



## Annie Hawes

**Extra Virgin**  
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**Q: Did you keep a diary recording your daily experiences in Diano San Pietro? How did you choose what incidents to include as you wrote *Extra Virgin*? Was it a deliberate decision to write your account in the present tense?**

**A:** No, I've never managed to keep a proper diary. I always use a big month-by-month wall calendar instead, where I scribble down a couple of sentences about what's been going on during the day, along with lists of things to do, plans and appointments. When it came to writing *Extra Virgin* I hauled a great pile of the things out of the bottom of my wardrobe, along with a sack full of photographs stretching back a couple of decades. If an event is at all memorable, you find that just a few words - maybe even on a things-to-do list - can activate great floods of memory. Still, the main outlines of the book had been developing in the back of my mind for a long time before I actually started to write, so it wasn't too hard to choose stories that gave a flavor of life in San Pietro, of what might be surprising or noteworthy to an outsider, as well as connecting up with the tales of the individuals I'd decided to focus on. And yes, it was a deliberate decision to write in the present tense. I actually started off the first couple of chapters in the past tense, then discovered that using the present made everything feel

more immediate and vivid, so the writing flowed much more easily. Right up to the end I was still considering rewriting the whole thing in the past, but got such positive responses to the book the way it was that I abandoned the plan!

**Q: Were you surprised by how welcoming and helpful your new neighbors were? Did you ever experience any direct hostility as an English property owner in Italy?**

**A:** Compared to London neighbors everyone was certainly very welcoming and helpful - although I think a lot of this was because we arrived in the village to work, and not as tourists. The whole concept of a "holiday trip" in the modern sense was (and still is) pretty incomprehensible to the older generation in San Pietro, so anyone who arrives there as a tourist is by definition pretty incomprehensible themselves; while on the other hand the notion of someone leaving their country to find work is one that most Italians are only too familiar with. Apart from the tourism question, though, I think that maybe any small country community anywhere, any place where everyone knows one another and naturally expects to get to know newcomers, might be pretty similar as long as you got off on the right footing. And no, I've never experienced any hostility as an English property owner - partly for the above reasons, also because the place we chose to go and live was somewhere no local would have touched with a bargepole, and lastly because, as I've described in *Extra Virgin*, any hostility of that who-do-they-think-they-are kind gets directed mainly at the poor old Germans, for obvious historical reasons.

**Q: Since you completed *Extra Virgin*, have you made any additions or improvements on your home there?**

**A:** Yes. Now I have a bit of money I have a genuine water closet and accompanying cess-pit, and no longer have to watch my guests being horribly unnerved by the old earth closet; I also have a huge oblong rainwater tank cunningly concealed below the house between the olive trees, collecting water off the roof to make up for the terrible effects of global warming, which are causing our well to run out of water earlier and earlier each summer. My hope is that we'll collect so much rainwater that we'll be able to fill up the water tank.

**Q: Do you think the people of Diano San Pietro or Diano Marina would recognize themselves if they read your book in translation? Would they agree or disagree with any of your characterizations?**

**A:** Yes. Stefano at the bar, son of Luigi and Maria, is still reading it, very slowly and with the aid of an enormous dictionary, and nabs me every time I go into his hostelry to tell me how spot-on some description or other is (thank the lord!) Part of my project in writing the book was to bear in mind how local people would perceive what I wrote, and to make sure nothing I said reduced them from their individual selves to the facile jolly-Italian-peasant clichés and stereotypes of which there are also so many about. I imagine though that if *Extra Virgin* was ever translated many local people would fail to see the point of my describing, as if they were worthy of note, things which to them are completely ordinary and everyday affairs.

**Q: Did you model your account of life in Diano San Pietro after any other contemporary or classic books about living as a stranger in a strange land?**

**A:** No. I did read a lot of contemporary accounts - partly because I was sure that, in some mysterious way, somebody must have already written my book! - but I eventually found myself modeling my account AGAINST what seemed to be the prevalent way of representing local people in this genre - simply as a colorful backdrop to the author's own experiences as a stranger, their culture and indeed their individuality irrelevant to the story; or only there for the author's own delectation, having no independent existence of their own. A "stranger" is by definition "strange" to the host culture, as well as vice-versa; I wanted to write a book where local people's perceptions of me were as important as my perception of them: to take the reader with me through the long slow process of my learning to understand the people of the village and their everyday assumptions about the world, until they were no longer "strange" at all; or at any rate, no stranger than me.

**Q: Are you worried that your story might encourage other foreign enthusiasts to move your remote village, altering its essential character?**

**A:** Tricky one. But San Pietro has weathered a good century of tourism on the Riviera, just a couple miles away, with no ill effects, and has even been cheered by the influx of holiday-home owners up in the hills. As long as the market for olive oil stays buoyant, San Pietro homes will stay full, nothing for sale; and no more planning permission is being granted outside the village. So I think we're safe! Meanwhile, I gave a copy of *Extra Virgin* to Signor Ugo, our mayor and shopkeeper - for respect, even though he doesn't read English - and the next day when I went to get my bread he had to get it out and show me the HarperCollins address on the inside page, with the words "New York" printed there, large as life. Tears had come to his eyes, he said, when he'd seen that and realized that the name of Diano San Pietro was now known so far and wide, right on the other side of the world. More seriously, though, when you go to any of the towns and villages where literary fame has brought some tourism, the local inhabitants all seem to be rather pleased by the development; with the massive tendency all over Europe for people to leave the countryside for the city, anything that creates a few more jobs and keeps a few more people in their home towns is welcome. It is maybe only visitors who would see this as "spoiling" and being disappointed.

