

JUNE 17, 1993

Up until the eighth day on our group's Italian trip, all nine of us made the hikes. However, steeper terrain and rougher trails began to cut down the number of walkers. On the daily itinerary, a walk from Agerola to the coastal town of Positano was described as being along the "Path of the Gods, with amazing views of the countryside suspended between sky and sea."

After taking the walk and seeing one hiker collapse and another having to be steadied by an extra guide, a better choice of words might have been, "Forget the Path of the Gods stuff; travel light and allow five hours extra to make the way on washed-out trails from the outskirts of Agerola to the church in Postiano."

On the map, the topography showed smooth, well-marked ground. Spring floods, however, had peaked after the cartographers shot the work. If there is an Italian Park Service of active status, and not a pension service for political loyalists, the rangers hadn't reworked the trails except on paper.

From the very start, though, the tall rough cliffs cast a spell. Under the shaded areas, profusions of daisy-like anemones blossomed in purples and whites and yellows. Before leaving the last roads, honeysuckle smells filled the air. Man's rubble disappeared and spates of volcanic gravel turned up from Vesuvius' eruptions some 25 kilometers away.

Across a canyon, down a deep abyss, a herder and four dogs drifted a flock of belled goats up to pasture. Dozens of bells tinkled and echoed from the drive. A cuckoo joined the music and a hawk screeched at the dogs warning the canyon's creatures danger approached.

Soon the shepherd shaded up underneath a tall rock spire. His dogs stationed themselves on the outer points of the herd ground. I'd counted 200 pair trailing below my stand. I'd have given \$40 for a mule to ride back and talk a little trade with the herder. I'd have been delighted to take his grocery list and mail his money home and order a can of flea powder for his dogs.

The Italian guide only understood half of my Spanish and the British fellow had a worse time translating my Southern dialect. But I'd have bet big money that the goat herder would have caught onto every word we'd have needed to communicate. My companions, like real compadres who know all about cow markets and football teams. Nice men and ladies, but papered professors and learned scholars.

All the sculptures and religious paintings in every niche and corner of the churches and town squares were also causing me to have dreams wild and fierce enough to short out the horror shows on a VCR.

Single hotel rooms in Europe size down to people used to walking in heavy traffic while keeping their arms close to their sides, and bathing in shower stalls too small to rinse more than one rib plate at a time. After seeing all those cherubic marble angels, and huge carvings of giant soldiers spearing fiery faced dragons, and madonnas clutching their chests and looking off all blubbery eyed, every morning my bed looked more like a rodeo ground than a place to sleep.

By the time we topped out on the Positano side, I had to carry a professor's pack. He must have brought his reference library along, or perhaps his collection of Civil War canon balls. Cameras and my pack had to be reslung to fit under my chin to put on his gear. As heartsick as I was for level ground, the support helped keep my head up and my spirits strong.

Way down, and I mean way down like three or four thousand feet, stood the steeple where we were to meet the bus. At a sharp bend in the trail we met a guy carrying a big white sack of donkey dung. He was taking five steps to our one and climbing uphill. Lots of good reasons to carry a two-bushel sack of donkey manure up in the mountains, especially if the crop being fertilized needs privacy and protection from nosy parties, like the state police, or worse, the local chapter of the Mafioso.

A rain passed below us on the trail, slickening up the rocks and bringing the walk to a muddy finale. A lady in the lead turned her ankle and we all took on a bit of mud on our clothes from stumbling and sliding on the steep places.

Light showers kept falling and the chauffeur began to holler about messing up his bus. The last I saw of the "Path of the Gods" was that old boy carrying his sack higher up the trail, making a white blurb in the haze.