The mobile phone culture in Italy.

They flip open and light up jewel blue. They close with a snap and stow away in the smallest of pockets. They play Handel’s ‘Water Music’ as loud as an orchestra from the depths of a coat. They cause frenzied fumblings and arrested conversations. They are the commonest diversion on trains and park benches where RSI’s are incurred through the endless pressing of tiny buttons. If we are to believe the implication of new laws, they are a major cause of RTA’s. A person walking along, talking and laughing animatedly, cannot be assumed to be a lunatic. Even if the mobile phone is not immediately apparent, it may be present in the form of an insect-sized receiver held by a headband against the ear.

In Italy mobile phones are a way of life. They are called ‘cellulare’ (cellphones) and are carried by virtually everyone apart from the extremely elderly. They are answered with the formulaic “Pronto” (“Ready”) in the teeth of whatever else may be going on. Their newness or otherwise is a status indicator. They demand attention, even when not audibly clamouring, for the reading of messages, or texting - and other things like games which I prefer not even to think about.

In the world of the mobile phone, work and leisure are inextricably mixed. The next call may be from a friend, a family member, or from a business client. There never seems to be a question of division of labour whereby a work telephone would be used within office hours just for work, and a home telephone for matters and people domestic. To have a cellphone is to be a person with an aerial on one’s head.

Having said that, there is one class of person who makes use of two mobile phones to deal with two separate departments in his life. This is the unfaithful husband, who gives his wife and family one number and his mistress the other. By means of judicious switching off of one or the other phone, he is able to maintain the duplicity for which Italian men have a reputation.

I have seen quite another class of person with two cellphones. This is our doctor, whose mobile number is given out to all her patients. Presumably the other phone has a different function, being for her family or certain professional contacts. But it leads me onto an extremely positive and helpful use of the technology. It would be hard to imagine a General Practitioner in Britain answering a mobile phone while in the midst of surgery to accept the order for a repeat prescription or offer advice on an ongoing problem. GPs are ferociously protected by a barrage of receptionists and secretaries and can typically be phoned only at one hour of the day (11.15 am in the Practice we used to attend in England). In Italy, however, certainly within surgery hours and usually outside them as well, the doctor can be reached directly. It does depend on the individual doctor as to what he or she is willing to do from that point. Our first one would refuse to give me repeat prescriptions although he was perfectly happy to provide them and drop them into the Pharmacy for my husband.

“I’m a doctor, not a postman,” he argued whenever I made a request on my own account.

However our current doctor does the service gladly thus not only saving us time but also reducing the congestion in the surgery waiting room. She will also offer advice on the making and breaking of hospital appointments and other matters, all with patience and good temper. I have heard her criticised for allowing interruptions to her face-to-face consultations, but I am personally thankful.

Other professionals are helpfully accessible via the mobile phone culture. An electrician, for example. His home line is manned by a wife who only knows he will be home for lunch (a more useful piece of information than it sounds as Italian lunches are almost as sacrosanct as French ones). However you can speak to the man himself, out on another job, if you have his cellphone number. Likewise someone like a surveyor, or a lawyer, who is often out of the office, can be contacted directly rather than through the vague recollections and assessments of a receptionist.

When the gas lorry is due to deliver gas to our outside tank – an event which ends up being pinpointed to an eight-hour span of time – it is handy to have the driver’s number so as to ask his ETA as he makes his way through the villages.

So although it can be irritating to watch the alacrity with which the demanding little objects are answered and to realise people’s growing dependence, on balance, living in Italy, the mobile phone makes life slightly more efficient, slightly more predictable, and therefore quite a lot more pleasant. Long may it continue.