

I wish you, your family and friends a healthy, positive, adventurous, fun and loving 2018.

So maybe Christmas and new year celebration reflections are the easiest way to start my update!

2017 was not the most active year for me. A consequence of this was my endless searching through our various storage places for pairs of trousers that would, sort of, fit me – without the pockets seemingly opening out to become an extension of my ‘long forgotten’ waist! I had joined ‘gag’ and ‘pilates’ classes starting in October – but previous abuse meant there was no way I could look streamlined! and Christmas festivities put pay to any dream of wearing trousers with even a 2cm reduction in size.

Why share the embarrassing truth? It’s because our Italian friends make a special effort to spruce themselves up for the year-end celebrations. I decided therefore that my formal dress suit was the only game in town. Back to the archive searches and I found two suits. The bad news is that one suit had ‘38 inch’ waist trousers, hmmm! The other I bought in Italy and the waist size was 44?. Nowhere else to go so I tried on the trousers and just about squeezed the offending parts into them. I committed to keeping food down to a minimum for the last two days of the year to at least have some psychological belief that it would be fine on the night.

Another painful test in South Italy, was my attempt to find a dress shirt, (my previous purchases having turned to an aged yellow tint colour!) I tried to describe the shirt type in the local shops, but the sales staff were content to try to sell me an ordinary shirt but with cut back collar. I was struggling but managed to find a shop where they brushed off the dust from a pack to display a dress shirt. Google translate didn’t help but the shop assistant described it as a ‘camicia diplomatica’. The model I bought was much more advanced than I had previously used. Hopefully you can see from the picture that collar is similar to conventional, folding down around the neck, sown down at either end, through which one slots the bow tie (papillon). I thought that would be much smarter than my previous shirts where the bow tie strap was exposed around the collar and would rise up as the evening went on, requiring occasional adjustment.

So, all kitted out, two days of starvation and then I was ready for the big event. It has become tradition to celebrate at an out of town restaurant-come dance hall. The investment was a princely 70 euros for each of us – with the promise of excessive eating, excessive dancing, lots of fun and limitless drink. Most importantly we would be served generous lashings of good friends’ company and shared emotions at the bewitching hour.

One, not so trivial, part of the preparation was the fitting of that bloody new shirt. Well, not so much the shirt but lacing the bow tie through the shirt collar accurately enough so that the linked bow tie didn’t ‘droop’ and didn’t ‘choke’. The complication was that the adjusting strap of the tie disappeared into the collar ‘loop’ so I couldn’t adjust it ‘in situ’. Several attempts at squeezing two fingers into the collar didn’t work and so I had to take the shirt off, adjust, retry with shirt on. Four times!! Still a little ‘limp’ I decided that my sanity was more important than a properly fitted bow tie.

We planned to get to our table 20 minutes before the designated hour. Our logic was to claim the seats with the best access to everything, as we were part of a group of 24 people – not quite the ‘beach towel’ process, but close. That was successful because the Italians never arrive early! Soon the place was full and we spent several minutes performing the cheek to cheek kiss and hug ritual with many people, some of whom I knew by sight only! We managed to get an almost fully seated table ( those of you that have travelled on Ryanair will sympathise – upon the aircraft’s wheels touching the tarmac, some Italians think it’s ok to reach up into the overhead baggage compartments – hostess cries of ‘rimanete ai vostri posti per cortesia’ , probably the only Italian words they are taught at training school).

It was close to 10pm before the food started to arrive. Knowing that the ‘lentils’ dish has to arrive before midnight, it was going to be a struggle for the waiters and restaurant staff to comply with tradition.

The party was in full swing, the various food courses arriving, intermixed with the calls to the dance floor. I looked at my watch. It was 11.30pm; no lentils, no main course; then – disaster.

At the far end of the room a crowd gathered around one of the tables. In Essex I would have thought it was fight time. No, not here. The music stopped. Seemingly all eyes in the room were attempting to see what was happening. Occasionally, messengers were sent from our end of the room to get updates. No need, Gianni, the DJ, announces that someone had fallen ill, probably because he had eaten too much and that they were about to call for an ambulance. Interestingly, a doctor sitting at the table next to ours did not move.

My watch now showed just 17 minutes before midnight. I then remembered that last year the final countdown in the room was 15 seconds later than the actual time. I was doing the countdown for my ‘table’ and found our group popping the champagne several seconds before the rest of the room. So, throwing caution to the wind, I handed my watch to Gianni and explained that the time recorded is taken from an atomic clock (that’s what Apple advertised) and so it would be a good idea to use my watch as his guide. He thanked me then, seemingly, every five minutes, bellowed out the number of minutes from midnight.

I know you are asking yourselves, ‘what about the lentils’. Don’t worry, in true Italian fashion they improvised. The main course and lentils were all served on the same dish at the same time; phew! A few minutes later, and just two minutes from midnight, the champagne arrived. JIT.

At midnight, the champagne popped; the cheek hugs ritual went through a second round; the Italian version of the conga started in various zones of the dance floor, followed by several ‘near misses’ as different people chains avoided one another, in true Italian driving-style manoeuvres - and the food was left on the table to get cold !

The party carried on for hours, the stricken client made a recovery (no ambulance), then we finally made our way back to the relative comfort of home. Happy New Year!!

New Year's day is another traditional festival of food and friendship. We shared our treat with four English friends in a wonderful masseria called 'Tenuta Moreno', located just twenty minutes from our villa. The website link (<http://www.tenutamoreno.it/it/home/>), it is really worth a few minutes to browse through the photos on the website.

We were located in one of the many private rooms and there were three other tables in the room, each seating between six and ten people. We had our own waitress who was very accommodating, efficient and polite. The menu was exciting and the presentation of each course was excellent. Of course, wine was included in the price, as was champagne and 'free bar'. All this for 60 euros per person.

My 'social hangover' from the previous night's festivities meant that I was soon (after two glasses of wine) walking over to each of the other three tables. I spluttered my inadequate Italian new year's greetings to each person, with associated tapping of glasses. The guests had travelled from various locations, Lecce being the furthest away, to participate. With good reason!

Coffee and liquers were served at a communal bar, again, very efficiently and generously. This gave me the opportunity to rekindle very recently made friendships and banter, our group being called 'Brexit' !

Several group, couples, views photos then followed, (it now being after sunset and a new life of colour lighting up the masseria and its grounds). Fond farewells and Diana and myself committing to a detox starting the next morning!

This morning my detox breakfast was followed by the first gym session of the year. It's called gag, 'gambe-addominali-glut. In English, 'legs-abdominals-glut'

Now I don't profess to be fit and neither am I generally a nervous person, but this whole 'gag' thing was initially, difficult. I attend two sessions each week, each lasting just over one hour. The 'palestra' is basically a 5x5 metre square room, with floor to ceiling mirrors on two of the walls. This is the difficult part because the other 8 to 10 participants are women. Not in itself a problem, but I claim one corner of the room with the instructress in close proximity, and mirrored walls to each side of me. I have to stay close to the 'boss' as I don't really understand some of the shouted instructions and I am partially deaf. Thank goodness I can see, but trying to work out my moves using the mirrored reflections as guide is not always easy. Also, some of the stretch routines do require my fellow companions to move the various parts of their bodies in quite extreme angles, as I do, but with less flexibility. However, I have overcome my nervousness and know I will lose weight- but it will be a long haul and I will sacrifice myself.

The second session of the day, and following on from the 'gag' session, is called 'postural training', a sort of pilates class. More gentle but a very good way to stretch those parts of my body that I forgot existed. Diana comes along to these sessions and is there to help me if I don't understand the instructions. However, our 'leader' does speak several languages and is quick to guide me, if not by what she says then by physically moving me in the appropriate direction.

All-in-all, we are set for a great year and I am looking forward to fitting into my 38 inch waist trousers by summer. Our gym work will be accompanied by two sessions per week of 'line dancing' and 'couples dancing' lessons, Finally, walking the dogs, especially our Sunday morning stroll along the local beach area will all contribute to our well being.

I sincerely hope that those of you reading this article will have an opportunity to enjoy a healthy life in this coming year and, again, wish you all health, happiness and fun in 2018.

