



David: <http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/index/index.html>

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Bennett and Tom's Excellent Adventure

An irreverent tale of Honeymooning and shoe-shopping in Italy.

Yes, yes, for our honeymoon Tom and I really flew to Rome to buy shoes. Tom wanted badly to go Milan (his idea of the birthplace of civilization), but I insisted, "Honey, they sell those shoes in Rome."

But it turned out that Italy is a country of bowlers.

At least, that's what their preferred choice in footwear suggests. The Italians have made bowling shoes a fashion statement. Red leather shoes with stitching up the top, from the tip of the toe to the laces. Everyone – and I mean everyone – wears them, from grandmothers to school children to the hot – scorching hot! – young guys. They all share a common, warped sense of bowling attire as fashion.

Two gay guys flew to Italy and didn't bring home any shoes. Sad, but true!

Rome: An Annunciation Too Far

We loved Rome, even though much of it is, ahem, "ruined" (joke). The Pantheon is an elegant structure, with a rotunda of 5 concentric circles, each composed of sets of 5 concentric squares. If only one building was destined to endure the millennia intact, this may have been the perfect choice. It alone was worth the trip. The Coliseum, the Roman Baths, the Fountain of Trevi – each was a magnificent bonus.

At the Vatican Museum you are shepherded through about 200 rooms on the way to the Sistine Chapel. Every square inch of the place is covered with paintings of cherubs and the crucifixion and the like. One room, painted by Raphael, was purportedly used as a study by Pope Leo, but after about five minutes in that space anyone, Pope or not, would have a killer headache. I'm sure this is just blasphemous, but even in the Sistine Chapel I couldn't help thinking that the whole place could really use a fresh coat of paint. Something a tad more Protestant – think Shaker – might be an improvement.

They honestly had signs up in some cathedrals apologizing for how changes in public taste during the Restoration had led city magistrates and church officials to order the whitewashing of frescoes. Yes, some few of the 2,567,431 paintings of The Annunciation will never be seen again: oh, the losses! They seemed ashamed that the cathedral might be appreciated simply for its architecture and the remaining art treasures that line the walls and rooms. The most stunning of the cathedrals we visited was the Santa Croce in Florence, where the white-washed walls and ceilings allowed for an uncluttered appreciation of the

magnificence of the structure itself. The architecture *was* the art.

I had to regard many of the paintings we viewed simply as historical artifacts. Remarks like "the sophomores in art class at Whitcomb High School could do this" were not welcomed. When in Rome, I learned, do not suggest any lack of appreciation for old things. And as a man newly united to someone younger, I'm permanently invested in fostering an active appreciation for older things. Think of me as Italian art.

Florence: Bad Timing, Great David

The timing of our visit to Florence was unfortunate. We had originally planned to arrive on Friday and leave Monday, but we imagined that many of the sites might be closed on Sunday. So we changed our plans to arrive on Saturday and leave on Tuesday. Turns out that most things are closed on Sunday *and* Monday. Oops.

So we had to choose quickly between seeing Michelangelo's statue of David (at the Gallery of the Academy of Art) and Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" at the Uffizi Gallery. Hmm – naked girl or naked guy?

The David has to be the single most perfectly presented piece of art on the planet. You walk down a corridor that has two unfinished Michelangelos on each side, and at the end of the corridor, standing under its own rotunda, which provides the only lighting for the piece, stands the David. You've worn the t-shirt, you have the magnet on your refrigerator, but the statue is truly transcendent. An entire world of possibility for expression through stone is captured in this one masterpiece.

When we stepped out of our hotel in Florence on the morning we were to drive to Ravello, we were greeted by a marching band, decked out in uniforms and accompanied by dancing girls with batons. It was like stepping into the half-time show at the Texas Tech vs. Baylor football game.

We quickly went from being entertained to concerned, however, when we discovered that this band was just the beginning of a march that stretched for miles and miles. The left had called a General Strike to protest recent decisions of the right-leaning government, and they were taking this strike business at least semi-seriously. All public transportation was shut down, and an army of chanting Italians waving Communist flags completely clogged the streets – literally for miles (no half-hearted little demonstrations for these folks!). To get to our car rental agency, we had to walk against the crowd, carrying everything we

owned.

We were lucky to find the uber-right wing Helga, who had no time for the petty dissatisfactions of the working class, stationed resolutely behind the Hertz counter. And what a welcome sight! If not for Helga we might be scavenging with the rats under a bridge along the Arno.

The Amalfi Coast: Steps & Horses

Driving in Italy is like driving in major US cities – a kind of every man for himself mentality prevails – except they do it faster. And each lane of the autostrade has its own posted speed limit: fast, faster, and fastest. We were tooling along at 150 km/hour, and folks were passing us like we were standing still. And you have to realize that this is all in tiny little European cars – the monsters that we drive in America simply will not fit on the streets of these ancient cities.

Ravello is splendid – gorgeously situated 1,000 feet above the Mediterranean. This became our favorite part of the trip. Everything is straight up and down, making the driving a feat of geometry and physics, not to mention a serious test of your nerves. Our car even got hit by a police car, and the driver didn't stop! Besides having the mirror whacked off the driver's side by a cruiser, I also sideswiped a stone wall during my drive along the sidewalk and up a flight of stairs to get the car into the hotel lot, and the rental return guy didn't even blink. It turns out that if you bring the car back, apparently regardless of its condition, the rental agency is grateful and everybody's happy.

So to avoid the stresses of driving along the Amalfi Coast, most people opt for the stairs. There were 1,415 stairs from our hotel in Ravello to the sea. Straight down. Perhaps the most fun Tom and I had in Italy was climbing back *up* the stairs, from Amalfi to places unknown. We climbed beyond where mere mortal tourists ascend, up to where we encountered more donkeys and horses on the steps than people. Some guy was apparently building a house high in the hills by carting construction supplies up the stairs on a flotilla of horsebacks.

We were actually chased by these horses up the stairs (there's no chance to catch your breath when a pack of horses are quick on your heels!) to a landing from which the stairs branched out in three different directions. I tried my best to discern which direction the, uh, "cowboy" was leading these horses, but once we had committed to what seemed