



Italy Fall 2018

By Peter Scholtz

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A couple of years ago, I promised my wife, Chris, to go on a trip each year with her. In my absence, she had been traveling with her brother, Curt, and so the three of us left for my first trip to Italy. We went to Rome and the Amalfi Coast; Sorrento, Capri, and Positano. Italy is as pretty as everyone says.

Flying into Rome is a bit chaotic, but the cab ride to my hotel was cathartic, seeing the ancient city for the first time and relating all the pictures and stories I heard about it. Most of the “modern” city was built in the 19th century, although the ruins from ancient Rome crop up everywhere, and the city is uncovering more all the time. I wonder where this will end. Will it become an endless expanse of rubble? Many fallen columns are left untouched, as if sacred in some way. The ruins permeate the entire Roman atmosphere, giving you the sense that Rome will last forever.

We visited the Vatican, the Coliseum, and the Pantheon, among other places. The Pantheon is most impressive since it is so intact, in spite of being almost two thousand years old. My wife and I trudged up Palatine Hill to see how the elite lived during the Roman Empire. At the top, there was a quaint museum, guarded by two young women with official patches on their shirts- security. No one was going in, and there was no one coming out. We approached the entry and one woman said, “Do you have a ticket?” “Why no,” I replied. “How much is it?” She told me that I needed to buy the ticket at the bottom of the long hill, a good quarter mile down (and back up). Then of course there is the lengthy wait in line to buy one. Or, “do you have the special super pass for tourists?” “I have a really good pass,” I employed her. It does enable me to go to many key sites. “No, you can’t go in,” she snapped. Another older couple from Indiana arrived, and they too had some comprehensive tourist passes like me but not the ultimate SUPER pass. “I can’t go all the way down the hill and back. I would die,” said the husband. Why don’t they sell the tickets right there? They could not tell us. By now I really wanted to get into the museum that no one is allowed in. What is in there? Not one person went in or out. Such is the way of Italian security.

Rome, with its low rise buildings and cobblestone streets is fun to walk. It is a shopper’s paradise. I saw every brand name I knew plus many other upscale designer clothes that I am oblivious to. Every narrow street seems to have a sidewalk café, and we just bounced around daily wandering into whatever food place struck our fancy. I ate lots of seafood, mostly unidentified fish. The highlight was when I ordered baby octopus, thinking it would be smaller pieces than I was used to at home, but instead I got a plate of pasta. Arranged neatly around the outside of the plate were twelve intact whole octopuses the size of a silver dollar, all perched and staring at me. One looked like it was smiling. My wife was not pleased, nor intrigued, nor did she want to try any. Oh, well.

The weather forecast for October around Rome was decent. The common forecast was partly cloudy with occasional rain. As I expected, we got a very brief shower every day or so and it was nice. The sun

seemed to come out often and we had no complaints. Being from New England, I am used to clouds. We left Rome on such a day to travel by rail to Sorrento, a two hour train ride south.

The Rome rail station is more like an airline terminal, large but still reasonably easy to navigate. While standing in the center, watching the board, we were approached by a short smiling woman in her early forties, wearing a security lanyard. She asked if we needed help. Being a seasoned New York City traveler, I knew this culminated in a large tip for her services. No thanks. Then I noticed that there was no tag at the end of her lanyard. She was nothing official, and I assume the authorities won't let her pose as one by having a tag. Did I look that naïve or helpless? Or was it my preppy navy blue blazer that made her think I had money? Minutes later, a young man approached us with the same pitch and another tag-less lanyard. These two seemed to bother few other people. What's with us? It must be the blazer. Once aboard, the ride was pleasant and comfortable. Large picture windows enable you to enjoy the scenery.

Sorrento is so pretty, it is why people swoon when they tell you that Italy is the most beautiful place in the world. The town is on a high cliff, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. Our hotel was on the cliff's edge and our room was three floors below the lobby, with a balcony carved out of the cliff side. Taking the elevator to the bottom of the cliff let you out into a James Bond looking tunnel of solid rock that led you to their dock and swimming area. Of course, there was a seaside bar. Offshore, there was a constant contingent of cruise ships, all with their own flotillas to transport passengers into Sorrento for the day. We got into town early and were planning to go to Positano for the day, an iconic town down the coast, east of Sorrento. The only road was closed due to a fire, so we decided to tour the Sorrento peninsula on an open air bus, all views of the water from high above winding on the Cliffside roads. It was cloudy, as it frequently was, when we left. We no sooner got out of town on our way when it began to rain, and then really rained. Clear plastic ponchos were hastily passed around the bus, all passengers being exposed. It then started to really pour, a torrential downpour. By now, all passengers were huddled under the opaque ponchos, listening to the tour guide recording on headphones, calmly describing the beautiful coastline below with all the famous landmarks. The passengers were all staring at their knees. I would occasionally glimpse out from my poncho and saw only roadside buildings. It was so bad that we were still getting wet and some passengers started to giggle and then several just started laughing as the tour audio continued to drone on. As we returned to Sorrento the rain finally subsided. The trip was an hour. The rain lasted an hour. What a waste. The downpour was the only intense rain on the entire trip and it was the one hour we were in an open air bus. What are the odds?

The next day we visited Capri. Capri is very trendy, upscale and has quite a landscape. We walked the streets of Anacapri, the tiny village halfway up the mountain, far above the seaside. The shopping draws a very international crowd, but it also highlights the Italian fashion scene. It seems in all the cool spots that every young Italian has that five day old beard. I concluded that the current beard trend must have started here. I watched a young couple having coffee on the sidewalk, the man having the perfectly groomed beard, in a skinny colorful suit. Why are these suits so skinny? I can't get into them, and I thought only old men wore suits, so why is it that only young men can fit into them? It's a conundrum. The ferry ride to and from Capri is enjoyable, although service is irregular. One should see the Mediterranean from the top of the island, an incredible view. Capri is always considered a highlight of that part of Italy.

From Sorrento we traveled back to Rome. Once again wandering the streets we saw several ads for evening recitals. One was on the Tiber River in what was once a church, but now a small venue. We caught a cab to return that night and once again, rode down narrow streets, dodging pedestrians. Our driver then turned up a narrow street and encountered a parked car blocking the way. This man was loading the car with stuff out of an apartment. Our driver protested, the other man raised his voice and our driver left the cab. The two men started screaming at each other, in each other's face. My meter is running. Is this a scam (once again, the cynical New York attitude)? I thought they would come to blows but miraculously, they never touched each other. It must be an Italian rule or something. Chris thought it was very exciting and worth the extra money we undoubtedly would be paying. My wife also likes football.

We got to the recital which comprised of a pianist and two singers. The recital exploded with this first piece by a young woman singing *O Mio Babbino Caro*, a very well-known opera piece. I was instantly enthralled and had this intense emotional response. There were only 26 people in the audience, remarkable. I have never heard such talent in such a small venue. A few days later we attended another recital at a local neighborhood church which was every bit as grand as St. Patrick's Cathedral. I was surprised by the number of young kids, in their teens or twenties, and how much they appreciated classical music and opera. We Americans are such a young culture.

I am struck by the amount of tourism that clearly the Italian economy is dependent on. Italy generates ~12% of its GDP from tourism compared to the United States at a little over 2%. The large influx of foreign money clearly floats this otherwise challenged economy. Government debt is high. Growth is slow. In terms of big risks to the global economy, Italy is up there. The government is fighting the EU with its current budget, proposing a percentage deficit that exceeds the EU rules of 2% of GDP. It proposed 2.3% which economists all think is based on optimistic assumptions. The elected government has promised the people a guaranteed income (government handout) which is very popular, albeit questionable policy. The next global recession will expose the weak Italian banks and their bad loans. New governments are frequent in Italy and one can only think that in spite of these problems they will endure, and muddle through, but it will likely be quite messy.