Social Culture in Italy

Despite some natural differences, there are also big similarities between Portugal and Italy. Generally, in both countries, people are friendly and welcoming, and the Catholic Church still plays an important role in people’s lives.

Similarly to what happens in Portugal, in Italy, when we meet someone, we normally say “good day” (buongiorno) and shake hands. We will only say ‘Hello’ (ciao) with friends and young people, since this is a more informal way of greeting. If we go into a shop or if we enter a place where there are people standing or waiting for something, for instance, it is also polite to say “good morning” or “good afternoon”.

Kissing in Italy

Italian families and friends usually kiss when they meet, irrespective of their sex. If a lady expects you to kiss her, she offers her cheek. Between members of the opposite sex, the ‘kiss’ is deposited high up on the cheek, never on the mouth (except between lovers!) and isn’t usually really a kiss, more a delicate brushing of the cheeks accompanied by kissing noises. There are usually two kisses – first on the right cheek, then on the left. It’s also common in Italy for male relatives and close male friends to embrace each other – a different habit from Portugal, since men – apart from male parents and children – don’t kiss each other (they just shake hands or tap each other on the shoulder).

Invitations

To be invited to dinner by an Italian family can be considered a rare honour. In this case – and this rule goes for both countries – it is polite to take along a small present of flowers, pastries or chocolates.

Although in Portugal it is common and acceptable to take a bottle of a good wine, in Italy some people say you must never do it, although this obviously will depend on the hosts and on how well you know them. However, if you do take wine, it’s unlikely to be served with the meal, as it will have already been chosen.

Going out

Italians like to go out and to party. They are generally fun happy people and are very sociable. However, they will probably prefer to be in a bar, with friends than to go to a club all night long. They also value family a lot, so many of these social occasions may include their family members as well.

Dress code

Italians dress well and seem to have an inborn sense of elegance and style. Presentation and impression are all-important to Italians and are referred to as bella presenza or bella figura (literally ‘beautiful presentation or figure’). Italians generally dress well and appropriately, tending to be more formal in their attire than most northern Europeans and North Americans.