

December 1997

Cheryll and I just returned from Italy, and here's a summary of our trip.

Due to mechanical difficulties, it took four hours from when we boarded the 747 in Detroit until the wheels left the ground. We still made our connection through Amsterdam on time, although we did miss the chance for a brief tour of the city. We arrived on Sunday evening, December 21st. Our tour company put us at a hotel on the outskirts of the city about three miles from the Vatican City.

The next morning we met my Dad and Dee. They had flown into Rome a few days earlier, having left their boat in a marina in Tel Aviv, Israel. The four of us spent the morning touring the Vatican Museums and craning our necks at Michelangelo's ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. (I stopped in to visit with the Pope, and we chatted about a few policy issues. I suggested he recognize that we no longer live in an agrarian society and that he should ease his stance on birth control. He listened politely but was noncommittal.) The four of us took a walking tour of Piazza Navone, Trevi Fountain, the Spanish Steps and the Pantheon. We stopped at the McDonald's in the square in front of the Pantheon. Ronald McDonald is known as the American Ambassador to Italy. We had beer and ice cream cones in front of the ancient Roman church. Dee's blood has thinned over the years in the tropics, so she shivered through the dinner at a sidewalk cafe, but the rest of us enjoyed some authentic Italian food.

On Tuesday, we all took a bus tour of Tivoli, a town in the hills about 20 miles east of Rome where Emperor Hadrian had his summer estate. In the afternoon, we visited the Catacombs of San Callisto. The elaborate maze of tunnels extends for over 20 miles with the graves of early Christians seeking to hide their burial from the pagan Romans. In the evening, Cheryll and I met the group with whom we would be touring for the next two weeks. The bus was nearly full with 43 of 46 seats occupied. There was a family of six, another of four, a mother with two teenagers, three mother-daughter combinations, two sisters, three single women, one single man and nine couples. Cheryll and I were close to the median age. We had dinner with one of the single women, Kitty Finn, who works for a printing company near Chicago. It appears Kitty has been stalking us for several years now. We had honeymooned at the same lodge in Oregon years ago. We had all been in Spain over the holidays last year. We were all scheduled on the same trip to Egypt and Israel, and switched to this tour on the same day as a result of the terrorism in November at the pyramids. Weird.

On Christmas Eve, we toured the Colosseum, the Forum, Circus Maximus, St. Peter's Basilica (I helped the Pope edit his Homily for midnight mass) and Castle St. Angelo. In Piazza Barberini, near the Rome Planet Hollywood, we got to see some gypsies working. They were all in the range of twelve to sixteen years old and worked in groups of three or four. Each group was led by an older girl who was carrying a baby in a sling on her chest. The girl with the baby would step in

front of a tourist and say something while the other kids surrounded him. We didn't see any wallets change possession, but the intent was clear. We had pizza for lunch with Dad and Dee at a small cafe and met them for Christmas Eve dinner at a restaurant near their hotel.

On Christmas morning we left on our bus tour, and Dad and Dee flew back to Israel. We stopped at the Leaning Tower of Pisa which looks like it could topple any day now. They are trying to save it by injecting concrete under one side and putting weights on the other. There's a shop next door which will be crushed if it ever does fall. We spent the evening in Florence.

The next morning we went to study sculpture. Cheryll spent a little too much time admiring Michelangelo's "David" and announced she wants a replica for the foyer. We'll see about that. We saw the "Birth of Venus" in the Uffizi Museum and spent the rest of the day wandering the city. We paid 8000 lire (about five dollars) to climb 412 narrow steps to the top of the bell tower for a magnificent view of the city at sunset.

On Saturday the 27th we drove to Genoa to see Christopher Columbus' house. Along the way the bus was tittering with what had happened the previous evening. There was an optional dinner excursion for which Cheryll and I had not signed up. The bus was scheduled to leave at six. One couple, Ron and Annette, were late. Neither of them have any IQ points to spare. After 20 minutes, the tour director called them in their room where they had fallen asleep. They came down ten minutes later with their bags packed, thinking they had slept through the night. It took another ten minutes to convince them that it was in fact Saturday evening and not Sunday morning. The excursion left 45 minutes late and Ron and Annette were pretty quiet for the rest of the trip. We stopped at the mall in Milan and continued on to a lovely resort in Stresa on Lake Maggiore. After dinner, the group had a try at "Bowlingo"; the Italian version of bowling which involves pins on strings and small balls with no holes. I started showing my age when I fell asleep and missed the late night skinny dipping party to which some of the college aged girls in the group had invited us.

On Sunday we bought all day ferry tickets and toured Lake Maggiore. It was a beautiful clear day. At one ferry stop we took a cable car to the top of a mountain and found a beautiful small alpine ski resort. In the evening we took our drinks on a sunset ferry ride -- very romantic.

On Monday the bus crossed the border into Lugano, Switzerland. We shopped for watches, clocks, and Swiss Army Knives, but we didn't buy anything except hot chocolate. Back into Italy and onto Padua where we visited Juliet's balcony (of Romeo and Juliet fame). According to legend (or the local Chamber of Commerce), great luck was ensured for me when I rubbed the well worn right breast on Juliet's bronze statue nearby. We continued onto Venice and a short stroll to our hotel. Our bags were delivered on a barge. After dinner, we took a

water bus (vaporetti) along the beautifully lighted canals to Piazza San Marco for an overpriced beer at a piano bar.

Venice is a fascinating place and we spent Tuesday exploring it. It's amazing that a city exists on wooden pilings driven into the mud as it slowly sinks into a lagoon. I'm not sure what economically supported the city after the barbarians stopped invading a thousand years ago and before the 20th century growth in tourism.

Cheryll likes to pretend that souvenir shopping has a purpose, so she develops little shopping missions; things she concludes that she needs when traveling. After a day visiting the shops, her list of missions was beginning to expand; a glass picture frame, a new watch, a glass pendant, Amaretto cookies, postcards from everywhere we went, Amaretto, a Pinocchio doll, a watercolor of Venice, an inlaid wood picture, etc. All of these had been transformed into necessities and it was our mission to collect them all. Kitty's addiction is even worse than Cheryll's.

On New Year's Eve we headed to Assisi with a short stop at the basilica in Ravenna. Assisi is a lovely walled town in the central Italy's Apennine Mountains. St. Francis was it's most famous resident who is largely responsible for giving up materialism and reducing the standard of living of the Catholic clergy to what it is today. The town was hit by a severe earthquake in September and damage was still evident in the form of leaning walls which have been buttressed against collapse. The Italian version of "Dick Clark's Rockin' New Years Eve" was set up to be broadcast from six different locations, two of which were in Assisi. Many of the locals prepared by chilling their champagne in the town fountain. We rang in the new year by popping a champagne cork in the town square in front of an ancient Roman temple watching tap dancers perform for Italian television. A giant TV screen showed the festivities from the other locations. The highlight for us was when someone played the Rolling Stones' "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" on the accordion.

On New Year's Day there was a lot of snoring on the bus after our early departure for the Abbey at Montecassino; sight of a fierce W.W.II battle. We continued south past Naples to the lovely resort town of Sorrento. On Friday we took a ferry to the touristy island of Capri. Emperor Tiberius' old swimming hole is called the "Blue Grotto". It's a cave located at the base of a steep cliff which drops into the ocean. There is a small opening at the base of the cliff which can only be reached when the sea is calm. We were taken in rowboats that barely fit through the tiny opening. The rest of the day was spent wandering the towns of Capri and Sorrento. Cheryll started getting very nervous as the end of the trip approached. Would she be able to complete all of her shopping missions?

On Saturday we traveled to the base of Mount Vesuvius to see the ruins of Pompeii. It was very well preserved, having been covered in 79 AD with the ash of an eruption by Vesuvius. Kitty left the tour early to fly to Athens to meet a

Greek cruise ship captain she had met last summer. In the afternoon we returned to Rome for more shopping, veal and pasta. Our flights home the next day on KLM connected perfectly through Amsterdam, and we were a few minutes early arriving in Detroit. It was clear over the North Atlantic and we got to see the glaciers and fjords of Greenland for the first time.

The weather worked out fairly well. Most days the highs were in the fifties and sixties. In Venice the temperatures were only in the thirties. It sprinkled a few days, but not enough to inhibit any of the activities. We'd like to return sometime and visit Sicily.

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