

JUNE 24, 1993

The last days of last month's walking trip in Italy were spent out of Sorrento. Naples, just across the bay, has more to see than Sorrento, but the crime rate is so much higher here that Sorrento stays full of tourists. Well, not all crime is limited to Naples. English newspapers cost about \$3, or \$4 in Sorrento news stands, and a street side place had a waiter charging six times a slice above the market for pizza.

A big attraction was the ferry ride to the fabled Isle of Capri. Swarms of visitors push onto the decks for round trip jaunts. From the sea, the beauty of Capri slowly appears into a spectacle of cliffs and verdant manhewn shelves adorned by white plaster villas roofed in Mediterranean red tiles.

On the day we made our way up to the game refuges and ruins of Caesar's palace on Capri, subscribers to public transportation overloaded the busses past the limits expected of a vegetable cannery. Pressed together with minimum air space, our sanity threatened by maelstroms of different languages, the conductor singles out Americans to make a scene over our unpunched 70-cent tickets.

His opening threw the case heavy in his favor. "The fine for riding a city bus without having the ticket punched within 30 minutes of purchase, is 10,000 lira," he said. The catch being settling up in foreign court, not paying the \$6 or \$7 fine in American currency.

My ticket was mashed in the bottom of my shirt pocket by an Alpine-looking gent who seemed to be pressing backwards to find space where he could go into his skiing crouch. On the left flank, two matrons swayed on a strap so nearly out of reach they dangled from the floor on the upside of curves. The sweep of the automatic door cleared my posterior on right turns by inches and less on left ones; the passenger numbing my right arm was humming the love song "On the Isle Of Capri." Her idea of romance, I supposed, was to paralyze the victim by cutting off circulation of one of his limbs.

Whether the walk in the higher country of Capri was beautiful, or the extra space so precious, was hard to appraise at the time, the bus ride had been so draining. But after a rest I recalled how trails led through lush forests and patches of wild orchids. How birds flitted into high reaches and handsome villa doorways brought out friendly servants smiling and greeting us.

In the afternoon we made a long climb up walks and stairways to the ruins of the summer palace of the Emperor Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus. Caesar's birth date was 37 B.C. and his reign lasted until 42 A.D., but nobody ever explains how folks kept it straight in those days to use B.C. if Christ hadn't been born yet.

Like a lot of stuff scholars publish, the blanks are filled after the fact to pass by proof readers for the National Geographic Magazine, or tossed out by some big smart alec who thinks just because he has letters at the end of his name and his box number on his zip code, he can flip B.C. and A.D. around like the pages on the clip board of a kite-flying judge's tablet.

Caesar didn't know how to date his birthday any more than kids over at Mertzon during the Great Depression knew how far they lived from the sea. But like all emperors

he sure knew how to keep the slaves busy laying bricks and packing sand from Egypt for bricks to provide a nice view of the island and the sea.

On the way up I noticed a villa named "pietra," meaning rock, or stone. Looking at the depth of the palace's foundations, and the height of the cisterns, it would seem that being one of Caesar's slaves probably only bettered being a gladiator by how much you minded digging rock holes versus hearing a lion roar about six inches from your left ear.

At Naples, the Bourbon kings who ruled 1600 or 1700 years after Caesar planted a big oak forest by having the peasants break through volcanic rock to make the tree wells. Kings and emperors are called tacky names, but they sure knew how to keep their subjects away from idleness.