

BEHIND THE BOOK - TAKING THE KIDS TO ITALY

I avoided going to Italy for a long time. There always were - and still are - aspects of Italian American culture that really bothered me: a certain kind of prideful exclusivity (we are the only great ones!), a penchant for anger, violence, and showing off. A boastfulness that probably had its roots in decades of being made fun of, excluded, made to feel ashamed of our food and style and accent.

Fortunately, these bad parts aren't nearly as prevalent as stupid shows like Jersey Shore make it seem. There are so many things I love about the culture (see this month's greeting) - but the bad parts were there, nevertheless, and I foolishly thought they'd be more common in Italy than in Italian America. So, even though I had several chances to go in my twenties and thirties, I avoided visiting the bel paese.

Big mistake.

I remember exactly when I realized that mistake. It was 1988. Amanda and I were traveling in Europe after one of my tours with USIA cultural exchange exhibits in the former USSR. We'd flown from Moscow to Frankfurt, and rented a car there, planning to drive to a small house we'd rented for two weeks in southern France. That route took us through Bavaria and a part of Switzerland, and then across a corner of northwestern Italy. We made a quick stop in Torino for a simple lunch of pasta with marinara sauce, a salad, and a glass of wine. I remember walking away from the restaurant and saying to Amanda, "that was one of the best meals I've ever had in my life." A few minutes later, as we were driving along a street lined with eucalyptus trees and ancient stone houses, I had this thought: oops.

Since that day we've been to Italy nine more times, often for month-long visits. We've stayed in the Dolomites, the Alps, Rome, Milan, Venice, Florence, Orvieto, Cagli, Rimini, Santa Margherita, Genoa, Lecce, Lucca, and the villages my father's parents left to come to America. We've driven from the heel of the boot to the Swiss border, swum in Lake Como, the Adriatic, the Tyrrhenian Sea, spent time in the Sistine Chapel and the National Park of Abruzzo, played golf on a dozen courses, including one with views of Saint Peter's, eaten hundreds of fabulous meals, had hundreds of glasses of good wine, enjoyed scores of conversations in both languages, meditated in the churches, seen the tourist attractions and been places tourists never go. And almost all of that has been as wonderful as our first meal in Torino.

'Almost' being the key word here.

In 2003, stranded unhappily in the countryside in the depths of a New England winter with two small children - the girls were six years and eighteen months old - I came up with what I thought was a brilliant idea: Let's rent a house in Italy for a month and get away from the cold. Amanda and I talked it over at length one frigid night, as we often talk over my crazy ideas, and decided that maybe it wasn't such a brilliant idea after all. Making such a trip would be too difficult with two small kids, too expensive for our modest travel budget, and the weather probably wouldn't be that great in any case. We decided we'd try to take a vacation in Florida, instead. St. Augustine sounded like a good place.

But the very next morning - God must have a sense of humor - I woke up to an email from my former agent. She was writing, out of the blue, to ask if we had any interest in renting a house in the Italian countryside north of Rome, a little place called Contigliano. A friend of hers owned the house and was trying to rent it.

I took it as a sign: we were meant to go back.

We sent off a check for the house, packed up, invited my mother to come with us, and got on the plane at Logan Airport.

There began the most disastrous vacation of our lives. Juliana, eighteen months, started throwing up on the day after our arrival and threw up for seven days straight, during which time she ate almost nothing. Once she started feeling better, I caught what she had. The house was freezing cold so we decided to abandon it and drive 500 miles south to another apartment I knew about (yours truly behind the wheel with the stomach flu). We got lost at least a dozen times. In that apartment, Alexandra fell out of bed, banged her head hard on the stone floor, and ended up with a huge lump on her forehead. A bit later, Amanda got a piece of metal in her eye, and then Juliana developed a urinary tract infection that came with a temperature of 104. Three a.m. Thirty miles from the nearest hospital. Five thousand miles from home.

I could go on, but I won't. Details are in the book. The point is that everything that could go wrong did go wrong. We came home a week early, something I have never done on any vacation anywhere.

It took us a while to recover (and four years before we were ready for another trip to Italy). I had an urge to write about the disaster, in service to the truth, maybe, or out of a kind of twisted therapy. But I realized that no one would want to read it. So I decided that, in order to make the travel memoir readable, and in order to regain the part of my sanity that had been lost during those three weeks, I would try to see those events through a humorous lens. And it turned out that, in fact, looked at from far enough away, it was all pretty funny.

Taking the Kids to Italy is what Graham Greene used to call 'an amusement', that is, not a serious piece of literature. Still, I think it's one of the more entertaining books I've written and readers have told me they'd been through similar disasters and our story actually made them feel they had company in their misery.

Now that we've been back to Italy another few times, it seems clear that we crammed all our bad travel luck into that one trip. We've been healthy since then, haven't gotten lost quite as often, haven't rented another cold house, either. Amanda can't bear to open this book - the only one of my twenty that she hasn't read - so I recommend it guardedly. If you're looking for some laughs at our expense (I don't mind), if you want a little armchair traveling without the gushing tone of most travel memoirs, if you've had a rough family trip yourself, if you want to know how I react under stress (not always well), and if you want to meet some curious and amusing Italian characters like the octopus man in Monopoli, well, this might be a book for you.