Dreaming of Italy

For centuries English aristocrats and poets headed south seeking culture and sunshine on what became known as **The Grand Tour,** much of which was set in Italy. Behind the wheel of a very modern-day Ferrari Roma, Stephen Bayley imagines himself following in the illustrious footsteps of intrepid travellers from Dr. Johnson to Lord Byron

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Emulating Sir John Mandeville and Thomas Coryat, the Ferrari Roma takes in the exotic setting of Venice

Europe's greatest writers are Dante and Shakespeare. Dante created imaginary heavens and hells which haunt us still.

Shakespeare created an imaginary Italy fixed forever in the world's imagination: *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice* are just his two best-known plays with Italian settings. But *Much Ado About Nothing* is set in Messina and *The Taming of the Shrew* in Padua. Prospero's island in *The Tempest* is probably the Aeolian Vulcano.

In all, ten of Shakespeare's plays have an Italian context. But there is no evidence that Shakespeare ever actually left the British Isles. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* he writes of "sailing to Milan". Of course, anyone who has ever been to Milan knows that it is not a sea-port! But the English vision of Italy is more about dreams than realities.

Then in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, when Wales exported coal to Italy and Italy exported labour to Wales, a significant transaction occurred. The result was an astonishing network of Italian cafes in this wild and beautiful part of Britain, something unique in all of Europe. Many still exist. You find Sidoli's in Rhyl, Forte's in Llandudno, Marubbi's in Wrexham and Cresci's in Skewen.

The legacy of this is that *pizza* is a national dish in the UK and that *cappuccin*o rivals tea as a diurnal beverage. In the recent virus calamity, the first commodity to be exhausted on supermarket shelves was. . ..*pasta*. More *prosecco* is drunk in the UK than anywhere else on the planet.

In between, came the invention of The Grand Tour. No other European aristocracy attached so much significance to visiting Italy as the English. The expression 'Grand Tour' makes its first appearance in Richard Lassels' *Voyage of Italy* which was published in 1670. Although here the 'Grand Tour' refers to the necessary transit of France. Quite correctly, Lassels says that, once in Italy, it is a 'Giro'.

But to the Grand Tourists, France was really a distraction. They were not even much interested in Versailles or Fontainebleau. Although pleasures were to be had in Paris : here the *milordi* would stop to buy bright clothes and do a little anticipatory whoring. But Italy was always the dedicated focus. Only here could young Englishmen be polished into a serviceable version of humanity.

The prestige of Italy was such that the great *Dictionary* author and diarist Dr. Johnson said a man who has not been there "is always conscious of an inferiority". He even suggested that the very purpose of travel was to see the Mediterranean. And D.H. Lawrence (probably thinking of wet English Sunday afternoons) gloomily said the Englishman only feels comfortable when travelling south.

Unfortunately for the English wishing to travel south, the Alps presented an obstacle. Descriptions of crossing the terrifying mountains enliven three centuries of travel writing. Moncenisio was the favoured route. Wolves, precipices, cliffs and horrid vistas were all dutifully described. Until the rail tunnel opened in 1871, Grand Tourists had been required to abandon their coaches on the French side and be carried on a litter (*chaise a porteurs*) along a fearfully narrow and unguarded ledge cut into the mountainside by the Duke of Savoy in the early eighteenth century. ››

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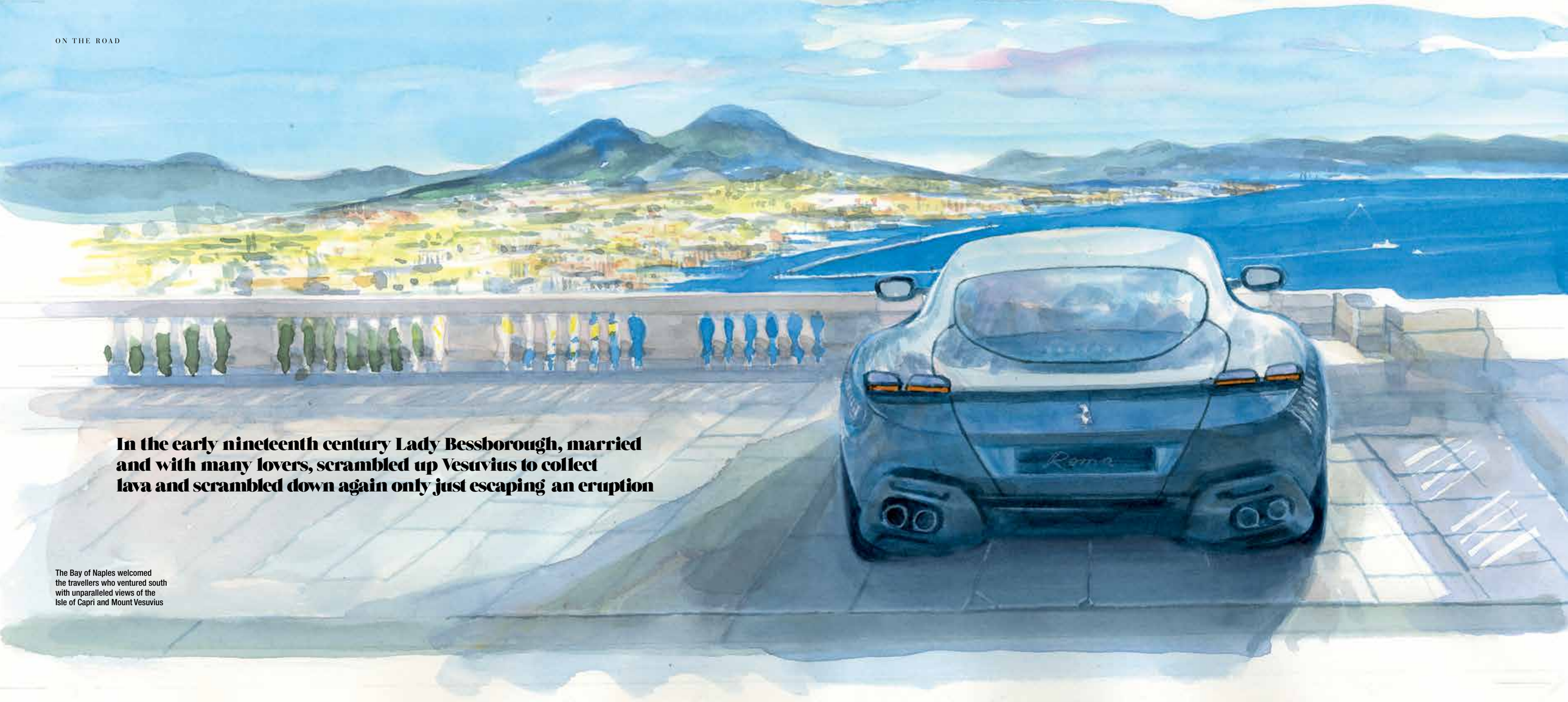
For 19th century travellers the Moncenisio Pass was the preferred way through the Alps. It was an often strenouos crossing that filled the pages of many travel journals

Following in the historic footsteps of three-times visitor Queen Victoria, the elegant Ferrari Roma slides into Florence's Piazza Duomo

The English community paid for the façade of the Santa Croce Basilica and gave Florence its reputation as the world's leading city of Art



In the early nineteenth century Lady Bessborough, married and with many lovers, scrambled up Vesuvius to collect lava and scrambled down again only just escaping an eruption

The Bay of Naples welcomed the travellers who ventured south with unparalleled views of the Isle of Capri and Mount Vesuvius

Once across the Alps, Italy's smaller towns were not much favoured. Modena was "melancholy" whilst Bologna was known for lap-dogs and sausages. Instead, the first destination was Venice : fabulous, magical and exotic. Especially to travellers who had left, say, Somerset or Lancashire.

The earliest English reference to 'Venyse' occurs in Sir John Mandeville's *Travels* of 1357, but it was Thomas Coryat's *Observations of Venice* of 1611 which established the trope, still valid today, that Venice is the most beautiful city in the world. The English perspective on Italy is, indeed, a long one.

But not every English visitor was so appreciative. The historian Edward Gibbon described Venice as "old and generally ill-built houses, ruined pictures and stinking ditches". To Gibbon, the Piazza San Marco had "the worst architecture I ever saw".

And many visitors found Florence grim and grave. Although Lord Byron was "drunk with beauty" after visiting the galleries, his evenings were evidently very boring. Time was spent with Shelley shooting pumpkins with their pistols.

Rome was the ultimate destination. There was Michelangelo and Raphael, but most of all there was Antiquity. The high-point of The Grand Tour was the 15th October, 1764 when Gibbon "sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the bare-footed friars were singing Vespers in the Temple of Jupiter". And this inspired him to write the incomparable *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

It was not just the glories of Rome and Naples which appealed. There were always side-trips. From Milan, Grand Tourists would visit Domodossola and the lakes. From Florence, Fiesole and Vallombroso. From Rome they would visit Tivoli, Frascati and Albano.

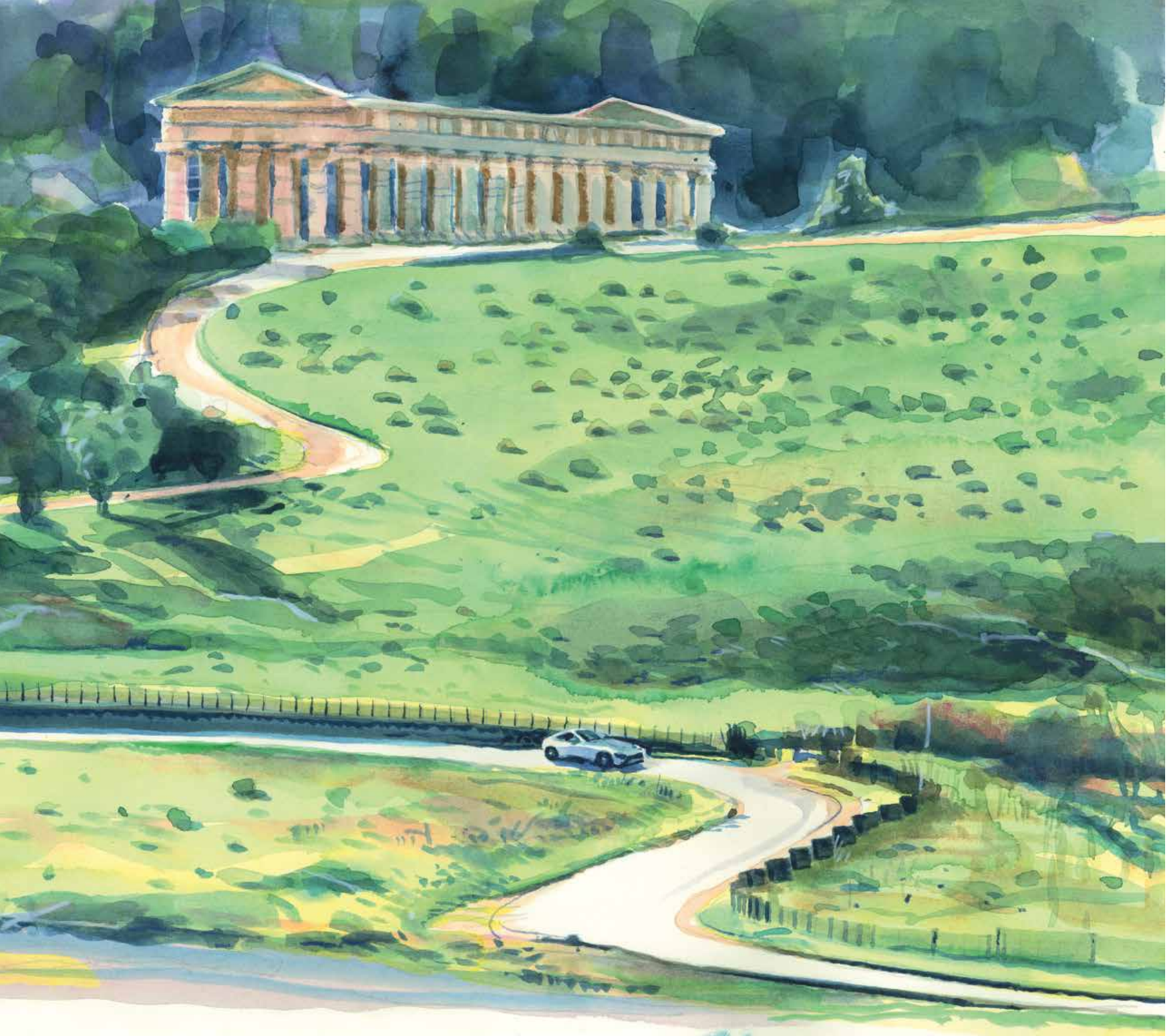
The Grand Tourists enjoyed the Roman *campagna* painted by Claude: an oneiric paradise of nymphs and ruined castles. So much did the Frenchman's vision of Italy affect English taste that a fashion emerged for travellers to carry a convex tinted mirror that became an instrument of transformative magic. The 'Claude Glass' improved nature, wherever it was, by making it look Italian (Forgetting the absurdity that the user had to stand with his back to the view! But, this is a story of fantasies more than of realities).

When in Venice, travellers would find The Lido, Mazzorbo, Chioggia and Burano were distractions. From Naples, Capri and Vesuvius. Lady Bessborough – much married and with many lovers - scrambled up the volcano to collect lava and scrambled down again only moments before being engulfed in a pyroclastic atrocity. Such was Lady Bessborough's commitment to Italy, she died in Florence.

The more intrepid travellers went further south still, exploring the fearful and austere temples at Paestum or Segesta, the latter nowadays visible from the Palermo-Trapani *autostrada*. In Paestum, the Scottish solo traveller Craufurd Tait Ramage braved bandits, scorpions and snakes armed with nothing more than a straw hat, intense curiosity and a tightly furled umbrella.

Women were a part of the adventure as much as Art. Dr Johnson believed that wild young men best be wild abroad. Ramage wrote to his mother from Naples that "I do not think I will remain a bachelor". James Boswell continuously contracted sexually transmitted diseases which punctuated his pleasures. Although he noted in a letter to Rousseau that in Turin his "detours of delicacy" made the forthright ladies of Piedmont think him a "peasant or imbecile" because he did not "head straight for the main chance".

Sex and drink played their part. The manners and morals of Grand Tour Naples may be guessed at if I say that Emma Hamilton, wife of the ››



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Anderloni and Ponzoni's carrozzeria workshop in Milan was named 'Touring' in deference to the English influence upon travel and Italy

British envoy, also became the mistress of the naval national hero, Lord Nelson. At Neapolitan parties, Lady Hamilton would perform her "Attitudes" dressing up as Medea or Cleopatra and striking lascivious poses for the gamblers and drinkers.

Every Tourist enjoyed the food. Or almost everyone, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (who drowned near Lerici in 1822 after writing *Prometheus Unbound* in the Baths of Caracalla) was astonished to find that Italian women ate garlic. One lady traveller insisted on eggs in their shells since that would be the only uncontaminated foodstuff. However, in Siena, Boswell "ate well. The wine of the district was very good, and on holidays I regaled myself with delicious Montepulciano. The air is fresh and the weather is always fine". And if that sounds like a travel brochure, it was – to be sure – an advertisement of a sort.

The Grand Tour declined as an institution at the end of the eighteenth century, as visiting Italy became a more democratic activity. The distinction can be seen in the Art of the day. To the Grand Tourists, it was the meticulously realistic paintings of Canaletto which accurately recorded the surface. But to the Victorians who knew photography, J.M.W. Turner's luminous canvases better represented the mystery and the magic.

Britain's greatest painter visited in 1819, 1833 and 1840. His champion, John Ruskin, said "The Alps made him sad, but Venice gave him delight." Ruskin's own *The Stones of Venice* was published in 1851 and remains one of the greatest ever explanations of architecture and the human spirit. But during the later nineteenth century, Florence became the most popular Italian city for a new tribe of Tourists.

Although no democrat, Queen Victoria visited Florence three times, accompanied by her loyal servant Abdul 'Munshi' Karim who wore a turban, and by Scots Guards who wore kilts. There is even a fountain as a monument to her near the Piazza Vittorio Veneto. Nor was Victoria an aesthete: her favourite occupation in Florence was the *Scoppio del Carro* – an exploding cart - on Easter Sunday in the Piazza Duomo.

It was reckoned that in the late nineteenth century, fully a third of the population of Florence was English. The sentimental poet Robert Browning's Casa Guidi was one favourite haunt, but so too was Caffè Doney on the Via Tornabuoni. E.M.Forster's 1908 novel, *A Room With a View* describes the mood of English residents in Florence: wistful and perhaps a little patronising.

But there were material additions too: it was an Englishman who paid for the façade of Florence's Santa Croce. Indeed, it was the English community – rich, talkative, well-connected - which gave Florence its reputation as the world's outstanding city of Art. Another great Victorian was John Addington Symonds, whose life of the Florentine Benvenuto Cellini, an account of roguery, villainy and violence, helped establish the stereotype of artists as tormented souls.

But despite angry artists, Italy was always '*Il terreno amico*'. That sense still endures together with an almost unbearable sense of yearning. The most haunting words about England's love of Italy were written by W.H. Auden in 1948.

> "*Out of the Gothic north, the pallid children*
> *Of a potato, beer-or-whisky*
> *Guilt culture, we behave like our fathers and come*
> *Southward into a sunburnt otherwhere*".

This "sunburnt otherwhere" is the one landscape that the English are homesick for.

And as the most perfect footnote: when Felice Bianchi Anderloni and Gaetano Ponzoni created their *carrozzeria* in 1926, they called it 'Touring' in deference to the English influence upon Italian travel.

Of course, Ferrari makes the best Grand Touring cars of all. One day soon I will drive the new Ferrari Roma. I will use its unusual digital key to unlock a beautiful car. And in the car I will unlock dreams of Italy, one of the most enduring and pleasing fantasies... at least for this pallid child of a potato, beer-or- whisky and Guilt culture. ■