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Participant Report

Babilonia Italian Language School

A Gem Among the Stars

Article and photo by Linda Weinberger
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The garden at Babilonia is a favorite spot for studying and relaxing.

When one mentions Taormina, Sicily, eyes light up and memories kindle. Visitors to Taormina speak of the energy and happiness of *le piazze*, the piazzas, the views from this town atop Mount Tauro, and the maze of ancient streets. Since the days of

famous Taormina Film Festival. Taormina boasts Michelin-rated restaurants, five-star hotels, and designer boutiques. She reigns as a glittering star in the Mediterranean.

However, nestled near the Greek Temple is one of the true gems of Taormina. [Babilonia Italian Language School](#), founded in 1992 by director Alessandro Adorno at age 24, is a leader of Italian language studies in Sicily and indeed, all of Italy. At a time when it seemed laughable to start a school in Sicily dedicated to teaching Italian, Alessandro forged ahead and established the first Italian language school south of Rome.

Housed on the beautiful grounds of Casa Silva, an impressive villa built in 1811 by a cousin of the English royal family, Babilonia is also a cultural center hosting art exhibitions, jazz and small symphony concerts, live theater, and book presentations by Italian authors.

After searching for "Southern Italy Language Schools," I discovered Babilonia, and it took me only about a minute to decide I would spend a week there before my husband and I began a vacation in Sicily. I traveled by myself from the U.S. to Rome to Catania and then by bus to Taormina.

Opting for a home stay, I was placed with an ideal *Nonna Siciliana*, Sicilian grandmother, who lived just a 2-minute walk from Via Timeolone, the steps leading to the school. The school assists students with accommodation options including homestays, apartments, and hotels.

Monday morning I was awake and ready when my home stay hostess Antonina called out, "*Buon giorno, Linda. Colazione pronta!*" Breakfast was typically Italian. . . Bread, butter, jam, coffee. . .or in my case, tea. After stumbling through some conversation, I made my way to school and the entrance exam.

Now I knew I would face a test, and I especially liked one aspect of this particular evaluation. I was asked, in Italian, of course, to rate myself as a learner on my own strengths and needs. Additionally, I had to demonstrate what I knew in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and usage. After a verbal interview with Anita, I was assigned to the pre-intermediate class.

I had registered for the standard course of two sessions per day (1 ½ hour each), one in grammar and one in conversation (about \$310/week). What I quickly learned from other students is the flexibility that Babilonia offers to customize one's learning opportunities. For example, a student who was staying in the area for 3 weeks and was on a budget opted to take only the conversation module for 1½ hours each day. Another took the standard course plus a small group class in the afternoon for a week. Others had a private lesson early in the day, then spent their days as tourists.

I decided on the spot to expand my learning opportunities, so I registered for three one-hour private lessons (about \$50/hour) and the Casalinga Cucina course (\$283), which would also provide evening meals. For three evenings at 7 p.m. I walked to the home of Donatella to help make Sicilian meals and eat with her family.

Class Time

My classes at Babilonia were *perfetto*. How did the teachers know exactly what I

approach to language learning rests solidly on four legs. . .writing, speaking, listening, and reading. The twelve teachers are all university graduates with broad language experience. Each week the staff meets to discuss the progress of every student.

I compiti, homework, is assigned in the grammar class and reviewed the next day. Typical of me, I often found my homework paper covered in red corrections, and I kept reminding myself, "Mistakes are for learning." Indeed, I did learn. The diagram illustrating indirect and direct object pronouns is embedded in my brain. Now that is not to say that I always get them right, but my brain likes the visual map. I looked forward to my conversation class each day, where we participated fully in role-plays, games, and listening/speaking activities.

Between the grammar and conversation classes students enjoy a half-hour break. A small café right on the grounds of the school provides drinks and pastries. During the break I would order lunch from the café, with choices of pasta, salad, or *panini*. My lunch would be ready each day after classes finished.

The lovely and ancient gardens within the school grounds provide a welcoming and relaxing spot for students. The palms and bamboo, Roman stones, and Byzantine well are among the protected elements of this most delightful space. I marveled at the pomegranate, grapefruit, orange, lime, and persimmon trees, all loaded with fruit. I discovered that *le zanzare*, the mosquitoes, also love the garden. Bring your repellent!

The school is widely accredited and draws students around the world; the breakdown is about 20% American, 35% Germanic, 10% Russian, and 35% other. During my week (October, low season), there were 10 students in each of my classes, divided nicely between "youngsters" and "oldsters," about 45 students in the school. Alessandro shared with me that the summer the school started there were 12 students total. Now the school draws about 900 students per year. About 5% of the students take additional courses, cooking being the most attended. Seasonal courses such as diving are also popular.

Cultural Center

Babilonia stands solidly as a proud bearer of Sicilian culture. Indeed, as Goethe said, "To have seen Italy without having seen Sicily is not to have seen Italy at all, for Sicily is the clue to everything." Beyond the Hollywood stereotypes, Sicily embraces a rich, varied, and multi-textured history.

During my week at Babilonia, I attended a free seminar at school on the *Miti e leggende di Sicilia*, Myths and Legends of Sicily, with Peppe, one of the teachers. He enchanted us with the tales of *Polifemo*, *Persefone*, *Ulisse*, and more. I never wanted it to end, and have decided that I will spend my winter reading mythology.

Another afternoon was a free showing of the film "Mediterraneo." I actually missed the film because I climbed up to Santa Maria della Rocca, a *chiesa*, church, high above Taormina with a new friend and classmate. The following evening students gathered for a lesson (\$5) in making *sarde a beccafico*, couscous-stuffed fried sardines. In the U.S. I would not be able to get a sardine past my lips but these were. . .*delizioso!*

Twice during the week the school sponsored happy hour with *le notizie della settimana*, the news of the week, and dinners for students (\$20 exclusive of wine). Friday night's dinner also featured a Brazilian jazz duo. OK, so now I want to go to Brazil and dance after hearing them. *Fantastico!*

From humble beginnings and a clear vision of the future, the school and cultural center continues to develop its presence to include so much more than just language learning. Babilonia boasts a vibrant study abroad program, www.study-abroad-programs-italy.com, has recently been appointed to the board of the American Association of Teachers of Italian, and participates with the University of Minnesota in a food sustainability project.

Secondo me, in my opinion, Babilonia is the jewel in the crown of the ever-glittering Taormina.

Cultural Immersion Opportunities In and Around Taormina

Babilonia Student Card: Your student ID card will afford you free admission to the Greek Theater, reduced admission to Isola Bella, and restaurant discounts around town. Be sure to ask. It is part of the Sicilian culture of friendliness and hospitality to honor students with *un po di sconto*, a small discount.

Bam Bar: At 45 Via Di Giovanni, near the school, you really must go to experience one of the true cultural taste delights of Taormina and Sicily, a first-rate *granita*. And if you want to be especially Sicilian, order a brioche with your *granita*. You will be very happy!

Casa Cuseni: “The Finest House in Taormina” was built between 1905 and 1907 and attracted literary and Hollywood figures including Lord Bertrand Russell, Truman Capote, Oscar Wilde, Greta Garbo, Tennessee Williams, and many more. It has been declared an Italian National Monument and is protected by the Victoria and Albert Museum of London. It is a hotel and museum, which you may visit.

Castlemola: If you think Taormina is high on a hill, you are right. Then look up, and the small settlement you can see in the distance is Castlemola. You can reach it by foot, or by bus, taxi, or car. But go to Castlemola. It is a delightful village, declared one of the prettiest in Italy, and friendliness abounds. The specialty drink is almond wine. Castlemola is also becoming known as a destination wedding spot.

CiocolArt: Who does not love chocolate? And who would love it more when it is sculpted into incredible, Italian works of art. The Chocolate Art festival is held each year in Taormina approximately between Christmas and New Year.

Gole Alacantara: Between the Etna volcano and the Nebrodi Mountains, the River Alacantara (from the Arab word “Al Qantarah” meaning “arch bridge”), is home to a botanical and geological park of nature trails and river hiking areas. Wear water shoes and clothes that can get wet, then go wading.

Isola Bella: Ride the *funivia* (3€ each way) or walk down to Isola Bella, a rocky beach with an isthmus that leads you to this small beautiful island.

Local Festivals: As in every part of Italy, local festivals are a necessary and integral part of the culture. A few in the Taormina area include:

- Black Friday (the Friday before Easter)—Angels and Demons

- Palio di Normanni—Piazza Armerina. Mid-August
- Couscous Festival—San Vito Lo Capo. End of September.

Mount Etna: A visit to Taormina and eastern Sicily would not be complete without a visit to Mt. Etna. Excursions are available from Taormina through [Saistours](#) or [SAT group tours](#), both on Corso Umberto in Taormina. Additional tours are available to Noto, Siracusa, Lipari, Vulcano, Palermo, Cefalu, Panarea, and Stromboli.

Taoarte: From June through August, cultural events are showcased throughout Taormina. Music, theater, dance abound.

Taobuk: The first and only book festival in Sicily is held in Taormina each year in September. Bringing together authors, journalists, students, and tourists, the festival is in its third year. As part of Taobuk, Babilonia supports and participates in a writing contest, last year garnering 120 entries worldwide.

Taormina Film Festival: Held in June, the film festival is a major event in Taormina, showcasing Hollywood blockbusters and international films. It attracts the glamorous directors, producers, actors, and actresses, as well as film buffs from all over the world. The photo archive book *La Dolce Vita* (ISBN 978-88-905243-2-5), detailing the fascinating fifties and sixties in Taormina, is written in Italian and translated to English by Babilonia. www.taorminafilmfest.it

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Thank you for your wonderful review! I will be attending Babilonia this summer for three weeks in July, and could not be more enthused!

Diana

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