

The Irish Times, August 14th 2004

WHEN IS A BRIDE ABROAD?

The smooching started at Dublin airport. The Alitalia flight to Rome on a Thursday in July was thronged with noisy Italian teenagers returning home after their Irish vacation, many wrapped in deep amatory embraces that continued in the aircraft aisle all the way to Fiumicino, much to the amusement of other passengers. I was in the company of a more discreet Irish couple on their first visit to Italy where they are planning to get married next year. Our destination was Sulmona, the self styled "City of Love" in the Abruzzo, in the centre of what's called the green heart of Italy. Niall Hefferman and Barbara O Sullivan are just one of hundreds of Irish couples looking for destinations other than Ireland to tie the knot; in their case, they were interested in alternatives to Rome. And they are a romantic pair; he proposed to her at Niagara Falls last year and bought her a piece of the moon (from www.moonestates.com) as a present recently. No half measures here. The first evening was spent in Castel Gandolfo, better known for the Pontifical summer residence, in a small hotel overlooking Lake Albano. "An Italian version of Killiney", was Niall's opinion of the area, once the starting point of the history of Rome. The hotel's terrace restaurant is a very alluring location at night, but despite the distracting views and delicious food, the young man at the table next to us never removed his eyes, nor his hands, from his female companion the whole evening during which, we were later told, he presented her with a ring and a necklace. As we left the restaurant, a firework display erupted on the other side of the lake; this, apparently, was also part of the young swain's proposal. "It's quite common", shrugged our guide dismissively. "Rich people from Rome live here and can afford such gestures." The place certainly seems to have a reputation for amatory adventures and sports other than boating and swimming; cars with courting couples and windows covered in newspapers lined the darkened lakeshore drive later that evening as the moon disappeared behind the surrounding hills. The love theme continued to dominate the next few days. It was an easy two-hour motorway drive to Sulmona, a beautiful medieval city of some 25,000 people set in an amphitheatre of mountains, the highest of the snow-capped Apennines. It is famous for being the birthplace of the great Latin love poet Ovid who immortalised it with the words "Sulmo mihi patria est" (Sulmona is my fatherland) and SMPE has been the town's emblem ever since. It is also the capital of confetti, colourful sugared almonds that are given to guests at Italian weddings. (What we call confetti, the coloured bits of paper, they call coriandori). The oldest confectionery company of some ten producers goes back to the early 18th century and the sweet shops in the town looked like florists with lavish displays of all kinds of confetti in the shapes of flowers, grapes or other seasonal produce. Some 300 people are engaged in making these arrangements by hand. For the locals, the fact that an Irish couple wanted to get married in Sulmona was a source of amazement, pride and amused delight and the pair were welcomed formally by the Mayor who wished them "a long, rich and serene life" and interviewed by Italian newspaper and television journalists, becoming overnight celebrities. Later in the lovely church of St. Francesco della Scarpa, Niall and Barbara made a "promesa di matrimonio" in front of its curate Don Antonio Berluti, a statement of intent on the part of the church and the intending couple. If and when Barbara and Niall do say "si" there next year, they will be the first Irish couple to do so in a city where some 150 weddings take place every month followed by the usual 7-10 course celebratory feast, customary in Italy. Food plays a big part here where even a simple lunch was a gastronomic experience; zucchini flowers, grilled aubergines, tomato salad, salami and prosciutto was just the first course in a "slow food" restaurant. Next morning we were to witness an Italian wedding in Scanno, one of the most photographed medieval villages in Italy, a thousand metres above sea level. The drive from Sulmona is a spectacular one through the narrow and rocky gorges of Valle del Sagittario, which opens up onto the vividly green Lago di Scanno just outside the town. The women in this village have always been noted for their traditional costumes, heavy, wool skirts and bodices that weigh around 12 kilos and ornate turbans said to be of oriental origin, but the bride in the Santa Maria Della Valle parish church was dressed in conventional white satin and lace bearing a long train. As the couple emerged from the church, they were showered with rice and posed for pictures in front of a heart made of rice and rigatoni pasta on the ground in front of them. Fireworks exploded as they walked down the steps to the clapping crowd. This town is also famous for its gold jewellery particularly love tokens; Cupids, arrows and hearts featured in the windows of Di Rienzo, a jeweller still using 17th century techniques to create fine filigree items that developed originally from the elaborate buttons worn by the women. The Manucco, for instance, is rather like the Claddagh ring, but with a difference. A wedding ring of three interconnected circles, it shows two hands that open up to reveal a heart. The "Amorino" is a baroque style brooch or amulet featuring a crown, a hanging angel and a heart, usually given by a groom to his bride while the Presuntuosa is given to fiancées to ward off other men..

The Irish Times, August 14th 2004

From love tokens, our couple later had a taste of a love potion, in the form of a special cinnamon liqueur, a speciality of the nearby Hotel Le Focette. But despite the most breathtakingly beautiful churches in Sulmona and nearby Lanciano, it was the little 17th century church of the Annunziata, Madonna del Lago overlooking Scanno Lake that stole Niall and Barbara's heart. The church was built in 1679 over the road to protect travellers; its altar lies right against the bare rock of the cliff and its spectacular domed blue and gold ceiling features a dove surrounded by heavenly angels. It can just about seat thirty people on simple wooden benches. The final call was back in Sulmona where preparations were under way for one of the city's biggest celebrations, the Giostra Cavalleresca, a Renaissance festival starting with a long and lavish procession in which hundreds of locals dressed in medieval velvets with banners, bugles, drums, cavalry horses and standard bearers paraded to the city square to watch the jousting tournament. The two-day event where riders and horses compete in a figure of eight competition to spear rings from a fixed knight on horseback is an awesome display of speed and precision. Our couple were given a special dispensation by Maria Clotilde Iavarone, the President of the event, to take part in the parade and decked out in velvet. The evening concluded with an open air Banchetto Rinascimentale in the Palazzo San Francesco, a former convent. Italians do these events with style and brio; the food included wild rabbit and wild boar and the guests were treated to music on antique instruments and entertainment in the form of fire-eaters, jugglers and sword fights. The event takes place every year at the end of July is followed by the Cate Naccio Nuziale in Scanno (the Wedding Padlock Festival) in August and in Lanciano by the award winning Mastrogiurato Pageant in early September, which re-enacts an historic event that goes back to the Middle Ages. Back at Rome airport, as we left, another group of young Italians were preparing for their trip to Ireland and their own youthful adventures in an unfamiliar country. For Niall and Barbara the journey had confirmed their decision and their dream. The dolce vita of their first taste of Italy may have finally come to an end, but the huge Shakespearian sign over the departures building at the airport, summed up their brief interlude more sweetly than confetti. "If music be the food of love, play on". What a way to say goodbye! Que bella figura!

The number of Irish couples getting married in Italy has almost doubled in the past four years. According to figures supplied by the Department of Foreign Affairs, 496 couples from Ireland got married in Italy in 2000, the vast majority in Rome. By the end of this year, that figure is expected to be around 840. Italy is still the preferred destination of choice and most weddings are in Rome, though places like Cyprus, Prague and Spain are also popular. The foreign wedding boom in Italy is also attracting couples from other countries like the UK and the USA and some 80 wedding agencies have opened up in Italy in the last four years. Here in Ireland the number of agencies and tour operators developing wedding packages is growing. For Irish couples like Niall and Barbara, the advantages are many. Firstly, numbers can be limited, prices kept down and access has become easier. "Cheaper travel has been a huge factor", says Franciscan Father John O Keffe of St. Isodore's Church in Rome who conducted some 30 weddings there last year. "Now families are coming for the marriage whereas before it was just the couple. Weddings are becoming more international. We had one couple recently where the groom was Irish and the bride from Tokyo. The world is small for young people." For Fr. Denis O'Brien of the Basilico di San Silvestro in Capite in Rome another popular Irish destination, who conducted 270 weddings there last year, the increasing numbers from Ireland represent "a protest vote against a very complicated system of weddings in Ireland and the tremendous social pressure to invite all family members almost to second cousins. I really believe that the commercialism of marriage in Ireland is rampant and decadent. Many who come here want to place the emphasis on the essentials with a ceremony that concentrates on what Christian marriage is all about. People can get married for considerably less; much more should be done to simplify marriage at home. People themselves have upped the ante too much. There is a need to take back the ground that has been lost and recover a sense of the spiritual in marriage," he says. The demand has also brought its own problems with only two people working in the church and "a mountain of paperwork to be done for each wedding. "Italy is famous for its bureaucracy", says Fr. O'Brien. "The ceremony itself is the easiest part."

www.irishweddingsinitaly.ie (Paola 0876611894) Organised Niall and Barbara's pre wedding trip. A small Irish/Italian company specialising in the Abruzzo, they organise holidays and weddings in the area (as well as Rome and Tuscany). Paola Shanahan is from Pescara in the Abruzzo and has been living in Ireland for eleven years so has the advantage of familiarity with both Irish and Italian customs and cuisine and can offer couples "an alternative Italian experience to the traditional Irish/Roman wedding".