

# Academics in Paradise

By PETER MONAGHAN

**Y**OU ARE looking over the moonlit Mediterranean from the veranda of a stately villa on the Italian Riviera, through a stand of pines that incline toward a sea smooth in the dusk.

Dinner is over. You savor, still, a surpassing-fine minestrone prepared by a talented resident chef. Then came cuttlefish, potatoes, and spinach, followed by a light dessert of pineapple drizzled with Grand Marnier. You've sampled fine wines of the region, of course. Now you try a shot of Santa Maria al Monte, an herbal *digestif* that cures what it does not cure. The acrid tonic is found only here, where the hills that drop from the Apennines meet the rugged but imaginatively domesticated coast around the city of Genoa.

It almost slips your mind why this setting, home to the Liguria Study Center for the Arts and Humanities, is so conducive to the study of arts and letters.

But you sit on a sofa and relish another of a month of evenings with an international cast of colleagues. Conversation ranges through the reveries of Marcel Proust, Ligurian separatist sentiment since the federation of Italy, and the rather racy poetry of an obscure Genoese writer, Olindo Guerrini.

All that, at least, might have occurred to you had you been here during a recent month at the center—known simply as “Bogliasco” to the cognoscenti of the now numerous (and stunningly appointed) academic and artistic retreat centers scattered about the globe.

Telling you about Guerrini would have been Jeremy Dibble, a University of Durham musicologist and music historian, and a talented pianist and vocalist. He mentions the writer in connection with his project here, a critical biography of the eclectic Italian composer Michele Esposito (1855–1929), who pioneered Irish art song by incorporating Hibernian strains into his otherwise-Italian compositions.

The effusive Dibble has not resisted rousing a few game souls in the party to renditions of Neapolitan songs—the hackneyed ones that gondoliers in Venice sing because it is those that most convey Italianness to tourists. But perhaps the singers were simply engaging in giddy fun—a parody of having so fine a time in a style of life they may never again attain.

Eight academics and artists, guests for a month here at Bogliasco, find quickly why it has become one of the most desired of European retreats. It may not be as much bandied as Bellagio—all the name that the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Study and Conference Center needs—but, as a relatively new center, now in its 12th year, it has many enthusiastic advocates.

“I feel like a mosquito in a blood bank here,” says Dibble of his productivity—a whole chapter in the first week alone. “Absolutely,” agrees Willard Spiegelman, a professor of English at Southern Methodist University. “There are no requirements to deal with the banalities of ordinary life. You don't go anywhere, buy anything, cook for yourself. ... You don't clean up.”

The book he is completing under contract to Farrar, Straus and Giroux—its working title: “Pursued by Happiness: An Investigation of Pleasure”—makes him something of a specialist in contentment, and he says that being here has certainly continued his history of it. He professes to have spent virtually his whole life in a good mood, but never more than during his month here. “The physical comforts of the place increase one's sense of well-being,” he says, “and for many people like me, a sense of well-being is conducive to good academic work.”

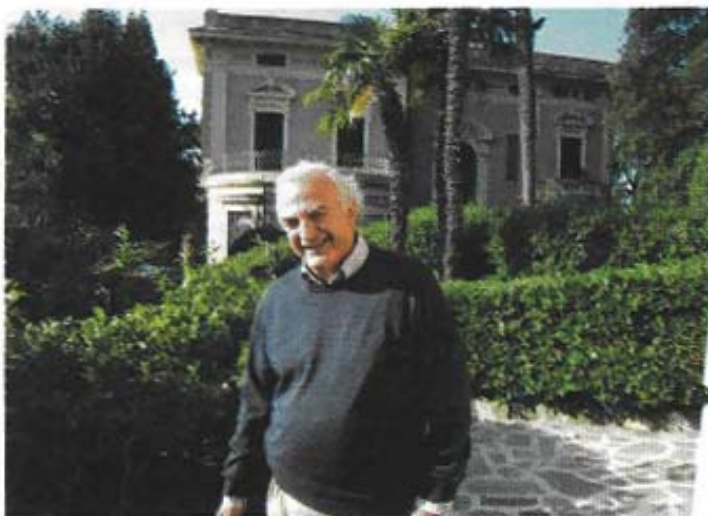
It would be, perhaps, only the rankest discontent who could grouse while sitting on the porch that Spiegelman has shared with a companion (spouses and partners are invited to Bogliasco, and spoiled right along with the fellows). He can view the Mediterranean even from his study. Or he can venture down the walkways that plunge to the sea.

The Liguria center came into existence when the artistic children of the late Swiss-born businessman and art collector, Roberto Biaggi, wished to celebrate their father's cultural interests. The president of the center's governing body, the Bogliasco Foundation, is James Harrison, a retired professor of music and composition at Hunter College whose wife is one of the benefactor's daughters, Marina Biaggi.

The center's stated mission is to reward outstanding scholars and artists in at least midcareer with a quiet, pampered month of contemplation and an ideal work setting. Fifty fellows come here each year, for one month each, from September to December, or February to May, in cohorts of eight—with spouses and partners, if they wish.

*Below, left:*  
The Bogliasco center's Pasquale Pesce helps visiting scholars immerse themselves in Italian life.

*Below, right:*  
At Bogliasco, says Southern Methodist U.'s Willard Spiegelman, “there are no requirements to deal with the banalities of ordinary life.”





CHRONICLE REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER MARSHMAN

The center's director, Anna Maria Quaiat, who cared for the Biaggi children when they were young, oversees a staff for whom nothing seems too much trouble. They trim hedges before dawn, prepare and serve meals, and bake specialty pastries of the region to stock kitchens with snacks.

For the first week that each cohort of fellows is here, Pasquale Pesce, Bogliasco's amiable director of development, is in attendance to orient the visitors. He directed Bellagio from 1992 to 1998 and still teaches part time in Rome at the Intercollegiate Center for Classical Studies, run by a group of American colleges. Thanks to spending considerable time in the United States as a young man, and to various nonprofit pursuits, Pesce, a specialist in the sociology of organizations, speaks excellent, rather stately English. He offers a wealth of knowledge of Italian life, and he reveals, little by little, a surprising biography.

It turns out that he grew up on his well-known archaeologist father's digs. He then began his adult life as an actor—not to name-drop, but he may in the flow of conversation mention some rather renowned thespians who are old friends.

He is a walking compendium of tips on making the most of time here. He knows where in Genoa to find the best *linguini nere* (squid cooked in its own ink, served over linguini) and lightly pan-fried *acciughe* (fresh anchovies)—at Da Vittorio, down one of the city's narrow, baffling passageways. He can disentangle Italian political intrigue for fellows who care to tackle it, and he seems able to discourse on every wine or vineyard in Italy.

**T**HE RESEARCH CENTER is a short walk from the village of Bogliasco. Lanes, staircases, and squares in the village and along the coast convert every cranny to human use on a human scale. Serpentine walks take strollers toward Genoa to the north, past buildings with the painted *trompe l'oeil* facades that have created illusion here since Roman times. It all inspires Spiegelman's completion of chapters on such topics as the pleasures of walking in foreign cities. And it moves him to proclaim that cheerfulness—with recourse to neither psychopharmacology nor religion—is given too little credit for generating artistic insights: "There's a pre-Freudian equation of creativity with melancholy, even though the myth was long ago exploded that depression is tied to creativity."

Can life here be so tirelessly gratifying, conducive to study, offering all the collegiality that academe promised before sober reality intervened? Can there be no tense moments or hurt feelings among eight academics and artists, all wedded equally to their endeavors, but not all equally humble about it?

Well, says the optimistic Spiegelman, "even if one doesn't feel equally sympathetic to everyone who's here, one sees them only for a couple of hours a day."

Some of the fellows are not academics—or not any more, at least—and for them scholarly contention and cavil may make a nice change. "I have marvelous, stimulating company of really nice people," says C.K. Stead, one of New Zealand's most eminent men of letters, who retired from university teaching a decade ago to a life of contemplation and writing. Retirement alone brought him great peace of mind, he says, but here his sense of purpose has ratcheted up: "I've got a lot of work done and at the same time feel I'm on holiday. It's a dream." In his time at Bogliasco, he polished up his collected poems for release by Carcanet in Britain, while also completing a literary autobiography titled *Book Self: The Reader as Writer and the Writer as Critic*.

He is just back from the dip in the Mediterranean that he and his wife, Kay, take each morning, by the village church. The climate here permits swimming much of the year.

Do not fear, advise Bogliasco fellows, that a month of being treated like a doge—with none of the normal academic distractions like meetings, office hours, and corrosive gossip or such domestic ones as shopping, cooking, or walking the dog—will encourage you only to slacken off, sit in a village square, get sunburned. ...

"The immersion that's been possible is really valuable and welcome," says Anthony Alofsin, a professor of architecture, art, and art history who has come here from the University of Texas at Austin to complete a novella and a book on Italian stone building ornaments.

"The environment here is not something everyone could lapse into, but it's something I seem happy to be doing. I live in Texas, so being by the Mediterranean is like being by a watery life force." ■

*The village of Bogliasco, Italy, near Genoa, is home to the Liguria Study Center for the Arts and Humanities.*

### Liguria Study Center for the Arts and Humanities

Bogliasco, Italy (near Genoa)

The center provides scholars and artists midcareer and older with room, board, and studio for a month. They are housed in three villas on the Italian Riviera overlooking the Mediterranean. Each year 50 fellows spend one month at the center, from September to December, or February to May, in cohorts of eight. Partners are also welcome. Fellowships are awarded in archaeology, architecture, classics, dance, film and video, history, landscape architecture, literature, music, philosophy, theater, and the visual arts.

For more information, see <http://www.liguriastudycenter.org>.

*For other retreats, see following page*

# Unforgettable Scholarly Retreats

## American Academy in Berlin

<http://www.americanacademy.de>

**What:** The academy awards residential fellowships to academics, policy experts, writers, and artists who stay at its spacious villa in the Wannsee district of Berlin. Henry Kissinger, a co-founder, called the academy "the first trans-Atlantic post-cold-war institute in Germany."

**Who:** About 25 Americans with backgrounds in the humanities, arts, social sciences, or public policy win fellowships each year to spend a semester (and sometimes an academic year) at the Hans Arnhold Center, joined by invited distinguished figures in public policy who attend for one to four weeks.

**Participants say:** "Thanks to the academy's resources, I was able to complete a tremendous amount of research. At the same time—and this is one of the advantages of a residential fellowship—I was able to interact with an extraordinarily diverse group of fellows. ... In my own case, it was the single most important intellectual experience of my life since I completed my Ph.D. at Stanford in the mid-1970s. ... The chef, Reinold Kegel, is a Berlin legend." —David E. Barclay, professor of international studies, Kalamazoo College



The American Academy in Berlin is located in the city's idyllic Wannsee district.

## American Academy in Rome

<http://www.aarome.org>

**What:** Sitting among grand but quiet gardens on top of the highest hill in Rome, the academy invites scholars of the fine arts and humanities to mingle with creative artists. They may use a library strong in the history, archaeology, and art of Rome and Italy, and enjoy fine cuisine: Chef Mona Talbott, who worked for Alice Waters at the celebrated Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif., has organized a local sustainable-agriculture project that supplies fresh fruits and vegetables.

**Who:** Up to 30 fellows—winners of the Rome Prize—most in early to midcareer, generally spend one academic year at the center, some with partners and even children. The academy accepts applications from scholars in such fields as archaeology, architecture, art history, classical studies, design arts, historic preservation and conservation, Italian studies, landscape architecture, literature, musical composition, and the visual arts. The center also plays host to winners of several smaller fellowships as well as invited eminent artists and scholars. Together with artists and scholars who rent apartments and studios for various lengths of time, they create a community of up to 100 residents.

**Participants say:** "I am here on a predoctoral fellowship and have found it a wonderful experience. ... Certainly living in a dormlike environment as an adult takes some getting used to, but I cannot think of another moment in our adult lives when any of us will have an opportunity to get to know people quite so intimately as we have here. Being here while working on my dissertation has also been wonderful since it has eliminated some of the incredible isolation one feels as a graduate student." —Christina Ferando, doctoral candidate in art history and archaeology, Columbia University

## Bellagio Study and Conference Center

Lake Como, Italy

<http://www.rockefeller.org/bellagio>

**What:** The Rockefeller Foundation provides residencies at its large villa on 50 acres of gardens on a hilly peninsula overlooking Lake Como. Fellows dine together and present their work to each other, and drink grappa after dinner.

**Who:** Under various fellowships, about 135 scholars, writers, and artists in any field and from around the world visit the center, year-round,



The Bellagio Study and Conference Center overlooks Lake Como, Italy.

for stays of one month—with partners, if desired. Fellows also include policy makers and nongovernmental-organization workers.

**Participants say:** "I can remember thinking how perhaps this was why monasticism and scholasticism went so well together in medieval times. Solitude, quiet, congenial people, and nothing to complain about. ... In addition, conversations with fellow residents (artists, writers, musicians, scientists, and scholars from many countries) over meals and seminars three times a week were extremely stimulating. ... I have taught at a very good liberal-arts college for 30 years, but this experience at Bellagio was the closest I've ever come to experiencing the liberal-arts ideal itself." —John C. Holt, professor of the humanities in religion and Asian studies, Bowdoin College

## Camargo Foundation

Cassis, France

<http://www.camargofoundation.org>

**What:** The foundation awards fellowships with stipends, generally for one academic semester. Fellows stay in apartments with their own kitchens on a property situated on a high cliff overlooking the Mediterranean near Marseille, on the French Riviera.

**Who:** A dozen or more scholars in the humanities and social sciences come here to work on Francophile cultures, along with visual, literary, or performing artists.

**Participants say:** "My group had a photographer, a composer, a poet, a novelist, a filmmaker. ... All were highly accomplished and really an interesting and engaging group of people to be around. ... I also had the opportunity to see how people from different disciplines work, and to get to know a set of new and interesting people. I bought a bike, did a lot of cycling, and played on the local tennis team, so it was not all work." —Frank R. Baumgartner, professor of political science, Pennsylvania State University's main campus

## Villa I Tatti—The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies

Outskirts of Florence, Italy

<http://www.itatti.it>

**What:** Founded by the art critic and connoisseur Bernard Berenson, Villa I Tatti is set on rolling hills northeast of the tourist hustle and bustle of Florence. Fellows live in the villa's apartments or find apartments in the area. They may use the large Berenson Library, which specializes in the Italian Renaissance and related fields; they also have access to Harvard's online facilities and to libraries throughout the Florence region.

**Who:** The center selects 15 early-career scholars from around the world, specializing in areas of study related to the Renaissance, to spend an academic year at the center, with stipend. It also brings in scholars from Eastern Europe, who stay for three months.

**Participants say:** "There are basically no obligations; however, participating in the life of the center is the best choice one can make. Sitting around a table and chatting about everything while eating Florentine specialties—the food is excellent and many of us gained weight—breaks shyness and academic hierarchies. ... I will never forget the stunning beauty of the place: The villa is full of the artworks of the Berenson collection, and the garden is a work of art in itself at all seasons." —Federica Ciccolella, assistant professor of European and classical languages, Texas A&M University at College Station  
—PETER MONAGHAN