

MAY 27, 1993

In January, an outfit named Betchart Expeditions announced a spring walking trip to Southern Italy. Subscriptions included an honor society of professors and members of the Smithsonian Institution who had taken previous trips with the agency. My interest ran high because only top flight travel people work for the Smithsonian; also, Betchart guided last summer's trip to Alaska in a competent manner.

Departure date was set for the 29th of April. Timing to hike in Italy is critical. Urgency prevails. The Roman Empire's Appian Way, the old cobblestone road leading south out of the capital, for example, dates to 320 B.C. The huge coliseum in Rome is 1920 years old; or, on down to Naples, score the eruption of Vesuvius at 79 A.D. covering Pompeii in ashes not to be rediscovered until the 1700s. So fast action needed to be taken as all the buildings and ruins had historical and archeological significance.

The trip made up in Naples. I flew from San Angelo to Dallas to catch Alitalia's flight to Rome in Chicago. At Rome I caught the train to Naples to join the other eight members of the expedition.

Flying so many hours plus the time on the train required working a pedestrian plan for three different air terminals. Airport authorities post sign and paint colored lines in end less patterns. All directions translate into sign language braille, and about six different languages. But some where along the way a subtle trick throws the traveler off into a blind alley, or down to a dead end security zone. Before leaving home, I go over a collection of maps on the air terminals, torn from airline magazines. Where possible, I review the field notes of previous passages noting danger zones around baggage claim areas and congested elevator and escalator sections. Tips on how to find rest stops and avoid smart-alec car rental clerks come from the margins.

This time I scored, finding the way in two out of three concourses without more than a mile of back tracking. Rome's Fiumicino brought me down the worst, from the International terminal to the train station. The trouble was my costume. I was wearing a pair of kakai pants, a black turtleneck shirt, a safari hat with a chin strap made from a white shoe lace, and a black elastic band to keep eye glasses from falling overboard on a boat.

About every 40 steps a blue sign said "La stazione ferroviaria," or train station. All worked in deadly accuracy up to six elevator doors with six plates of instructions in Braille. On each venture I'd bypass the right door and end up retracing the signs. How I caught on to the lousy instructions happened by accident. On the sixth trip downstairs I stalled out and had to shift the harness on my backpack around in front of a well dressed gentleman reading an Italian newspaper.

Without glancing up, he said, "You going to Africa?" I was so startled to hear English, I replied, "My gosha mighty, is that where the train station is?" Unless putting in all these buildings and runways had changed the whole world, I knew Africa was clear across the Mediterranean Sea from Italy.

Still buried in the news, he told me to wait a minute and he'd escort me to the right train. Alitalia, the national airline, also connects to the country's train service. Once in the station, I offered to buy a cup of coffee. He didn't give grounds for refusal.

A time audit at my final destination showed air time to exceed ground time by eight or nine times. I'd left the ranch at 6 a.m. on April 29. Flashing tapes in the depot at Naples showed the date to be 12 p.m. on April 30. I didn't know how fast the castles and coliseums were decaying, but I was starting a case of jet lag that would've killed the front legions of Caesar's army, with enough left over to make Cleopatra wish she'd stayed home and minded her own business.

Travel advisories warned of the high crime rate in town. So I took off my hat and mashed the crown against my chest until a ride came along to the hotel.