

INTERNATIONAL LIVING

SINCE 1979

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LIVING THE DREAM

Name: Jennifer Sontag
From: Missouri
Living in: Terrasini, Italy

It's a dilemma many Americans face: Even a good salary can be tough to live on.

"I used to work crazy hours trying to raise my two children and put them through university. The latter alone cost over \$100,000 per degree," Jennifer Sontag explains. "I'm well educated, had a six-figure salary, and I still could not live."

In 2016, the divisive election made Jennifer feel alienated from her community, and a divorce meant losing access to her husband's health insurance.

"That's when I started thinking," Jennifer says. "What am I doing here? I need to start looking for options."

Jen hired a Florence-based company to trace her Sicilian heritage and apply for an Italian passport. "But come 2021, everything was still in lockdown, so the company told me they could no longer help. That's when I decided to fly to Italy and do the process on my own," says Jen.

Through a combination of extensive research and grit, Jen was approved for her passport in a mere 11 weeks. But it wasn't easy.

"I had to find 120 years' worth of birth, marriage and death certificates, plus the original generation's naturalization papers to the U.S.," she says.

That's because Italy—thanks to its aging population crisis—boasts one of the easiest ancestry citizenships in Europe. Any descendent of an Italian citizen alive in 1861 (when Italy became a nation-state), can apply for an Italian passport.

The key word here is Italian *citizen*.

"We originally thought that my great-grandparents had become American citizens immediately upon arrival to the States," says Jennifer. But thankfully, her great-grandparents didn't renounce their Italian citizenship until *after* having children... meaning Jennifer was eligible for an Italian passport.

Following Her Grandparents' Footsteps

Another challenge: many Italians, including her great-grandparents, who came to the United States during the first waves of



You can enjoy *la dolce vita* too in Terrasini's Piazza Duomo.

18 Million Americans Qualify for Italian Citizenship. Do You?

Natali Lekka

immigration were illiterate in both Italian and English.

"There were a lot of misspellings of names in documents, as well as wrong dates. A lot of times, a birthday was recorded as the date a person was registered in the vital records office, so my grandmother had three different birth dates on three different documents."

The only solution to inaccurate documents, Jennifer says, is to have them legally changed.

"Once you do that you need to put an apostille on them, as part of the Hague convention, and you need to have the documents

translated. Then those translations need to be certified by the Italian courts. It can be a complicated process."

Now, Jennifer lives in the same village her great grandparents once left behind. "My life is very different now," she says. "In the U.S., you have to drive everywhere for everything, whereas here I can walk to my local grocery store, and everything is a lot more relaxed and community-based. The butcher knows your name, the grocer

knows what you like.

"Relationships are a lot more personal, and once you make your first Italian friend, they start introducing you to their other friends too. In the U.S., one of the first things you get asked is, 'What do you do for a living?' Here, I've never been asked that."

The Italian Citizenship Concierge

Jennifer's success with the passport process motivated her to found the Italian Citizenship Concierge, a company that walks eligible Americans through the passport application process. Her specialty, she says, is in bringing eligible Americans to Italy for the ancestry passport process, as she once did. It's a good niche, given that there are only 10 Italian consulates in the States... and 18 million eligible Americans.

Not all of those eligible, of course, are trying to nab an Italian passport, but the small percentage who are have booked appointments with Italian consulates years out.

"In New York, appointments are fully booked for three years and they have a waiting list of over 7,000 people," says

"In Italy, my taxes are only 5% of my income."

