

May 11, 2003

Trip to Europe

Over Easter break, I went on a trip with my family to Europe. My sister is studying in Belgium for a year, in a town named Leuven. It was a great experience to see how life is different in other countries. Life in general is much different. It was so interesting to see all the various people and cultures and the way they interacted in their own environment. We also have some family in Italy and took some time to visit them over Easter, which was also a great thing.

When we first arrived at Rome Fiumicino Airport, we rented a car to drive into the region of Abruzzo, on the eastern coast of Italy. We drove two-and-a-half hours into Chieti, the province and city very close to the town our family is from, and where some distant relatives are located.

The hotel in the town we were staying in was small, and had a great view down the hill the city is located on. The Italian people running it were very nice. Over the past year or so, my dad has been learning Italian, because of his interest in Italy and our family heritage. He wanted to put it to use with the people in the hotel, but the woman at the desk wanted to try her English with him, because the town we were in was very out of the way and tourists usually did not visit, and hardly anyone in the town itself spoke English.

Being very jet-lagged and tired, but not wanting to succumb to our bodies for fear of falling asleep at 12 in the afternoon, we took a walk, after checking into our hotel, and ended up in a small park. There aren't many children at all in Italy in general, so to us, it

seemed like the whole town's population of kids was gathered around this one fountain in the park. As we rested on the benches, we watched these children playing for awhile. There were about four or five little children, all on bikes circling the fountain. Two little boys would trail two small, twin girls, who had dolls in the back seats of their bikes. The boys would try to hit the girls' bikes with their own, and sometimes they succeeded; it was all very amusing to watch them go back and forth, laughing and talking in Italian. Also, there was some maniac little boy that just learned how to ride on two wheels and he was flying around weaving and running his bike head on into the fountain, all the while his grandmother and mother yelling in Italian at him.

But once in awhile one of the little girls would fall down, but they wouldn't cry or become upset. They'd lie on the ground with the biggest grins on their faces, laughing, until their dad came to pick them up, and the bikes that were pinning them down, off the ground

Seated all around the park on the benches were full, extended families.

Grandparents, parents, kids, aunts, uncles, everyone really, were seated together. I write this long episode because for me, it was the greatest example of Italian lifestyle and social interaction. Everyone seemed so happy and content, and it seemed no one was worried or had any problems to think about. It showed the great sense of family Italians hold. This whole park experience in general was one of the highlights of the trip for me; it was very amusing and interesting to see the interactions and mannerisms of the local people, all a half a world away. I didn't encounter anything quite like that in the other places we visited, especially in the bigger cities, because those places catered to tourists, and the small day of Chieiti offered us a unique view of the locals in their natural

element. Family appears to be central in the way of the life of the Italians, which is a great thing that I think we are getting away from, here in America.

The next day was Good Friday and there was another very interesting insight into the people of the town. The inhabitants of Chieti have a special tradition of a parade after the Good Friday service, around and through the town. It was a very solemn event, and somber music was sung by the men as they paraded through the city carrying artifacts fabricated to represent the tools of Christ's crucifixion. As the men walked out, there was a total silence in the huge piazza below the cathedral that was filled with thousands and thousands of people gathered to witness this extraordinary event. The air seemed still and heavy, and it was quite breathtaking and an incredible sight.

The next day we toured the coast of Italy, which was very breathtakingly beautiful. Although it wasn't exactly beach weather, every day that we were in Europe was in the mid-60's and a clear blue sky. We were extremely fortunate with the weather. One thing I noticed about the kids in Europe, they are absolutely obsessed with soccer (called football over there). Everywhere we visited, someone was playing a game or kicking a ball around, even on a beach we visited, some kids used driftwood to set up the goals and started a match.

The next day was Easter Sunday, which is a very big happening over there. Entire large families are invited for the feasts on Easter Day. Family being a very important thing to them, we were honored to be invited to the house of a distant relative for Easter Day. This was an amazing meal, with the people and the food. We arrived and greeted all the people, who were mostly older, the youngest being my parents' age; there were no kids there, so having four of us in that house was big event. We sat and ate for about

three or three-and-a-half hours. They kept bringing out the most delicious of foods, course after course. After the feast, another amusing tradition, after dinner, they brought out a huge chocolate Easter egg, about the size if you made an oval with your arms. It was absolutely monstrous, and made completely of chocolate. Italians sure know how to eat.

While we visited, we tried to talk with our distant relatives, although none of us could really hold a conversation besides my dad, because no one spoke English except the one doctor, who was the most highly educated. The little town they lived in is called Giuliano Teatino, which is in a beautiful setting in the mountains. All over southern Italy, the scenery is amazing, with rolling hills of vineyards and olive groves. It puts our Atlantic Coastal Plain to complete shame.

Outside of the city of Rome, in the countryside, all of the experiences we had with the people were very positive. Every person we met was extremely nice and patient with us and our dad's broken Italian. They were quite sincere and seemed to enjoy the little things of life, like company with relatives and were happy talking with us. There did not seem to be any of the "anti-American" sentiment towards us that I could notice. Everyone was eager to try and help us and tell us whatever we wanted to know.

The following morning, when we went to the airport, we discovered the true inefficiency and lack of drive to work in the Italians. There was a horrendous mix up with our tickets, and we spent hours straightening it out. Needless to say, there was exactly one person in the whole airport that actually helped us.

After the entire harrowing ordeal, we finally made it to Belgium, which was also an interesting experience. A major method of transportation there is trains, so we took

one from the airport, lugging six pieces of luggage onto the train to the Catholic University of Belgium in Leuven. It's a quaint, mostly college town, where there are innumerable outdoor restaurants, bars, and pubs, and seemed like a great little place. Our hotel seemed to be five stars after the low water pressure and small, cramped rooms of Chieti. Throughout the three days we visited Belgium, we took a train to Brugge while my oldest sister had classes, and then toured through Leuven. There is so much history spread all throughout these towns that are part of the whole environment, integrated into the town life. Every which way you turned, there were old walls of a fortress, or an old church built centuries ago, which were all very fascinating, and an accepted part of the way of life of the residents there.

It is very interesting because in those parts of Europe, within less than fifty miles of each other, people speak many different languages; therefore everyone in their childhood studies at least three or four separate languages. It is amazing how these people can learn anything else besides these numerous languages they must study, such as Dutch, French, and English. In a stark contrast to Italy, mostly everyone we encountered in all the parts of Belgium spoke fairly fluent English.

Alcohol is big part of the lifestyle in Belgium and everywhere else, and they are known for their beer, which is quite strong compared to our "watered-down" beer here in the States. The laws against drinking are fairly lax, but it is surprising, because I don't believe drinking is as out of control among teenagers over there as it is here. I suppose when one is told not do something, they are more inclined to do it than if it is not a forbidden thing.

After spending a few days in Belgium, we flew back to Rome, leaving my oldest

sister, so now it was just my parents and my little sister. When we went to Rome, we finally did all the tourist things. We went to the Vatican, which was amazing with the huge buildings and piazza, and St. Peter's Basilica was just breathtaking. We decided to go to the very top, and as we went, we went along the inner rim of the cupola and looked down onto the floor of the Basilica, and the people walking around were tiny specks, like ants, because we were about 447 feet up in the air. The sheer immensity of the place was awe-inspiring, and it was hard to imagine it was built about five hundred years before our time. Once we went up the winding, twisting, angled stairs to the very tip of the dome, we took in a breathtaking view of the entire city of Rome. One interesting piece of information, a law was passed so that no building may be built taller than the tip of the top of St. Peter's Basilica. What a way to stifle economic expansion, although preserving the sanctity of the site.

The Vatican Museums hold a vast amount of historical and interesting pieces.

We went through the various halls, but reached the astonishing Sistine Chapel. I stood there staring at the ceiling for a long time, gazing at the sheer genius of Michelangelo, and the thought of how he could possibly paint something that seems so alive and real. The colors were vibrant and the figures seemed almost ready to move. The ceiling is so high up; it is incredible that he could paint and still keep the right perspective from the floor.

We then visited the Coliseum, which has so much history, and we had a tour guide that had a vast knowledge of the place itself, and also of the history of the Roman Empire. He had some interesting information about the culture of humans during that time, and it is interesting because it sounds like life hasn't changed much since that

ancient era.

All in all, the trip to Europe was an amazing experience, and really broadened my horizons of different people and countries. It generated a new appreciation for the country we live in, because although the life lived there is very different and seems pleasant, the politics and workings of these countries seem so strange and backwards. To see and interact with the people, however, was a great occurrence that I will not soon forget.