

My First Trip to Italy in 1997: Passegiata

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As students taking a course in Medieval Italian City-States through SUNY Geneseo, my roommate Colin and I took a trip to Italy, and I was promptly separated from my tour group during our first night after being swept up in the hectic nightly Sienese ritual "passegiata."



One of the first things I remember about the flight to Italy was the fact that the stewardess was beautiful. She was tall, olive-skinned, and had a beauty that was both sultry and aristocratic at once. You could also tell that she was a warm person by the way she spoke to the passengers, switching back and forth between English and Italian, depending on who she addressed.

I was sitting with my junior-year dorm roommate, Colin Donovan, and we were both lucky enough to have her check on us several times. I wasn't yet 21, but I asked her for a Bailey's Irish Cream. Without double-checking my age or even giving me a questioning look, she got the drink and handed it to me with a smile.

Now, I've had, for as long as I can remember, a desire to photograph anything beautiful – women, art, scenery, and milestone events in my life. During my last year of High School, Griffin started referring to me as a “little old lady” because of my penchant for shoving a camera in his face. But I wanted to remember him, and what he looked like, as I got older. The same held true for this stewardess. I had brought at least 12 rolls of film with me, ready to document every aspect of this trip. I wanted the first photo I took to be of this woman.

It was the sort of thing my father would do a lot when we were on vacation. He'd ask an extraordinarily beautiful tour guide in Colonial Williamsburg, Va., to pose with his children just so he could have a picture of an extraordinarily beautiful tour guide in a flowing, 19th century dress. More often than not, these pictures would come out overexposed – an act of God that probably annoyed me almost as much as my father.

But I didn't have little kids with me to pretend the shot was for them. I sat in my chair, holding my camera, waiting for the stewardess to walk by. There were several problems. For one thing, the “Buckle your seat belts” sign was lit. Also, the stewardess had been doing less and less walking by of late. I was sitting right in front of my two teachers and tour guides – Doctor Eric Olansky and Joachim Sanchez – and I was intimidated by her beauty. After all, there was no way of knowing how anyone would react, especially the stewardess herself.

“What's up,” Colin asked, wondering why I'd gotten so quiet.

“I want to take a picture of the stewardess.”

Colin smiled at my eccentric desire. “Are you going to sneak one as she walks by?”

I shook my head. “I don't want to take a picture if she doesn't want me to. I'll ask her.”

“That'll be great,” Colin laughed. “If you have the balls to do that.”

“Will you take the picture?”

“Sure, if you take one with me and her.”

“I'll try.”

“But you've told me you were going to do it, so don't you dare back out now or I'll never let you hear the end of it.”

“I'm nervous,” I admitted. “But I'm gonna do it.”

Of course, another agonizing hour passed without any sign of an opportunity. I was not the sort of person who made such blatant passes at people, and, in order for me to do anything exciting or out-of-character, I have to do it on impulse. Once I start thinking about it, it becomes something I



have to do. Anxiety gradually builds within me until I start to sweat at the forehead and a desperate look comes to my eyes.

Well, it wasn't going to happen this time. I had been too timid in my life so far and I needed to be more aggressive. This would be one little test. She was a stranger and if she recoiled at the suggestion, I wouldn't have lost much. The stakes were low, but I was still scared, so I knew I had to do it, or I would never have the courage to walk up to a woman at a bar.

"Excuse me?" I said as she walked by.

She stopped. "Yes?"

"This is my first trip to Italy and I want to remember the flight over. Would you mind taking a picture with me?"

She eyes the camera, confused. "What do you want a picture of?"

"Us," I said, gesturing back and forth between her and myself.

"Oh." She straightened, her expression still puzzled, but in no way judgmental. "Come on, and we can go in the back to get the others."

Colin stood from his aisle seat and let me out into the open. Then we both followed the stewardess to the flight attendants' station at the back of the plane. There were two other stewardesses sitting down drinking coffee when we got there.

"He wants to take a picture with us," she said.

The male attendant bowed out of the picture, but not before offering to take it himself. I was glad because this allowed Colin to be in the shot as well. It could have easily been an awkward moment, but the woman was so classy and understanding about it that the whole thing went very smoothly.

Colin and I thanked the attendants and then returned to our seats. I was relieved that it was over and cheered that the first minor event of the trip was a happy one.

As we came into a landing, a view of some of the greenest, most majestic land I'd ever seen greeted my eyes through the plane's window. On drives to State University of New York at Geneseo, I had noticed some very nice land just off the highway, with the occasional farm and herd of cows dotting the landscape. But those views were seen on ground level, from the highway, while now I was seeing the greenery of Italy from the sky, with no highway in sight and no farms. It almost seemed untouched by civilization, and it was beautiful. I took a photo of it through the window, which I assumed would not develop well.

The plane came in for a landing, and shortly thereafter I was able to pick up all my bags and head out into the airport with Colin and the twenty-two other people in my group. I was surprised when my passport was not immediately checked and we seemed to make it out of the airport in record time.

After we emerged from the airport in a city area, I got my first shock. I had no ideas where the rolling hills went, but they couldn't have been too far away because I had seen them only five minutes before the plan touched down. Still, they were nowhere to be seen, and the street was no more attractive than a busy section of Baltimore. Even the airport exterior was odd, because it had a space-age modernism to its architecture.

"I'm not liking this," said Colin, and I agreed.



Or Professor (and tour guide), Eric Olansky, knew exactly where he was going, so he led our tour group across the street, into a building, down some stairs, through a few large chambers filled with fellow travelers, and viola, we were on a train. He had worked things out with such speed, efficiency, and precision that all we had to do was keep the back of his head in our line of vision and chase after it. But he was fast and had very little luggage, so it was tough keeping up.

My luggage had wheels, so while I had a lot of stuff, keeping up was fairly easy. It was only when we hit the odd staircase that I had trouble because I had to carry one suitcase and two carry-on bags up and down the stairs. This didn't bother me much because it meant I dropped back to where the pretty blonde in our group was. She had the second most luggage of all of us, and Colin and I would take turns helping her get her stuff around. Colin had noticed her before I did, which was no surprise because he always kept his eye open for someone to pursue. This was one of the rare instances where we both singled out the same girl. The last time that had happened was not pleasant, and I didn't want any trouble during my first trip to Italy.

It was very surreal speeding through a foreign country. I'd get to a place and not even be sure how I'd gotten there. To this day, I can't remember what route we took to get to the train tracks. All I know is we got there in record time.

We took one train for about twenty minutes before getting a transfer. On the ride, Colin sat next to the blonde, whose name was Eileen, and talked to her about music. He asked her if she liked Billy Joel and she said as far as she was concerned, the Beatles was the only band truly worth listening to. Colin's eyes grimaced when his face didn't. I wondered if that meant he'd lost interest in her. I wondered if I had a chance with her. Then I shook my head. That was absurd. She was way too pretty for the likes of me.

At the next station, we found out we barely missed the train because of delays we'd hit during our flight. Since it would be about a half hour before anything happened, we left our luggage in one large, dusty room, and then went off to find food.

It would be my first time buying something in another language. I tried to prepare what to say as I scouted out what was essentially a glass counter filled with cookies, pastries, and cold cuts.

My American comrades' Italian had been limited to the equivalent of "one" and "thank you." They would each point a clumsy finger through the glass at what they wanted, say "uno," and then pay for it. Seeing that this worked, and not wanting to do anything to show up my friends, I fell back on "uno." Once I finished the transaction, I found myself disappointed that my first conversation with a local in Italy had been rendered in cave-man Tuscano. Still, I was tired and in no mood to worry about pronunciation and idiomatic expressions.

The food wasn't filling because I didn't buy much, but it was good for the present. The dirty walls of the bathroom had Italian graffiti written on them. I knew enough of the language to recognize "for a good time call Francesca" and "Death to fags," "AIDS is God's judgment," and "Dante was right."

It was comforting and disappointing to see that Italy was a lot like America after all. I wondered then if graffiti was the same all over the world. Was it all racist, sexist, and phrased the same way?

Several stopovers later, we reached the outskirts of Siena. There was no way we could continue on as a group because there were too many of us and the cabs and buses were too small to hold us all at once. Colin wanted to wait for a cab, but I raced with Joachim to find myself a bus. I wasn't in the mood to wait any longer and I wasn't comfortable enough using Italian money to figure out things like tips, which I'm not very good at giving in America.



As I ran across the street to reach the bus, I found myself remembering Olansky's warning to pack light. Even with the wheels, the bags were becoming a drag. Still, I had been warned time and again to pack light. I ignored the warnings deliberately, expecting to suffer at least a little bit, and I knew it would all be over soon.

The bus was crowded before the eight of us piled in, and our collective baggage made it worse. We slid our tickets into the machine, which stamped them. The bus then sped away from the street corner, traveling with such speed that I felt myself swaying drunkenly back and forth, even grasping hard onto the support poles.

The bus must have, at some point, passed through the medieval walls of Siena, but I was too busy trying to stay on my feet to notice. When the bus slid to a stop, Joachim told us all to jump off. He took quick stock to make sure we were all there and then gestured to the main street of Siena.

"We better move quickly," he said. "It's passeggiata."

With that, he charged down the cobblestone streets into what looked like the fastest flowing river of people I had ever seen. My group rushed against the grain, barely dodging locals and fellow tourists whose only concern was remaining on their own courses. Everyone in my group was able to negotiate the crowd more skillfully than I was because I had the most luggage of all of them. Eileen had wisely chosen a cab whereas I had not. How was I to know that passeggiata, whatever that was, was going to be going on when we arrived? How was I to know that the uneven street floor would play havoc with the wheels on my luggage, constantly tipping the suitcases over on their sides if I moved too quickly?

The people of Siena kept sailing past me, waiting for me to get out of their way, laden as I was. And none of them minded jostling my bags and causing them to tip over.

On the fifth time my bag fell, I bent over to right it and sensed before I straightened up that I had lost my group.

I was right. Before me, roads diverted out into two directions, and I couldn't tell which way my group went because they had been concealed from me by the crowds.

As tired and sweaty as I was, I decided not to panic. I really wanted to get to the hotel and go to bed, and I remembered it was called the "Lontano Garibaldi," so all I had to do was ask somebody where the place was.

I stopped one man. "Mi scusi, sono Americano. Dove Lontano Garibaldi?"

He did not know what I was talking about. A person walking by heard the question and gestured towards what looked like the way I had come. Still, I was so disoriented by the waves of people that I figured I might have gotten myself turned around. Maybe it wasn't the way I had come from.

I trusted his advice enough to walk several blocks in that direction until I spotted a very familiar statue. The thought crossed my mind that it would be wise to wait at the statue for rescue. I heard somewhere that that is what boy scouts are taught. Stay in one place until rescue comes. But I wasn't a boy scout and I was tired of being rescued. I wanted to find my own way.

I asked a teenage girl where the Lontano Garibaldi was. She didn't know.

Two other people I stopped were German tourists. They didn't know.

One man was visiting from Rome and didn't know



Siena well.

Yet another directed me even further along my present course, which I was sure was the wrong way. But with the third person pointing in the direction I was facing, I decided to trust to the advice of the three natives.

Still, I wanted to be sure I was understood. I double-checked.

“Lontano Garibaldi e il Piccolo Hotel.”

The man’s eyes lit up and he again pointed ahead, the direction that he also happened to be traveling in. Before he could get too far ahead of me, I raced to catch up with him and said, “Cammina con me, per favore?”

He nodded and walked me to the correct street. He pointed down the street, nodded, and then continued on his way. As I walked towards the hotel, I noticed that it was called the Hotel Villa Piccola and it was on Garibaldi Street

That was when I started to panic. I went into the reception area of the hotel and tried to communicate with the woman at the front desk. She was a slightly round woman in her 50s with graying hair.

I decided this was not the time to be grammatically correct or bashful about my attempts to speak the language. Even if I mangled my sentences and peppered them with English words and phrases, I would make myself understood.

“Buona sera. Sono studente. Ho andare a Italia con il professore. Desidero camminare a Lontano Garibaldi. Il professore in l’hotel e io am here. Dove Lontano Garibaldi hotel?”

The woman didn’t quite understand yet.

“Posso telefono l’hotel Lontano Garibaldi? Il mio professore posso aiutarmi?”

The woman reached under the desk and withdrew a phone book. She leafed through it and found the hotel pages. She pointed to an ad for the Locanda Garibaldi and asked me if that was the hotel I meant.

I nodded, not realizing until she started dialing its number that I had gotten the hotel’s name wrong. There was no Lontano Garibaldi. There was only the Locanda Garibaldi. “Lontano” meant “far away.”

She got the hotel owner on the phone and explained to him what had happened. He then went off to tell someone the news. A few moments later, she handed me the phone, and Olansky’s right-hand man, Joachim was waiting to hear from me on the other end.

“Ciao, Marco. Where are you?”

I told him what happened and explained to him that I was too lost to find a way back on my own.

“I don’t know where the hotel is,” said Joachim. “Are you with someone who can tell me how to get there?”

“Sure.”

I gave the phone to the woman and she then offered Joachim the directions. After she hung up, she invited me to wait in the lobby. She had been so helpful that I felt bad that it wasn’t her hotel



I was staying at.

Of course, it seemed like it took Joachim forever to arrive. After thirty minutes, he appeared in the lobby, clearly surprised that I had wound up on the other side of the city from where I had been lost.

“Olansky, of course, is ready to give you a big speech when you get back.”

“Cool,” I said.

“How the hell did you get all the way here?”

As we left and thanked the receptionist, I began to explain to him what happened.

I suddenly felt safe and knew that I’d be okay because Joachim was with me. Passegiata was over and he was able to walk with me at a reasonable pace, so that my luggage wouldn’t keep tipping over as I walked.

It was true that, in many ways I failed, but at least I tried to find my way and kept my head without really getting upset. It also taught me that, while I didn’t know enough Italian to prevent myself from getting lost, I knew enough to get myself found.

Maybe I wasn’t all that incompetent after all.

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