

FILE THIS UNDER LOST AND FOUND IN ROME

Landmarks vanish, turning a brief stroll into a day-and-night ordeal

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My wife, Linda, and I have just returned from a European vacation that concluded with 10 days in Italy. We rented a car when we left Venice. We visited and ate our way through some beautiful cities as we worked our way to Rome.

I wish I could better explain the collective insanity that rules the streets of Rome. Every vehicle is driven by a type-A personality pushing to gain 20 feet on the guy next to him. Add in a couple hundred thousand map-carrying, walking tourists and chaos reigns.

Because we were staying four nights, we rented a small apartment instead of a hotel room. After 90 minutes of white-knuckle driving we finally arrived. We unloaded and checked in. I had to return the car to Hertz. Linda volunteered to come with me but I needed a break from her co-piloting skills. So with fear in my heart and MapQuest in my hand, I headed out into the Vespa-infested streets of Rome. All of a sudden I was on the right street with the Hertz sign coming up on the other side of a six-lane highway. With nerve endings on fire, I made a somewhat illegal left-hand turn and shot into the small garage-door opening and onto a ramp under the car rental office. I was alive.

I walked upstairs to settle up only to be told that I had neglected to top off the car with gas. In the United States when you do this, they typically stick you with an extra buck or two per gallon. In Italy the penalty is far greater. In this instance it was going to cost an extra \$70 to have them fill the tank. I absolutely did not want to get back in that car, but \$70 is a nice dinner.

I left my hat and paperwork on the counter, offered up a prayer, and re-entered the nightmare. On return I made the same illegal left turn through multiple yellow lines, shot into the "bat cave" and got out of the car like it was on fire. I went upstairs, paid the lady, picked up my hat and began the two-mile walk back to the apartment.

About halfway back, I realized I didn't have the paperwork. No matter, I'm a pretty smart guy; I surely can find a place I left

just an hour ago in spite of the fact that I didn't know either the building name or street name.

Two hours later I came upon a small men's store with some young people hanging out front. They were the first of many to whom I had to confess my plight. They let me go online to shoot Linda an email seeking rescue. The store was closing, so one of my new friends, Alesandro, walked me down the street to a nice hotel and introduced me to the concierge and explained my quandary. Ale's girlfriend, Tina, gave me her card with the warning that Rome can be dangerous and to give a call if I haven't been retrieved. I got tired of waiting, left messages with the hotel desk and went outside looking for some familiar sign to trigger my memory.

Three hours later I was just as lost, and now exhausted. I went into a restaurant, called Tina and asked her to send another email to Linda. Instead, at 11:30 at night, she and Ale got in their car and drove across Rome to reel me in. They had a smartphone that I used to send another message to my bride. I even called a couple of my kids back home to see if they could raise Linda. (My wife does not have much faith in my computer skills, so she hadn't looked for a message. When she did think of it, the Wi-Fi at the apartment was shut down until morning.)

My guardians took me back to the hotel. It was 1:30 a.m. Remember that \$70 I saved on the gas? The hotel room was \$190. At 8:15 a.m., there was a knock at my door. Linda had spent a sleepless, worry-filled night. As soon as she got the message, she walked the **THREE BLOCKS** from our apartment to the hotel.

That night we had dinner with Ale and Tina. We are hopeful that they will visit us in San Diego later this year.

Tim Lyons lives in San Marcos.

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