

## Roman Holiday

“I always did everything I was supposed to do,” recalls long-time Westporter Geri Zatcoff. “I majored in business administration because my parents thought I’d get a better job than as the English or philosophy major I wanted to be. I got good grades in school, and when I graduated, I landed a good job in banking as a pensions specialist.” But eight years later, the S&L scandal of the late eighties sent her stable comfortable world into a tailspin, and she found herself without a job for the first time in her life. She had also grown disillusioned with what she saw as a rising tide of conspicuous consumerism and yuppyism. Net effect: She was lost at twenty-nine, with no direction home.

One evening she was sitting in a bar waiting for a friend, when she was struck by this question: If she could wave a magic wand, what would she create? And she realized at that moment that what she wanted more than anything else was to live in Italy. She had visited Rome and Ischia in the eighties, and had the most wonderful experiences, plunging into a different culture and a simpler way of life. Living there, though, had never crossed her mind. Now she couldn’t get the thought out of her head.

But being the practical person she was, she didn’t just jump on the next plane. “I planned for one year,” she says. “I decided to become a cocktail waitress in the upscale Pump Room in New York’s Ambassador Hotel. “I worked my little patootie off.” To make even more money, she rented out her little Manhattan studio as a B&B eight nights a month and crashed on friends’ sofas. “I never worked so hard in my life,” she recalls. Nor was she ever so motivated.

One year, and 10,000 disposable dollars later, Geri booked a flight, but even then she set up a safety net, in the form of a return ticket. Her plan was to go for six weeks; if she was as happy as she expected, she’d come home, sell everything and move for the foreseeable future. It didn’t help that her family was saying things like she might permanently take herself out of the job market. But she was focused on her goal and, ultimately, stuck to her original plan.

She landed in Ischia, where she felt comfortable, and spent six lazy months not working — just waking up, strolling to the café, enjoying a leisurely breakfast of cappuccino, croissant and the morning paper. She’d write postcards and in her journal, then buy a picnic

lunch of bread, cheese and fruit and head to the beach. But the need to make money welled up, and she moved to Rome, her other comfort-zone epicenter. There she relied on her training as a fitness instructor and slowly developed an impressive client roster (including the wife of the Minister of the Interior). She met a guy, whom she dated off and on, and studied Italian, immersing herself in the culture and just basically recovered from a decade as corporate drone. During her two-year stay, she developed a deep appreciation of Italian sensibility and gusto for living life to the fullest, whether that be food, family or fashion. “It’s not the plate that matters,” she says. “It’s what’s on the plate. Italians never eat alone. Even if it’s just sharing a bowl of pasta, it’s always a social affair.”

But after two years she was ready to move home, and her first order of business was getting a master’s degree in exercise physiology, something she had previously avoided. “Everything courageous or risky that I’ve done since then has been because of my having moved to Italy,” she says.

Geri never returned to banking and spent the past decade working in fitness as the director of the local YMCA. But the business setting wasn’t soul-satisfying. Recently she again tapped the strength she developed from living overseas, and in June quit the high-powered job to grow her own wellness consulting business based here in Westport. It’s a risk she feels will pay off big-time. “If I could pick up and move to a foreign country,” Geri says today, “I know I can do pretty much anything.”

Excerpted from *Radical Sabbatical: See the world. Get free. Maybe change a life, too?*

by Suzanne Gerber

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