



Flying Alitalia with i-Italy. My Tuscan Roundabout

Renata Conte (September 14, 2010)



Two years ago I won the i-Italy contest for two roundtrip Alitalia tickets. My husband, my daughter, and I headed to Tuscany where my son was studying. And, we must say, it wasn't anything like we expected!

The last time I was in Italy was almost two years ago. My son was studying abroad in Siena, and I had serendipitously won i-italy's essay contest and was presented with two round trip [Alitalia](#) [2] tickets, which expired after a year. I could not resist this fortunate opportunity. My husband, daughter and I decided to think outside the box and spend Thanksgiving week in the rolling hills of Tuscany visiting my son and the local vineyards instead of shopping like lunatics and cooking an unnecessary amount of food for the holiday here in New York. This was actually the first time I would be in Italy without that (sometimes oppressive) summer sun shining down on me. My family is native to the Emilia Romagna region and I had only passed through Tuscany by car on occasion.

This was like a virgin adventure for us.....a new season and a new region. My son was living with a host "mother" outside Siena's historic center, so we decided to pick a random hotel near the address he gave us. Now, after numerous trips to my Italy I can safely say that stars on an Italian hotel are



not equivalent to stars on an American hotel. We knew that going in, and we are good sports. The place was very generic, but we were there to be with my son and to explore the famous Tuscany and the Chianti region. It had a nice enough staff, who could not hide their inquisitiveness when we checked in that first day. The host "mom" had dropped my son off in the parking lot of the hotel in the middle of a downpour. He must have been hooked up with the only Italian middle aged woman who could not "fare da mamma" for him. When we found him in the lobby he was soaked and starving. (The Mom made him eggs for dinner that night! sometimes for a special treat she'd leave him a few pieces of head cheese to eat for dinner!) We hugged and kissed and hugged and kissed, and then answered all the front desk clerk's amusing questions. Yep, American, yep, it is Thanksgiving week, yep, it's cold and wet out there, no, we don't know anyone in this particular area nor anywhere in Siena for that matter, but we're together now and it's all good.

My son explained to us that it had been raining for quite some time, and that it was so damp and cold he had to change socks 3 times a day. He had a few days off from class so we made plans to see some sights in Siena with our now well versed son. He had sights to show us and his favorite restaurant for us to try. He wanted to introduce us to his new friends and show his sister where he took classes. Whatever unpleasantries he endured at his host home, he knew it was not typical of Italy nor the warm Italians with whom he had already formed lasting relationships. He was feeling a love for Italy that I never thought possible in him. This was truly a new adventure for us all.

Now, my husband is an adventurer, he had no problem driving from Amalfi to Bologna a few years before, show him where someplace is once, and he'll find 5 different ways to get there off the top of his head. Driving is his forté. Thus we rented a car for our Tuscan adventure. This, it turns out was our downfall. We got lost every day, 5 times a day, and that was just venturing from the hotel to the historic center of town! If I never see another roundabout, it would be too soon. Ugh! We never met my son in town on time; he couldn't believe we'd gotten lost yet again attempting the 2-3 mile trip. To this day I cannot say what the mental block was. It might have been the constant rain that made things look different from day to day, or just the unfamiliar lay of the land, I don't know. One would think it would become more familiar after so many attempts to reach the same destination. My husband would start out saying "ok, I know what I did wrong last time" and then the madness of the EIGHT MILLION SIGN roundabouts would overcome us and we'd be lost again!

After a particularly frustrating 4 hour, rain soaked, skidding on hills return trip from San Gimignano back to the hotel (we subsequently realized we had been heading to Rome instead of Siena on the Autostrada) we decided to take a break from Tuscany and head to familiar territory, our Emilia Romagna. I called the cousins, assured them we remembered how to get there, we even "Google mapped" it. Everything was going fine. We recognized the shopping center off the autostrada, and my husband pulled off to stop in the Carfour so we could arrive bearing gifts. This, as it turned out was our downfall...again. I was so happy, parking the car going into the store just like a local, my dream come true. Alas, it started raining while we were in the store, the woman at the perfume counter yelled at me when I tested a perfume, and we couldn't find the car when we came out. I had to actually stop a cop and ask him to help us find the car. I even asked if they steal cars often around here, he patiently replied that "they" did not. We felt like such idiots, but at least we entertained the police department with a story to share at their evening meal. Monteveglio was relatively easy enough to find, the little hilltop town of Oliveto.....not so much. We drove around in circles for 2 hours, damn roundabouts again! I called my cousin (I speak passable Italian, they speak NO English) tried to explain where we were, she sent Mauro down the hill into Monteveglio to escort us back to the house. The end result: a 2 hour trip equals 5 hours in the language of rain and roundabouts and new adventure.

It's funny, I always feel such a longing to be in Italy, but I never feel Italian when I'm there. All these obstacles in just the one week made us feel like we had to work too hard for our Italian-ness. Maybe it was just too much of a new adventure for us. Only the sight of the olive trees outside our hotel window could stop our shivering from the cold, wet confusion we experienced in that car. I guess I should just stick to the summer and all the usual tourist attractions, but that would never get me any closer to picking the right turn off the roundabout, would it? And that, amici miei will always be my ultimate dream.



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