

SLOW TRAVEL



IT WAS a posh hairdressing salon in Mayfair. The price, tip included, equalled a week's wages. But I had reached – and exceeded – my savings target, so there was enough for that longed-for Italian vacation and a little left over. A girl has to splurge occasionally, right? Chestnut rinse. Highlights. The works. I felt like a film star as we headed for Waterloo Station. It was late summer, 1958.

My flat-mate Jill had an ancient, wicker picnic hamper. We had filled it with fruit and sandwiches for the long train journey. Jill, whose happiness depended on regular cups of tea, had insisted on including another of her treasures – a tiny, portable stove which she swore would not leak. To this day, I cannot smell methylated spirits without remembering the strange taste of those sandwiches.

When darkness fell that night, we were somewhere in France, heading south-east; Jill, me and six strangers squashed in a carriage, with the window half open for some fresh air. I had a window seat, so I leaned my head against the wall and fell asleep to the sound of wheels clicking along iron rails and the steady chuff, chuff, chuff of the steam engine.

When I awoke, we were approaching Basel, there was soot in all my pores and my hair was filled with large, black smuts the size of currants. I soaked my face and hair in cold water in the tiny washbasin of the train lavatory. A week's wages gurgled down the hole on to the tracks below.

Have you noticed, though, the way those tiny tragedies, like the shadows in a painting, are one of the elements that give dimensionality to our memories? Bland experiences, on the other hand, are soon forgotten. As are similar flights between similar airports. That train journey, ruined hairdo and all, is something I remember vividly, and with delight. It placed Italy on the map for me.

My Italy is the land you reach when you have stood on deck watching Dover's white cliffs slowly fade, traversed a large section of France, and passed through those luscious Swiss valleys with their emerald grass, chocolate-box villages and the sound of cowbells in clear air. Italy is what lies before you when you finally come down through the Alps on to the plain of Lombardy. Italy, for me, is a far place lying a day, a night and most of another day from home. The blue jewel they call the Mediterranean is a reward it takes many hours and many turns of the wheels to earn. That's what my journey taught me.

Of course, like most other people, as the years went by I became seduced by the speed, convenience and (almost) instant gratification of cheap air travel. I, too, have flown to Tenerife in February on a whim. I, too, have hunted specials on Expedia.com. Most of those journeys were so alike that memory can no longer separate them.

But now, as the perils of global warming penetrate our consciousness and we all begin to understand the deadly effect of jet travel on Earth's atmosphere, we are realising that we cannot continue to fly around like that with impunity. That's irresponsible. So it's time to rediscover 'slow travel'. Not just the ecological value of it either, but the pleasure of it. For, as I learned in 1958, slow travel gives you gifts that Easyjet never can.

This year, my partner and I took a train to Italy. After nearly half a century, once more my journey commenced at Waterloo. And what a great experience it all was. No smuts in my hair this time, as Eurostar glided smoothly into Paris. After a short transfer on the Metro from the Gare du Nord to Bercy, we joined the Artesia night train to Rome. By the time we reached Swizerland, I was happily asleep in my bunk, in air-conditioned comfort with pillow, sheet and blanket. When dawn broke, we were already in Italy. We arrived in Rome at 9:30 a.m., rested and full of anticipation.

Then, heading away from the busy, tourist-trampled regions, we continued southwards to a part of Italy ideally suited to slow travel – the Cilento. Lying a hundred miles to the south of Naples, it stretches from the Tyrrhenian coast to the foot of the Apennines in Campania and Basilicata. Most of it has been incorporated into the *Parco Nazionale del Cilento e Vallo di Diano* – which, at a hundred and eighty-one thousand hectares, is the second largest national park in Italy. It includes beaches, coastal resorts, mountains up to six thousand feet high, picturesque villages, and lots of history, including well-preserved ruins dating back thousands of years.

Our destination was the little, medieval, hilltop town of Pisciotta. For us, that turned out to be the perfect choice. Many of the small towns along that western coast have accessible, sandy beaches, so the proliferation of seaside vacation accommodation and bucket-and-spade shops inevitably lends them a certain sameness. But Pisciotta is different. With its tiny, cobblestoned piazza, its one narrow shopping street and its maze of ancient alleys, it seemed to us a charmingly authentic place, bustling with life and full of friendly people. Perched on the edge of a ravine, it is a town of steps, with just one navigable thoroughfare for cars.

From the piazza, a walking path leads steeply down one winding kilometre to Marina di Pisciotta, where there is a boat harbour, a safe, sandy beach and some shops and cafés. (Alternatively, you can drive there via three kilometres of hairpin bends). I enjoyed the path, which passes through a grove of ancient olive trees, though my pleasure was slightly marred by the fact that the town's obviously antiquated sewer line follows the same route and – though well underground – has air vents in several places. Necessary, no doubt, but unfortunately placed. (However I was relieved to note that the pipe stopped well before the sea, at an efficient-looking treatment plant!). The beach was clean, un-crowded and pleasant and the water warm, clear and teeming with small, silver fish who nuzzled our legs.

An essential aspect of slow travel is taking time to savour one's surroundings rather than dashing from place to place. So we rented a self-catering apartment with a huge, sunny terrace. For us, as keen walkers, hikes in the surrounding hills were a highlight of this vacation. As were the strolls around town, the farmers' market, the delicious gelati, and dinner at the town's best restaurant, the Tre Gufi (Three Tawny Owls). Another highlight was a boat trip around Cape Palinuro, with its spectacular caves, including a blue grotto – less famous than its namesake on Capri but equally and just as awesomely blue.

On a day outing to a Cilento beauty spot – the Calore Gorge – as we returned hot and thirsty from our hike along the river and stopped to buy a bottle of water at the kiosk, some people gathered around to greet us. “Why have you come here?” one woman asked us in Italian, her face full of eager curiosity. “Do you have relatives or friends in this area?” I explained that no, we knew no-one. We were simply tourists, here to walk and enjoy the scenery. “Where are you from?” she wanted to know. I told her, and we chatted a while. I thought how rare it is, nowadays, to encounter such a sweet, untarnished interest in foreign visitors.

Although it is possible to travel down the whole coast by train, and Pisciotta has its own station, we had decided to rent a car in Salerno so that we could explore some of the hinterland. However, driving in Italy takes courage, as anyone who has tried it will confirm. Although my husband, being American, slides comfortably into left-hand-drive mode, his hair, like mine, was a shade whiter by the time we got back.

So yes, there were some challenges. Living without e-mail was one of them. The tiny, biting flies that came at dusk were another. But there was also the taste of fresh figs and goat's cheese and the superb, Cilentano olive oil. There was the blue of sea and sky and the view from train windows, and the conviviality of sharing a sleeper and having to negotiate bedtime in French and/or Italian. The less pleasant things – itching bites, Internet-deprivation and those heart-stopping moments on narrow,

mountain roads when other drivers hurtled by at sixty miles an hour just before a bend – when looked back upon, become, like that ruined Mayfair hairdo of 1958, part of the vivid, three-dimensional memory of a wonderful vacation. A vacation taken slowly and savoured, like fine wine. An Italian vacation that, like my first one, began and ended, not at the destination, but at the moment our train pulled out of Waterloo Station.

That's another advantage of slow travel; by giving you journeys that are as enjoyable and memorable as all the other parts of your vacation, it also gives you longer vacations.

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