



IMPRESSIONS OF EUROPE

A no-holds-barred account of a regular Malaysian nutter's journey through central Europe!

CRITICAL REVIEWS

“Starts slow, ends in a flurry of twists. An unforgettable read.”*What Book?*

“A celebration of life!”*Time Magazine*

“I think we should hire the author”*Lonely Planet*

“Waste of time. Why travel when you can spend your time making your first million?”*Business Week*

“One day my son will conquer the world”*Edwin’s father*

“Life is like a box of condoms.”*Forrest Hump*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	4
<i>Absorption Mode</i>	6
<i>Pinnacles of Heaven</i>	8
<i>Summer Beer Festivals</i>	9
<i>Kuh Lotto</i>	11
<i>Attack Of The Malaysians</i>	12
<i>Mediterranean Blues</i>	13
<i>Pit Stop At Roma</i>	14
<i>Gypsies</i>	15
<i>Roman Thoughts</i>	16
<i>Sperlonga</i>	18
<i>Barefoot In Rome</i>	20
<i>Going Home</i>	21

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Many thanks also to Alex Boehm, who assisted me with precision details on navigation, and Anja too, for your beautiful presence, never-ending hospitality and courtesy. Maybe someday we will meet again?

Andrew Wong, thanks for being the jinx and taking the crap for all the negative incidences! Alvin Low, thanks for the condensed milk and the prawn paste. Thanks guys, for voluntarily de-touring from Sweden to Germany to hook up with me in Passau, and all the food you cooked.

For VK With Love

Absorption Mode

I arrived safely in Frankfurt airport. The plane didn't crash. Phew! It seems that I had arrived right in time for the Love Parade. The first sight of Europe that greeted me was exactly the way I imagined it - all the taxis here are Mercedes Benz. I took a train to Nürnberg and spent a little time there and headed on to Passau.

German trains are exceptionally silent and clean. They are also very efficient - if the train is said to arrive at 1803 hours, it DOES arrive at 1803 on-the-dot. The countryside is beautiful with never-ending fields of gold(wheat) as far as the eye can see, loooong sunsets and loooong dawns. The Germans seem to live in a very liberal society and you can do almost anything here except behave ill-mannered(for me, so far, it's been "controllable").

The summer is NOTHING like Malaysian weather, so far. It is between 15 to 20 degrees in the day and even colder in the night!!! My lips have begun to crack and I didn't bring enough sweaters(only one thin pullover and one fleece).

I went to a famous pastime leisure among the older generation of Germans where it is quite interesting for me to experience. As a person with a tropical origin, it was really a different experience altogether because my friends and I went to a typical "bath" - not Turkish, but maybe or probably German. The air as it is now is cold, between 15 to 20 degrees. At this club, there area few outdoor swimming pools complete with heated water and therefore, it is possible to see steam coming out of your mouth and yet your body is warm at the same time and the air you breathe is cold. There are also pools of different temperatures - all outdoor and jumping in and out of everyone of them confused my body. Eventually, the water that was at first cold, isn't cold anymore, but warm(?).

Liberal living in Germany required me to get used to bathing with the windows open all the time(I'm not used to it). Nobody seems to care if anybody is peeping or not. Even bedroom windows are never closed. Everybody at the pool club was mostly naked but me (behave, guys - in the changing room of course).



On a warm day in Passau

I went to Regensburg by train....and may I say, the trains are bloody expensive! I just realised that for the amount that I paid from Frankfurt to Passau(return - DM 222), I could have bought a return plane ticket to London and back for DM 190! Anyway, the trip to Regensburg was marvellous because I got to see the German countryside. I also felt funny to be in some old train stations that are equipped with automatic water dispensing taps in the toilet! Even the cubicles for the disposal of human faeces are built in a pay-per-shit manner where the door handles are replaced with a coin slot. Another impressive feature I noticed in the train stations were automatic rubber roller belts at the side of the staircase to help passengers carry heavy luggage up the staircase. For all these impressive features, Germans are made to pay premium prices for these train rides(especially expensive in Germany) and it is compulsory.



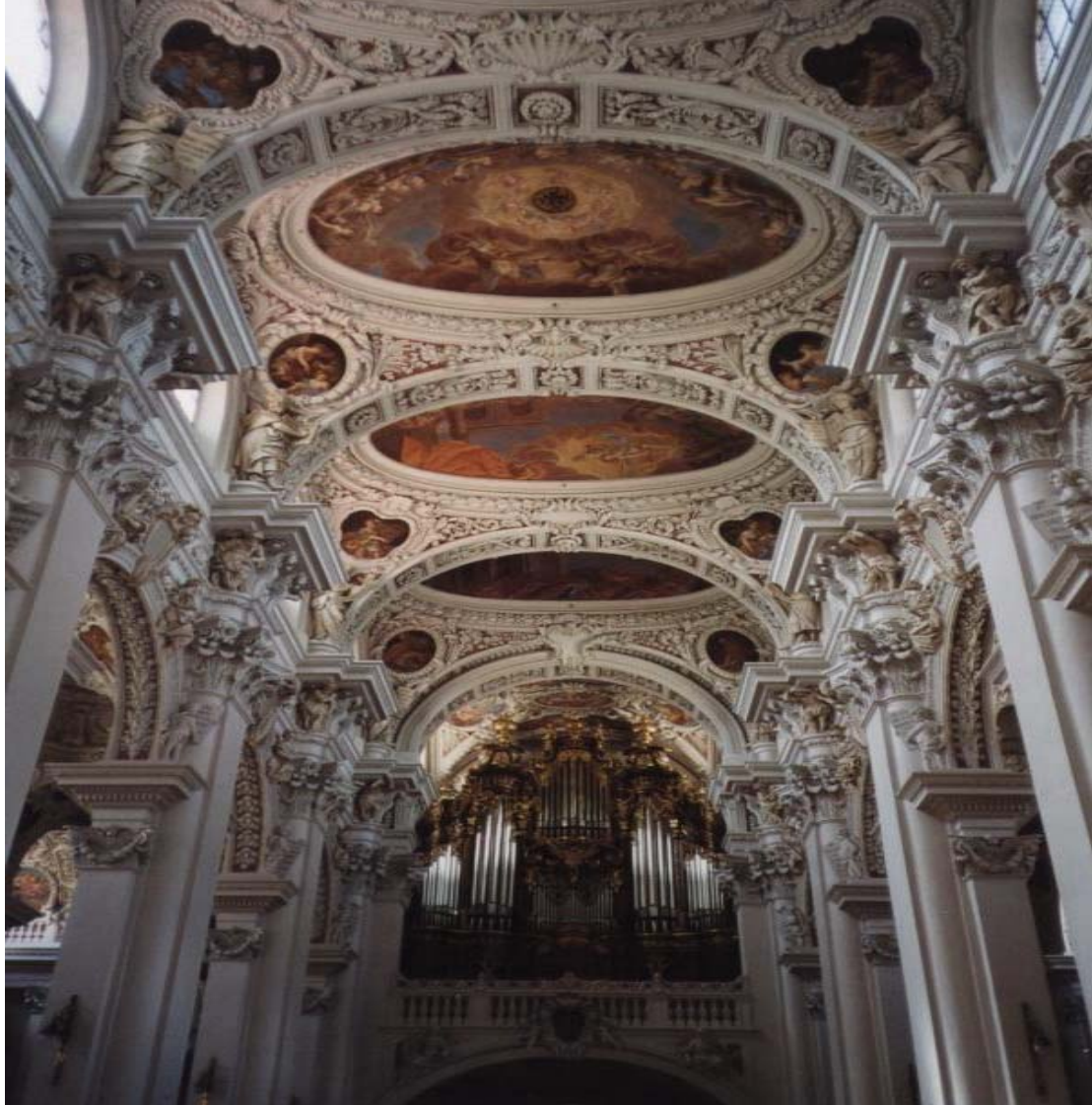
My wonderful hosts

I got to stay at a place in Wenzelbach, a little village on the outskirts of Regensburg (population 140,000), in a huge house perched on the side of a hill overlooking a small valley. And man, this house was HUGE. A house like this in an exclusive suburban area in my country would cost total earnings of a few lifetimes. The top level is a small exercise room and the "suite" where I got to stay :) and the ground level is where the reading room, living room, balcony, kitchen, dining room and toilet is situated. Below is where all the other bedrooms are and another level below is a room for firewood, a room for food storage, a heater room and about 3 or 4 other store rooms. In the garden are many home grown vegetables, apple trees, cherry trees, etc. The hosts (see picture above) were really hospitable and kind enough to cook typical Bavarian dishes for me to try – especially Schweinebraten mit Knodel.

There was a jazz festival in Regensburg and I took a walk around town to watch performances. The setting of the place seemed to try to instil a "carnival" mood but however, the German folks were rigid or "stiff" and didn't look like they were partying or having a fun time. Or maybe they are just conservative. I was told that in Germany, the smaller the town, the more the festivals. Funny.

Pinnacles of Heaven

On this same day, I also visited a cathedral...and man, it was magnificent! The mere sight of this majestic structure aroused thoughts of astonishment and wonder!



Cathedral at Passau

Regensburg was the highest region of Europe conquered by the Roman Empire and the cathedral was a remnant of it. Stepping into the cathedral felt like stepping back in time hundreds of years ago. The ceilings and pillars seemed to reach high up to the heavens and the brilliantly tinted glass added character to this ancient place of worship. Scenes of certain movies flashed my mind and I could picture monks of the old times sitting in the very same chair I was sitting in. Amazing.

Summer Beer Festivals

At night, we made an "ad hoc" trip to an open air party by a tent and a campfire. Many different young German faces were there and as usual, I was the only Asian. But I like it in the sense that it makes me feel like I am seeing/experiencing something truly...German? Totally not influenced by Asia. However, it was freezing cold(10 to 11 degrees Celsius). The cracking sound of burning wood and strumming guitar reminded me about certain island trips I made in Malaysia... and in much warmer weather!

Certain friends had written emails to me to keep me updated about home. It was nice to receive news from home once in a while....I have not started to miss anything about Malaysia yet(not even the weather) but I have started to miss the food. Coming here has made me realise what I must bring to be prepared for my one year stint as a full-time student in UK. For example, waterproof shoes & jacket. Sheeesh... And condensed milk cannot be found anywhere.... as for sambal belachan(a Malaysian appetiser), I could only taste it in my dreams. German food is okay and healthy but for a guy like me who has been eating spicy, unhealthy food all his life, it is bland. But, still edible and at times even delicious(especially jagerpfanne)! I have noticed that potato is a staple diet in their daily cooking here....not as staple as rice in Asia but almost everything here has got potatoes. And bread is also consumed regularly, therefore, many different kinds of bread are available. Cheese too.

During the summer season, the people here hold festivities from one vicinity to another, all held consecutively so that one may go to everyone of them. My friends tell me it is typical of Bavarians to have it in a big tent, LOTS of beer, music, and meat. I went to 2 of such events. On Friday, it was held in a HUGE tent, DJs spinning Italian, French and English music...lots of 1 Litre beer mugs were everywhere. Sometimes they played German songs and I noticed they are mostly very "spirited" sing-along songs which have simple lyrics like "Lets go beer drinking" or "I wanna have some fun" where everybody sings along. Certain scenes reminded me of the rave events back in Malaysia except this one, people from 18 to 80 were there, all having fun. There was an old man, a casualty of excessive alcohol intoxication, who snaked around knocking anything stagnant, groping any woman(sometimes men) and making every opportunity count since he may be excused as being drunk. I thought to myself that if this man were in Malaysia, almost certainly there would be 20 to 30 Ah Bengs(rough people) waiting outside to rape him with a fork so that he may have a night to remember. The men seem to really take advantage out of being drunk, grabbing unacquainted women on the dance floors, etc. There must have been at least 3000 Germans there, all from the villages around. I said to myself that if I were to ever meet a friend from Malaysia there, in the tent, I would eat my own underwear. Curious eyes stared at me as though they'd never seen an Asian before. Maybe, as I was the only Asian there.

On Saturday, I went to another one of these events which was more family oriented. It was called Haferfest and it was a celebration by the river. There was a band playing in open air, food, BEER(a must), meat, etc. The night ended with a colourful display of fire in the sky.... When the fireworks display was on, everybody took the opportunity to grab any girl and kiss. Some were excessively affectionate. ;) Many people were dressed in the Bavarian costume, the Lederhose. There were even Bavarian "wannabe(s)".

On Sunday, I went to another house in another village to where no Asian guy has ever been before. My hosts were soooo great because when they heard that I was coming, they specially cooked an Austrian specialty - a certain kind of sweet Knödel. I've never before seen the kind of courtesy I was accorded in any Asian household. It was very impressive.

Kuh Lotto

This was the funny event of the week. After having the sweet Knödels for lunch, we headed on to watch a COW LOTTERY or "KuhLotto" in another nearby village vicinity. A cow is placed in a designated area with specially marked lots. The lots are where people place their bets - at 5 deutsche marks a lot. The 1st prize is DM2000, 2nd prize DM50. The winner is determined by the lot in which the cow.....shits. No kidding, I shit you not. Urination is not included. Can you imagine the kind of things these folks must be doing in their pastime? I wondered if they have a Human Lottery. And get this, if the cow dung happens to be spread over more than one lot, then the winner is determined by the lot that has the most amount of shit. I have never seen so many people gathered to watch a cow shit before....and after it finished its business, everybody was bending over to take a look at the prized shit. I was told last year, it took 5 hours for the cow to shit. I wondered did these people really stand around in the hot sun, waiting for the cow to shit for 5 hours? Thank heavens this year it only took one hour!



Bullshit.

My "absorption" mode in a new country, Germany, was slowly dying out as I was progressively adapting to their system and most of the things didn't seem weird or unusual for me anymore. I went to watch an English movie, "Mickey Blue Eyes", with my friend Anja and her classmates as part of their school excursion. It was an educational trip to assist them in improving their understanding of the English language. However, I found myself to be the only one laughing throughout the movie, in a packed cinema. Hmmm....

Attack of the Malaysians

Two friends of mine from Malaysia, Andrew and Alvin, were supposed to meet me here in Passau(south east of Germany) but they took the wrong train and ended up in East Berlin(north east of Germany)!!! This is a typical mistake that a Malaysian first timer in Germany would do. In Malaysia, when the train is supposed to leave at 10pm, the train would arrive at the track/platform about, maybe an hour earlier and leave probably 10 or 15 minutes late because there are not so many routes to run. In Germany, the trains arrive at the platform 5 or 10 minutes before departure and leave EXACTLY on time. Precision is a matter of utmost importance to Germans. Alvin and Andrew saw a train on the track, half an hour before they were supposed to depart, and simply jumped on it. And of all the trains they decided to accidentally jump on, it was a train that had only one stop - East Berlin. Over here, 2 trains heading different directions can be using the same platform within a span of 20 minutes. I swear I could've done the same mistake!



Andrew and Alvin happy to have finally hopped on the right train.

However, they managed to take the RIGHT train from Berlin to Passau and they brought along with them some foodstuff from Malaysia which I have been craving for. On the day that they arrived, we went to attend a "South East Asian" party at the University of Passau. The event was organised by German students doing South East Asian studies, therefore it was a real treat for them to coincidentally have some South East Asian visitors. :)

Mediterranean Blues

I started getting restless and I missed the ocean as I have been spending the last few weeks surrounded by mountains and hills so I headed down south all the way to the ocean to catch a glance of the Mediterranean sea. On the 1st of August, I went to München on transit to the southern border of Germany to try to hitch-hike my way there. We managed to reach Kufstein in Austria and then further down to Innsbruck. The people who picked us up were sociable enough to have a small chat with us and told us that the authorities of Austria has very strict anti-bumming rules. They are all out against homeless people. On touching Innsbruck, it was evident as there was not a single public bench available in the whole damn town! We could not find a single spot to sit and rest. Not even at the train station or bus terminals. Some Germans have told me that the Austrians are sometimes kind of "odd". I never really paid attention to this statement until this one time when I was sitting down at a cafe in Austria, a matured woman accidentally knocked my chair. She stopped, held both my cheeks as though she wanted to kiss me, and said sorry. Then she patted my cheek and repeatedly apologised again. I thought that was pretty weird. About an hour later, the same woman passed but I did not notice her. She poked me on my shoulder and repeatedly said sorry, again. It makes me wonder if I have such an intimidating face? :)



Hitchhiking from Kufstein to Innsbruck, Austria.

From Innsbruck, we took a train down south due to a shortage of time available. We stopped at Rome and the first impression of Rome reminded me of Malaysia. Many touts approached us wearing fake "government authorised tourist officers" tags and tried to sell us accommodation. However, the way they approached us alerted our senses to search for cheaper alternatives. Found one for 30000 lire (approximately RM60) a person, shared bathroom.

Pit Stop At Roma

I know it sounds funny but the first meal we had in Rome was at a Chinese restaurant. It was a wrong decision. Their fried rice was so crappy that no self-respecting Chinese would consume. But hey, we're in Rome anyway, so that was, in a way, expected. However, we were charged 5000 lire(RM10) for a small plate of chilly and further charges were added on to the bill which were not expected. We felt cheated by our own kind.



The Colloseum in all its splendour.

After having our first Chinese meal in Rome, we spotted the Colloseum around the corner and headed there. This mammoth structure amazes the mind...made me wonder how the ancient Romans were able to construct such a magnificent structure just for the purpose of entertaining themselves with a bloodsport. It was probably the world's first ever stadium – built 2000 years ago and withstood the test of time. Walking through the gateways felt like walking to the battle of my life, like, that scene in the movie "Gladiator". Thank God I'd watched the movie before heading here because it supplied me partial information and understanding about the history of Rome. This "Eternal City" is the centre of European civilisation. A group of American students conducted a free promotional tour of the ancient ruins, explaining the whole history of Rome from the time of Romulus right up to Octavious. They showed us the exact same cobble stones that the chariots used ride over to face the Roman Emperor, the steps where Julius Caesar was killed and even the Senate house where Caesar shocked the Senate by returning from a great battle from which he was expected to be killed and made the famous remark "I came, I saw, I conquered".



Tour of the ruins of ancient Rome. The cobble pavements in this picture were the same pavements that existed during the Roman Empire.

Gypsies

On the way there, Andrew was approached by 2 ladies with babies in their hands, begging for food, money, milk, whatever. It crossed my mind that they could probably be trying to pickpocket. So, I watched them closely from a distance behind and it HAPPENED. One of the ladies got extremely close to Andrew, asking him for water to feed her baby, trying to focus the unsuspecting Andrew's attention on her. The other lady had her hand in Andrew's pouch. I jumped over some barriers and ran up to the lady and pulled her hand out of her pouch. The lady was shocked and shouted in a foreign language. She didn't know that Andrew and the rest of us belonged to the same group. I immediately asked Andrew to check his pouch and he shouted his wallet was missing. The situation was pretty chaotic but I knew that we could not let the 2 ladies go. I confronted her and raised my voice to try to scare her into giving up. Anger and rage filled my senses but I tried hard not avoid violence because punching a female would be unforgivable. When I wanted to check their body(it was a sticky situation but I had no choice), they lifted their blouse willingly and one of them even opened her pants. They were trying to distract us to their openly exposed private parts after being caught by me. Luckily, 2 African peddlers who'd seen this happen too many times came along to help us out. The ladies decided to give up and pretended to pick up Andrew's wallet from underneath a road barrier nearby. Construction workers were present nearby and they knew what the commotion was about but didn't lift a finger to help out. An old Italian man standing nearby who was watching the whole incident clarified with us what happened and asked us to call the police. He said Rome is a beautiful city but it was marred by these Gypsies who were mainly Yugoslavs and told us to "whack the fucking bitches"(quote) if it happens again as it has happened many times to unsuspecting tourists.

Roman Thoughts

The group of us had been caught up by the idea of seeing Rome to the extent that we had charged into Rome without having a single idea about how much even a cup of coffee costs. However, the first day was a real eye opening experience. The Italian drivers drive like Malaysians - maybe even worse as they are known to create their own laws. Nobody stops at pedestrian crossings. I find that Italians in Rome or maybe generally, have an air of arrogance around them. Even the Italian language contains phonetic expressions that make it sound snobbish. Hmmm...well, maybe style is of utmost importance. The people at an Italian restaurant had no patience with us even though we were only trying to tell them we were being overcharged! We were nearly kicked out of the hotel unless we book extra days. I figured the tourism industry has really spoiled the warmth of the people...most of them were grumpy, rude and could not be bothered to help out in any way - even if it was something plain simple such as asking directions. Italians or maybe just Romans were impatient and short tempered. On the other hand, maybe I was just unlucky to have encountered the Italian "Scrooge" most of the time. I don't know...

Nevertheless, the fact that we were in Rome itself was already too unbelievable. We had to pinch ourselves just to see if we were dreaming. We went to see the Vatican city, all the famous fountains, ancient buildings, "Mouth of Truth", etc. I wondered why don't we have such places in Malaysia...then I figured it is probably because nobody in Malaysia sculpts or is that artistic. It was a lot of fun hanging out at all these places - especially at night when all these fountains were all lit up and rays of light from underneath the water would dance on the sculptures creating a glittering effect that arouses the senses. Enchanting.



Up till this moment, I've noticed that the people in the countries I've visited just do not drink plain water. They would anytime prefer to drink soda water...it is still water, only carbonated. Why? Well, they told me it's "tastier". Duh! By the way, the people at Rome drink from the fountains. No kidding. If you see the statue of a little boy peeing, you can drink that water. It was awkward for me to see that because if I were to drink from a fountain in Kuala Lumpur, I'd probably lose my bladder. It seems that the water that is flowing through these fountains is pure spring water, which is very clean, fresh and cold. There are many of these areas in Rome from which this spring water is dispensed for the consumption of the general public. After a while, I adapted to the sight of people drinking from these fountains and I remembered the saying "When in Rome, do as the Romans do"....even if it means sharing drinking water with pigeons that drink from these fountains as well. The first gulp was the hardest. Phew! I thanked God I'm still living. If an award for water wastage exists, Rome would be the winner because this water flows consistently like a tap with no stoppage. And it flows day and night, non-stop. I just hope that all the people I saw drinking from these fountains weren't only tourists and there were Italians among them.



The Italian girls – Ingrid, Aleksandra and Eva.

On our last day before heading down further south, we made new friends with 3 Italian girls from Trieste - Ingrid, Aleksandra and Eva. We had breakfast together and spent the rest of the day chatting, learning about each other's lives, etc. They were pretty interesting people, pretty friendly and unforgettably pretty!

Over in Malaysia, we usually see bouncers only at discos or nightclubs to control rowdy people. But over in Rome, bouncers are the people taking care of the churches and cathedrals. Complete with wireless earpiece, suits and sunglasses. This is to control the crowd that throng these places of worship by the thousands per day. I estimated that the tourist arrivals at the train station alone must be at least about 200 people every hour. To enter the churches, women must be decently clothed - no sleeveless or spaghetti straps, mini-skirts. Man - no singlets and no short pants.

Sperlonga

After Rome, we decided to head on to Sperlonga, which is a Mediterranean town by the sea. On the way, we met 2 other Italian surfers who were heading on their way to Spain to surf! Sperlonga is a town situated between Rome and Naples. It really caught us by surprise because the town was so picturesque, like a typical scene from a documentary of small towns by the Mediterranean in Greece. Rectangular structures clustered together perched on a hill by the ocean, overlooking a lighthouse/tower by the Mediterranean Sea. The first impression really fired up our spirit again. The scenery was so unbelievably nice that we for once contemplated giving up the lives that we lead, to live there forever. Italians were partying by the beach and having fun in the sun. We tracked 2 kilometres with our backpacks along the highway cutting through the side of the hills and managed to reach a campsite (cheapest accommodation available) that provided us with a wooden hut complete with a fridge, cooking utensils and 3 comfortable beds. The amenities at this campsite were considered luxurious to us - a restaurant, a bar, an area to wash dishes, washboards to wash clothes and even the showers in the toilet had cold or warm water. It was a strange feeling to have every Italian stare at us everywhere we go. There was this once when we first stepped on the beach, there was a moment of silence - people stopped kicking the ball, stopped chatting, stopped whatever they were doing and looked at us with the kind of face that seems to say "How did they ever end up HERE????". :) Sperlonga is a beach town that is an exclusive Italian holiday destination. I think an Oriental person in these small towns of Italy were an extremely rare sighting. Throughout the whole stay, I did not see a single Oriental person. People here seem to be much friendlier than Rome. I suppose this is because Rome is a city and therefore impersonal. We were mostly mistaken as Japanese as Malaysians were never known to travel much. Well, maybe as tourists but not backpackers. One guy came up to me and waved his hand simultaneously saying "Sayonara". I learned that in Italian, the word "ciao" is not only used to say goodbye, but also to say hello.



Lighthouse overlooking the Mediterranean at Sperlonga.

There were loads and loads of hot, young girls skipping around. The maximum clothing at the beach is a bikini. The amount of breasts that were plainly visible blinded me. Topless girls have become such a common sight here that nobody even bothers to look....except us! Coming from a country where nudity is against the law, it was a tall order for us to try to "blend" in. I wondered if the guys were just acting cool but are really observing secretly (like us) or they really don't care. However, I did not see a single guy totally exposed. Therefore, the scene of the beach on that day has been etched in my mind as a good memory. :)

We also headed out to the buildings perched on the hill and found small lanes that simulated a maze. One would get lost here as there doesn't seem to be any system. The paths/alleys and buildings looked as if they were built on the spur of the moment. Most of the buildings and alleys were painted in pure white. Bouganvillas were flowing down balconies, clothes were strung out in between walls. With the white of the surroundings and the setting of the Mediterranean blue in the background, the mere sight of this warm place really soothes the mind and relieves the weary heart. Rome was dirty and chaotic like most cities but Sperlonga was calm, laid back, idyllic, cleaner and a personal experience to be cherished.

Barefoot in Rome

When we were back at Rome, we decided to spend the night sleeping on the floor outside the main train station. We locked our important documents, money and other belongings in the station locker and prayed for our safety as we were told that many muggings, theft, murders and heinous crimes are known to have happened at the main train station. We picked a spot that had bright lights and the occasional security guard. Then we slept like pigs. Andrew had taken off his shoes so that his feet may breathe after walking many miles with the backpacks and put his shoes right next to his head covered by his cap. When we woke up, his shoes and his cap were stolen. The thief must've been really brave because they were stolen from right under Andrew's nose. But if the thief had been caught, I'd almost feel sympathetic for him because I know Andrew is capable of killing him. But we survived the night without any other untoward incidences.

Going Home

I made my way back to Germany the next day while the other fellows headed on to Trieste, a small vineyard town 2 hours from Venice. In the train, I got to see the Italian countryside overland and it was funny to see the gradual transition from rustic old Italian architecture to modern day skyscrapers in Germany. I noticed there weren't any tall buildings at all in Italy. Even in the cities. Well, I don't know about Milan because I have only been to Rome, Sperlonga and Florence. I wondered if it is a government regulation not to build tall skyscrapers in the name of preservation. However, I do know that in Rome, no building is allowed to be built taller than the Vatican Dome.

I spent the last few days in Germany lazing my time away and saying goodbye to the friends I had made in the small town of Passau. I am now in United Kingdom. My experience in Europe has given me valuable knowledge that I will not be able to gain by reading any book or studying for it in any institution, especially interaction with its people. I've enjoyed myself sharing my experiences and I welcome any similar experience that you might want to share with me. I'd like to thank you guys for taking the time to read. I hope that I have managed to make you feel as if you were there with me in the journey.

Take care!

Edwin Chong Kar Ken