



THE

# Italian

## MARINE INDUSTRY

### THE PASSIONATE PERSPECTIVE OF AN ITALIAN-AMERICAN GEARHEAD

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**T**his is a first. In all the years I've been writing articles, I've always begun the process by making an outline. What you are about to read is a departure from my usual method. I'm writing from the heart, not the head, in an effort to reflect the experience Bill Parlato and I shared during our weeklong visit to Italy, which we traveled literally from coast to coast.

While Bill tells about our visits to the various manufacturers and their facilities, I'm taking a detour from my gearhead role to delve into the passionate, emotional, and creative side of our Italian experience.

Our mission on this trip was twofold. We wanted to visit a variety of interesting companies whose products are an integral part of recreational marine manufacturing. Our second goal was more nebulous: to answer the question of why so many of these companies are found in this small region.

Italy is a little country, with an area only slightly larger than Arizona, and its population of 59 million is roughly equal to that of California and Texas combined. Although marine equipment and vessel manufacturers are distributed throughout Italy, there's an especially large concentration in a belt that stretches across northern Italy and over the Apennine Mountains, passing through the cities of Milan and Bologna, from the Ligurian Sea on the northwest coast to the Adriatic Sea on the northeast coast.

From Roman aqueducts, the coliseum, Michelangelo's David (the marble for which was quarried in Carrara, home of C-Map Light Marine), and da Vinci's numerous

achievements to Alfa Romeo automobiles, Pininfarina's auto design house, Beretta firearms, Ferretti marine manufacturing, Pirelli tires, and Armani clothing, Italians simply love to conceive, design, and build all manner of things. It's engrained in their psyche. In their very genes, perhaps.

And they simply can't leave well enough alone. The design always has to be tweaked and improved, even if that "improvement" is nothing more than a change in appearance. As the descendant of Italian emigrants, perhaps this explains my insatiable gearheadedness.

When Bill and I first began discussing our trip, I immediately juxtaposed my enduring sentiments of Italy with my gearhead passion for marine systems, equipment, industrial design, and manufacturing. Fostered over a lifetime of dinner table stories and two previous trips to this uniquely beautiful and sometimes chaotic land, my feelings about Italy have sometimes seemed at odds with my passion for technical excellence and achievement. Perhaps this is why I burned with the desire to resolve the riddle of why these marine manufacturers exist where they do.

Some of my earliest memories are those of my grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles telling stories about their Italian experiences. All of my grandparents lived in Italy, as did many of my aunts and uncles, and many arrived here in the United States through New York's famed Ellis Island. I'd heard their stories so many times, I could accurately repeat them and would sometimes correct family members who omitted certain





details. (I was reprimanded for that several times. In traditional Italian families, it's frowned upon for children to correct adults, even when the adults are wrong; think *The Godfather*, not *The Sopranos*.) These collective memories were engrained in my young mind.

The conflict stems from the reputation Italy has for—how shall I put it?—a less than orderly approach toward life. For example, making a line at a bank or post office, or queuing to board a ferry, often resembles organized chaos. On one of my trips to Italy, my wife, Sandy, and I ventured out for a day trip to an island called Giglio, which lies off the Tuscan coast just south of the island of Elba, the location of Napoleon's first exile. We took the ferry from Porto Santo Stefano, drove around the island for a few hours, and then headed back to the ferry dock.

When we crested the rise above the ferry terminus, I was certain we would be stuck on the island for the day.

A jumbled collection of cars, trucks, and buses, along with a group of private motor coaches, was trying to board the vessel simultaneously. The end of the "line" was nowhere to be seen. "What are you going to do?" Sandy asked me. My reply was to shift my agile diesel Peugeot into first gear, step on the accelerator, and aim for a small gap between a VW bus and a large construction truck.

Before I could enter the breach, however, a quick-footed ferry line "director" stopped my progress by leaping in front of my vehicle. In Italy, this is about the only way to stop a moving car, as traffic signals and directions from police, even the paramilitary state police, the *Carabinieri*, often are ignored. (Italy's *Carabinieri* have very impressive navy blue uniforms with a large red "field marshal" stripe running up each leg, and they ride cool motorcycles and often carry automatic weapons. I know

Above: The sheer madness that followed Milan's soccer victory over Liverpool brought the town of Pesaro into the streets. Horns, screams, fireworks, and singing could be heard for hours. Passion is alive in everything in Italy.





The family component is a strong element of Italian business. Here, the Besenzoni family stops for a picture.

this because I was once stopped by one for speeding, a feat not easily achieved in Italy.)

I showed the director my ticket and he instructed me, in Italian, to wait. As we waited, we watched scores of other vehicles board the ferry. With each passing vehicle, we became more and more convinced we'd never make it aboard.

Patience is not viewed as a virtue in this land, so every few minutes I'd ask il direttore, "Ora?!" ("Now?!") Each time, I received the same reply: "Subito, subito." ("Soon, soon.") Eventually, and with a flair that reflected his absolute authority if not his complete control over the situation, he gave the universal two-handed "proceed" gesture. I saluted and drove aboard, the last vehicle to enter, our rear bumper protruding through the safety



Barbara Barbalarga of CNP Explorer Vessels exemplifies the value of women's roles in thriving Italian companies. Her youthfulness and professionalism will help CNP succeed.

chains as the vessel churned away from the bulkhead.

The ferry's captain, by the way, exhibited a similar approach toward maneuvering and docking the vessel back at Porto Santo Stefano. A strong Mediterranean wind blew, and the small harbor rocked and rolled from the swell. Instead of moving toward the ramp slowly and cautiously, he accelerated at what appeared to be cruising speed and waited until the last possible second to apply full reverse power. The ferry's bow ramp stopped just short of the bulkhead. It was impressive ship handling, although perhaps a bit reckless because of the tiny margin for error.

This is quintessential Italy, frenzied and wild, yet successful and oh so fun. In many ways, life in Italy is the antithesis of life in America.



Connecting with readers Enrico and Evelina Gabbai was a highlight of our stop in Marina di Carrara.

To be sure, today's Italy is not the Italy of my grandparents, and in many ways it's not the Italy my parents saw when they began visiting the country more than two decades ago. Education and productivity are national passions. Bill and I witnessed this in many forms as we visited manufacturing facilities, most of which were efficient and modern. The workforce appeared motivated and enthusiastic, in spite of the fact that many of the employees perform repetitive tasks. People in general appeared happy and fulfilled.

The differences between Italian manufacturers and their counterparts in the United States are numerous and clear to see. As Bill mentions, in Italy there are large numbers of women in the manufacturing workforce, and just because they stand on an assembly line doesn't mean they look "industrial." In fact, in all the factories we





Fortunately, we had elaborate dinners, because lunch was often a rushed snack in the little Ford along the side of the road.

visited, I don't recall seeing the same pair of shoes twice. Style is not just important to Italians, it is essential—from the way one dresses and the car or motorcycle one drives to the marine refrigerator's paint finish to the neatness of the weld beads on a stainless steel passerelle.

As our trip progressed, issues concerning style, appearance, and function became more and more evident. For instance, the front office of every factory we visited, without exception, was beautifully furnished with pieces that were unique and of exceptionally high quality. (The country has a thriving furniture industry.) Many of the furnishings, such as built-in shelving and cabinets, appeared to be custom made. All of the hardware, hinges, doorknobs, and locksets were made of solid brass and were durable, functional, and good-looking. Even the office doors were made of heavy solid wood, rather than hollow wood, with stain and varnish finishes second to none. The facades of many facilities we visited were beautifully crafted with stone, marble, or modern chrome-and-glass fixtures, and some included fountains.

Because many of these companies are located in decidedly picturesque settings, every attempt appears to have been made to blend them with the surroundings. In some cases, the factories sit right in the middle of neighborhoods, with residences on either side, and it all fits in well. Simply put, to Italians, appearance is not only important but is a paramount part of doing business, as are the rituals to which we were exposed throughout our trip.

For instance, nearly every business meeting was preceded by an offer of espresso (with the schedule we kept and the time difference, it was a welcome offer

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This view is typical of many of the companies we visited: industrial innovation surrounded by lush landscape, culture, and history.

indeed), as well as a selection of mineral water, fruit juices, and pastries or cookies. Small tokens or gifts were nearly always offered, which is not unusual; I have tons of hats and T-shirts from the many American manufacturers I've called on. However, the Italian version often involved bottles of local wine, satchels, hardbound books detailing the company's history, or finely tailored dress or polo shirts.

Of course, the other half of the ritual involved eating. The owners and representatives of every company we visited assumed, quite naturally for Italians, that they would be allowed to take us out to their favorite restaurant for dinner. Each meal was truly memorable, and each more satisfying than the last. Because missing a meal was unthinkable, I'm certain that after the day we arrived I never had an opportunity to become hungry. Sadly, very sadly, in some cases we had to decline the offer of a meal as a result of our typically hectic American schedule.

Italy's famed Autostrada is always a pleasure to drive. It's well designed and maintained, and the countryside vistas and long tunnels are sights to behold. As far as I could tell, Italy has no equivalent to our optical FastPass/E-ZPass system, but we were able to pay nearly every highway toll using an automated credit card machine. Simply slip the credit card into a slot, and in a few seconds it's ejected and the gate opens (you have to remember to request a receipt by pressing a button). Not as quick as a FastPass, perhaps, but then again there's nothing to display or renew and you don't have to remember to move it when changing cars.

We did not stay in any chain hotels in Italy. In fact, franchise chains of anything other than gas stations are rare in Italy, and it would be difficult to imagine a fast food restaurant in a lovely mountainside village, although

we did see an occasional McDonald's or Kentucky Fried Chicken in larger urban areas.

The hotels were all unique, yet there were a few similarities in our experience. In Italy, working in the food or hotel industry is considered a serious profession, and the folks who do so, from front desk clerks to waiters, are clearly driven to please. For example, in two of the hotels where we stayed, in Sant'Agata and Bologna, we were forced to get under way at an especially early hour, well before the start of normal breakfast service. However, the person responsible for serving breakfast (in both cases, he was also the front desk clerk and the only hotel employee we ever saw) made sure Bill and I were able to start off our day with a full breakfast. Imagine staying at a chain hotel in the States and requesting an "early departure breakfast."

The downside of boutique hotels is the general lack of Internet connections and sometimes not enough wall receptacles for plugging in a computer and a camera battery charger simultaneously. In one hotel I was unable to get the air conditioner or the shower to work, although that was an exception. But the furniture and tile work were beautiful.

Interesting and poignant were the responses Bill and I received when we asked the question, "Why has northern Italy spawned this crop of marine accessory manufacturers?" In nearly every case, the answer was different. Everyone had his or her own view of why this was so. In some cases, the respondent initially had a blank look, as if the question had never been posed and an answer never pondered. Others began responding before Bill or I had finished asking the question.

Answers ranged from: "Italians have, for centuries, been manufacturers and innovators" to "It is in the Italian people's heritage to innovate and take risk, the natural






result of which is manufacturing, be it automobiles and motorcycles or clothing and refrigerators." I would add that in addition to Italians' passion for design, innovation, and entrepreneurial risk taking, their nearly universal proximity to the sea makes marine products a natural. And, of course, they also have an extremely well developed sense of style.

It's tempting to dismiss "Italian style" as cliché, but it is an undeniable part of the culture. Walk down any metropolitan street in Italy, and it's difficult not to notice the fashion and presentation in the shop windows lining the avenue. Even in the smallest town we visited, Sant'Agata, I was able to find a trendy store operated by a woman and her son that sold everything from jewelry and apparel to leather goods. It was there that I purchased a fashionable white leather handbag for Sandy that I'm told is all the rage here in the States.

In spite of the fact that we were expertly guided through Italy by our Garmin nüvi, Bill and I still used a map for a small-scale visual reference of our objectives. I marked our destinations on the map, which had been printed by the Italian equivalent of AAA and had been used many times by my father. I've taken the map on every trip to Italy, and it must be 25 or 30 years old. My father's notes about ferry departures and travel distances are scribbled in the margins, and a few of mine are now there as well.

This threadbare map, alongside the nüvi, provided an interesting analogy for Italy and its marine equipment industry: a combination of the old and the new, family and tradition alongside robotics and lean manufacturing. The answer to our question is much like Italy itself, varied and unique. And I believe all of the answers we received were equally correct. Italians simply love to create, compete, innovate, and take risk. They also appreciate the appearance of what they create nearly as much as the function of their creations. You simply have to look at a Lamborghini or a Ducati to understand this component of their culture.

When these qualities are combined, it makes for an impressive mercantile force, one that has continued to prove itself in a competitive marketplace. When we asked Italians how they plan to compete with considerably less expensive manufacturing in China and other Far Eastern countries, they responded with an uncharacteristic single voice: "Creativity, constant innovation, and extremely high quality."

After visiting these companies and seeing firsthand the passion and commitment that these men and women bring to their work, I believe it's safe to say that there will always be a strong, vibrant, and creative Italian marine manufacturing industry. 

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