

## A Summer Full of Encounters

The summer of 1978 was probably one of the most varied for me, and probably my last as a carefree teenager. At seventeen, with a school certificate with commendation and a place at technical college in my pocket, the world was, despite a chronic lack of money, my oyster.

Although we were not part of the '68 movement or the core of the flower power generation, we were also not part of the isolated Saturday Night Fever youth. While intellectually and socially we followed the motto 'make love not war', our youthful tendencies were actually closer to 'sex, drugs and rock'n'roll'.

So we swung between Joan Baez, Cat Stevens and Bob Marley on the one side and Queen and Jethro Tull on the other and endured the Bee Gees and their associates just to please our female friends.

Between authoritarian parents and the emerging opposition of society we wanted to change the world - during the week at least, the weekends were for fun and pleasure.

This everyday dilemma of maturing young guys, paired with the love of adventure and curiosity, drove us to travel. So it was no surprise that following our successful 10 day trip to Bavaria the previous year, we sought more distant targets abroad.

After several suggestions, we finally decided on a four week camping holiday in Italy. We, that is, with descending ages, Jacky, Frank, Holperle, Michl and myself. The other two (Holle and Borda) of the magnificent seven had decided to disappear to Corsica.

After nearly three months of planning—no, really, three months—some readers might question it, but we lived in a 'village' environment and there was no internet at that time so we had to organise everything personally, by phone or even by letter. After endless planning, we came to the conclusion that we would need to scrape together at least 750 Deutschmark for trains, campsites and meals.

For me, that meant working in an underpaid position at the urban building authority for two weeks during the Easter holidays and the four weeks between leaving school and the holidays. It was a pretty fun time, especially when I think back on the time when three police officers gave the order first to dig up a foxhole and then, within half an hour, to reseal it. Efficiency that sticks with you for a lifetime! But a guy'll do anything for relaxing days on the beach.

After some tough weeks during one of the hottest summer months I've ever experienced in Germany, it was finally over. With a bulging rucksack we got on the bus to the train station, then on to the train from Venice to Latisana (as far as I can remember), before getting back on the bus to the centre of Bibione and then we finished the last 2km of the journey to our campsite on foot.

Back then, Bibione was very open and ordered and was only slightly similar to the town it is today. There were two main streets, in a T-shape, where everything in the town was.



Our campsite was nearest to the town and was right next to a kid's holiday camp (which would prove to be very enjoyable). There were another six or so along the coast. As far as I can guess, these have all fallen victim to a hotel construction boom since.

The five of us guys were in five one-man tents, set up in a circle under the shade of a few pine trees, but because we didn't want to spend all day in the tent, our location wasn't so important. Nearly everybody around us was local; mainly families with children whose fathers only saw them at the weekend. But I'll come back to that later. We quickly put up our tents, put on our swim stuff and headed to the beach. For the next four weeks, we were going to have nothing but sun, beach, sea, food, drink and lottsss of fun.

The exchange rate was about 400 Lira to 1 Deutschmark. So in other words, a margarita pizza cost us 2.50 DM, a half pint was 1.75 and a glass of wine between 25 and 50 Pfennig. Even with our limited budgets it was a paradise. At the beginning, most days were spent like this.

Probably our first memorable experience was a slightly surreal acoustic break of the peace of our campsite. Several times a day we heard a female voice shouting through the campsite:



"Davide, Davide..." Sometimes it hit a short time later. The more insistent the shout, or more accurately, the more annoying the voice, the more likely a clap.

We quickly found out that Davide was a three year old toddler, who kept wandering off to explore his surroundings. The desperate voice belonged to his mother, around mid-20s and probably just sprung from a Milan catwalk, dark-haired and with a dreamlike figure. Nevertheless, the shouting and especially the subsequent punishment annoyed us tremendously. So here's how we stopped it:

Our dear friend Holperle unfortunately only had two weeks' holiday and so we accompanied him in due course to the bus station, waited with him until his bus arrived, put him on and waved after him sadly. As the day was still early, just 11:00 and we had nothing in our stomach, we headed to one of the two pizzerias at the bus station. As soon as we sat down, someone came over and asked what we would like to have. The conversation went something like this:

Waiter: Prego! (Yes please)

Us: Quattro Pizza Margherita (Four margherita pizzas)

Waiter: Scusate, ma non abbiamo pizza. (Sorry, there is no pizza)

Us: No? Perché? (No? Why?)

Waiter: Non facciamo pizza a quest'ora, solo la sera. Qualcosa per colazione? (There is no pizza now, only in the evening. Breakfast?)

Us: No, grazie. Birra? (No, thank you. Beer?)

Waiter: Birra? Sicuri? (Beer? Sure?)

Us: Si, quattro birra, per favore! (Yes, four beers, please!)

Waiter: Bene. (O.K.)

He walked off, shaking his head, and brought back four beers.

Whether it was really the right decision is not something clearly realised even with hindsight. However, an empty stomach, the intensity of the southern sun and alcohol is a fatal combination. After two hours and a few rounds of beer we tried to find our accommodation.

In general, children and fools tell the truth. In our acute condition we were probably both, because nothing else can explain our mischievous but sincere actions. Just before the entrance of our campsite, we were overcome with a complete arrogance. We counted loudly to ten with every step, stopped short, jumped with both feet, one arm swinging upward, forward and shouted "Davide ...". The arm went up with a roar of "... Bang" then back down again and the act began with a loud "one" once again. Our bravado echoed all the way through the entrance, along the street and to our camp. When we got there, we stopped laughing and lay down on our sleeping bags to rest.

Of course, our actions were not without consequence. Firstly we received a warning (not the last) for disturbing the siesta time and secondly, and somewhat successfully despite complaint, you could hear continue to hear shouts of "Davide" but the "bangs" stopped forever.

Our next intercultural encounter was also related to children. As previously mentioned, there



were some Italian families who were fatherless midweek. There were two such family tents next to ours. So it was inevitable that we visited the neighbourhood kids now and then and played with them. That and perhaps our Davide stunt probably gave us some bonus points with the neighbouring fathers. One fine Saturday morning our dear Michl was called over by one of the gentlemen. The rest of us followed fifteen minutes later. Michl was sitting in a deckchair at a camping table with a glass of red wine in front of him, grinning from ear to ear and invited us to try some. We didn't have to be asked twice. This time we had had breakfast even earlier. Six lords and masters sat around the small table, talking animatedly with their hands and feet and drinking one bottle after another. Finally we drank coffee with grappa or just straight grappa. The session was finally ended by the better halves of our hosts. While they were very pleased with our spontaneous meeting, the enthusiasm of the ladies turned over time into displeasure with their men. Anyway, we moved away politely when the blokes were in their tents. Of course, we did not forget to thank them for the invitation and the nice encounter that evening.

We also seemed to have left a passable impression, because prior to our departure on Sunday evening the patron gave us ten bottles of Lambrusco with the warning that it was already five years old and may no longer be any good. We buried the bottles in the sand under a pine tree, poured water over them regularly so they were not too hot and the following afternoon tested one bottle after another. What can I say, they were all great!



The final encounter was also related to children, but was probably the most intimate and for us the most welcome.

As already mentioned, our site was right next to a kid's holiday camp. The building and grounds were surrounded by a wall and a three-metre high chain link fence covered in barbed wire. Only the beach was not separated from ours, which proved to be a godsend for us. On a wonderful afternoon we discovered, not far from us, a group of young people of the opposite sex. It had a magnetizing effect on us and the prospect of a little female companionship was very tempting.

While there may have been other reasons at the end of the 80s that we did not simply approach the girls, I'm pretty sure that it was rather a question of who of us would dare to make the first contact. Finally we chose a nonverbal approach; Jacky grabbed his camera, approached them and despite the protests of the beach babes risked a photo. The image later proved less successful, but the approach was better.



The ice was broken, we were approaching step by step and the first muted communication began. We found out that children from socially disadvantaged families who cannot afford a holiday were offered the opportunity of a holiday in Bibione. In addition to the adult in charge, it was mainly young female volunteers who supervised the kids. Therefore, they only had a limited time free to go to the beach when the children were taking their afternoon naps. In the evening they were not allowed to leave the facility. Because there was a certain affinity between us, we arranged to meet the next afternoon. We lay together in the sun, chatted, went swimming and played games in the water together - it was lots of fun. While we had to be good on land, in the water we did everything we could to get some body contact – all cleverly hidden behind a variety of games. Since we had little mutual free time, we arranged to meet in the evening at the fence between the camp and the campsite.

Fortunately, around a few of the border posts on each side there were lot of trees and so they weren't visible from the building. We used these for our first meeting. As it was not clear when the girls would be able to slip away and we were in a time without mobile phones, it was not possible to arrange a particular time or communicate. So at dusk we sat down against the wall and waited. An eternity passed before the awaited moment arrived and we heard the first sounds on the other side. Strung like tin soldiers we stood at the fence and stared into the darkness of the trees until we saw the first shadows moving towards us. The ladies had long since decided who they were going with. We hardly had a say but because they were all very sweet, none of us protested. So it was not surprising that graces were aimed at us accordingly. There was a quick discussion about how we could overcome the barrier. But since all attempts at climbing had failed and we still had no tools at hand, we didn't waste time with any more efforts. We parted in pairs along the barrier and enjoyed the few intimate minutes that remained to us this evening. When we had to separate, we were already looking forward to our meeting the next day at the beach or as onlookers.

However, this fence was a huge obstacle for us, which would have to be overcome immediately. So we looked at the hurdles more closely in daylight and found a place where two wire mesh pieces met and were joined only with metal clips. As resourceful young men, we needed only a knife and some small pliers to crack the obstacle. We had both with us. To the delight of our nocturnal visitors, by the next rendezvous we had managed to open some of the seals so they could easily slip through the open gap when they got there. So our moonlight beach encounters were born and guaranteed. As soon as our companions were through to our side, we closed the secret door hastily. To prevent the emergence of rumours, conjecture or fantasies from the outset, there was no more than holding hands, talking and a bit of kissing. The carefree and amorous days together went by much too quickly. Our childminders fulfilled their social workload and had to go back to their hometowns. Sadly we didn't exchange addresses (no phone numbers, e-mails or Facebook back then). Although it wasn't intended, it was a goodbye forever, because apart from a day trip that Jacky, Michl and I took on our journey home, we never saw any of our Italian holiday beauties ever again.

In addition to these three encounters, of course we had dozens more in the four weeks. Such as the Asian waiter who had great fun with us, a debate with a bartender who thought we had had enough, the young Italian who thought we were American and could not be

convinced otherwise, or the policeman who almost arrested one of us because we accidentally got lost and tried to get into a private party. Not to mention the four Italian guys who camped next to us for a long time and with whom we cooked spaghetti, drank red wine and sang songs. All these situations proceeded peacefully and even the difficult and ambiguous were resolved with openness, understanding and rationality for the satisfaction of all.

Maybe it was our youthful curiosity, coupled with the impartiality and openness that made contact with our Italian hosts and other foreigners so easy or perhaps it was the sincerity and respect with which we all treated each other.

### **Additional:**

This summer was really one of the most plentiful and interesting that I had in my life. A week after my return from Bella Italia I was able to visit London with my father and his younger brother. Since I hadn't seen him for four weeks and had the idea of London in my head, I was looking forward to seeing him again. We went by car to Belgium, on the ferry across the Channel and on to London, where we lost our way among the big city bustle and ended up somewhere in the harbour. The port was basically all right, because we were going to meet my uncle at a famous ship (Cutty Sark? HMS Belfast? I can't remember). But where was it? With no map and no sat-nav (there was none then), my father sent me to the nearest harbour pub to ask for directions. What do most people think of when they think of a port bar? Dimly lit, tobacco smoke-filled places with dark and greasy tables, benches and chairs in which dark, twilight and predatory figures roamed?! With such an image in my mind, I should go in there and ask for directions?! I was amazed! But, not just that day, but also in the future in the pubs of Rotterdam port, I was proved wrong. Because I walked into a bright room, with bright furniture and three warm-looking Englishmen. I made my way to the first available table where a man sat. I had hardly said two words, when he took the chair out next to him and asked me to sit down. I thanked him, he was probably a little surprised, politely declined and asked for directions. The man evidently knew the area well and described in detail the necessary route and still made sure with the bartender that he was right.



They were absolutely right, as it turned out shortly afterwards. I thanked him, said goodbye with the same warmth that had been shown to me and left.

Within a few minutes, I had learnt three things: Port pubs are better than their reputation, Englishmen are friendly people and prejudices spoil lives!

The days in London were as always exciting, varied and too short. It was nice to witness how two brothers met again after years of separation, not knowing that it would be the last time.

Not just the experiences in the summer of 1978, but also many encounters with people in different regions of this earth, have taught me an important lesson: Every individual wants to be perceived as a person and respected. No matter what age, sex, religion, skin colour, class, profession, origin or views, it applies to everyone and is a universal need.

**We are born as human beings with the right to respect, but also with the duty to respect others in the same manner.**

by AnA (Pseudonym) - Germany

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