

BEHIND THE BOOK - THE ITALIAN SUMMER: GOLF, FOOD, AND FAMILY AT LAKE COMO

In the spring of 2007 I decided it would be wise to take the family to Italy for the summer months. A nice idea. The kind of idea that, for a person with a vivid imagination, can sprout blossoms in abundance. Given a little time, maybe a bit of spring sunshine after a long, snowy winter, an idea like this can take over the whole yard. You walk outside, it's sleeting, cool, dreary, but the yard is bursting with flowers. Everywhere you look you see more evidence of the brilliance of this idea. It smells nice. You can feel the way it makes a difficult day easier to deal with. You start to be convinced that you should have come up with this idea years earlier, should have planted, not only your own yard, but the entire neighborhood with seeds from this same packet, so that, night and day, they would be growing, sprouting, reaching out new branches, filling every empty space, making others happy.

The only problem - and some days even the beautiful aroma of these blossoms wasn't quite enough to keep me from thinking about this problem - was a lack of funds. Ideas are cheap. Plane flights to Italy (especially in 2007, when the Euro was at an all-time high versus the dollar) are not. And then there would be the matter of renting a place to stay, perhaps eating, maybe even playing some golf.

The solution to this problem - for a person with an imagination - was to put together a book proposal that, coincidentally, as a side-benefit, strictly as an afterthought, would require spending the summer in Italy.

My agent was skeptical. When I broached the idea: "I could play golf, eat great meals, get to know some Italian characters, write about the kids' impressions, talk about my lovely wife," my agent seemed less than enthusiastic. I cited the fairly recent success of another light-spirited travel book, and a personal favorite, *A Year in Provence*. Even that argument failed to move her. I wanted to turn my gaze out the window and show her the imaginary field of blossoms in the yard; I wanted to infect her with my own passion for Italy, family travel, food, golf. This proved a hard sell. Next to impossible, in fact. I did not give up.

In the end, maybe she was made uneasy by a certain tone in my voice - not desperation, exactly, but something on the far side of perfect sanity. The tone of a man so accustomed to making worlds out of his imagination that he has possibly lost the ability to distinguish between what is real and what exists when he closes his eyes and sees flowers in the yard.

In any case, with a great deal of reluctance, she agreed to have me write up a proposal, which she would send to three publishers. Here the imagination came in handy. In thinking about this proposal, I decided we should go to Lake Como because I'd heard it was the most beautiful place in a beautiful land and because I thought it would be cooler than, say, Sicily or Naples. I pictured a simple but elegant rented house, not far from golf, swimming, good food. I cited meals from other Italian trips, the kindness of the locals, the passion my wife has for travel, the fact that the girls, while only nine and almost six at the time, were seasoned travelers who seemed to like an adventure as much as their parents did.

Despite this elaborate proposal, the first two publishers rejected the notion out of hand. My agent did not provide details. "They passed," she said, over the phone. "Pass" is publishing speak for No. The third, in the person of an editor named Zachary Schisgal at Simon and Schuster, took a very long time to decide. So long, in fact, that we were getting to the point where, if we didn't buy our tickets soon, it was going to be too late to make reservations.

Then Schisgal expressed an interest in meeting me. I went to New York, had my shoes shined before the meeting (a regular superstition of mine before big NY meetings), went up to his office and made my case. I felt capable of writing something like *A Year in Provence*, Italian Style, I told him, crossing my ankle over my knee so that my shined shoe was more visible. I was not, I wanted to show him, the kind of guy who came to New York City with dull-looking shoes! I was not some rube from the hills of Western Massachusetts who came up with crazy ideas and lost publishers money! I liked Zach right away. He listened attentively, seemed impressed, but made no commitment.

And then, after another few weeks had passed, my agent called to tell me that Simon and Schuster had made an offer that would pay for the trip, and pay for the time it would take me to write up the story, and maybe even leave a little left over to pay things like the electric bill, the car insurance, and next winter's heating oil. We were going.

I have a grandiose side. It's small, as grandiose sides go, and much smaller than it once was, but it's there. It sometimes takes the form of a voice that whispers in my ear. This voice suggested we should take the Queen Mary to Europe, rather than simply flying both ways. The voice had a receptive audience because a) I don't like to fly, and b) Amanda's father had a grandiose side, too, and had taken the family to Europe on the Queen Mary when Amanda was the same age as our older daughter, Alexandra. Nine. Was I less of a provider than my father-in-law? Was the nine-year-old issue a mere coincidence, or the finger of Fate?

I decided it was the finger of Fate. I decided, sensibly I think, that a ride on the QMII would make for a more interesting story. Even *A Year in Provence*, hadn't included a transatlantic cruise. Once I'd booked passage - flight east, cruise west - I spent hundreds of hours looking at rental houses around Lake Como. Late one night, bleary-eyed from all this research, I stumbled upon a guy named Harold Lubberdinck, who owned a company that specialized in lakeside rentals. We were picky, I wrote Harold. We wanted a swimming pool, a nice view; we didn't want to be too far from the golf course. We hoped to be able to walk into town. I wonder sometimes if part of me was making all these conditions because I wanted Harold to say it was impossible, out of our price range, no such house existed. Maybe I wanted someone to tell me to stop, to settle for ordinary, to live within my means.

But then he found just such a house. Halfway up a hill on the lake's pretty western shore, a twenty-minute ride to the hundred-year-old Menaggio and Cadenabbia Golf Club. Not only did it have a pool, but the pool was shared by the Italian neighbors - a great way to make friends. Incredible view. Historical interest (Mussolini had been executed just down the road). Harold sent dozens of photos. We signed up, flew to Paris, where rental cars were cheaper, and drove to northern Italy.

What followed was, to use a clichéd expression I have come to like, the vacation of a lifetime. The house was, in fact, perfect. Harold turned out to be the most attentive landlord imaginable, taking us to restaurants, lending us a cell phone that worked in Italy, stopping by with his wife and kids to say hi and share a drink or a birthday celebration (Juliana turned six while we were there).

Morning and night Amanda and the girls and I would sit out on the covered patio and look down at a view so spectacular it could not be imagined: a slope leading down to the sapphire waters of the lake; on the far bank green hills rising to eight-thousand-foot gray peaks that turned pink at dusk. We could see for many miles north and south, up and down the lake. We could walk into town for cappuccino and pastries. We could ride the ferry to the other small towns on the lake. We could enjoy some of the many hiking trails, all of which seemed to end at overlooks with even more spectacular views.

We made a summer of traveling around to various towns and having good meals. We drove to St. Moritz, simply because it was a famous resort. We took the train into Milan to pray at the Duomo there. Amanda had photography time. The kids had pool time. I golfed at least three times a week and met some characters - Italian, Swiss, Dutch, Austrian, American - that even a person with an active imagination could not have created. One of our neighbors turned out to be a famous Italian folk musician. We all went out for dinner, we all splashed in the pool, he gave us some of his music, I gave him some of my books.

I don't think it rained a single day during the six or seven weeks we spent at Lake Como. When the summer was coming to a close, we drove back to Paris, flew to London, took a train to Southampton and boarded the Queen Mary for a final week of overeating and luxury.

We are ordinary people. I built half my own house, I wear jeans 98% of the time, we clean our own bathrooms and worry about money constantly. So a trip like this was out of our league, really. I admit that. I acknowledge it. I consider it highly unlikely that I will ever set foot on a luxury liner again, probably never rent a house as nice as the small house on the hillside in Mezzegra. We spent too much of the advance, ate too much. I played too much golf. But we will remember the trip forever.

My only wish is that the book had been as successful as that summer. Zachary Schisgal ended up losing his job at Simon and Schuster - not because he bought my idea, I hope. Despite some nice reviews, the publisher did not make a great effort with the book. It sold probably a millionth what *A Year in Provence* has sold. And yet, I think it's a happy read, maybe one that will plant flowering shrubs in the minds of its readers, armchair and actual travelers both. The kind of book you can turn to after a rough day, or a rough winter. The kind of book that will build nice dreams in your inner eye. Food, golf, family time, Italy.... what's not to like?

Eventually, Peter Sarno at PFP was able to get the rights back, and re-publish it with a cover photo taken by my wife, a cover I like so much better than the one S&S put together. *The Italian Summer* still sells modestly, but it's made me some good friends, garnered me some nice fan mail, and when things are going not as well as I imagined they would go, I pick it off the shelf and read a few pages, and remember, and laugh.