

Katy met us at the station, and we all took the subway to the base at Agnano, where she had parked the car. We then drove around, getting some of our bags from her room and taking them to the hotel. In an Opel, transporting four people and four large suitcases requires several trips, so we brought what we could in the first trip, and left the rest for later. It was especially late when we left for dinner, and Katy accidentally missed the exit, so we had to take the long way as well. The food was good, despite the mostly American crowd at the restaurant, and I opted for pizza, since we were back in Napoli. For the first time, I decided to forget about appearances and get the leftovers to go, leaving me with half a pizza for breakfast the next morning. Leah, who had already enjoyed wine with her meals, decided that she needed to try grappa once before we left, and that night was selected as the best choice since we didn't have to be up early the next morning. The shocked waiter looked at this innocent-looking American girl like she was insane when she ordered the grappa, but brought it to her anyway. With the first sip, her head snapped back and her eyes bugged out of her head. She rested for a moment, and then had another sip. Katy had a sip, and recoiled. Sue decided to have a sip, and her head snapped back and her eyes bugged out of her head. Leah continued to drink it, commenting after each and every sip, "It has a mild raisin-y flavor," and, "It grows on you." Like moss? Or perhaps the hair it will put on your chest? I declined her offer to sample the grappa.

A full serving of the raisin flavored beverage that grew on her left Leah quite drunk (though she insisted she was only "tipsy.") She spent the rest of the night saying, "Grappa is good," and adding "issimo" to everything she said. In the meantime, it was necessary to make another run back to Katy's room to pick up the rest of the luggage. I was too exhausted to do it, and Leah too drunk, so Sue got the job once again. Back in the room, I got to hear an endless stream of, "Leah is drunkissimo." "I am tiredissimo." "I should go to bedissimo." Arrrgghhh! Luckily, the grappa knocked her out as well as perverting her sense of humor, and she was soon sound asleep.

Our plans for Saturday included a hike of Monte Vesuvio and a trip to Ercolano to see the ruins there, having heard they were better preserved than Pompeii. Despite the trip to Katy's room the previous night, we once again had to stop at Katy's room because she forgot something. Between that and our need to sleep in, we had a bit of a late start, but it was a gorgeous, warm and sunny day, and we were all in high spirits. Katy even thought there might be time for a trip down the Amalfi coast as well as our planned outing to Vesuvio and Herculaneum. In retrospect, this was probably absurdly ambitious, assuming one wanted to actually spend some time at any of the sights.

At this point, it is helpful to describe driving in Italy. I, myself, did not actually drive in Italy. We left that to Katy, who had some experience in the matter. Italians are not known for their good driving habits. Quite to the contrary, they have a reputation as very bad drivers, and very crazy, at least as far as developed countries go. Since the police almost never give tickets, traffic laws are treated as more of a suggestion than a rule. As Katy put it, "The only time you get a ticket is if you are in an accident." Of course, she also added, "In Napoli, it's not a question of *if* you get in an accident, but *when*." While an American might need a few feet within cars to feel safe, the Italians seem to think nothing of passing another car – or pedestrian, for that matter – with only one or two inches to spare. I experienced this first hand in Firenze, when I was buzzed by a car as we walked down a narrow, crowded street. The little white car zoomed by me, within inches of my person, leaving me momentarily stunned in its wake. Between the cars and the omnipresent mopeds, which follow even fewer traffic rules and zoom in and out of traffic as if performing an alpine slalom run, driving in Italy is quite rightly called an adventure. (For a brilliant take on Italian drivers, view the flash movies at: <http://www.infonegocio.com/xeron/bruno/italy.html> (the first part of it) and <http://www.infonegocio.com/xeron/bruno/yesno.html> )



Unlike Americans with our frightening preference for SUVs that resemble school buses and uniquely bad driving habits to match, the Italians, like most continental Europeans, drive small cars which can fit on the old roads of their ancient cities. Though Italian performance cars may draw the attention, it is Fiats, Opels and the remarkable Smartcar that dominate the streets. In the north, where the money is, the cars get larger, but even there a sub-compact is a relatively sizeable car. In the south, Leah's Nissan Sentra would be a luxury car. So, to imagine the Italian road, one must visualize tiny cars so small that they look like toys to the

American eye moving either very slowly or very quickly, mopeds zooming in and out of traffic whether or not there is room for them, and miniature three-wheeled trucks that can't drive more than 30 mph, all cruising down the Autostrade, or a narrow winding road. We experienced both, from the highways which link the various Naval bases, to a winding road so narrow that one must pull in the side view mirrors in order to avoid scraping a wall, never quite sure when a car will come screaming head-on around a blind corner. In most parts of Italy, streetlights and signage are generally obeyed. In Napoli, it's a whole different world.

Neapolitan drivers ignore stop signs. They often ignore stoplights. Lane markers are irrelevant. A driver will drive at breakneck speed, only to suddenly slow to a crawl for no apparent reason, all while drifting in and out of his lane, talking on his cell phone (rare is the Italian without a cell phone glued to her ear) and to his passenger at the same time. As Katy said, accidents are a matter of when, not if, something she knew all too well from personal experience, after a bad traffic accident last fall which left her hospitalized and with permanent problems in her knee. Add to this the fact that both of the cars she purchased in the past year died within a week or two of her acquiring them (the latter the first night we arrive, you may recall,) and one understands why everyone says, "Katy has bad luck with cars."

So now we return to a brilliant and warm Saturday afternoon in early March, when our erstwhile party was on the road near Ercolano, looking for the signs which would point us toward Scavi di Ercolano. Suddenly, the driver of the shiny red car in front of us slammed on his brakes, and the little silver Opel rental in which we were riding smashed into its bumper. Katy had managed to swerve at the last minute, preventing us from smashing directly into the back of the other car, but a crash was unavoidable. *It's just a question of when.* In that endless moment immediately before impact, I heard the screech of brakes and squeal of the tires. I instinctively screamed, but no one even noticed or remembered that I had, for they were transfixed in their own endless moments. Then came the impact, with the sound of breaking glass and plastic. After a moment to get over the initial shock, we stopped to assess the situation. No one was hurt, and the other driver was getting out of his vehicle, clearly unharmed as well. Katy and Sue got out of the car to assess the damage, and I eventually joined them, grabbing the digital camera to document the scene. A crowd of men at the bar across the street gathered at a distance to watch the excitement, and we waited. Katy and Sue tried to figure out what the Italian word "a-vis" meant in English, (which I luckily managed to translate as "Avis.")



After numerous cell phone calls to the rental agency and the usual exchange of insurance information, the other driver took off in his no longer quite so shiny red car, and we were left staring at the smashed front of the car. The woman at the rental agency told us to return the car and it would be exchanged for another, but there remained the problem of getting it there. I examined the damage; the wheel well had broken and was rubbing against the tire (a common problem in most accidents these days, it seems,) making it undrivable for the moment. I turned to my backpack and the stock of emergency supplies therein. Everyone likes to make fun of me for my large packs and survival kits, but I get to gloat whenever I get to save the day because of them. I quickly pulled my Swiss Army Knife from my pocket, cut a length of parachute cord, and tied off the offending piece of plastic so that it wouldn't rub on the wheel (not too much, anyway.) That problem solved, we all piled back in the car and headed back to Napoli and the base at Agnano with the Europcar office.



It took us several hours to drive back to Napoli, take care of details with the cars, and return back to Ercolano. We made it, however, and survived the now infamous (to us, at least) intersection on our second time through. We soon came to the base of the mountain, and began our slow ascent through the switchbacks along the narrow that led up the side of the volcano. The views out over the Bay of Napoli and the vast expanse of the city were incredible, so much so that we occasionally had to remind Katy to watch the road and not the view. Cars came flying around the switchbacks at inappropriate speed, but Katy performed splendidly and we managed to climb all the way to the parking area for our hike without further incident. At

the base of the trail stood a small café and gift shop, the later hawking some of the tackiest souvenirs imaginable, sculpted from the volcanic rocks of the infamous mountain. After a quick pit stop, we gathered



ourselves and our gear (well, mostly I gathered my gear,) took a staff from the man with the hiking sticks, and began our ascent up the wide graveled path that led to the cone. Though the path was wide enough for a vehicle, the loose gravel made for unstable footing, and the grade was enough to take its toll on my compromised lungs. I was still fighting the cold I'd caught less than a week earlier, and soon fell into a coughing fit sufficient to scare off anyone who might dare approach me. (Most of you have experience my coughing fits at least once, and know that the usual response to them is "Are you dying?") With the help of my inhaler and a

succession of cough drops, I managed to haul my sorry self up the path, leaning heavily on the walking stick, but climbing happily nonetheless.

The views from the heights were spectacular. The Bay of Napoli and the city unfolded out around us. In the bay, Capri, Ischia and the other islands appeared shrouded in the haze, and to the south stretched the Amalfi coast. In the distance, the snow-capped peaks of nearby mountains poked up through the clouds, and the higher we climbed, the more they revealed themselves. As we walked around the peak, rising steadily as we went, it seemed the world continued to unfold before us in a grand spectacle of haze-shrouded wonder. We reached another gift shop near the rim of the Grand Cono, selling the same tacking souvenirs. (My favorite was the famous statue found at Herculaneum of the god Hercules, "struggling to relieve himself," as the guidebook phrased it, displayed directly next to a statue of the Madonna.) There were numerous books and postcards featuring the erotic art of Pompeii, as plentiful as the photos of the volcano erupting. At this stop we had to pay an entrance fee to proceed to the rim; after all the work climbing, they get you just before the climax. We paid our money and continued the short walk up to



the rim, where we could look down into the crater of the restless mountain. Only the steam rising from the scattered fumaroles belies the destructive power within. We continued to circle around the cone, as far as the path would allow us to travel. Climbing higher around the rim of the crater, the views to the south opened up, and the mountains rose high in the distance, overlooking Pompeii. At last we reached the end of the line, where there was, of course, another gift shop. We stopped to admire the view, and the proprietor pointed out the

location of Pompeii in the great spread of land extending before us. We purchased two postcards, pre-stamped with a summit cancellation stamp, and began our descent.

My lungs dealt with the descent far better than the climb, but Katy's knee, already additionally stressed by the accident that morning, started to cause her real trouble. We took our time climbing down, but Katy was unfortunately in great pain. We were going to have dinner at a restaurant close to the hotel, so that we could all get to bed early, but we missed the exit for the restaurant, so we continued on to Romario's, one of the restaurants we'd tried earlier in our trip.