

Sicily and Malta, December 2004, A.K.A. Rich and Cheryll's Adventures in the Land of Pinocchio

Our original flight from Detroit to Palermo, Sicily required connections in both Paris and Rome. The flight to Paris was oversold, so we agreed to connect through London on a slightly later flight in exchange for future travel vouchers. This was a major mistake. We made it more or less on time, but our luggage was left behind in Detroit. Of course, we didn't know that until several days later. We spent the next three days calling and emailing to find it. If we believed the "service" people at the luggage office in Palermo, it was in Rome, then Detroit, then Palermo, then back to Rome, then lost, then on the way to our hotel and then back in Rome. It became clear that they would say whatever they needed to get us to hang up without them having to do anything. There was a performance of "Pinocchio" at a theater, but we were getting one for free as the noses grew longer and longer at the airport.

This trip was done entirely on public transportation. There were six planes, two ferries, five trains and 20 buses. We managed all of our connections, but the people at the bus companies were about as helpful as the luggage people at the airport. Perhaps it was naïve to think that, as outsiders, we could walk into the birthplace of the Mafia and be greeted with open arms and warm hospitality. People in the inside circle very much enjoyed each other's company with animated conversations accompanied by dramatic hand gestures.

In Sicily, we visited Palermo, Agrigento, Syracuse and Taormina. Palermo is the capital and a busy city, but has many interesting squares and cathedrals. The highlight for Cheryll was a visit to a very bizarre set of catacombs. During the 17th and 18th centuries, members of Palermo's upper class who didn't want to be forgotten after their death were embalmed by Capuchin monks and placed in the catacombs. There were underground passages lined by hundreds of semi-preserved bodies and skeletons. They had been carefully dressed and then tied to the walls in standing positions. We've never seen anything like it.

While officially part of Italy, the reluctant Sicilians still keep their own language and many customs. Regrettably, we found many of the people to be rude, arrogant and pushy. The streets are lined with cars which are double, and often triple, parked. We watched one man put up his hand and cut off an ambulance, even though its lights were flashing and siren was blaring. The Chinese may use their horns, but the Sicilians lay on them until whomever gets out of their way. Littering is a way of life, and the sidewalks are obstacle courses, as cleaning up after your dog does not appear to be a local custom. Few people are willing to inconvenience themselves to help anyone, and not just at the luggage office. One rural bus driver refused to pick us up 100 feet from the official bus stop, even though the sign was hidden in an overgrown tree.

After an extra day in Palermo, we gave up on our bags for the rest of the trip, bought some extra clothes and a duffle bag at a street market, and took the train to Agrigento. It's a pleasant city, and we enjoyed the Christmas lights as we strolled the streets of the ancient town. There were some very talented Russian groups performing folk music in the squares. Outside of town we visited the ancient Valley of the Temples. At sunset, we enjoyed the view from our balcony over the Mediterranean Sea.

Syracuse has some old Greek and Roman theaters and interesting alleyways in the medieval city. It's a mix of ancient Greece and 18th century baroque. We enjoyed happy hour from our balcony overlooking the town square.

Taormina is a very ritzy touristy town built into the top of a hill overlooking the beaches and sea as well as steaming Mount Etna. All middle-aged women are required to wear fur coats in Taormina. We did lots of walking and enjoyed perfect New Year's Eve weather from our balcony. The Sicilians may not have impressed us with their organizational skills, but they sure can put on a fireworks display. There were at least a dozen simultaneous shows going on all over the mountainside. We even saw flashes of light from the distant coast of mainland Italy.

The weather was generally pretty good with highs around sixty each day. There were some rain showers, but not enough to hinder our explorations.

The variety of pasta sauces was much greater than we have at home, but the pizzas tended to be rather uninspiring with ingredients to which we are not accustomed. We were surprised to encounter a Pizza Hut franchise where the people were lined up outside the door in spite of the prices that were easily twice as high as the local restaurants. Could it be that the American version of Italian food is better than the Italian version?

Our five days in Malta was definitely the highlight of our trip. Never have we seen so much well-maintained history packed into an island only 30 miles long. We stayed in the old city of Valletta which was built in the 16th and 17th centuries by the knights of the Order of St. John. From our balcony we had an incredible view of the forts surrounding the harbor. We visited some temples that are over 5000 years old. This is far older than either Stonehenge or the Pyramids. On four days, we bought guidebooks that provided great insight on five-hour hikes through the countryside, along cliff tops, ancient fortifications and winding back roads. We walked from town to town, through the fields and past many shrines, temples, monuments and cathedrals. Much of the country is full of little stone shacks used by bird hunters. There seems to be a national obsession with bird hunting and trapping. Fortunately for us, it was not the season, and everything was quiet. The Maltese were generally very nice and helpful, although they share the Sicilian attitude toward dog feces. We wish that we had spent more time in this island nation.

Our baggage was waiting for us in Palermo when we returned on the last night of the trip. Apparently it had visited Amsterdam on its way to Palermo. We had it for eight hours before Northwest lost it again on the way home. Renato Guttuso was a famous Sicilian artist who wrote that “In Sicily, you can find dramas, pastorals, politics, geography, history, literature... in the end you can find anything and everything, but you cannot find truth” and maybe your baggage. We heartily agree.

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