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Episode #120

Vespa

1st Jan, 2021

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and today, if you are listening to this episode on the day it's released, is the 1st of January.

[00:00:29] So, happy new year, I hope today is going to be a great day for you, and that 2021 will be a fantastic year for you too.

[00:00:39] To [kick off](#)¹ 2021 we are going to tell the story of Vespa, the [iconic](#)² Italian scooter.

¹ start

² very famous and well known



Vespa

[00:00:48] It's a pretty amazing story, and takes us from World War I right through to today, involving Hollywood, British music, and some fantastic Italian engineering.

[00:01:01] Before we get right into that though, let me quickly remind you that you can get all of the bonus episodes, plus the subtitles, that transcript and the key vocabulary for this episode and all of our other ones over on the website, which is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:17] This is also where you can check out becoming a member of Leonardo English and join a community of curious minds from all over the world, doing meetups, exchanging ideas, and generally improving their English in a more interesting way.

[00:01:32] So if that is of interest, and I can't see a reason why it wouldn't be, then the place to go to is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:42] OK then, Vespa.

[00:01:45] Now, you probably know what a Vespa is. Perhaps you've driven one before, or maybe you even own one.

[00:01:53] They are small, Italian [scooters](#)³. Like mini motorbikes, but that you can sit on a little bit like a chair, with your legs in the front.

³ small, less powerful motorcycles



Vespa

[00:02:04] If you think of Vespa, you probably think of people [whizzing around](#)⁴ the streets of Rome, well-dressed men and women going along narrow streets.

[00:02:17] It's a brand and a name that will be forever associated with Italy, and indeed the British newspaper The Times once described Vespa as “a completely Italian product, such as we have not seen since the Roman [chariot](#)⁵”

[00:02:36] To understand where Vespa comes from, we need to go all the way back to the end of the 19th century, to Genoa, in northern Italy.

[00:02:47] In 1884 there was a factory built by a 22 year old man called Rinaldo Piaggio.

[00:02:55] It initially [fitted out](#)⁶ luxury ships, and by the start of the twentieth century it was also making railway [carriages](#)⁷, [vans](#)⁸, and engines.

[00:03:08] In 1914 the First World War arrived, so there was evidently less demand for luxury ship [fittings](#)⁹ and railways [carriages](#), so the factory switched to manufacturing [aircraft](#)¹⁰, aeroplanes, for the war effort.

⁴ moving around quickly

⁵ a two wheeled vehicle used by the Romans for racing and fighting

⁶ provided with equipment

⁷ the parts of the train where the passengers sit

⁸ medium sized road vehicles

⁹ pieces of equipment

¹⁰ vehicles that can fly, e.g. aeroplane



Vespa

[00:03:26] When the war was over, Piaggio had become a specialist in the manufacture of aeroplanes and parts for planes, so it continued to do this, building new factories in Tuscany.

[00:03:41] In 1938, Rinaldo Piaggio, the Piaggio who had founded the company, died, leaving it to his two sons, Enrico and Armando.

[00:03:52] When World War II started, these Piaggio factories were [prime targets¹¹](#) for Allied [bombers¹²](#) - they were producing planes and parts for planes that would be used in the war effort, and the factories were continually attacked.

[00:04:09] And on August 31st 1943, they were bombed [to smithereens¹³](#), they were completely destroyed.

[00:04:18] This was only 9 days before the Italian [surrender¹⁴](#), on September the 8th of 1943.

[00:04:26] With World War II in Italy finally over, it was time to rebuild, and the Piaggio brothers didn't waste much time at all.

¹¹ important targets

¹² planes that drop bombs

¹³ completely, utterly

¹⁴ to stop fighting and admit defeat



Vespa

[00:04:37] Enrico, who had been given the task of rebuilding the destroyed factories, asked the Allies for help.

[00:04:45] Italy, like much of continental Europe, was in terrible condition at the end of the Second World War, and Enrico Piaggio had no money to rebuild his destroyed factories.

[00:04:58] Whatsmore, a lot of the machinery from his factories had been removed and taken to Germany.

[00:05:07] The Allies helped bring it back, and work was able to start on the Piaggio factory.

[00:05:13] But Enrico Piaggio had an idea.

[00:05:17] He [foresaw](#)¹⁵ a future in which there was demand for a convenient, simple, and affordable [mode](#)¹⁶ of personal transportation for [the masses](#)¹⁷, and decided that he would build it.

¹⁵ saw (what would happen)

¹⁶ way of doing something

¹⁷ most people



Vespa

[00:05:32] He [enlisted](#)¹⁸ the help of one of his engineers, Renzo Spolti, in 1944 to design this dream [scooter](#)¹⁹.

[00:05:42] They nicknamed it Paperino, which is the word for Donald Duck, or [duckling](#)²⁰, or little duck, in Italian.

[00:05:52] By 1945 Spolti had a [prototype](#)²¹ ready, but when he showed it to Enrico Piaggio he wasn't [blown away](#)²², he didn't think it was that great.

[00:06:06] From the front it looked quite similar to the Vespa that you would recognise today, but it had its engine between the front and back wheels, so you sat with your legs on either side, a bit like a motorbike.

[00:06:23] This wasn't the [home run](#)²³ design that Piaggio was hoping for, so he changed engineers, [enlisting](#)²⁴ an aeronautical engineer, a man called Corradino D'Ascanio, to have a go.

¹⁸ asked for the help of

¹⁹ a small, less powerful motorcycle

²⁰ a baby duck

²¹ the first example of something

²² amazed and delighted

²³ a great success

²⁴ asking for the help of



Vespa

[00:06:37] D'Ascanio was what we would today call a [first principles²⁵](#) thinker.

[00:06:43] Instead of just designing something because that was the way it had always been done, he approached everything from the point of view of 'what would the most sensible way of doing this be'?

[00:06:57] He wanted the driver to be able to sit comfortably, but with the previous design there was the engine between the driver's legs, like it is on a motorbike.

[00:07:09] D'Asciano's [genius²⁶](#) move was to place the engine on the back of the [scooter](#), to the right of the rear wheel, and meant that he could create a space for luggage to the left of the rear wheel.

[00:07:23] And [crucially²⁷](#), moving the engine out from between the two wheels meant that the driver could sit comfortably, more as if they were sitting on a chair than on a horse.

[00:07:37] This wasn't only more [comfy²⁸](#), but meant that women who were wearing skirts, which most women were, they could also ride the [scooter](#) without being uncomfortable.

²⁵ if you are a first principles thinker, you think about a problem from the ground up

²⁶ very clever

²⁷ most importantly

²⁸ informal for comfortable



Vespa

[00:07:49] The name for D'Asciano's invention, legend has it, comes from when he first presented it to his boss, Enrico Piaggio - he exclaimed 'Sembra una vespa!', which means 'it looks like a [wasp](#)²⁹' in Italian.

[00:08:05] And thus, the invention immediately had a name.

[00:08:10] Looking at a Vespa, there are certainly similarities with [wasps](#)³⁰. The Vespa has two fat parts of its body, joined in the middle by a thin part, and the mirrors look like a [wasp](#)'s [antennae](#)³¹.

[00:08:27] This isn't an episode for [petrol heads](#)³², for car and motorbike lovers, but there are some important design elements in the Vespa that made it so successful, and are worth pointing out.

[00:08:41] Firstly, you could sit comfortably, [enabled](#)³³ by the fact that the engine was gone from the middle.

[00:08:48] This also meant that there wasn't any chain required to go from the motor to the wheel; the motor was attached to the wheel.

²⁹ a small flying insect that can sting

³⁰ small, flying insects that can sting

³¹ the long thin parts of an insect's head that it uses to feel things

³² people who like cars or motorbikes

³³ made possible



Vespa

[00:08:57] So unlike with motorbikes you wouldn't get oil all over your legs.

[00:09:03] And secondly, there was this big [mudguard](#)³⁴ at the front, a big [shield](#)³⁵, which protected your legs from [splashes](#)³⁶, [mud](#)³⁷ and so on.

[00:09:15] Thirdly, the [shaft](#)³⁸ for changing gears was on the [handlebars](#)³⁹, where your hands were, so you didn't have to reach down to change gears.

[00:09:27] And finally, the wheels were put on an arm more similar to an aeroplane than a motorbike, which made changing the [tyres](#)⁴⁰ easier.

[00:09:38] D'Ascanio had created something that was, in many ways, a [scooter](#) inspired by a plane.

[00:10:23] It was [comfy](#), it was easy to ride, anyone could do it, men and women, no matter what they were wearing, and you didn't get dirty.

³⁴ a flat object to protect against wet earth

³⁵ a flat object

³⁶ rising water from the ground

³⁷ earth mixed with water

³⁸ a pole to control gears of a car or motorbike

³⁹ the bar you use on a motorbike or scooter to control its direction

⁴⁰ thick rubber rings used on wheels



Vespa

[00:10:34] The Vespa made its [debut](#)⁴¹ on the front cover of the popular Italian magazine La Moto, in April 1946, and in the same month Piaggio filed a [patent](#)⁴² for it.

[00:10:49] Piaggio didn't wait for the public's reaction, and he ordered for 2,000 units to be built immediately.

[00:10:58] Although there were some initial [sceptics](#)⁴³, these [scooters flew off the shelf](#)⁴⁴.

[00:11:05] In the first year 2,500 were produced and sold, then the next year 10,000, 20,00 by the end of the following year, and by 1956 Vespa had produced a million [scooters](#).

[00:11:23] It had also inspired [copycats](#)⁴⁵ from around the world, with similar designs of [scooters](#) being produced in Germany, Japan, Britain, and of course by other companies in Italy.

[00:11:38] You've probably heard of some of these [makes](#)⁴⁶ and companies - Lambretta and the Fuji rabbit.

⁴¹ first public appearance

⁴² the official legal right to make or sell an invention

⁴³ people who do not believe that something is true or good

⁴⁴ sold quickly

⁴⁵ imitations

⁴⁶ name of a product



Vespa

[00:11:44] But none of them ever got anywhere close to the popularity of the Vespa.

[00:11:51] So why was that?

[00:11:17] A large part of it can be [put down to](#)⁴⁷ the relationship between Vespa and Hollywood.

[00:11:24] Piaggio made sure that Vespa was associated with models and high fashion, often appearing in photoshoots, and being an [aspirational](#)⁴⁸ urban object.

[00:11:37] In 1953 a film called Roman Holiday was released, which had Gregory Peck and the [cult](#)⁴⁹ actress Audrey Hepburn riding through Rome on a Vespa.

[00:11:51] This really put it on the [world stage](#)⁵⁰, and its popularity across the globe continued to grow.

[00:11:59] Piaggio started something called Vespa Clubs, which were clubs for Vespa owners, which had over 50,000 members, all passionate Vespa fans.

[00:12:11] The Vespa was more than a way of getting from A to B, it was an [aspirational](#) symbol of freedom, a tool to allow you to live your life in the way you wanted, allowing you to go where you wanted, when you wanted, at any time you wanted.

⁴⁷ attributed, explained by

⁴⁸ wanted by people because it is connected with a lifestyle they want to live

⁴⁹ very popular among a particular group

⁵⁰ on a global level



Vespa

[00:12:31] And still now it is [synonymous⁵¹](#) with Italy, Italian [chic⁵²](#), and stylish living.

[00:12:38] It would take too long to list the celebrities who have either been filmed or photographed on a Vespa, but it's everyone from Audrey Hepburn of course, through to Antonio Banderas, Joan Collins, Gérard Depardieu, Charlton Heston, and Sting.

[00:12:56] And perhaps most famously, Anita Ekberg in the [cult](#) film La Dolce Vita.

[00:13:02] With a brand that was so [synonymous](#) with cool, Vespa seemed [unstoppable⁵³](#).

[00:13:09] It also developed some strange, or at least, unexpected fans.

[00:13:16] In the UK in the 1960s there were two, opposing [subcultures⁵⁴](#), the Mods and the Rockers.

[00:13:26] These two [subcultures](#) were very different, they dressed differently, they listened to different music, and importantly, they drove different kinds of motorbikes.

[00:13:37] The Rockers drove big motorbikes, and the Mods [adopted⁵⁵](#) the Vespa as their motorbike of choice.

⁵¹ having the same meaning

⁵² cool and fashionable

⁵³ not able to be stopped

⁵⁴ a way of life of a particular group in society

⁵⁵ chosen



Vespa

[00:13:46] The Mods were more [stylish](#)⁵⁶, more [appearance-conscious](#)⁵⁷, and they would [customise](#)⁵⁸ their Vespas with extra mirrors and lights.

[00:13:56] Indeed, the UK is still Vespa's second largest market. Italy, naturally, is still number one.

[00:14:04] And Piaggio, the company that makes Vespa, has gone on to produce lots of different kinds of Vespa, but the general principle, and the general style, hasn't changed dramatically from the one D'Ascanio presented to Enrico Piaggio back in 1945.

[00:14:24] If you've been to Italy, especially in the south of Italy, you will know that Vespas are still incredibly popular.

[00:14:32] You only need to be 14 years old in Italy to ride a 50cc Vespa, and many Italian teenagers are anxious to turn 14 so that they can get their first [scooter](#).

[00:14:46] There is even a popular Italian pop song with [lyrics](#)⁵⁹ all about how amazing riding around on a Vespa is.

⁵⁶ attractive and fashionable

⁵⁷ caring about how you look

⁵⁸ make or change according to how you want

⁵⁹ words of a song



Vespa

[00:14:46] The word Vespa is now far more commonly associated with Vespa the [scooter](#) than Vespa the word for [wasp](#), and Vespa has become for many a term that just means '[scooter](#)'.

[00:15:10] People have set all sorts of weird and wonderful records in Vespas too. In 1952 a Frenchman built an [amphibious](#)⁶⁰ Vespa and crossed the English Channel, the water between the UK and France.

[00:15:25] An Italian student got to the Arctic Circle on his Vespa, an Argentine crossed the Andes, and people are forever going on hugely [ambitious](#)⁶¹ adventures on this little [scooter](#) that was only ever really designed for short, urban trips.

[00:15:45] Like many Italian manufacturers, Piaggio has had its share of problems with bad investments and poor productivity, and almost went [bankrupt](#)⁶² in 2003, before being saved by a wealthy Italian businessman.

[00:16:01] But it survived, it has been going from strength to strength, and no doubt millions of people will enjoy riding their little [wasps](#), their little Vespas, for many years to come.

[00:16:16] OK then, that is it for today's episode on the history of Vespa.

⁶⁰ able to go on land and water

⁶¹ wanting to do something that is difficult

⁶² run out of money and unable to pay your debts



Vespa

[00:16:21] I hope it's been an interesting one, that you've learnt something new, and that this has inspired you to rent one if and when you visit Italy.

[00:16:30] At least now you will know a little bit more about this [iconic](#) little [scooter](#).

[00:16:36] I want to do just a quick [shout-out](#)⁶³ in this episode - it was a request from an amazing Spanish/Italian member of Leonardo English, a lady named Silvana.

[00:16:47] So, Silvana, thanks for this suggestion, I hope you enjoyed it.

[00:16:51] And as a final reminder, if you are looking to improve your English in a more interesting way, to join a community of curious minds from all over the world to unlock the transcripts, the subtitles and key vocabulary, then the place to go to is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:17:10] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English

[00:17:15] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

⁶³ a public mention or credit



Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Kick off	start
Iconic	very famous and well known
Teamed up	got together
Scooters	small, less powerful motorcycles
Whizzing around	moving around quickly
Chariot	a two wheeled vehicle used by the Romans for racing and fighting
Fitted out	provided with equipment
Carriages	the parts of the train where the passengers sit
Vans	medium sized road vehicles
Fittings	pieces of equipment
Aircraft	vehicles that can fly, e.g. aeroplane
Prime targets	important targets



Vespa

Bombers	planes that drop bombs
To smithereens	completely, utterly
Surrender	to stop fighting and admit defeat
Foresaw	saw (what would happen)
Mode	way of doing something
The masses	most people
Enlisted	asked for the help of
Scooter	a small, less powerful motorcycle
Duckling	a baby duck
Prototype	the first example of something
Blown away	amazed and delighted
Home run	a great success
Enlisting	asking for the help of
First principles	if you are a first principles thinker, you think about a problem from the ground up
Genius	very clever



Vespa

Crucially	most importantly
Comfy	informal for comfortable
Wasp	a small flying insect that can sting
Wasps	small, flying insects that can sting
Antennae	the long thin parts of an insect's head that it uses to feel things
Petrol heads	people who like cars or motorbikes
Enabled	made possible
Mudguard	a flat object to protect against wet earth
Shield	a flat object
Splashes	rising water from the ground
Mud	earth mixed with water
Shaft	a pole to control gears of a car or motorbike
Handlebars	the bar you use on a motorbike or scooter to control its direction
Tyres	thick rubber rings used on wheels
Debut	first public appearance



Vespa

Patent	the official legal right to make or sell an invention
Sceptics	people who do not believe that something is true or good
Flew off the shelf	sold quickly
Copycats	imitations
Makes	name of a product
Put down to	attributed, explained by
Aspirational	wanted by people because it is connected with a lifestyle they want to live
Cult	very popular among a particular group
World stage	on a global level
Synonymous	having the same meaning
Chic	cool and fashionable
Unstoppable	not able to be stopped
Subcultures	a way of life of a particular group in society
Adopted	chosen
Stylish	attractive and fashionable



Vespa

Appearance-conscio caring about how you look

us

Customise make or change according to how you want

Lyrics words of a song

Amphibious able to go on land and water

Ambitious wanting to do something that is difficult

Bankrupt run out of money and unable to pay your debts

Shout-out a public mention or credit

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