

JUNE 3, 1993

Travel leaders chose a suburb of Naples, Torre de Greco, for the first hotel of my trip to Italy. May Day celebrations had closed all the museums and shops. Workers denied the day off stayed home on strike, a very popular Italian pastime. Also, traffic lights in that third largest city in the country failed to work because the contract hadn't been let by the city government.

Darkened traffic lights, or block-lettered traffic signs in luminous paint, or fully armed police officers for that matter make no difference to Italian drivers. Speed limit on the highways is 150 kilometers per hour, or 80 mph in U. S. standards. Within cities, for short bursts, spluttering, popping motor bikes and fast geared mini autos race off at breakaway speeds faster than a flagman at Indianapolis ever sees.

Doctrine reaching back into Mediterranean family laws forbids giving a child a gasoline powered vehicle of more than 50 horse power before the fifth birthday; nine out of 10 bikes carry two passengers and one out of 500 use the brake levers.

Once, on the coast of Florida, a winter circus crew put on a special daredevil act by Barnum and Bailey's most in, trepid trapeze artists and fearless human cannon balls for a hurricane victim's benefit. Children held their eyes and grown people cried out; but at the highest pitch these exhibitions never produced the thrills of an Italian city street.

Apart from the traffic, Mt. Vesuvius loomed six or seven miles away. On the day we climbed to the lip of the cone, only a few crevices vented steam, or smoke and where once this old monster boiled in destruction and fire, Australian lotus trees leafed out on the floor.

The guide chose a washed-out back road for our route. The overview of Naples from the volcano's slope brought the destruction of Pompeii and Herculean into sharp focus.

Hot lava, mud slides, fiery ashes and sulfurous gases enveloped and smothered the two cities in 79 A.D. Gladiators were forgotten and left to die in chains; portions of the cities were covered by mud so fast that excavators found cooked eggs and a library of 1700 papyrus roles.

Of the 8000 to 10,000 inhabitants of Pompeii, 40 percent lived in bondage. The coliseum seated 20,000. Historians know other communities came to the events, because recorded evidence show a serious fight among the fans in 59 A.D. "Recorded evidence" is a phrase frequently used by guys who dig and sift clay-looking dirt and develop a swagger in front of TV cameras with their chin covered in bushy whiskers and a big fogging pipe hanging from their mouths.

Even if the phrase is only a hunch, the odds are high that if 20,000 sports fans gathered to watch anything from a mumble peg match to a man-eating lion stripping the hide off gladiators, some smart alec just had to throw a cushion at the wrong place of his sword in the wrong place at what he thought was the right time.

Watching from the inside lane of the sidewalks of Naples, or standing in a coffee bar, observing wild arm swinging, and loud outbursts of laughter or crashing storms of anger seem to be the foundation of the culture here.

One night in a tour office, waiting for a contracted ride back to the hotel, two gray bearded gents disagreed over the obligation. Nowhere in or out of martial debates, or on or off the floors in heated courtroom trails, have I ever seen two men come as close to blowing the linings of their arteries without physical attack.

Visitors who pass through the beautiful old city of Naples are frightened of the high crime rate. At 5 in the afternoon the hotel at Torre del Greco locked the gates leading onto the streets.

After climbing up the side of Mt. Vesuvius on volcanic gravel footing, the curfew meant little to the group. Out on the front patio, the sun set on Mt. Vesuvius without one American to witness the view.

Landowners in the Campania region were able to claim whatever antiques their plows turned up until 1900. Townsmen and builders stripped the huge temples of marble, yet so much remained from the Greek occupation in 6 B.C. that the local museum is unable to catalog the huge collections of artifacts. Only portions of the graphic murals recovered from the tombs are yet to be solved under both multi-deity and Christian occupancies.

The countryside of the region grows artichokes and strawberries. The most popular product is the mozzarella cheese made from the milk of Mediterranean water buffaloes. The species was introduced from Eastern Europe in the 7th century. Buffalo milk brings 2200 lira per liter, or about \$1.70, and cow's milk brings 800 lira per liter, or sixty-odd cents in U.S. currency.

"La Nuova Contadina," an all stainless steel cheese factory at Agripoli and Altavilla makes mozzarella from buffalo milk. Italian mozzarella, using cow or buffalo milk turns out as a soft bright white cheese with a short shelf life. The campania region invented the pizza and also offers a delicious fried cheese sandwich slightly related to American grilled sandwiches.

Buffaloes weigh up to 2000 pounds. A cow will produce on rations as economical as orange peelings or brewery waste. Subject to all the diseases of other cattle except for a strange immunity to leptospirosis, buffaloes must have mud to wallow in and adequate shade in the summer months.

Buffalo calves are weaned in special sheds. From birth they are trained to answer to their name they will respond to the rest of their life. They are very curious. When horses were reintroduced for pleasure riding, buffaloes in the pastures stood for hours watching the horses graze. Never aggressive, buffaloes along the highways allow tourists to feed and pet them through the fences.