



CYCLING THROUGH A POSTCARD

BY MANJULA MARTIN

→ WE ARE ROCKING back and forth in complete darkness, lulled into dreams of boats larger than the one we are on. A fuzz of Italian leaks into the cabin from the passageway outside: “Ladies and gentlemen, something-something-something, arriving, 7:30 AM, breakfast.”

In the ferryboat’s lounge/bar area, small, fluorescent, and crowded, we receive our trays of strong espresso, bread, jam, and cheese slices, and take them to sit by the window. A few truck drivers drink their coffee, black, each at his own table in solo silence. I pull back the thick generic upholstery of the curtains to discover the daytime outside. The sun rises over Salerno, Italy, and a tugboat pulls us into the city’s shadow.

Off the dock, after the rush of cars and trucks piled high with shipping crates exits, I inhale a jolt of carbon dioxide and wheel myself around the engines, metal, and rope that litter the docks.

After two months on islands in the deep south of this epic nation, we had arrived on the mainland, the Boot, to the region called Campania. The rooftops and steeples on Salerno shimmer in the pink of the dawn. Out of sight to the north lurks hedonistic, hulking Napoli, and above that rest the stones of Roma and the conclusion of six months living on and off my bicycle.

At a small café on the edge of town, my partner and I refill two more cappuccinos, testing our regional dialect comprehension skills on the café owner when he joins us at a table on the

sidewalk. The sun grows bright, and the October morning air is pleasantly sharp. I sneak into the cramped bathroom behind the café’s back patio and change from jeans into cycling shorts. We saddle up.

The day blooms, a perfect one for a finale: a 67-kilometer ride from Salerno to the resort town of Sorrento on one of the most beautiful coastlines in the world — the Amalfi. Our last day of touring stretches before us in a winding array of steep, high roads built atop impossibly inhabited rock formations, stiff sheer drops, infinite views, and small towns bellowing their green church domes and rich rocky histories across the Mediterranean. It’s a Saturday, and weekend warriors are out in full force on their hyper-light carbon road bikes, shouting “Ciao!” in grouped blurs of bright spandex up every steep incline as they pass us, our big bags, and our breathless silence.

We are appreciating it as we experience the drip of wet northern rain on the rocks, the roar of approaching scooters around the next blind curve, and row after row of intricate terraces above and below the road. Each terrace is trellised with scaffolding made of large branches, protecting exponential hillsides packed with oranges, olives, oranges, and stone.

At the end of a long tour, there is a specialness to every single hour. It’s a peculiar feeling: I am ready for this adventure to end; I am tired; I miss showers. But I am also memorializing my experiences with romantic eyes. I am already missing the miracle of encountering something new every single day, the light feeling of being always on the move, the joys and pains of talking to strangers, the constant struggle to find the correct word, sound, or phrasing in a new language in order to acquire my basic daily needs. I carry some sadness, too — the quiet *tristessa* of knowing that soon I won’t be seeing views like this every single day. Soon, I won’t be

tapping the well of adrenaline in my thighs after a long climb or stretching wrists cramped from braking through wet downhill switchbacks, accepting food and wine from strangers, or eyeing every olive grove I pass to evaluate its campsite potential.

We take our time on this winding and steep road, working hard, stopping at minuscule shops to buy ourselves luxurious treats of Coca Cola and bottled water. At noon, we park the ponies in a small concrete platform carved into the road, which turns out to be a parking lot turnout for the house wedged below it on the sheer cliffside above the water. My partner makes tuna and pecorino sandwiches, and we eat in silence. We toast each other with the dregs of a bottle of Amaro, an herby Sicilian aperitif, and I watch the blue of the Mediterranean fluctuate according to the darkness of the clouds barreling by above it. I savor the bitterness of the liquor and the sweetness of the day.

Then, the rain arrives.

On a road that serves as a border between the sea and the land, up high there is nothing but you and the wind. The clouds have no mystery up here: you can see them coming, some dark and pregnant, others fast and cold, and they always, eventually arrive. Today, they arrive with lightning and deep thunder strong enough to shake the gold plating off the *duomo* in the town of Amalfi itself. My face is soon colliding with heavy balls of water, thick drops, at first slow and then in curtains, all driven in whatever direction the wind pleases. We hide beneath an overhang of bougainvillea and grapevines, wait for the worst to pass, realize that it won’t, and place our soaked shoes back on our pedals. At the summit of a climb, we catch a break — a lull in the ferocity of the rain and a sign saying “Sorrento, 7 km.” It’s all downhill from here.

But the sky doesn’t want to let us go yet. With more cracks and snaps of the atmosphere, it begins to hail. Ice the size



HOWARD AND MARGIE FULLMER

of marbles falls deep and thick on the road, and we again seek shelter in the doorway of a building. The clouds keep falling, and water keeps running downhill to form threatening streams that grow to rivers, their flow sweeping piles of ice into gutter drains and clogging the lanes of the road. The converging currents of water and ice march at a landslide’s pace downward toward where we stand beneath a small cement overhang at the bottom of a sloped driveway. The temperature drops until I can see my breath where there used to be warm autumn sunshine. The risk of flash flooding is real. The water around my ankles begins to rise toward my knees.

The first attempt to leave our sheltered area for higher ground produces a bruise the size of a thumbprint on my hand. We wait longer. We are wearing shorts, and every inch of my exposed skin is now red with the cold abrasions of the storm. The only way out to the road is through knee-deep ice and equally deep ice-cold rushing water. We take a few swigs from our bottle of Amaro and go for it.

six months ago with clean panniers. I’m stunned that such a beautiful day can turn so nasty and that it still surprises me. And I laugh even louder when, as it often does on tour, something unexpectedly good happens.

A woman across the road leans out of her upstairs window, waving us inside. She puts me roughly into the bathroom, demanding in sign language that I take a hot shower and dry off with her blow-dryer. When I emerge from the steaming bathroom with dry clothes on, she is offering my partner a giant mug of hot chocolate. We drink it while it’s still boiling and talk with her and her husband who is watching rugby on television. He grew up here and says he’s never seen a storm like this in his entire life. Sometimes snow, yes, but this? No, never ice like this.

After many expressions of gratitude in multiple languages, we are ready to attempt the descent to Sorrento, hoping to make it there before night arrives. We set a snail’s pace for the surprisingly patient cars behind us, going only fast enough to move our heavy loads around each switchback successfully, trying not to brake at all on the dark new ice. My partner hits a patch of refrozen slush as he brakes and goes down in front of me, panniers bouncing out into the lane from his falling bicycle and body. I brake in time not to run him over, and the car behind me does the same. Everyone and everything is unharmed, and we plod on. Down, down, around, and down. And then it is over.

We arrive as night falls into the perfectly regular town of Sorrento, packed with tourists and luxury hotels, now glistening in the ice of a freak hailstorm on the evening of the last day of our bicycle tour.

And just like that, we’re civilized.

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We're wearing dry socks and acting like none of it ever happened, finding the cheapest *pensione* in town, eating pizza for dinner, praising hot water heaters, watching bad American television dubbed in Italian, and anticipating meeting visiting friends at the train station the next afternoon. I sit on the sagging bed looking at the starlit sky out the window, and I'm amazed at how something as dramatic as the storm we just experienced can feel so much like a narrative climax. A climax but also not *the end*.

The dramatic weather-inspired turn in our picture-perfect last day of riding was, like the coast it took place on, epic — and yet it was entirely regular too. I pull on my still-damp socks in preparation for leaving our room to seek pizza, and I pause at the familiarity of this action. Here I am, in another town, with another adventure behind me, ready to seek yet another new meal and see what the streets of the world have to offer.

This sort of duality is typical of my experience of bicycle touring, in which traveling is really different than living but also isn't. Over six months and five countries, I have experienced astoundingly beautiful place after astoundingly beautiful place, and I have not taken them for granted. But I have also stopped being surprised by them. Because, mostly, places are astoundingly beautiful. And also, mostly, people are *living* in them, creating and experiencing wonderfully regular lives within these postcard settings. They're growing food and running bars and watching sports and doing the dishes. And a few of those people might not let you into their café during a storm, but most of them will probably make you hot chocolate and help you get warm before putting you back out on the road.

Sometimes a sunny day turns into the storm of the century, and sometimes things might get a little bit uncomfortable. But usually we're all going to make it. 

Manjula Martin's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in The Virginia Quarterly Review, Shareable, The Rumpus, SF Weekly, Modern Farmer, and Post Road. She lives in San Francisco and rides a Surly Long Haul Trucker.