

An American in Europe: Reflections on Travel and Culture

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by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is adapted from daily journals written during the course of a six-week backpacking trip through Western Europe. It consists of four essays that reflect on and interrogate both what it means to be a tourist and how one experiences and relates to foreign cultures. Each of the essays is set in a specific country and explores specific aspects of these questions.

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: England.....	11
Chapter Two: Italy.....	24
Chapter Three: Germany.....	38
Chapter Four: Hungary.....	47
References.....	52

Introduction

What am I doing here?

-Arthur Rimbaud writing home from Ethiopia

The Itinerary

This project is both a response to and a reflection on a six-week backpacking trip through Western Europe undertaken by myself and two companions in the summer of 2008. Our own personal version of the Grand Tour began in London at the infamous Tower and from there moved in rapid succession through Ireland, Germany, Hungary, Austria, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands before finally ending in Paris with an open air screening of *Ninotchka* in Parc de la Villette in the city's nineteenth arrondissement. In visiting fifteen cities in approximately forty-two days, it was impossible for us to linger for too long in any one place, especially since travel between and around cities consumed a significant amount of our already limited time. Our shortest stay was in Berlin, where we had one full day in which to explore a battleground of the Cold War, and our longest was in Barcelona, where we spent a leisurely four days sleeping in and visiting the museums. This division of time reflected the fact that the main planner of our trip had been studying Spanish for nine years and so particularly wanted to visit Spain and is fairly representative of our attempt to identify the most important places to visit on a continent full of such places.

The Cast of Characters

Beside myself, the backpacking party consisted of my older sister, Ashley, and our friend Jared, both of whom had just graduated from Miami University and had their first real, adult jobs waiting for them back in the U.S. They functioned as the staid, serious chaperones for myself, the carefree, irresponsible college student. Ashley has inherited from our mother a tendency to over plan and was therefore the person who

wrote our original itinerary and derived our transportation route. In some manner, the intricacies of which were known only to herself, she selected the cities we were to visit. After she has polished and perfected her plan, she was obliged to guard it against the criticisms and adjustments Jared and I began to heap on it. These defensive efforts did not meet with much success, but she did manage to salvage a four-day stay in Barcelona in which to practice her Spanish. With some help from myself, she compiled the lists of churches, museums, parks, and other tourist attractions and sites of interest that occupied most of our time.

Jared did not contribute in any significant way to the planning of the trip, but did prove useful for directions once it got underway. He held a newly acquired B.A. in Geography and seemed perfectly content to decipher the free maps we obtained from our hostels but slightly less so to ask for directions when these maps failed to guide us to our intended destination. As the serious student of geography that he is, Jared was often frustrated by tourist maps. One hot day in Florence, we found ourselves wandering through the city streets in what seemed an increasingly futile attempt to locate the Accademia with the doubtful aid of a map without a scale which helpfully labeled the Accademia by means of a large white box, which box, rather less helpfully, obscured all of the surrounding streets leading to the museum.

Beyond the navigation, we could always count on Jared for a bit of comic relief. I can perhaps quickly sum him up by noting here that he has a very ironic, deadpan sense of humor but had to look up the meaning of the word deadpan when he first heard me use it in a sentence. The three of us were sitting on a bench on the side of a wide, dusty street

in Berlin one afternoon, eating bratwurst we had bought at a nearby stand while resting our feet a little before the start of a two hour walking tour, when Jared suddenly said:

“It probably shouldn’t surprise me, but I didn’t expect to see so many Asian tourists.”

Ashley and I stared at him, then cast amused and disbelieving glances at each other. I was not immediately sure of whether he was being serious.

“I mean,” he persevered through the silence, “now that I’m here and everything and see them, it doesn’t seem strange. But I never thought about it before.”

After a bit more rambling in this vein, he lapsed into silence. After a few seconds, I gave in to the temptation to ask:

“Where did you think Asian tourists went?”

“I never really thought about it,” he said. “I knew people from all over go to New York City and I knew Americans go to Europe and Asia and everywhere, but I never really thought about where people from other countries go when they don’t come to the U.S. It’s just one of those things you never think about and then you say, ‘Oh, that makes sense.’”

I was the final member of our party. As the recipient of a research grant that partially funded my own travel expenses, I was outfitted with a spiral notebook in which to record all of my acute and penetrating observations on European culture. Instead of a reporter-like, small notebook, I opted for a normal, school-sized notebook in order to avoid losing my justification for the large deposit recently transferred to my bank account. My copious notes included such irrelevant details as my delight in the Walk/Don’t Walk signs in what used to be East Berlin in which the little man is wearing

a flat-topped hat with a wide brim. When he is red, he stretches his arms out like a crossing guard. When he is green, he appears to be striding forward purposefully. Beyond this, the notebook is full of my complaints about the hostels, the heat, and my own increasing exhaustion as weeks of inadequate sleep and lack of privacy began to sap me of what little energy I possess and send my tolerance level for other human beings, never very high, into a downward spiral.

The Mechanics of Travel

By the time I returned to the U.S., all I wanted to do was lock myself in my bedroom, there to sleep for a full twenty-four hours. Cesare Pavese once remarked that: “traveling is a brutality” which keeps you “constantly off balance (Patterson).” Short trips are manageable by all but those unswervingly committed to their routines, but long trips must wear on even the most cheerful and easy going. After a six week, low budget trip, I am entirely in sympathy with Paul Theroux’s opinion that: “Travel is glamorous only in retrospect (Patterson).” The more you travel, the more obsessed you become with such mundane details as how to keep your clothes properly clean and the more your dreams begin to take the shape of a hotel room with cable and air conditioning. After you have returned to your comfortable home, you can look back on your experiences and extract some sort of meaning out of them. In the moment, however, you are too busy locating a decent restaurant for a much a needed lunch to engage in such a frivolous exercise.

Bill Bryson, the author of several travel books, wrote about “what an odd thing tourism is.” You do not fully realize the truth of this, I think, until you have been a tourist

for more than a week or so at a time. As Bryson says, “you fly off to a strange land, eagerly abandoning all the comforts of home, and then expend vast quantities of time and money in a largely futile attempt to recapture the comforts that you wouldn't have lost if you hadn't left home in the first place (Bryson).” You suddenly have to expend a significant amount of time and effort to ensure access to such necessities as food, Internet access, laundry facilities, and a decent bed for the night. You no longer have a daily routine with which to ground yourself and therefore may easily end up aimlessly wandering a grocery store in Budapest searching for something cheap to make for lunch, only to finally end up with spaghetti and tomato sauce. Or you might sit for an hour in a restaurant in that same city waiting for the proprietor of an establishment called *A Lonely on the Planet Hostel* and being repeatedly offered drinks at ten o'clock in the morning by a waiter who assures you that, “the man is coming,” while visions of stabbings and robberies dance through your head as you entertain steadily increasing doubts about the reliability of hostelworld.com. Or you might find yourself in Paris, arrested in your climb up the steps to the Sacré Coeur by one of the men who try to sell bits of colored strings as rings, who has mistaken the annoyed “back off” spoken by one member of your party for “fuck off.”

If you have large amounts of money, you can probably avoid many of the inconveniences of travel - although I suspect that no amount of money will exempt you from losing your luggage - but a backpacker has no protection from the minor and major annoyances of a long trip. Instead of a clean hotel with crisp, clean sheets and a private bathroom you can be sure is cleaned everyday, you stay in a room with fifteen beds with a door that is always unlocked and use bathrooms whose floors always seem to be wet

from someone else's shower. On your arrival in a new city, you must walk from the train station to your hostel while weighed down by your backpack. I found this particularly annoying. I was the least fit of our group, but carried the heaviest backpack, under the weight of which I walked either in a hunchbacked plod or a drunken weave. Bearing all of this in mind, I feel justified in declaring that I do not like to travel and would not if it were not necessary to do so in order to see the chateaux of France and Venice's Grand Canal.

Travel vs. Tourism

Travel is judged by just about everyone who is an authority on the matter - and by many who are not - to be an educational, mind broadening, and intellectually stimulating exercise practically designed by nature to make good, global citizens of us all. This is some truth to this, but I think the type of travel to which this really applies is an extended stay in a foreign country, the kind of stay that gives you a chance to experience a different culture in the course of your normal, everyday activities. The sort of trip in which you attempt to squeeze as many cities as possible into a very limited space of time provides a somewhat different sort of education. The latter tends to drift irresistibly toward tourism and away from the consciousness altering Travel everyone touts. It often teaches you more about the mechanics of travel itself than about foreign cultures.

In his novel, *Dodsworth*, Sinclair Lewis wrote that:

He who has seen one cathedral ten times has seen something; he who has seen ten cathedrals once has seen but little; and he who has spent half an hour in each of a hundred cathedrals has seen nothing at all. Four hundred pictures all on a wall are four hundred times less interesting than one picture; and no one knows a café till he has gone there often enough to know the names of the waiters. (Lewis 216)

Anyone who has visited a large art museum can easily see the truth in this. There is nothing much to be gained by staring at hundreds of paintings for a few seconds each, even if you do take the time to read the accompanying informational plaques.

Immediately before the backpacking trip, I studied for a semester at Royal Holloway, one of the colleges in the University of London. I lived for five months in Egham, a small town located a short forty-minute train ride from London's Waterloo Station. Although I hardly became an expert on English culture, I did have the chance to absorb some of that culture merely by going on with the business of living. I shopped on the local High Street, watched large amounts of British television while putting off my schoolwork, and lived and attended classes with British students. I ate in the local pubs when I had the money and took the train to London with the commuters. In contrast, most of my time during the backpacking trip was necessarily spent at tourist attractions, where, unsurprisingly, most of the people in the immediate area were tourists. This is obviously not the best way in which to learn about a foreign culture, if only because this probably requires you to interact with the natives over a more sustained, substantive conversation than just asking for an entrance ticket or a Coke. But most of us do not have the resources to make an extended stay in Paris, so for the few days we have there we can, I think, be excused for wanting to see the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower. Going sightseeing is not synonymous with wasting your time.

Format

Sinclair Lewis wrote in *Dodsworth* that:

Since the days of Alexander the Great there has been a fashionable belief that travel is agreeable and highly educative. Actually, it is one of the

most arduous yet boring of all pastimes and, except in the case of a few experts who go globetrotting for special purposes, it merely provides the victim with more topics about which to show ignorance. (Lewis 216)

Spending a few days in Amsterdam visiting Anne Frank's house and walking along the city's canals does not give me anything near a complete picture of Dutch culture. What it does give me is the right to say: "I have been inside Anne Frank's house." For some reason, people want to acquire this right. This is related to that strange compulsion people have to say: "At least now you can say you've been there" when you mention any famous place or event. But no one really cares whether I have been to Anne Frank's house unless I can relate some interesting or useful information about it, and perhaps not even then. According to Vita Sackville-West: "Travel is the most private of pleasures. There is no greater bore than the travel bore. We do not in the least want to hear what he has seen in Hong Kong (Macmillan 577)." After reading a good amount of travel writing, I am inclined to agree, at least in the case of people who insist on giving a day-by-day account of their experiences. I have therefore tried to avoid writing a travelogue.

The original inspiration for this project was *Paris to the Moon*, Adam Gopnik's book of essays about his experiences in France. In one of these essays, entitled "The Rules of the Sport," Gopnik shares the troubles encountered in his attempt to join an American style gym in Paris. When he discovers a "New York style" gym called the Régiment Rouge will soon be opening, he goes to join and finds that, within the gym's several levels of membership, the most expensive and highest level of membership will only allow him to visit the gym once a week, as opposed to the three to four times a week he wishes to visit. The gym has to invent a special membership to accommodate him. After securing his membership, Gopnik returns to make use of the gym and finds he is

not allowed to use the equipment before he speaks with a *professeur*. But this is only an oral interview; he does not yet receive an actual demonstration of the machines. That will come later. From this experience, Gopnik proceeds to argue that the French do not buy into sports or exercise the way Americans do. You do not hear the equivalent of: “How about those Knicks?” in France. Instead, the conversational vacuum is filled with complaining about the bureaucracy and the French get their exercise in attempting to deal with the bureaucracy, a bureaucracy one can see in the organization of the gym.

Inspired by Gopnik’s interesting and entertaining essays, I decided to follow his example. However, as I began to plan out my own illuminating and carefully observed essays, I realized I could not easily map the Gopnik model onto my own experiences. Gopnik lived in France with his family for several years. He had firsthand experience of the culture. In order to imitate him, I would have to read up on the culture and traditions of the countries I visited and make conclusions based on secondhand information where he was able to rely on first hand information. Therefore, the first of the four essays, which is set in England, is the only one that really attempts to approximate this model. The second essay, set in Italy, is about feeling ambivalent, uncomfortable, and off balance in a foreign country. The third and fourth essays, set in Germany and Hungary, are more about tourism than the culture of either country.

Chapter One: England

*When people say England, they sometimes mean Great Britain,
sometimes the United Kingdom, sometimes the British Isles - but never England.*

-George Mikes

Alexander Woollcott once observed that the English “have an extraordinary ability for flying into a great calm.” It is very English to form a calm, orderly line. As George Mikes said: “An Englishman, even if he is alone, forms an orderly queue of one (Macmillan 188).” During my five-month stay in England, it was this aspect of English culture that made me feel most at home - not because it reminded me of the United States, but because it dovetailed neatly with my own personality in a way American culture does not. There are, of course, plenty of other things to like about the English and, indeed, the British as a whole. Their food may be much maligned - and often for good reason - but the British have a seemingly endless variety of delicious cakes and pies which do not seem to be available anywhere else. One of the most popular brands, called Mr. Kipling, is sold under the apt, very British, and nearly perfect slogan “exceedingly good cakes.” British television offers *Doctor Who*, a science fiction show that appears to have been running since television was invented, as well as excellent late night, restrained by rules much more lax than those of the FCC, in the form of Jonathan Ross and Graham Norton. In London, helpful signs painted on street corners advise you in which direction to look to avoid being flattened by oncoming traffic. The British have done away with the phrase, “You’re welcome” in favor of, “Cheers,” which sounds much friendlier. No matter how hard you try, you cannot say, “Cheers” as flatly or as unemotionally as you can say, “You’re welcome.”

But the British are human, and therefore flawed. The BBC, spurred by statistics showing the UK has the highest rate of teen pregnancy in Europe, produces a few too many documentaries on the subject. The British say torch when they mean flashlight and ask: “All right?” when they mean: “How are you?” The first few times I was asked if I

was all right, I answered a bit defensively, wondering if I looked ill or upset, until I realized the question does not, as it does in the U.S., imply that the person at whom the question is directed is looking less than her best. Finally, as a friendly warning to anyone considering a trip of his own to the UK, it is always important to exercise caution in pubs when ordering anything containing sausage because the menus do not always make it properly clear that you are ordering blood sausage – which is, unfortunately, just what it sounds like – rather than regular sausage.

Americans have a tendency to conflate the terms “English” and “British” and a bad habit of saying England when they really mean the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom is made up of four nations: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. There are significant differences among these four, and not just in regard to accents. They do not function in the same way states do in the U.S. In fact, the English had a hard fight to gain control over the other parts of what is today the UK. Only recently have they begun to devolve a bit of power back to the Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish by way of giving them their own parliaments invested with significant authority over issues such as healthcare.

In Scotland, in particular, I encountered a surprising amount of anti-English sentiment. If the devolution policy was intended to suppress Scottish nationalism, it certainly seems to have had the opposite effect. According to some, the divide between England and Scotland has only widened, to the extent that they now “seem like entirely different countries” (Lyall). The Scottish National Party, which advocates Scottish independence, is currently the largest party in the Scottish parliament, holding forty-seven out of a hundred and twenty nine seats. On my first tour of the Scottish Highlands,

my gregarious, kilted Scottish guide denounced Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as "anti-Scottish propaganda," refused to play music by any but Scottish artists, and shared stories of massacres by the English of innocent Scots as well as battles fought between English and Scottish soldiers, most of which the Scots lost, but in all of which they fought bravely until the bitter end. On my second tour of the Scottish Highlands, my restrained English guide told many of the same stories while carefully avoiding making the Scots sound like the temporarily vanquished heroes and the English the imperialistic villains.

So what holds the disparate elements of the United Kingdom together? The answer appears to be the pubs. Wherever you are on the islands of Great Britain and Ireland, you can be sure you are never far from one of these pleasant establishments. In England, for example, three-quarters of adults patronize pubs and over a third do so at least once a week (Fox 88). Even to a foreigner, it is immediately obvious that pubs, which are frequented by members of all social classes and age groups, are one of the primary social spaces. I do not drink, and am therefore not in the habit of visiting bars in the United States, but I often ate in pubs while in England because they are, on the whole, very comfortable and welcoming, particularly when it is cold and rainy outside (i.e. almost always). If you are wandering the streets of London around lunchtime, you can easily distinguish which establishments are the pubs by keeping an eye out for two key indicators: a sign with an odd name, such as *The Monkey's Forehead*, and, if the city happens to be enjoying a day of decent weather, a small crowd of people with beers in hand blocking the sidewalk. Pubs can be found in every corner of the British Isles, but in England they have the distinction of being one of the few places in which, with the

facilitation of alcohol, it is socially acceptable to start a conversation with a complete stranger.

If you know anything about England, you have probably heard of the ever-present English rain and the famous English reserve. In her book *Watching the English*, Kate Fox says of English social interaction that “the rules of privacy and reserve override those of sociability” and therefore “talking to strangers is never compulsory” (Fox 26). This is a social rule after my own heart. I am always slightly annoyed by the type of person who feels it necessary to strike up a conversation with a stranger while standing in line because he did not have the forethought to bring a book, ipod, or acquaintance with which to occupy himself. In the United States, you are obliged by the demands of politeness to make uncomfortable small talk with this sort of person. In England, you are rarely forced into this situation.

It is not that the English are rude. Who but the English would paint those helpful warnings on street corners? Rather, Fox says the English display “negative politeness,” which is “conceived by other people’s need not to be intruded or imposed upon.” This is in opposition to “positive politeness,” which involves a “need for inclusion and social approval” (Fox 408). So, for example, an Englishman will almost certainly apologize if you bump into him, but will not share his life story with you as you queue for theater tickets. In a useful aid for those considering a trip to England, Fox offers a list of “key phrases” necessary to properly engage in social interaction with strangers. These phrases include: “sorry,” “please,” “thank-you/cheers,” “I’m afraid that...,” “I’m sorry, but...,” “would you mind...,” “could you possibly...,” “excuse me, I’m terribly sorry but you seem to be standing on my foot,” and “with all due respect, the right honourable

gentleman is being a bit economical with the truth” (Fox 408). It may be difficult to believe that a society that once controlled an empire on which the sun never set would use some of these phrases, but they do.

According to my own observations, the rules of negative politeness are applicable to the English when they are sober, but rather less so after they have had a few pints. During my stay in England, I came across a rather large number of stories in the tabloids, and sometimes even in reputable newspapers, about English holidaymakers traveling abroad, drinking to excess, and ending up either in jail or in hospital. *The Guardian* newspaper, reporting in typically English fashion on the rise of British arrests abroad, commented that “the British tendency toward inebriation appears to have played its part [in the arrests], with the [Foreign Office] attributing many of the arrests to ‘behavior caused by excessive drinking’” (Jones). If the English can be a bit straitlaced when they are sober, they seem to lose a good number of their inhibitions after a few drinks, which gives rise to the so-called British “hooliganism.” British football hooligans are particularly famous across Europe. The Scots, Irish, and Welsh contribute to this reputation, but the English know how to do their part.

While Ashley, Jared, and I were in Budapest, we stayed in an apartment with two young men named Dominic and Chris, both university students from Plymouth, England. Our party was feeling fairly miserable as a result of the one hundred degree heat and the completely unfamiliar and unpronounceable language, but their troubles were compounded by the fact that they had wandered the length and breadth of the city, hopping on and off trams, without finding one decent pub amidst all of the strip clubs. In James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom muses that a “good puzzle would be [to] cross

Dublin without passing a pub (Joyce 58).” Unfortunately, in Budapest the word “pub” could be replaced with “strip club” and the resulting puzzle would be just as challenging. Thus the English students seemed to be experiencing culture shock. Denied a place to drink, they had alcohol on the brain, with the result that they gave the impression that drinking is the English national pastime in much the same way baseball is the national pastime of the United States. Dominic helpfully gave us a short history lesson on the close relationship between the English and alcohol.

“Gin was once so cheap,” he told us, “that everyone just sat around all day drinking gin and nobody did any work.”

This was, I think, a reference to the “gin craze” of the eighteenth century, when gin and other distilled spirits suddenly became cheap enough for the poor to afford. In 1743, the average adult in England drank 2.2 gallons of distilled spirits a year, prompting parliament to pass a series of eight acts limiting the sale of gin (Warner 2-5). The government was certainly worried enough about the consumption of alcohol to take action, but I am not sure this was because the economy had ground to a standstill, as Dominic claimed.

“You hear about the binge drinking problem with uni students now, but it’s been a problem for a long time,” Dominic continued. “And the parents are drinking too much too – too much wine with dinner. My parents do.”

Binge drinking among college students is certainly a frequent topic of discussion in the United States as well as in England, but our two countries seem to approach this problem in very different ways. Before my freshman year at Miami University, I had to complete an online course called Alcohol Edu, which, while not unduly pedantic, was

clearly designed to discourage excessive drinking. When I went to study at Royal Holloway, I found that there were actually two pubs on campus,

George Orwell might have said that the English are “inveterate gamblers, drink as much beer as their wages will permit, are devoted to bawdy jokes and use probably the foulest language in the world,” but he also believed that the “gentleness of the English civilization is perhaps its most marked characteristic” (Fox 149). The explanation for these apparently conflicting descriptions seems to be that the English are very well behaved unless they have been drinking. Pubs are *the* place to go to observe the English wild side, such as it is. If, however, you want to observe the English at their calm and orderly best, you can do no better than to use English public transportation. The train is similar to the pub in that it forces a group of strangers to share a confined space, but the rules which govern social interaction are very different. On the London Underground, signs on every escalator remind people to stand on the right in order that people who are in a particular hurry can pass on the left. Even at busy stations like Waterloo, everyone queues for the right side of the escalator to leave the left side free. The Underground trains are silent, but this is not unusual. Every subway system I have ever ridden on has been near silent. It is the regular, above ground trains that show off the famous English reserve.

For an American used to being stuck in a small college town due to lack of both a car and access to public transportation, English trains are the height of convenience. The optimal time to ride one of these trains into London is early in the morning, around 7:00, when the commuters are making their way to work. Every seat is occupied. People are standing shoulder to shoulder in the aisles. But nobody speaks. People are dozing off,

staring into space, or reading the *The Metro*, the free newspaper available at the stations, but despite the hundreds of people crammed onto the train, there is not a single human voice to be heard beyond the recorded female one announcing the stops. At first, I found this silence a bit unnerving. Where, I wondered, is the low hum of voices you hear whenever you are in a crowd? I once observed a woman traveling with a baby who was making the gurgling noises you expect of babies, thereby creating a low level of noise in an otherwise silent train car. The woman, distressed, was furtively hushing the child every few seconds. Of course, no one was actually looking at her in disapproval. To do so would be to risk eye contact, which is simply not done on an English train. During my first few weeks in England, I was uncomfortably aware that I was the only person looking around the train car. It seemed natural to me to familiarize myself with my surroundings when I first boarded, but everyone else was avoiding any possibility of making eye contact with anyone else. In my experience, people usually know when they are being looked at and will glance in the direction of the person doing the looking. Not so on the English train. It is almost impossible to make eye contact with anyone. Even when the trains are full, the English can somehow find the few empty seats without looking at anyone directly. After a period of adjustment, I decided I liked this particular English custom. The English understand privacy in a way Americans do not. Public space in England is not necessarily social space.

On the night Ashley and Jared arrived in London, we caught the 10:39 train from Waterloo Station to Egham. Both Ashley and Jared were tired and jet-lagged and, I think, a bit annoyed that they had to travel forty minutes to get to my university flat, but I assured them the train was always quiet. After walking about halfway up the platform,

we hopped onto one of the train cars. At first, all seemed normal. There were only a few other people in the car, all of whom were as silent as usual. A few minutes later, however, a hen party – known as a bachelorette party in the U.S. - composed of around ten women boarded the train, shouting and laughing in a manner that was very much out of place and obviously the result of copious amounts of alcohol.

“Forfeit!” a few of the women yelled to one of the others. “You have to do it!”

The woman thus addressed resisted these appeals, provoking more laughter and shouts.

One of the women suspended her cajoling to look around the car. Her eyes finally stopped on Jared, probably because the three of us, being American, were looking over at the source of all the noise while everyone else was studiously avoiding eye contact.

“Could you stand up?” the woman asked Jared. She had an Irish accent. “She has to sing to you.”

A few of the other women joined in this request and finally succeeded in convincing the woman who had to pay the forfeit to sing a few unintelligible bars to Jared. A few minutes later, as the train pulled out of the station, another woman with a forfeit had to blow kisses to a young Chinese man who was part of a large group of tourists who had boarded a few seconds earlier. After this, although the noise level remained high, the hen party appeared to have no further desire to speak to any of the other passengers.

Trying to salvage a bit of my supposed expertise on the English, I quietly told Ashley and Jared that this situation was highly unusual. But the Chinese tourists were bent on completely destroying my credibility. They somehow picked up on the fact that

the women were celebrating an impending wedding. As a friendly cross-cultural gesture, one of them, introducing herself as Debbie, approached the party and offered to sing a traditional Chinese song for the bride-to-be. The bride-to-be seemed a bit embarrassed and would not stand up, but the Irish woman accepted enthusiastically. Debbie and two other women therefore sang Mo Li Hua, which in English means Jasmine Flowers.

Debbie later translated the lyrics into English for me:

What a beautiful jasmine flower.
 I'm so eager to pick it,
 But I'm afraid of being scolded by the gardener.
 What a beautiful jasmine flower,
 White as snow.
 I'm so eager to pick it,
 But afraid it won't come out next spring.

This is one of the most popular Chinese folk songs, and the three women took care to sing it properly and seriously. After the applause, in which we three Americans participated, had died down, the Irish woman who had earlier spoken to Jared decided the hen party had to reciprocate, and so led her companions in an off-key rendition of “Blanket on the Ground” that discarded most of the verses in favor of a few lines in the chorus:

Just because we're married
 Don't mean we can't sleep around
 So let's walk out by the moonlight
 And lay the blanket on the ground

When this song petered out, one of the men in the Chinese group offered to sing another traditional love song called “The Girl in Daban City,” after which it was decided again by the Irish woman that the hen party must return the favor. She therefore launched into “Tie a Yellow Ribbon ‘Round the Old Oak Tree.” At some point during these performances, the Chinese group asked if they could take a few pictures and there was much activity as the Chinese tourists took pictures of the hen party, the hen party took pictures of the tourists, and various pictures were taken of some mixture of the two.

This episode was entertaining, but I was somewhat annoyed that the sacred silence of the train had been violated. If I had been on my own, I probably would have avoided any active involvement in this social faux pas, but Ashley and Jared wanted to join in and were soon chatting with the Chinese tourists. Perhaps seeing this, the Irish woman ventured over to sit next to our party. She introduced herself as Maria and apologized for all of the noise, explaining, “We only do this once every few years.” When she saw that we were inclined to talk, she went on to tell us she was from Dublin. On moving to England, she said, she had been terrified by English behavior on trains. She put her knees together, folded her hands on her lap, sat up straight, and adopted a blank expression to demonstrate what was so frightening about English public transport. Given that Maria was from Dublin, it was not surprising that she was the most vocal member of the party and the only one to attempt to enter into any sustained conversation with the Chinese tourists and ourselves. Dublin was the friendliest city we visited. We just had to look slightly confused for some passerby to stop and ask if we needed directions. That sort of thing never happened in England. In keeping with this, the

English members of the hen party, despite being thoroughly soused, were content to interact only with each other.

What were the sober English passengers in the car doing during all of this excitement? Staying quiet as usual. They may have complained afterwards to their friends and family, but in the moment they sat quietly, neither requesting a bit of quiet, leaving the car, nor joining in. They might have been thinking: “Typical,” the traditional English reaction to small annoyances and major disturbances, but it was not, in fact, typical, and only occurred as a result of the improbable intersection of several events. It required a group of tipsy English women, accompanied by an Irish woman (who was necessary to initiate interaction with the other passengers), and two groups of friendly tourists to all board the same train car on the London Waterloo to Reading line. Fortunately for the regular travelers on English passenger trains, such an intersection of events is exceedingly rare.

Chapter Two: Italy

When you travel, remember that a foreign country is not designed to make you comfortable. It is designed to make its own people comfortable.

-Clifton Fadiman

Aesthetically, Italy is a jarring combination of the picturesque and the bland, a combination that always kept me feeling a bit off balance. Our three-city tour of Italy began in Venice. As the train approached the station, the sun was sparkling silver on the water and the sky was a cloudless blue. When the train moved over land, to our left we were treated to a view of charming old houses complete with window boxes full of flowers and balconies draped with washing. To our right was the highway, full of trucks and exhaust fumes. After we had properly arrived in Venice and dropped off our backpacks, we headed off for lunch at a little restaurant near the Piazzale Roma. This restaurant offered outside seating, as any good European cafe should. Our table was situated beside the bank of one of the smaller canals, from which position we could see the water reflected on the underside of a nearby stone bridge. It was a charming spot, but our chairs bore a remarkable resemblance to the plastic deck chairs we put on our back patios here in the United States while the umbrella shading them was a dull beige, enlivened only by its large Coca-Cola advertisements.

As tourists in Venice, we were obliged to waste €60 on a gondola ride. We therefore wandered along the smaller canals until we ran into two men, one old and bit chubby, the other young and slim, who were both wearing the striped gondolier shirts and carrying their beribboned hats. The younger man agreed to give us a ride for a sum that wouldn't prevent us from eating the next day. His gondola was black, with two red cushioned seats at the back near the gondolier's post and a little wooden chair further toward the front for overflow passengers. There were small statues of golden dragons on the middle of each of the gondola's sides, off of which were hung red and gold braided ropes embellished with red pompoms. Our young gondolier spoke English with a very

thick accent, so, although he pointed out a few important buildings here and there, we couldn't catch the significance of most of these buildings and were left mainly to enjoy floating along Venice's canals. This was very romantic despite the fact that many of Venice's buildings are rather run down, with algae carpeting their steps, and notwithstanding our consciousness that the whole tradition of the gondola ride is more than a little kitschy. Our gondolier was a very competent, cheerful person, who had the forethought to yell out something in warning when we passed a construction site to ensure that the construction workers did not drop any beams on our heads. However, my unalloyed enjoyment in the ride was marred when we passed a motorboat full of cardboard boxes operated by a fat man smoking a cigarette. He stared at us as we passed, more out of boredom than interest. My pleasure in the memory of the ride was effectively destroyed when, on disembarking, we heard an accordion player in the distance singing "That's Amore." I could not avoid facing the fact that the sort of people to whom he was singing was almost certainly the sort of people to whom we belonged.

Venice was by far my favorite Italian city, but even here I was always confused. I was never able to resolve this question of whether I liked Italy. Italy was the only country that presented me with this problem because it was the only country in which I found roughly an equal amount of things to like and dislike. In his book *La Bella Figura*, Beppe Severgini says that Italy "is the only workshop in the world that can turn out both Boticellis and Berlusconis" (3). Perhaps this is why I could never make up my mind. I wanted to enjoy myself, but I was always pulled up short in this effort. I was, in fact, mostly miserable, finding Italy's possession of so many masterpieces of art and architecture intensely provoking. If only Michelangelo's *David* was in Paris and the

Duomo were in Amsterdam, I thought, I could properly appreciate these works of genius. As I sweated in the heat, dutifully visiting Italy's many monuments and museums, I glared resentfully at every establishment selling gelato at a price that forced a choice between a cold gelato and a daily calorie requirement fulfilling lunch. Even Venice's considerable charm could not completely please me, and the situation continued to deteriorate after we left the canals and the gondolas behind.

After spending two days in Venice, we headed to Florence. I had visited to Florence and Rome a few years previously and had pleasant memories of Florence, at least, but I quickly realized that I had liked Florence the first time around because I went there immediately after a stay in Rome. I had thoroughly disliked Rome, which had obviously colored my view of Florence, rendering it a bit of a haven. However, the second time around, I wasn't unduly impressed. To be fair, this might have had something to do with the fact that walking had suddenly become a painful exercise. To save money in Venice, which is notoriously expensive, we had stayed in a campground. Unsurprisingly, this campground was infested with mosquitoes to the degree that it was unwise to stand still for more than two seconds unless you wanted to be swarmed. We started off in actual two person tents furnished with cots, but quickly upgraded to a plastic cabin, which at least had the advantage of an electric light.

The morning after our first night in this cabin, I awoke to discover mosquito bites covering my arms and legs as well as what appeared to be a ring of almost overlapping mosquito bites on my ankles. Ashley was similarly afflicted, although Jared was annoyingly bite-free. My arms and legs looked bad, but did not really bother me. My ankles, however, itched constantly. I applied some anti-itch cream, thoughtfully packed

for my sister and I by my mother, and tried to forget about my discomfort. However, when we woke up early the next morning to catch the train to Florence, the bites on my arms and legs looked much as they had the day before, but the bites on my ankles had turned into large yellowish blisters.

“Is this normal?” I asked Ashley and Jared.

They confirmed my suspicion that it was not, in fact, normal. There was no time then to do anything but run to catch the bus to the train station, but after just the bit of walking required to get us from the Florence train station to our campground, my ankles had begun to swell. I therefore told my companions I would sit the day out in the hope that the problem would disappear overnight. This hope turned out to be fruitless. After hours of walking the following day, suffered through in order to visit museums and churches I had already seen, my ankles had swollen to a size that was approaching alarming and the pain was enough to provoke some small consideration about seeing a doctor. But as it was Sunday, and as I am never enthusiastic about medical visits, even in the United States, I decided to adopt a wait and see attitude.

When we arrived in Rome, therefore, circumstances were not conducive for a reversal of my dim view of the Eternal City. Before my first trip there with a school group in late December of 2006 and early January of 2007, I pictured Rome as I had seen it in *Roman Holiday* when I perhaps would have done better to remember Daisy Miller, who caught Roman Fever in the Colosseum and died young. When we first arrived at our hostel near Termini Station in the early afternoon, a friend and I decided to take a walk around the neighborhood. The area around Termini is what you might call full of local color if you are feeling charitable. If you are not feeling quite so generous, you

would call it seedy. As we walked down a busy street, we noticed a man with a small boy walking ahead of us. Suddenly, the two stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. The man took something out of his pocket and showed it to the little boy. A few seconds later, my friend and I were startled by a loud bang that stopped us in our tracks. The man and boy had gone on their way again before we realized they had set off a firecracker. At the time, we thought this was an odd, isolated event.

A few days later, however, during Rome's New Year's celebration, the full meaning of this episode became clear. The entire city seemed to be out celebrating in the streets. One of my friends had heard that the biggest party took place at the Piazza del Popolo, where there would be live music and fireworks. The two of us decided to pick up another friend at a restaurant so the three of us could head over together. Firecrackers and fireworks were going off everywhere as we walked from our hostel to Termini Station. As we waited for our bus, a group of young men near us was engaged in setting off firecrackers without regard to the comfort and safety of those around them. They finally succeeding in singeing a woman's boot and earning themselves a long tirade in Italian, after which they moved a few feet away to set off their remaining firecrackers.

After we had successfully located the third member of our party, we decided to walk to the Piazza del Popolo in order to enjoy the pleasant weather and to participate more fully in the party the city had become. People wandered the streets with open wine bottles in their hands. Some of these streets were deserted, while in others we had to push our way through the crowd. We inevitably got lost several times and at one point were forced to walk quickly through a deserted and dimly lit park. When we finally arrived at the Piazza del Popolo, it was nearing 12:30 and, if there ever had been live

music, the band had packed up and left, but had left behind them a still sizeable crowd. Before we reached the Piazza, this crowd had thrown its empty wine bottles into the middle of the square and was now engaged in throwing firecrackers on top of the broken glass. I have no doubt there was an increased police presence that night, but based on the number of cops I actually saw - i.e. zero - there is a larger police presence in New York for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade than there is in Rome on New Year's Eve.

Obviously, Rome is not always as chaotic as it is on New Year's Eve. But I doubt anyone has ever described the city as orderly. The traffic alone would make this ridiculous. It is worth noting that I am not the most cautious or law abiding of drivers. It has long been my opinion that, if you come to a red light and look carefully for both oncoming cars and cops, on seeing neither, it is perfectly safe to run the light. This position has earned me many I-never-would-have-expected-it-of-you stares and a number of safety lectures. So I am nothing near a poster child for safe driving, but even I was distressed by Roman drivers and, in fact, Italian drivers in general. Beppe Severgini explains that, for Italians, red lights are not an "order" but rather "an opportunity to reflect" (Severgini 9). "What kind of red is it?" they ask themselves. "A pedestrian red? But it's seven in the morning; there are no pedestrians this early. That means it's a negotiable red; it's a not-quite-red" (Severgini 9). Italians do not think themselves above the law, but they do "grant themselves the right to interpret it" (Severgini 10). It took a good deal of soul searching for me to admit to myself that I dislike Italian traffic because Italians drive the way I drive myself. The only difference is that I realize that it is in the best interests of myself and everyone else on the road for me drive as little as possible while Italians seem to think their manner of driving is perfectly acceptable. In Italy, I

was forced to confront a world in which everyone was as careless of the rules of safe, sane driving as I am and face up to the fact that this is not the sort of world in which I want to live.

To me, Rome was a place of controlled chaos I found vaguely discomfiting. The order I had so loved in England had disappeared. To add to this, I always felt the city was hidden behind all the history. It was certainly fascinating to stand in the Colosseum and the Roman Forum, but the modern city seemed beyond my reach and indifferent to any attempt I might make to find it. The Italians are perfectly friendly to tourists, but it is difficult, or at least it was for me, to see beyond the Rome of all the fake designer purses sold on the streets. And I didn't particularly care to try to see beyond them. Rome never inspired in me any spark of desire to become better acquainted with it. I just wanted to see the monuments and the churches and the museums and then get as far away as possible. This was accomplished to my satisfaction on my first trip to the city.

To my considerable dismay, however, I soon discovered that you cannot advise someone *against* going to Rome. To do so would be to advise them against visiting the Colosseum, the Vatican, and the Roman Forum. Thus, when Rome appeared on our backpacking itinerary, I knew it was useless to protest. Gloomily, I reflected that I should never have thrown that coin into the Trevi Fountain. Legend says if you throw a coin in the Trevi fountain, you will return to Rome. I had idly added my own coin to this tradition on the second day of my first trip to the city. On my second trip, as I limped slowly to our hostel on my aching feet, I bitterly regretted this. I am not at all superstitious, but Italy and my ankles had interfered with the rational operations of my brain and caused me to at least consider that proposition that I might have brought all this

on myself. Our hostel was about par for the course in terms of cleanliness, but sadly lacking in organization. Even though it was late morning when we arrived, it took us a good fifteen minutes to locate an employee. Later that same night, while using the hostel's sole computer, located in the establishment's one very narrow hallway, I watched one of the employees pick the lock of the office with a knife.

On our first day in Rome, we visited the Colosseum and the Roman Forum and from there walked the short distance to the Mouth of Truth. By the time we arrived, I was nearly crying and convinced that my ankles were about to give out completely. We therefore cut the day short and retired to our hostel, where I tried to determine the exact condition of my ankles but was stymied by the discovery that they had disappeared sometime during the day. It is a distressing thing to look down and find that your ankles have gone, and it was this that convinced me it was time to call the doctor. Accordingly, the next morning, while Ashley and Jared visited the Vatican, I hobbled out of the hostel, which was apparently a cell phone service dead zone, and called the doctor I had selected from the list on my insurance company's website due to his good sense in locating his office a short metro ride from my hostel. I dialed carefully. A woman answered the phone and said something unintelligible in Italian but which did not sound to me like the standard, "Hello. How can I help you?" greeting.

"Hi," I said, hoping I had the right number. "Do you speak English?"

"A little." This is the standard answer in Europe regardless of how well the person actually speaks English. People who appear to be fluent in English and people whom you doubt are actually speaking English will all give the same answer.

“Could I make an appointment to see the doctor today or tomorrow?” I asked hopefully.

“Tomorrow is ok,” she said. “The doctor is not in the country today.” She spoke with a strong accent, but was easily understandable. I was encouraged.

“Tomorrow is fine,” I said.

She said something about ten or eleven and I said I would be there at ten. There was an awkward pause as I waited for her to ask my name and she waited for me to say something else. Finally, I just said, “Thank you” and hung up. Flush with success at probably securing an appointment and with my ankles looking less like an extension of my calves than they had the day before, I decided to do a little sightseeing. After weighing my options, I decided it was unwise to venture too far from the hostel and so settled on walking to the Trevi Fountain, which was a short Metro ride away. After splurging on overpriced gelato, I was in a sufficiently good mood to throw another coin into the Fountain, purely in the spirit of scientific inquiry.

The next morning, I headed off to the doctor’s, taking the metro from Termini to Barberini and then setting off on the route I had written out for myself. This route was probably the longest one possible, but had the advantage of staying to the bigger streets. I located the building without much trouble. It’s true that there was no visible number on the building I determined was my intended destination, but I concluded it must be the correct one because the numbers of the buildings on either side both approached but did not reach the number I had written on my sheet of paper. I therefore walked off the street into a covered courtyard and turned left into a little alcove. My progress was here arrested by a locked gate. After a cursory glance at my surroundings, I had seen only one

button. I pushed it hopefully. This button turned out to be for a hair salon, which was located a few steps directly in front of me. A middle-aged woman emerged from the salon to stare at me. It took me a second to realize I had called her out. As I don't speak Italian, I was unsure of what to say and she stared at me in silence for a few moments before going back in. I cast another look around me and found another button on the opposite wall. I carefully examined the other walls. On locating no further buttons, I pressed this one, a bit less hopefully than before. Fortunately, this was not one of those buzzers which require you to talk into an intercom to the person on the other end before the door is unlocked for you. I was just buzzed through the gate. There were no signs posted anywhere, so I wandered up some stairs. At the landing, I found another locked door and another buzzer, pressed it, and was admitted to what I assumed was the doctor's office, where I was greeted by a puzzled looking woman who seemed confused as to what exactly I was doing there.

"I have an appointment?" I said tentatively. It was more of a question than a statement. I was about to give my name, then remembered that she wouldn't recognize it even if I was in the right place.

"You talked to the doctor?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, before I recollected that this was not, in fact, the case because I knew the doctor was male. "No," I corrected. "I called yesterday."

"You talked to who?"

"I don't know. A woman."

"Me?" She seemed to have no recollection of having a phone conversation in English the day before.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“The doctor is not here. He went to Tunisia yesterday. He is back today.”

“Do you know when he’ll be back?”

“He isn’t here. You can wait and I can call him?”

I agreed and went to sit in the waiting room, which was furnished with a leather sofa and shelves along the wall containing medical books, many of which had English titles. To my dismay, most of the English books were gynecological in nature. I had thought this was a GP’s office, but started to think I might have made a mistake in my zeal to find a doctor with an office nearby. The coffee table in front of the sofa offered a selection of magazines in English and Italian, none of which were current. I sat uncomfortably for about twenty minutes, at which point the receptionist reappeared and apologized, informing me the doctor’s phone was turned off but she could keep trying if I wanted to wait. I had nowhere else to go, so I told her I did. After another half hour, she reemerged with a cell phone which she handed to me, telling me the doctor was on the line. The doctor, who, to my relief, spoke with an American accent, told me he would be in at noon if I wanted to wait. I told him I would.

At this point, I decided I should call the hostel (we only had one cell phone between the three of us), where I was supposed to meet Ashley and Jared for lunch, to leave a message telling them they shouldn’t wait for me. As I had not thought to bring the hostel’s number with me, I walked into the next room, where the receptionist was working.

“Excuse me,” I said. “I was wondering if you could look up a number for me. I need to call my hotel and tell my friends I’m going to be late.”

She obligingly pushed the phone toward me.

“No,” I said. “I don’t know the number. I need to look it up.”

It took another minute, but she finally understood what I was asking and obligingly went to her computer to look up the number. But although we were able to verify that the hostel did exist, we could not find the number. She looked in the phone book, searched online, then finally called information, where she spoke to someone with whom, oddly enough, she seemed to have a personal relationship, but the number could not be found. I reflected that I probably shouldn’t have expected the hostel to have a listed phone number when its employees didn’t appear to have a key to the office. I thanked the receptionist for her time and started to walk back to the waiting room but turned back to ask:

“The doctor is a general practice doctor, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” she assured me, quickly enough that I concluded she probably understood what I meant, or at least thought she did.

When the doctor, who turned out to be a native of Pittsburgh, finally arrived around 12:30, I was shown into a room furnished with a desk piled high with papers and a small doctor’s chair with the usual paper cover. He motioned for me to sit down at the desk and asked me what the problem was. After I had explained, he motioned me over to the examining chair to take a look. It turned out I was afflicted with infected bedbug bites. He checked for a fever, which I thankfully didn’t have, and examined my lymph nodes, which also appeared to be satisfactory.

“That’s good,” he said. “If they were swollen, it would mean the infection had moved up.” He waved his hands vaguely around his head, giving me visions of brain fever and hospitalization narrowly avoided.

After he had bandaged my ankles, he directed me back over the desk, where he wrote me a prescription for antibiotics.

“Now,” he said, after handing me the prescription, “it’s time to discuss payment.” He looked at me as if he expected me to make a suggestion. I had no suggestions to make. After a few moments, he said, “I usually charge €120, but I’ll knock it down to €100 for you.”

I had no idea how much it should cost, so I agreed readily enough to this. He took out a pad of paper with his name and office address printed at the top, wrote €100 in large figures on the middle of the pad, and asked me my name. After I had given it, he wrote it in smaller letters above the number, ripped the paper out of the pad, and handed it to me.

“Can I pay with a credit card?” I asked, with the strong suspicion that he would answer in the negative.

“No,” he said. “I only accept cash. There’s an ATM down the street-”

I assured him that I had cash, paid, and left with the only copy made of the “bill” tucked safely into my wallet so I could later send it to my insurance company for reimbursement. After I relayed this episode to Ashley and Jared, Jared recommended that I make an appointment with a “real doctor” once we got home, one who would “know my name before examining me.” I know I was bitten in Venice and treated by an American doctor, but I am still tempted to blame Rome for the entire episode. After all, it was in Rome that I was finally forced to see a doctor and, at least when they are in the

U.S., American doctors always ask you for your name and insurance information before they examine you.

Chapter Three: Germany

*I am leaving the town to the invaders: increasingly numerous,
mediocre, dirty, badly behaved, shameless tourists.*

-Brigitte Bardot

Two and a half hours by train from Munich, just outside of a little town that is the perfect cliché of a Bavarian village, stands Schloss Neuschwanstein, the perfect cliché of a fairy-tale castle. Neuschwanstein is perched on a rocky outcrop 200 meters high, surrounded by lakes and dense forests of fir trees and the spectacular backdrop of the Bavarian Alps. The site is very remote, approachable only by a strenuous climb up a steep and winding road. From the vantage point of the village below, the castle appears very small. It is not until you are almost properly in Neuschwanstein's courtyard that you are dwarfed by the size of the castle's towers, turrets, and spires.

For a castle, Neuschwanstein is relatively new. Its façade of white limestone, embellished with a bit of red trim in the form of its brick supporting walls, therefore looks almost too clean and well kept. You expect your castles to be in a bit of romantic disrepair. And I, for one, certainly do not expect to see any red brick. Adorning one of the walls facing the castle's exterior courtyard is a single strand of green ivy which looks suspiciously as though it has not arrived there by natural means. In his book *The Swan King*, Christopher McIntosh says Neuschwanstein has a "mad beauty that goes beyond taste, good or bad" (McIntosh 129). Indeed, in its way it is dreamily perfect. The landscape, the towering walls, and the height at which the castle sits above the surrounding area combine to cast an almost surreal aura over the scene – that is, until you get up close and can no longer see the castle for the tourists.

Neuschwanstein sprang from the imagination of King Ludwig II, occupant of the Bavarian throne from 1864 until 1886, when a government commission declared him insane and summarily deposed him. He drowned under mysterious circumstances shortly afterward. Ludwig began the planning for Neuschwanstein in 1868, when he was just

twenty-three (Krückmann 9). In his book *The Dream King*, Wilfrid Blunt explains that, as a child, Ludwig “spent many agreeable hours with his toy bricks...creat[ing] castles in the air” (Blunt 137). When he ascended to the throne, he came into possession of the necessary funds and authority to move a few of these castles down from the clouds into the Bavarian Alps. Unfortunately, the proverb “castles in the air” did not originate with Ludwig II. If Neuschwanstein properly belonged in the world, it would have. King Ludwig’s “castles in the air” were, literally, castles in the air, particularly in the case of Neuschwanstein, which sits high at the top of a hill. Ludwig initiated the construction of three of castles, spending in total thirty-one million marks, or “approximately the amount of the indemnity paid to Prussia after the Seven Weeks’ War,” but only Schloss Linderhof had been finished by the time of his death (Bunt 138).

According to Ludwig himself, Neuschwanstein was to be “in the genuine style of the German knightly fortresses” (McIntosh 127). It is, in fact, a “pastiche medieval castle,” (Blunt 138) and a mixture of the modern and the new. At the time it was built, Neuschwanstein boasted one of the first telephone lines in Germany, which connected the castle to an administrative building down in the village (Kruckmann 57-8). Ludwig himself roamed the countryside at night in a sleigh “carved of wood and extravagantly gilded, decorated with Tritons and putti bearing the royal insignia (Kruckmann 57-8). His way was illuminated by an electric light bulb powered by a “chromium-based sulphuric acid battery in a leaden sheet metal box hidden under the seat cushion” (Kruckmann 58). This sleigh was one of the first vehicles outfitted with an electric light.

Such a grand castle as Neuschwanstein requires a grand inspiration. In a letter to composer Richard Wagner, Ludwig described it as a “worthy temple for the godlike

Friend through whom alone can flower the salvation and true blessedness of the world” (Blunt 138). This “godlike Friend” is Wagner himself, Neuschwanstein being intended as a homage to such Wagnerian operas as *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Die Meistersinger* (Krückmann 11). The walls of the castle’s rooms are accordingly adorned with murals depicting scenes from Wagner’s opus. I do not know very much about classical music and therefore am not familiar with Wagner’s work. My only frame of reference in this area is Woody Allen’s joke: “I can’t listen to that much Wagner. I start getting the urge to conquer Poland.” Apparently, listening to too much Wagner also provokes a desire to expend vast amounts of your country’s money on fairy tale castles. A second inspiration for Neuschwanstein was Ludwig’s desire to escape from Schloss Hohenschwangau, where his mother was often in residence, “profan[ing]” the castle with her “prose” (Blunt 138). Neuschwanstein was to be a refuge for Ludwig and for the “outraged gods” who would “take their revenge and sojourn with [Ludwig and Wagner] on the steep summit, fanned by celestial breezes” (Blunt 138).

I have visited several castles and ruins throughout Europe, and at each was informed by guide or plaque that these imposing edifices were built to impress visitors and onlookers with the wealth and power of the residents. The grandeur, in other words, was directed outward. While, at least on the surface, it does not initially appear so, Ludwig took the opposite approach to castle building. He built them as a “mode of self-expression” and “for the sheer satisfaction of giving substance to his dreams” (Blunt 137). It was a “hobby” (Blunt 137). According to Christopher McIntosh, we see a “reflection of [Ludwig’s] whole inner life” in his “architectural creations” (McIntosh 127). Ludwig’s castles therefore stand apart from their fellows. As a general rule, the

function of every castle not built by King Ludwig II of Bavaria is to be observed. These castles are therefore, in a sense, particularly well suited to becoming tourist attractions. When we visit Versailles, we are taken aback by the power and wealth the French Kings must have had at their disposal to build and maintain something on so grand a scale. This is exactly what Louis XIV would want us to think.

Ironically, the same cannot be said of Ludwig II in relation to Neuschwanstein, today one of Germany's most popular tourist destinations. There is some question over whether Ludwig was actually insane, but for whatever reason he was certainly a very solitary man. Neuschwanstein sits on top of a rocky outcrop and would have been difficult to reach at the time it was built. Ludwig designed it this way. In a letter to Richard Wagner on May 13, 1868, he described the location as "one of the loveliest that can be found, inviolable and inaccessible (Blunt 138). Those final two words might also be translated as "sacred and out of reach" (McIntosh 128). Ludwig was apathetic over affairs of state and "withdrew into the solitude of the lower Alpine region in Bavaria, where he created his own cosmos and could live protected from the harshness of the outside world (Krückmann 8). He built his castles for himself (and perhaps for Wagner). He wanted to retreat into solitude in them; he did not want to draw people to them in order to impress them with Bavaria's power. It is therefore safe to say that, whether or not Ludwig was insane when he died, the tourists who today descend on Neuschwanstein en masse would undoubtedly push him over the edge.

As a tourist, you do not often consider what effect your presence has on the people who actually live where you are just visiting. If I were a resident of Paris or Berlin, I would find the sprawling walking tours and tourist groups that wander these

cities excessively annoying. Even at Miami University, I am vaguely discomforted by the campus tours given to prospective students and their parents. In some sense, I think of the entire campus as my home and therefore as off limits to people who do not belong, particularly those who insist on congregating in large, slow-moving groups. In cities well-known for their tourist attractions, the visitors and the natives are often somewhat segregated. The residents of Paris are probably not going to ride to the top of the Eiffel Tower, for example. But as a tourist you must tramp through their city in order to reach the Eiffel Tower. I know you are supposed to make an attempt to interact with the locals in order to get the real flavor of a place, but I can't help thinking that, in deference to the real residents of any particular place, you shouldn't do this unless you are unusually interesting or unless *they* approach *you*. Otherwise, you should strive to make yourself as inconspicuous as possible, always remembering that your presence could destroy the place you have come to see. The more tourists who visit an area, the more that area will change to accommodate the tourists. In the case of Neuschwanstein, the tourists overwhelm the "mad beauty" Christopher McIntosh sees in the castle, leaving it more cartoonish than sacred.

Looking back, I am somewhat ashamed to have assisted in the campaign to bring Neuschwanstein down to the level of a Euro Disney tourist attraction, but the deed is already done. When we arrived in the village below the castle in the late morning, as short of cash as ever, we were planning to trudge up the steep, twisting road to Neuschwanstein until I noticed that a horse drawn carriage cost only €5 per person. I had not ridden in a horse drawn carriage since a long ago visit to New York City when I was twelve, and it seemed fitting to ride up to a castle in such a conveyance. But the ride was

€5 per person for a reason. I ended up teetering on the left edge of the carriage's front seat, a seat already fully occupied by the driver and three very decent sized men. As we started up the road, I could see the face of the horse on the left. As much as a horse's face can to the untrained eye, it looked tired. As the horses plodded up the hill, I began to feel a bit guilty for making them pull my weight. To make matters worse, the driver would pull out his whip every so often. He didn't hit the horses very hard, it has to be said, but he was still hitting them with a whip. As we made our way up the hill, we had to stop once to allow one of the horses to relieve itself in the middle of the road. Our horse was hardly the first one who had done so that day. When we passed the evidence of this, the flies that had gathered rose in a column and swarmed us. We may have been driving along a small, secluded road surrounded by trees, but the atmosphere was somewhat marred by the tourists and food stands and by the time we reached the castle I had concluded that the way proper way to appreciate a carriage ride is to sit in the back, facing away from the horses, in order that you may enjoy the vague, pleasant feeling that you are riding in a horse drawn carriage without having to see most of it.

Neuschwanstein is a very popular tourist destination. Accordingly, the tours are swiftly moving, strictly regulated, and conducted in large groups. Our guide was a woman with a rather soft voice and a strong accent. The few times I managed to push to the front of the group, I caught a small portion of what she was saying. Otherwise, I was left to look at the murals covering the walls, which have no particularly great artistic merit and a questionable decorative one. In the Throne Room, modeled on the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, a blue dome spangled with yellow stars looks down on a "tessellated floor represent[ing] the animals and planets of the earth" (Kruckmann 19). According to

Ludwig's own notes, the "niche in the throne room shows Christ, the supreme law-maker, sitting on the rainbow and surrounded by cherubim and the symbolic attributes of the Evangelists, as a sign that he is ruler over heaven and earth" (Kruckmann 22). Also depicted in the Throne Room are "Manu representing the Indians, Zoroaster the Persians, Hermes the Egyptians, Solon the Greeks, and Augustus representing the world dominating Romans" (Kruckmann 20). It is difficult to believe that such a room, and by extension the castle itself, was not built to intimidate. You would not realize this without the assistance of a bit of background reading. Ludwig's dreams seem to have got away from him. He modeled Neuschwanstein after the great castles, which were designed to awe and intimidate, and Neuschwanstein therefore must retain some of their haughty grandeur. Ludwig might have only been interested in fulfilling his own fantasies, but he ended up fulfilling a lot of other people's as well. He might even be said to have created them, since Walt Disney based the Sleeping Beauty castle on Neuschwanstein.

After our tour, Ashley, Jared, and I watched the traditional end-of-tour video in order to rest our feet for a bit. To our surprise, the video was not the typical dry, factual history you get at most tourist attractions, the filmmakers having obviously decided to exploit Ludwig's probably undeserved reputation for insanity. The film featured dramatic music and, instead of a deep voiced narrator, the audio consisted of quotes from Ludwig and various acquaintances read in dramatic fashion. The visuals were a combination of actual photography and animation, often in the same frame. The video must have been meant to recapture some of the romance lost among all the tourists with cameras at the ready, but I am convinced the quotes from Ludwig's journal would not have sounded nearly as odd if they were presented in a more conventional manner. In

one of his journal entries, he wrote: “I want to be an eternal mystery to myself and others.” When this statement is typed out, it does not seem to necessitate the presence of mental illness, but the acting and directorial choices made in the movie pushed the viewer toward that conclusion. However, it was this video which sparked my interest in Ludwig by including a part of the letter in which he spoke of Neuschwanstein as “sacred and out of reach.” This phrase struck a chord in my privacy deprived soul at the same time that it increased my shame at belonging to the invading hordes of tourists which made this sentiment ridiculous. Surrounded as I was by sightseers, I was struck by the irony and was sufficiently intrigued to do a bit of research after I returned to the U.S., a feat none of the other tourist videos, at least, managed to accomplish.

Chapter Four: Hungary

It is easy to forget that communism was about bad taste as well as despotism.

-Former East German visitor to Statue Park

The tourist experience in Berlin centers on WWII and the succeeding division of the city into East and West during the Cold War. The standing portions of the Berlin Wall are a visual testament to the city's past, but they are not very imposing or particularly impressive; it was the barbed wire and armed guards that kept the East Germans from passing through to the West. Needless to say, neither deterrent remains in modern Berlin. Left with the burden of entertaining us, our Scandinavian guide shared exciting tales of Cold War heroism interspersed with bits of amusing trivia. In one story, a clever East German man, I'll call him Otto, pulled off a successful escape to West Germany. One day, Otto walked up to one of the wall's checkpoints. Putting on an air of extreme stress and distraction, he started to walk quickly through. When stopped by a guard who demanded he explain himself, Otto claimed to be an Austrian come to visit his mother in West Berlin. He had crossed into East Berlin that morning on business, he said, but had just gotten a call from the hospital informing him that his mother was seriously ill. Concerned, he had rushed out of his business meeting, leaving his papers behind.

The checkpoint guard informed Otto he could not cross the checkpoint without his papers, but Otto remained persistent. Eventually, the guard gave in and agreed to speak with his supervisor. He sent over another guard to keep an eye on Otto in his absence. While they were waiting, the second guard asked Otto what all the fuss was about. Otto repeated his story: he was an Austrian, come to visit his mother, who was living in East Berlin. He was staying in West Berlin because he had business there. He had just gotten a call from the hospital informing him that his mother was seriously ill and, in his anxiety, had left his hotel without his papers. The guard told him there was no way he

would be crossing the checkpoint without papers, so Otto reluctantly turned and walked into West Berlin.

Our guide in Berlin was full of such interesting stories, which were entertaining even if they were sometimes of dubious truth. They made for an absorbing tour, but were perhaps not the best way in which to experience what life was like under communism. Life under communism was probably not very exciting. In fact, all of my information indicates that it was not at all pleasant. Students of my generation have missed the opportunity to observe communism in action, but a small spot in Hungary offers us the chance to test Adlai Stevenson's assertion that "communism is the death of the soul." After spending forty minutes in Budapest's Statue Park, I am inclined to think Stevenson knew what he was talking about - even if he was a Cold War politician.

The weather for our trip had been bearable until we reached Budapest, where it suddenly became oppressively hot. The language was completely unfamiliar, the ticket machines at the tram stations only took change - that is, when they were in working order - and our rented apartment was three flights up. When the temperature is over one hundred degrees, you should not be sightseeing. You should either be relaxing in an air-conditioned room or wallowing in your misery. Ignoring this eternal truth, we decided to hike twenty minutes up Castle Hill to Buda Castle, which looks splendid, but not sufficiently so to distract from the heat. In short, the day was shaping up to a failure, but we all hoped to salvage something from a late afternoon trip to Statue Park, which showcases the remains of Hungary's Cold War communist dictatorship.

When the communist regime fell in 1989, a literary historian named Laszlo Szorenyi proposed to remove all of Hungary's communist statues and monuments from

their grandiose positions around the city and relocate them to one spot. He initially suggested “an island in the middle of the Danube” serve as their new home (Greenwald B2). The people of Budapest certainly did not want to leave the statues where they were. The city is celebrated for its art. But Szöcsényi’s countrymen did not immediately take to his idea. The historian had moved to Italy by the time Budapest’s city council decided to adopt the proposal several years later against critics’ insistence that nobody would want to come (MacLeod 8). In other former Soviet satellites such as Romania and Bulgaria, communist statues were destroyed or melted down (MacLeod 8). In Hungary, they were shipped to a depressingly featureless wasteland located a twenty minute bus ride out of the capital.

From their former grand pedestals, the Soviet statues have been exiled to a park paved with gravel and surrounded by a low, circular brick wall. In the center of the ring is a small patch of grass adorned with red flowers pruned in the shape of a star. The park’s forty-two statues depict communist heroes both well and lesser known. One six meter monument is cast in the shape of a soldier with a look in his eye that suggests supernatural possession. This soldier is fully equipped with Kalashnikov and hammer and sickle flag proudly held high. Before entering the park proper, visitors pass through a brick archway, to the left of which sits a bust of Lenin. To the right stands a truly awful statue of Marx and Engels. Across from this archway is Stalin’s Grandstand, a full-scale replica of the base that once held an 8 meter bronze statue of Joseph Stalin. On October 23, 1956, during the Hungarian uprising, the rebelling population pulled the statue down by cutting it off at the knees. Today, Stalin’s boots are all that remain on the pedestal (“Stalin’s Grandstand”). The small store at the ticket booth offers such souvenirs as a t-

shirt advertising Stalin, Lenin, and Mao's "3 Terrors World Tour" and jars containing the "Last Breath of Communism." Our cash was short, so we refrained from buying any of these keepsakes, but I bought a Coke from the ticket taker for a bit of relief from the heat.

When I first saw Statue Park, I was disappointed. Undoubtedly due to the heat, I had been expecting a green, leafy park complete with shady benches and twisting paths that twisted around a corner every so often, there to come across a bust of Lenin. As I stood in the gravel and heat, my eyes glazing over as I stared at poorly constructed bronze monuments bearing labels like "Soviet Heroic Memorial," I recognized this for the ridiculous bit of wishful thinking that it was. The reality is that the concentration of previously scattered communist "art" does not produce a tourist attraction designed for entertainment. The designers probably intended it this way. If you are considering that maybe communism might have had its good points, you need only visit Statue Park to dissuade yourself of this notion. If the art seems to be a calculated attempt to drain your soul of all hope and joy, the actual practice can only be, as Adlai Stevenson said, "the death of the soul."

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