

JULY 1, 1993

Betchart Expeditions' responsibility for the walking trip to Italy ended on the 12th of May in a predawn check out in Sorrento. Power outage at midnight had darkened the hotel; packing and portage had to be done under the weak glow of a pen-type flashlight to make a 6 a.m. flight from Naples to Rome. Lanterns lighted the hallways, but negotiating the stairways loaded in luggage took a slow, careful descent.

The farmer at Paestum had sent along a chestnut stick her cowboys carry to work cattle and punch the water buffalo out of the milking stalls. The Naples air terminal was my first experience carrying a punch stick. In every line from the check-in through security, I kept either poking the person in back, or turning to apologize to the one behind and sticking the one in front. I expected trouble, but when I caught a glimpse of myself in a wall mirror, I discovered the crumpled condition of my hat, the darkness of the bifocals, and the way I kept stumbling over my gear were making the other passengers think I was handicapped.

Alitalia had booked a hotel in Rome for half the regular price or room rent in the capital. I didn't know a soul in town, but tours kept checking in and out all along. Every night, their guides posted the next day's itinerary in the lobby, saving a whole lot of trouble working out the logistics of such a big undertaking as Rome.

Plenty of Americans on tour ate breakfast in the dining room. Several hombres from Texas borrowed parts of my newspaper. One guy from Houston sat down at the table until his wife came down and ordered him to move over to their crowd.

In a bit she came back and apologized, and asked whether I'd like to share the basket of sweet rolls on my table. The sudden change was such a surprise, I asked her whether her group was moving, or was my basket rolls going to move. Turned out she was right in the first place. She and her husband did belong to their crowd.

Cabs and busses and rapid transit shuttles me about town and as far off a Florence. The first bombing to occur in Rome since the outbreak by the Mafia happened, but the location of the blast was blacked out. The only trouble I had was being accosted by a couple of Gypsy ladies on my way to the central train station. I jerked loose and kept shouting "no".

A cab driver waiting on his fare either yelled "adelante", or "anadale". "Andiante," I think, means one way, like on a train ticket. Nevertheless, having two of those toughies, one carrying a baby, hanging on each arm wasn't. a time to look for the right word in the dictionary.

People everywhere else were friendly. I had a tough time in a grocery store understanding bags to pack things weren't free, but after a guy came forward and offered to pay the 200 lira a sack cost, I caught on to the deal.

At the Vatican, waves of people poured through the museums and chapels. Signs ordered visitors to wear clothes suitable for visiting sacred places. Those orders had a lot of appeal because about half the women at the airport were wearing their gym clothes, or whatever those green and pink sweat suits are called. With the Pope jumping on the Mafia, the time might be wrong to support him, but if His Holiness was going to ban those awful-looking things around his capital, his game was worth backing.

When it's time to go home, the bungalows start looking like they have steeples and the cathedral's shadows aren't much larger than the shade off a telephone post. Spending money becomes harder and asking directions to the restroom more tiresome. Cameras have to be unloaded and suitcase buckles seat cured. Taxis cease to be fun and the air connections look a lot better than they did when leaving home...