

Southern Italy in spandex: Something new to talk about

As I pedal my bike into another spectacular hill town in the Italian countryside, I am reminded of the saying, “Beauty often stems from madness.” My lifelong friend and I decided we would do something special for our 50th birthdays, so we signed up with the tour group, Ciclismo Classico, for a 12-day bicycle tour across southern Italy. Many of these breathtaking towns are built on the most rugged and hilly of locations, likely for defensive purposes. The buildings appear to defy gravity as they cling to the surrounding hillsides. The streets in the towns are narrow and steep. I’m not sure where the children learn to ride their bikes, because if you pointed them uphill they would just fall over, and if you pointed them downhill you wouldn’t see your kid again for a week. Same with learning to drive—you might as well take a sledgehammer to the family car, considering the dangers presented by the tight, inclined hair-pin turns. Speaking of driving, apparently if you put your flashers on you can park anywhere. It doesn’t seem to matter if you partially block the only

street in town while you pop in for a quick café.

Every town has a central *palazzo* filled with old men smoking and talking. I’m not exactly sure what they said to each other as my Italian is a little rusty, but I think it went something like, “I had nothing to say to you

by the looks we were getting, we were probably on someone’s bench. Sure enough, when we stood up to leave three old men immediately took our place. At least we gave them something new to talk about.

Life was simple on this trip—we would cycle during the day while admiring the amazing scenery. Challenging switchback climbs would segue into fast, flowing descents as we competed in our own Giro d’Italia (albeit one for middle-aged men with hairy legs). This was punctuated by stops for espresso, pastries, or gelato, and of course time was allotted for delicious lunches of pasta, fish, meats, and other delicacies. Nights were spent sampling fabulous southern Italian cuisine while sipping amazing Italian wines until we would either pass out or fall into a peaceful slumber. The rhythm of the country gradually replaced our North American impatience, allowing us to take the time to savor the experience.

My advice? Slow down and enjoy life, and remember the importance of good friends.

—DRR

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yesterday and I’ve got nothing to say to you today. Nothing has changed except for those two guys in spandex over there. Are you going to be here tomorrow? Because I will have nothing to say to you then either.”

One Sunday afternoon we sat on one of the benches in the *palazzo* and had a beer. The number of men gradually increased as the afternoon siesta hour receded and their wives kicked them out while they prepared Sunday dinner. It dawned on us that, judging

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Some stories are heartbreaking, some are heartwarming; this one is both

I would like to share the story of someone I have known for 10 years—a patient who was referred to me when her previous endocrinologist retired. Her story is even more special to me because she and I shared a childhood dream to spend time with elephants in the wild. Her dream came true—in a much more complicated way than mine will likely ever come to pass (or so I hope).

She was chronically ill from early childhood and had to spend much of her time at home. She read a book about elephants and was spellbound. She put the book in a suitcase and told everyone that one day she would go to South Africa and see these magnificent creatures. Because she was often on her own, away from school and isolated from her friends, she created an imaginary family around her to serve as her friends and provide her with comfort and support.

She was eventually diagnosed with cystic fibrosis at age 14. She was determined to beat the odds, survive, and become a teacher. At 21, when she had just completed her teaching practicum, she was diagnosed with diabetes. She took this in stride and continued on living her life to the fullest, until she became so ill that transplantation was the only option. She had a double lung transplant in 1999, at age 40. After the surgery she was able to breathe normally for the first time in a long time.

Since that time, she has spent her life as an ambassador for the transplant and cystic fibrosis community. She has kept a daily diary for over 16 years, chronicling her life and her gratitude for being alive.

She has done everything she can to keep her lungs in the best shape they can be. To that end, she has competed in five World Transplant Games and four Canadian Transplant Games. She usually competes in at least five

events at each one: the 3 km, 1500 metre, 800 metre, and 200 metre runs, racewalking, and sometimes a relay! She has amassed an astounding number of medals—prior to this year she'd won six gold, five silver, and two bronze medals at the Worlds, and ten gold, eleven silver, and three bronze medals at the Canadian Games. She says her greatest athletic accomplishment was racewalking the Vancouver half marathon in Vancouver 2007 in 2:45:53. Over the years she has donated a number of her medals to comfort others with cystic fibrosis, those awaiting transplants, and donor families. She is one of longest-surviving double lung transplant recipients in Canada. Last year she received the Courage to Come Back Award in the medical category.

Earlier this year she learned that the World Transplant Games were in Durban, South Africa. She knew that whatever it took to get there, she would go. I urged her to read a book I knew she would love, *The Elephant Whisperer*, by Lawrence Anthony, a renowned conservationist. She did, and it spurred her on to realize her childhood dream. She spent time at Anthony's game reserve, Thula Thula, in Zululand and visited many of the elephants and people she had read about in the book. The elephants were

as much and more than she had ever expected. At the games she won two gold medals and one bronze medal. Before leaving Africa, she spent another few days at Tau Game Lodge and saw an amazing variety of animals, including more of her beloved elephants. She was able to watch them up close at the local watering hole from her veranda. When she was leaving, the elephants congregated en masse outside the veranda, as if to say goodbye. The staff said that they knew a friend was leaving. I don't doubt that this will be one of her most cherished and enduring memories.

In her life she has approached everything with a calm acceptance and grace, but with the ferocity of a lion. She has never lived it as if every day was her last, but rather as if it were her first. She is tireless in her efforts to encourage anyone she meets to follow their dreams and believe in themselves.

This tribute is to my friend, Margaret Benson. She has an indomitable spirit, and an incredible zest for life, and is truly an inspiration to me and to everyone who has had the good fortune to meet her.

—SEH



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