

Italia

by Prof. George Bent



One jellyfish sting. Three bouts of flu. Two broken collarbones. Six cases of head lice. Visa problems. Intense sciatica. Mosquito bites the size of small kittens. The loss of irreplaceable family heirlooms, a few teeth, and a computer with months of digital photographs documenting our travels. How on earth could anyone possibly consider these events to help constitute what was, by far, the greatest year in my family's collective life? How could anyone possibly believe us when we say that a nearly fatal event taught us more than we ever knew about the gift of life we all possess? And, more to the point, how on earth can anyone possibly write a 500-word essay that begins to capture the life-changing experience that was ours? I don't think it can be done.

From August 1, 2006 to June 27, 2007, Lorri Olan and I shepherded our three children – Liam (age 7), Catalena (age 8), and Miles (age 11) – through the

French countryside, the ruins of Greece, and the bureaucratic maze of the Italian public school system during my year-long sabbatical in Florence. Designed to provide me the opportunity to conduct research and to write portions of my most recent scholarly project ("Public Painting for Common People in Late Medieval Florence"), as well as to see for the first time cultural landmarks I regularly teach in class, our eleven-month European sojourn turned out to be a cultural experience that changed each of us profoundly and perceptibly – but not because of the books I was reading (or, hopefully, writing).

Although centered in Florence, where we came to consider ourselves residents, our weekend and holiday travels took us in a circular arc from Southern France to Normandy to Paris and back down to Burgundy; across the sun-baked mountains of Attica and the Peloponnese; and through the bucolic ranges of Tuscany and the urban chaos of Italy's greatest cities. We sat on the sands of the Riviera, the D-Day beachheads near Bayeux, and the landing site where Persian soldiers waded ashore before their fateful, catastrophic meeting with the Greeks at Marathon. We rode bicycles through the gardens of Versailles and the Villa Borghese and (twice) around the walls of Lucca, drove a borrowed Mercedes through the hills of the Chianti district, and walked among the ruins of Pompeii and Delphi and Rome. We rolled and filled our own, fresh ravioli with spinach and ricotta cheese, rolled and baked our own, fresh pizza with mozzarella and ham, and dipped bread and cheese in puddles of newly-pressed olive oil from the trees of newly-found friends. We slept in farmhouses built in the 17th century, ate and played (regularly) in the palace of a diplomat, and competed on soccer fields and in swimming pools next to athletes whose passion for

those games exceeds anything the typical American sports fan could claim for our national pastimes. We hiked up the hills of Mistras, traced the coastline of Cinque Terre, and skied down the slopes of some Alpine mountain we'll never know the name of. We ate lunches and dinners in restaurants filled only with locals, sipped wine in medieval castles, and watched fireworks from Florentine rooftops that overlook some of the city's finest and most famous cultural monuments. We got front-row seats before the *Mona Lisa*, rode a gondola for sixty seconds, and ran 10K races through the streets and parks of Europe's oldest cities. We ate unbelievably stinky cheese, toured the leaping-off point of the old pilgrimage road to Santiago de Compostela, and ascended to the top of a glass building overlooking the entire city of Paris. We bounced on bungee cords, rode on the back of motor scooters, and weekly ate the very best gelato in the very best gelateria in the very best gelato city in the entire world. We did a lot, we saw a lot, and we remember most of it.

But most importantly, we made friends at every turn. A French mother helped us rub sand on Liam's jellyfish wound as a lifeguard worked to understand my fractured Fren-english as I described the aquatic attack. Italian teachers lovingly mentored our children as they struggled to negotiate the seemingly impossible transition from American secondary-school education to an altogether different one taught in a language they could not speak – at first. The Caribbean nanny of Ethiopian twins introduced us to their adopted American mother, thus beginning a family exchange that did not end in Italy. And the schoolmates and parents and professional acquaintances we made (mostly through our children) transformed quickly into deep friendships, as demonstrated by the astonishing outpouring of support and unconditional assistance we received when Miles was hit by a speeding car, thrown fifteen feet into a busy intersection, and carted off to a strange hospital without either of his parents there to hold his hand.

How can I put into words the lessons we all learned about openness, exchange, and raw spiritual beauty, injected into us through our immersion in that new culture? How can I describe the taste of a pomegranate, or the feel of mushy calcium deposits between your toes in an outdoor spa overlooking the hills of Umbria, or the way your mouth explodes when your tongue meets a slice of fresh parmesan cheese topped with a sliver of prosciutto crudo on unsalted Florentine bread? How can I explain the joy of belly laughs in the middle of the Piazza Navona at Christmas time, or the amazement of watching two dozen Italian acquaintances celebrating New Year's Eve with a collection of firecrackers that would land most Americans in jail, or the stunning sense of stillness that washes over you as you look down at the long stretch of dunes at Omaha Beach where thousands of people lost their lives in a few, short, blood-soaked hours that changed the course of history?

I can't.

I just can't.