



MLK DAY

Stranded in Sicily during the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday.

Langston Harris

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Suddenly, the door opened and Mary screamed. While we were stopped at a traffic light, a young man reached in and took her purse off the floor. As she struggled with him, I grabbed his hand to keep him from taking the purse but I was trapped with a seat belt and unable to move the car, so he prevailed. He jumped on a scooter with an accomplice and was gone. We later discovered the way to lock the doors in the rental car and always kept them locked for the rest of our trip.

We had arrived in **Catania, Sicily** on Sunday, January 14, shortly before the incident occurred. It was dark as we picked up our rental car and started driving to the **Liberty Hotel**, where we were to stay for the next few days. Catania is a crowded city with crazy traffic, lots of scooters and inconsiderate drivers. We had gotten lost in a rough part of town, driving around for hours trying to get our bearings. We kept referring to the maps that we had but they were very confusing. Finally, afraid and concerned about our predicament, we parked in what appeared to be a service station. I nervously approached a small group of older men to ask for help. Of course, I realized that my knowledge of the Italian language would be a problem but I persisted. The men seemed a bit bemused but they were friendly and helped me with the correct directions to the hotel, where we arrived sometime after midnight. The hotel staff were very considerate and helpful after we explained to them what had happened. They showed us to our room and offered to help in any way they could. We were finally able to relax enough to get some sleep.

Mary's stolen purse didn't have much money and we were able to stop the credit cards but it also held her passport and we couldn't leave Italy without it. So, we started making plans to get a replacement passport at the US consulate in **Naples**. Unfortunately, Monday,

January 15, was Martin Luther King Day and all the US consulates and embassies were closed for the holiday.

After a pleasant breakfast at the hotel and a short walk around the neighborhood, we went to the local police station to file a report about the robbery. There were several people waiting in a crowded room to see the station commander. We waited nervously for our name to be called and were eventually ushered into a small office where we tried awkwardly to provide the Italian-speaking policeman with enough information to file the report. Finally, we were able to get a copy of the burglary report, which we found out later that we would need for the replacement passport.

The next day we were able to contact the consulate where we learned that we would have to fly there to get the passport. I quickly learned that the airline websites were in Italian so I asked a friendly young hotel staffer named Francesco to help arrange the flight. He offered to make the reservation to Naples and we were convinced that we would be leaving the next morning. So, we managed to calm down a bit, had a good meal in a restaurant near the hotel and relaxed for a while.

We got up early the next morning, drove to the airport, flew to Naples and took a taxi to the consulate. It was in an area of town that seemed a bit dangerous and I was glad to be there in daylight. Presumably, there had been recent protests against the United States and the consulate was somewhat surrounded by military vehicles. We also had to enter the building through a metal detector. When we arrived in the consulate office to register our request, the agent verified that we would need the police report we had filed in Catania to prove that the passport had been stolen. We were also told that we must pay for it in cash. Fortunately, I had the required ninety-eight United States

dollars so Mary was issued a temporary passport and we took another taxi back to the airport.

When the flight was opened for check-in, we discovered that our reservation was for the next day and wasn't transferable. Our young friend Francesco was unaware that the date for return trip was the day after we arrived. He was young and probably unfamiliar with airline reservations so I really could not blame him. Since we didn't want to stay in Naples overnight, we had to buy another ticket in order to return to Catania that day. The trip had taken the whole day but we could at least say that we had visited Naples.

We were able to continue onto other adventures for another few days



in Sicily, including a little fishing village in the north called **Santa Maria la Scala**, for a fresh fish lunch, and a day trip in the south to **Syracusa**.



I learned two very important lessons about traveling: First, when driving, or being driven, in a car, lock the doors, and second, when traveling outside of the United States as an American, bring US dollars. I also realized how friendly Italian people can be. All-in-all a much better ending to the trip. I certainly don't blame Doctor King and will forever honor the day that memorializes him.