid to ask for clarifications on the dress code for certain events. If you are still in doubt, always err on the side of over-dressing.

Casual Wear. So, if you decide that you are going to attend an informal cocktail party with your friends and you want to look “*bello*” but still casual, you can wear a full range of bright, colorful shirts matched with classical cut trousers. For the men, this is your moment to be a little more free and expressive. Polo shirts, linen shirts, stripes, squares, colorful patterns; almost everything is allowed as long as you keep in mind the aforementioned color-matching rules. Don’t get too excited and carried away with extravagant patterns, but feel at ease to show your personality a bit.

I shouldn’t have to say it, but there should be no Hawaiian prints, no t-shirts from a concert you attended 10 years ago, no “surfer” wear, and certainly nothing with cut-off sleeves. Furthermore, anything by trendy brand names like Mexx, G-star, Energie, FCUK, Sean Jean, or Hollister is not acceptable, especially after the age of 21. Good taste is something you should try to nurture in any given occasion, even if the ambiance is more relaxed. For a lasting impression, you want people to say, “Who was that nice-dressed man at the party last night?” and not, “Who was that guy with the paisley shirt and baggy jeans?”

For the ladies, instead, there is an infinite range of cocktail dresses with flowery patterns, stripes (and on and so forth) to be chosen amongst a variety of fabrics and different cuts. It’s practically impossible to even describe the abundance of options available to the *signora*, but one thing to always bear in mind is your age. No offense ladies, but Italian rules are inflexible on this point: skirts above the knee for ladies over 50 should be avoided (reduce this to 45 if you have children), and shoulders should be covered, as



so

well, by a refined “*stola*” or foulard, even in informal occasions. Uh-oh, I can already hear the ladies’ comments and objections: “But I could still pass for a twenty-something, what’s all this fuss about my knees?” Fair enough. You might very well be as fetching as you were in high school, but you’d be better off demonstrating that your charisma and good taste have matured with age, and that you have more intriguing ways of being seductive than reducing the length of your skirt.

Furthermore, even for younger women, you only want to show one asset at a time. If the skirt is short, then no cleavage, and vice versa.

Formal Wear. This last rule particularly applies to a more formal environment. Let’s say you are going for a job interview or to a fancy dinner. Being properly dressed up without showing too much skin is a sign of class, professional attitude, and personal confidence. You are not a child, but rather you’re a person whose opinions can be taken seriously. So, why don’t you pick a lovely, classical “*gessato*” (pinstriped) suit or a mono-color jacket/skirt combo to be accompanied with high-heeled dark shoes and a small black purse? Seems too “dark” for you? Yes, you could be right. In fact, to show a bit of personality even in your formal attire, you can add some tasteful earrings (red coral, purple amethyst or whatever color and material you might fancy) and an understated necklace or a lovely foulard. Avoid bracelets, as they usually bangle too much and don’t fit under tight jacket sleeves. You don’t need to look like a Christmas tree during a formal dinner or a job interview, and every accessory you choose has to be discreet and subtle. Leave all the shiny stuff for a Halloween party. That goes for heavy makeup, too.

(On a side note, given the “Cassanova” reputation of Italian men, revealing just a little something at a job interview can pay off at times. But it has to be subtle. I’m not encouraging this practice, but there you have it.)

For the gents instead, it is always appropriate to wear a white shirt (in fact, *always* white shirts in formal occasions, please) and a suit that can be, again, “*gessato*,” or plain— dark blue, grey, or black. Ties are to be chosen following the previous tips (I won’t repeat myself since you are good fashion students and have learned the basic rules). A touch of color can also be added with socks and a pocket handkerchief.

Yes, that's right; a good pair of socks can be a small detail that Italians know how to use in formal occasions. You can opt for plain colors or stripes, or a beautiful argyle that can be momentarily flashed when the trouser lifts up just a bit while you sit on a comfortable vintage chair in some fancy Venetian hotel. Instead, if you don't quite like the idea of showing off beautiful socks, you can always play with those little squared pieces of fabric that appear on your chest, comfortably snug in your left pocket of your jacket. Again, you can play with colors and fabrics so that your look is still formal and elegant, but different from anyone else in the room. The main point is that elegance doesn't have to be conformist and boring if you know how to finagle it just so. Moreover, if you want to add extra points to your "fashion score" and be the "*straniero*" who leaves everybody breathless for his style and sophistication, you can embellish your already refined look by adding a pair of silver *gemelli* (cufflinks), small shiny items that claim "*Si, Signore mie*, I know what I am doing and I'm doing it right!"



As you can see, deciding what to wear is not merely a superficial matter that concerns only the social elite, but it expresses how we present ourselves to the rest of the world, and this permeates every aspect of our social life. In a nutshell, what we wear tells a lot about who we are. It shows that we are aware of a certain casual or formal situation and that we are proactively adapting to the event. Not only that, it reflects on your upbringing and therefore is extrapolated to the qualities of your mother. Never commit the sin of embarrassing Mamma, whatever you do!

Il Buon Gusto

Maybe you've noticed that there's a central theme that runs through this entire discussion: good taste. This is a point that I could never stress enough, and it goes beyond just fashion. It encompasses every aspect of life in Italy. Beyond the importance of dressing well, it's just as important that you know how to pair the proper wine with your meal and match your sofa with your curtains. Manners are also important, as they demonstrate that you were raised properly in a good family with good taste.

Social context should always dictate how we behave so that, for example, if you are a gentleman visiting a "cattedrale" you will (hopefully) take your hat off, or if you are a lady you will (again, hopefully) put a scarf on your head and cover your shoulders. If you should forget this, someone will certainly give you a gentle reminder and possibly even offer you something to put on temporarily. These types of implied rules are not only for sacred places; every social situation, event, or even physical place requires its established dress code and mode of behavior.

Understanding this will save you from making poor figures (*brutte figure*) and receiving accusing stares that might send the *malocchio* (evil eye) in your direction.

For example, it is totally unacceptable for men to wear sleeveless shirts (tank-tops) in the city, even if it's really hot. This is exclusively a summer beach look but the offense here is not limited to fashion. Most probably, you stink like a monkey and nobody will want to stand next to you and your hairy armpits on the Metro. What's more, a sweat suit, no matter what the brand or how much it cost, is never acceptable outside of the gymnasium. Why? Well, it's not just because it looks sloppy (which it does), but because it sends the message that you simply don't care enough about yourself to make an effort to be presentable. In fact, it's much more of a reflection on your character than your wardrobe. A man who dresses himself with such disregard for good taste cannot be taken seriously.

And ladies, what should you do when Mother Nature has been a little too "generous" with the curves? Again, it's always a matter of good taste and self-respect. Italian rules of good taste suggest that a lady should leave only three buttons undone on her blouse, so that her chest can still breathe and be part of her look without being unnecessarily exposed to everyone else's inquisitive eyes. In general, avoiding transparent fabrics or revealing pieces of clothing are correct fashion choices that show more of your personality and less of your private parts.

Likewise, show some discretion with your makeup. Sensual beauty is very much prized in Italy (Sophia Loren made a career by exploiting this subtle art), but too much makeup and painted nails makes you look cheap and, frankly, like a tourist who lacks refinement and sophistication. Again, we can blame it on the Italian men whose stares and comments on the streets have taught women not to seek *too much* of that sort of attention through clothing choices and makeup.

This discussion also concerns those micro mini-skirts that look more like the product of a recycled handkerchief. How many times have you seen ladies struggling with those ridiculously small pieces of fabric, trying in vain to cover their bikini area from public view? It would be so much better (and more alluring) to add just a couple of centimeters to the hemline and you could still show off your legs without giving away too much. Sure, everyone likes to be noticed, but Italians have a lovely saying that goes, “*Meglio farsi scoprire che scoprirsi*” which means that it is better to let others “discover you” than facilitating the task for them by voluntarily undressing yourself in public. Always remember that your clothes should *add* value to your body image instead of making you feel uncomfortable and restricted—not to mention naked.

However, some parts of your body should be revealed. It is polite and proper for both men and women to take off their sunglasses on two main occasions: when entering a building, and, even when you are in the sun, when you are speaking with somebody directly. Yes, please take off your Ray Bans and show the integrity of your beautiful face to your listener. If you really can't stand the strong sunlight (ok, you are forgiven since, as a foreigner, maybe you come from a rainy country and you are not quite used to bright light) you can always take off your glasses, exchange a few words with your friend, and then ask the other person if he/she minds if you put your sunglasses back on. In this way you will show that you are a well-travelled, polite “*straniero*” with a deep knowledge of the local culture.

Yes, good taste also includes good manners. The Italians are big on using formal titles and refined forms of speech in their daily lives. [Their language](#), like most Latin languages, contains a “courtesy form” of address that should be used when speaking with strangers, elders, or people of a higher social status. What's more, you should never dive right into a conversation without offering a few pleasantries first.

“*Buongiorno, come sta? Come sta sua moglie? Ed i suoi bambini?*” Good morning, how are you sir? How is your wife? And your children?

The *stranieri* are excused if they don't know how to use this courtesy form, but for an Italian it would be unacceptable to address a stranger, a supervisor, or an elderly person using the familiar “*tu*” form. They're also very concerned about titles: note the baker greeting the gentleman behind you with, “*Buongiorno, Dottore! Cosa Le serve oggi?*”

And Italians love to complement each other's outfits. “*Che bella camicia che indossa oggi!*” What a beautiful shirt you're wearing today!

Trust me, Italians absolutely love an overt display of manners and good taste for all things—but especially when it comes to clothes and accessories.

The Change of Seasons

Most travelers to Italy choose to visit in the warmer months, which is certainly understandable. But there's much to enjoy in the off-seasons, too, not the least of which is the lack of crowds and scarcity of fellow tourists. The autumn is a time when the grapes are harvested and stomped and fermented into the heavenly nectars of Chianti, Barolo, and Nero D'Avola. In Rome, the street vendors sell their warm chestnuts to locals and tourists alike as they stroll down Via del Corso during the evening *passaggiata*. While visiting Venice in the winter you can watch the fog, *la nebbia*, creep across the lagoon and settle upon the city like a great gray ghost. In the Alps, people make Vin Brulè, or hot chocolate, to keep them warm by the fire, while a quilt of white snow unfolds down the mountain to cover the trees and buildings of the little villages.

But the change of seasons doesn't only refer to the weather—it also signals the time of year when the entire summer wardrobe is stowed away and the sweaters reemerge from their dormant state. This is the so-called “*cambio di stagione*,” and it's an important event that occurs twice a year in every Italian home.



Most foreigners have all their clothes in the same closet; wintery gloves mixed up with bathing suites and ski equipment. Italians don't. And at this point you might think, “Of course they don't, do they do anything that the rest of the world does?” But as weird as it may sound, Italians only keep the appropriate clothes for the appropriate season in their wardrobe at any given time. You can be 100% sure that as soon as the first rays of spring sun slip through the breaking clouds, Italian women will be ready to take everything out of their closets, and clean off every single shelf, corner and internal/external wall of the aforementioned closet. Then they wash everything from the passing season that they will not wear for another year, put it all into another storage-wardrobe or box, and fill the shiny, fresh and clean wardrobe with the spring clothes that have been patiently waiting to reemerge. Whew! Don't you feel tired after only having read this?

Even though all this work might seem a bit unnecessary, I promise it's for your own good. First of all, if you are the eccentric type of person, you won't fall into the temptation of mixing unmatchable clothes from different seasons. Secondly, the “*cambio di stagione*” will save you

an endless amount of time when picking the right outfit since you won't need to dive into an ocean of random clothes before getting the ones you need on a rainy day. Thirdly, you could be a step ahead of everybody else and organize your whole wardrobe according to the type of occasions in which you would wear certain clothes. For example, the top right side of the wardrobe could be for clothes you wear on the mountains whilst a more accessible lower right side of the wardrobe would be dedicated to work clothes. Finally, by making the "*cambio di stagione*," you will have an opportunity to see if you have clothes that you no longer need or (let's be honest) that don't fit anymore because of a bit of weight gain during the winter months. It's a good time to donate unwanted items to a charity or pass them off to your younger siblings.

However, the careful reader might have noticed a potential problem here. What if, after one glorious weekend preview of spring, the weather turns cold again for several more weeks? This is the price of being "*alla moda*," my friends. Once you've changed your wardrobe for the year, there's no going back. The practical Italian anticipates this and is not fooled by a few spring days in early March. That's why you'll often see Italians still wearing winter clothes (including heavy jackets) well into May. In fact, to be more accurate, one is well-advised to look at the calendar and *not* listen to the weatherman. Dressing appropriately for the season has nothing to do with the temperature outside and everything to do with the established rules of fashion.

Accessories

In Italy, carefully selected accessories are a crucial component to any wardrobe. Specifically, Italians have mastered the art of the scarf and dark sunglasses, which serve for both form and function. However, it must be said that the most important element of your ensemble is undoubtedly your shoes. Notice when two Italians meet each other it doesn't take long for the gaze to drift downward to the *scarpe*. It's important to understand that an inexpensive dress can always be improved by a great pair of shoes. But *not vice versa*.

A word of caution for the ladies visiting Italy: beware the *sampietrini*! These are those beautiful black paving stones that are so common throughout the country, but are especially notorious in Rome. Indeed, the name comes from *Piazza San Pietro* in Vatican City, which is completely paved with them. They have a reputation for sabotaging expensive designer shoes in the blink of an eye. You see, the space between these stones is just perfect for trapping and then snapping the *tacchi* (high heels) from the rest of the shoe—just ask former First Lady Laura Bush, who was a victim of their perils. Get to know your local *calzolaio* (shoemaker)!



Regarding sunglasses, spending a little more money on this accessory will go a long way towards creating “the look” of Italian style. Italians love their designer brands, and Ray Bans are particularly popular, as are Gucci, Prada, and Furla. Many types of frames are acceptable, as long as they're not too small. And lenses can be any color, but I would suggest that they not be too dark and certainly you should avoid the mirrored lenses. You *want* people to recognize you—but at the same time you don't want to give away too much.

I should also mention that people who wear glasses for more practical purposes (like seeing) can, and should, use these to show off their fashion sense, as well. Italians prefer styles with clean simple lines and rectangular lenses. But unlike the sunglasses, opt for designs which are smaller rather than large.

Scarves are essential accessories for both men and women and can be a real “wardrobe expander” for travelers. They can spice up an outfit that you've already worn three days in a row

and can be thrown into a bag or purse to pull out when the sun sets and the weather gets chilly. Nothing says European-chic like a light weight scarf worn with jeans and a casual jacket. These little swaths of cloth are perfect for expressing personality through color and fabric choices while the rest of the outfit remains the mere backdrop to showcase this versatile accessory. As with anything, play with colors to make a glamorous effect or picking out a detail of your shirt to match.

Lots of Italian men use messenger bags (*borselli*), which are especially useful when zooming around on a Vespa. Choose leather, of course, and nothing too complicated. No big logos or unnecessary hardware attached to the exterior. The man-bag should blend in, not stand out. You can never go wrong with black or dark brown, or opt for tan if you want to be a little more spirited. It should always be worn over your neck and across your chest—NOT over one shoulder the way a woman would carry a purse. Since the pants are so tight, you might just need one of these messenger bags in order to store your wallet and house keys.



There are certain accessories that never go out of fashion and that you absolutely won't have to hide during a "*cambio di stagione*." Let's start with a "must" for the ladies: the ubiquitous small black purse with a precious chain-handle. This little gem spans across decades, and you can see its early appearances in the 1920s black and white movies. Nowadays, it is on every red carpet. In the same way, a short, black dress will probably survive any occasion and, by only exchanging accessories and shoes, you can adjust its mood, turning it from a day dress into an evening one. One more thing that gives a classic and elegant touch to literally any outfit is white pearls. Yes, earrings, necklaces or bracelets are also a must, and every woman should have at least one of these items on hand for special occasions.

Men don't have as many options when it comes to accessorizing beyond a wristwatch and tie. To kick it up a notch, you could learn the art of the pocket square. The simplest pocket squares are white with a colored border. It's probably best to match the pocket square with the color of your tie, but since it is such a small piece of fabric, you are free to go wild and pick something

with a subtle pattern or contrasting color. The simplest way to arrange one of these little swatches is to lay out it flat, then just pick it from the center and stuff it in your jacket pocket.

Speaking of ties, gents should also keep at least a couple of nice *cravatte* to wear in formal occasions. Two or three solid colors and two or three with very simple patterns will do. You never know if an important event will suddenly come up and you don't want to be the one rejected at the door without a decent tie. Following this reasoning, make sure you have a nice pair of leather shoes (obviously Italian ones) so that in any circumstance you will look thoughtful and sophisticated. The color is up to you, although dark colors are usually easier to match with suits and coats. Spend more money on each pair and buy fewer pairs—real men only need three or four. And of course, your shoes always have to be well-polished—dust is *not* part of the look!

For men, your wristwatch might be the second most important accessory after your shoes. It doesn't have to be a two thousand dollar Rolex, but it shouldn't be a Day-Glo Timex, either. It should be simple, but elegant—nothing too ostentatious. Technically, it should also keep time—although you'd never guess this by the lax attitude toward punctuality in Italy.

Oh, and one last thing: make sure your wallet is of good quality and condition. You don't want to spoil your whole beautiful image when you have to pay the dinner bill.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

Now this will be a moment in which you might possibly recognize yourself in some fairly awkward couture mishaps. I can imagine your faces turning into a guilty, fearful expression while you are mentally browsing all the possible fashion heresies that you have unwillingly committed to date. But this is not the time for shame—no, this is the time for redemption. This is when you will be born again as a *fashionista*, an enlightened foreigner that will never again think to wear a “I’m with stupid →” t-shirt to a restaurant.

Let’s start from a common mistake that both men and women are wont to commit. Yes, I’m talking about that lamentable species of knee-length trousers, often referred to as “cargo shorts/pants.” C’mon! You are not on an African safari or fishing the Outer Banks, are you? So if you want to avoid looking like Indiana Jones, I would highly recommend abandoning such a look. You might be wondering why this seemingly harmless garment can cause so much distress among the fashion conscious. Well, besides the fact that it looks ridiculous (subjective opinions aside), this length of shorts/pants causes an optical illusion in which even a leggy runway model would look like a midget. Therefore, unless you play in the N.B.A. or are planning a trip down the Amazon River, ditch the “adventurer” look once and for all. You just look clumsy, not sporty.

Of course, the ladies want to feel comfortable while strolling the many beautiful *piazze* and so many like to wear flats (ballerinas) instead of heels. It’s OK, I mean, flats are lovely if you don’t wear them with those maxi dresses or gipsy skirts (which are of questionable taste, if I can add an off-topic opinion here). Ballerinas with long dresses produce the same midget-effect of the aforementioned trousers with the additional fault of giving you an awkward look, so that even the fittest woman on earth will look like a penguin caught in a fabric trap while walking down the stairs or sitting on a train.

Let's now pass the ball to those gents who can't live outside of their beloved gym shoes. They are called "gym" shoes for a reason—can you guess what is it? Yes, that's right, because they are meant to be worn only in the gym or during some sort of athletic activity. For Italians, somebody who wears gym shoes to a social event is indirectly saying, "Yeah, I know I should do the right thing, but I couldn't be bothered to pick out something nicer." This is a real offence to the rules of good taste, as if you're thumbing your nose at every sacred commandment of Italian culture. The opinion formed of you by others will reflect this attitude.



So gentlemen, if that isn't enough incentive for you, then know this: Italian women will definitely notice your lack of culture and treat you accordingly. Therefore it's in your own best interest to lose the backwards baseball hat and instead wear some grown up accessories.

You know what? This is getting confusing, isn't it? I'm going to make this particular discussion a little simpler for you. Let's summarize some of these sins in a list of definite "no-no's."

Cardinal Sins of Fashion:

Don't wear flip-flops unless you're at the beach or pool.

Lose those white, shapeless, fisherman's hats. Yes ladies, I'm talking to you, too.

No fanny packs. I shouldn't have to mention this one, but one glance around Piazza Navona tells me that it's still necessary.

No short-shorts, micro-mini skirts, or tank tops. Have a little dignity, for the love.

If you, your spouse, and your children are all wearing matching outfits, then one or more of you looks totally ridiculous. And it's probably not your children.



No socks with sandals. I almost wrote that you shouldn't wear white socks with sandals, but honestly, once you've made the decision to wear the socks, does the color really matter?

No do-rags or skull caps. Very few people pull off this look—and you're not one of them.

No American/British flags emblazoned on your clothing. The locals know where you're from, believe me.

Furthermore, no Italian flags on your clothes—again, for the same reason as above.

No Bermuda shorts. Unless you're from Bermuda.

Nothing made of lycra, spandex, or see-through mesh. I realize that you want to be comfortable, but nobody really wants to see all that.

No silly t-shirts with clever sayings. (Example: “If you like my meatballs wait till you see my salami!”)

No *Godfather* t-shirts, either. It's insulting to everybody. And why *Scarface*? Yes, Al Pacino is a great Italian-American actor, but the *Scarface* character is actually Cuban, people.

Bright-colored shoes, impudent amounts of jewelry, complicated headgear, and other strange accessories should be reserved only for *Carnevale*.

These suggestions certainly won't help you dress like an Italian, but at least you won't bring too much shame on yourself and your country of origin.

Summary

Italians are known world-wide for their fashion sense, and they tend to dress well whether going to the opera or just to the grocery store. They have a reputation for creating a sense of style that not only compliments the body, but also expresses the true inner self. But never in a loud, ostentatious way—always with taste and discretion. Yes, appearances matter in Italy. It's wonderful if you have a good heart and a sharp intellect. But Italians would further expect you to have a nice haircut, a refined sense of style, and a really beautiful pair of leather shoes besides.

Dressing well is a way to show other people that you are someone. Americans do this through their homes or cars but not generally through their clothes. You could oversimplify it by saying that Italians place emphasis on appearances while Americans value the conspicuous spoils of achievement. I'm not sure if that's entirely accurate, but it's a starting point.

Lastly, it's all how you carry yourself. YOU are making your outfit beautiful by the way you wear it—the outfit won't make you beautiful if you don't have a good “*portamento*.” And for goodness' sake, don't rush about. Italians are never in a hurry, unless they're speeding down the *autostrada*. Walk as if you're getting paid by the hour and you know that people are admiring you and your sense of style.

Now let me congratulate you *Signore e Signori* for having completed this crash course in dressing like an Italian. You've successfully navigated through the do's and don'ts, the strange rules, the “illogical” tips, and all types of counterintuitive suggestions to assist you in the monumental task of blending in with the natives. No question, you've also endured no small measure of ridicule, which you've handled with all the grace and dignity that your new attitude requires. In order to accomplish this feat, you have said goodbye to your favorite white socks (I hope), you have burnt your favorite pair of worn out tennis shoes, and you have even promised to attempt the daunting “*cambio di stagione*.” *Bravi!*

All of these things are truly honorable, and it doesn't matter if you can't yet match the colors perfectly and you don't quite understand the rationale behind an after-work *bidet*. Remember that Rome wasn't built in a day and in the same way, Italian fashion took centuries to mature. We'll give you time to catch up, don't worry.

Keep on trying and experimenting. Have fun with it and find some Italian friends that will make this fashion journey even more enjoyable (at least for them, as they will undoubtedly have a laugh or two at your expense). I have to leave you to your own judgment now. Hopefully I'll see you around town the next time you visit Rome. Or actually, perhaps I won't notice you at all, since you'll perfectly blend in with the locals. My work here is done.



About the Author

Rick Zullo is an American expat living in Rome with his Sicilian wife. Born in Chicago and raised in Florida, he came to the *Caput Mundi* in 2010 and forgot to go back. When he's not exploring the riches of his adoptive home or writing for his blog, he spends his time teaching the world English, one Roman at a time.

Rick's blog is at rickzullo.com and you can also find him on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). He invites your comments, questions, and even criticisms.

You can find his other books on Amazon.com:

[*Teaching English in Italy*](#)

[*Eat Like an Italian*](#)

[*Talk Like an Italian*](#)

[*Live Like an Italian*](#)

There will be one more book to round out the series, can anyone guess the title? Here is a hint based on this Italian proverb:

“Da quattro cose l'uomo si fa capire: dal parlare, mangiare, bere e vestire.”