

We'd all been up early that morning, and were all quite worn out, so we decided to eat on base to rest, avoiding the long drive to a restaurant off-base. There was a T.G.I. Friday's just downstairs from the hotel, so we headed down there for a bite. In less than two weeks in Italy, we'd quickly become acclimated to and spoiled by Italian dining. We'd forgotten that we had to ask for our drinks without ice to avoid getting a giant glass of ice with a miniscule amount of liquid in it. We'd forgotten the bad music blasting from the sound system so loudly that we could barely hear each other talk, and our heads soon began to reverberate from the racket. It was, in a word, painfully American. (Well, I guess that's really two words.) At least they still served Fanta, the delightful orange soda that was not sickeningly sweet or dyed to a radioactive orange. It came in a pitcher rather than a bottle, and the glasses were filled with ice, but it was still Fanta. We wanted to order in Italian, for ordering in English had become foreign, but that was difficult since the menu was in English. When we said things like "Grazie," to the Italian waiter, he responded in English. It was a return to the US in a way, and the experience made us all the more unenthusiastic about going home.

We had only one day left in Italy, and the original plan had been to go to Pompeii (somewhere along the way, it was decided to go to Pompeii instead of Herculaneum after all.) Katy had to work in the morning, and her knee was not going to allow for any prolonged walking, so she wasn't going to be going to Pompeii. Leah and Sue decided that they wanted to spend their last day with Katy and see her perform with the rock band more than they wanted to see the ruins, so they made plans to go to work with her in the morning, and go into downtown Napoli for the afternoon. I, on the other hand, figured seeing one band was enough, and couldn't bear the thought of leaving without seeing the ruins. After having been so close, I couldn't imagine going home without a visit. As much as we want to return, we don't know when we might once again be able to do so. I had to go. The others clearly felt differently, so I was in a bit of a bind. But Pompeii called, so I decided to strike out entirely on my own during my last day in Italy.

The guide book explained that a train ran directly to the Pompeii Scavi, so setting out on my own was not an impossible proposition. It turned out to be quite convenient, in fact. There was a subway station within walking distance of the NATO base at AFSOUTH (which is where Katy works,) one we'd already taken several times into downtown Napoli. I rode in the car with the others as far as the base, and while Leah and Sue went off with Katy for the rock band rehearsal, I walked down to the subway station at Bagnoli. Stopping first at the newsstand to purchase a ticket, "Uno per un giorno," I was on my way. The line took me down the now somewhat familiar route to Napoli Centrale, the main train station, where I was to catch the Circumvesuviana train to Pompeii Scavi. I found the correct ticket booth and bought myself a ticket, but then wandered around in a bit of a circle trying to find the way to the trains, having accidentally walked right by it my first time around. On the second try, I actually noticed the arrow pointing down another corridor. I stopped at an information booth, hoping for a map of the ruins. Instead, I was given a far more useful map of the Circumvesuviana lines, complete with a time schedule of trains. He told me to go to platform three, which for some reason I thought I already knew, and also repeated several times that I needed to catch the 9:41 train, which was, alas, almost a half hour later. I wandered down to the platform and sat myself down on a bench to wait for my train.

My siblings and I all have our mother's deep brown eyes, and David and I both have brown hair that has darkened to near black (in certain light, at least) over the years. With a father from the extreme North – so far North that my mother's Sicilian family called him Polish – we have some moderation to our Sicilian blood, but in the US, we still look quite Italian. In Italy, however, I had no doubt that I would stand out like the American that I am. And so it was as I traveled around with Leah and her very non-Mediterranean family. When we entered a restaurant, if the staff spoke English, we were often addressed in it. We were given the menus with the Union Jack stickers on the front, and allowed to order our panini before we paid for them. As I fully expected, I was not mistaken for an Italian. That is, I was not mistaken for an Italian until I ventured out alone. Sitting on the bench waiting for the train to arrive, I was approached by two women who asked me something about the train. I couldn't hear them, so I stood up, saying "Che?" as I did. At that point, they decided that I had no idea what I was doing (which would not be far from the truth,) and went off to find someone more reputable to answer their query.

The train came much sooner than expected, but I hopped on anyway, anxious to get to my destination. When I'd left the others earlier, we'd decided that I would try to be back at Centrale between four and five. I would take the calling card we'd purchased and call Katy's cell phone to finalize the plans,

once I knew the train schedule and could give them a more definite time. This left me far less than the full day suggested to explore the full extent of Pompeii, and I wanted to see as much as possible. Once on board, however, I studied the map and noticed that the line I was on branched off just before Pompeii, one branch heading past Pompeii on its way to Sorrento, but the other heading off in a different direction. I realized that



in taking the earlier train, I had boarded one that would not be stopping where I needed to go. I quickly assessed my options. I could get off the train at the next stop, and hope to catch the proper train. A better option, I decided, was to continue on to Ercolano and switch trains there, because the time schedule was listed for the Ercolano stop, whereas it was not for the others. And so, I rode on to Ercolano, gazing out the window at the flowering cacti and at trees so full that they seemed to spill forth their fruit, huge oranges and lemons of such vivid color that they seemed otherworldly, all flourishing among the graffiti covered walls and apartment buildings from whose windows spilled the daily wash and the ubiquitous rainbow-striped PACE flags.

When I disembarked at Ercolano, I briefly considered trying to find the ruins there and be done with it, but instead sat myself down on a bench to await the 9:28 arrival of the Sorrento train. It was a long wait, but the day was bright and warm, and I didn't mind sitting out in the sun. While I waited, I was again approached by two women, who asked me something in Italian. It was far too much for me to decipher, so I responded, "Non so." I thought I was saying "I don't know," having said those same words in every phone conversation I had with my grandmother for years. Whenever the Italian got beyond the few basic words I knew, I would reply, "Non so," and quickly hand the phone back to my father. As it turns out, the correct phrase is, "Non lo so," so not only was I confused, I appeared illiterate as well. Realizing that I was a poor choice, despite initial appearances, they moved on to the fellow sitting next to me, who quickly answered their question. 9:28 came and went, but my train eventually arrived and whisked me off to the Pompeii Scavi stop, where I followed the signs up the short hill to the entrance.

There was a phone right there near the entrance, so I tried to call Katy's phone and tell them my plans. I hadn't bothered to write down the country code, since I knew it, but when I tried to call, it wouldn't go through. I tried a few more permutations, but none would work. Feeling a bit anxious, I asked the woman at the information booth for help, but her suggestion did not work either. I started to feel rather panicked, but not knowing what else to do, I bought my ticket for the ruins and went through the gate. I'd already wasted a while fussing with the phone, and had no idea what else to do. It was only after I'd entered and started to walk down the road that I remembered the guidebook in my pack. It was a guide for the whole country, and these books invariably have a section at the front with handy tips for travelers. Sure enough, it gave the international calling code for the U.S., something I hadn't thought about when writing down the numbers. While I was in Italy, calling an Italian cell phone, the card was an AT&T card which went through the U.S., so I was effectively calling the U.S. to call Italy. I hurried back to the entrance and begged the guard to let me exit and return, something which is apparently not usually allowed. When I explained that I needed to make a phone call, he agreed. More informed, I finally managed to get through to Katy's phone, and left a message telling them where and when to meet me. Feeling much better, I returned and began my exploration of Pompeii.

For the next few hours, I walked non-stop through the ruins, in dazzling sunlight. While a Nor'easter brewed back home, I basked in the warmth of a brilliant spring day in the south of Italy. It was pure bliss to wander around in short sleeves for the second day in a row. And wander I did. In contrast to



the compact area of the Roman Forum, which represented only a portion of the ancient city, the ruins at Pompeii stretch for quite a distance. I started off on the main roads looking at the main buildings – and Pompeii is mostly buildings, since the artifacts and remains have all been removed to centralized storage locations – but was soon drawn down the little side streets and the tiny apartments where the regular people lived. In the homes of the less common citizens, it was fascinating to peek through a window and see the remains of a brilliant wall painting beyond. From the little side streets, I headed towards the two theatres, one large and one smaller. Eventually, I decided to

follow a planned route up and down the streets in order to see as many of the sites highlighted in the guidebook that I possibly could. I walked up and down the stone-paved streets, many blocked to ancient vehicular traffic by large stepping-stones placed at the intersections with larger roads. Along the way, I peeked through fences into some gardens, while other homes were open that day, allowing me to wander through and see the paintings, frescoes, and remains of their formal gardens.

After hearing all the stories of Pompeii being a frozen moment in time, I was somewhat surprised to find only buildings, though I later found the storage buildings which today house the artifacts, as well as a few remains in glass cases placed randomly in a few of the buildings. One imagines that a visit to Pompeii yields a glimpse into life in an ancient Roman city, with bodies at the tables where they perished, surrounded by the dinner plates, perhaps. But volcanic ash and archeology don't quite work that way, and it is mainly buildings one sees in this excavated city. The excavation actually began hundreds of years ago, when archeological work was performed much differently, and the art and artifacts were removed from the site, including removing the wall paintings from the walls themselves. There were no fences around the buildings – or the city itself - back then, and much of it succumbed to plunder. The best of the statuary and artifacts are now housed in the Napoli Museum, but time had run out on our trip, so I wasn't able to get there to see the collection. Still, the longer one walks through the city, the more one gets a sense of it as a place where real people once lived and breathed, loved and fought, and walked down the same streets on which we may now tread. As one enters into the more recently excavation portions, this sense becomes all the more palatable. One can see some of the graffiti on the walls, hidden behind cloudy and scratched Plexiglas. Then there are the more risqué sights at which people like to titter, like the infamous painting of the god Priapus and his very large, very erect member. Overheard just outside this building: A young woman saying, "It's too bad that gene pool had to die out!" The much talked about lupanaria (whorehouse) turned out to be rather a disappointment, though it was not at all crowded, despite haven been described by the guide book as the most popular building in the city. It was guarded by a white-haired and sour looking guard, apparently to keep out anyone under eighteen, the only such building with such a limitation. Over doors of each tiny room, containing only a carved stone bed, (Ouch! One hopes they had mattresses on top of those.) was a picture showing the particular specialty to be obtained therein. I was the only person there, and the stern guard seemed to be watching my every move, so I was afraid to take any photos, worried that they were not allowed either. Ducking out of sight, I did sneak one photo of one of the paintings, but it was one of the less-well preserved specimens. Feeling remarkably uncomfortable – made so not at all by the overt sexuality of the place, but by the overbearing guard – I left rather quickly.



Beyond the lupanaria were the baths, one of the most impressive and intact complexes I saw. It was there that I also saw what has to be the most amusing English translations I encountered on our entire trip. On the wall of the baths was a sign, of modern vintage but not all that recent, the English portion of which read:

THE RUINS MANAGEMENT

INVITES ALL VISITORS TO WALK CAREFULLY
THROUGH THE RUINS IN ORDER TO AVOID
UNPLEASANT ACCIDENTS, THE ANCIENT
ENVIRONMENT IS IN FACT UNCOMFORTABLE AND
RUINED BEYOND ALL MEASURES OF SAFETY.

I, for one, was quite alarmed to know that the ruins were ruined. Though properly admonished, I continued to explore the city, without incident, I would add. As my day grew shorter, I returned to the forum to see all of the major buildings I had passed by in my earlier endeavors to avoid large tour groups. It was more crowded, mostly with Japanese tour groups and French school children, with a large tour group of Germans and many random Brits thrown in the mix as well. It was in the forum where I finally saw the bodies and some of the artifacts still housed at the site. I went through the forum, still marveling at it all even after hours of walking through the city. My photographic media was running quite short, however. I'd scraped together

all of the remaining rolls of film I could find for this last adventure, and also brought Sue's digital camera with a clean memory card in it. I finished off the film first, and quickly ate my way through the 140 or so available images on the card. Towards the end I began to ration them, and went back deleting some of the



obviously bad ones I'd taken earlier. I was also running short on time, but it wasn't quite time to leave to catch my train, and I wanted to see the Amphitheatre. Unfortunately, this structure was at the far end of the city, so I had quite a walk. It was this walk that took me down the graffitied streets, however, and through numerous other fascinating areas, until I finally reached the amphitheatre. While tiny compared to the looming hulk of the Coliseo in Roma, it is one of the most well preserved structures of its kind. The upper level was closed off, but it was still quite interesting to go inside at the ground level. When I entered, a group of rowdy French school children was running around and wreaking havoc on the silence, but their leaders eventually reigned them in and led them off to other sights, leaving only the few small groups sitting down for a snack on the grassy floor. I ate a Bounty bar (I love these!

It's the candy bar I always wanted – less bitter than Mounds or Almond Joy without the damned almond. Why don't they sell them in the US?) to tide me over, for I'd had no lunch, just a Luna bar, and it was getting late. I had to hurry back soon after, though I still managed to stop a few times along the way.