Paolo and Carla Rossi have lived in Padova in northeastern Italy all their lives. This city of 300,000 people is just 40 km (25 mi.) inland of Venice and the historic river connection between the two is now reopened for tourist cruises. Padova has its own character and is known for its university with origins in medieval times and modern specialist departments such as law and engineering. It is also a major medical center based around the nationally famous hospital. Part of this is the children's hospital known as the "City of Hope." For many retailers of consumer goods, Padova is the "standard" Italian city: if a new product sells there, it will sell throughout the country.

Padova is part of Veneto, one of the wealthiest Italian regions. Business is so good that unemployment is low and workers have to be brought in from abroad to meet the needs for labor. The organization of business is distinctive, based around many small-to-medium sized manufacturers, often family-owned, which produce small components that are assembled locally. For example, Paolo owns a firm that produces pumps used in Germany and the United States, but his factory could only be located in Padova because of the local network of component suppliers. Other firms in the area produce goods requiring particular skills, such as spectacles (Safilo) and the machinery required in making shoes. Shoe factories line the river below Padova, producing for fashion houses such as Versace and Armani, with much of the output being exported. There is a history of local people working at home to assemble a small number of components - a feature that Benetton used in its early days when it did not have many factories. Present changes affecting the manufacturing sector include larger companies absorbing the smaller units and reducing the numbers of home workers.

Small family-run units also remain typical of shops in Padova. The Italian government has so far resisted an influx of foreign (especially French) supermarket chains, although a new shopping mall is now being built on the outskirts of Padova. Still a feature of the city, however, is the central shopping area, the Salone. It is an area between two open squares in which an upper floor is occupied by a museum and the ground floor by around one hundred specialist food shops. The squares house vegetable and fruit markets. Beyond these is another square with clothes shops and market stalls. Italian shops are restricted to a maximum of 8 hours opening time each day, which keeps out foreign retailers who might operate 24-hour stores. Greater incorporation in the European Union may make the small retail units with limited opening hours difficult to maintain.
Moderately wealthy Italians, such as those in Padova, enjoy a wide range of recreational pursuits. While the younger people will eat a pizza and spend the late evening at a discotheque, families will often eat out on a weekly basis as a social event. At the restaurant they meet and make friends. A family may go to the cinema at 8 pm and then eat at a restaurant from 10:30 pm. It is normal for Italians to eat late in the evening. The many restaurants provide a great variety of menus. Among the cheaper restaurants, the trattoria offer simple menus including thin-crust pizzas. The agriturismo prepare dishes based on their own produce, from vegetables to meat and wine. There are also expensive ristorantes with more ambitious menus. Virtually all restaurants make a fuss of their clients with continuing attention throughout the evening, explaining the menu and the origins of the food included.

At the weekends most families will leave the city for the mountains to the north or the coast to the east. It is common for Padovan families to own two cars; Paolo and Carla have two Mercedes at present. Few people use public transport. This makes for some problems, including difficulties of parking in the city center during the week and tailbacks of returning weekend traffic on the main roads. If there is a long period of sunny, calm weather, air pollution becomes a major problem. In the 1999-2000 winter, the city council suspended all city center traffic for several hours in the middle of each day during a long spell of such weather.

For many Italians, soccer is the main sport. Paolo follows the team in the neighboring city of Vicenza, where he grew up. Up to three years ago he went to most home and away matches, but now attends the home matches and watches the away fixtures on satellite TV. Padova also had a Serie A (top league) team a few years ago and built a splendid stadium for it, but then the team was relegated to the lower leagues.
Education is important to Italians, especially as family size has reduced from the large numbers of children in the mid 1900s to some of the smallest families in Europe. Nearly all children are educated in the public school system. A child may attend nursery schools from 3 years, joining an elementary school at 6 years, a middle school at 11 years, and a high school at 14 years. High schools often specialize in areas such as science, languages, or computing, but also provide a broad education. Some people prefer to send their children to private schools and Padova has a number of these, including three schools where students are taught in English. At the end of high school there is a matriculation examination and those who pass can gain entry to university courses. Some Italian universities have their own entrance examinations to choose from the large number of applicants. Changing courses is straightforward. Students do not have government grants, but tuition fees are low because they are mainly paid from taxes.

As in much of Europe, healthcare is mostly free. Families sign up with a doctor for general care and hospital treatment is not billed. There is a small charge for medicines, except for those on very low incomes. For those who do not wish to wait for operations, and can afford it (often through insurance) there is a private hospital sector. Other social welfare provision varies across Italy. In Veneto, where there is a shortage of labor, the unemployed are paid a small benefit and have to accept one from a selection of jobs offered or lose this benefit.

The family remains central to the lives of many in Padova. Paolo and Carla Rossi keep close links to their parents, brothers, sisters, and cousins, all of whom still live near them. Because northeastern Italy is prosperous and work has always been available, there has been little need for emigration to other countries, such as the United States. The family shares a house in the mountains and Paolo sometimes
Environmental Case Study
Living in Italy

goes sailing for a period with his brother. Long-established ways of life continue, but there is also an awareness of change and the new opportunities it brings.