

## 2004 PESCHICHI, ROME AND OSTIA, ITALY

Saturday, September 25, 2004. I flew from Corfu to Athens to Rome. There is probably a ferry from Corfu to Italy but I did not discover it. In Rome I had a wheelchair take me to baggage claim and I walked out expecting to be met by Alitalia Club. There were a lot of people meeting others but no one for me! I couldn't even find anyone who spoke English! It was now 11:00 and I thought I might have missed the bus to Peschichi. I couldn't find anyone to tell me where the shuttle was. In desperation I finally took a cab to the Satellite hotel. They had no record of Elizabeth Cerulli, but suggested I try their sister hotel, the Palace. We reloaded my bags into the cab and a few blocks away drove up to the Palace. Elizabeth was in the lobby, along with the others from Delta! I was so happy to see her! The cab cost a small fortune but it was worth it.

I am here for the 23rd Annual Bridge Week, put on by various airlines. Alitalia sponsors this year's tournament. Elizabeth's son is a pilot with Delta, which establishes our relationship. The Delta team is 13 strong. There are teams from ten different airlines with Alitalia by far the largest.

Elizabeth and I walked a couple of blocks to an ATM for some needed Euros. Then we sat around in the lobby waiting for the bus to Peschichi. It came about 1:00 and 44 of us were loaded into a 48- passenger bus for the trip across Italy to Peschichi on the Gargano Peninsula. It was a long 6-hour drive in a cramped bus with only one 15-minute rest stop! I managed to grab a not so great slice of pizza during the stop. However, the scenery is beautiful and mountainous. I was exhausted when we reached the Maritalia Village.

We are in the hotel proper rather than the cottages, which is fine since we had rain for the first two days. Our director is Fulvio Fantoni. He is a most attractive man who was second in the Cavendish last year. He had not directed before but made his calls in the pleasantest way so everyone had a good time.

The first night we played a pairs game and Elizabeth and I were pleased to come in fourth. They use "Greek scoring". First north south and first east west are considered tied for first and second, regardless of the actual score. Second each direction is tied for third. We were second east west which translated to fourth overall. This seems fairer than the way it is done at home with the top scores from either direction counted together.

There are several differences from our games in the US. The boards are little pockets in a square frame. The convention cards are smaller and much simpler than ours. Fulvio, the director, made up the boards for us for the first couple of games. Then we had to make up our own. The print was very small and I had the feeling many of the Italians had never had to do this before. One difficulty was the travelers, for the language is Italian! It took a while to figure out that one column was the opening lead, and that the contract was written  $2S + 1$  or  $3H - 1$  and so on. Both NS and EW scores are shown. The traveler was placed in a separate folder rather than in the board, which made it easy to open the wrong one.

At the end of the game the scores being entered into the computer are projected on the wall. As each board is entered you see your position change. Boards were scored across the field of 22 tables. It is fun to watch like a barometer game. The game is only 18 boards long, but since the games don't start until 8:30 PM, that is just as well. Some of the Italians don't speak much English, and Fulvio was often called to interpret. The SAS people and Lufthansa people all speak English and of course so do Aer Lingus and the Brits.

Many more things are alerted, including cue bids, since the systems played are so different.

The events were Saturday: open pairs, Sunday: mixed sex pairs, Monday: Main team (a two session Swiss with all members on the team from the same airline), Tuesday: mixed nation pairs: Wednesday: 2 session Main Pairs where each pair was from the same airline. Thursday: Mixed nation teams where each member on the team was from a different country, and Friday: Same sex pairs. It is all fun and with the mixed nation pairs we got to know lots of the other players.

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For the mixed sex pairs and the mixed nation pairs, my partner was Ron Vass from British Air. He spoke with a cockney accent and had me playing "Benjie-Acol", which fortunately had five card majors but did not include such things as transfers or negative doubles. He used a short club opening, which I never play at home and don't like. One feature I did like is that a two club opening is 19-22 points. Two diamonds is 23 plus. I considered it quite a challenge! He was a good player but we did not do well together.

The third day was "Main team", teams from each airline play. We were paired with Mike McGowan and Mike Whitaker for the two-session, 40-board event. We managed to come in third despite one fouled series of boards where we were playing one set, our partners another. Fulvio let us correct the situation but we were still playing after everyone was finished and were so rushed that we did very poorly. My last hand of the evening was played at 6H doubled, while the other team didn't even find the slam. My hand AJ10, AKQxxxx, K, J. Feeling too strong to open 4H and afraid 1H was not enough, I opened 2C. Elizabeth with her 11 points had no trouble finding the slam. My right hand opponent doubled for a club lead (he had AQ clubs). My partner's hand was xxx, Jx, AQJ, Kxxxx. The slam was no problem!

Our main pairs game, in which I played with Elizabeth we came in second. Thus we won three trophies, which were pottery figures from the local potters.

I was curious how many Italian Points I won. We got 44 point in the open pairs and 77 points in the Main pairs but Fulvio's program couldn't determine what we got in the team games. He estimated we had over 150 Italian Federation points all told! I plan to hang them next to my 17 Australian points, which are equally invisible!

As for the hotel, we put our passports and money in the room safe and then couldn't get the darned thing open again. Various people tried to work the key without success. Finally on Monday morning the "technical" person came to work and had to use a crowbar to get the safe loose. He shortly appeared with a new safe. This worked fine for a day and then the whole locking mechanism came off in our hand! I moved our passports etc to the hotel safe!

The hotel and cottages are nicely landscaped. Olive trees have their fruit still on them. There is a beautiful pool and tennis courts. Food was served buffet style but was disappointing, for it was not very good and monotonous. No one cared for the cold vegetables. The good part is that I may have lost some of the weight I put on during the cruise down the Croatian Coast. Also there was unlimited wine with both lunch and dinner!

We walked down to the beach the first day, but it was blowing a half gale. There was heavy surf and no one was enjoying the long expanse of sand. You can see Peschichi in the distance on a promontory overlooking the Adriatic, but it is too far to walk.

Since there is nothing near the hotel we feel somewhat isolated. Elizabeth has no ATM card and needs to find a bank to change money. Fortunately there is an ATM machine for me. It rained for two days and we caught up on our rest and reading.

On Tuesday we took an excursion. The Gargano Peninsula sticks out like a pimple on the east coast of Italy. Much of it is a National Park. The people who live on the peninsula are farmers growing olives and grapes for wine. They turn their livestock loose to graze and several times we ran across cows in the road. Chickens are also loose.

Francesco the personable hotel manager acted as our guide although he confessed he had never done guiding before. His love of his home region more than made up for his deficiencies in that area.

Our bus climbed up through numerous hairpin turns, finally finding the main highway. Our first stop was at San Giovanni Rotondo. Padre Pio is a 20th Century saint having been canonized only a few years ago. The bus parked in a bus parking lot and small minivans took us up to the churches. There are three. The first is the original chapel of the monastery. We got in line to see it and it was some minutes before we realized that

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the line was for those wanting to confess! The large modern church next to it was very beautifully done. I stopped to take a picture and lost the tour! Thus I never got to see where Padre Pio had lived or his tomb. But I walked down a small way to the largest sanctuary, which is where the services are now held. A mass was going on inside for what seemed like a thousand people. Outside they could accommodate a thousand more. I caught up with the group and we got back to the bus.

Our stop to eat our picnic lunch was at an area where they were selling the local products: Pasta, olive oil, even wine. I didn't buy anything.

The main sight was Mont Sant' Angelo. Here a massive castle dominates. It dates back to the 3rd century and has newer additions. Although it is a ruin you can walk the ramparts, and follow a narrow corridor that snakes through the wall and leads to a room with various archeological finds. I was interested in the catapult, never having seen one before. Francesco told us that this was his favorite playground when he was growing up.

Nearby is the Church of St Michael, an archangel whose appearance in the 3rd century caused some miracles. It is a long climb down to the grotto where he appeared and all the way down we could here the chant of the litany of saints. It really sent chills up my spine and when you reach the beautiful grotto you feel something mystical happened here. There was an elevator to bring us back to the surface.

We walked the streets of the town, which was preparing for the feast of St Michael the next day. There were larger displays of lights. The town itself was fun with wonderful displays of bread, fish, and candy, even parakeets for sale.

As we turned down toward Peschichi we found the Foresta Umbra (dark forest) the second largest forest in Europe, after the Black Forest. The trees are very thick and the light is dim. We passed a deer farm where they are breeding the indigenous deer back from extinction.

Thursday they planned another excursion to some islands or to a grotto in an open boat. Neither of us are beach people so we opted instead to explore Peschichi. We caught the local bus for 1. The crusaders used to stop here on their way to the Holy land. A small castle overlooks the picturesque harbor of fishing boats. Inside the castle we found a lovely old church. Small alleys ran off the main road and steps led up and down to the houses. It was very picturesque. Outside the gate to the castle we ran into Pam and Jack Barbee who insisted that we go back and see the Purgatory Church. We had walked right by it, since it was indistinguishable from the other buildings in town. You had to look carefully to see the skull and crossbones carved into the lintel. Inside the church was small but the ceiling was beautifully painted. To one side we found an old wooden organ. The altar was not a crucifix but there was an effigy of a man with nails in him to one side.

We then walked some on the modern part of town but it was not as interesting as the old town. The cathedral was modern and unimposing.

We had wanted to stay and have lunch in town but the jitney bus only ran until 1:00 and we had no enthusiasm for walking back down. Back near the Maritalia we found an establishment labeled "Pizzeria". On entering we found behind the bar area a lovely restaurant with tablecloths and a glorious view of Peschichi above us. I had a delicious tortellini dish and we both enjoyed a change from the disappointing meals the hotel was giving us.

Another morning we walked down to the beach on a sunny day and saw many others enjoying the beach. We sat under a beach umbrella for a while but did not swim.

So the week came to an end and we took the same uncomfortable 6-hour ride back to Ostia and the Satellite Palace Hotel. During the refreshment stop I lay on a stone bench and did some stretching exercises which seemed to help.

That night, Dianne and Alan Coulstock from British Air took us to see how the metro worked. The stop was about two blocks away and the ride into Rome takes about 30 minutes. We went to the Coliseum, which was closed, but the area was all lit and the

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ruins were lovely.

Most interesting is that when you get married in Rome it seems to be the thing to come here and have pictures taken with the Coliseum in the background. There must have been a lot of wedding on this Saturday for we saw bride after bride arriving clad all in white.

We saw some of the stray cats that Elizabeth remembered from a previous visit. We also walked up the hill to look down into the forum but could not enter.

Back in Ostia, which is the lido of Rome, the Coulstocks suggested we go to the beach where there were many restaurants for dinner. We took the Metro one stop to Ostia Centro and then walked and walked and walked and walked. We could not find the beach. The area in which we walked was residential without a restaurant to be seen. Finally we did find one. It was pretty modest but the food was good. The proprietor found us a ride back to the Metro.

Sunday, October 3. We caught the Metro back to the Coliseum with the intention of catching the sightseeing bus. We got to the stop but then found we needed a ticket, so we went back into the Metro and bought two. Then we stood a long time waiting for it to come. On Sunday the street becomes a pedestrian area and although a few cars were allowed through, our bus was not. Thus we had to walk down to the Victoria Emmanuelle Square. A large crowd was waiting for the bus but we elbowed our way to the front. We still would not have gotten on, but the family ahead of us did not have tickets. All the seats were taken on the upper open deck so we rode downstairs for two stops where it was difficult to see what the taped guide was talking about. Finally someone came down from up above and we grabbed the seats. I told Elizabeth that we were not getting off until we had completed the two-hour tour. I didn't see how we would ever get on again, even though our ticket allowed us multiple stops. It was fun to see the city for it had been perhaps 30 years since I had been here before and Elizabeth also felt we should refresh our memory. However, it was tiring to sit so long in the sun.

At last it was time to debark. I waited until I was sure there was a restaurant and we got off. Some people jumped into our seats before they got cold! We went to a Pizzeria and the pizza was excellent. However, the place was really a carryout and had no restroom. Luckily a block away there were the 'golden arches'.

Then we had to get back to the Metro. I was sure all buses ended at Metro lines as in Atlanta so we jumped on the #64 bus. It took us past St Peters Square and we went to the end of the line. There was no Metro! However, there was a train station and two nice young women told us to get on it for one stop and then showed us when to debark.

Two changes later and we were back in Ostia. For dinner we went to the little restaurant around the corner from the hotel. It was not open when we arrived and we chatted with an Australian couple that was also waiting. The food was great, washed down with a half liter of Pinot Grigio.

Monday we went back into Rome to see St Peters and the Vatican Museum. We took the Metro to Termini and then got on the #64 bus. I have never been so jammed into a bus in my life! There were few seats and a handicapped man whose crutches made my small bit of floor space treacherous occupied the one nearest me. No one got off all the way although a few more crowded on.

When we got to the Vatican there was a great deal of security, similar to what you find at an airport. Crowds and crowds of people too. We got in one line by mistake. It was for the people who were having a private audience. At last we did get into the cathedral and walked around admiring the beautiful La Pietra and other sculptures. We decided the museum would be a mistake with all the crowds. We walked out through Bernini's colonnade and found a small snack restaurant, which had a restroom. I ordered a pistachio ice cream. The language was a barrier and when the ice cream came to my table there were two! I declined one. However, when we got ready to pay they wanted to charge me 7 euro. I argue to no avail and finally gave them the five I had in my hand but

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I was obviously ripped off. Elizabeth had a smaller cup for 2 1/2 euro and said I should have asked. Well yes, I should. We walked along for five or six blocks to the Metro and made our way back to Ostia Antica.

Two thousand or more years ago a settlement was made at the mouth of the Tiber and it grew to be a large city. With the decline of Rome the city was abandoned and the Tiber covered it with mud as it extended its mouth further out to sea. In the early 20th century, excavations were made and the city was rediscovered.

We stopped by the Metro station and had a sandwich. The friendly proprietor told us the ruins were closed on Monday and probably the castle was as well. We walked on into town and found a beautiful 12th century castle overlooking a quaint village. One house was almost completely covered with ivy. The castle was closed but we did stick our noses into the sweet old church. Then I walked a long lane to the ruins and looked through the fence. I could see the ruins of many houses, and feel the site must be almost as large as Pompeii. Alas, I could not see the mosaics.

We went back to the same restaurant the second night and again it was delicious. However, halfway through, I realized I had lost the key to the safe box at the hotel, which held our passports and my American money.

I must say my belongings were secure. It took a locksmith about an hour and one broken drill bit to get the darned thing open. I never realized how hard it is to get into one of these things. 150 euros later I am poorer but wiser. I will never be so careless with a safe key again.

Tuesday, October 5, 2004. And so we made our way to the airport and I was delighted to find I had been confirmed in business class. I had dreaded crossing the Atlantic in the back of the bus. Elizabeth, who is a pass rider, also was in business. There was a long wait in Atlanta for wheelchairs since many flights arrived at the same time and they were short of pushers. Eventually a man appeared and pushed both of us together through immigration and customs. A limo brought us back to Foxcroft.