

Italy Journal
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I was at home the day before my trip packing frantically and more than a little worried. The package had not arrived yet. I was busy counting by sevens, “seven pairs of underwear, seven pairs of socks, seven shirts” when the doorbell rang. I rushed to the door excitedly. The UPS guy handed me a small yellow package. It was my new electronic 10-language translator. On past trips I had always traveled with no fewer than three dictionaries and phrase books in my pockets. I decided that I should finally enter the computer age and travel a little lighter. In addition, this gadget took its paperback relatives one better - it could talk. That’s important if you don’t want to stress the wrong syllable and accidentally order a diaper with tomato sauce.

The long flight to Frankfurt went without a hitch. They even upgraded me to business class. It was then a quick flight down to Verona followed by an hour-long train ride to Trento at the base of the Dolomites. The Dolomites are basically the Italian part of the Alps. The views during the train ride were beautiful. Sparkling rivers and lakes, towering granite mountains, dense forests, and vast emerald valleys patched with vineyards. It’s like a full-scale postcard. I arrived at my hotel pretty late. My first day in Europe consisted of pasta with tomato sauce and then straight to sleep. I awoke once in the middle of the night from jetlag but I managed to fall back to sleep.

The next morning I set out to explore the town of Trento. With the exception of the churches and the castle, most of the buildings are less than 100 old, which qualifies as brand spankin’ new by European standards. They are mostly five-story rectangular buildings painted happy pastel pinks, greens, yellows, and blues. I started out walking south along the Adige River that runs just next to the town. It’s a fast-moving river that is a beautiful yet strangely unnatural shade of opaque turquoise. I must have looked a lot like a tourist or a fugitive the way I kept looking back over both shoulders as I walked. As far as I could tell I was dressed pretty much like a local. Jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers must be big in Milan this year. My goatee might have given me away. I did notice a remarkable absence of facial hair on the locals. Well, on the men at least.

My head turning did pay off. Once as I looked back over my right shoulder, I saw a big blue steel wheel about 10 feet in diameter. I don’t know what most people would think at this sight, but I immediately thought, “That looks like a pulley for a cable car.” It was. I bought a ticket for the cable car and within 10 minutes I was hoisted about 300 feet up to the top of a nearby mountain. There was a small town up there called Sardagna. In Sardagna I found a soccer field, an elementary school, a church, a bunch of residential buildings, and what seemed to be a defunct spring water bottling plant.

The spring was still there, trickling down from the top of the mountain. I followed it up a bit until I was looking down over the town and the cable car station to the valley below. To say that this place had spectacular views would be like saying that America’s foreign policy is unpopular. It’s basically true but doesn’t even begin to express the proper magnitude.

I had bought a round-trip tram ticket so I headed back toward the station. As I neared an intersection I crossed paths with a mountain biker who had just come huffing and puffing up a dirt trail that, according to my map, led to the base of the mountain. I figured if he could bike up it then I could certainly walk down it, so I forewent the tram and started hoofing it down the trail. On the way I passed some fantastic rock formations and thought to myself how much great climbing was to be had around there. No sooner had the thought crossed my mind that I noticed several routes up the rock already bolted for sport climbing. There were also some rectangular passageways carved directly into the rock but I didn't bother exploring because there were some men around posting Italian "Private Property - No Trespassing" signs and I didn't want to start any trouble. I continued down in the shade of a canopy of trees and reached the bottom about a half hour later. The roads through the town are often pedestrian unfriendly, so I had to stay within a foot-wide shoulder between speeding cars and a stone wall. Back in town I felt like having a drink. I saw a café with a big "Fanta" sign outside the door, so I went in and said in my best Italian accent, "una Fanta, per favore."

"Pronto?"

"Uhhh. Fanta." I pointed to the door, trying to indicate the sign that was not visible on the other side of it.

"Non capisco."

"Bibita... arancia... Fanta," I strung together a few words. Now I was really stretching my Italian capabilities. She muttered something else in Italian, shook her head, and started waiting on the next person in line. One of the other people in line spoke some English and took pity on me. She asked what I wanted. I told her I wanted a Fanta orange soda.

"Aranciata Fanta," she said to the waitress. The waitress handed me a Fanta. I was befuddled. She doesn't understand "Fanta orange drink" but she understands "Fanta orangeade." Well, you learn something new every day. In addition to the orange soda lesson, this was also the day that I learned that "bruschetta" is pronounced with a hard "c" rather than an "sh" sound. I managed to order one at a café, along with an orange soda of course. After the soda I tried a local wine and a couple shots of espresso.

I have often made the argument that the development and sophistication of a society can be surmised from their toilets. Public toilets here consist of a roll of toilet paper and a hole in the floor. I won't get into too much detail here, but it might be helpful to learn a little yoga or tai chi before your next visit. Also, don't wear your good shoes.

I strolled around town noticing the more interesting places, a Chinese restaurant, a bookshop, a travel agency, an Irish pub. Evening came but I didn't notice it because the sun sets really late in this part of the world. I had noticed a couple of public parks on the city map and decided to check one out that was only a couple of blocks away. The park was idyllic. The water in the pond was just the right shade of blue, the ducks quacked just the right quacks, and the benches had just the right amount of bird droppings on them. I found a splatter-free spot and took a seat, relaxing and absorbing the scenery. I spotted a new bird flitting from branch to branch. It looked like a sparrow, a little bigger than the

ones that you'd see scrambling for dropped french fries and McDonald's, with a tan head and distinct white epaulets. At one point I heard a high pitched noise and turned to see a young boy screeching while running straight toward a bunch of ducks who were sleeping on the shore of the pond. They scattered and glided to the safety of the water. I thought it was such a shame that the birds should learn to fear humans like that, but then I reconsidered. It's probably better that they do. I noticed a bunch of fluffy white cottony stuff on the ground in the park. At first I supposed it was from molting birds. A strong breeze then came along and I found myself being barraged by cottonballs. I decided that they must come from a nearby tree as I got a good close look at one when it pegged me right in the eye.

My day came to an end as I heard the crack of thunder over my head, then the *pak pak pak* of raindrops hitting the leaves on the trees. I cruised back to the hotel and spent the rest of the evening indoors.

You would think that this picturesque village tucked away in the mountains would be immune to the danger of pollution. Unfortunately this is not the case. Recently the government forbade anybody from driving a car for several days because the smog had become so appalling. I can't imagine what that must have done to the local economy.

On Thursday I was off to Venice by way of Verona, where I stopped into a pizzeria for lunch. I ordered a vegetarian pizza with no cheese and, of course, an orange soda. Verona is a beautiful ancient walled city, but more about that later.

I've found that Italian food in Italy is very much like Italian food in the USA. In fact, often the USA version is better. In Trento my bruschetta was sprinkled with dried basil flakes. The pizza in Italy is almost like the "Italian style" brick oven pizza you can get in the States, but not quite as good. Anyway I'm pretty sure that pizza is an American invention, in which case any snobbery about "real Italian pizza" would be pure affectation.

Strangely for all of their focus on food there are not a lot of fat people here. Obesity is not a big problem in Italy (pun intended). The genes here seem to be a pretty thorough mix of the aquiline noses from the south, the triangular noses from the east, the rounded noses from the north, and the upturned noses from France. Every color of hair is well represented, both natural and artificial, and minority ethnic groups appear in small but measurable numbers.

After lunch I went back to the train station and caught the train to Venice. I had bought a second class non-reserved ticket on an inter-city train. This is the train on which you would find goats if they still herded goats around here. By the time I got on board, all the normal seats were taken. I took a tiny jump seat in the aisle so every time someone wanted to pass by, I had to stand up. Luckily a man in a seat near me left at the next station so I was able to grab a real seat. I was sitting across from a couple of Italian women, one about 50 years old and the other probably closer to 70. I managed to understand a few words of their conversation. One word in particular that caught my attention was "vegetariana." I joined in the conversation at that point and I learned that not only was this woman an ethical vegetarian, but she had been a "frutitarian" on and off

for the past 20 years. A fruitarian eats only fruit because they feel that it is unethical to kill a plant. Personally I think it's insane, but this woman didn't seem unhealthy. There were people smoking on the train and she asked if I smoke. I told her I didn't. She responded that she preferred the marijuana kind, and pointed to a picture of a marijuana leaf embroidered onto her hemp handbag.

The two women left at the next stop and some more people sat down. I found myself next to the Heijermans family. They were Dutch but living in France. They all spoke Dutch and French, and the two parents spoke English as well. The two children, a boy and a girl, spoke mostly in French but the daughter was also studying Chinese. We all had a great time talking in a whirlwind of Franglish about music, wine, George Bush, and what, according to the young boy Leo, would have happened if Iraq had won the war.

The Heijermans family and I parted ways at the train station at the Piazza di Santa Lucia in Venice, which abuts the Grand Canal on the west end of the city. I only had to walk about 50 yards from the station to find a nice little bed and breakfast with an available room for _100. After checking in, cleaning up, and changing out of my sweat-soaked shirt, I went off to explore the town. The city of Venice is a maze of canals, narrow alleyways, and bridges. To find one's way from one end to the other is a feat of orienteering. Most of the buildings in the city are emblazoned with graffiti, which is an Italian word. It looks like it was invented here in Venice. The graffiti isn't particularly colorful, creative, or profound, but what it lacks in quality, it makes up for in quantity.

You know how the steps on public stairways are usually the wrong size? They're either narrower than a normal stride, or wider than one but narrower than two steps, which leads to a very uncool hopscotch walk as you ascend or descend the staircase. Well, kudos to whomever designed the steps on the bridges in Venice, because they are exactly the right size.

I weaved through the narrow alleyways and over bridges. It was sort of like being in a life-sized board game. I stopping along the way to look in gift shops, buy a drink, and indulge in the best sorbetto I have ever eaten. Eventually I found my way to the famous bridge called Ponte Vecchio (the Ancient Bridge), and across to Saint Mark's Square. The tourists were teeming, as were the pigeons, so I teemed along with them for a while until the dulcet tones of a jazz trio caught my ear. I sat for a while listening to the music, enjoying an _11 glass of wine, and watching the pigeons and the people and trying to decide if the birds or the humans were more rational. From what I saw, I might vote for a pigeon over a republican at the next election.

I eventually pulled myself away from this pleasurable pastime and caught a boat back up the Grand Canal toward my hotel. On the boat was an advertisement (thank goodness for those!) for an Indian restaurant, which sounded much better than Italian, and it happened to be close by. It was called Il Ganeshi, which I believe translates loosely as "The Ganeshi." I had a papadam, pakoras, aloo matter, and roti, all of which were very good. During dinner I was entertained by the antics of a very cute dog who had come with one of the human patrons, and a very cute little girl who, as it turns out, also came in with some humans.

I saw the little girl's parents drinking an after dinner drink that I didn't recognize, so I ordered one. They called it "grappa Indiana." As far as I can tell, "grappa" is what they call just about any kind of liquor. This one was a sweet clear liqueur with a few drops of cardamom oil in it, which gave it a green tinge. It tasted like cardamom candy, if you can imagine that.

Walking back toward the hotel, I saw a stone stairway along the Grand Canal that looked like a nice place to sit and quietly practice my guitar, which I had been neglecting. I got my guitar and went back there, sat down and started playing. Now it's common knowledge that playing guitar outdoors doesn't help to meet women, but it turns out to be a great way to attract couples as well as large groups of drunk Americans. By the end of the evening, I had a little backup chorus singing "Jane Says" very poorly at the top of their lungs.

Friday morning I was off to Trieste. I didn't know much about it, just that it's on the coast near the eastern border with Croatia. When I was in Miami Beach for the new year's celebration I met a Triestina. I thought I might get a little beach time in since the weather was beautiful. The environment in this part of the country is like nothing that we have in the USA. It's like the forests of Pennsylvania alongside the peaks of Colorado with the ocean and weather of southern California. The history of Trieste is long and colorful, but you'd never know it by looking. Over the years each ensuing occupant destroyed every vestige of the previous society. The effect of this is that, although this area has a documented history dating back 4000 years and beyond, the oldest buildings in town, with the exception of a few churches and ruins) date from the mid 1700s to the mid 1800s. These are generally large governmental buildings, white marble structures with terra-cotta roofs, resplendent with decorative (and probably also functional) columns and arches. To my untrained eye, the architecture resembles of European buildings from the same era such as the palace at Versailles. The 19th and early 20th century building look a lot like those of Washington DC such as the treasury building, a picture of which you may be able to find in your pocket.

Being on foot, I was disappointed to find that the nearest beach was several miles from the city. I was consoled, however, to learn that the local beaches are all rocks anyway. I suppose this is typical of the Adriatic since most of the beaches in Croatia or the same way.

I stashed my bags at the train station and went for a walk. Cruising down one of the main thoroughfares, I saw to my left a two-lane road with a steep grade going up. This happens to be one of my favorite directions (along with down and of course north by northwest) so I followed the road up the hill. As I continued on, the road became progressively smaller. Two lanes became one. Asphalt turned to gravel. Finally I found myself hiking along a dirt trail overgrown with weeds. As the path leveled off I was treated to an extraordinary view of the city below. A little further along, the trail ended at a staircase that led to another paved road. I descended the mountain through the campus of the University of Trieste which includes the International Maritime Academy. There was a lot of building restoration going on. It struck me that there is restoration everywhere at the moment. Every tourist attraction in Italy seemed to be a spider web of scaffolding, barricades, and Da-Glo orange tape.

I made it back to the train station, got my bags, and got a room at the closest hotel. They have some strange homonyms in Italian. I was a little confused when the man behind the desk handed me my key and told me that my camera was on the first piano. I was pretty worn out, so I had a nap and then went out for dinner. I headed for an Indian restaurant that I saw advertised, but it was closed. I guess I was too late. I still wasn't sure what the normal eating schedule was. I did notice that restaurants keep very strict hours so if you haven't eaten during the usual lunch or dinner time, you're out of luck.

I found a pizzeria and ordered a vegetarian pizza without cheese and an orange soda. I was getting pretty good at the orange soda thing at this point. Funny thing about Italian vegetarian pizzas: they don't bother distributing the items evenly of the crust. It's like an edible dish with a pile of green beans here, peas there, carrots on one side, broccoli on the other, a small mound of cooked spinach, and a few slices of eggplant. I basically had to eat the veggies off of the pizza before I could eat the crust.

The menu had the "storia della pizza" on the inside cover in which they claimed that the pizza was brought to the United States by Italian immigrants. I'm not sure if I believe it, but even if we didn't invent it, we definitely improved upon it. While I ate my pizza there was some graffiti in front of me. It said "Rivolta!" which I believe is an homage to the famous Italian-American actor John Rivolta. (Ok, maybe that's a stretch but if you think back to Look Who's Talking Now, the name seems appropriate.)

The nice thing about taking trains is that you can show up at the last minute and not worry about losing your seat. The next morning I was on the 6:25 train to Milan. Again the weather was perfect and the scenery beautiful. I took a little nap and before long I had arrived. It was easy to tell when we hit Milan. This was a REAL city. Even on Saturday there were busy people moving every which way, dodging me as I wandered around looking for a hotel. I found one close to the station, stashed my stuff, got a map, and headed out. What a place! I don't know if I could classify myself as a "country person" or a "city person," but I definitely love a big, exciting city like this. I passed a Burger King and just for kicks I decided to go in and see if they had the BK Veggie burger. Unfortunately they didn't. I continued walking through the main shopping concourse as the love theme from The Godfather played on a lone accordion in the distance.

As I had imagined, the shopping in Milan is among the best. It's like Beverly Hills' older brother, or more precisely Beverly Hills' great great great great great great great great grandfather. Sure Beverly Hills has some nice shops, but Beverly Hills doesn't have a medieval castle or a full-on gothic cathedral! The cathedral looks like something from the Lord of the Ring. It made me wonder how much money the local bishops stole, conned, and extorted from the Milanese people to build it. I took a tourist elevator up to the top levels of the cathedral and took a look around. There was a mass going on inside and I listened to the music for a few minutes. The organ and the choir made a beautiful sound, however misguided. At least we tourists were listening.

The castle is a few blocks from the cathedral, and it was a real working castle as recently as 1859. Since its construction around 1400 it has seen more action than a New Orleans prostitute. Its history starts with a battle between the sons of a feudal lord for control of

Milan, when one of the sons built a military fortress. Leonardo Da Vinci was the official engineer and painter here in the late 1400s. After that it was controlled by France, Spain, Austria, France again, and Austria again. In fact, Italy didn't get it back until 1859 when they basically stopped using it. They began converting the building into a museum in the late 1800s and the construction continues to this day.

Italians wear really big sunglasses. Forget about the little blue John Lennon circles that barely conceal your eyeballs. I'm talking about huge oblong lenses the size of windshields, gradient tinting and all, that cover everything from the forehead to the upper lip. Personally I haven't had any problems with the sun here, but these people must be really sensitive or something.

Because Napoleon won a couple of battles here, they got their own Arc de Triomphe, which they now call the Arco di Pace, the Peace Arch. I was passing by the arch when I suddenly realized that my feet hurt so badly that I could not continue. Luckily there was a bench in a nearby shady spot, so I sat down for a while.

After 10 minutes figuring out how to buy a subway ticket followed by a three-minute train ride I was back at the hotel. A quick nap and a shower and I was ready for more action. I was hungry and I remembered a Japanese place that I had passed earlier. They were surprised to hear me greet them in Japanese, and doubly surprised when I asked for wasabi. Apparently Italians don't like horseradish. After dinner I walked back to the main shopping area near the cathedral. As I suspected, that's where everyone had gone. There I was entirely unable to procure a non-dairy sorbetto, so I had a drink instead, sitting in the truly awesome presence of the cathedral.

Why do mannequins have nipples? Do women want to know what the outfit will look like when it's cold? Do they suckle the baby mannequins?

I had just started walking home when I heard a ruckus coming from down the street. It sounded like a traffic jam. I went to investigate. It turns out that the local soccer team, the Forza Milan, had just won a championship. The team colors are red and black. People were wearing red and black jerseys, waving red and black flags, blowing air horns, singing, dancing, shouting, and generally having a good time celebrating in the streets. I figured "when in Rome," (or Milan or wherever) so I bought a red and black jersey from a nearby vendor and started waving it in the air, hooting and hollering with the crowd. Hoots and hollers are nearly the same in Italian.

Continuing down the road I discovered the local nightlife. It's on a street called Corso di Porta Ticinese and tonight it was full of people, drinks in hand, going from bar to bar and getting to know their neighbors. It would have been perfect, I supposed, if I had been with a group of people or had spoken better Italian. As it was I was playing a little out of my league so I just bought a fantastic sorbetto and absorbed the atmosphere, occasionally waving my jersey and giving a thumbs up to a passer-by. It turned out that all this time I had been walking in the opposite direction from my hotel so I had an especially long walk back. I got in around 2:15 am, set the alarm for 9:00, and went to sleep.

I did manage to make the 10:05 train for Verona, where I had already made a hotel

reservation. I had also already picked up a tourist guide, so I had the whole day planned. The first thing I had to do was eat. I went back to the pizzeria where I had eaten on Wednesday. I had one trip to the small but creatively stocked salad bar and spaghetti in what was possibly the best tomato sauce I have ever eaten. Oh yes, and an orange soda.

Verona is another old city with walls and castles and a history dating back to the middle ages. It's also the town where Romeo Montague and Juliet Capoletti (Capulet is the anglicized version) were supposed to have lived. I found out that while there is some historical evidence that these two families did exist, the story of Romeo and Juliet has never been verified. Shakespeare based his story on a French poem that was derived from an older Italian tale. He never actually visited the city. Nevertheless, there is a building in Verona that is thought to have been Juliet's, and one thought to have been Romeo's. Juliet's is much more popular as a tourist attraction because that's where the famous balcony scene took place. That's where light through yonder window broke, and the balcony is, in fact, to the east. These days there is an Armani Exchange boutique, a bar, and a small modern art gallery in that courtyard along with a statue that is supposed to be Juliet, although the statue looks like a full-grown woman and Juliet was only 14 when she killed herself. Verona also has streets named Shakespeare, Montague, and my personal favorite, Two Deaths.

Verona has a lot of history besides the Shakespeare stuff. There's a big ancient stone arena. Of course it was under construction at the time. This particular day it was the scene of a peace rally. Italian peace flags are rainbow colored so it looked a lot like a gay and lesbian rally. I followed my planned walking route past several old churches and cathedrals, a fort, and a great old bridge that dated back to the 1st century although it had been rebuilt a couple of times. I strolled past Il Fornaio, The Body Shop, and the LaCoste store to another medieval castle, not quite as impressive in scale as the one in Milan, but the interior was full of beautiful artifacts and paintings. The castle had its own old bridge. My feet were pretty worn out at this point, so I went downstairs under the bridge and sat by the river for a while. There was a little girl there throwing rocks at the ducks while her mother commented approvingly. I gave them a dirty look and the mother made the girl stop. The setting was very relaxing, but it was marred by the little scattered along the water's edge. Plastic bottles, aluminum cans, plastic bags, food wrappers, and assorted bits of paper were strewn everywhere.

On the way back to the hotel I noticed a Chinese restaurant and decided that's where I would have dinner. By this point, my feet and legs had reached a stage that is usually reserved for marathon runners and the like. I could no longer willfully move my legs but they just seemed to move of their own accord. I made it back to the hotel, collapsed on my bed, and fell asleep.

I awoke around 7:30 pm, washed my face, and headed back out to the Chinese restaurant. My feet were feeling much better now. Based on my experience at this restaurant and the one in Milan, I came to the conclusion that Marco Polo definitely did not bring any recipes back with him other than the one for noodles. They have the noodle thing pretty much down, but they can't make a Ma Po Tofu to save their lives. They did have orange soda though.

Just as I was finishing dinner there was the sound of a shattering window outside. Everyone in the restaurant looked around nervously. A few seconds later a man rushed in asking someone to call an ambulance. I and several other diners went outside to see what was happening. The first thing I saw was two bodies wearing motorcycle helmets laying motionless in the middle of the street. Then I saw the tall man. He was very thin, with a graying beard. He was sobbing loudly, his eyes closed tightly, both arms wrapped around his head as he wailed and moaned. Occasionally he would kneel down, then stand again and support himself against a road sign. I surmised that he was the driver of the Volvo with the smashed front end, airbag deployed, door open, about 20 feet away from a mangled motorcycle laying on its side. I don't think I'd ever seen such a gut wrenching and honest display of fear and hopelessness. I just stood there watching the tall man, wanting to somehow console him, and then the bodies, hoping they would move. Then, almost simultaneously, they both did move. The gathered crowd breathed a shared sigh of relief, and the tall man began to calm down. A man and a woman tended to the injured people, telling them to lay still. Knowing there was nothing that I could do to help, I went back inside and pensively finished my meal. Most of the other diners had already come back inside.

As I left the restaurant the paramedics were just lifting the second victim onto a gurney. Where the body had been laying there was a puddle of blood. It was much brighter red than I imagined a puddle of blood would be. A local shop owner came out with a bucket and broom and began cleaning it up. I walked back to the hotel, being very careful to look both ways before crossing the street.

The next day I left Italy. At the Verona airport, I noticed the ServAir Chef catering truck going by. It had the Ralston Purina checkerboard logo on it. That was a little frightening. I knew what went into their other products. I had, as they say, as much fun as a person can have by himself, but still I couldn't wait to get home and have anything but an orange soda.