

Lost In Italy

A true account of a return road journey
between Cyprus and the UK taken during
the Summer of 1998.

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Foreword

I wrote this account of my 1998 road journey from Cyprus to the UK and back, on a shoestring, as a historical record of the trip largely for my own amusement.

Now four years on, much has changed in Europe. Most of the countries mentioned now share the same currency and Cyprus itself is primed to join the EC in the next enlargement of the community.

I have quoted lots of prices where relevant, but inevitably these will be out of date, but I have left them to provide a flavour of what the trip cost.

Thanks to a dreadful ferry accident in Greek waters, the old ferries are no longer allowed to ply the route between Cyprus and Greece and there is currently no replacement service.

Would we do it again? You bet! It was a great experience, and there are plenty of alternative routes that we could have followed. It is even getting safe enough to take the route through the Balkans. All we need is a replacement ferry!

What follows is not for the humourless, the politically correct or the easily offended.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 – Summer 1998 Preparing The Way.....	1
Chapter 2 – The Ferry.....	6
Chapter 3 - Greece.....	17
Chapter 4 – Italy at Last.....	24
Chapter 5 - Pompeii.....	29
Chapter 6 – On to Rome.....	34
Chapter 7 - Florence.....	42
Chapter 8 – No Parking in Pisa.....	44
Chapter 9 - France.....	46
Chapter 10 - The Long Road Back.....	51
Chapter 11 – France Again.....	54
Chapter 12 – Switzerland and the Italian Lakes.....	58
Chapter 13 – Verona to Bologna.....	62
Chapter 14 – Pisa to Siena.....	65
Chapter 15 – Rome Again.....	69
Chapter 16 - Sorrento.....	75
Chapter 17 – The Final Leg.....	80
Chapter 18 – Trouble at Sea.....	83
Chapter 19 – A Slow Boat To Cyprus.....	88

Chapter 1 – Summer 1998 Preparing The Way

Sitting under the front veranda of our small terraced house near Paphos, my wife and I have frequently watched the ships amble by and wondered at the possibility of driving back to our home in the UK, perhaps taking in some of the historic sites of Italy on the way as an alternative to the usual airborne route. Certainly the romantic notion of travel at one's own behest would seem to make a pleasant change from sitting around for hours in the sweltering heat of Paphos airport departure lounge, where, in the summer months, the air conditioning never seems to cope with the sweating hordes of Brits., Russians, Germans - and sundry other European tourists.

Then there is the never-ending flight, with its cramped seating, mewling children, and (on Cyprus Airways¹ at least) tobacco fog. Air 2000, the other main carrier, wisely bans smoking on its flights. Cyprus Airways tried to do the same, but had relented in the face of opposition from its own cabin crews. Ever wondered what the cabin crews do between serving meals and flogging the duty free? Press that red button above your head and watch as the curtain in the front of the plane swings back and a grey cloud of smoke comes towards you, gradually clearing to reveal a bored looking steward.

If you happen to sit in the centre of the plane – around row 13 – watch the crew member sitting in the take-off seat by the wing door. What does he know that you don't, that causes him – most Cyprus Airways cabin crew are male – to cross himself as the plane starts its take-off run?

And why is it that, once in the air, I always manage to find myself sitting in front of the guy – it's usually a guy – who spends the whole 5 hours of flying time vomiting into a paper bag, and behind that child who spends the same five hours kneeling on the seat in front, staring at me over the backrest, two green lines of mucous trickling from his – it's usually 'his' – nose. You cannot help but watch in awful fascination as the lines move up and down with each breath. Even the trick of arriving an extra hour early at the check-in does not always guarantee that wonderful front or wing door seat that eliminates at least one of these horrors. Now I learn that some carriers are charging extra for these seats.... The bastards!

There must be a lot of profit in the travel agency business, if the vast numbers of them in Cyprus are anything to judge by, or is it just that the locals are desperate to get away at every opportunity? One thing is certain: it is usually cheaper to start your return journey in the UK, than to start from the Cyprus end – regardless of the probability of travelling on the same aircraft - so I was not expecting the sea crossings to be any less expensive; and I was not to be disappointed.

I tried a travel agent on the sea front at Kato Paphos.

"Can you tell me about the ferry to Athens?" I had already established that it was not possible to sail direct to Italy, and my sense of adventure did not run to the drive through Albania, Serbia or Bosnia. So it would have to be a two stage hop via Greece.

"Why you want to go by ferry? Is cheaper to fly to Athens."

"Won't it be difficult to take the car on the aeroplane?" My sarcasm was lost in the salesman's personal translation to his native Greek. He insisted that the ferry was a waste

¹ Cyprus Airways in common with most carriers has now banned smoking on all flights.

of time and that he could do me a special price by air. I was getting nowhere, and took my leave, but managed to grab a ferry brochure from his display before leaving.

I had better luck in the back streets with Soulli and Sally of Medusa Travel, two eminently sensible and helpful young ladies. They pointed out that there were two ships to Pireas each offering a weekly service. The F/B Nissos Kypros, which from Soulli's facial expression was not likely to be a real source of pleasure, and the F/B Sea Empress, which she gravely described as worse. The Nissos Kypros it had to be.

A born cynic, I smelled a rat, when it was suggested that we reserved the best class of cabin, with port-hole, bathroom and beds. Was this a ploy to extract more pound notes, kicking and screaming from my wallet, or sensible advice? The girls had been particularly helpful so far, so we compromised and we went for the second best choice, with bunk beds instead of the conventional type. My wife did not seem too keen on the idea of climbing a ladder to get into bed, but hey, £10 is £10, especially when it's ten Cyprus pounds!

The Cyprus ferries sail to Pireas, which is the port for Athens. The boats for Italy sail from either Patras, which is about 120 miles away, or Igoumenitsa, which is completely at the wrong end of the country. We wanted to go to the heel end of Italy, which means Brindisi or Bari. Unfortunately, the Brindisi boat sails from Igoumenitsa, but there was a little known (little known in Cyprus) boat that runs a nightly service from Patras to Bari operated by Ventouris Lines. That was going to be our boat. We booked a return trip to coincide with the arrival and departure of the Nissos Kypros, working on the principle that it could not be too difficult to get from one port to the other in the time available.

As it happened, there was no accommodation available on the return ferry, on the date required. No problem. We arranged to travel from Bari a day earlier and spend the extra night in Greece.

Travel dates were governed by the availability of car insurance. You need a green card to take a vehicle from Cyprus into the EC. There is no way on earth you can get a green card for a longer duration than 90 days. If there is, I, despite the most persistent efforts, failed to find it.

Now I always thought that a green card was a document issued by your insurance company to prove that your cover was valid while you were travelling. - Wrong!

A green card is apparently a supplementary insurance, over and above your normal insurance, providing cover at huge expense. In fact I was horrified to learn that the three months of green card cover was going to cost me two thirds of my annual premium. I was already beginning to regret having forked out the deposit for the ferry tickets. I could have flown to the UK for the cost of the vehicle insurance!

One of the nice things about vehicle insurance for frequent visitors to Cyprus, like me, who keep cars in that country, is that my insurer will allow the suspension of the insurance on the vehicle during those protracted periods that we are out of the country. I could not, however, figure out why, if a Lloyds underwriter was providing cover via the green card, at great cost, I could not suspend my Cyprus insurance cover for the duration of the vehicle's absence from the country. So not only did I have to pay two thirds of the annual premium for the green card, but I still had to pay a quarter of the annual premium for which the insurer would not be providing any cover at his risk.

My vehicle is a Mitsubishi diesel double cabin pickup truck. This is a beast of a vehicle with four wheel drive and such creature comforts as air conditioning, power steering and electric windows. You might wonder why on earth I would want such a monster, but if I tell you that in Cyprus, diesel costs roughly 70 pence a gallon, and that such a truck is classed as a commercial vehicle and therefore commands both a low rate of import duty and excise duty, its ownership makes good practical sense. Add to this, the comfort of a large car, and the go anywhere practicality of four wheel drive, and you begin to understand why every second vehicle in Cyprus is a diesel pickup truck.

I timed my 20,000 km service to coincide with start of the trip, and arranged with the garage to buy a set of essential spares on a use or return basis.

Given that all mainland Europe, at least the bits we would be visiting, is in the EC, I was surprised by the different motoring requirements of the various countries on route. Some countries require a first aid kit. Others require two red triangles to be carried. Some require you to carry a spare set of light bulbs. Almost all require a fire extinguisher. To these I added a tow rope, various engine belts and filters.

Those countries which require you to carry a first aid kit do not appear to define what constitutes such a kit. Draw a red cross on a Tupperware box and throw in a few sticky plasters and that might well do the trick, however useless it might happen to be in a real emergency, or, heaven forbid, a road accident. I was not surprised that the first aid kit bought for the sake of appearances contained six plasters, a lump of cotton wool, half a dozen aspirin tablets and some strange yellow liquid in a bottle with Greek writing on the label, which I assumed was probably iodine.

First aid should be left to those who know what they are doing. I happen to be trained in first aid and I do not believe that such silly products should be a legal requirement. Those items that would really serve some useful purpose – a Brook airway; inflatable splints; a seat belt knife etc., would cause more harm than good in the hands of the layman. Much better to require the traveller to carry a mobile phone, to summon the emergency services, or to add first aid training to the requirement for holding a driving licence.

I do not own a mobile phone. There is no-one I want to ring so badly that I need a 'phone readily to hand, and I certainly don't want to be annoyed by others ringing me. I do however concede that on such a long trip a mobile phone would have its uses.

In any case, road emergencies aside, there is no place for the mobile phone in a car. How many times have you travelled along the motorway to be overtaken by some pratt in a repmobile, rapt in conversation on the telephone he holds in his right hand, while he describes patterns in the air with his left? The car, of course, is wafting along, completely out of control. If one of these morons were to run into my car, should I still have the ability to stand, I'm afraid I would not be responsible for my actions.

My wife and I like camping, something we came to quite late in life. I had never even stepped into a tent before my fiftieth birthday, although I confess to owning a caravan when the kids were young. We are not wealthy people. Our two homes are the result of financial prudence over very many years. Camping was therefore the obvious choice of accommodation for the trip; though we were flexible enough to take in alternatives if the need arose.

Chapter 1 – Summer 1998 Preparing The Way

We have, in the UK, a modest frame tent, but the bare tent weighs in at 38 kg, which takes up all the baggage allowance for air travel for the pair of us. All the sundry equipment that accompanies it fills a small trailer; so that was out of the question.

Cyprus is not really a land of happy campers, so while there is some equipment available, there is nothing like the choice available in the UK.

My wife and I once shared a camp site in Wales with a group of soldiers on exercise. We were most impressed with their Vango Equinox tents, which were not only suitably commodious, but which packed down into small bags in next to no time. The military, bizarrely had bright orange tents. We could only find a rather more discreet green colour, but the whole lot packs easily into a suitcase, leaving lots of room (and baggage allowance) for other useful things, like clothing.

This tent proved a bit more expensive than the run of the mill offerings, but had the distinct advantages of a completely separate inner compartment with a zipped doorway to keep out the wildlife, and fly screens on the access doors; but even though the tent is described as accommodating four, four people would find it decidedly cosy. The only downside was the fact that it was made in China. Nothing I had ever bought from that country of origin had ever lasted for more than a couple of weeks. I hoped that this would prove the exception. After all, with loads of tax payers money to spend, it had been good enough for the British military.

We added a pair of back-packers inflatable mattresses – a bit like upmarket lilos – and a pair of ancient, but serviceable, lightweight sleeping bags, a legacy of our caravanning days. We reasoned that in southern Europe, in the summer, it should be quite warm at night.

A camping stove was obtained from a large supermarket in Limassol and gas bottle refills are available very cheaply in Cyprus from every corner shop. The containers are, however, a little on the large side for camping, if you don't have a truck to travel in.

I bought four plastic fruit baskets from the village shop, to prevent the load from wandering round the back of the truck, and packed everything we thought we might need: food, a jar of instant tea, clothing, cooking utensils, plastic crockery, a cold box, a plastic stool that would make a useful table, a couple of neat folding tripod stools (also ominously made in China), ground sheets etc.

Recognising that I was not going to find cheap diesel again for another three months, I bought four 20 litre plastic containers at CY£1.36 a throw from the local supermarket. It cost me CY£2.50 to have each of them filled with diesel, and I tucked them away at the cab end of the truck, to use when I got back to England where the stuff is taxed out of sight. I am not sure that it is strictly kosher to carry large quantities of diesel like this, but at this price I could afford to lose it should I bump into Mr. Jobsworth at one or other of the customs posts we would pass through..

As it is impossible to buy decent barbecue charcoal in England, I filled the remaining space with three sacks of charcoal, packed into bin liners to keep them dry and the dust off our belongings.

Chapter 1 – Summer 1998 Preparing The Way

Our personal luggage, in soft travel bags, was thrown on the back seat. It was surprising how much clutter we managed to accumulate, but eventually the truck was loaded and sheeted up to keep out the weather and prying fingers.

All that remained was to put out the cat and set off. For our pains, my wife and I are cat people. It's not that we own a cat, in as much as anyone can *own* a cat, but that cats can always recognise a mug who might provide a little affection and a free meal. So we now have Ginger, who adopted us the previous November, when as a tiny kitten he turned up on our doorstep. I suspect strongly that here some local villager took us for the mugs, as the kitten was rather too young to have made that choice for himself.

Like most cats, particularly males who still have their bits intact, he is very much his own boss, and comes and goes as he wants. If we are about we will feed him, if not he will go elsewhere. His favourite spot is, the roof of our neighbour's veranda, much to the annoyance of the occupants, who are not cat people.

As we drove away, Ginger was sitting on our doormat, contentedly chewing on a rather large, and very much alive, lizard, which was clearly not enjoying the experience. Ginger was not going to starve in our absence. His only danger was that a cavalier disregard for traffic might turn him into a roadside pizza.

We had to be in Limassol port for around noon on the day of departure, but having experienced Cypriot bureaucracy on a number of occasions, we felt it would do no harm at all to arrive somewhat earlier. Pausing only to fill up with a last tankful of cheap diesel at the BP station just outside the port, we made our way to the terminal building.

Chapter 2 – The Ferry

Everyone seems to expect that travellers always know what to do and where to go, so we were not surprised to find the departure terminal lacking in informative signs, with loads of people milling about looking equally confused as we. A policeman pointed us towards an enclosed yard, where we left the vehicle, and armed with the vehicle's registration book, insurance documents, passports and tickets, we made our way to the customs desk.

Many travellers confuse the apparent abruptness of Cyprus customs officials with rudeness or arrogance. It is nothing of the kind. Well, sometimes it is, but most times they are merely uncomfortable speaking a difficult second language to a clientele clearly unwilling to learn their own. A smile and a little patience, the odd 'kalimera' (good day) 'yia sas' (hello) or 'efcharisto' (as near as you can get the spelling in English, the 'ch' enunciated as though clearing your throat, rather than 'ch' as in cheese - it means thank you) go a very long way. Impatience or a rude response to their questioning immediately elicit the wrong result.

There were two men behind the counter: a smart young man, wearing spectacles, with a rather casual approach to a uniform which was unbuttoned at the neck. Cyprus is a melting pot of several races, but this man's antecedents seemed only scantily Cypriot. The other, a loud, bulky, swarthy man who might double as a night-club bouncer, was wearing casual clothing. He was some sort of port official.

I approached the studious looking man with the glasses and uniform and passed my vehicle documents to him. Without looking up, he asked me in English if I was permanently exporting the vehicle. I told him that we were coming back after the summer. He looked at the vehicle registration book and I could see from his expression that he was troubled at its contents. After what seemed like several minutes, but was probably only a few seconds, he looked up into my face and said *"Is this vehicle duty free?"*

It is possible to buy a motor vehicle in Cyprus, without paying import duty. It could be for export, in which case it may have a temporary registration, with a letter 'E' (for export) followed by the next number from the list.

Regular visitors who stay less than six months a year may temporarily import, in which case they are issued with a 'V' plate. This is a series of registration numbers comprising a number, the 'V' followed by a two digit number indicating the year. A 'V' plated car would have to be put in bond (and parked in an expensive field) when the owner was out of the country. A third class is for certain ex-pats. granted permanent residency, who can have a vehicle with a normal Cyprus registration, while still not having to pay the duty.

When we bought ours, double cabin pick-up trucks could not be bought duty free for use in Cyprus, only for export, in which case they would exhibit either an 'E' or a 'V' plate, which rather depends on how soon the vehicle is to be exported. Given that the duty on commercial vehicles is only a couple of thousand pounds, paying the duty cuts out all the hassle. A truck with a Cyprus plate would have to be duty paid. The customs official would have known all this.

My truck has a Cyprus registration and the duty has been paid.

"It's duty paid." I said innocently.

He stabbed his finger onto a group of biro ticks at the top of the second page of the registration book.

“It says here that the vehicle is duty free”.

“Well it’s not. In any case I can’t read Greek.” Not strictly true, if I have enough time to look up the difficult words.

“When did you pay the duty?”

“When I bought the vehicle.”

“When was that?”

I turned the book over and showed him the date stamp on the front cover – two years earlier.

“Wait there!”

The official stood up and with my book in hand strode across the room to an office, where a more senior customs officer – I guessed that from the extra gold braid on his uniform – was in residence. The two men pored over the registration book. Then they peered at me in unison over the glass panel of the office wall, then returned their attention to the book.

Five minutes later the bespectacled customs officer returned, without the book, and started to deal with the next person in the queue. I was left standing, somewhat bemused, without a clue as to what was happening.

“Excuse me.” I elbowed the customer away from the counter. *“Can you please tell me what is happening?”* I put on my most winning smile.

“We will telephone Nicosia and get the details of your registration faxed to the office. You will have to wait there.”

Two hours later, the man with the gold braid emerged from the office with my registration book and a fax message. He conversed earnestly with Spectacles, stopping from time to time to look at me, then returned to his office, leaving the registration book on the desk.

I smiled that smile again. *“Is everything OK?”*

“Is OK. I will staple this fax into your registration book. When you return, you must go to the transport ministry and get the registration changed.”

Spectacles returned to his next customer.

I used my elbow again.

“What happens now?”

He passed the registration book across the counter to his swarthy companion and pointed at the queue which had formed at his portion of the desk.

Eventually, a second set of paperwork was completed and I was given a document to take away. It was not clear what the document was for, or what I was supposed to do next, but after quizzing Spectacles one more time, I gathered that I had to wait for another customs official to check my vehicle.

This second customs officer accompanied me to the yard where my vehicle was parked. He pointed to the bonnet.

“Open.”

I did as I was asked. The customs officer looked at the manufacturer’s plate on the bulkhead and compared the numbers with those on the registration book. Of course they did not tally.

“Where is the chassis number?”

“It’s on the chassis!” I led the customs man to the rear wheel arch and wiped my finger through the dust to reveal the number stamped into the metal. That seemed to satisfy him and he signed off the paperwork and handed it to me.

“What do we do now?”

He pointed to the departure lounge and wandered away.

In the departure lounge there were a number of other potential travellers all experiencing the same difficulty, but we established that we had to go to the shipper’s desk to register for a boarding card, then through passport control for exit stamps on the passports.

By this time there was a queue of more than a hundred passengers waiting at the desk, and, unlike an international airport where there are distinct areas before and after the customs control, where ne’er the twain shall meet, here passengers could mingle freely. It was chaotic, but our cabin on the ship was pre-booked, so it was just a matter of waiting until our point in the queue arrived at the desk, where we were allocated a cabin and given boarding cards, then through the immigration for our passports to be stamped.

Ten minutes later we were queuing to board the ship, only to discover that you had to unload the luggage you needed on the voyage, before driving the car on board. You can imagine the confusion as dozens of drivers rummaged through their possessions on the quay side before handing bags to loved ones who were left milling around to wait while the vehicles were taken aboard.

The F/B Nissos Kypros is an old ship, of German origin, built to transport railway trucks. There is no railway in Cyprus, but the tracks are still present in the garage area. Furthermore, the loader required the cars to be turned round in the garage area and reversed into place. This proved quite amusing as the Mitsubishi truck has a very poor turning circle, and I held up the traffic for quite a time, while I executed a perfect twenty three point turn as I shuffled the truck around between the rails, before reversing the length of the ship to the place indicated.

The exercise was not helped by the fact that there were three factions of crew, some Filipino, some Russian (or of some other Soviet Bloc origin) and some – the officers – Cypriot. Each group appeared to have very little, if any, command of the others’

languages, but they had obviously performed this exercise many times before – even if the paying passengers had not a clue as to what they were supposed to be doing.

With the vehicle locked up, and parked so perilously close to its neighbours that I prayed for a calm crossing, I left the garage and went to find my wife who was standing with all those other wives and families in the scorching Cyprus mid-June sunshine.

The ship's reception is at the top of a mountain of stairs and is manned by those members of the crew who are linguists and therefore command officer status regardless of nationality. It's a bit like the old military joke that a sergeant is the one who can read and write, and a corporal knows someone who can read and write.

Any crew members not loading cars, muck in to conduct passengers around the rabbit warren of passages to their allotted cabins. Ours, number 63, was on the boat deck. The port hole was painted shut and the view from it was of the hull of a lifeboat, located reassuringly close at hand.

The cabin was badly in need of a refit. Fittings were loose, the air conditioner noisy, but it was scrupulously clean, the beds had been made, and there were plenty of clean fluffy white towels.

There was nowhere to sit, except on the bottom bunk, which offered insufficient headroom to make this practical, so we were not going to be spending much time in the cabin. Soulli had been right about reserving the best cabin available, and I was already beginning to wish I had taken her advice.

The shower was hot, with plenty of water, but shared its living space with the lavatory. If you can imagine a shower cabinet, with a lavatory in one corner, you should get the picture. This ingenious arrangement meant that if you hung the toilet roll on its holder, use of the shower would soak it. Best plan was to leave the toilet roll in the cabin and only take it in to use as required. In any case, the toilet flush was useless. To compensate the cleaner had dumped an excessive quantity of green toilet cleanser around the bowl, to mask the smell of anything that might have been left lurking below. Apart from a pee, should I have needed one in the night (you tend to bladder weakness when you get to my age) I vowed to use the public toilets elsewhere on the ship.

It took forever to load the rest of the vehicles. No doubt the confusion at the entrance to the ship's garage contributed here, but Cypriots have a very laid back approach to time keeping, which is part of the charm of the country, so we were not surprised that the timetable was just something to fill the brochure and bore little resemblance to the true time of departure. Still, we found time to sit around on the sun deck at the rear of the ship to admire the visiting cruise ships, registered in Cayman, Panama and Moldova – wherever that is.

This was an opportunity to exchange horror stories with fellow hardy Brits., who were making the trip, and we fell into conversation with a couple of Welsh lads, who had arrived in Cyprus only a couple of days earlier, with the express intention of buying their own double cabin pickup to ship back to the UK, saving themselves about £6,000 on the UK price. They had intended returning immediately, but a visit to Cyprus by the president of Greece had closed all civic offices and they had not been able to complete the paperwork on the day in question, so they had had to make do with a few days unscheduled sunbathing.

As Mitsubishi had launched the new shape L200 truck only a few months after I bought the older model, I hated them already. In actual fact, they had gone to buy a Toyota truck, but the version in Cyprus has a 2.8 litre engine (as opposed to the 2.4 litre version available in the UK) and on being told that the UK import duty was higher on commercial vehicles of over 2.5 litres - a fact that had more to do with sales pitch than reality - had been persuaded to go for the Mitsubishi.

Having run around in the vehicle for a couple of days, they were already having second thoughts about the wisdom of the choice. I would have killed for that truck, which I could no longer afford, so I hated them even more.

I didn't tell them that of course, but I discovered that they had not heard about the cheaper cabins in the bowels of the ship, where there are no windows, no space, and no air conditioning. Thinking of them in the cramped confines of the tiny cabin in sweltering heat, with no ablutions to hand, I felt better already; and we stayed in their company throughout the trip.

The older of the two, perhaps a little younger than me, was using crutches. He had had his leg broken, above the ankle, by a gang of yobs the previous New Year. It was healing slowly. Coincidentally, my mother – she's 82 – had been decorating the bedroom ceiling – she's a tough old bird – a few weeks earlier, and had fallen off the ladder, breaking her foot off at the ankle – an almost identical injury - so I was keen to obtain as much information as possible.

Clearly my mother was made of better stuff than this Welshman, because he had had to have a heart by-pass before they could operate to fix his leg. My mother, on the other hand, had already stolen a Zimmer frame from the next patient and was perambulating around the wards of Manchester's Hope Hospital, much to the amazement of the medical staff. She was keen to get back home to finish the decorating.

There were a lot of Greek people on board the ship – Greek, as opposed to Greek speaking Cypriots – who obviously had done this trip before. Several had brought mattresses and sleeping bags and had found themselves parking spots on the various decks of the ships, where they had set up camp. One old peasant couple, had even brought a camping stove and were cooking up some concoction for their evening meal. This all seemed rather dangerous, but no-one from the crew seemed in the least bit concerned, and as they were a long way from our cabin, with the lifeboat right outside the window, I did not see why I should be concerned either.

This business of deck travel seems to be the way to go. A one way deck ticket cost only CY£36, against CY£101 for the cabin that you cannot sit in, and there are ample toilet and shower facilities available on board. Next time I might try this approach.

Eventually the ship cast off, and sailed out of Limassol port. The view of the slowly diminishing city from the rear sun deck is one of the high points of the voyage. I took several photographs.

The ship eventually turns right to follow the coast, and sometime around, I guess, six p.m. we were passing Paphos, which we had left that morning. It had taken all day to get back to where we had started.

Dinner was at seven. You have the choice of a self service restaurant, or waitress service in the ship's main dining room. This is located up front, where it stops passengers from walking on the bows of the ship, which seemed a dreadful pity. We joined in the queue to enter the restaurant and waited for our turn to be seated. The Maître De, a smartly turned out Cypriot gentleman, bearing, I thought, more than a passing resemblance to Bruce Forsythe with suntan and hair, looked at me and barked sternly "Ticket?"

This was a new game. "I beg your pardon"

"Have you got a ticket?"

Of course I didn't have a ticket. I had been on the ship for over four hours. I had been through no end of red tape, but no-one had had the courtesy to mention that I needed a ticket in order to get a meal. There were menus and itineraries posted at various locations around the ship, but was there any mention on any of them that you needed a ticket?

This is the first time that I have ever come across a restaurant that demands payment, up front, before you even take a seat at table.

My patience was beginning to wear a little thin, and the friendly smile had already gone from my lips.

"No-one has said anything about a ticket. Where pray, does one obtain such a ticket?"

"The purser's office." He snapped and walked away from me to attend the next customer.

This time the customer was a Greek speaker, but Brucie's manner was just as abrupt. This customer must have travelled on this ship before, as he knew about the ticket business. Brucie, snatched the ticket from him and gestured him towards a chair. There was simply no need for such rudeness. If he got through the trip without a smack in the mouth, I was going to be very surprised. I guessed it was something to do with the way the customers dressed. I always wear tee shirt and jeans. I don't even own a suit, and I see no point whatsoever in dressing up to eat a CY£6 four course meal on a ferry boat.

For that matter, I wouldn't want to eat anywhere that would not accept me as I am. I positively abhor pretentiousness. The Greek customer was dressed casually also and suffered the same treatment – yet I noticed some deference creep into the creep's attitude when some more smartly attired customers came into the room.

I was tempted to say "Fuck you pal" and eat in the self service with the rest of the *hoi polloi* (a suitably appropriate Greek description for us normal folk), but CY£6 for a meal sounded OK to me, so I was bugged if I was going to give up at the first hurdle.

The purser's office is at the other end of the boat, so we trudged along the passageways to acquire a meal ticket.

The purser – actually I think it was the purser's assistant – was a pleasant young Cypriot lady. When I suggested that it might be helpful if someone had mentioned that a ticket was required for the meal, she just gave one of those Gallic shrugs that are so well used in European countries, and so expressive of their lack of interest; as if to say "This is the way we always do it. What's the problem?" Anyway, I handed over CY£12 and we got our tickets. I would have bought the tickets for the following night, but this meal business had not been going well and that self service restaurant was beginning to look more attractive.

We returned to Brucie's den. He didn't seem to recognise me. I waved my tickets triumphantly under his nose, with both hands. He took them from me, glanced around the half empty room and pointed to a table across the room, alongside some other English folk. We were obviously not going to be allowed to sit near any Greek people.

The curtains were closed. I opened the nearest curtain to view the fabulous sunset across the bows of the ship.

"I wouldn't do that." It was the English chap on the next table. *"His nibs – Brucie- has just told us off for opening the curtains"*.

I smiled politely. Just let him dare I thought. I could see him glaring at me from across the room. I glared back, but his attention was distracted by more diners entering the room and he rushed off to interrogate them about their lack of tickets. By the time he had finished I had tired of the view and had shut the curtain, but he glared at me again just the same. I smiled back at him smugly.

For just CY£6, the meal was excellent. Not exactly *cordon bleu* you understand, but very reasonable indeed. There was soup, salad, grilled plaice, followed by (overcooked) steak with vegetables and a sweet Cypriot dessert, which is a bit like egg custard, with rather more body than the English version. The plaice was served with mayonnaise as a sauce, which went particularly well as a combination, and not something that I would have chosen otherwise. Since then I often have mayonnaise to accompany grilled plaice.

The Russian (or was it Ukrainian) waitress was brisk, efficient and polite, but understood very little English. So the dishes were served with only the briefest of descriptions *"Soup"*; *"Feesh"*; *"Salada"*; *"Beef"* and *"Sweet"*. Each time I expressed my thanks, she responded with *"You are welcome"*. It was one of the few expressions she could say in English, and I took a perverse pleasure in expressing thanks for the smallest thing, just to elicit the response. Childish I know, but once started I could not resist seeing if she would get fed up of it. She never did, and I vowed to myself that if she was the waitress the following night, I would behave better.

After the meal, we retired to the bar, where there were large Sony TV sets either side of the stage. This was World Cup time and England were playing at 9.00 p.m. local time. I located us a pair of seats by the right hand TV and settled down to wait for the kick-off.

As the broadcast changed to the football programme, a guy came over and switched off the TVs so that some second rate band could play dance music. Judging by the numbers of people who took this moment to leave the bar, I was not the only one disappointed.

We decided to go on deck before taking an early night. As we passed the self service restaurant, we could see another TV set around which were crowded several dozen people. Had the picture on that TV been watchable, I would have braved the cigarette smoke to join them, but we were moving steadily away from Cyprus and the picture was failing with each minute. Sitting in a smoke filled room in front of a broken TV picture listening to a commentary in Greek was not my idea of a good time. In any case, England lost.

My wife and I returned to our cabin and broke into a bottle of Keo brandy from my luggage and before long it was time for bed.

Despite the constant vibration of the engine, the slight roll of the ship and the roar from the air conditioner, we found it surprisingly easy to sleep.

I find sea travel interminably boring. You chat to a few people, wander around the boat, read a bit and gawp at the coast of Turkey, or the Greek islands, wherever you happen to be, then start all over again. At least there is a bit more to do on a cruise ship, but a cruise is not my idea of a fun holiday. Thankfully, most of the journey seems to take place at night, so at least you can sleep through it.

On the second day, Tuesday, the tedium is broken by stops at Rhodes and Patmos.

We began the day with a visit to the dining room for breakfast, but Brucie the ticket vulture was hovering round the door, and somehow a breakfast suddenly did not seem such good value for money. There was no way I was going all the way to the purser's office for a ticket to buy a boiled egg and a couple of slices of toast, or whatever other delights were on offer. We made our way to the rear sun deck and had a coffee instead. It never ceases to amaze me how much caterers feel they can charge for a sachet of Nescafe and a third of a pint of hot water – all the more galling as I had a fresh jar of PG Tips Instant tea in my travel bag.

A good tip for cheapskate travellers like us is PG Tips instant tea. It tastes almost as good as the real thing and is so much more convenient than tea bags or leaf. I also quite like Typhoo instant tea, which has milk powder included, provided you double the suggested quantity. Made as indicated on the label, the result is a rather nasty wishy washy brew. Unfortunately, my wife hates it, so we tend to stick with the PG.

The ship was scheduled to arrive in Rhodes at 09.30, but as we were late leaving, and as the pace of the journey so far was, shall we say, leisurely, we were late arriving. We could see Rhodes at 9.30, but it was well after ten as we approached the port.

My wife and I have a strong affection for Rhodes as it was the destination of our first ever foreign holiday some ten years earlier. We enjoyed that holiday immensely. The weather had been perfect, though the week before it had snowed! A couple of weeks after we left there was a phenomenal heatwave which resulted in massive fires. We saw none of that. It was just a great holiday.

I remember buying an ornamental coffee set from one of the street traders – you know the sort of junk you buy to use up those remaining drachmas before you fly back to Blighty. When we arrived home and unpacked the thing, one of the saucers was gilded in a different pattern to the rest. My wife thought I was crazy, but I will pursue a complaint with the determination of a terrier worrying a duster, so when I found the vendor's card in the packing, I wrapped the offending saucer carefully and mailed it back to him with a terse note and a request for the correct saucer to be returned. Frankly even I never expected to see it again, but three weeks later the correct saucer was returned by post, with a brief note of apology. I was most impressed. We still have that coffee set in our display cabinet in the Paphos house. We have still never used it!

Parked up in Rhodes port were two ultra modern sailing cruise ships. I would have loved to have seen them under way, but they remained moored at the quay with little sign of activity around them. Apart from a small Greek warship, the harbour seemed strangely quiet.

We watched from the rear sun deck as the ship was very skilfully reversed to the end of the quay. A tug boat fussed around like a mother hen, but it didn't actually have to do anything to aid our docking. The only bright moment was when some old buffer in a tiny fishing boat decided to chug past the stern of the ship. He seemed unconcerned as the bulk of the ferry threatened to crush him and his little boat against the harbour wall, but he scraped through with feet to spare.

Never having paid much attention to the docking of a large ship before, I had to admire the accuracy with which it was reversed up to the quay. At the final moment, the drive was killed, and Russian sailors lobbed balls of nylon rope, with nylon lines attached, to the harbour staff. These were then used to drag the heavy hawsers ashore. Loops in the heavy polypropylene ropes were then slipped over sturdy metal stanchions, and the ship's winches pulled us neatly into place, with a satisfying creaking from the ropes as they stretched and strained under the load.

Frankly the effort of parking up this large boat seemed out of proportion to the amount of time we were to stay in Rhodes. There was just about enough time to throw off a couple of container lorries from the garage, and to allow a handful of foot passengers to leave.

This included one guy, who on first encounter I had taken to be mentally ill. As we had boarded the ship at Limassol, he had been in front of us in the queue, and the harbour policeman at the boat's entrance was clearly having difficulty communicating with him. After he had boarded, the policeman looked after him and gave that universal sign for madness, of the finger screwed into the side of the head, before shrugging and taking our passports for examination. It turned out that he was profoundly deaf and could only mumble incoherently. He was, however, quite a nice guy, but without the skill of sign language, communication with him was laboured, even though for his part, he could lip read English. He was happily travelling Europe alone and having a great old time, without letting his disability get in the way. We wished him well and waved him on his way.

Making up a little of the time lost at Limassol, we departed more or less on schedule at eleven a.m. and threaded our way through Greek islands to Patmos, to arrive in the late afternoon, when the light was at its best.

Patmos is everyone's idea of a Greek island, with a flat calm sea running right up to whitewashed houses with blue painted doors, which are scattered prettily on the hillside, atop which is some sort of fortified monastery. I snapped away with the camera, as we manoeuvred between the cruise ships parked up in the narrow mouth of the bay to take our place, arse end on to the quay.

There was quite a cross wind blowing, its effect exaggerated by the hills around the tiny port. Mooring the boat proved quite an exercise in seamanship for the crew, and there was no fail safe option of a tugboat to hand in case of difficulties. I don't know much about ferry boats, but I guess it must have sideways facing propellers at the front for it to be able to spin around in its own length, like it has to do to dock here. Here, because of the strong cross wind, the ropes and winches came into full play, and we had four mooring ropes spaced out across the harbour wall, to prevent the ship from twisting away from its final position.

Some of the crew of yet another Greek warship, parked alongside, watched with idle curiosity as we made fast to the quay. We saw a lot of warships on this trip. With much justification, Greece is very wary of its massively armed neighbour Turkey, with whom it is

in constant conflict over territory, and had only a few months earlier nearly been involved in a shooting war over a rock outcrop occupied by a few sheep.

This is a conflict which goes back as far as history itself, so far be it from me to cast any opinions on the rights and wrongs of the situation, but Greece is a member of the EC, and therefore technically one of us. Turkey on the other hand is a belligerent nation, armed to the teeth with all the latest weaponry from the United States, with one of the largest standing armies in the world. While hiding under America's umbrella (and with Blair so close to Clinton that he should be renamed Monica), Turkey seems to have carte blanche to do what it will in its part of the world. If that means invading parts of Iraq, or keeping some 40,000 soldiers in illegal occupation of part of Cyprus, then why the hell not? I am, however curious why the EC finds it necessary to give hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to Turkey. Oh.... I see.... It's to buy more weapons from Uncle Sam.

Round about the time of this trip, Turkey signed a military co-operation pact with that other belligerent in the region – Israel. But of course I'm not allowed to say that for fear of being accused of anti-Semitism. Everyone knows that every Israeli has been personally persecuted for 2000 years. One thing is for certain: no good is going to come of this pact in Near Eastern relations. Hardly surprising then that the Greek navy was staying on its toes.

Patmos was an excuse to stretch ones legs and get off the boat for a couple of hours. This is just long enough for a wander round town, or a short bus ride up to that fortress on the hill. It is not the sort of place you would want to stay - just a few restaurants and bars, a harbour full of small boats, and the odd souvenir shop. Two days of that and I would be forming an escape committee.

Apart from dropping off a few supplies for the islanders and as a photo opportunity for the passengers, there is not a lot of point stopping at Patmos. In fact from November to April, the island is off the ship's itinerary altogether.

We returned to the ship in time for dinner call at seven, remembering to purchase our meal tickets on route to the dining room. I waved the tickets at Brucie. He took them from me and directed us to the seats we had occupied the previous evening, as the ship cast off and began to wend its way back out to sea.

We were joined a few minutes later by another married couple of around our own age. She was Greek. He was from 'Brum'. They both now lived in Coral Bay, just a couple of miles from our house near Paphos. We got on like a house on fire, swapping anecdotes about life in Cyprus. Curiously, the Greek lady did not like the Greeks, and in a mass stereotyping of the nation as a whole, considered them to be extremely rude. They were on route to Thessaloniki to visit relatives, and neither seemed very keen on the idea. It was not a trip they made very often.

Our Brummie dinner guest claimed a milk allergy. He took one look at the fish dish – a delightfully chunky piece of sea bass marinated in an oily sauce – and decided that he couldn't eat it, because the sauce must contain milk. My repeated thank yous to the agreeable Ukrainian waitress the previous evening must have struck a chord, for she dumped the extra portion of fish on my plate. It was excellent, and I did not like to mention to my Brummie friend that there had been no milk anywhere near it during its preparation.

The dessert was ice cream. Guess what that is made of. Guess who had two portions.

If I had any conscience, I might have felt guilty at eating half our dinner companion's meal, but I hadn't and I didn't. I did, however, invite them to the bar for a drink. We promised to look them up on our return to Paphos.

The bit of the Mediterranean between Patmos and Pireas is rather open and unprotected by land masses. It therefore has a tendency to roll. This is apparently true whatever time of the year you sail, but in winter I would imagine that it gets very rough here. Our dinner companions confirmed that they had sailed in winter and the sea was breaking over the dining room windows. Now that IS rough! Those who have only seen the Med. in the summer might be tempted to think that this is just a large mill pond, enjoying flat calm conditions. Don't be deluded. In winter this sea gets very angry indeed.

My wife has an inner ear problem which renders her liable to dizziness and motion sickness. By the end of the meal she was looking decidedly green, and was annoyed with me for inviting our new friends for a drink. I could see that I was going to get some earache after we left the bar.

We only stayed for the one drink, and we made our excuses and left. My wife was decidedly unwell, so I risked life and limb in the top bunk, so that she could have easy access to the bathroom.

Wednesday morning and my wife was still feeling very groggy, though the sea was now back to its familiar flat calm. She could not face breakfast, and I could not face Brucie, so it was another expensive Nescafe sachet on the sun deck as we chugged towards land. The ship had lost some time in the night, so at the scheduled docking time of 8 am, we were still some way off. We were in no more hurry than the Nissos Kypros, so this is not something we were going to lose sleep over and in any case, we did not have to be in Patras until five that afternoon. Easy peasy!

As we returned our cabin keys and collected our passports from reception, we experienced a very nasty shock. A notice had been placed on the wall by the reception desk indicating that we would have to pay 3000 drachmas (about £6 sterling) to take our car off the ship. Worse still, we would have to pay CY£20 (about £25 sterling) on our return to Limassol. This is nothing to do with the port handling charges detailed in the brochure, and was not mentioned anywhere previously. This seems to be a blatant rip off by the shipping company, Salamis Lines, to keep the ticket price lower than it otherwise need be. I wasn't impressed and my complaint to the purser was met with the all encompassing shrug, which conveys more than a dozen words of reply.

Chapter 3 - Greece

As with the loading procedure, unloading was chaotic. There is no room in the garage as the cars are parked closely together, so you have to take your hand luggage to the quayside, then leaving your passengers to wait, wander back to the ship to collect the car, handing over the 3000 drachma before the vehicle is released. Then what?

The immigration building is about a quarter of a mile from the ship, and at half that distance is the exit from the port. You have to park the car, then go to the vehicle transit office and hand in the paperwork provided at Limassol. Ultimately the paperwork is stamped and you are free to take the vehicle away. I suppose you should then go to immigration and show your passport, but hey, I'm an EC citizen and Greece is an EC country. In any case no-one said that's where we had to go. I drove the truck to the exit and waved the paper at the security man on the gate. He just waved us through. We couldn't believe it. No wonder there are so many illegal immigrants in Europe.

Now where to?

Outside the port entrance is a roundabout. You have to accept that this was the first time I had ever driven on the right, and my vehicle is right hand drive, because in Cyprus they drive on the correct side of the road. At the far side of the roundabout was a sign displaying EXIT in English. That had to be it. To emphasise the point two men on a motor scooter trundled round the roundabout and took the indicated exit. I followed, and was a little surprised to see both of the riders turning to stare at us. They then drove off across the footpath leaving me facing the wrong way in the morning rush hour traffic.

I caused a minor traffic jam as I turned round in the road to return to the roundabout. Now I do have some small knowledge of the Greek language, but some of the words coming from the open windows of the cars I had inconvenienced were not in my Greek dictionary. I waved, smiled apologetically and gunned the truck back to the roundabout and tried another way out. Success!

I had heard that road deaths in Greece are amongst the highest in Europe, but these guys are pussy cats behind a wheel. In any case a couple of tons of large truck has a remarkably intimidating effect on the drivers of small cars and I experienced no problem whatsoever. If I wanted to change lanes they let me. If I wanted to make a turn - I turned. This was easier than I thought it was going to be. Only the occasional left turn caused a few heart stopping moments as I forgot about the traffic approaching from the right, but I soon got the hang of it.

Pireas is a toilet – one of those nasty hole in the floor toilets, without any paper. It is without question the dirtiest scruffiest place I have ever been. The heat was intimidating. Pollution from thousands of badly maintained vehicles choked the air. If there is an MOT testing system here, it is not rigorously enforced. Half the vehicles we saw would not have been allowed on the road in Britain. There were bits hanging off. There were clouds of exhaust smoke. Tyres were bald (though admittedly in such dry weather a bald tyre grips as well, if not better than a treaded one). I had little doubt that rain was unlikely that week.

The shops and houses were not much better. There was litter everywhere. Shops displayed their wares on the pavements in the dust and smog; and the Greeks could teach even the Cypriots a thing or two about inconsiderate parking. Food from one of the street shops would give you lead poisoning. It is not a place in which you would want to

linger.

We quickly picked up a sign for Patras and headed off in that direction.

According to my AA road map of Europe, the motorway is a toll road, and running alongside is the A8. In practice, the two are at times indistinguishable. Unless you have lots of time and local knowledge, it is almost impossible to avoid the toll road, so for this leg of the journey, we did not even try.

As we climbed out of Pireas, in a stop start stream of rush hour traffic, you get a good view of the port and the sea around. The Greeks are a famous seafaring race, but until you see it with you own eyes, nothing prepares you for the sheer volume of shipping that uses the port. There were hundreds and hundreds of ships of every shape and size from super tankers to small coasters. Everywhere you looked there were ships, and this went on for miles and miles.

After an hour of chugging along in heavy traffic, windows tight shut against the air outside, air conditioner running flat out, we turned on to what is euphemistically described as a motorway.

We were appalled to see that the hard shoulder had been used for fly tipping of builders waste, which spilled into the carriageway. The road is mainly of two lanes in each direction with a sort of hard shoulder separated by a white line from the carriageway. Sometimes there is a central reservation. Sometimes there is opposing traffic.

As you clear the town, you hit the toll gates, and it costs 600 drachma (£1.22) to proceed further. You are presented with a paper ticket which bears dire warnings that you must retain it in case you are stopped by the authorities. I can read the Greek alphabet so road signs did not present too much problem, though to be fair, many were duplicated in English.

We travelled on to Korinthos where we left the motorway to have a look at the Korinth canal. This was a magical bit of engineering to cut away a small hill to dig a canal across the isthmus thereby saving hundreds of miles of sea journey to get to the other side. You can stand on the bridge, and, if you are lucky, shipping will pass hundreds of feet beneath your feet. It's brilliant and a definite stopping point should you ever be in the area.

It was at this point that I noticed my camera counter indicated that I had passed shot 36 on the film and was still taking pictures. I opened the back of the camera and found that the film had jammed and all my beautiful shots of Limassol, Rhodes, Patmos, the ship and Korinthos had been lost. I ripped the film from the camera and threw it into the canal. I replaced the film, only to find that the camera itself had now jammed. You don't expect this sort of thing from Nikon, so I threw it in the car and recovered my other camera body from my bag. That one still worked. At least I could take the Korinthos pictures again.

An old peasant woman approached selling lucky white heather. Where had she been half an hour earlier I asked myself. I felt like pushing her off the bridge. Instead I declined. She persisted. I glared at her and she backed away muttering those Greek words that were not in my dictionary. A pair of stereotype fat American tourists in garish clothing came on to the bridge. The woman scuttled off to pester them.

"Wow honey. Lucky white heather." I could hear their voices from the other side of the bridge as the old woman forced yet another bunch on to them. I could swear that she

looked back at me with a grin of smug satisfaction. Had she been closer at this point I might have given her that push.

We returned to the car. My mood was gloomy. It was oppressively hot and the air conditioning barely provided a welcome respite.

We travelled on along the back road for a couple of miles before rejoining the motorway traffic. Dangerous looking goods vehicles whistled past us at ridiculous speeds; and apparently you are expected to drive on the hard shoulder to allow faster moving traffic to pass. I was keeping to around 90 kph to keep the fuel consumption down. The big diesel starts to guzzle at anything above 80, especially with the air conditioner sapping about twenty percent of its energy. 90 was a fair compromise between economy and progress. The Mitsubishi is one of the few diesels that does not sound like a tractor from behind the wheel. Despite the intense heat outside, it showed not the slightest sign of being ruffled. It was as if it was enjoying the freedom from being cooped up in that ship.

Ten minutes more and my back teeth were floating. I could do with a pee and a cuppa – in that order. We pulled into a lay by and switched off the engine. That was a mistake. Immediately, the sun seared in through the windows stripping away all the coolness that the air conditioner had produced. I fired up the engine again. Bugger the cost. I left it ticking over, and ran the blower flat out.

I stepped out into a furnace. It was reportedly 39 degrees in the shade. In the sunshine it must have been in the middle fifties. Now Cyprus gets hot, but this was oppressive, dry, searing heat. I dropped the tail gate of the truck which makes a handy kitchen range, and set up the camping stove to boil water for a cup of tea. My wife began to wilt visibly and retreated to the cab.

I stepped behind the hedge – more of a few tatty shrubs than a hedge - for a pee. Clearly I had found the spot where every other traveller finds the need to perform bodily functions. The smell was indescribable. There was excrement and toilet paper everywhere. This was disgusting, but we were not to pass anything that remotely resembled a public convenience, so what do they expect. I added a stream of urine to the mess and beat a hasty retreat.

I don't care how hot it is, there is nothing more refreshing than a cup of tea. My wife was less convinced, but I felt much better after the brew. My annoyance at the loss of the photographs had abated. We packed up again and resumed our journey along the motorway.

A few miles farther along the road we passed another toll gate. It was closed. Rather it was open to traffic. There was just no-one about to collect the money. We did not linger to find out why, but for the next twenty miles we played leap frog with an ancient lorry bearing police badges. It was flat out at 90 kph. We passed it on the flat, then on every down incline it would gather enough speed to drift past again. Every time it passed, the two uniformed occupants stared coldly at us through the side window. The first couple of times we smiled back with the sort of smile that said 'hey we are friendly foreigners; there's no reason for you to stop us', then when it became clear that they were in a hurry to get where they were going, we ignored them, kept the speedo on 90, and let them do their own thing.

I was a little disappointed when they turned off. It had been quite a game watching them

struggle to get past, just giving the throttle a hint more pressure, putting the speed up to 91 or 92 to make their task a little harder, then backing off as they crept past, their truck belching a cloud of black exhaust smoke.

All around, the scenery was beautiful, yet everywhere the Greeks had touched, they had ruined. The buildings were ugly, not like the pretty buildings on Patmos or even Rhodes, and everything that remotely resembled a beauty spot had either been developed or used as a rubbish tip.

We had to fork out another 500 drachma in tolls before we arrived in Patras about lunch time. Our ship to Bari left at seven that evening so there was lots of time to kill.

There's not much to do in Patras.

We found the main ferry terminal, an impressive structure that looked rather better organised than the part of Pireas port we had used earlier. We dumped the vehicle and found a café outside the terminal, where we had a sandwich and coke for lunch. At the café we found a couple of families who had been with us on the Nissos Kypros, so we exchanged a few pleasantries and asked if they knew where we had to go. Of course they were just as much in the dark as we were.

We wandered over to the terminal building and found it largely and strangely deserted. There was no Ventouris check-in desk and it appeared that most of the staff who might be able to help had gone to lunch.

On returning to the car, my wife spotted a small sign, which read something like Ventouris 800 metres farther along the road at gate 5. We drove the 800 metres until it seemed we were about to leave town. To our right we could see several modern ferries towering above the wall of the port. Just as we were about to give up we spotted it: Ventouris F/B Venus, and beyond, gate 5.

After the main terminal building, the terminal at gate 5 is a rather seedy affair, aimed more at the needs of heavy lorry drivers, and there were quite a few milling about. I drove in through the gate. I stopped alongside a rather bored looking policeman.

"Ventouris?"

He pointed at the customs shed and walked off. I drove over to the shed. It was before 2. We were not supposed to be there 'til at least 5, so not surprisingly it was closed. Rather it was an open building, but there was no-one there, but for a waitress at the small café, who was deep in conversation with a young man. There were romantic rather than business waves flowing between them. There were also a few scruffily dressed men whom we presumed were lorry drivers. I didn't recognise their language, which was of Eastern European origin.

The Ventouris check in was firmly closed and looked abandoned. It was oppressively hot and now humid to add to the discomfort. The rotating fans just moved the fug around. We returned to the truck and drove unchallenged off the port and went to look for somewhere to pass the afternoon. In doing so, we spotted the Ventouris office and there appeared to be someone at home.

The woman behind the desk spoke excellent English. I explained that we had tickets on the Venus for that afternoon. I asked her what the procedure was. She said that we

should return to the check-in desk at gate 5 and someone would come at four o'clock. Now we were cooking on gas.

We drove around a bit, had a bit of a walk, but Patras is about as interesting as Bootle, so we soon got fed up of that and decided to return early to the terminal, where at least there should be toilet facilities.

We were early of course and still had a couple of hours to kill, so we sat and shuffled in the heat. There were perhaps a dozen or so others sitting around, who we assumed were also waiting. A few of them were obviously Italian, smartly dressed and speaking that delightfully musical language. They looked even more out of place than we did. The rest were lorry drivers.

The toilets were interesting. There were separate rooms for ladies and gents, but no signs to indicate which, and both were identically laid out. I noticed that the men were using the left hand door, so my wife logically used the right. They were barely clean and smelled like the monkey house at the zoo. There was no paper and there were no towels, or electric dryer, but at least there was running water.

Lying on one of the benches in the waiting hall was a human form completely hidden under a pile of blankets – and don't forget it was still well over thirty degrees in this building. From the smell arising from the blankets, which kept everyone at a safe distance, I suspected a corpse, but after an hour, the corpse got up and proved to be a cleaning woman, who was completely bathed in sweat. Her clothes were wet and clinging to her. Her hair was dripping and she looked decidedly unwell. She wandered off to the toilets and selected the right hand door, to emerge a few minutes later wiping her brow on a grubby piece of cloth. She picked up her bedding and left, leaving an evil damp patch on the vinyl upholstery of the bench.

We alternately wandered around, sat in the truck with the cooler on and sat in the waiting hall until about five o'clock when the same bloody woman from the office came and opened up the check-in. Why she could not have stamped my ticket and given me a boarding card when I spoke to her at the office I don't understand.

Because the Italians were quicker off the blocks than we were, we were third in the queue. The lorry drivers did not seem to be in any hurry to stir. Perhaps they had another boat to catch?

The woman looked at our passports, then looked puzzled at our tickets. She quizzed us as to where we had bought the tickets. I told her. She studied ledgers, then gave the all too familiar shrug and handed us the boarding cards. We knew where the ship was, so we made our way along the quayside and were waved onto the ship.

Wow! This ship was huge. The garage was like a jumbo jet hangar, with more than one floor. We were directed up the ramp to the upper floor. This ship was a floating multi-storey car park.

We grabbed our belongings and went through the door straight into the reception. This ship was something else. Superb!

The purser looked at our boarding pass and handed a key to one of the stewards, who led us down the now familiar rabbit warren of passages and staircases to the front of the ship and showed us into our cabin.

Wow! And wow again! This cabin had two double beds, a bathroom with separate shower room, a table and chairs, a wardrobe and positively acres of space. The windows, and I mean windows, not portholes, filled one wall and overlooked the front of the ship. Surely some mistake I thought. I half looked round as if to get some reassurance from the steward, but he had already gone. I looked at my wife and she looked back. We were speechless. This was more like a stateroom than the double bunked cabin we had booked.

It became a little clearer later on, when we found that there were almost no passengers on the ship. There were some HGV drivers and, of course, the Italians, who were in the adjacent cabins. There was also a German family, but that appeared to be about it.

I was a little alarmed by the flushing toilet in the cabin, and my wife was petrified of it. It was one of those vacuum toilets. You press the button; nothing happens for a moment, then whoooosh! The contents of the pan are whisked away. It did not help that we had read somewhere that a rather obese lady had been killed by one of these toilets. She had pressed the flush, either by accident or design, whilst still seated, and because her bulk had effectively sealed the mouth of the pan, her innards were sucked away by the vacuum. The thought of it came to mind every time we opened the bathroom door.

It's only an overnight hop to Bari, so there's just time for a meal, a sit down and a sleep before docking.

We had the restaurant to ourselves. Well actually there was a crew member with his family at one table, but they left soon after we arrived. The menu was impressive and reasonably priced, but most of the choices were off. My wife settled on moussaka. Moussaka is one of those dishes that can be either wonderful – as provided by, for example, Aspromalis restaurant in Yeroskipou (Cyprus), or a disgusting stodge, as made by most other restaurants. Very few have the quality of home cooking. It is generally a dish to be avoided.

I decided not to risk it and was persuaded by the waiter to go for the special - barbecued king prawns. As the dishes were served, I could see my mistake. The moussaka proved to be a delight, and the king prawns, while tasty enough, were only a nibble for someone of my size. I watched jealously as my wife mopped up the last few morsels of her moussaka. I went to bed still feeling hungry; but not before we sat in front of the windows, watching the sun go down over a glass or two of that Keo brandy from Cyprus. During this time my wife went to the fearsome lavatory and missed the dolphins that danced around in the sea off our bows. She was cleaning her teeth the following morning so she missed the turtle that was sunbathing just to the starboard side (that's the right for you landlubbers) of the ship. That made me feel a lot better about the moussaka, but I didn't say anything.

We slept like royalty in those huge beds – though given the problems the royalty have had recently, perhaps that was not such a good analogy. It's a wonder that some of them get any sleep at all. We didn't bother with breakfast, but went down to the bar for a coffee. We were promised arrival at 12.15pm – though the brochure claimed 11.30. What is it about shipping timetables in this part of the world. If they mean 12.15, then why can't they put that in the timetable? Three quarters of an hour might not mean much in the overall scheme of things, but it certainly would if you were planning to – say – catch a train that left at 12!

The harbour officials arrived on board with a pair of large dogs. These were not your well

trained drug sniffing variety of dogs, but somebody's pets. All the passengers were assembled in the bar. There cannot have been more than twenty in total. Most must have sneaked aboard just before we sailed from Patras, because we had not seen them earlier. Judging by the numbers, there would have been no profit for Ventouris on this trip – yet our preferred return dates had been booked solid, so presumably it is not always like this. We were thankful it had been a slack time, for otherwise we would have missed out on that super cabin.

Chapter 4 – Italy at Last

We trooped off the ship down the staircase to garage. A couple of policemen in uniform cursorily checked our passports, and waved us through. The garage was almost empty. There was a motor caravan with German plates, a couple of vehicles with United Nations registrations, and no more than half a dozen others, parked in a row, behind our truck. Actually the motor caravan had formed a separate queue all on its own, but you can't expect Germans to stand in line. All of these vehicles took but a tiny space against one wall – I think they call them bulkheads on ships – of the vast garage. In the middle of the space was a tilting ramp. It was closed, but as I checked over the truck, it began to open. It was all rather clever as the ramp could be tilted from either end. It was tilted the opposite way from when we had loaded.

I checked the odometer: 237 km since we had boarded the Nissos Kypros at Limassol.

I drove down to the main garage below. There were a couple of huge articulated lorries about to leave, but I was waved past them by some obliging crew member.

It's the same old story at Bari. There's no indication of where you should go. I stopped in a queue behind some lorries. The Germans in their motor caravan went steaming past followed by the United Nations' cars. They seemed to know where they were going, so I joined their lane and followed all the way to a gate manned by two uniformed policemen. There were traffic lights at the gate. The lights changed and we all drove out into the road beyond. There were no formalities, no customs checks. My bright red and silver truck might just as well have been invisible.

We had been warned repeatedly by well meaning friends about the dangers of travel in Italy. The gist of the advice was to get the boat to Ancona or Venice in the North, then don't stop 'til you clear the country's borders. There were dire tales of bag snatches from motor scooters, smashed windows and thefts from the car at traffic lights, robbers, pick pockets, car thieves etc., and no-one even mentioned the Italian Mafia. We were also told that Italians drive like lunatics, and that we were foolish to visit the South. Naples should be avoided like the plague. Even the Sunday Times got in on the act with a travel feature that coincided with our departure. SEE NAPLES AND LEAVE ran the headline.

None of this explained how you got to see such famous sights as Pompeii or even Rome without visiting the south of the country. We ignored all the warnings. In any case, I have worked as a policeman in Manchester's Moss Side. I have been petrol bombed, stoned and threatened with assorted weapons so a few Italian criminals were not going to spoil our trip.

Our first impressions of Bari, were of a rather seedy and run down holiday resort. The road we were travelling on was paved with ancient paving slabs, roughly a metre square – I didn't get down on hands and knees with a tape measure, but they looked to be about a metre - that must have been in place since at least the early 19th century. They had stood up well to the traffic that cannot have been envisaged when the road was laid, but their foundation had sagged a bit leaving the joints uneven; and where an odd corner had broken away, there was a vicious pot hole. This did not exactly ensure a comfortable ride, and we were going to see a lot of roads constructed like this.

We very soon found the Italian road builders' deliberate mistake. They forgot the road signs. There are almost no road signs on roads in Italy! There are thousands and thousands of advertising hoardings, which clutter every highway and byway. I find these

extremely distracting. Sometimes at junctions, there is a 'totem pole' on which there are indicator boards pointing to the companies in a certain direction. These boards measure about half a metre by twenty centimetres, and are usually painted with a brown background. There can be as many as twenty of these indicator boards mounted on a single pole. Sometimes, if you are lucky, one of these indicators is painted blue or green and indicates the name of a town. This is usually a local town that is not on the map – well not on my AA map. The blue signs are for local or trunk roads. The green signs point to the motorways.

As you might imagine, at anything above twenty five miles an hour, these signs are almost impossible to spot. Most motorways are subject to tolls, so we were only interested in the blue signs. At least the green ones sometimes give the name of the next large town, which might just appear on the map, but don't count on it.

As the town turned into industrial estate - and given the position of the sun in the sky we were travelling roughly north west, we were at least heading in the right direction. I'm not sure how you would manage if it was raining! – my wife spotted a green sign. 'NAPOLI'. I had missed it, but she assured me that we had to turn left, which did not seem the right direction to me.

That's another thing. Italian road signs are, not unreasonably, all written in Italian, and that means Italian spelling of town and city names. Don't buy a map with English spellings or you might never find your way home. Most of them are fairly obvious. It does not take much brain power to work out that Napoli, for example, is the same as 'Naples'. But it is not always so simple.

I've been married to my wife for a lot longer than I care to think about and I know that she does not tell porkies, so if she says we turn left, I will usually give her the benefit of the doubt, and when I don't, it's usually me that's wrong. Women can be so annoying!

I turned left and immediately picked up a second sign, this time for Altamura via the SS96, which was definitely on the right path. The idea was to head for Potenza then on to Salerno, where hopefully we would find somewhere to stay the night.

Soon we left habitation behind and travelled on through rather uninteresting farmland, with what appeared to be a preponderance of grain crops. There were very few buildings – mostly agricultural – and we had travelled some distance when I noticed a tree by a small lane on the left side of the road. Standing under the tree wearing tight red cycling shorts and a yellow halter top, with bare midriff and sporting a parasol was Whoopie Goldberg.

I have to point out, before I receive the writ from Whoopie's solicitors, that it wasn't really Whoopie Goldberg, but at eighty kilometres an hour it was an easy mistake to make. She was wearing that outfit she wore in 'Sister Act' – no, not the nun's habit. I pointed her out to my wife, but she had already spotted her for herself.

"That looks like Whoopie Goldberg. What's she doing out here?"

The penny did not drop at first, but half a kilometre further on there was another tree, another lane and there she was again. The attire was similarly garish, and this time there was no parasol to help the tree keep off the sun. For the next few miles, every tree had a black prostitute. Just so the shirt lifters did not feel left out, some of the prostitutes were

male – again all were black. Or were they there for the girls' pleasure? – No. I don't think so.

But where the hell had they all come from? There was no habitation for miles. They must be shipped in by bus every morning and collected at night. Where from and what's more to the point, why were they allowed to get away with it? It wasn't exactly discreet.

Soon we had left the entertainment behind and the countryside began to look altogether more beautiful, with rolling hills and waving cornfields and a road free from traffic.

We were getting a bit hungry, but we were soon to learn one of the most bizarre practices of the Italians – Siesta! I have no argument about the desirability of sleeping in the afternoon when the heat of the day becomes unbearable. It also means that you will be fresh and perky for the evening. But here they take it to extremes. The whole country stops and from 12 'til 4 nothing stirs. No doubt this is the time that all those African prostitutes slip ashore. No-one would notice,

We drove through village after small village and not even a stray dog stirred. All the shops and bars were shuttered and the sound of the truck echoed around the empty streets. It was like one of those American disaster movies, where some alien invader has snatched away the population.

Around 2.30 we drove through yet another village and on a bend in the road, I saw the open door of a bar and there were people inside. I slammed on the anchors and reversed to the doorway. Several faces peered sullenly through the door.

I left my wife to guard the truck and went in search of nourishment. In a glass case next to the beer pump were some mountainous triple-decker sandwiches on white bread, oozing mayonnaise and filled with grated vegetables and other promising looking fare.

The barman wandered towards me and looked at me questioningly. There were three others on my side of the bar. They all stared. If all three shared a brain they would make a half-wit. There were not many branches in their family trees. It was like a scene from Deliverance!

The barman wiped his hands on a grubby tea towel. He raised his head in question. I pointed to the sandwiches. "*Due per favore*" I couldn't remember the Italian for sandwich. He gabbled a stream of incomprehensible Italian with a guttural accent. I repeated my request and more insistently stabbed my forefinger towards the sandwiches.

There was that shrug again. They do it here too. This one meant 'bloody foreigners'. He wrapped two sandwiches from the pile in white paper and neatly twisted the ends. For a clumsy looking peasant labourer he certainly made a beautifully neat parcel. He rang the till and said something unintelligible. I looked at the indication on the till display, giving thanks for modern technology, and read 6000 lire (about £2).

Now what's all that about? Six thousand lire. All those noughts start to get very silly when the sums reach more than a few pounds in value. Why don't they knock off the last three noughts and re-issue the notes as New Lire or some such, like the French did some years back when the Franc became too unwieldy? When you consider a one thousand lire note is worth about forty pence, you can see why Prada do so well with those handbags. They are needed to carry all those useless notes.

I suppose the Euro will put an end to the problem, but can you really see the Italians, the French and the Germans all using the same currency, just so the big supermarket chains can screw another few pounds of profit. It's not going to work is it?

I handed over a 10,000 lire note and was given the appropriate change. I expressed my thanks and left. They watched me all the way to the car, and, I suspect, until we disappeared into the distance.

At Potenza, the SS93 joins one of the few free motorways – they call them autostrades - in the country; and on a wide, almost deserted road, the miles fall away rapidly. From here, it is downhill all the way to the west coast. Credit where it's due, the Italians certainly know how to build roads. They might not have a clue when it comes to putting up direction signs, but the roads are superb. In Britain or France, when the road comes up against a hill, the road builders find a way round. In Italy they just tunnel straight through. Where there's a valley, there's none of that up and down business to run along the bottom, they whack in a viaduct. Some of these viaducts run alongside the hills for miles.

Given that there is so little traffic, you have to wonder where all the money comes from to do it that way. While we Brits. have to struggle through road works and inadequate road systems, our taxes to the EC are paying for Italian gangsters to drive their big Alfas and Lancias along superb empty roads.

You approach Salerno from on high, which gives commanding views of the bay. There is a lot of industry here and you drive through it as you approach the town. We didn't much care for what we saw, but Salerno is at the southern end of the Amalfi coast, destination for thousands of British holiday makers and one of the things we wanted to see.

Our interest had been piqued by a movie we had seen on Cyprus TV, where the action supposedly took place in Ravello. We had marvelled at the sweeping roads with their fabulous views. As we turned onto the Amalfi coastal drive, it very quickly became clear that this film had been shot elsewhere.

The Amalfi coast road is about 75km in length, and the views are indeed stunning, but the road is very narrow and winding. No long sweeping straights – and where was the Alfa Romeo Spyder and the girl with the flowing red hair? It is jammed with traffic and invaded by hundreds of idiots on motor scooters. Overtaking is impossible, but Italian drivers in their Fiat Unos and Lancia Uno clones manage it. They manage it by driving recklessly on the wrong side of the road into blind bends. In those blind bends they almost inevitably have to swerve to avoid an oncoming scooter, or more usually us in our truck.

The truck with its poor turning circle is not the ideal vehicle for this road. It lacks the acceleration to get out of trouble. It is too wide for any possibility of overtaking – though the Uno brigade sailed past as though we weren't there – and it has problems with the tight bends. Had it not been for the power steering, I would have had forearms like Popeye! The fact that tourist coaches are allowed to use this road was a prospect that filled me with alarm.

By Amalfi town, my blood pressure had reached bursting point and I was ready to drive right over the next scooter that carved me up. A tiny sign pointing inland towards Napoli offered a welcome relief that was gratefully grabbed. The road was very steep and

winding, but mercifully free from traffic. The truck has the power to climb almost vertically, so the incline presented no problems, but those bloody Unos would have struggled, so I prayed that I did not run up against one here.

Eventually the road levelled out, and some two hours after starting our Amalfi adventure, we picked up a sign for Pompeii. Pompeii was right at the top of our agenda.

Chapter 5 - Pompeii

We approached from the Sorrento road. We had not actually been to Sorrento. We would save that for later, but this road runs into the Salerno/Napoli autostrade at right angles, just by one of that road's toll gates. My direction was straight across the approach to the autostrade, my concentration completely gone once I saw the 'camping' sign.

There was a huge screech of tyres on ancient paving slabs. I had forgotten for a moment that I was driving on the right, and a large Lancia was bearing down on us from the right in a cloud of tyre smoke. I waved a pathetic apology to the driver, and gunned the truck into the opening opposite. The truck seemed to respond to my adrenaline surge and positively darted out of harm's way.

The road turned out to be the approach to Pompeii railway station, opposite which is an entrance to the ruins, and a hundred metres further is the entrance to Camping Zeus, our first camp site in Italy, and our first opportunity to use the new tent. We were not so stupid as to leave it until this time to erect the tent for the first time, but we had not actually used it before.

Camping Zeus was not listed in the RAC Camping in Europe handbook, but no matter, it was an excellent site and we found a pitch at the far side, under a tree for shelter. We were both absolutely worn out, and erecting the tent proved something of a trial. Next door from a small back-packers' tent, two English girls, of about the same ages as our own daughters, saw our plight and wandered across to see if they could help. Not wishing to appear a complete prat, I politely declined, but it still took an hour to erect a tent that, with practice, can be thrown up inside twenty minutes.

The secret of comfort with inflatable mattresses is not to put too much air into them. Four lungful in each segment is all that is required. It should look inflated but you should be able to pinch thumb and forefinger together through the material. When you lie on it, your weight is spread overall and you are lifted off the ground. It does no harm to put a puff more air in the outer segments to prevent you rolling off in the night.

If you blow it up hard, you run the danger of it bursting in the night. This is because your body heat warms up the air inside which expands and has nowhere to go. I remember one night, many years ago when the kids were small. We were sleeping on an over-inflated double mattress in the awning of our caravan, somewhere in Scotland, and were woken in the night by a huge bang. The two sides of the mattress had pulled apart and the huge resulting hump in the middle of the bed had thrown us on the floor. So be warned!

After a cup of strong tea, and a camping meal cooked on the tailgate of the truck, life began to return to our weary brains. We set off to explore the camp, which, while small, had excellent facilities. Not surprisingly most of the campers were Italian. There were a couple of Dutch registrations and a few Germans. We and the two girls were the only English folk in evidence.

There are only two essential requirements of a tent camping site for happy camping - three if you count a complete absence of children and dogs! – and those are a level, preferably grassed pitch and clean toilet facilities with hot showers. Camping Zeus had both and for a modest 22,000 lire a night (about £7.50) offered impressive value for money.

Next morning we set off on foot to buy groceries – essentials like bread, cheese, ham etc. We found a small ‘alimentari’ – a bit like the old fashioned corner shop grocers that Tesco and Sainsburys wiped off the street plan in Britain. The shop was dingy with a handful of elderly customers dressed in black, but the smell an intoxicating mix of spices, ham and fresh bread.

My Italian is about as useful as the phrase book, which we had left back at the camp site. It got better as the trip went on, but for the moment we were presented with a dilemma. This was not a self service store, where we could grab a basket full of kit and present it at the check-out. The Italian lady behind the counter wanted to serve us personally, and she had even less English than we had Italian between us. The woman in front of us in the queue ordered some wonderful looking prosciutto (that’s what Sainsburys call boiled ham in England!). That would do nicely for lunch. When it came to our turn, I pointed hopefully at the ham and held up six fingers. The woman immediately saw the joke and laughed. These southern Italians are such lovely people. She understood my request for six slices. Bread was a little more difficult as they had all shapes and sizes. I pointed at the shelf.

“Pane?”

“Si. Pane.” I said even more hopefully. The shopkeeper was playing the game and offered her hands in a variety of sizes, like an angler bragging about his catch. I indicated the larger size. She was better at this game than me and laughed that delightful laugh again.

Her husband – it said Claudio Giordano on the receipt – a rather scruffy, grouchy individual hogged the till as though someone was going to snatch it from the counter. Surely not me? He didn’t deserve her.

I was a little bemused to notice that the bread was sold by weight, but nevertheless 5,400 lire (less than £2) was very reasonable for six ounces of superb ham and a large loaf of fresh baked bread.

Across the road was the greengrocer. Some tomatoes would go rather well with that ham. Luigi Di Cascone – doesn’t that just trip off the tongue – did not keep much in the way of stock, and his tomatoes did not look too well, but a bag of four cost twenty pence, so I shouldn’t grumble.

The bread was light with sharp crusts and a delicate flavour. The ham lived up to expectations, but was cut a little thin for my taste. I think the idea is to get more surface area on the taste buds, as the quantity was generous enough for our sandwiches. The tomatoes were utterly awesome. I have never tasted such delicious tomatoes before.

When you cut a tomato, it tends to leak an almost clear, or maybe pale pink juice. These tomatoes burst open with a rich red juice that stained our chopping board – and the taste just burst with sweetness. Never mind that they looked a bit misshapen and bruised, they were wonderful. Clearly, Italy keeps this tomato production for its own domestic consumption. Either that, or the flavour disappears on the way to Tesco.

The camp site was within easy walking distance of the ruins, so after an early lunch, we headed that way. Entrance fee was 12,000 lire (less than a fiver) and you can wander at will. This part of the world gets oppressively hot in early July, so we took a couple of bottles of water – none of this pretentious mineral water, just fresh water straight from the

camp site tap.

Good footwear is essential. You don't want to be walking round the ruins in flip flops, no matter how hot it gets. Those go anywhere sports sandals are just the thing, but with open toed footwear like this, keep away from the grass as there are poisonous snakes in Italy!

Pompeii, as everyone will no doubt be aware, is the excavated ruin of a city that was buried in a pyroclastic flow of superheated dust from an eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. This dust vaporised the inhabitants, some of whom have been re-created in plaster of Paris from the hollows they left when the dust hardened to rock around them. It also preserved the buildings to a remarkable degree, so that the frescoes remain to show how the ancients of Pompeii decorated their homes and work places.

What most people who have not visited may not be aware of is the sheer scale of the place. It is quite simply huge, and takes a long time to explore; and everywhere you go, you are aware of the brooding presence of the still active Vesuvius lurking in the background. One day, maybe soon, it will blow its top again and in a couple of thousand years tourists will be picking their way through the ruins of Naples, which lies a little to the north of here. It's a sobering thought and one cannot help but keep glancing up at the hollow peak to check whether the white cap is cloud or smoke.

The water did not last long, but thankfully there were a couple of points where taps had been added to ancient drinking fountains, where the bottles could be replenished.

I was replenishing the bottles for the third time when I was approached by a Jewish American girl with a New York accent.

"Is this water safe?"

I replied that if it wasn't we would be in trouble tomorrow and continued to fill the bottles. If it was a choice between total dehydration and stomach upset from bugs in the water, I would take the chance and worry about the stomach pains later. I can now report that the water proved perfectly safe. We didn't even experience a twinge of discomfort – but just to be certain, we later drowned any remaining bugs in Keo brandy.

I have to say that despite the heat, Pompeii was wonderful and well worth travelling to see.

As we left the site, we were accosted by dozens of market traders selling oranges, lemons and the juices from them. The juices were available just as they come, straight from the fruits, or frozen into a slush. The region is apparently renowned for its citrus fruits, but when you have lived for any length of time in Cyprus, a country full of citrus orchards, citrus fruits are not the novelty that they might be for those from more northern climes. We declined. A cup of tea is far more refreshing. In any case, I rather suspect that a glass of frozen lemon juice might have the restorative properties of paint stripper.

Having walked around in the sun for six hours, self catering did not seem an exciting option for our evening meal, so we set off on foot to search for sustenance. A few remaining orange sellers eyed us hopefully but we passed by on the opposite side of the road.

At the end of the street was a café advertising pizzas and pasta. Sounded good. They were closing and were not interested in preparing food for us. The waiter explained in

perfect unaccented English that we could find a restaurant if we were to go into Pompeii town. He assured us that it was only a few minutes walk and pointed us in the right general direction.

A few minutes? Hah!

It took us at least half an hour to hike to the edge of town. The place was ominously deserted. Everywhere was closed. Only an occasional vehicle rumbled past on the dark tyre-rubber stained grey paved street.

It was the night Italy were playing France in the World Cup. Nobody, but nobody, takes their football more seriously than the Italians and the Italians love the French just as much as the English do.

Pompeii is an attractive town of typical Italian architecture. The main street has tall buildings that missed the ravages of World War II, and offer a variety of small shops with flats above, their balconies overhanging the street. It was hot and all the windows above us were open. When the game commenced, it was like being in the terraces at Wembley on cup final day. From every window there were the forte sounds of televised football commentary and the roar of the crowd. Every favourable attack by the Italian team brought forth a crescendo of compressed air driven horns from a hundred living rooms. It was deafening.

We found a street café with customers. It was closed, but all the customers were gathered around a large screened television. Our approached was ignored. We continued along the street and almost missed the yellow 'M' of a McDonalds restaurant. American fast food is the curse of the world and normally I would not go anywhere near a burger restaurant for BSE on a bun, but we were starving and it was open. There were two television sets, one for the staff, one for the customers. Both were noisily watching the game.

"A Big Mac with fries and a gristleburger with cheese"

The waiter accepted my order without question and without taking his eyes off the screen began to serve. In the UK McDonalds employees all seem to come out of the same box – scruffy little oiks in their late teens to early twenties with acne and greasy hair. Here, Italian style was much in evidence and had the waiter been wearing designer sunglasses on the top of his head, I would not have been surprised. Glancing round, I noticed that the 'restaurant' even had a distinctly un-American ice cream parlour, selling fruits and an impressive range of Italian ice creams.

He served the Big Mac in a box with a packet of fries

"Gristleburger?" he questioned.

I pointed to the picture of a cheeseburger on the counter top. He didn't take his eyes from the screen and uttered a loud groan as his team missed a shooting opportunity. Momentarily he glanced at my pointed finger and without further comment grabbed the appropriate box from the warmer behind him. Then it was back to the TV.

11,700 lire including drinks of coke – about £4. Not bad. The burgers tasted like Macdonalds burgers everywhere, but they took away the gnawing hunger. We stayed to watch the game as we ate our meal. It was clear that Italy's football team was in big

trouble.

Match over, the air horns packed away until next time, and traffic once again invaded the streets. Faces were gloomy. The bloody French had won.

As we walked back to the camp site, we stopped to buy some peaches from a fruit seller in town. 1200 lire (42 pence) for four of the most delicious peaches we had ever tasted. What is it about country produce in this part of the world? Southern Italy may be poor, but my do they know how to grow fruit and veggies.

We forced the two English girls reluctantly into conversation. Maybe they felt rebuffed at our refusal of their offer of help the previous evening, or more likely it was an age gap thing. They had been to Sorrento for the day. Yes they had visited the ruins. We didn't get much else out of them.

Time for an early night and back on the road tomorrow.

Chapter 6 – On to Rome

Packing the tent was much easier than its erection had been, and we were ready to leave before 8 am. If only the site manager would hurry up, take our money and open the gate.

He had retained our passports – or at least mine – something which is quite common apparently when camping in Europe. The camp sites have no legal right to take the passports, and it's only to stop you from fleeing without paying, but if you argue, you don't get to stay. I had visions of my passport disappearing and being sold to some Albanian illegal immigrant, but it was returned.

We avoided the autostrade and turned right past Claudio's and Luigi's shops and headed along the coast road, past Torre del Greco and Ercolano (Herculanium in English, this town has more spectacular ruins, but we were suffering a culture overdose from the previous day) and pressed on towards Napoli. This route is fascinating and exciting. It is a true glimpse of the past. I doubt that much has changed here since the 19th century. Everywhere it bustles with activity. Street traders rush around with bread, meats and other produce piled on tiny carts. The inevitable Unos dash around, and every third vehicle is a kamikaze motor scooter.

I have ridden motorbikes. I hold a full licence, and have a moped at the house in Cyprus, but the skill – or was it luck – of these scooterists defied explanation. They never seemed to use mirror or signal, and appeared not to look where they were going, but they weaved through the traffic with a deft touch on the throttle and steering without coming into contact with the cars or one another, and were rather less of a nuisance than might be imagined. The easiest ploy was to ignore them completely and let them worry about their own safety.

We had clocked another 330 km from Bari to Pompeii and here was the first heavy traffic we had encountered. The driving position in the truck is quite high, offering a view of the road in front over the roofs of the cars, so the right hand driving position was less of an imposition than it might otherwise have been. It was no longer causing me any problems, though I did have to keep telling myself that the kerb should be on my side, whenever I had the road to myself. This practice I was getting, of driving on the right in traffic, would prove beneficial later on.

Although this was the main coastal route, we did not actually get a glimpse of the sea until we reached Napoli itself. We were not intending to stop, but rather to continue on up the coastal SS7 road via Velletri to Rome (they spell it Roma here!). We particularly wanted to see a fabulous ancient mosaic at the hill town of Palestrina, about which we had seen a TV documentary earlier in the year. Although the bloody AA map was singularly lacking in detail, I figured that if we turned off at Velletri and went cross country to Valmontone, we should find a connecting road to Palestrina.

Interestingly, Palestrina was shown on my map as being unconnected to the road network. It was a blob in an open space. That couldn't be right.

We stopped at a supermarket on the outskirts of Napoli. The designation 'supermerceto' is self explanatory and therefore easy to spot, but this was the first we had seen, so time to stock up on supplies.

The trolleys had those pre-payment locks and chains holding them together, and unfortunately we did not have the 500 lire coin required to separate them, so we had to

make do with what we could carry. The ham and bread were behind the delicatessen counter, but by now I had consulted the phrase book.

“Sei fette di prosciutto per favore”. The assistant picked up a haunch of ham and began slicing. He showed me what he had done and silently begged my further comment.

“Si grazie”. I was getting better at this. I mimicked the local accent. It drew no comment from the staff.

“Vorrei del pane?” I asked questioningly. He turned and selected a loaf and offered it for my approval.

“Si grazie”. Transaction done. The bread was weighed and priced and the purchases were handed over. With these few words and the availability of the odd supermarket, we were certainly not going to have any problem with our self catering.

We added cheese from the cooler – a variety we have not seen before or since, but it looked to be a popular local brand – which proved to be excellent. Butter caused rather more difficulty. I don't think the Italians must be a butter eating nation. We bought a pack. It was pale, unsalted and looked and tasted like lard – yes it was butter! – and it was ludicrously expensive. It was crap! I would have thrown it away after the first taste, but my wife abhors waste. We ate it – eventually - but I promised myself we would not be buying any more Italian butter.

The checkout man looked like a gangster from a 'B' movie. He was fat, tattooed and wore a large gold earring. Quite a nice bloke really. He recognised us instantly as English and said:

“You are Engleesh?”

“Si - Yes”

“Ah. Manchester United?”

I didn't try to tell him that we live in the shadow of Old Trafford, but Manchester United is clearly the first English name known the world over. I nodded and smiled. He chatted away in heavily accented English, and when he had used up his limited vocabulary (which was much greater than mine in Italian) we paid for the food and left.

We were pleased and not a little surprised – after the warnings of our friends and neighbours – that the truck was just as we had left it, the sheeted load of camping equipment et al was untouched. With not a little relief we drove on.

The SS7 may not have been the best choice of route to Rome. It is constantly broken by small towns, with the inevitable build-up of traffic. You couldn't get a good run at it. Once we cleared the environs of Naples, it got better, but the towns we passed through were failing holiday towns, and even in July there was a distinct lack of happy holidaymakers.

Worse. Much worse. Every time we were stopped at traffic lights, we were accosted by beggars. They were gypsies from eastern Europe and did not speak either Italian or English. They did however understand *“Bugger OFF!”* when shouted forcefully through the open window.

The usual routine was for a team of these gypsies to occupy each road at the junction. Then as the traffic was stopped by the lights, they would work their way down the queue of cars, and tap on the driver's (in our case the passenger's) window. If it was a female beggar she would thrust a bundle of rags containing a baby at the window and then replace it with a card with some begging letter in Italian, and written in crayon. Her assistant would then thrust his open palm at the window. They were insistent and could have been intimidating, but they could see from my face that I would have happily driven right over them, and moved on to easier pickings from the car behind.

I guess they must hire these babies by the day, unless it was a baby boomer year for gypsies. All of the babies seemed to be under 12 months old. None of them cried. They just looked mournfully at you. A life of begging starts at an early age.

The older children had learned a new trick. Those tall enough to reach over the bonnets of the cars had old washing up liquid bottles filled with water – at least I hope it was water – and squeegee mops. They persistently tried to wash the windows of the cars then demanded money. I noticed that the Italian response was to turn on the windscreen wipers in advance, which seemed to put them off.

They attacked the cars from the pavement, or passenger side, which makes it even more difficult to prevent. They hadn't reckoned on my vehicle being right hand drive, and one of the more persistent was forced to leap out of the way, shouting abuse in some strange tongue, as I tried to grab him by the throat through the open window.

This begging business was very well organised. The police were conspicuous by their absence.

As well as beggars, Whoopie began to put in an appearance again, but here there were as many white as black prostitutes – again both male and female. They openly plied their trade alongside holiday complexes where, presumably, Italian families would take their children. It was all very shabby and not at all what we had imagined.

I was just discussing with my wife who on earth would want to pay for sex with one of these scrubbers at ten o'clock in the morning when the car in front stopped by one of the prostitutes and as we caught up with them, they drove off together. We looked at one another in disbelief.

For mile after mile, the view was much the same – run-down holiday resorts and industrial areas, but the farther north we travelled the better the road and the lighter the traffic. Near Terracina, about midway between Roma and Napoli is an area of fine beaches, relatively free from development and looking for all the world like parts of the Pembrokeshire coast. Here the Italians gathered in droves. There were thousands of parked cars and everyone seemed to be having a good time. We drove on.

A little farther north and the road turns inland. It is all around here where Mozzarella di Buffala is manufactured. That's the cheese that's too expensive for your local home delivery pizza parlour, but is what makes a real pizza. There are cheese factories dotted all along this road, almost to the outskirts of Roma itself.

Palestrina proved much easier to find than I had hoped. As you cross the A1 autostrade on the SS600, it is clearly signed, and as you approach the town, you can see it perched on the top of its hill and you just point your vehicle in its direction.

The mosaic is an ancient map of the Nile and is housed in a museum that forms part of some converted religious edifice, right at the top of the hill. It is well worth the visit. The entrance charge is 4000 lire, (under £1.50).

When we arrived in the early afternoon, the place looked closed. We had visions of that siesta problem again. A sign pointed to the booking office down the street. The booking office was closed. Things looked bleak, when a second floor window, very high above us opened and a very smart middle aged Italian gentleman shouted something to us in Italian. I had been practising my shrug. "SorryEngleesh".

Why is it that after a couple of days in a foreign country you start to mimic the way the locals speak English? Its bizarre. I just cannot help myself. It's not only me that does it either. I've heard you.

The man directed us to the top of a large flight of stone steps to the front door of the building, where a security guard had come out to see what all the noise was about. He beckoned us over. These people are so friendly.

The museum is ultra modern inside and has few exhibits. It has excellent toilet facilities, which were very welcome; and on the top floor there is the mosaic. The mosaic is huge and mounted on a wall where it is properly lit. It has been thoroughly restored and is wonderful. My wife and I stood gazing at it, alone except for the attendant sitting on a chair in the corner of the room. It's not as though anyone could steal it, but I suppose there might be some vandal who would want to prize out the odd tile as a souvenir.

If you are into mosaics, as we are, they have a second one at Palestrina. This is much smaller and less grand than the map, but worth a peek nonetheless.

I wandered over to the window. There was a fabulous view across the plain to the mountains beyond. I attempted to take a photograph through the glass. The attendant rushed over and opened the window for me. I was amazed and thanked her.

We ambled back downstairs, treading cautiously over a glass floor which showed the ancient foundations illuminated below. I am quite a big chap and I always fear the glass breaking. It never does of course; but you cannot help but worry.

We left and after a short pause to take a few more snaps of the view, wended our way down the hill. Without the hill to guide us, we lost our way a couple of times, but eventually reached the SS6 which was big enough to be shown on our useless map.

We had consulted the RAC camping book earlier and decided to stay the night at Camping Tiber, which, as the name suggests, is on the bank of the river, just outside the outer ring road – the GRA – or tangenziale. It was just a matter of finding the GRA, turning right, then leaving again at junction 6. Easy? Huh!

We hit the outskirts of Rome at four in the afternoon. For the next two hours, we drove some 60 kilometres through wide streets. It's all a bit like that road that runs from the M1 to Swiss Cottage in London, only with railway tracks at the side – or sometimes in the middle. I remember asking my wife why she thought the railway lines were painted white; and I noticed a light train (a bit like Manchester's Metrolink only covered in graffiti) parked by a small grassy hillock. Quite simply we were lost. There were no road signs to help, and those few that we found pointed only to local suburbs of Rome that were not listed on my map. When we passed the train and its hillock again some two hours later, I

knew we were going round in circles. We must have passed the GRA and were travelling around the inner ring road, for certainly we had not turned off anywhere.

I was tearing my hair. I was tired of driving and fighting off beggars. I was ready to kill the next toe rag with a squeegee. My wife, usually a haven of tranquillity and reason in such circumstances suggested we back track. Maybe there would be some signs if facing the other way? The back of a sign which I could see in my mirror pointed back to the SS6 convinced me of her wisdom. We turned around on the forecourt of a petrol station. The attendant rushed out to serve us, then cursed as we turned back into the traffic.

My wife spotted the GRA before me. It was just a normal road on a flyover above our road and it was right by the bloody filling station where we had just turned round. We simply hadn't noticed it. I don't know why, but I was expecting something altogether grander – and better sign-posted. OK perhaps not sign-posted.

I drove up the slip road, followed the indications of the signs and found myself dumped back off it again on the SS6, exactly at the entrance to the filling station. I used it to turn round again. The attendant was not amused. I tried again and used a different combination of slip roads, and.. hey.. I was on a motorway class road, with huge traffic signs and travelling at 90 kph. Brilliant!

Camping Tiber is sign posted from junction 6 on the GRA, and thus easy to find. It's a super site, all that anyone might desire from a camp site, with acres of flat grassy pitches, all with electricity on tap should you need it, with loads of trees to provide welcome shade from the sun. There were excellent toilet facilities, a small supermarket, a restaurant and a swimming pool. The Tiber, however, was a disappointment. The sluggish green snake of water with muddy banks formed one boundary of the site. Wisely it was fenced off. It looked very polluted. If there were fish in here, I would bet they'd glow in the dark.

The site wardens spoke excellent English and we were given a brochure for 'Camping Italy' - a group of like-minded camp sites all around the country and a voucher which promised ten per cent discount should we choose to stay at one of them. If you collect five stamps, you get a free night's accommodation and for ten stamps, three free nights.

There was another brochure which offered similar discounts at another smaller range of sites.

We were pitched next to an Australian couple who were back-packing around Italy. Actually back-packing was not the correct term for what they were doing as they were cheating with a hired Fiat Punto they had picked up in France. Nevertheless they were travelling light.

They told us about the free bus from the camp site to the railway station and the train tickets that could be purchased from the camp site. They offered to show us the ropes.

That night we prepared a simple meal and washed it down with a bottle of excellent local wine from the camp shop, then after a hot shower it was time for an early night. We were not even disturbed by a huge party of noisy Polish school children who were holidaying on the far side of the site. We slept like the dead.

The next day, Sunday, we had a laze around. Pompeii and the long drive had taken their toll. In any case we suspected that Italy, being a religious country, might be closed on a

Sunday. As it transpired, greed overcomes religion and the tourist sites were open, but we needed the rest. I took the opportunity to wash the truck. With Cyprus being desperately short of water, truck washing had been neglected of late.

The first camp bus at eight the following morning was full of mainly German tourists. The bus offers a half hour service, but does not run during siesta, from noon 'til four. The trains from Prima Porta station are frequent and the early train was packed with Italian commuters. There are no guards or ticket collectors. You punch your own ticket in the machines provided and for an entirely reasonable 1500 lire (about 50 pence) you then get 72 minutes of travel and that can be on train, bus or underground, or any combination of the three.

The trains are modern. The interiors are clean, with hard plastic seats to sit on and lots of standing room, but outside they were completely covered in graffiti 'art', which made them look very shabby indeed.

The train runs to Flaminia station which is reached in about twenty minutes and is located a few minutes walk from the city centre. We left our Australian guides at the station and wandered aimlessly around the sights, having had the good sense to buy a guide book from the camp shop while we waited for the bus.

The two most well known sights in Rome are the Coliseum and the Trevi Fountain. We started with the latter because it was nearer to the station. This actually takes some finding, because it is hidden down a warren of back streets and is crammed in a piazza between some tacky looking warehouses. It looks a lot smaller in the flesh than in the pictures. The picture in the guidebook must have been taken from a helicopter or the roof of the warehouse opposite, because there is no suggestion of the buildings that crowd it.

The fountain was not working and some workmen were paddling in wellies in the water, with a nifty vacuum cleaner type of gadget that slurped up all the coins that the tourists had thrown in the previous day. They must gather a fortune in coins from this fountain. They could do with spending some of them to clean it up. It looked decidedly grey and a bit sad. We were very disappointed.

The Coliseum is a majestic spectacle, or rather it would have been had it not been covered in scaffolding. Nevertheless it was a tourist magnet on a grand scale and in every direction there were hundreds of mainly Japanese tourists snapping away with miniature cameras. But what were those men doing outside, dressed as Roman centurions?

We were pleased to note an absence of those grotesque Conranesque shopping palaces that despoil so many British cities. The old buildings have been retained and with them the city has real character. Unfortunately it all needs a good clean up to remove the centuries of grime from the stone work. To be fair, the Roman authorities had made a start, but there is so much heritage in Italy that the task is gargantuan.

We were quite alarmed to see the level of security at banks in particular. All banks have armed guards, some with machine guns for Christ's sake. If you want to enter, you have to go into a reception area, where you have to leave all your possessions – save, presumably, your cheque book or credit card – in a locker, then you enter through more security, if they like the look of you, into the bank proper. On the other hand, there's nothing to stop you getting mugged at the 'spit bank' (ATM) outside.

It was the food shops that impressed me most. In Britain's high streets we have not seen shops like those for thirty years or more. The big supermarkets now dictate the limited range of plastic foods that we can buy, and anything that doesn't offer a quick turnover is quickly abandoned. Here you can buy anything. It's a gastronomic paradise. No wonder the Italians have such a reputation for fine food.

Rome is such a cosmopolitan city that its people lack the style that is evident elsewhere, but the women wear their sunglasses on their heads like a uniform, even if they have to squint in the glare of the sunshine, and their clothes look well cut and expensive.

We took in a few more of the tourist landmarks before finding the Tiber and with it the road to the Vatican. Looking down on to the banks and bridge piers, we noticed that cardboard box city had reached Rome too, as had the ever pervasive graffiti.

The Vatican is another tourist trap, with street vendors selling tacky plastic items of a religious nature, pizzas, outrageously priced drinks and fruit. The food and drink salesmen were doing a roaring trade; the souvenir stands less so. We stopped for a salmonella pizza and hoped that it would not take effect on our bowels until we got back to the camp site. It was tomato with a hint of cheese and sprinkled with dried mushrooms. It tasted like cardboard dipped in tinned tomato.

The great piazza in front of the cathedral was thronged with priests and penguins. I have never seen so many God botherers in one spot.

I don't believe in God. Religion is a con. It's a means of exercising unelected power over the gullible. I have no quibble with the *aims* of Christianity – the doing good to others, and living life by a set of worthy standards. We could do with a lot more of that, but those who exercise religion seem highly suspect to me. They could do with a few more commandments too. Thou shalt not bugger little boys might be a good start, given the clergy's apparent propensity for child abuse. And all this business about the promise of a better life in the hereafter, if you live a blameless life in the here. When you are dead you are dead. It's a long sleep with no dreams, from which you don't wake up. It's Saturday night on the beer without Sunday morning.

In any case, why would anyone want to sit on the right hand side of a god that allowed half of his creation to starve or live in abject poverty. I'm sorry, a god like that does not warrant my time and attention. It doesn't exist.

When you look at all the money the Catholic Church has tied up in the Vatican – and I am only singling that religion because here we are at their headquarters – then something has gone wrong with their interpretation of the gospels. If they were to flog off only a few of their treasures, a lot of genuinely needy people could be helped.

Religion is the scourge of the world. It runs the world economy. My god is better than your god so I am going to kill you. In that case I'll need some more weapons from the Americans. It is grotesque. It is also not surprising that America is home to some really bizarre religious nutters.

So I stepped off my soap box and went inside, past the scaffolding that hid it from view. The building is truly magnificent, but grubby. This, God's HQ on earth, needs a good clean inside as well as out. The only clean bit is the floor, polished by thousands of shuffling feet. The walls are blackened by years of candle burning. There is no sense of

reverence inside, with thousands of tourists flashing away with their cameras or whirring their camcorders. The only suggestion of deference is that no-one is smoking.

That is saved for outside, where around the mighty pillars that surround the piazza the floor is ankle deep in fag ends, fast food wrappers and drinks containers. The church should flog a couple of pictures and get it cleaned up, but their acquisitiveness seems to hold no bounds.

By this time we were too tired to go into the museum to see the newly restored Cistine Chapel ceiling. The queues seemed never ending. We would save that for another occasion, so we returned somewhat gloomily to the railway station.

We stopped off on route for lunch in the Villa Borghese park at the Casina Dell'Orologio. The café takes its name from a remarkable water driven clock, which unfortunately didn't work. I had forgotten that these cafes charge a premium for eating at their tables. 26,000 lire for two sandwiches and two small glasses of German beer – that's getting on for £10 – was, I felt, criminal. It was little surprise that there were only two other customers, a young couple sitting on a swing seat, with their hands in one another's clothing.

As we left the park we took advantage of the first public lavatory we had seen. This was spotlessly clean, with attendant service for 400 lire (less than 10 pence) each. Public conveniences in Italy are as common as rocking horse droppings so this was especially welcome.

The return train was pleasantly empty which was welcome as my arthritis was playing up and my hips and knees were throbbing persistently. All that walking, on top of Pompeii a couple of days earlier, was going to extract a terrible price.

We arrived back in Prima Porta just after three. The bus would not arrive for another hour. Some Germans from the train, who had been on the bus that morning, set off to walk the kilometre or so to the camp. We resigned ourselves to following them.

Late in the afternoon, we asked at the camp office if they knew of a supermarket – the range of goods on sale at the camp shop was useful but limited – and were told that the nearest was 16 km farther out of town. They don't seem to be big on supermarkets around Rome. We went to find it and the 16 km was a conservative estimate of the distance. Traffic was heavy and Whoopie's friends were scattered along the route.

Now when you go into a British supermarket you might find that the display of pasta takes up about three feet of shelf space. Here, the pasta occupied two complete aisles. There were another two aisles of tomato based sauces of every possible concoction. There were cheese, bread, wine, mushrooms in shapes and sizes I had never seen before, the inevitable ham and precious little else. The butchery counter had a few strange cuts of meat, and some veal mince on special offer.

The container that held the veal mince was tardis-like in its capacity and the quantity provided was excessive for our requirements. That night we had an obscenely huge fry-up of veal, with tomatoes, onions and pasta. It was wonderful, and needed lots of wine to wash it down.

The three nights at Camping Tiber cost 121,400 lire (nearly £40) which seemed a little steep, but we could not fault the site. We had added another 646 km since Pompeii.

Chapter 7 - Florence

Next stop Firenze, or Florence as we knew it, along the SS2 through Chiatishire via Siena. This is a beautiful road. Italy was starting to look a lot cleaner and less tacky. We stopped on route for a second refill of diesel. It was more than three times the price we had paid in Cyprus and those drums of diesel on the back of the truck were already looking a good investment. Fuel was only going to get dearer the farther north we travelled. We stopped for our usual lunch of ham and tomato sandwiches – I could eat those sandwiches every day – in a convenient lay-by and made use of a hedge for ablutions. We had been getting to know quite a lot of Italian hedgerows. Hidden by the hedge, was quite the prettiest hill top village we had seen. I haven't a clue where it was, because it was too far away, it was not on my map, and as I have reported a number of times, the Italians are very sparing with their directional information.

We picked a site from the RAC book which was not the one in the brochure from Camping Tiber. It was close to the A1 autostrade – very close! We had clocked up another 378 km from Rome.

This site was huge and ranged over a steep hillside and many of the pitches were neither even nor level enough for tenting. We found a pitch within easy distance of the toilet block and already had the business of erecting the tent down to half an hour. We weren't too happy with the pitch as it sloped and the ground was too hard to bang in the lightweight aluminium pegs without them bending – however I soon discovered that the hinges on the tailgate supports of the truck proved a handy tool to straighten them again.

While we were struggling, a young couple on the next pitch suddenly packed up and left, leaving a much better spot under a tree. No sooner had they got into their car than we lifted our tent bodily and carried it to the new location.

The toilet facilities on this site were by far the best we experienced anywhere on our journey. In fact apart from the Amathus Beach hotel in Paphos, which has gold fittings and piped music with volume control in its public area toilets, these were the best public facilities I have seen anywhere – and life hasn't always meant travelling on the cheap.

I particularly liked the lavatories. When you stood up after performing your bodily functions, the seat would rise and puff disinfectant from a number of jets around its circumference to make it safe for the next user. Wonderful!

The proximity of the autostrade is not a problem in the daytime, but the site is located near one of those long causeways suspended on concrete stilts that the Italian road builders are so fond of. Heavy goods vehicles running across the viaduct cause a roaring, booming noise that is all pervasive at night, and we found sleeping difficult. This spoiled what would otherwise have been a near perfect site.

It was a long walk down the hill to the site office and the road, and here too it was possible to buy bus tickets for the journey into town.

The British government has been wittering on for some time about how much better the public transport is in Europe than in Britain.

Bollocks!

I am not sure what their agenda is, but you can take it from me it just ain't so. It is however cheaper than British public transport.

The buses in Florence don't have seats. Well actually I counted 10 seats on the bus we used, but those seats are for the sick and disabled. The bus was packed with standing passengers and it's a good half hour run into town.

Florence is a beautiful city. The Duomo – Santa Maria del Fiore with its orange tiled dome and marbled walls is a joy of a building, marred only by the beggars who haunt the piazza outside.

From a distance (e.g. from the next bridge along) the Ponte Vecchio is a delight to the eye. Closer, and you find that the buildings on the bridge are in fact jewellers shops. The traders had conspired to prevent photography by leaving huge and ugly cardboard boxes all over the bridge, so if you want to take home a pictorial memento, you have to buy a postcard.

In one street, there was a display of modern art, which comprised a series of huge mirrored boxes with hidden doors that gave access to the interiors. I suppose that being mirrored on all sides the authorities thought they might blend in unobtrusively with the surroundings. They thought wrong. Never has such a display looked so out of place.

Thanks to the one way system the return bus takes a different route, so it took some time to locate the correct stop. When we did eventually find the bus, it was pleasantly empty. There were even a few unoccupied seats. My wife and I welcomed the opportunity to sit down for the return trip.

A few stops along an elderly woman with facial hair got on the bus and stood in front of my wife's seat where she stooped to stare in her face and dribbled. As none of the Italian passengers in the other seats seemed interested in showing her any courtesy, I stood and let her have my seat. She took the seat and continued to stare ominously at my wife, whose seat I feel she would have preferred.

There's lots to discover in Florence, but culture overload was making its presence felt again so we decided to stay only the one night and move on to find somewhere we could sleep properly.

This part of Tuscany is filled with interesting hilltop towns, the most popular architectural feature of which appears to be the square tower. This is taken to its ultimate in the historical town of San Gimignano which has thirteen of the damned things. Perhaps I'm a Philistine when it comes to architecture but they have brick structures like this back home in Lancashire. They are called factory chimneys and no-one there raves about them.

I am not convinced of the appeal of Tuscany, but it seems very New Labour to me - a triumph of style over substance. The countryside is very pretty, and I especially liked the rolling fields of sunflowers all pointing their heads at the sun, but I cannot imagine why anyone would want to pay an arm and a leg for an ancient ruined villa – a money sink – to actually come and live here.

We were making excellent progress following an early start and thought it might be a nice idea to divert to Pisa and have a look at the leaning tower.

Chapter 8 – No Parking in Pisa

As we drove along tree lined roads, we came to a cross-roads manned by a gang of half a dozen Carabinieri. This branch of the constabulary always seems faintly ridiculous in their colourfully braided blue uniforms with slashed peaked caps, jodhpurs and riding boots, when their preferred mode of transport is the Alfa Romeo but here they were more alarming than usual, armed with AK47s. Part of the uniform is a red 'lollipop' that slips inside the top of their boots. It is used to signal traffic to stop. One of them waved his lollipop at me. Having visions of the trip ending in a hail of machine gun bullets I quickly slowed. As I got nearer they recognised me as some foreign Johnny and waved me on. We were obviously, and thankfully, not who they were looking for.

On the approach to Pisa, we found a superb UniCoop supermarket. This had everything you could think of, including the acres of pasta shelving. There was a glorious smell of cooked meat from the far end. On investigation we found a female assistant, at a small separate table, slicing huge chunks of porchetta from a steaming joint.

Porchetta is a local delicacy of spit roasted suckling pig stuffed with fennel, rosemary, garlic and other herbs. The pig in question looked a little large to have been still suckling, but the smell was indescribably mouth watering. We had to have some, and while I did not know at the time it was called porchetta, and with the limited assistance of my phrase book, I was soon carrying away a large portion. Given that I had provided the sales assistant with a few minutes entertainment with my linguistic efforts, she threw in an extra slice for free.

We also bought some interesting bread rolls with a view to having porchetta muffins for lunch.

Disappointingly, Pisa was besieged by crowds and there was nowhere practical to leave the truck unattended, so reluctantly we passed through. Our route did however take us right past the tower, which looks much smaller and much prettier in the flesh than it does in its photographs.

We headed north towards Genoa, stopping on route to make up the sandwiches. The porchetta was still warm, the bread drying rapidly in the glare of the sun and we still had that bloody awful butter to use. There was enough meat left to have for our evening meal too.

Porchetta is an explosion of taste. It is really something which should be eaten in moderation, rather than in huge slices on bread rolls! The salty, somewhat soapy, aftertaste of the herbs remains with you for a long time. It is something to savour just once in a while. It is not the sort of thing that you would want twice in one day, but we were destined to finish it later.

Our journey took us ever northwards along the SS1. Genoa is a large industrial town and port. It is not the most attractive of places.

I'm sorry to appear so negative, but I was getting thoroughly pissed off with Italy. The people are lovely, the language is a joy to hear and away from the towns the scenery is delightful, but so many of the towns look the same. It becomes difficult to remember where you are or what you have seen. The country is completely awash with culture. It may have been just my frame of mind, or the heat that was getting me down, or perhaps you need to take it more slowly, but I wasn't enjoying it as much as I had hoped. The

main consolation was that the truck was running beautifully and no matter how far we travelled there was not a hint of discomfort.

From Genoa on, we were looking for somewhere to stop. We trundled on through such delightfully named resorts as Varazze and Celle Ligure. Wherever there was a beach it was fenced off into small cells or cages for which payment was required to enter. Frankly I was not enamoured at the prospect of paying a few pounds to sit in a cage on a postage stamp sized section of beach. My wife and I like to wander, to explore, to stick our noses into the underbelly of the places we visit to see how they tick. You can't do this behind barbed wire.

By Savona it was time to consult the RAC book, which this time let us down big time. It directed us to Camping Stella, set in the hills that rise sharply from the coast. We drove up to a huge motorised gate. A toot on the air horns and it opened just long enough to let us past. It was closed quickly behind us. We were trapped.

Around the site was a substantial fence. The site manager came out of his caravan wearing a grubby vest, shorts and sandals. He opened the kiosk. It was liberally sprinkled with 'Don't do...' warnings. He took our passports then conducted us to a pitch right under the kitchen window of a small site restaurant. The window was open and there was a strong smell of stale cooking oil emanating from within. There was no alternative pitch. We had come another 350 km from Florence and the light was failing. We were stuck in the camp site from Hell.

The man in the vest pointed out the swimming pool and the shower block and asked if we needed electricity because it was extra. He seemed disappointed when we declined.

We had a look round. The toilet cubicles were so small that, once inside, I could not physically turn round. I had to step in backwards. My shoulders touched the walls on either side. When I flushed, the damned thing wouldn't stop. I had to go for help. Hot water was extra; as were the showers; and the washing machine; and the iron. Everywhere there were little notes demanding 2000 lire for this 5000 lire for that. It was outrageous.

The swimming pool was wonderful. It was surrounded by high barbed wire topped fences with a full height pay-to-enter turnstile, itself covered in barbed wire, just in case you thought you might use it to climb into the pool area. I took photographs because no-one would believe just how bad it was. The whole place was reminiscent of an Italian prisoner of war camp. Have you seen the film *Von Ryan's Express* with Frank Sinatra? This was the POW camp! All that was missing was the sweat box for those who complained – or at least we didn't see it.

On reflection, the fences might have been there to keep out the wild life, rather than to keep the guests in. I swear we heard wolves howling after dark. Our guide book even suggests that there are wild bears roaming in the hills not too far from here.

The final insult came the following morning when I was presented with a bill for 43,000 lire (and I had used none of the extras). That's £15! I couldn't believe it, and as we drove away numbed with shock, I was already drafting, in my mind, the letter of complaint I would send to the RAC for recommending this dump. Incidentally, I never got a reply to that letter which I mailed as soon as we arrived home.

Chapter 9 - France

Historical buildings are very interesting, but my wife and I really love mountains. The next part of the journey was through the best of the scenery on the trip. We began by taking a wrong turning and after driving for almost an hour, ended up in a village at the end of a mountain road. There was a roundabout with only one exit – back the way we came. We had no alternative, but to turn round and go all the way back to Savona to try again.

The road passes through Cuneo (worth a look) and eventually through awesome scenery into the French Alps and, almost without warning, you reach the border. We crossed into France at 90 kph. There was an Italian policeman at the Italian post, then his French counterpart at the French post a couple of hundred metres farther down the road. Neither paid us the slightest attention.

The transformation between Italy and France is marked. It's like driving through a time warp into the twentieth century. Here at last we found road signs again, though whereas Italy has blue signs for trunk roads and green for motorways, France does it the other way round. It's called European unity.

We stopped at the top of the mountain pass on the D900 to avail ourselves of a convenient rock – there are no hedges up here. The views are breathtaking and remain so all the way down to Gap.

We were rather worried as we travelled along, as it was getting late and with tomorrow came the weekend. We had no French currency and desperately needed a Bureau de Change. Now here I have to declare that my French is a lot better than my Italian – not brilliant, but I can make myself understood, and can understand even more than I can remember of it, so asking for information at Post Offices, which usually offer money changing facilities, did not present a problem. We were told that we could change the money in Gap. Gap seemed a long way away and time was pressing on. We despaired at the thought of returning to Italy to camp over the weekend.

In Gap we found that the only places to park near the banks were on meters. We had no French money so we couldn't even get change. There were rather a lot of traffic wardens and police around to risk illegal parking, so we had to park on the edge of town and literally ran all the way to the town centre, where just before closing we could change some traveller's cheques. On the way back, we discovered that we had been parked just round the corner from a bank, which we had taken to be a primary school.

We had to cross the main road to get back to the car. In Italy, we had very quickly learned that zebra crossings are killing grounds. They were lines painted on the road to make it simpler for the motorists to run the pedestrians over. No-one but no-one stops for pedestrians on zebra crossings, so when the first car that approached the crossing at Gap stopped to allow us to cross, we were momentarily taken aback.

We waved our acknowledgements to the driver and were halfway across the road when a car overtook the waiting vehicle and forced us to leap to safety as it roared across the crossing. My wife said that she bet it was an Italian driver, and sure enough there on the back was a white 'egg' with the letter 'I'. So it was still not safe to cross the roads while we were so close to the Italian border.

Our Camping Italy brochure was no good here, so with some trepidation we consulted the RAC again and found a site on the Route Napoleon just as it starts to climb out of

town. The RAC claim the site is manned by English speakers. They must have been having a day off.

What a great site, and what views of the Alps – stunning. They had even left a hose pipe lying around to make it easy to wash the truck again. Savona to Gap – including the detour had been 325 km.

Saturday was shopping day and chance to look round the pretty little town of Gap, with its mighty hypermarket - 'Hyper-U' - on the outskirts of town, where we made the mistake of buying some delicious looking meringues, smothered in chocolate. Not only were they huge, but they were very heavy and made us feel sick.

Diesel was refreshingly cheap here at the supermarket, so for 135 francs, (about £14) I made sure the tank was topped up.

In the afternoon we just walked and simply absorbed the stunning views. It was gob-smackingly beautiful. I could have sat for hours and just absorbed it all. If ever there was a place I could feel happy living in, this was it – but there's a down side. In the winter it gets perishingly cold and this little town is buried under feet of snow. I hate snow with a vengeance, so it would have to be a summer home.

Sunday was a day to go touring round the area in the truck, to find moody mountains, sparkling lakes and pretty streams. We added another 110 km round the mountain roads. I could have stayed for days, but England was beckoning.

Cost of three nights at the Gap site was a very reasonable 174 francs – about £18.

On Monday, we pressed north and gradually left the Alpine scenery towards Valence where we hit the Peage – the French pay-as-you-go motorway system. Not being into pay-as-you-go if I could possibly avoid it, the N86/N82 Routes Nationale seemed a much more promising option.

If you follow the road signs, you would find only blue signs, directing you to the motorway network. It was as if the Routes Nationale did not exist. The problem seems to be that having built the motorways alongside perfectly fine and often dual carriageway roads of equal quality, they wanted to ensure that they were used – and it was working, because not only are the old roads difficult to follow, they are all but deserted.

We had not previously been to the Loire Valley and from the travel guides, this home of the wine industry promised to be something special. It turned out to be miles and miles of flat boring countryside. In fact most of central France is painfully flat and uninteresting; and whereas in England the landscape is broken by pretty hedgerows, dry stone walls and a variety of textures and colours, here there are just fields as far as the eye can see, with no apparent boundary, where one stops and the next begins, to break the monotony.

And what is all this business about French gastronomy? The French mock our fish and chips, but from the roadside signs, it was clear that chips were the national dish. We saw more signs offering 'Frites' here than we ever have in England.

Somewhere between St. Etienne and Roanne, we got stuck in a traffic jam and the traffic built up behind us as far as the eye could see. After half an hour without any movement whatsoever, I decided to have a wander to see if I could discover the cause.

Half a mile down the road was a level crossing. The gates had stuck and there was no sign of them being opened in the near future. I returned to the truck and followed the example of a growing number of my fellow travellers and turned back. We could always take an alternative route via Lyon.

About a kilometre back down the road several vehicles were taking a right turn into a narrow country road. Giving them the benefit of local knowledge we followed. I have a bad habit of doing this. I point the vehicle in the right general direction, and having a good sense of direction, three times out of four we get where we were supposed to be going. Today was one of those three. We skirted the level crossing and came down again to join the main road some ten kilometres further along.

These relatively empty roads certainly allow you to gobble up the miles, but they are purgatory if you need a pee, as there are no hedges and no lavatories. Just when we had reached bursting point, we came across a small copse. A procession of motorists dashed into the trees to relieve themselves. Those who could not wait that long simply stopped and peed in the gutter at the side of the road. This did not appeal to my wife's sensibilities, though if needs must, I could have lived with it.

By late afternoon we had travelled all the way to Nevers a distance of 527 km. Here the RAC pointed us to the municipal site, which is just by the bridge on the southern approach to the town, right on the banks of the Loire. 55 francs (£5.73) a night. The Italians could learn something from the French about camp site pricing.

The camp has basic facilities, but all you need; and you can, if you wish (we did) camp at the water's edge. We pitched camp and set off to explore this attractive little town.

It was World Cup Final day and there was a buzz of excitement round the town as France were hot favourites to win. Everywhere there were fans in football strip who drove round in cars and filled the street cafes that had TV sets tuned to the match channel. At the end of the game there was pandemonium. There were celebrations going on everywhere – it was like Pompeii town had been, only with a better result for the local side. The revelry, the bugles, the fireworks, the car horns made a continuous cacophony until after five am when through sheer exhaustion we were finally able to fall asleep.

We arose about eight thirty, bleary eyed, to a sombre grey looking sky with low clouds and a sudden nip in the air. We decided to press on north to Fontainebleau. It began to rain almost as soon as we hit the road and on reaching Fontainebleau it was lashing down. Rain whipped across the road in horizontal sheets in the teeth of a bracing westerly wind. We stopped outside the gates of the abbey and saw that there was nowhere close by to park. We were not really equipped for such weather, though we both had lightweight waterproof jackets – mine bought specially for the trip. We decided that we'd had enough of culture and didn't want to see Fontainebleau so badly that we had to get soaked for our pains. There was no option but to press on northwards.

We skirted Paris and, not having a clue where we were, I decided to follow a Dutch registered Opel Astra with a full complement of passengers and luggage, the driver of which seemed to know where he was going. I have been known to do this before too. My wife thought I was crazy, but I surmised that he was probably going home and that Holland was in the right general direction. For once I was right, and he led us round Paris and on north to Beauvais and Amiens, around the battle fields of World War I.

The place still has an air of deep sadness about it, and is punctuated by beautifully tended war graves, sometimes in plots of only a few dozen. It's difficult to imagine the horrors of trench warfare. We are just young enough to have avoided even World War II, but when you see the battlefields, especially in the pouring rain, you get a small impression of how it might have been and you wonder at the limits of man's stupidity – the numbers of people that had to die to satisfy the egos of a few influential men, who never so much as got their boots dirty. We pressed on with heavy hearts towards Calais.

We reached Calais around five. The rain had subsided, but the wind was relentless. The Calais municipal camp site office was closed. In any case, I doubted that it would be possible to erect the tent in such a high wind. I suggested we cross the channel and see how the weather fared on the other side. We had already travelled 631 km from Nevers.

We travelled along the promenade at Calais and made our way towards the port. Then my wife saw the mountainous seas in the Channel.

"If you think I'm getting on a boat tonight, you have got another think coming!"

I suggested the Channel Tunnel. She was rather worried about the prospect, but reluctantly agreed that it was the only solution.

The Tunnel is brilliant! I drove up to the toll gate and my credit card was returned £95 lighter - Ouch! Everything was running properly for once, and we had half an hour to shop at the duty free before we had to present ourselves at the train. We were given a large letter to hang on the interior mirror. We passed through passport control, with barely a glance at our passports from the official on duty, and found ourselves in the Duty Free car park.

We could have filled our boots at the various hypermarkets that have sprung up all around the port and tunnel entrance, but frankly we couldn't be bothered. I just grabbed two bottles of Woods Rum from the duty free for 210 francs (£21.90) and it was time to go back to the car. The truck just crept under the height gauge, and in 35 minutes we were driving off the train on British soil, then remembering to drive on the left – I still wanted to go anti-clockwise around roundabouts - we joined the traffic on the M20. It was 8 p.m. local time.

We were hungry and so we headed for the first service area – a Road Chef. They were having a quiet evening. Despite the queue, there were no staff to be found and the food on display looked as though it had been there since lunch time – all dry with curling edges. For the first motorway service area in England, visited, no doubt, by thousands of foreign visitors, this was a disgrace. We weren't *that* hungry. We returned to the car and pressed on.

It was my intention to use the M25/M40 corridor to Birmingham then the M6/M56 to Manchester, because the M40 is usually fairly quiet compared with the southern end of the M1, but it was a long time since I had travelled this route and I didn't remember there being any service areas on the M40, so I wasn't anticipating eating until the M6.

It was dark by the time we reached the M40, and others must have been aware of the lack of service facilities, for just outside Oxford, there was a super new service area and the sign that shone out like a beacon was one of the few good things to come out of America. KFC – Kentucky Fried Chicken. It's the only junk food that I really like. A KFC

Variety Meal was appreciated like a gourmet dish. My wife doesn't like her chicken on the bone, so she had the Fillet Burger.

Our hunger satiated, we returned to the truck and decided that we might as well press on home. It needed only one coffee break at Keele to wake me up, as my wife stayed dozing in the truck. The place was full of truckers and sales reps. I shared a table with an old guy and we chatted about travel. He was off to Ireland. I don't remember the coffee, but it kept me awake long enough to complete the last leg and we found ourselves outside our home in Manchester at one the following morning – 1112 km from Nevers! It was heaven to sleep in our own beds again. The total distance from Paphos - 3801 km.

The stay in Britain is not part of this story. Suffice to say that the truck was not the most practical vehicle for use in England. There is nowhere to put the shopping. It's big and unwieldy and does not fit in the average car parking bay. Great for carrying building materials, it was put to good use, but as a personal mode of transport... useless. My British registered car was, however, off the road as I had cancelled the road tax before my last trip to Cyprus, and there did not seem any point having two vehicles on the road when it's almost impossible to get my wife behind the wheel.

All that remains is to report on the return leg.

Chapter 10 - The Long Road Back.

The summer of '98 was great. I don't think a day can have passed without it raining, but it provided an opportunity for some maintenance on our Manchester home.

We had to be back in Bari for the 21st of September as our passage to Greece was pre-booked. We would have liked to have left earlier. We kept looking at the weather forecasts for a window of opportunity, but there were wall to wall rain clouds over our proposed route. The satellite photos from the Internet didn't look promising. There was cloud covering all of Britain, France and the north of Italy, and depression after huge depression sweeping in from The Atlantic. We agreed that the 4th of September was as long as we dared leave it, so, unless the weather bucked up in the meantime, like it or not, that was the day we were going to leave.

The day before, I had fitted a set of ornamental steel railings to the newly erected wall I had built at the front of our house – I said that the truck was handy for building materials. The railings had been delayed as they had been sent away to Doncaster to one of only two plants in the north of England that do hot dip galvanising. They had been delivered pre-painted in black, but I thought the arrows on top would look smart painted gold. After I had painted them, I decided they looked silly and so at 5 am on the morning of our supposed departure, I was out in the front garden with brush and paint, restoring the colour to black.

We had learned a few things on the outward trip. Most important, you cannot buy decent tea in France or Italy and we had run out of the PG Tips quite early on. The best we could come up with was Liptons yellow label, bought in Gap, which had about as much flavour as hot water and had those silly bits of string attached that you dangle over the side of the cup. No wonder they drink so much coffee on the continent. We stocked up with several jars of PG Instant, more than sufficient for the return trip. We even added a couple of jars of the Typhoo with the milk powder for good measure.

Brewing up from a gas burner at the side of the road is a pain in the arse, so we packed a couple of Thermos flasks. That way we could fill them with boiling water at our normal cooking stops and then have a brew whenever we felt like it. The Instant still makes a decent brew, even when the water has gone off the boil – which is more than can be said for tea bags.

Given the weather, we decided to take our 'four seasons' sleeping bags in place of the lightweight ones we had used on the outward leg. We also bought a few plastic stacking boxes to keep our provisions under control. They had had a tendency to wander around the back of the truck. We packed some tinned goods to remove the necessity to shop daily for fresh food.

I wanted to take our portable refrigerator, as keeping milk and butter fresh on the outward leg had been a major problem. My wife disagreed. It would be tricky getting it back home again afterwards; and we had no real use for it in Cyprus to warrant leaving it there and buying a new one. It would have been an extravagance for just a couple of weeks travel. Reason prevailed. We left it behind.

I forgot the bloody marmalade!

Given the luggage space available, we decided to return with a few goodies for the house in Cyprus. In particular we packed a new microwave oven, some very large prints in

frames and a huge sectional mirror. None of these items could have been practically carried by air in ones personal luggage allowance, and the cost of having them shipped separately would negate any advantage of buying in the UK.

When it came time to go, the truck was well filled. There was not an inch of free space in the back. The back seat was piled to the height of the seat backs and the mirror boxes occupied the rear footwell.

We had long since used all of the cheap Cyprus diesel, so a last minute stop at Asda was required to fill the tank. £29 for 45 litres that would have cost only £7.20 in Cyprus! It would have cost £13.80 to refill *each* of the plastic containers, so we discarded them.

We have good neighbours. Bill and Sheila on the left had just returned from holiday in Switzerland, and Bill happened to mention that you need a vignette to display on the windscreen if you want to drive on the Swiss motorway network. They don't mention that in the guide books! He told me that the vignette costs about £20, which seemed a bit steep for one or two days travel through the country, but the cost is for an annual ticket. Nearly three quarters of the year had gone! I was about to plan a different route when he told me that if I could get his vignette off the car, I could have it, as he would have no further use for it.

I jumped at the opportunity, but the Swiss are wise to this one and it is almost impossible to remove – Almost! It is stuck to the windscreen with a super sticky adhesive and is designed to break into jagged sections should you try to peel it away from the glass. The Swiss had not, however, reckoned with the determination of a man with a light wallet! With the aid of a very sharp wide bladed wood chisel, I was able to peel it away intact. The original adhesive is for one time use only, but clear Sellotape, cut to form a narrow border around the circumference, had it attached to my windscreen in no time at all. You had to look very closely to see that it had been doctored.

Another neighbour, Ian from across the road, warned me to avoid the rush hour in Birmingham either by leaving early or late, or we would be up to our ears in traffic. Good advice. I used the M6/M1 corridor a lot before I retired, spending many an hour listening to the car radio and going nowhere.

We decided on the late option. Thankfully we did as the postman arrived late carrying an urgent communication. Had it been left until our return to the UK for Christmas, we could have been seriously out of pocket. There was no option but to delay a while longer so that I could put my financial affairs in order. It was very late in the morning before we finally took to the road.

I wanted to make our first overnight stop on the French side of the Channel, so I tried to make up some lost time on the motorway. That truck can certainly motor when it has a mind to. Never mind the extra cost in diesel, it can go on the credit card. Out of sight, out of mind, and the bill paid by direct debit.

Having enjoyed the KFC so much on the way up, I thought it a nice idea to delay lunch until the same Oxford services, a decision encouraged by the good progress we were making on the M40. For a long time this motorway had been virtually ignored by motorists travelling south, because it adds quite a few miles to the London journey. You don't see the M1 traffic on the map that causes you to waste even more time and fuel. Now, a lot more had caught on, but the traffic was still light for a major motorway and I

could keep the hot pedal to the floor.

It doesn't work. Does it? You can't go back and relive the same experiences. After a couple of weeks of excellent camp site meals - we might have done the trip on a shoestring, but we didn't buy any crap – the KFC had been a welcome change. On the way back it was disappointingly ordinary. I still like it, but it just wasn't the same.

The journey was uneventful with the weather ever threatening to break down. A high spot was on the M20 when we were overtaken by a vintage Bentley – one of those soft top jobbies that used to run round Brooklands, complete with supercharger bolted on the front. It looked in mint condition, and was roaring down the road guzzling gallons of go-faster juice at every mile. What a beast. We followed it at 80 mph – oops! 70 mph – all the way to the channel tunnel terminal and parked alongside outside the duty free. That was another £95 on my credit card!

When the owner and his party had gone, I took a closer look at the old banger. It had been superbly restored with new leather cladding to the bodywork, a new hood and new interior. It had cost a lot of money. Pity it had started to rain. That new leather was going to get wet. I hope it doesn't soak up the water like a chamois.

I went to stock up with our rum allowance and ran into Miss Jobsworth on the till. I presented the two boarding card/duty free vouchers, the two litres of Woods and my Gold Card. I was told that I could only have the one bottle unless my wife presented herself in person at the checkout with her boarding card. What a silly system! We compromised. I paid for both bottles, then arranged to leave them at the checkout. I would return to the truck and send my wife to collect them. It worked, but what a rigmarole.

Chapter 11 – France Again

My wife had lost her anxieties about the Channel Tunnel, so would not hear of using the ferry. I needed no persuading. It really is a joy to use. Frankly I cannot understand why anyone would still wish to mess about with shipping.

The Calais weather was much the same as it had been at the other end of the tunnel. There was rain in the air, but so far, that's where it stayed. It was a miserable grey evening. We headed off along the N43, intending to stop at the first decent camp site we could find. That came in the shape of Louis Camping, at the village of Lostebarne somewhere near St. Omer. We still had the useless AA map and the village was unmarked there, but it was 45 kilometres from the tunnel.

There was a sign from the main road that said 'Camping' and we turned off to the right, travelled a kilometre through dairy cattle country and found ourselves in a delightful little site. All the pitches were grassed, flat and fenced off like rows of suburban gardens with trees and flowers.

People tell me that the French are rude and anti-British, especially in the north of the country. There has always been a rivalry between the two countries, but I have always found the French to be charming and helpful. I think the trouble is that the British never see themselves as the foreigners, wherever they happen to be. A little tact and respect go a long way to ensuring that problems do not arise. There's always the odd arsehole who'd be a pratt wherever he/she was, but by and large people respond to how you treat them. The young lady at Louis camping was delightful even though we had dragged her from the warmth of her house and her evening dinner table with the family.

We just had time to erect the tent, now down to twenty minutes flat and were sitting in its shelter, puffing into air beds when the rain began in earnest. It thrashed down for about quarter of an hour then just as suddenly stopped. Wrapped in waterproofs, we used the respite to prepare our evening meal, anxiously watching the black sky. Miraculously we just had time to serve the meal and retire to the cab of the truck to eat it when the rains came again.

It bucketed down for most of the night. Not one drip entered the tent. There was a little condensation on the outer skin but the sleeping compartment remained snug.

It's surprisingly noisy inside a small tent when the rain beats against it, but it did not prevent us from sleeping soundly. By morning, the ground was waterlogged, the grass turning to mud beneath our feet. The tent was speckled with fallen leaves stuck fast to the fabric. The sheet on the back of the truck contained a lake of several gallons of water, but it had stopped raining.

There was no way the tent was going to dry so after breakfast we stuffed it into a bin liner and made our way off the site – 46 francs (£4.80). Not bad at all. We will definitely be calling again on our next visit to France.

Traffic was light as we motored south east along the N43 towards the Luxembourg border. Despite the promise of cheap fuel in that country, there seemed no point adding unnecessarily to the journey so our intention was to stick with the French side of the border via Metz and Nancy to the Swiss border at Basel.

There are no peage motorways in this part of the country, so the traffic signs don't tend to send you out of your way to use them. This makes it very much simpler to stay on the

intended road, without having to make inspired guesses, at every roundabout, as to the likely run of the original roads.

366 km south of Louis Camping was a small lake at a place called La Val d'Ire, with a camp site of the same name. We had been merrily steaming along, the weather brighter, with grey clouds scudding low across the sky, when my wife spotted the sign. We had to turn round and return to the site entrance. It had one of those rusting wrought iron signs across the gate 'La Val d'Ire Camping'. Did that translate to 'angry valley'? A whitewashed brick building stood at the entrance. A crone was knitting in the office behind a large plate glass window. I entered and said 'Camping' in my finest 'Allo Allo' accent.

The crone was shy but friendly and happy to take our money – 48 francs (£5) for the night – and we were invited to pick our own slot after our passports had been locked away in a drawer.

La Val d'Ire was once, no doubt, a popular camp site. It had, however, lost out to other more fashionable districts and now all that remained were a few sad looking static caravans on the far side of the lake, where even fewer elderly French families were suffering the last few days of the summer – which, by all accounts, had been as bad as that in England. Around the lake, were a number of carp fishermen, digging in under shelters for the night. Some had as many as five rods pointed at the water.

There was plenty of space to choose from, unfortunately not much of it flat. We took to the high ground near the caravans and the toilet facilities.

The weather broke into a thunderstorm as we finished erecting the tent leaving us huddled in its tiny accommodation until it passed us by. The carp fishermen remained at their rods.

The toilet facilities were clean but old and uninviting. There was no hot water. There had been no sun to warm the solar panels on the roof. At 9.30, while we were washing before retiring, the toilet block was plunged into darkness. With no windows and no campsite lighting, it was seriously dark.

After such an early night, punctuated by further storms, we rose early and gathered the tent into the bin liner once again. A young chap was cleaning the toilet block. He spoke no English. We had a short but friendly conversation about the merits of Manchester United – what else? He seemed most impressed that we were on route to Cyprus. Clearly there were few foreign visitors still using this site.

The crone returned our passports and offered us a souvenir – a collection of post cards showing how the site had appeared in its heyday. The cars in the photographs were Renault Dauphines and Austin A40s. They had been taken a long time ago, but then the camp had bristled with happy people playing games and enjoying the sun. It was very sad how it had all faded away. Imagining a demand for payment for these historical records, I politely declined, but they were pressed upon me as a gift. That made a pleasant change!

The following day – Sunday – saw us continue our drive south, through countryside that was much more varied and interesting than that of central France. Our immediate destination was Mulhouse, where the RAC book promised us accommodation at Seppois le Bas. Seppois le Bas is in fact nowhere near Mulhouse. It is miles away in the wrong direction, towards Belfort, but we followed the directions. Had we known how far it was

going to be we would not have bothered, but then we would have missed one of the most delightful areas of Alsace, and that would have been our loss.

Alsace is one of those mongrel areas in the border country that has German, Swiss as well as French influences. The people here don't see themselves as French, but as Alsatians - and funnily enough, we noticed a lot of Alsatian dogs. These are the same as German Shepherd dogs, but the war with Germany found them renamed Alsatian, as patriotic Brits. did not want to be seen owning anything German. Funny how times change. Most people in Britain now call them German Shepherds again!

The camp site at Seppois le Bas (383 km from La Val d'Ire) is run by the municipal authority of the area, and was clearly very popular. It was packed with modern trailer vans, permanently sited and bearing French and mainly Swiss registrations. There was a predominance of TV aerials and satellite dishes which reinforced the suggestion of permanence.

Ours was the only tent and we parked away from the caravans on a dryish spot at the far end of the site. Our only companions in this area were a Dutch couple on tour with their small trailer caravan.

There must be something wrong with Holland. Its residents all seem to be elsewhere. We had noticed that the Dutch were the most serious of campers. We never visited a site where there were no Dutch tourists, and we saw them in droves on the road. There was even one at La Val d'Ire. By now we had started to look out for them.

The camp was full of noisy weekend trippers with their children, but by six thirty they had all left, leaving just the Dutch couple and ourselves. Half of the toilet facilities were locked up after their departure, presumably to cut down on the workload, but the showers were wonderfully hot and we both had a good soak.

Shortly after we retired for the night, we detected a major problem with the site. There are two churches in the village, one on either side of the site, and visible from it. Both these churches have chiming clocks, with full repeaters on the quarter hour. It was like having two sets of Big Ben, in competition with one another, in your back yard. The clocks were not quite synchronised, so at midnight there were two tunes and twenty four bongs. This drove us to distraction and seriously impaired our ability to sleep.

On Monday we explored the village. It was a delight with gaily painted timbered buildings all vying to display the brightest arrays of flowers in their window boxes. The whites, yellows and beiges were all attractive, but the lilacs and deep purples we thought were somewhat over the top. A purple painted house, no matter how attractive the surroundings, cannot help but look garish.

The village shop did a great line in cheap – very cheap - Côtes de Rhone. It was sold in litre bottles and they had racks of the stuff. I noticed that the bottles were all old and appeared to have been used several times.

We were surprised by the numbers of French motorists who stopped and asked us for directions. I'm not sure why all these people thought we might be able to assist. We were hardly dressed like the locals. We looked just like what we were – foreign tourists.

Later it rained again and I had to rig a shelter from rope and tarpaulin to enable us to prepare a meal.

That night tiredness beat the clock chimes, but the Dutchman had had enough and had already left. We had the site to ourselves. The damned clocks awakened us bright and early the next morning.

We left so early that the site manager came to the door in his pyjamas, but he seemed happy enough to take our money. Perhaps, now that all his customers had left, he was thinking of a lazy week ahead. 126 francs (£13.14) was not, we felt, an unreasonable charge for the two nights.

Chapter 12 – Switzerland and the Italian Lakes

We entered Basel about 10 am and were stopped at the customs post. The customs officer looked like the Serbian General Mladic – the wanted war criminal. It was the build, the uniform, the coldness around the eyes.

We spoke no German, and Mladic appeared not to speak French. We settled on Serbo Croat - sorry English. No, we had nothing to declare. He looked at the full load we were carrying without raising an eyebrow. We were just passing through to Italy. I swear I saw a sneer. He glanced at the vignette on the windscreen and did not notice the Sellotape. He waved us on. We drove into the roadworks, cobbled streets and tram tracks of Switzerland and headed for the motorway.

We had been told that there were toll gates on the motorways marked for those with and without the appropriate vignette. Well we didn't see any. We just drove straight onto the N2 and headed off towards Luzern. The traffic was modest and fast flowing, we stepped up the speed to around 120 kph and followed the flow. Most of the vehicles passed us.

Our view of Switzerland was lost in low cloud, which hung a few hundred feet up the hills on either side of the motorway. We did not see any mountains whatsoever. We did, however, see a lot of electricity pylons. There are electricity lines everywhere and when there are no views to distract, they become glaringly obvious – a blot on the landscape.

We might have stayed over in Switzerland, but the weather was against it, so we pressed on, stopping only to relieve ourselves at a motorway service area. There a coach party of elderly British tourists had stopped for refreshment. My wife overheard two of them bemoaning the price - £3 – they had paid for a simple cup of unimpressive coffee. Nescafe has a lot to answer for. We felt quite smug as we poured water from our hot flasks onto our instant tea.

The best part of this run was the St. Gothard tunnel. It runs for mile after mile underground. That this remarkable feat of engineering was completed long before the Channel Tunnel made us wonder why a rail link had been chosen for the latter, when clearly a road tunnel over such a long distance is an entirely practical possibility. It would have saved all that argument about high speed train links to London.

Exhaust fumes did not seem to present a problem, so clearly there is some impressive ventilation system working away behind the scenes.

We followed the motorway to Como, where we crossed into Italy. At our chosen exit, the road goes through what can only be described as a builder's yard, manned by Carabinieri and a customs official, neither of whom seemed particularly interested in us, then we drove out of the opposite side of the yard and it was Italy again. We could see the lake brooding in the background, with a grey mist hanging across the water. The RAC pointed us to several camp sites in the area, but we decided to drive on to the next large town – Lecco – where there was a lakeside camp. Distance travelled 465 km.

Oh dear! The only good things that could be said about this site were that, by Italian standards, it was cheap – 31,000 lire (£10.79) – and the view across the lake was fine.

We pitched on the lakeside by a reed bed, next to a wrecked caravan and some ancient agricultural machinery. No sooner had we pitched camp than we were attacked by a swarm of wasps that had taken residence in the old caravan. Fortunately we had on board some Cypriot insecticide called Aroxol. This is wicked stuff. It is the most powerful

Chapter 12 – Switzerland and the Italian Lakes

aerosol insecticide we have ever come across. Spray a flying insect and it drops dead at your feet. None of that buzzing around for ages nonsense, before finding a spot to play spinning tops with its feet in the air. I sprayed the wasp nest generously. That concentrated their minds somewhat and we were not troubled by them again.

The camp was surprisingly busy, with several other tent campers present – most late season campers we had encountered had motor or trailer caravans. Better still, it wasn't raining.

Most of the space was taken up by a variety of caravans, ancient and modern. Many of which had wooden extensions added. It was like a shanty town. It WAS a shanty town. Several of the caravans were occupied by people who clearly lived here. This is a hard way to live – washing clothing at a communal sink with the aid of a rubbing board. Cooped up in a single tiny room with a tribe of children – but the people themselves were lovely. They may have been near the back of the queue when life handed out its favours, but they seemed happy enough. They were certainly friendly. I left my sponge in the shower and a young urchin of about 12 came rushing after me to return it.

It was refreshingly warm here, and an evening stroll round the area revealed that people lived behind high fences and locked gates – so perhaps crime is a problem after all. The charm of the locality had been completely destroyed by careless planning which had allowed industry to build on the water's edge. It made us rather depressed.

We moved on 190 km to Lake Garda the following day, and in particular to Camping San Francesco at Sermione. This is a purpose built modern camping facility right on the water's edge, and next door to a chalet holiday complex. The site is featured both in the RAC and our Camping Italy discount brochure.

We were not immediately allowed to enter the site, because the office and gates were closed for siesta – the mind boggles – so we took the opportunity to look round at the excellent swimming pool and games area. They allow dogs on this site, so I spent the next twenty minutes cleaning the mess from the sole of my shoe!

Eventually the gate opened and there was a rush to register. My discount was acknowledged and we were given site passes which had to be carried at all times. Our allocated pitch was right at the water's edge, but disturbingly close to the restaurant and entertainment tent. We looked round for a better pitch, but decided to remain where we had been allocated.

The pitch was surfaced with gravel, which is fine for caravans, but not too comfortable for tenting. We had problems with the pegs again. Next door was a young Belgian couple with a huge dog (Benzo) – a young St. Bernard perhaps. I don't mind dogs. It's invariably their owners that are the problem. I am pleased to report that on this occasion there was no such problem. The dog was, however, very large and was anchored to the fence. I hoped that it did not have an upset stomach as the pitches were very close together.

At the end of the row were a couple of round German shirt lifters in a motor caravan. What they do behind closed doors is up to them, but theirs was not my idea of camping.

They had colour TV, a satellite dish and terrestrial aerial, microwave oven, even pedal cycles with little petrol engines so there was no need to pedal. This is couch potato camping. I was amazed to note that they even used the cycles – engines running - to go

to the toilet block. It was less than a hundred metres away!

The toilet facilities were excellent, but some pratt had stolen all the adjusters from the thermostatic controls in the men's showers – the women still had theirs I'm told. The showers were thus rather cool for my taste – however, I found that a 10 mm spanner from my tool kit fit exactly so I at least could adjust the shower to my preference.

The restaurant was al fresco, and meals were accompanied by light music, but as time went on I began to wonder if Robbie Williams' - Life Thru a Lens - album was the only one they possessed. It's a fine CD. I have it in my own collection, but played back to back repeatedly, it began to pall. As darkness fell on the restaurant, so did the crowds of diners, noisily munching on their pasta and pizzas, but by 10.30 it had all but closed and so our fears for our beauty sleep seemed not to be realised.

At the end of the row, the couch potatoes had their windows open and I could see their TV flickering, but what on earth were they watching? We could clearly hear the words to 'Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep' above the restaurant PA. I wandered over to ask them if they could turn it down a touch, but as I approached, it became obvious the noise was coming from farther down the path. I returned to the tent to report to my wife who was relaxing with a large plastic tumbler of rum, perched on her Chinese stool. From the smile on her face, I doubt she even noticed the music. Downing the last few dregs, she agreed to accompany me to locate the source of the music – not that I needed the moral support, but there was no way to sleep with that row going on.

As we walked along the lakeside footpath, the noise got louder, until we reached the boundary of the site, and it was clear we still had a couple of hundred metres left to go, to where there were disco lights flashing in the night.

It was children's night at the outdoor disco of the chalet camp next door. We pushed our way in. On stage there were 10 year old Spice Girls and on the concrete dance floor mothers and children danced with abandon. Fathers, we noted, stood around the edge drinking beer. Everyone seemed to be having a whale of a time, but given the ages of the children it surely would not go on much longer. We hoped that the adults didn't continue after the kids had retired. They didn't! Loud outdoor public address systems and sleep do not sit well together – particularly horribly distorted loud public address systems.

The next day we took a spin round the lake. This took rather longer than anticipated. For one thing the round trip is some 190 km. For another, the Italians are big on cycling and there were hundreds of them riding around the lake in the same clockwise direction that we had chosen. It must be easier on the legs this way as there were relatively few travelling counter-clockwise. Or perhaps, they just preferred the view.

The road is littered with tunnels and bends, so you get baulked by cyclists at every turn. Despite the slow pace, or even aided by it, there are some wonderful views, particularly at the pointy top end of the lake near Riva – and although the AA map shows the return leg as being a minor road – yellow on the map – it is every bit as wide as the previous bit. Riva is noted as a windsurfers' resort, being subject to steady winds from the mountains, but the few windsurfers out on the lake, were having difficulty making any headway whatsoever in flat calm conditions.

Private beaches and anti- caravan measures restricting the access height on the few available car parks mean that parking is a problem, but we stopped for a while in a tow-

away zone, by the waters edge, working on the premise that everything stops for siesta. We had an hour of splendid scenery uninterrupted by officialdom, watching a variety of impressive marine hardware buzzing up and down the lake.

On our return, we found that a German couple had parked their small VW motor caravan in limbo between our pitch and that of another set of Germans with a trailer van who had replaced the Belgian couple. I thought that was a bit rich, but assumed that they were travelling together and wanted to stay close to one another. All the usual jokes about Germans and towels on sun beds came out, but they were not really causing us any inconvenience.

They were not travelling together and the occupant of the trailer caravan was quite miffed at the interlopers and words were exchanged between them.

The guy from the VW came over to us and apologised for any inconvenience. He was from Munich and his girl friend was from Rome. They had shared a holiday and he was about to put her on a train home. They had only remained in that spot to irritate the guy with the trailer van who they considered a plonker. He would move the VW when they went to book the train tickets after their evening meal. Sounded fine to me.

During the evening we went for a walk to the edge of the adjacent town of Sirmione. This is spread along a short peninsula that juts out into the lake, with the old town at the lake end. There is a fairy tale castle that you can visit, and parking is available if you rise early enough – otherwise public transport is the better bet. Walking back to the camp site in the dark is recommended only for the foolhardy as there is no footpath, just a bumpy grass track along the side of the road in total darkness. Local drivers have little consideration for pedestrians.

On the way back we were stopped by a German tourist, a mature lady in a motor caravan with a couple of youngsters in tow. She was looking for the site, but had been driving around in circles for so long that she was almost crying tears of desperation. We pointed out the site across the fields and indicated where she should turn. I have never seen anyone look so relieved.

When returned to the site, we saw that the Munich man's VW had been moved to another pitch near the toilet block. We exchanged a few pleasantries with him and that was that.

The weather was holding. Lake Garda is very pretty in the sunshine and here at least efforts have been made to keep it that way. Purely out of curiosity, on our evening walk, we had picked up a flier from an estate agent in the town which listed available property in the area. Properties here demand serious money. No wonder they keep it so nice. The place is awash with rich people.

With our kit now properly dried out after a couple of days in the sun, we were quite reluctant to move on, but there was loads more to see before the 21st. Site fees for the two nights amounted to 69,120 lire (including the discount), which is a whopping £24, but frankly the standards maintained here and the special location justify the price. We would recommend it.

Chapter 13 – Verona to Bologna

Verona is only a stone's throw from Lake Garda, so we went to have a look. Not recommended! There's nothing wrong with Verona. It's just that we got lost and ended up driving round and round the town. We decided not to stop and set sail for Bologna, where our Camping Italy brochure offered us another 10% saving.

Close to Bologna is the industrial town of Modena, the home of Pavarotti, Ferrari and Maserati. We saw none of them! In fact we saw only one Ferrari car during the whole of our time in Italy, both coming and going.

Even with the detour, it is not a huge step to Bologna (209 km). The camp site is adjacent to the exhibition centre on the outskirts of town. The attendant, a miserable sod bearing a slight resemblance to Adolf Hitler, was not pleased to see us. He was less pleased when I presented the brochure for my discount. If these companies don't want to take part in such promotions, why do they sign up for them? He refused to honour the discount unless I could produce the voucher that accompanied the brochure. We hadn't had that trouble at Sermione – but there again, they didn't hand out the requisite voucher.

I was irritated out of all proportion to the loss of a couple of pounds. It was the principle rather than the money that was at issue. I would have been just as irritated had the discount been a mere 10 bob. My wife ignored my mumbling and cursing as we erected the tent on one of the few remaining decent pitches next to the shower block. Opposite was a family of what appeared to be South American Indians with bright clothes and an ancient and battered transit van. There was some sort of international festival at the exhibition centre and presumably they had overflowed from there – either that or the organisers had mistaken them for gypsies and turfed them out.

Alongside our tent was a small bivouac. The occupants had left their towel hanging from a tree, but it had begun to rain so I pushed it under the doorway of their tent – at least I hoped it belonged to them. My Samaritan deed was quickly rewarded, for I noticed the unused discount voucher from Camping Tiber screwed up in the bottom of the door pocket of the truck. I seized it like a trophy and marched off to the office. Sadly Adolf had gone home and his replacement was a much nicer chap altogether. He changed the receipt to reflect the discount – though he had difficulty working out 10% and I never really managed the full discount, but honour was served.

The proximity of the exhibition ground meant that the camp site had its own bus service into town. This was handy, and, as usual, cheap. The next morning we braved the rain and rode the bus into town.

Bologna is another historical city of typical Italian architecture. There is the usual arrangement of narrow streets and wide piazzas, and the expected surfeit of historical buildings and fine art. A high point of the day came with a veteran car rally, with entries from all over Italy and a few enthusiast guests from much farther afield. There were even crews from the USA. Best of all was an old buffer in flying helmet driving an ancient and battered Fiat sports car, that looked as though it was normally used as a hen house – great fun.

Bologna has its own leaning tower – a brick built edifice dating back to the 12th century, and is propped up by scaffolding. This, like those to be found in the hill towns of Tuscany, is of the factory chimney school of architecture. It should be pulled down before it falls on somebody.

In Bologna, the ever present beggars had found a new ruse to persuade people to part with their coins – the exposure of bodily deformities. They would sit in the shop doorways, exposing, for example, a deformed naked foot, whilst waving a tin can with a few coins as bait.

Here too we came across our first exposure to crime. I was ripped off in the market. The old woman on the veggie stall sensed my discomfort with the currency to perfection. I ended up buying the world's four most expensive tomatoes. They weren't even nice tomatoes!

That was my fault entirely, but a short while later we were sitting in a small piazza when a shifty looking youth carrying a ladies handbag sat down on the next bench then proceeded to riffle through the contents. He had just pocketed the cash from the purse, when two traffic policemen came round the corner. He ran away taking the bag with him – yet moments earlier he had been quite unconcerned at our presence only a few feet away.

The return bus number 21/C departs from outside 29 Via Marconi. The street is named after the scientist of the same name from around here, who reputedly invented radio. Since the Russians came out of the cold, they too claim to have been responsible for its invention. I even recall that some Asian chappie has also put in a bid, but generally Guglielmo Marconi is the boy who gets the credit.

The buses run irregularly – albeit to a timetable, and like the trains, the buses run on time – one of the things that Mussolini sorted out. The Via Marconi bus stop is used by a number of routes including that of the 21, which, unlike its C suffixed companion ('C' for Campeggio), does not go all the way to the camp. We allowed a couple of 21s to go past, and eventually saw the 21/C, got on and punched our tickets.

The driver then stepped out of his cab and went walkabout. This caused some minor consternation among the passengers. Then we saw another 21/C approaching the stop. There shouldn't have been two 21/Cs, so several of us alighted and dashed to change buses. Unfortunately, in our rush, my wife fell headlong over the step of the second bus, badly bruising her leg.

The pouring rain and long walk even to the edge of town meant that there was not a lot to do back at the camp site. There was a tiny little bar but it did not seem inviting, so during the evening we sat in the truck, drank rum and cocoa, read and listened to the radio.

The north of Italy is big on FM radio. There are dozens of stations playing all kinds of music, chat, drama and sport. My wife and I both love to listen to the Italian language. It is the most musical language that there is. I love Italian opera – particularly Puccini – and now we found that we both loved Italian popular music. High in the music charts and to be heard on lots of channels was the Italian singer Eros Ramazzotti. Fantastic. We just had to buy his CD.

For two nights, with our eventual discount, the site fee came to 60,000 lire, which was not the best £20 we had spent, particularly as there was no hot water available, but the site is the only practical one in the area. Before leaving we made sure that the site warden stamped our Camping Italy brochure and gave us a new voucher. Those stamps were now mounting and we decided to concentrate solely on Camping Italy sites to get our

free night back in Rome.

Chapter 14 – Pisa to Siena

The next step was to Pisa. We had been very disappointed in our inability to park on the way out, but the RAC and Camping Italy identified a site allegedly within 800 metres of the leaning tower.

The Pisa site is certainly within walking distance of the tower, but 800 metres is a very conservative measurement. I would have put it at well over a kilometre. It's a strange site and is mainly used for a single overnight halt by visitors to the tower. After all, there is little else here worth looking at. There is no natural shelter, and the pitches were muddy, though I could hardly blame them for the weather. To get round the former, a number of posts had been erected and at some time in the past, cloth canopies had been stretched between them to form rows of giant awnings. Unfortunately, they had suffered the ravages of the weather and were flapping noisily in the strong wind. There is also a railway close by, and while we did not find train noise a problem, Italian freight does tend to be shuffled around at night.

The mud problem could only be avoided by picking one of the driest looking pitches. Fortunately, it was getting towards the end of the season and there was plenty of space from which to choose.

The toilet facilities left a little to be desired, but at least there was a ready supply of hot water – and later we found another toilet block close to the reception, which was an improvement on the main facility.

The approach to the leaning tower and the marble Duomo alongside is an obstacle course of mainly African street traders, many of them in national dress. They sell a variety of junk from plastic representations of the tower itself, via wooden trains with a selection of carriages carved into letters to spell your name, to cheap leather belts. Although it was impossible to avoid them, they were not as pushy as you might find such traders in – say – Egypt. A firm 'NO' was usually sufficient to deter them, and of course 'no' is equally 'no' in Italian.

The tower really is very pretty, although it is no longer considered safe to enter, leaning some 15 feet out of true at the top. It was leaning before it was even completed, but the powers that be have for some time been trying to find ways to straighten it. The latest ploy is to use large weights to try and sink the high side, thus forcing it upright again. If it doesn't work, one day there will be an expensive pile of rubble here, with the biggest cost going to the local tourist trade.

The Tower tends to overshadow the magnificent Duomo which shares the same plot, which has stood for more than 900 years. It is a beautiful building, but on this visit much of it was hidden by scaffolding.

You can easily see both antiquities in a morning, which left us hard pressed for something to do in the afternoon. A trip to the coast was called for, with Livorno presenting itself as somewhere new to explore. On the way we passed the American military base, Fort Darby, which despite its size, does not appear on the maps or in the guide books. It's not as though you could miss it. Presumably Uncle Sam grabbed the land after the war and has hung on to it ever since. It runs for miles and miles, and while we never actually saw any American personnel from the road, they certainly have plenty of military hardware lying about doing nothing, and local cafes and bars for miles around have an American flavour.

Livorno is a large port with regular sailings to the islands off the western coast – Sardinia, Elba and Corsica. It is also a stopping off point for cruise ships and in port to prove the point was a giant floating skyscraper.

The weather was foul. It wasn't raining but the wind was beating in from the sea. The sea itself was breaking across the road and the area seemed to be an assembly point for local youth, who hung around in groups on corners and in car parks, with cars and scooters.

We were tempted to run south along the coast, but had a change of heart and turned north instead to Marina di Pisa, but there proved to be nothing there worthy of our attention and so we returned to the camp site.

The Pisa site charged us 31,500 lire – including discount - for the night (almost £11) which is a bit steep for what is on offer, but justified by its proximity to the Tower, which means you need only linger the one night. It also meant another stamp for our collection. The journey to Pisa, including the trip out to Livorno added another 252 km to our tally.

We stopped at the UniCoop supermarket on the outskirts of town – another go at that excellent porchetta was beckoning, but it was 8.00 am and the place was closed. Already there were two children begging at the traffic lights at the end of the street.

So on to Siena and another site from Camping Italy. That should give us four of the required five stamps.

A little later that morning, passing through one of the many small towns along the route – I think it was probably Poggibonsi – we spotted a sign for another UniCoop supermarket. Actually, it was difficult to miss it as the Italians love their advertising boards and there had been reminders for it every few kilometres, from as far as 50 kilometres away. It was located behind huge railings down a back street. We stocked up on groceries and I spotted several varieties of Grappa, the local firewater distilled from the residue left after pressing grapes to make wine. In that respect I expected it to be something like the similarly conceived Zivania that is made in Cyprus villages, and which you sometimes see on sale in old mineral water bottles. Zivania has little real taste, but has a kick like an angry mule. I expected some of the same from Grappa.

I picked one of the more expensive varieties, in the hope that it might have been of better quality. It wasn't until we left the shop that my wife pointed out that there was a twig floating in the bottle. A twig? It was more like a small shrub, complete with leaves – inserted to 'enhance' the flavour.

This branch of UniCoop also had porchetta, but this time it was sitting cold on the shelves of the ham counter. We bought some anyway. The taste proved to be similar, dominated by the infusion of herby stuffing. We won't be too concerned if it is a long time before we sample it again.

It was only a short hop to Siena – 158 km – and although we had travelled this way a couple of months earlier, it was completely unfamiliar to us. The camp site is located about 10 km outside town, which is not very convenient, but it's a lovely spot in the shadow of a Tuscan hill village, and there is a bus service into town.

Not only was the site in a pretty location, it was also cheap by Italian standards – 24,000 lire (with our discount) or £8.35. The site was consequently rather full, and our pitch was less than ideal, on a muddy shelf cut into the side of a grassy bank in a small copse of

pine trees.

Siena had had its fair share of rain and the grassy bank above our tent was cracked and looked unstable. Any more rain and we were moving away from that bank. I had visions of being buried under tons of earth. It had only been a few months earlier when there had been massive mud slides to the south of here. For this reason, I cannot say I was entirely comfortable during our stay here.

We were pitched next to another tent, occupied by a young Dutch couple. They seemed to spend rather a lot of time engaged in sexual activity – I mention this more out of envy than anything else. They had arrived earlier and had found a better, flatter pitch than ours, but our tents were quite close.

We had our usual lunch of ham and tomato sandwiches, sitting at a picnic bench in the middle of a deserted play area. There was not a cloud in the sky and it was pleasantly warm. I never get fed up of eating Italian ham, but the tomatoes were definitely out of season and more like the flavourless, watery sorts of thing you can buy readily in the UK, or Cyprus for that matter. The beginning of July is clearly the better time to visit to find those magnificent red-juiced samples.

As we were finishing our meal it began to rain. We couldn't believe it. The sky above was completely blue. There was not a cloud in sight, save for those over the hills on the horizon. We weren't the only ones puzzled by this phenomenon.

We repaired to the truck, passing our Dutch neighbours. There were humping and grunting sounds coming from the tent. I said pointedly to my wife, that they were having their afternoon bonk – forgetting for the moment that many Dutch people speak English as well as we do. They emerged a few moments later looking rather red faced.

We chatted with them – like you do – and they told us that they had got fed up with France and had decided to start exploring the mediaeval hill towns of Tuscany. They were singularly unimpressed when I suggested that if they'd seen one, they'd seen them all. Only the street layouts were different.

That afternoon we took a drive to Siena where the old town is at the top of a particularly high hill. On the way into town we were driving along gently, minding our own business, when some Italian lunatic in a Landrover Discovery took it upon himself to overtake us. He had picked a bad moment as two police officers in a pale blue Alfa Romeo took this exact moment to emerge from a side street. Now it's difficult to apportion blame here. The Discovery driver certainly picked a bad spot to overtake, but then the police driver should have looked right before sticking his nose out into the road.

It was the nearest near miss I have seen for a long time. The Discovery disappeared into the distance. When the police driver had cleaned his trousers, I saw the Alfa approaching from behind. It would have been difficult to have missed it. Its headlights were flashing. There were high intensity blue flashing lights on the roof and the siren was wailing. I pulled over towards the kerb to let it pass.

It was quite a long time before we saw the results of this encounter. The hapless driver of the Discovery had been pulled over at the side of the road and two furious policemen were gesticulating wildly at him. A punch-up seemed on the cards!

We continued to the old town, which is now pedestrianised and after having a quick look

round, we headed back. We were amused to see that the Discovery and the police were still where we had left them. The Discovery driver looked decidedly sheepish and one of the policemen was scribbling on an A4 notepad.

The small hill village by the camp site was within easy walking distance, but was deserted. Even here, people live behind substantial gates and high walls. On the outskirts of the village was a war memorial with a huge rusting mortar mounted on a pile of stones, surrounded by benches. This must be where the old men of the village gather to gossip, because by each of the benches were mounds of cigarette ends. It's a pleasant spot under olive trees to while away a lazy afternoon.

That evening our supply of rum – purely medicinal you understand - was getting a little low, so we thought we might sample the Grappa. We eyed the foliage in the bottle suspiciously and sniffed the contents. It had the bouquet of a stagnant pond. I have not tasted a stagnant pond, but I would imagine that this is what the taste would be like too. It was rather weaker than the Cypriot equivalent – which thankfully lacks the twig! It was quite clearly the most unpleasant tasting beverage that either of us had encountered.

Then on to Rome, the scenic route through the very best part of Italy – Umbria. You can keep Tuscany for me. Leave it for the poseurs. Umbria has better contours, better scenery and better towns. We ran past Lake Trasimeno – which is like an inland sea, rather than the little blue splodge that it appears from the map, then on via a free motorway to Perugia. Just past Perugia on the SS75, there is a turn-off into the hills to Assisi, along the SS147. It is well worth taking the diversion to look at this historic town. Unfortunately, there had been a serious earthquake here some 12 months or so earlier which had caused incalculable damage to the irreplaceable frescos by Giotto on the ceiling of the Basilica di San Francesco, and restoration work was being carried out.

We stopped at a small supermarket in Assisi for the inevitable ham and bread for lunch. We won't do that again. These out of the way places know how to charge. Ouch!

Then it was back down to Foligno and on via Spoleto, and Terni to possibly the most picturesque of all these Umbrian towns – Narni. It is easy to get lost at Terni, thanks to a convoluted road network and the usual lack of informative road signs, but it is worth persevering to go via Narni. The views from this hilltop town are utterly splendid.

After Narni, you lose a lot of the wonderful scenery as the SS3 runs down into Rome.

Chapter 15 – Rome Again

Camping Tiber expects you to arrive from the Tangenziale, so there are no signs directing you to it from the SS3. You run straight up to the Tangenziale at Prima Porta, where you cannot really miss it – the ring road that is, not the site. My mind was in neutral for here I took a wrong turn and we found ourselves heading counter clockwise along the Tangenziale, away from where we wanted to be. The next exit – the SS2 – takes you back out into the country again and there is nowhere convenient to turn round on this dual carriageway road, so I took a chance and headed cross country, back to the SS3 again. As luck would have it, the road dropped us back into Prima Porta, and so this time I made sure I took the correct turn. With the various detours this leg of the journey had been 330 km.

Triumphantly, I presented my Camping Italy brochure and my voucher from Siena to the receptionist.

I couldn't believe it. She wouldn't accept it. She said we could have the discount, but no way could we have the free night, as it had been two years since they had been involved in the promotion and they were no longer part of the Camping Italy group.

Nonsense! They were still issuing the vouchers. I told her that it had only been three months since she started us off on the Camping Italy trail in the first place. I showed her the Camping Tiber stamp in first place on the brochure.

I got that shrug again. She wouldn't budge and her command of English was getting weaker all the time. We could have the 10% discount but not the free night - bottom line. Frankly I was furious. I was in half a mind to find another site, but the annoying thing is that Tiber is so damned good and convenient.

Later that evening, I saw that the staff had changed and I returned to the reception to try again for my freebie. This time the response was more polite and the explanation more convoluted, but the result was the same. I demanded the return of my voucher. The woman had the nerve to give me another Tiber voucher. I insisted on the one I had got from Siena, which matched the last stamp on the card, and took some small satisfaction in that she had to dig for it in a mound of others.

I cannot say that I enjoyed Rome too much on the earlier visit, but we planned to stay for three nights once again and this time the weather was more appropriate to sightseeing, being both cool and mainly dry.

First on the list was the Cistine Chapel ceiling, which is accessed from the Vatican Museum. We walked directly to the Vatican from Flaminia station. The street traders were already out in force and despite the early hour, there was a large queue waiting at the museum.

We stopped off at a large record store on route to see if we could buy the Eros Ramazzotti CD, but we did not know which to buy and the staff were less than helpful, so came away empty handed.

On the approach to the Vatican City there is a huge cross-roads, with zebra crossings at each corner. Given the huge numbers of tourists, the crossings are manned by armed traffic policemen with Carabinieri lollipops and whistles. The traffic takes no notice of them whatsoever. The policeman at our crossing was standing in the road frantically waving his lollipop and blowing for all he was worth on his whistle. The cars continued to

pass by him on either side. At one point I thought that he was going to draw his automatic pistol and start shooting, but he drew a notebook instead and jotted down some numbers of offending cars.

Some drivers too must have seen this scribbling for at last sense prevailed and the traffic stopped. A surge of people dashed across the road and then a motor scooter made a break across the crossing and this was like a signal for the cars to follow. Those remaining on the crossing had to flee for their lives. Unbelievable!

The museum entrance fee was 15,000 lire (about a fiver) a head. Judging by the sheer weight of numbers visiting, this entrance fee must be an extremely lucrative little earner. Inside there are a selection of routes planned – the Vatican authorities should lend their signposting expertise to the Italian highways departments – according to the time you want to spend browsing the treasures. The longest route is expected to take five hours.

In the busiest sections – usually near the public conveniences – the crowd surged along like the contents of a rush hour tube train. In other parts – particularly the extensive picture galleries – the crowds were less dense.

The pictures, not surprisingly, have a religious theme. Judging from the efforts committed to canvas, in the modern art section, several of the artists must have been severely disturbed. It was therapy not religion that they needed.

My particular favourite piece in the gallery was a wonderfully simple monochrome stained glass window depicting the Virgin and Child, lit from behind.

It is not only the Cistine Chapel that boasts a fine ceiling. There are lavish ceilings in many of the rooms and corridors and personally I would rather see such wonderful examples of the plasterer's art, with their sculptured patterns and friezes. The frescoes on the Cistine ceiling are completely over the top for my taste, but the restoration has been wonderfully executed, and I would have been disappointed had I not seen it.

While everyone is looking up at the ceilings they miss completely the wonderful mosaic floors. How many people go through the Cistine Chapel and never even glance down at its fabulous floor?

My wife is very squeamish when it comes to stuffed animals, so when we passed one particular display of a stuffed swan in a glass case, she pulled a face and walked on the other side of the corridor until a guide happened to mention that the swan was porcelain and a gift from an American president – Kennedy I think. We looked closer. It was almost impossible to tell that it wasn't a real swan even with nose pressed against the glass. It is hard to imagine the patience that went in to producing such exquisite workmanship. If it was Kennedy's idea of a gift to God, it didn't work. He got his head blown off. Perhaps God wanted to thank him personally?

There's too much to see in the museum, and if we'd hung around with the guides, we would still have been there now, but already my left hip was giving me some gyp and walking was becoming increasingly more uncomfortable, so we departed without visiting all of the exhibits.

Despite the crowds, and the over-riding impression that this museum was there as a means of extracting as much money from tourists as was humanly possible; and despite my belief that the Jesus Christ of the New Testament would have had a fit had he seen

what was being hoarded by the church in his name, no visit to Rome is complete without a visit to this museum.

Returning to the street by the same route that we had entered the museum, the map in our guide book implied that we could turn left or right and the walk around the outside would be about the same. Big mistake!

On the ground, the distance must be three times as far because the map irons out all the corners into a gentle curve. Here, choking on exhaust gasses we walked and walked, my hip getting more and more painful by the moment. I happened to notice that all the parked cars seemed to be damaged. To take my mind off the numbing pain, I began to take note. We must have passed several hundred parked cars. We did not see a single one that did not have bodywork damage somewhere.

Eventually we reached the other side. We sat down on the stone steps of a building and munched an expensive salmonella pizza from one of the street vendors until the throbbing pain in my leg began to subside a little to allow us to move on.

A little farther down the road were hundreds of young soldiers in strange dress uniforms with short waist length, page boy, jackets. Some carried musical instruments. Their crew cut hair and the strange well cut uniforms suggested American service recruits, but then some buses arrived to take them away. They were from an Italian military academy.

As we wandered back towards the station along the Via Del Corso we spotted the sign for the Trevi Fountain again and decided to detour just to see if it was working.

The tiny piazza and the steps around the fountain were thronged with hundreds of happy people, laughing and eating and throwing coins over their shoulders into the water. Many were tourists. Just as many were local office workers taking advantage of the afternoon sunshine to eat their sandwiches al fresco. Policemen whistled at errant children who tried to climb on the sculptures and traders mingled with the crowds selling rubbery faces that could be squeezed into a variety of shapes for merely 1000 lire. So captured were we with the carnival atmosphere that I nearly bought one! OK – not that nearly!

The sun was in just the right spot to bathe the sculptures of the fountain and make them gleam with whiteness, like a toothpaste ad. Water poured out of assorted orifices. So this was what all the fuss was about? If you want to see the fountain – and if in town you should – then go at lunchtime. You won't regret it – but buy your fruit out of town. The street traders were asking 12,000 lire (about £4) for a kilo of peaches that cost only 3,000 in Prima Porta.

By the time we reached the camp site, I was in agony and the only solution to the pain was a hot shower to be later followed by a generous helping of rum. Two plastic tumblers of Woods and you could have taken out all my teeth without anaesthetic.

An early night was called for. Our slumbers were disturbed by the light of a torch shining on the tent around 4 a.m. Someone, it seemed was taking a great deal of interest in our equipment and at that hour was presumably up to no good.

I am not easily frightened and I will confidently tackle anybody who messes with me or mine. I decided to get dressed quietly and flatten the bastard. First things first. Even I draw the line at challenging a potential felon whilst stark naked.

It is a bit of a struggle trying to get dressed quietly in the confines of the sleeping compartment of a Vango, and there is no way you can avoid the noise of the series of zips that have to be opened before you can get outside, so when I did eventually hit the night air, dressed in tee-shirt, jeans and trainers, there was no-one to be seen.

Then I heard a woman scream on the far side of the site. It was more of an agitated shout rather than a full throated scream, but clearly someone else was having problems with the intruder. I decided to investigate.

A short while later I saw a torch bobbing about at the far end of the site. Dodging between the trees, like an SAS man on manoeuvres, I secreted myself in a spot where I could watch without being seen. The torch went round all the campers between the area I had first spotted it and my current location. I began to suspect that it wasn't a prowler, but probably a security guard. I waited until he returned to my tent and when he shone the light on it for a second time I jumped out into the open.

The man leaped back with a start, then, recovering his composure, casually walked over to me. I waited in the open for him to approach. He uttered a stream of words in Italian, the only one of which I understood was *campeggio* – camping. Only a supremely confident burglar would have done that. The security guard angle looked favourite.

I pointed to the tent and said 'English'. Any chance of having a good row with this idiot went out of the window when I realised that neither of us could speak a word of the other's language. There is nothing in the phrase book about challenging prowlers in the early hours before dawn. Phrases like 'I need a new sprocket for my bicycle.' Don't help much on such occasions.

He wandered off with his torch. I went back to bed.

Next morning I called at the reception to buy some more train tickets and to have a whinge about the nocturnal visitor. Clearly someone else had complained before me – presumably Mrs. Scream. The receptionist explained that the security guard claimed to have disturbed three men dressed in black clothing and had been chasing them round the site.

Well that was a lie for a start. He didn't have a good chase in him. I told her my version of events and suggested that she warn him that if he did it again I would give him a smack. She seemed less than enthusiastic about this particular guard, so I guess there had been complaints on other occasions. My earlier high regard for Camping Tiber, already at a low ebb, thanks to the free night fiasco, was diminishing rapidly.

The pain in my hip had eased and we wanted to visit the Museo Borghese to view its superb collection of Bernini sculptures. It hadn't occurred to us how large the Borghese park turned out to be. The start of it is only a short walk from the Flaminia station, but from there we hadn't a clue where to find the museum.

Two uniformed police drove slowly by in an Alfa. I waved them down and asked if they could point us in the right direction. The passenger was a bit surly, but the driver was a real gent and had more than a smattering of English. He directed us in great detail before driving off, then returning to point out an even quicker route.

We wandered off in the direction he had indicated, pausing to watch a column of around twenty mounted policemen, ride through the park. The leading officer, who held a rank

equivalent to Inspector in the British constabularies, rode a magnificent black horse. The column was followed at a safe distance by a man with a dustcart and shovel to collect the droppings. I guess the horses must have just had breakfast as they left sufficient deposits for the largest rose garden.

It was a couple of kilometres at least to the museum and we had to cross the main road that runs through the park. Sadly the park is a little neglected, but it does provide hundreds of acres of open green space and is clearly very popular with the Roman population.

There's a nifty little electric bus service through the park should you be averse to walking, and if you go straight there from the station, you should have sufficient time remaining to ride the bus on the same ticket you used for the train.

Something else it doesn't tell you in the guide books. For security reasons, visits to the Museo Borghese are strictly rationed and you have to pre-book a time slot when you can visit. We couldn't get in. There was also a notice outside with photographs of some of the better sculptures that had been lent to other museums around the world, so they didn't even have the full collection on view. We were thoroughly pissed off that we had missed seeing them, so in disgust we went straight back to the station.

I sat down on a form and cracked my head on a fire extinguisher which had been sensibly mounted above the form at my head height. I was dazed and a man from the railway office rushed over to assist. Apart from a small cut and a large bump on the back of my head I would live to fight another day. My hip was hurting too. I was not a happy bunny.

The train was largely empty. I wondered out loud whether it was worth stamping the tickets or if anyone bothered to check. Then, at the next station, from the doors at the end of the carriage came a ticket collector accompanied by burly cop in a black leather jacket, with a large automatic pistol slung in a well worn leather holster from his belt. His right hand never moved from its resting place on the butt of the pistol.

Two seats along sat a moderately attractive, but rather hard looking Italian girl in her late teens to early twenties. Her ticket had expired. The ticket examiner cut up rough and the girl looked somewhat discomfited. They argued for a time. The railway cop stood by looking anxiously all around the carriage as if someone might suddenly make a dash for the door.

Facing the girl was a rather seedy looking youth with spots and greasy hair. I assumed that he had taken the seat opposite to the her in order to leer. There had been no prior indication that they knew one another. Like Sir Galahad he leapt to her defence and produced a second valid ticket, which he seemed to be claiming was hers. Now why would he have that?

He took his chance and moved over to sit next to the hapless girl and pretended they were together.

The guard reluctantly moved on to harass another customer further down the carriage – a pensioner, who presumably was entitled to free transport. He looked old to me, and I'm the wrong side of fifty, but the guard insisted on him producing documents to support his travel concession. All this guard needed was a long gabardine raincoat and a trilby pulled over his eyes and it would have been a scene from a World War II movie, with the

Gestapo looking for escaped POWs. Then the train arrived at a station and the two interlopers left the carriage to move to the next one.

Spotty youth remained in the seat next to the girl. She looked out of the window avoiding his attempts at conversation, whilst feeling somehow indebted to him. When the girl left the train, Spotty followed her and we could see them arguing on the platform as the train carried us on to Prima Porta.

We were a bit early for the bus to the camp so we went shopping in the street market and bought some more of those stunningly flavoursome peaches.

We left early the next morning and with the begrudged ten percent discount the bill for the second three nights came to 89,100 lire (£31.01). Despite the problems, this remained my favourite of the Italian sites, though my wife preferred Sermione.

Chapter 16 - Sorrento

There were Camping Italy sites at Salerno and Sorrento. Salerno had looked a dump from a distance and Sorrento was one of the most popular Italian holiday destinations for British tourists, so there was no contest. Sorrento it would be.

We started off in the morning rush hour, and joined the Tangenziale, heading south for the SS6, which runs parallel to the A1 autostrade. Rush hour traffic in Rome is a rare experience that I would not wish to repeat on a regular basis. If you watch the movies, you imagine that its going to be a mêlée of blowing horns and cut and thrust high speed motoring. That's not it at all. The drivers grip their wheels with grim determination. They look neither to the left or right and intimidate their fellow road users into submission. Where the road will accommodate two lanes of traffic, they squeeze in three or four. You have to drive at the tiniest gap and force the other driver to give way. There is, of course, a distinct advantage in having a large truck here. There are bumps and nudges everywhere, but the traffic keeps on moving. If you were to wait for an opening in the traffic, you would be still there now. You have to drive like the locals – and it works. You can really make progress this way. Miraculously we got through unscathed.

In Britain this sort of driving would result in road rage and fist fights at every junction. In America you would probably be shot at. In Italy they accept it as normal. I wonder what the rates of heart disease are like in Rome, because this morning battle proved extremely stressful? I could not imagine doing it every day.

The SS6 is a lovely road. There are no beggars at the junctions and it sweeps on south getting faster and more free from traffic with every kilometre. In one town along the way – I think it was Valmontone – the traffic in front appeared to be held up. It was difficult to see the nature of the problem, so I tried to drive the Italian way and overtook the standing traffic. That was a mistake, as a traffic cop on a Moto Guzzi motorcycle came roaring up and flagged me angrily back into the line of standing traffic. He parked alongside the truck glaring at me, then spotted the Greek writing on the tax disc in the windscreen. He looked down at the registration of the truck, then realised that he might have a problem and drove off. The delay was caused by a huge wide load, which would have been a lot happier on the A1.

The road was easy to follow until we came to Frosinone, where it came to an end in the one-way streets of this market town. It's the usual story - No signs! And it soon became obvious that my choice of exit road was the wrong one. The options were to turn round or go the long way via Sora. We took the latter option, on the basis that our map was useless and that there were a lot more roads in practice than in ink on its paper, so it should be possible to throw a right and duck back to where we were headed. And if not, our only loss would be a few extra kilometres on the clock.

Instead the road wound its way uphill relentlessly towards Sora on a fine free autostrade – and even that was not shown on the map - and there were no escape routes until we were miles out of our way and we saw a sign for Isola Del Liri, which was on the other side of the triangle that would take us back down again.

We turned and found ourselves in a small town with no obvious way out. In spite of being lost, it was absolutely beautiful up here, there was even a major waterfall right at the side of the main street in the town centre. We passed a policeman on point duty and after a short while, we found ourselves approaching him again from another direction. He eyed us suspiciously as we passed. We tried again and found ourselves heading back

from the opposite direction. This time I stopped in the middle of the junction. There was no traffic to make this a problem – or to require the services of the policeman for that matter. I would down the window and asked hopefully “Cassino?”.

To emphasise the point I handed him the map and stabbed my finger on the blob that indicated the place we wanted. His face lit up and without the benefit of any English he carefully explained where we should go. The only word I caught was ‘autostrade’, but I could see where he wanted us to go and from his gesticulations we should turn right, then bear left. Easy!

As we turned right, there was a sign pointing to Cassino, and in a couple of kilometres more was a huge supermarket. This supermarket was interesting for several reasons. The fresh fish counter had some of its stock swimming around in a large tank, which is not something you see every day. The cooked meat counter was manned by a real character who called himself Mr. Ham. This guy was a comic who clearly relished experimenting on us with his few words of English. The wines and spirits section had a superb sparkling wine on offer for only 1600 lire (55 pence!) a bottle.

That was lunch taken care of, with a couple of bottles of wine for the evening.

Cassino is the site of one of World War II's major battles, where the Americans, in particular, lost a lot of soldiers. You can read the history books, but you have to see the lie of the land to gauge depth of the problem. The Germans were dug in on the high ground, where they had a commanding view and control over the wide plains below. It must have been like a turkey shoot.

The coastal area of Naples is picturesque and fascinating, but Naples also has some horrendous slums and is reputed to be one of the most dangerous cities on earth. The higher you go up the hill, the worse it gets.

It was our intention to skip round the back of the City via Casserta, before heading down to the sea to join the coast road around Ercolano. As we hit Casserta, we wished we had made a different choice of route. It is seriously unpleasant round here, and as we manoeuvred towards the coast we found ourselves trapped in a region of abject squalor.

We knew that if we kept the mountain at our backs and the sun in our faces, we could not avoid reaching the sea, but it was not so simple in practice as the narrow streets and blocks of flats closed in around us. Here Whoopie and her mates jostled on street corners with cigarette sellers. It is not a place for the faint hearted. A couple of times while we crawled through the crowded streets our vehicle was harried by youths on motor scooters. A particular pratt thought it a good game to weave around the front of the truck until I pressed the throttle and surged past. The plastic front bumper of the truck kissed the rear panel of the scooter as he swerved back into our path. We left him standing in the road scrutinising the scooter for any signs of damage and staring down the road after us. The natives were unfriendly so we didn't stop.

My wife joked that the police would be looking for a large red truck driven by a little old lady – it's right hand drive don't forget! I doubt that, in this neighbourhood, people would want to have any dealings with the police.

We had been driving round the area for about an hour, reluctant to stop to ask for directions and despairing of ever finding a direction sign, when we spotted a sign for the

Tangenziale – the ring road. But my wife, who was map reading, insisted that it was not on the map – not even on the blow up of Naples. It appeared to be a way out and I took it.

The road was a superb dual carriageway mounted on stilts above the streets below, but then after only two kilometres, it came to a sudden halt – a bit like that causeway in the movie ‘Speed’ where Sandra Bullock jumps the bus with the bomb across the gap. We had no bomb and there was no landing site beyond, so we took the slip road that dropped us back to where we had started our suburban adventure. I could have cried.

Then we saw an aeroplane take off nearby and realised from the map that if we headed towards the airport, we could slip out of town that way.

If we had thought driving in Rome’s rush hour was exciting, even that had not prepared us for Naples traffic. It was simply mad. We were on a two lane dual carriageway, approaching a roundabout. There were three lanes of traffic already moving along and vehicles were overtaking by driving along the footpath, swerving to avoid the pillars holding the unfinished causeway above our heads. We slipped in behind a scruffy tipper lorry and let him do the hard work of forging a passage through the traffic. No-one but no-one was going to sneak between us.

The tipper took us all the way through the congestion and out to the far side of town. Here we could see the mountain and the sun again and could so get our bearings. I was so pleased with myself that I missed a set of traffic lights and crossed a junction against the red light. We were lucky to avoid a collision and certainly upset a few drivers on the other road.

In my defence, I have to say that Italian traffic lights are the most ridiculous I have seen anywhere. They are invariably sited high on a gantry above the road and comprise minuscule and almost invisible green and amber lights and a large red one. The sequence is different from that in the UK or Cyprus (where road traffic regulations are based on the British pattern) and from green the amber light flashes for a bit then the red light comes on. Sometimes in slack times, the red light never materialises and the amber light flashes all the time. Whatever the sequence, drivers seem to pay scant regard to the lights. On this occasion I had seen the light flashing, but had forgotten about the red.

A short while later we were safely on the coast road, and took the detour around Ercolano which is located between the sea and the main road. This road proved not to have any scenic merit whatsoever and was surfaced by ancient and badly maintained paving which produced an uncomfortable ride and aroused fears for the mirrors in the back footwell. The road suddenly came to a halt at a ‘No Entry’ sign and a little arrow directed traffic into what appeared to be a small courtyard, via a very narrow arch. Fortunately the road emerged from the other side of the square and we found ourselves back on the main road. There was even a sign pointing to Sorrento.

Sorrento is a small, pretty and wealthy town, frequented by jet-setters and lots of British tourists, on the top of high cliffs over-looking the Bay of Naples. Many of the hotels have private rocky beaches with lift shafts tacked on to the cliffs themselves.

We stopped to refuel at an Esso station on the main street and were directed to the camp site located just through the town.

The site was very grand and comprised scattered terraces over a steeply undulating cliff top plot.

I confidently presented my Camping Italy voucher and requested my free night's accommodation. The young man referred to an older man who looked like a retired Mafia hit man. He eyed me suspiciously before nodding his approval. I said that we wished to stay an extra night and even obtained the 10% discount on that night too. Things were looking up. 31,500 lire (£10.96) for two nights in one of southern Italy's most prestigious resorts.

Our chosen pitch was near the cliff edge, but our view was obscured by the many olive trees that grew on the site. Nearby were a young English couple with a Rover cabriolet and a large trailer tent. Their efforts at barbecuing were hilarious, with loads of flames and badly singed food. Closer were a pair of caravans but no sign of occupants.

During our own meal, we were joined by a most beautiful cat – we had had feline visitors at most of the sites, but this one was a beauty – which naturally wanted to share whatever fare he could get away with. Afterwards we went to look at the 'beach'. This meant clambering down hundreds of uneven steps to the bottom of the cliff to find a postage stamp of pumice pebbles, with a couple of deckchairs, which I believe belonged to the hotel next door.

We sat in the chairs, despite the chill of the early evening, and savoured the wonderful view of the bay, with Sorrento on our right and Vesuvius menacing in the background. There was plenty of shipping activity in the bay. Hydrofoils flitted back and forth to Capri, just out of sight round the headland on our left. Conventional ferries also plied the route and there were freighters and private yachts. Anchored off the town was an enormous private motor yacht. It was almost large enough to be a cruise ship.

We retired around ten to be awakened near midnight with the sounds of muffled explosions, which shook the floor we were lying upon. We had been in Cyprus in '95 and '96 when they had had the serious earthquakes, and these bumps felt like the after shocks. Frankly I was a little concerned. We were very close to Vesuvius, and during the summer we had watched a TV documentary which had suggested that the volcano was long overdue for a major eruption.

I decided to get up and investigate. In my haste, I sat down on one of the little stools. One of its aluminium legs slipped on the plastic groundsheet and simply folded in half – Chinese crap! It looked like I would be standing for the rest of my camp site meals.

As soon as I left the tent, there was another huge bang and the sky, in the direction of the mountain, was lit with a red glow. Oh my God. The bloody mountain's going off! Funny how even non-believers still resort to religious epithets at times like these.

I rushed back to the tent and told my wife, who also decided to get dressed. Together we walked – actually we rushed - to the top of the cliffs to get a view of the mountain.

It was a bloody fireworks display, centred somewhere around Pompeii. We laughed out loud, either through relief or at our own stupidity. But it was a super fireworks display and we watched for about an hour as thousands of pounds worth of incendiary devices were blasted into the night sky. To give some idea of the scale of the thing, Sorrento must be at least 10 km from Pompeii as the seagull flies, yet the explosions shook the ground on our

side.

I wish we had known about it, it would have been an even more fantastic spectacle from closer at hand.

The floating gin palace had gone by morning. We wandered into town and noted that here too people lived behind high walls, motorised gates and barbed wire. There were droves of British tourists, but from the expressions on their faces it was hard to tell if they were having a good time. I have noticed this before. The British on holiday abroad never look as though they are enjoying themselves. Let's face it. We are a nation of whingers and if there isn't enough to complain about at home, we can always compare foreign parts adversely with home.

The supermarket in the town centre had staff that could converse as easily in English as Italian, because the place is geared up for the annual British influx. And just so the Brits. would feel at home, we were disappointed to see an abundance of dog crap on the footpaths. This was so different from, say, Florence where we had seen an elegantly dressed young woman collect her dog's deposits with a pooper scooper and drop them in her handbag – which I hope was reserved specially for the purpose – as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

Certainly, Sorrento presents itself as an ideal base for the many sights that there are to be found around here – Pompeii, Ercolano, Amalfi, Capri etc., but as a beach resort, a place to relax in a deckchair and soak up the sun, it is useless, unless the chosen hotel has its own pool, private beach and, most important, lift. Otherwise you get very brassed off with that trek down to the sea shore several times a day.

Chapter 17 – The Final Leg

Sunday morning, the 20th September, and it was our last full day in Italy. We rose early and were on the road before 8, much to my wife's distress, as she was feeling more than a wee bit fragile. We had finished off the bottle of rum the night before – You can't leave half an inch in the bottle, can you?

I decided to have another attempt at the Amalfi coast road because the roads were deserted. Sunday is, after all, a traditional day for a lie-in. Setting off counter-clockwise around the winding road we were on the cliff top side of the road, which obviously offered the best views.

As we rounded a bend in the road, there was Capri before us, the rising sun lighting it gold against the blue of the sea. What a fantastic sight! I had to stop and take photographs which I knew would not do it justice. My wife was already suffering from motion sickness to accompany her headache and I think the word to describe her mood is fractious.

This road winds round and round rocky inlets which offer the sorts of views that attract oohs and aahs in abundance. After a while we came up behind a tourist coach and the passengers moved from one side of the bus then the other in a Mexican wave as every new view appeared.

We would be stuck behind the bus for the duration as the road was simply too narrow, the straights too short to pass. It trundled onwards, its speed often as low as 20 kph, but by keeping at a sensible distance from the rear of the bus, I could let the driver do all the hard work while I could give a little more attention to the views.

Unfortunately, this meant that I followed the bus right into a car park at Amalfi. I felt a pratt as I drove round the car park and back out on to the road. The passengers on the bus waved from the back window. My wife moaned in the passenger seat and looked quite ill.

The Amalfi coastal road runs for 75 km. It took us three hours to travel the length of it, and by the last few kilometres the traffic had started to build. We were both relieved when we hit the motorway at the Salerno end.

The lack of bends on the motorway and the relative smoothness of the ride revived my wife and we stopped at the first service area to freshen up and have a drink. There was not much traffic, but what there was whistled along. It was here that we saw the blue Ferrari with its darkened windows glide past.

We continued to Potenza, where my map suggests that the motorway finishes and pulled off to take advantage of the ablutions at the service area. The café was busy and no they didn't have that damned Ramazzotti CD at the shop.

While I used the lavatory, my wife was very disturbed by some of the goings-on in the car park and around the coffee bar. A man followed me into the toilet then came straight out again. He then approached a man and a very large wad of money changed hands between them. Such is the nature of Italian currency that a large wad of notes is no indication of the value it contains, but she felt that it looked an impressive amount nonetheless.

Neither man spoke. Neither looked at one another. They made the exchange and the other man walked away. The first man looked intently at my wife with a blackened stare.

She pretended to read the map.

Then a car came and parked alongside, with two men wearing cheap suits, bright ties and shiny shoes. They looked like the bag men from an American gangster movie. They went into every shop in turn, some of which were closed for business, then returned to their car. They seemed very pleased with themselves, whereas the traders they visited did not. Then they returned to their car and drove away. We had driven into the meeting place of the local criminals. We did not linger further.

The motorway kept going, which confused us somewhat, and there was supposed to be a turn off on the left for Altamura that never materialised, so before we knew it we were heading down the SS407 towards Taranto, which is completely in the wrong direction, under the 'heel' of the country.

Relief came with a sign for Matera, a nondescript sort of place on the SS7 from which we could find our way back to Altamura and then back to Bari again. Although we had been along this stretch on our way out, the crops had been harvested in the meantime, and without them the region looked quite bleak. There was no sign of Whoopie and her friends now that the farmers' work had been done.

We were pressing on nicely until we came to a large blue sign indicating Bari to the left. We turned off and had to brake hard as there was a concrete barrier across the road that would have wrecked the truck. The bloody road had not been built yet! One of the few good road signs in the country and it results in a near death experience.

We turned round and resumed on the other road, and eventually we arrived at our destination – Bari.

It was like a ghost town. We had only see the coastal stretch on the way out. This time we found ourselves in a built-up area, strongly reminiscent of modern Pompeii. Paved streets, and high buildings with shops below and flats above. Lots of parked cars, but nothing whatsoever was moving. The sound of our diesel engine echoed off the walls. It was quite eerie.

Spotting a sign indicating the port, we thought it worth getting our bearings ready for the following day, while there was no traffic to hold us up. We quickly located the main gate, then followed the road south out of town, looking for a camp site. We knew of one that should still be open near Brindisi, from Camping Italy, but we felt sure there would be others not listed by the RAC. In any case, it was a good 100 km run down to Brindisi and we could manage without that.

As luck would have it, there was a camp site just outside town, about 5 km from the port area. It appeared at first sight to be closed up for the winter, but there was a staff member on duty and we were invited in anyway. We were directed to the camping area and told to pick our own plot. It was very blustery and there was rain in the air. The whole impression conveyed by the place was of Rhyl in December. The roar of the sea in the background added to the air of desolation.

Despite the fact that we were the only campers, finding a pitch was no easy matter. Every spot that looked suitable was awash with ants. I have never seen so many and such large ants in one place before. The ant hills, spaced every couple of feet, covered every available grassy patch.

There were lots of caravans on the site, which had been moth-balled for the winter. Only two appeared to be occupied. Many of these caravans had paved patios outside with rattan sun shades above. We decided to pitch the tent on one of these areas, close to the toilet block, and used the gaps between the paving and the frame of the sun canopy to take our pegs and guys. It worked a treat.

One of the two caravanners came across for a chat. He was pleasant old buffer from Matera, which explained why he would want to spend a wintry evening in a caravan by the sea! He spoke no English but we managed to communicate well enough with signs and the few words we shared.

His wife appeared very shy and scuttled past when it was her turn to use the bathroom.

We slept well enough despite the wind the cold and the torrential rain that fell in the night. My wife was not looking forward to crossing the mountainous seas to Greece, but by morning the wind had died and the rain had stopped.

After paying 30,000 lire (£10.44) for the night, we left and drove back towards the port, where we found a large commercial vehicle parking area by the port gate, overlooking the sea. We had thought Bari to look rather tacky on our previous visit, but here at least, it looked very pretty with the sun shining on the buildings.

Chapter 18 – Trouble at Sea

I wandered over to the port entrance and asked the policeman on duty where the information office was located. He directed me onto the port and pointed out the relevant building. There a charming young lady looked up the ferry details and told us that we had to return about 4 in the afternoon and go to the departure lounge opposite.

On the way out, a news stand was even able to produce an English newspaper – a Scottish edition of Sunday's Independent. Like most good Sunday papers – I'm a Sunday Times man myself - there were reams of it and it kept us occupied until it was time to check in.

We drove on to the port and for the first time, the security at the gate showed some interest in our load. I lifted the sheet and said "*Campeggio*". He got the message and immediately lost interest.

We then ran up against Mr. Jobsworth the parking attendant who would not let us park on the departure lounge car park – though there was plenty of free space – because we didn't have a boarding card. We didn't have a boarding card because you have to get it from the departure lounge. We parked some distance away next to a refrigerated lorry and some German tourists who had received equally short shrift from this idiot.

At 4 o'clock we made our way to the check-in. There were two young ladies behind the Ventouris counter. We walked over and I presented the ticket. The assistant had a troubled look and pushed the ticket back across the desk.

"No!"

"What do you mean 'no'?"

"There is no ferry. It is broken down. We have no passengers today."

Understandably I was rather disturbed by this piece of news, particularly as I had a ticket, and more important on Wednesday morning we had reservations on the Nissos Kypros, which only visits Pireas once a week.

The other girl had a brainwave.

"Is OK. We will put you on Superfast."

When we had booked the tickets, the Superfast ferry service had not existed. Thankfully it did now. It was leaving at 8.00 p.m. and would arrive in Patras, late morning, the day after. The only difference would be that this ferry would be stopping at Igoumenitsa on the way – a small but important difference as it turned out.

We were given a voucher to present at the Superfast desk, which was our next port of call. We were too early. The later departure of the ship meant we had to return at 5, so it was back to the newspaper for a while.

We tried again at 5 and this time were successful.

"I hope the cabin is as good as that on Ventouris?" I asked, remembering the superb cabin on the Venus. The return trip should have been on the sister ship Polaris, but they were similar ships.

I was assured that it would be better. Fat chance!

At the desk we met up with some London Cypriots who were taking a Mercedes engine to a friend in Limassol. They had driven non-stop, apart from fuelling breaks and once to visit McDonalds, from London, via the motorway networks and had reached Bari in 30 hours. That's some going for a 1966 Peugeot diesel, with three men on board and a huge engine on the back seat! They hadn't a clue about connecting ferries, so we told them about the Nissos Kypros.

Armed with our boarding cards, Mr. Jobsworth allowed us to drive past him to the ship, where we joined another queue to wait a further hour to board. During this time, I was fascinated to watch a sea angler fishing at the side of the ship. He had stepped down on to the narrow rubbing board around the base of the ship and using his free hand to support himself against the harbour wall, he was fishing in the gap between the wall and ship. One slip on the wet wooden surface of the rubbing strip would almost certainly have proved fatal.

The risk was obviously worth it to him for he pulled out fish after fish – grey mullet, each about a foot long.

Eventually, we were invited to board, and found ourselves down in the bowels of the ship. There was a lift up to reception which made a pleasant change from those interminable metal staircases we had encountered so far.

At the reception we were held up by an American tour group who asked the most inane questions of their guide, whose patience seemed limitless. Eventually we were shown to our cabin.

The booking clerk was wrong. The cabin was not as good as that on the Venus, but it was of the standard we had originally booked, and in its own right excellent, with ultra modern fittings, and the all important somewhere to sit. It even had credit card door keys, though whether that's a virtue is hard to say.

As soon as we were under way, we went to the restaurant, but the same food seemed to be available at the self service for rather less money. I can live without a tablecloth and waiter service, so we joined the Americans there. We tried the moussaka – although this is a different shipping line altogether and there was no reason to suppose it would be as good as that on the Venus. It wasn't! The consistency was OK but the portions were small and I needed a few chips to prop it up. Altogether disappointing, but it filled a corner. The bill was 5,250 drachma (£10.71), which was less than a pound cheaper than the superior meal with waiter service in the dining room of the Venus, so value was poor.

This boat has what is laughingly called a disco – even a swimming pool – on the after deck. The swimming pool was empty, though they started to fill it before we arrived at Patras. In any case it was a cold night and I doubt that anyone would have been brave enough to try it.

The 'disco' comprised an excellent PA system, with superb JBL loudspeakers, around a small deck which could serve as a dance floor. It was a pity they chose to play Greek rather than Italian music – but it was a Greek owned ship. The sound quality was excellent.

At some point during the evening, the alarm went off on a Mercedes car parked on the

rear car deck. It was some considerable time before the owner was found to silence it. That rear car deck has one facility not found on any of the other ships, but only of benefit to those with caravans or camper vans. It can be used as a floating camp site, complete with water and electricity supply, for just the price of a deck ticket.

This ship was pressing on a bit as it had the Igoumenitsa call to fit in. This resulted in excessive vibration being transmitted through the hull to the cabins. Even worse, was the public address system, with no end of announcements in an assortment of languages booming through the corridors. In the early hours of the morning there was a wake-up call for those leaving the ship at Igoumenitsa. This of course meant that everyone was wakened, so we did not manage to sleep for very long.

It's a good rule never to eat at a restaurant that displays pictures of the food outside, but I was suffering from egg and bacon withdrawal symptoms and the illustrated breakfast looked sumptuous. What could they do wrong with egg and bacon I reasoned. What indeed?

Ominously the breakfasts were not on display at the self service counter. I ordered two eggs and bacon for each of us. I couldn't believe what they produced. The bacon was the nastiest greasiest bit of streaky that I have ever seen. Credit where it's due, the eggs might have been floating in a pool of fat, but their flavour was quite outstanding. I have not tasted yolks that good since our honeymoon in Norfolk thirty years earlier – so the breakfast was not a complete disaster.

Patras harbour looks very small from the sea, but it manages to squeeze in quite a few ships. Squeeze is the operative word, and the juggling required to reverse the ship on to its birth was an excellent piece of seamanship.

There were hardly any formalities to contend with on the ship. An immigration officer had a quick peek at our passports and we were free to descend to the garage. After a short wait, the garage was opened and we drove out on to the quayside.

Most of the vehicles turned left and headed for the main entrance. We turned right and made our way along the quay to the gate 5 we remembered from our earlier visit. There was still no security on duty here and we drove straight out into the traffic. Thanks to some road works, there was a one-way system in operation but in contrast to Italy there are plenty of road signs. We picked up the Athens motorway and within twenty minutes of leaving the ship we arrived at the first toll booths.

We were in no hurry. We kept the speed at 70, because the truck was running on the smell of diesel in the tank and there was no way I was going to fill up with expensive Greek diesel when home was now in sight. We had not travelled too far when our Cypriot friends went steaming past in the Peugeot. They waved and disappeared into the distance.

We had noticed lots of boards for Dolphin Camping at Korinthos on the way out. It was one of only two sites in the region listed by the RAC. The owner made us very welcome. Clearly he receives quite a bit of custom from people on the same run. On entering the site, there were two other Cyprus registered 4x4s – a Mitsubishi Pajero (same as the Shogun in England) and a Landrover Discovery. Would you believe we knew the Pajero owners? I won't name them for reasons which will become obvious. They were camping with a tent. The other couple were going to sleep in the car. They invited us over for a

warm beer, before we erected the tent, and we swapped adventure stories.

The site was overrun by very scrawny looking cats and a small dog that needed a good kick. The damned thing was a menace. The site itself had the most powerful hot showers that we had found anywhere. Turn them up full and you were pummelled into the ground – brilliant.

Dolphin Camping is right on the northern sea shore just to the west of Korinthos. The sea here was billiard table flat and there was an excellent view of mountains in the distance. You can walk along the shore, before cutting back through vineyards to the road to make a circular route back to camp, but there was litter everywhere.

That evening we had a bit of a laugh around bedtime. We were sitting in our darkened truck having a night cap. The main lights on the site had been switched off and with the absence of a moon, it was very dark. Our Cypriot acquaintances – they are friends of one of our neighbours in Cyprus – were preparing for bed and had gone to the bathroom. He returned first.

Their tent was one of those cheap ridge tents with an inner sleeping compartment and clear plastic flaps at the front. What they hadn't realised is that with a light on inside the tent, the effect from outside is akin to standing in front of a bedroom window with the curtains open. He stripped to the buff and we were presented with a view of bare cheeks, highlighted with their lamp. She returned a few minutes later and we had a repeat performance in the other window. This was comical enough, but then we realised that they must have done this on every site they had visited. These people are not naturally exhibitionists. They will be mortified when they read this.

That night our sleep was broken and utterly destroyed by noises from an engineering works some distance away. The regular clanging noises of heavy machinery beating on something large and hollow rattled your teeth with their intensity. Sleep was simply not possible over that racket.

In the morning my wife went to the bathroom and ignored the damned dog running around her feet. The dog was so annoyed that it went over to another sleeping camper and snatched his Calvin Klein underpants from his back pack. It then dashed around the site, worrying them into the ground. I rescued them – which is how I know they were CK pants – and returned them. He didn't stir, so was probably none the wiser.

In the tent next door were a middle aged couple. Well at least he was middle aged. He strongly resembled Clive Sinclair, the C5 man. She was much younger – or maybe just wearing well. They certainly made an oddly matched couple. Even odder, they were on a cycling holiday and their mountain bikes were heavily laden with panniers front and rear. I think they were Dutch.

That's not my idea of a holiday. Holland really must be a dreadful place if they felt forced to cycle all that way to escape it. They left the site early after loading their equipment on to the cycles.

We adopted a more leisurely start and did not leave 'til nearer lunch time. In fact we deliberately delayed our start until the last possible moment that we could, without having to pay for a second night's accommodation as it was only an hour's run or so to complete the journey into Pireas. The cost for the single night was 4,000 drachma

(£8.16).

Instead of returning directly to the motorway, we took the 'scenic' route through Korinthos and over the canal bridge. There was no sign of the crone with the heather. As we cleared the area, there was a wonderful combination of road signs. The first read 'Athens via Toll Road' and pointed left. The other read "Athens Avoiding Toll" and pointed right. That was nice of them! We turned right, and sure enough we ran alongside the motorway and past the toll booths.

We continued along this road through several villages, built along the road, which made some effort to cater to the tourist trade, but it all looked rather run down and I would doubt that few tourists would find their way here. The space between Athens and Patras is one of those that most people would wish to cross over as quickly as possible.

After some 15 kilometres or so, there were barriers across the road and a notice in Greek that I was unable to translate. Beyond it, some workmen in hard hats milled about by a parked car looking rather anxious. We later learned that there had been a train derailment which had blocked the road. Our problem was that we were stuck in the middle of nowhere in particular. There was no option but to backtrack the way we had come.

A couple of kilometres back was a turning to the right and a signpost for the motorway. We took the turning and were quickly on the motorway travelling towards Athens. We had neatly by-passed the toll, and we followed the motorway until it petered out on the outskirts of Athens, where the road branches to Pireas. Tracking down the motorway, places you on the seaward side of the road, and again we were overawed by the sheer volume of shipping lying idle below us.

On leaving the motorway we thought it would be a good idea to stop for a snack and a drink, but all the lay-byes and parking areas were full of fly-tipped waste. In the end, we stopped at the side of the road where there was a view of the street, but the closeness of the traffic made this an uncomfortable and foreshortened halt.

The streets of Pireas are so narrow that they allow only one-way traffic, so we saw a different selection of shops on the return journey, but they all looked as grubby as those witnessed earlier. Here it is just a matter of following the signs to the port, then on reaching the waterfront, where there are literally dozens of ferries to the islands, you simply follow the road around until you reach the main departure terminal – and there parked behind the fence was the F/B Nissos Kypros.

Chapter 19 – A Slow Boat To Cyprus

We parked against the fence and waited until it was time to check-in. It was a long wait. Fortunately, there are toilet facilities, and refreshments available if you need them, in the terminal buildings.

Parked next to us was a UK registered Sierra Estate with a couple on board about our age. He was plump and English with a mop of curly hair, she was Cypriot. They too were waiting for the boat. The car was loaded to the roof and low on its suspension. They lived in Larnaca and had made the trip from London in much quicker order than we had. He was brooding over the fact that they had been stopped by the traffic police in Switzerland and had to fork out 140 Swiss Francs (about £60) in on the spot fine – payable before they drove an inch further. Their crime was to drive on the motorway without a vignette! Their only consolation was that they were given 24 hours to acquire one, by which time they had long since left the country.

While we chatted, I spotted Brucie from the ship's restaurant looking smart and sun-tanned and twirling his worry beads while he looked for a public telephone. He looked suitably free from blemish, so clearly no-one had hit him recently.

The Cypriots with the engine turned up a while later, as did the 'entertainers' from Korinthos, who we met in the departure lounge.

The Cypriots went to make enquiries at the immigration desk and were given stamped boarding cards. They told us what they had done, but when we tried the same trick, we were told that we would have to join the queue until the departure desks were opened. This, I hasten to add, was not a racial thing.

Unfortunately there were vast queues at the departure point, mainly of Polish people, but there were Germans, Cypriots and British travelling to Cyprus, and Israelis on route to Haifa – the ships next port of call after Limassol. Cypriots have never learned about queuing, so there was a little irascible banter amongst the waiting hoards. The Poles, on the other hand, were the most rude and self centred people I have encountered.

There was no-one from the ship to meet us, and there were no boarding cards bearing the shipping company's logo. We got round this by crossing out the details of another shipping company and substituting the details of our ship.

When it was our turn to reach the emigration point, the officer in his little glass kiosk looked suspiciously at the altered boarding cards. I told him there were none of the right type available and he just stamped it with the exit stamp. I thought we might have had some hassle with that, but no. Others were now doing the same.

The next step was to take the vehicles documentation to the vehicle customs point inside the port. I handed over the documentation, the boarding cards and the passports to the officer and he said *"Where is the car?"*. I told him that it was parked outside the port gate. He told me to bring it to the office. I went to get it and as I drove in through the gate, the police on the gate would not let me pass with the vehicle because I no longer had the boarding card. I told him that it was at the customs. He insisted that I went to get it. I left the truck at the gate and walked over to the customs again.

"Where is the car?"

I pointed to it across the yard by the gate.

“The police will not let me bring it in without the boarding card.”

The customs officer, with a snarl of irritation, dramatically stamped the paperwork and literally threw it at me.

“Here. Go!”. I went as the policeman came striding over towards us. I showed him the paperwork and he nodded his approval, then went over to the customs office where an argument ensued. I left them to it.

We then drove to the boat and within half an hour we were boarding. I remembered the rigmarole of turning the truck round on the ship and offered to reverse up the ramp, which would have been a lot simpler all round, but no, the loader insisted that I turn it round on board. I then went off the ship to collect my wife and our baggage and we joined the queue up the staircase to reception.

At the top of the stairs were the Cypriots - they of the Mercedes engine. They were joking with the immigration officer. When you step on the ship, all the Cyprus immigration formalities take place here. That can't be a bad job – immigration officer on a ferry. Just a couple of hours work when the boat is docked. The rest of the time sailing back and forth. There must be more to it than that.

Standing in the doorway at the top of the stairs was a Russian female officer, with a white officer's shirt, and a short white skirt that was two sizes too small. She looked like a KGB officer from a James Bond film. The muscles rippled in her arms and legs and her bleached blond hair was short and scraped back against the sides of her head, her buttocks hard in the short skirt. She was one hell of a woman.

She laid a muscled arm across the doorway.

“Wait!”

We weren't going to argue. Remember that James Bond film where Roger Moore sends Jeroen Krebbe down an oil pipe, in a tiny capsule, while the engineer is distracted by a woman who thrust his face into her bosom? Well this officer was that woman's sister! Magnificent! That clip came back to me as I watched her.

“Come!”

She waved us up to the desk, like a school crossing warden waves those last few children across the road, before blocking the doorway again.

The immigration officer was a nice guy. He saw our many Cyprus stamps in our passports and asked how we could spend so much time in Cyprus. I told him that I had taken early retirement. He sighed and said that he was retiring next year. He stamped our passports and said *“Welcome to Cyprus.”*

Whether by accident or design, we found that we had been allocated the same cabin with the 'view' that we had occupied on the outward trip. In the meantime, they had lost the handle from the wardrobe door and there were no bath towels. The top bunk had not been made up, and the bedding was stacked neatly at the foot.

Hearing movement in the corridor, I waylaid a passing steward and reported the lack of towels. He promised to send someone to rectify the omission. No-one came.

I went to the information office to try and obtain the missing towels there. Again I was promised that they would be supplied. I waited near the office to speak to the purser to purchase tickets for the evening meal. The man from the information desk saw me waiting and told me that there was no need to wait for the towels, he would send them.

The meal tickets were another problem. There was a huge party of Poles on board who had booked the restaurant. We might have to wait for a second sitting. I would have to book later. I returned to the cabin. Still no bloody towels. I waited an hour and went back to the offices.

This time, the Russian lady officer was behind the information desk.

“There are no towels in my cabin.”

“No towels? You want big or you want little?”

“I want big”

“Wait.”

She disappeared round the corner. There was a shout and literally five seconds later she was back carrying the missing bath towels. She thrust them across the counter to me. Her movements were sharp, like in unarmed combat. Perhaps she *had* been in the KGB?

I was certainly impressed. I got the distinct impression that she could run this ship on her own. The shipping line must have been impressed with her too for not only was she one of only two female officers that we saw on the ship, she appeared to be the only non-Cypriot officer. The other female officer was one of those whose father wanted a boy and whose mother wanted a girl and both were happy!

The purser told me that we would have to take our meals on a second sitting at 9.00 p.m. We could live with that.

As I returned to the cabin I took the outside route along the deck. It was pouring with rain. I couldn't believe it.

With towels to hand we used the waiting time to have a shower then left the cabin full of steam to chat with the couple from Larnaca on the rear 'sun' deck. The deck has roofing to shelter it from the rain. The Poles were presumably in the dining room.

We were well under way as nine o'clock arrived and had left the rain ashore. With stomachs that felt as though our throats had been cut, we made our way to the restaurant at 8.55pm. It was packed. People were still eating. We thought that there was no possible chance that it would be cleared by nine, but Brucie had them all out of there by nine on the dot. While we were waiting outside, a group of Poles came out and started a conversation right in front of us. One of the group had her back so close to me that I could feel her moving as she breathed. It was as though I wasn't there at all. Nor was this an isolated incident. If they met you in a corridor, they would simply walk through you, unless you ducked out of the way. I have crossed Poland off my holiday destination list!

Brucie rushed over to us and I handed him the ticket. We noticed that he was holding it upside down, which did not seem to confuse him. I suspect he needs glasses to read. He sat us at a table by the door and began an earnest conversation with a senior officer from

the ship's crew. There was a howling draught coming through the open door. I asked the officer, who was facing me, to shut the door, which he did.

There may have been as many as 12 diners in total for the second sitting. We had that uncomfortable feeling you get when all the staff are clearing tables around you, silently urging you to hurry so that they can finish work. The dishes disappeared from the table almost before you had time to put the cutlery on the empty plate.

The main course should have been pork chops. The waitress asked if we wanted pork or beef. As one we said beef. This was a good choice and made up for the shocking service. They had obviously been running low on the pork chops that had been prepared much earlier. We were served excellent grilled steaks which had been prepared fresh within the previous few minutes. The other diners, who did not get the choice – or who made the wrong one – eyed us enviously.

In the case of my wife, the meal was returned to the ship, via the lavatory, as we entered that patch of rough water near Patmos. The ship does not stop at Patmos on the return leg. She had taken her travel sickness tablets in plenty of time, but was violently sick and had to go to bed. She was not alone, as the crew had taken to putting sick bags in the corridor. Me? Not so much as a twinge. I don't think I have ever suffered from seasickness, and it gets much rougher than this in the English Channel.

The following day took us to Rhodes and this time there were a number of hours available to leave the ship. My wife was very grateful for the opportunity to step ashore.

Rhodes is part of Greece and the ship is effectively Cyprus territory, so in theory at least, it should be necessary to go through immigration and customs etc., but here they don't bother. You are given a landing card and told to be back at the ship for a certain time and that's it.

The Poles were loaded onto three buses and they went away on a sight-seeing trip. We wandered into the old town which is to be found just outside the harbour entrance.

Rhodes town is a tourist money magnet. The economy here is aimed at getting as much money as possible out of the passengers of the many cruise ships that call here. There were two huge vessels in port as we arrived, full of American tourists, who appeared to be buying up the town.

The town itself has not changed much since our last visit, except it's now cleaner. The square, where Telly Savalas had his shoot-out with the Germans in 'Escape From Athina', (or was it 'Escape to Athina?') is now a pedestrian zone, as is much of the old town, which is a definite improvement. One sad loss is our favourite Rhodes brandy – Manoussos – which used to cost little, but was as smooth as a baby's whotsit. The company has sadly gone out of business.

We had lunch, bought a few goodies and returned at the designated hour, to sit with our curly haired friend and his charming Cypriot wife, who, to her annoyance, had remained aboard. She was a real brick. How she put up with him I don't know. He was the most awkward man we have met in a long time, and had the most infuriating habit of saying 'Pardon' every time you addressed him. It was not that he was deaf either.

A number of times, I felt a sense of resentment bubbling under the surface between them. It seemed, however, that they spent long periods apart, and from the gist of our

many conversations on the trip, particularly when he wasn't about, those were the times she enjoyed most. Cypriot people are naturally friendly and hospitable. She was both of those things and more – a lovely lady.

As we prepared to sail, he happened to mention that the Poles had not returned. We waited to see what would happen. The ship sailed on time. The Poles remained behind.

I am not sure that the Poles were supposed to remain behind. If they were, then no-one had told the purser's office, for we were allocated a second sitting meal again.

No-one had told the dining room either because at eight o'clock there was an agitated request for a small German party, who had been on the second sitting the previous evening, to take their meals straight away. We thought we had better go and see what was happening at the restaurant. It was empty and Bruce was running round like a headless chicken, with a kitchen full of meals, a restaurant full of staff and no-one to serve. It was very quiet at table that night!

The following morning saw the Akamas coast of Cyprus appearing out of the mist and around eight we were passing our home again – but the boat chugged on, hugging the shoreline, for several hours to come, before finally we rounded the spit to head into Limassol – and what if we were an hour late, we were home at last..... or very nearly!

I did not fancy paying £1.60 for a cup of Nescafe from a sachet, but we had the flasks. The barman on the rear sun deck filled our flasks with boiling water several times on the voyage. I left him all the loose coins we had collected as a tip.

We collected our passports and left the ship via the staircase on to the dock, and then I had to go back on board to the garage and hand in my passport to the customs. It was in my bag on shore with my wife. No passport. No car!

We then gathered up our belongings and drove to the customs yard. My wife remained with the truck while I joined the queue, behind our Larnaca travelling companions, who had a mass of paperwork concerning the importation of the vehicle.

Spectacles and his swarthy colleague were on duty again. Spectacles looked at the mass of paperwork that our Larnaca friends were carrying and told them to wait on one side. That was a relief. I had visions of being stuck for ages. I handed him the registration book for the car. He opened it at the fax. I was horrified to see that all the print from the fax had disappeared. It was one of those photo-sensitive fax papers and it was now completely blank.

"What's this?" He fingered the fax.

"It's the fax message you got from Nicosia when we left to show that the duty on the vehicle had been paid."

"I remember." Thank God for that. He put my documents at the bottom of the completed file and I joined another queue by his colleague, who took CY£20 (£24) from me – the undeclared landing fee. Then I had to wait another twenty minutes while customs officers examined vehicles and my documents reached the top of the pile.

Cyprus has not quite caught up with British views on racism, so I was not surprised that a few Cypriot passengers managed to jump the queue, but our Cypriot friends from London

- the ones with the Mercedes engine – were having no end of problems. I'll bet that they fell for the full import duty on that engine. A priest in religious habit, with an Isuzu truck loaded to the sky was passed through without formality. Perhaps there is something to this religion business after all.

Eventually my turn came around and a weary looking customs officer with grey hair and no sense of urgency accompanied me to the truck.

"Open the bonnet."

I opened it. He checked the numbers against the registration book. They didn't match. They must do this twice a week when this ship calls, and twice again for the Sea Empress. You'd think they'd know by now that the chassis number is on the chassis.

"Where is the chassis number?"

I showed him.

"Have you anything to declare?"

With fingers crossed "No."

"Have you any cigarettes?"

"No."

"Have you any spirits?"

"I have a bottle and a half of rum" I had restocked at the duty free on board, which surprisingly carried the Woods brand.

He glanced through the windows at the load on the back seat, then signed the paper and handed it to me. We drove off before he changed his mind, waved the paper at the gate security and were in the streets of Limassol heading for the BP garage before we ran out of fuel.

We had been away for exactly three months to the day, yet Cyprus seemed to have been cleaned up. It has always been a bit untidy, but after Italy and Greece it looked positively pristine in the glare of the sun. The temperature was 32 degrees. There was wall to wall blue sky and it had not rained since we left.

Forty five minutes later I was parking the truck in our drive, while my wife opened up. Nothing had changed, except there was a 'dinosaur' skeleton bleached white by the sun on the doormat. It was the remains of the lizard the cat had been eating when we left. We opened the shutters and five minutes later there was Ginger sitting at the spot where his bowl should be. We were home.