
Letters From Italy

- to family and friends -

August 10, 2009

Flight



All's well that ends – well almost.

Aeroporto Falcone e Borsellino, Palermo, Sicily

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Flying over from the States was strange: at some point in the middle of the night – with all the windows shuttered and only the glare from the in-flight movie illuminating the cabin – I felt like I was in someone's living room with the TV on: not flying 600 mph at 40,000 feet with the outside air temperature at 60 below zero. Surreal.

We left Toronto Sunday at 5:00 in the afternoon on time – actually 10 minutes ahead of schedule – and got to Rome about 7:00 in the morning – a quick eight hour flight. The food was great and plentiful, as might be expected on Alitalia. From Rome we flew to Palermo on an Air One flight (remember that name) and rented a car at the airport.

Palermo is quite impressive from any perspective: the mountains run right down to the sea and the city is built in the valleys between them.



Palermo as seen from Monreale

The only turbulence we encountered on our drive to Cefalù – about an hour East along the coast – was from other Italian drivers. These are a bit disconcerting because they simply have no personal history of driving automobiles. You meet a first generation of neophytes behind the wheel. The effect is the same as placing democracy in the hands of the Afghans. Their most recent (and only) experience with driving has been with a motorbike. So they drive their newly acquired one or two ton machines with the same abandon. Scary. If there is enough space on a two lane highway to squeeze out a third lane – they will – independent of the speed or direction of the traffic.

This time I used a Garmin Nüvi 670 for navigation: updated with 2010 European maps. I cannot overstate the importance of this device when trying to navigate Italian roads! We are staying at the same hotel - the Kalura – that we stayed at two years ago, but this time we were able to take a direct route to it. Last time it took us 2-3 hours to find the hotel once we had arrived in Cefalù! And no

wonder, given the crazy, winding, twisting path that one must take to get to it. Last time, darkness fell before we found the place. I had to get out of the car and walk up and down the streets in order to see the little alleyway that led to this rather large hotel. The Garmin also detected that traffic was heavy along one road in the city and directed us around it. Coolest thing I have ever seen. Buy a Garmin. (I have stock in the company).

Slept the rest of the day. Ann and I had a wonderful late



Balcony of the Hotel Kalura Cefalù

dinner on the balcony of the hotel overlooking the dark sea and harbor lights.

Ann called her relatives in Isnello and tomorrow we will be heading there for four days. We located some of her relatives in this small mountain town the last time we were here. She's been corresponding with them in Italian for the past few months. They are looking forward to seeing us – and we them – once again.

It's late here, but early your time. Let the adventure begin.

Garrett (dad) with Anna Marie (mom)

Telecommunications Info (optional read)

This letter comes to you complements of the wonderful world of "Alice Mobile" (ah LEE chay MO bee lay" – a broadband service of Telecom Italia (TIM): an Italian telecommunications firm that supports broadband modems without contracts. I bought a USB modem for my new netbook in the Rome airport today between flights – much to Ann's grief, I might add, because she thought I was going to miss the connecting flight to Palermo. But, as usual, I managed it just in time. You can read about Alice (albeit in Italian) at www.TIM.it

This business of staying in touch can get very complicated or expensive or both. The trick is to keep it as simple, convenient and inexpensive as possible. So how DO you do that?

I don't do it with an international smart phone - that's for sure. Being of an older generation, my fingers never suffered the mutation of hand that allows the younger generation to text. Besides, formatting these columns on one of those devices is not possible.

I wanted to bring a laptop because of its capabilities for writing, but those things are (1) heavy, (2) especially cumbersome as carry-on luggage, and (3) short on battery life. The alternative was a netbook – for a lot less weight and eight hours of functional battery life, I could type on a keyboard somewhat bigger than a Blackberry's and go blind and crazy looking at a screen with about the same resolution. At the last minute, Gateway came to my rescue with the LT3103u – all the convenience of a laptop, two-thirds the footprint, half the weight, 1366x768 resolution, and five hours of battery life. Fits easily in my carry-on luggage, holds all of my writing software, and includes an AMD Athlon 64 processor, Vista, 250 Gigs of hard-drive storage, and 2 Gigs of memory. About \$379. Tolstoy would have loved it. And as I mentioned above, it takes an in-country broadband modem where a months activation fee costs just a little more than a slice of airport *focaccia*.

On these long flights I suffer to bring my Sony sound-cancelling headphones which double as a headset for my Sansa c200 MP3 player. Keep your iPod. The Sansa's about the size of a pack of chewing gum. It also receives FM radio, records voice, and stores and displays photos on an expandable 6 foot by 9 foot screen. Unfortunately they would not let me open that in the plane. Amazing.

All our electronic gear runs off European power so we did not have to lug a heavy converter. (Tip: bring plenty of plug adapters, however.)

One more electronic item and then we can get down to business. I do carry an international cell phone. It's a Samsung IP-830W (ancient, but very versatile as it is also a smartphone that carries my language dictionaries and my Microsoft Outlook contacts). My US carrier is Sprint. The advantage of having a Stateside-based international cellphone is that folks in the States can dial my cellphone number and the call is automatically routed to wherever I am in the world, assuming that Sprint has got my back in that location. Sprint does have pretty good contractual relationships worldwide and I know for a fact that it works great in Italy. On the other hand, at somewhere around a \$1.50 a minute you don't want to carry on a long-winded conversation with it. Now if we are in Italy and someone were to call, I'll give them Ann's in-country

cellphone number which drops the rate to about \$0.22 per minute. You can pick up an in-country phone and any amount of activation time at any large airport in Italy. Again the price is very reasonable (\$30-\$60 range). You can also buy a "local" phone in the States – plus activation time – for about twice that price.