

TRAVEL WRITING

From the *Sag Harbor Express* April 7, 2011

Escaping Winter

Italians Don't Make Lemonade,

They Make Limoncello

By Jim Marquardt

Lucky us, we got away from cold and miserable Sag Harbor in February, fleeing to southern Italy, Sicily and Malta. We hadn't been there in many years and were curious to see what changes we might find. We went with a tour group, a mix of people from all over the country, and we must say Midwesterners tended to cling together for safety, were very serious and believed that ordinary food was wonderful because the menu was in Italian. To be fair, they probably think New Yorkers are pretty strange, too.

After an overnight flight in a cramped seat, arrival day makes any foreign city look shabby and drab. But after a good night's sleep, Sorrento

was indeed beautiful, and the Amalfi Coast precipitous and stunning.

Breakfast is a major event in tourist hotels because it's generally included with the room, so everyone dives in to consume huge amounts of scrambled (powdered) eggs, sausage (often frankfurters), meat (like ham but with suspicious looking white spots), baked beans, neutral cheese, lots of bread, rolls and croissants. The juice and coffee come out of machines and taste like it, but no one complains, they're too busy loading up so they can make it through to dinner. Everyone raids a basket of fruit as they leave the dining room lest they feel faint while admiring more ruins.

Ann was smart and brought along a couple of bars of soap. The hotel soap measured an inch-and-a-half square. Showers in Europe are still difficult; probably designed to get even with Americans for being too loud. Most shower heads are on the end of a hose that you hold in one hand while you try to lather with the other, a tricky maneuver. The shower stall was so tight I couldn't crouch to retrieve the shampoo. One lady caused a hubbub in the hotel when she pulled out the emergency cord in the shower to dry her underwear and brought excited Italians rushing to her aid. Most important, don't use the hotel's laundry service. You think you'll find a nearby laundromat, but they no longer exist, one Italian telling me that all the "lavanderias" have become Internet cafes. My five pairs of socks, nine

boxers, and two T-shirts came back nicely cleaned and pressed at a price of \$60. It would have cost less to buy them brand new at K-Mart. Electricity is expensive in Italy and they don't believe in clothes dryers. You see laundry hanging outside buildings in rich and poor neighborhoods alike.

Palermo is a gritty city, where we see a monument the citizens see a great spot for graffiti. They like to brag that Lucky Luciano helped General Patton beat the Germans on Sicily. You've heard about crazy Italian drivers, well, they're still crazy. There are cross-walks but they dare you to use them. Stick out a foot on Main Street in Sag Harbor and traffic stops. Italian drivers speed up and send you scurrying back to the curb. Fortunately, their ubiquitous scooters are rigged for maximum noise levels so you can hear them bearing down on you. Italians still have no parking problem; they just park on any street and sidewalk that's open while the police in their Graustarkian uniforms stand on street corners conferring with one another and puffing cigarettes. It was chilly in Sicily and every other young Italian was wearing a shiny, puffy, black jacket, like ebony Michelin men. We'll probably see the jackets on Fifth Avenue next winter.

As you drive around Sicily, you pass many buildings that are either under construction or being torn down, it's hard to tell which way they're headed. There may be two stories of concrete with reinforcing bar sticking

up from the top in the hope of more to come, or in surrender. Yet, Italians continue to enjoy life. A favorite sport is visiting a gelato shop to pore over twenty or thirty different flavors on display. And like our own ice cream, gelato is expensive, one evening we paid ten Euros or about \$13 for two double dip cones. It was single dip after that.

But otherwise food and wine were reasonable everywhere we went. In one supermarket I bought a liter box of table wine for one Euro, about \$1.35, and it wasn't bad. Pizza is on the menu in every restaurant and really is no better than what we have on Long Island. The culinary pinnacle of our trip was outdoor lunch in a little town called Termini (the final stop on a bus line) high above Sorrento. We ate simply on homemade ravioli and pasta with a sauce of zucchini and tomato, crunchy bread and many pitchers of vino rosso, which may account for our euphoria. Our young guide then took us to a shop selling limoncello, a potent drink made from lemon peels marinated in alcohol. Lemons grow all over southern Italy and Sicily and when they're handed lemons, the Italians don't make lemonade, they make limoncello.

In eastern Sicily we climbed to a hilltop town called Savoca where Francis Coppola shot a number of scenes for the Godfather movies. They still talk about their parish priest who refused Coppola's bribes, forcing Al

Pacino's marriage to take place at the entrance of the church rather than inside before the altar. Yet Coppola later gave a gift to the town, paving the dirt road leading up to the little chapel.

There's no escaping Sag Harbor. In a small café on Malta the proprietor asked where I was from. I said the U.S.A. He kept asking "where?" as I narrowed it down to New York to Long Island to Sag Harbor. He told me he had met his wife in Astoria and had visited Sag on a day trip with his kids. Whenever we mentioned New York City to Italians or to people from other parts of Europe, they whooped in admiration, making us feel like rock stars. Mayor Bloomberg's ratings must be a lot higher in Italy than in Brooklyn and Queens.

#

