

Back in the pre-internet days, I'd grab my Lonely Planet guidebook and take off. I never knew exactly where I was going and never had reservations. There were times I might have had to go to the next town or spend more money than budgeted on a room or make a new friend for a place to stay. Often, I'd meet other backpackers along my journey and join them to explore some cool destination. Such spontaneity and serendipity made traveling more adventurous. Then came the internet, trip advisor and travel forums. I would plan hours planning and plotting my trips based on pictures, reviews and my LP travel guide and I'd make my reservations before I left- often nonrefundable, leaving no room for that spontaneous change of plans. So, I decided this trip I'd take some middle ground: I would not make a reservation until the night before. I primarily use booking.com. It is a great app. I can plot my trip and then click the map and it tells me what hotels and rooms are available. I booked my first night at the airport before I left. I've somewhat plotted out a course that gets me from Milan to Rome in 6 days. One of the pictures I will post shows my planned route. If I were to drive straight through it would only take me 13 hours, so I think I am good to make it in six days. I've been to Rome, Florence, Naples and Tuscany. This trip I wanted to explore more of the country and rustic side of Italy. Mountains, woods, rivers, small cobble-stoned villages and off the beaten tourist track.

I arrived in Milan about 10am and it took about two hours to deplane, go through immigration, fetch my luggage and get my rental car. From Milan I drove about three hours to the northwestern corner of Italy to a little town called Doues near the French border in the Italian Alps. The guest house had a stunning view across the valley to several snow-capped peaks- and the room was only \$54! I believe this area is much more popular for skiing in the winter than for summer activities, but nevertheless, it has a vast network of trails and is perfect for Alpine hiking. This morning I drove about an hour to the entrance of the Parco National Paradisio. It's Italy's oldest national park and is a treasure. I stopped on the way to the park for lunch provisions- cheese, focaccia, prosciutto and a bottle of Nebbiolo. My hike was fantastic- the trail was well-groomed and marked and not too vertical. It was sunny and about 72 degrees but there was a cool breeze at 6000 ft. I only saw two other hikers during the three hours I was on the trail. I had my picnic lunch aside a fabulous roaring river. I then packed up and headed to the opposite side of the park near a town called Ceresole Reale on a lake. The trip took about two hours (and a few extra minutes of me double circling a few roundabouts) but I finally got here! Casa Galletto is a traditional style house with three guestrooms situated right on Lake Ceresole. It's a somewhat sleepy tourist town in the summer with not very many restaurants, but I managed to find something to eat at Hotel Blanchard's dining room- a very simple dinner of beef ravioli and a mixed salad. I'm trying to forgo the desserts to allow myself some extra pasta rations! Tomorrow I plan to do another hike up to a waterfall and then I'll be headed to the Parma region...guess what comes from there? Pictures in a separate post since they will come from my phone as I'm typing this on my computer.

Yesterday was the longest drive I've had thus far of three and a half hours. Street are very well marked and easy to navigate (with GPS of course). About a third of my time has been on local roads and the rest on the autostrada. There is no speed limit in the left lane. I'd say I averaged 90mph in the middle lane just to keep up with the flow of traffic. I did have some apprehension when I first started about the tolls. The first toll booth I came upon I didn't see where I was supposed to take the ticket. I thought maybe it was just an electronic tracking thing already in the rental car. There I sat- with the barrier not rising and no attendants in site. Crap, one car behind me, now two, there I sat like an idiot tourist. I looked in my rear and the guy behind me pointed to a very small indiscreet button to my left—I pushed it- out came a ticket...thank God and the barrier arm rose. Then when I exited- I had some apprehension again- no attendants at this booth either. I pulled in the lane that had the money icon- and was thankfully able to decipher where the ticket went in. I owed 7 euros. I know from experience that often US credit cards do not work in many machines in Europe because ours require a signature not a pin. Luckily, I had gone to the ATM at the airport to get a few euros out, I put in my 20, my change came out, the arm went up, whew—I mastered the Italian tolls!

My next stop was at Antico Corte Pallavicina and when I booked it two nights ago, I didn't realize it was owned and operated by Massimo Spigarolli, a quite famous with a Michelin-starred restaurant on the property. I booked Antico Corte because it was a cool looking rustic/regal estate and in the countryside in the Emilia Romagna province- which Lonely Planet guide had rated the top region to visit in Europe last year. There was a small museum on the property that gave the history of it and the Spigarolli family that now owns it. It's so cool to be able to walk the property and through the halls imagining all that had happened in that place over the centuries. Massimo's great-grandfather was a sharecropper on a farm owned by the famous composer Giuseppe Verdi. Massimo is quite famous for the revitalization of Cullatello, a cured ham, similar to, but much more complex than prosciutto. I had never heard of Cullatello before- but it was quite delicious. I am not sure if my taste buds would be able to differentiate it from prosciutto in a blind tasting- but cullatello is considered much more of a delicacy and about five times the price of prosciutto. After settling in with a glass of the homemade sparking wine, I headed off to find the maître de to see if I could score a table- at this very famous restaurant on a Friday night! At first, I got a staunch "sorry- we are fully booked" response delivered with a look of like "are you seriously asking me that question lady?". And then after a minute of me explaining that I didn't care what time, or where I sat, I slowly wore Fabrizio down- and he finally smiled, caved and said he'd set up an extra table outside on the patio. I will tell you about that dinner in my next post so as to not bore my non-foody friends!! The property was lovely- almost everything consumed there was produced on site-butter from the cow's milk, jam from the orchards, wine from the vineyards and vegetables from the garden.

My room was fit for a Duchess and very comfortable. Overall it was a lovely place and experience and even better that I got it at about half of the normal price I believe because it was a last-minute booking and probably a cancellation they had. This morning I got up early for yoga in the rose garden and then took a walk to the Po river shore. By 11am the temperature had already

risen to 86 degrees. I packed up and then headed to a very rural little town outside of Parma where I was told was one of the best producers of parmesan cheese. I followed my maps app directions only to arrive at a dead-end street -no cheese. I turned around and found a few older men hanging out drinking espresso outside a café. None spoke any English. I was finally able to communicate that I was looking for La Grande cheese factory. Yes, they knew the place, no, it wasn't very far. I tried to get them to show me on the map on my phone- but one man insisted he'd personally take me there if I followed him...on his bike lol! This man must have been 70 years old and it was probably already about 90 degrees, but he pedaled away about a mile and half to the street where I needed to turn. I thanked him and gave him my bottle of water- it was probably the most interesting thing that happened in town that day!

The cheese production place was cool. I learned how parmesan was made and got to see the storerooms and tasted about 5 different kinds- aged from a minimum of one year to four. There is nothing better than a good chunk of quality parma!

From the La Grande I headed another hour in the car to my current location of Brisighella. It's one of the most well restored medieval villages in Italy outside of those in Tuscany. I found my guesthouse and popped into a trattoria for a salad and a drink- it was too hot for wine and I wanted something cold- a gin and tonic seemed in order. I looked up at the bar to choose my gin and what do I see? A bottle of Bootlegger! To those that don't know, this is a local Sullivan County gin- on a shelf, in a little trattoria, in a little medieval town, in the middle of Italy! Cool.

Massimo and Me.

I have always been a little bit of a foody. While I enjoy and am contented with the simple foods- I find it interesting how the same limited ingredients we have on this planet can be interpreted and presented in so many ways, but mainly, I just really like good food well presented. Michelin stars are extremely hard to earn- and often considered the highest culinary honor for a restaurant.

Country #85! One of the things I love about travel- aside from the obvious fun, is the education. On my way from Brisighella to the coast, I learned that (@ 24square miles)! I decided to take the 15-minute detour to the historic center and rode the tram to the castle perched high upon the hill and toiled around the main square. The country is perched high upon a hill and has amazing views of the valleys below.

From San Marino I headed to Porto Recanati. The Adriatic east coast of Italy is relatively flat unlike the dramatic cliff-side banks of the west, Mediterranean coast. The little beach town I went to had a couple of campground across the street from the beach and no high-rises or glitzy clubs and I didn't see or hear one American tourist while there. My little three-story hotel was a steal at \$150 a night and right on the beach. I had my second-best meal while there at a great spot on

the shore. The owner had closed off the patio because she thought it was going to thunderstorm- but she let me keep the little table outside the bar where I was sipping my first a gin martini in Italy having decided to take a break from wine. It doesn't seem like many Italian restaurants have bars in them or people drinking the pre-dinner cocktail. It was so nice at my little table that I decided I would eat there. I ordered a pasta dish with a roasted tomato sauce and some kind of shrimp- that had little claws-it was fabulous- as was the red wine that the chef insisted I drink with it. He came out after and chatted me up a little bit- I think he just wanted to practice his English. I told him it was my favorite pasta dish I had in Italy thus far. I showed him the picture of me and Massimo who he instantly recognized and then I told him his dish was better which made him smile with pride. In truth, I'd say it was probably a tie- but the dishes were so different it's really difficult to rank them. I had a relaxing day at the beach today swimming and reading my new book by Nobel prize winner Orhan Pamuk. I've learned that I don't have to always be doing some adventurous or touristy thing- just "being" in a place is enough of an experience.

So, overall, I'd say a great trip. The dollar is quite strong against the Euro right now, so a very affordable time to go to Europe. I'd say my favorite part of the trip were the beautiful mountains in the north. I did have some disappointment that I didn't really see more Sicilian Godfather like scenes of old cobble-stone villages where old men lingered in outdoor piazzas drinking espressos and chubby Italian grandmothers walked home with brown-wrapped packages from the local butcher. Despite the romantic notions of the "old country" for the most part Italy is quite the modern and cosmopolitan society....I think maybe what I was hoping to see is really not just a place, but rather a place in time. Italy however, is still quite enchanting. You can't drive more than a half an hour through the countryside without spotting the ruins of some castle on a hilltop, or terraced vineyards or fields of sunflowers growing so tall and in rows so straight they look like armies standing at attention. And of course, there is the food, and the wine and the music, the art and yes, the shoes! Out of all the cultures and countries on this spinning ball in the middle of space, I think Italy has given us some of the most exquisite gifts and I'm happy I got to share some of them!