
Letters From *Italy*

- to family and friends -

August 20, 2009

Il canto del gallo



Il cantante e autore – Antonio Famularo

Cortile biblioteca comunale, *Malfa*

Poste d'Italia – giovedì 20 agosto 2009

I'm having a hard time adjusting to the different time zone – six hours forward – even though it's been almost two weeks since we got here. Maybe it's because I don't really have to adjust; I can take a nap whenever I feel tired. Also, in the back of my mind – way back – I know we'll be returning home in a few days.

I usually awaken about three in the morning, having slept three or four hours. You would think that I would be feeling most tired about then, but no deal. So I go out to my office and lie in the hammock. Turns out, this is a good thing. The Northern Cross is in full view in the west and Ursa Major and Minor along with Cassiopeia are drifting around in the north. And although the Perseid's peaked on August 12, there must be a lot of stragglers, because they've been putting on quite a show. In addition, I've seen at least three satellites. I have to lie quietly for about



15 minutes and fix the location of the stars in my mind: then all of a sudden one of them begins to move – sometimes slowly and sometimes rather quickly – a very faint shimmer that fades and reappears as it drifts across the night sky. If I stay awake long enough, the sky in the northeast turns a hazy gray and then the haze pushes slowly west until the stars disappear one by one. They really are night people.

So I'm swinging in my hammock simply appreciating the beauty of the night sky, and trying to suppress any scientific urges to think about its depth or origin, when my butt begins to scrape ceramic tiles: fortunately not the ones on the floor, but those covering the bench, which is built into the outermost wall of my office. Ok, I've been eating a lot of bread and olive oil for the past week-and-a-half; but come on, this is Sicilia: it doesn't get any better than this – just two weeks out of the whole year to indulge; give me a break.

It's a cloth hammock. It must have stretched a bit while I lay in it for a couple of hours – maybe longer – yesterday afternoon. I look to see how the ends of the hammock are

attached to its supports. By the dawn's early light I recognize a knot – a bowline¹ – one that I learned to tie at the Annapolis Sailing School one fine summer long ago. I never really understood (appreciated yes, but understood, no) that knot until this very moment when I realize that I can loosen it simply by grabbing the line on either side of the knot and pushing towards it. The stiffer the line, the better this works. The knot pops open and I am able to take up the slack in the hammock simply by pulling on the end of the line. Problem solved. I turn to find Ann smiling at me from the doorway.



A bowline – see footnote 1.

Yesterday we got to the beach. It is quite spectacular – lying a couple of hundred feet below the nearest road, not far from *Il Gelso* (our villa), and accessed by a switch-back path cut into rock formations of volcanic origin. The “beach” itself is composed mostly of large stones, rounded into submission by wave action over the eons.



1. The knot above appears on page 71 of *the Morrow guide to KNOTS* by Mario Bigon and Guido Regazzoni, QUILL/William Morrow/New York, 1981. Translated from the Italian by Maria Piotrowska. The large loop of the bowline passes through an eye splice – the terminal point for all the lines emanating from the support cloth of the hammock. There is an eye splice on each end; they are beautiful pieces of work. I am not surprised to learn that the owner of the villa is a sailor.

Most of the beaches of Salina are of this nature, save the black volcanic-sand beach found at *Rinella*.



My first impression when peering at the beach from above was that I was watching a colony of albino seals sunning themselves on the rocks below. The sounds of Italian, being noisy and indistinguishable from seals at that height, made the colony all the more real. However, the bright colored air mattresses, plus the thought that I was going to have to hike down there, and then back up, quickly erased my first impression.



We made this sojourn in the late afternoon when the sun had lost most of its fury. The temperature here has reached 36 degrees Celsius regularly – a bit warmer than even this southern island is accustomed to. To convert that to

something we scientific Luddites in the U.S. can relate to: double the temperature given in Celsius ($2 \times 36 = 72$), subtract ten percent of that number from itself ($72 - 7 = 65$), and add thirty-two ($65 + 32 = 97$) – ouch! The concept of closing down everything here – from noon til four – makes a lot of sense under these conditions.

I'm not sure what would happen to life here if it rained during the month of August. The entire population of Italy is on vacation (including our car rental agency, but

that's another story) save those that make their living during these months. The businesses that cater to the vacationing population are in full swing.



Those that have merchandise to sell have it displayed in the open air: much of it stocked in such a way that it would be impossible to move inside even on long notice. Things and people would get wet. *A'Lumerredda* – our restaurant of choice here in *Malfa* – advertises itself as a “Spaghetteria – Piatti Tipici,” and has its entire seating capacity located outdoors: half of it under a vine covered pergola, and the other half simply open to the evening... make that, *night sky*

Yesterday we went to *Santa Marina* to buy our ferry tickets for the trip back to the mainland. There are only a few towns on the island – the remaining two that I haven't mentioned in previous letters are *Lingua* in the southeast corner, and *Leni* which sits in the saddle between the two volcanic mountains that dominate the island landscape. For a few euro you can travel by bus to all of these towns, which we did in three days time a couple of years ago. We have no ambitions to repeat that process; *Malfa* really has what we are looking for – a little downtime.

Tonight we've been invited by *Antonio Brundu*¹ to an event in the courtyard at the library (I hope it doesn't rain). We are to meet with the author of a new book by *Antonio Famularo* entitled *Il sale di Didyme*. We will also be treated to music by the author and *Giovanni Ruggiero*, who will accompany themselves on guitar while singing folk songs of the Aeolian Islands.

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As you can see from the playbill below, the event was advertised to begin at 21:30. Ann and I were standing in front of the *biblioteca* at 9:30pm and not a soul had yet arrived. We thought we had gotten the date wrong.

1. See my previous letter – *Malfa* – for a description of Antonio Brundu.

- 20 Agosto (ore 21,30):

Incontro con l'autore: Antonio FAMULARO. Presentazione del volume "IL SALE DI DIDYME" e intrattenimento musicale con Giovanni RUGGIERO "IL CANTO DEL GALLO" retrospettiva su VARTULUZZU RUGGIERO, CANTORE EOLIANO".

Malfa – Cortile Biblioteca Comunale

Just then a police car careered into the dark street where we stood and stopped directly beside us. *Carabiniere* was stenciled in bold red letters on the side of the vehicle. These are the tough guys; we figured we were about to be arrested on suspicion of being illegal immigrants, robbers, vagrants, or what have you for skulking on a dark corner late at night.

The rear door of the car opened and out popped a pleasant woman who was thanking the officer profusely for the ride to the biblioteca. The officer *prego'd* his reply and drove quickly off into the night.

A few minutes later Antonio Brundu drove up, greeted us warmly, and opened the door of the building. As if on cue, people as well as the featured performers began arriving. Everyone seemed to know each other. Even we had friends among the crowd.



Ricardo, a college student studying *informatico* (computer science), whom we had met on one of our frequent trips to the biblioteca, introduced us to his mother and father. His father is a recently retired pro-

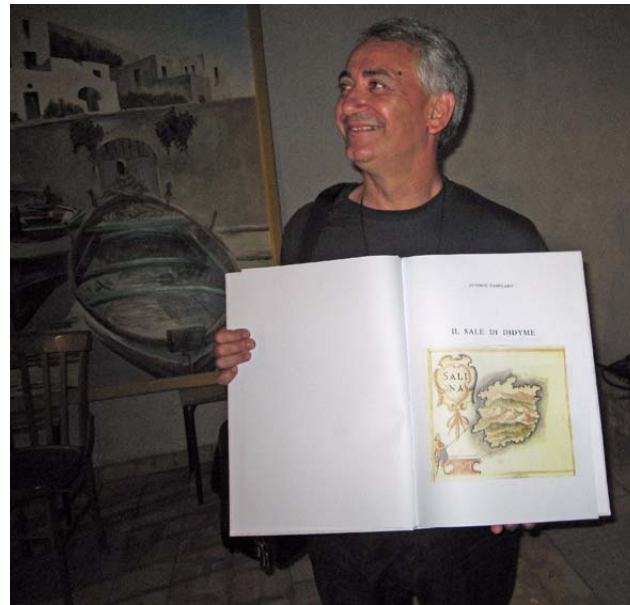
fessor of economics, and his mother – quite Teutonic in appearance – teaches German during the school year.

We also had the pleasure of meeting our dear friends from the villa – *Gianfranco* and *Loredana*. Gianfranco is the

daily operations manager of *Il Gelso* and Loredana is his lovely assistant. They make a beautiful young couple, but I'll save my glowing description of them for my next letter.

By 10:30, and after a lot of conversation, things got going. There were about 30 people in attendance. I must admit that we were a little concerned about the ending time. The musical entertainment was entitled *Il canto del gallo*, which means *The Song of the Rooster*.

No one was in hurry, however. It didn't rain. We had a great time. We even got *Signor Famularo* to pose for us holding his new book.



As expected, we got back to the villa quite late.

Garrett (dad) with Anna Marie (mom)