

I reached the train station at Villa Misteri with time to spare, so after purchasing and validating my ticket, I stood on the platform enjoying the afternoon sunshine, the last I would experience for quite some time. When the train pulled into the station at Napoli, I joined the hordes of people streaming towards the exit, where I discovered with some surprise that they were checking tickets before allowing people to exit. It's a good thing I was not in the habit of tossing my tickets after getting off the train. I went to our pre-approved meeting spot, where I quickly spotted Leah, Katy and Sue waiting for me. Leah's first announcement was that she had bought another pair of Italian footwear, this time a pair of rather impractical but obviously much-admired boots. I then heard the story of their afternoon, which was spent shopping. "You would have hated it," they all told me, and having been unwittingly lured into shopping with the three of them before, I heartily agreed. It would have been a torturous afternoon for me, wandering in and out of every shoe store, every clothing store, and a few more stores for good measure. Not only would they go into all of these stores, but they would waste valuable time looking around, and trying things on. Sometimes things work out quite for the best for all involved. Not only did I not have to go shopping "girl-style," but I was also able to spend the day walking around Pompeii at a pace that they would never have agreed to travel, packing in as much as possible into those few glorious hours. They got to spend time together, do some shopping, and not have to listen to me constantly complaining, "Aren't you done yet? We've been here forever..." "

Together, we took the subway back to the base, where we picked up the car and headed back to the hotel. Along the way, we stopped at an American-style supermercato to stock up on some Italian-style food. Leah wanted olive oil to bring home with us, and we'd decided that Italian chocolates and candies were the perfect gift for our friend and neighbor Kelly, who had graciously agreed to take care of our little furry monsters while we were away. I chose not to come home with a stash of Bounty bars, preferring to leave the uninhibited eating habits as a luxury of our vacation, though I'm not entirely certain that was the best choice when it came to the Bounty bars. Once finished at the supermarket, we drove back to the hotel, where we began the rather arduous process of stuffing two weeks worth of dirty clothing, all variety of random tech and photo gear, and more than a few souvenirs into bags that had already been overstuffed when we arrived. We got a late start to dinner, and realized as soon as we walked out to the car that a dense fog had descended at nightfall, enveloping the area in a thick shroud of suspended moisture. It was so thick that it was difficult to see the road, and if you did not already know where you were going, exit signs appeared only when it was too late to exit. We dined at The Opera Ristorante and Irish Pub, which in addition to being the closest restaurant, was also where we had dined on our first night in Italy. We savored our last helpings of caprese, with its perfect blend of olive oil and basilico over the fresh mozzarella di bufala and tomatoes. I had gnocchi of course, and though they were in much too salty a sauce, they were still real Italian gnocchi, the likes of which I've never encountered in the few Italian restaurants at home that even serve them.

Back at the hotel, we finished packing, while a bored Katy amused herself by lighting the Villa Albertina matches we'd removed from our luggage to make it airline security compatible. We needed to take some of the baggage to Katy's room, since there would not be time for two trips in the morning. Leah and Sue played a feverish game of Rock-Paper-Scissors to determine who would accompany Katy on the drive. After two draws, paper covered rock, and Sue was sent off with Katy yet again. Leah and I finished any packing that was left to do and got ready for the few hours of sleep we would be able to get that night. Leah decided to take a shower before bed to save time in the morning. While she was in the shower, the telephone rang. The front desk was calling to ask if there was a fire in our room. "No," I said, "We definitely don't have a fire here." "It's probably a malfunction," he said, apologizing profusely, "But the fire department has to come and check it out anyway." Sure enough, ten minutes later, there was a knock on the door. I warned Leah to stay in the bathroom, as I opened the door. Three Italian firefighters in full turnout gear, one carrying a small ladder, entered the room. While I stood there in my pajamas watching them, they looked around the room, agreed that there was no fire, and walked back out the door, leaving me half wondering if the whole bizarre scene had really happened. Leah soon emerged from the bathroom, having missed all the excitement, and we went to bed.

The fog had grown even worse since our return from dinner, to the point where Katy could see nothing on the roads. Their journey was treacherous and plodding, and it was quite late when they finally returned and fell into bed. Then, after we'd all fallen asleep, the phone rang. I was not sleeping next to it, so I waited for Sue or Leah to answer it, but neither did. After many rings, it stopped. Then, not long after, it

began to ring again, and I dragged myself around the bed to answer it. The clock read 12:40. I picked up the phone. "I'm sorry. This is the front desk. We're showing the alarm in your room going off again. We have to call. I'm sorry. We have to call." "There's no fire," I mumbled. "I'm sorry, we have to call you. I'm sorry," he said, at which point I figured it was appropriate to hang up and go back to bed. At least the fire department didn't show up again. Sue had woken to the phone, but was so disoriented that she thought it was an alarm clock. Leah and Katy both managed to sleep through the entire incident. Less than three hours later, our series of real alarms started to go off. (I believe in multiple backups after sleeping through the first half of a final exam in college, and nearly missing an early flight years later.) We got ourselves ready, and loaded the remaining luggage and ourselves into the car for the last time. We drove to Katy's barracks to collect our luggage, and after saying our goodbyes, hurriedly dragged our luggage down the street that led to the main gate, past security and out the gate, past the machine-gun toting Italian Army soldiers who stood watch just outside the base, guarding the airport, and down the street to the airport.

At the Alitalia ticket counter, we learned that we were not listed as being on our flight, the same flight which kept disappearing from our Expedia itinerary, and which I had confirmed just days before we left. Our tickets had been issued back in October for flight 1284, which thereafter completely disappeared and was replaced by flight 1280, the latter of which kept changing times and disappearing from the itinerary a few times along the way. The agent first told us that our flight did not exist, since the paper tickets had never been updated. I showed her the itinerary with the new flight number, the one for which our reservations had once again disappeared. With great relief, we learned that she could get us onto the flight. We checked our bags and headed to the gate to wait for the flight. Leah had her final cappuccino. Unlike Malpensa Airport in Milano, where the Italian boarding instructions were inaudible among the ruckus and the boarding was a free-for-all, boarding in Napoli was rather smooth, and we managed to be among the first people on the first bus, and then some of the first on the plane. Our seats were all together, and the flight went quite smoothly. We had a lengthy layover at Malpensa, which proved to be fortunate, because we had to hike back and forth across that airport several times before finally being able to go to the gate. First we had to find the Continental ticket counter, since due to the mix-up the Alitalia agent had not been able to give us boarding passes for the subsequent flights. This involved going through customs, where Leah and Sue were directed to the long line with a chatty customs agent who was asking everyone how their trips had gone. Then we had to pass through security again before we could even get to the ticket counter. Once there, we had a hard time explaining to the agent that we wanted seats in rows 17-23 (for the laptop ports); we think he thought that we wanted seats specifically in row 17. We were given two seats in row 17, and one in 18, two of the three being center seats. Only then were we finally able to head towards our gate (not to mention find bathrooms.)

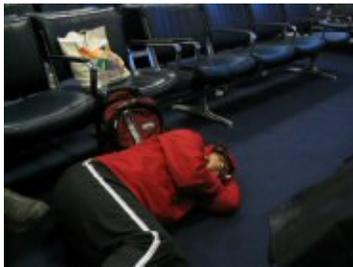
We availed ourselves of the last chance to eat in Italy; Leah and Sue downed their final caffés, and I had my last panino, which was quite delicious despite being airport food. Though in an Italian airport, we were now flying on a US airline, so the boarding process was a bit more structured. As it turned out that the flight was completely full, it was a very cramped nine hours for all of us, though the laptop power enabled me to watch a string of DVDs on my computer when the in-flight entertainment was not sufficiently entertaining. Despite the fact that she had checked when boarding that she would be getting her vegetarian meals, when it came time for lunch, Leah was told that there was no vegetarian meal. Exhausted and frustrated, she was nearly in tears when the same attendant returned a bit later with a vegetarian meal that was "unclaimed." Interestingly enough, when it came time for dinner, there was a vegetarian meal with her name on it. I can't imagine why there was that extra vegetarian lunch just sitting there unclaimed ... hmph. It didn't make much difference; vegetarian or otherwise, it was all basically inedible. Nine hours and two bad meals later, we touched down in Newark – in the middle of a Nor'easter. From the warm sun of Southern Italy to a snowstorm in the Northeast US, we knew we were home. We were home in a figurative sense at least. In a practical sense, we had a long way to go.



Probably intentionally, it seems that it is impossible to get to a bathroom in an airport until one has completely passed through customs. As going through customs can be a rather lengthy process, this can be somewhat problematic. First, we had to go through customs, having our passports stamped to show that we

had indeed arrived in the US. We then had to collect our luggage, despite having checked it through to Syracuse. We waited and waited, but our bags were not sliding down the long slide onto the baggage carousel, and we began to wonder if Alitalia had struck again. Eventually however, our bags began to appear, and I hauled them off the carousel. The next step was to declare our purchases using the forms we'd been told to fill out on the plane. Apparently, declaring my \$2 worth of Bounty bars was not necessary, and I was sent on my way. Restrooms, however, were not on the appointed route. We then had to re-check our bags and send them through the TSA scanners; when we got home we found that two of our three bags had been hand inspected as well. I pity the poor person who had to sort through two weeks worth of my dirty clothes. Baggage re-checked at last, we once again had to pass through security, where some fool behind us had a screwdriver kit in his bag. It took them several minutes to do anything about this, however, by which point he was long gone, so they decided that it must have been me. I, of course, had nothing of the sort in my backpack, but they scanned it again. They moved onto Leah next, who also had a red backpack. She, of course, also had no screwdriver kit in her bag, which they saw when they scanned her bag again. (Could you imagine Leah ever carrying a screwdriver kit?) We were finally allowed to proceed. I practically ran for the nearest bathroom.

Our layover in Newark was supposed to have been less than three hours, a good chunk of which was consumed by the process of getting through customs and back into the gate areas. Unfortunately, even if Syracuse knows how to deal with its snow, the rest of the East Coast does not, and flights were getting delayed left and right. Ours was no exception. We were supposed to leave Newark at 4:50 p.m., and arrive in Syracuse just before six. Since Sue and I both had to work the next day, we thought this would give us some time to prepare and get a full night's sleep. Our gate was moved. The departure time slipped to six, then seven. We decided that we should get dinner at the airport. I was amused by the "caprese" sandwich made with provolone cheese, but opted instead for a wrap. The departure time slipped even later. We had been up since 3:30 a.m. CET, and even with caffeine, we were starting to lose touch with reality. Leah fell



asleep curled up on the hard floor between the rows of chairs. The plane was arriving, we were told, but the crew was still in Lexington, Kentucky. We started to wonder if we'd get out before the flight that was scheduled to leave around nine, and began to bargain with the ticket agent to get on that plane standby, using the fact that we'd come in on an international flight as leverage. We actually got standby tickets on the other flight, and were waiting to see if we should run for that gate when our crew finally arrived. We decided to return the standby seats and take our original flight. The crew boarded, then some got off. We waited. They finally boarded us. We waited more. They moved us away from the gate. We waited more. The plane was de-iced. We waited more. At some ridiculously later hour, we finally took off for Syracuse, where Dennis was patiently waiting at the airport for us to arrive. By the time we collected all of our luggage, loaded up the car, slowly drove down the snow-slicked highway and arrived at our house, it was one a.m. We had been up for twenty-eight hours. We said hello to the cats and fell into bed. I did not go to work on time the next morning. I slept in until nine, getting up just in time to get to a doctor's appointment I had scheduled prior to the trip. Then I went back to work. We spent the next few days in a jet-lag induced haze which took many days to begin to lift.

Home again, we thought longingly of the meals we'd eaten, of fluffy gnocchi and smooth caffè. Leah tried to explain the wonder of this Italian beverage to some of her friends. "I was telling Christina and Dan about caffè and how it's different than the espresso you get here. They smiled and nodded their heads, but I don't think they really got it," she said sadly. Our first night back, we went out to eat, since we had no food in the house and no energy to cook anyway. Our one requirement was that it be anything but Italian food. We went to our favorite Thai place, where they know us, and we told them about our trip. It will be a long time before we go for Italian food; the comparison would be too painful. One of the first meals we did prepare was salad and fresh bread, the salad prepared with just a bit of that bottle of olive oil we'd brought home with us, and a touch of salt. It was close, but the greens were bitter. We're left to dream of those heavenly meals, as well as all the amazing places we went and all of the wonderful people we met, and hope that someday we will be able to go back. The world is a big place, however, and after this trip I want even more to see more of it.

And now, a few quick statistics: During two weeks in five cities, we shot close to 1500 photos. Despite eating our way through Italy, I lost four pounds or so, thanks to the innumerable miles we walked. We climbed the 463 steps to the top of the Duomo in Firenze, and thousands of other steps that went uncounted. We walked at the top of a volcano, and looked out over several cities from vistas on high. We traveled via airplane, train, subway, bus, automobile, and boat, in addition to the many miles we logged on foot. We saw cities over two thousand years old. We were occasionally swindled, sometimes stupefied, but more often amazed, enthralled and enlightened. It was an incredible journey, and a truly amazing adventure. I can only hope that my life holds in store many more.

Sometimes the most important things we possess are not truly possessions at all. As much as I may love my toys, and get great use and pleasure out of them, in the end it is the experiences of life that shape and define us. Through these experiences we begin to discover our hidden strengths and talents, but even more importantly, our potential. In his famous Walden quote, Henry David Thoreau wrote,

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

This tale has been my true account of living deeply and sucking the marrow out of life. Two of my favorite movies are *A Room with a View* and *Tea with Mussolini*; both are set in Firenze and graced by characters played by Dame Judy Dench. Both characters speak passionately of breathing deeply of the “true Florentine air.” Breathe deeply, and savor all that life has to offer, not only in the sunny spring splendor of Italy, but in the bleak gloom of a winter day in North Idaho. It is a lesson I am only beginning to learn, but one with the power to transform us all. My lessons learned were simple: Reach forth and take a chance; try something new. For me, it took giving up the notion that money well spent requires a fancy toy at the outcome, and getting past fears of trying something different from my usual comfort zone. I went into this journey with lackluster excitement, but returned with a reborn passion – for my art, my writing and photography, and for life itself.

For us to go to Italy and to penetrate into Italy is like a most fascinating act of self-discovery—back, back down the old ways of time. Strange and wonderful chords awake in us, and vibrate again after many hundreds of years of complete forgetfulness.

- D.H. Lawrence