



Hand delivering a postcard from the Galapagos to Italy starts a string of delightful surprises.

BY LINDSY VAN GELDER

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I certainly didn't volunteer to deliver the postcard because I wanted to make new friends in exotic foreign lands. *Au contraire*, I'm a person whose travels are motivated by nature, architecture and food -- in other words, all the attractions Barbra Streisand isn't referring to when she natters on about "peeeeeeeople who need people." But there I was on Floreana Island, at the ass end of the Galapagos, 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, and I wanted to send a postcard home to my partner Pamela in Miami. If I expected hand delivery of my own mail, *mano a mano*, it seemed only sporting to pick up somebody else's.

The Floreana post office is really just a raffish wooden barrel plunked down in the middle of the sand, a descendant of one installed in the 18th century by whaling crews. In those days it was an optimally efficient system: Sailors who were passing through checked the mailbox for letters addressed to their ships' ports of call. Today the barrel is stuffed with postcards from tourists of all nations. You could schlep them home and stamp them, obviously, but the true spirit of the olde mail barrel, according to our guidebook, demands the personal touch.

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The day my daughter Miranda and I were in Floreana, most of the mail was addressed to Norwegians and Argentines. But there was one postcard with frolicking sea lions on one side and *Saluti* scrawled on the other, intended for someone named Gina at an *erboristeria*, or herbal pharmacy, in Bassano del Grappa, Italy. I knew this was the home of grappa, the firewater liqueur. I had even been through it once on a train, so I also knew it was located at the foot of the Alps, in the Veneto region, about 120 miles from Venice. Pamela and I had frequent flier tickets to go to Venice in a few months. I pocketed the card.

Still, I wasn't prepared just to show up cold. When I got back home, I decided to write Gina a letter. I speak a little Italian -- that is, I know a lot of hotel and menu words, which I sometimes say in Spanish by mistake. But with the help of a dictionary, I managed to explain all about the mailbox traditions. I assured Gina that there was no social obligation that went along with her receipt of the postcard -- although I'd be glad to buy her a beer.

"Mom, you can't send this to strangers," warned Miranda, who majored in Italian. "They'll understand you, but they'll think you're a serial killer."

She rehabilitated my felonious grammar. Off went a letter to Bassano del Grappa. A month later I got an e-mail from someone named Luca. There was a note in Italian, plus a serial killer English translation that read:

"Dear Sirs VAN GELDER, let off ourself for the postpone what we replay at your letter, but we were outside for a travel. We are very happy to meet yuo in Veneto for make a friendship. If yuo send to as the date of yuor travel we can organize ourself for meeting. Reverence, Gina"

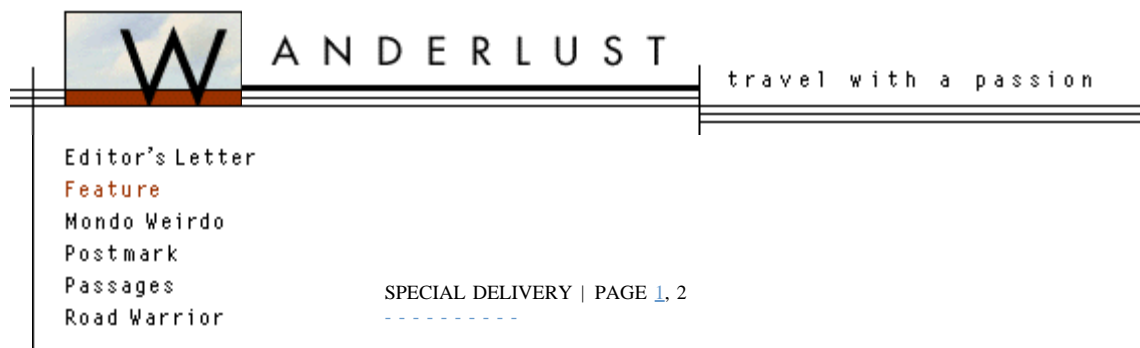
It was around this time that Pamela, who speaks no Italian at all, began asking me pointed questions about exactly how much of our time in Venice was going to be devoted to this project. But I had made a commitment to the spirit of the mailbox, damn it. I sent the dates. Gina/Luca e-mailed back phone numbers and said we should call when we got to Venice.

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A woman answered the phone.

*"Buon giorno," I burbled, "e Gina chi parla?"*

No, it wasn't Gina. It was Edda. Whoever Edda was, she knew exactly who I was -- "You're coming on Monday, yes?" -- and we managed, despite my rotten Italian, to communicate some particulars about the railway schedules. "Just go to the counter in the station," she instructed.

When I got off the phone, I realized that I had no clue about which counter she meant. The ticket booth? The postcard had been addressed to a pharmacy. Could it be in the train station? Did it have a counter? A few hours later I called again, and this time a male voice answered. No, Gina wasn't there. Neither was Edda. The male voice belonged to Luca, my e-mail buddy, who explained to me in halting English that the train station was not very big and I shouldn't worry. Then he added: "You perhaps don't know that Gina really doesn't speak any English? As you will see when you meet her on Monday."

I was beginning to doubt her existence altogether. Was Gina actually a dog, the mascot of the pharmacy? Was I the butt of a joke that had already traveled 7,000 miles?

"You really don't have to come if you don't want to," I told Pamela. No, no, she'd come. But we just wouldn't stay any longer than we had to.

Our doubts began to melt the second we got off the train. There, carrying a single red rose and a big sign that said, "WELCOME LINDSY TO BASSANO DEL GRAPPA," were a college-aged guy and two grinning 60ish ladies. One of them -- an Italian leprechaun -- immediately grabbed me in a bear hug. The more bashful of the two,

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dressed in brown and wearing eyeglasses, turned out to be Gina. My new best friend was her sister Edda, dolled up in bright red and wearing major eye makeup. The guy was Luca, their younger sister's son, an engineering student who, alone among the group, had once studied English. He had his dictionary out. So did I.

Before I could proffer the small piece of cardboard that had gathered us together in this spot, Pamela and I were whisked off to a restaurant for lunch. It was like being plopped down on the set of "Amarcord": We were joined by Luca's mother, who tooled in on a bicycle, and briefly by his father, as well as a parade of cooks and waiters to whom we were introduced as the Girls from America Who Brought the Postcard. Mounds of antipasto arrived at the table, followed by enormous platters of pasta with lobster and heaps of delicate baby greens. Prosecco, the champagne of the Veneto, flowed like the Adriatic. And a good thing, too, since most of the conversation that we could all muster had to do with the cuisine of the region. Someone would proclaim *sarde en saor*, and the rest of the group would mmmm and ahhhh, and then someone else would chime in with *spaghetti vongole* or *radicchio al griglia*, followed by more orgasmic choruses. From time to time one of us would raise a glass and toast, "From the Galapagos to Bassano del Grappa!" and we would all whoop. I noticed that Pamela was not looking at her watch.

The family's *erboristeria* was currently closed for renovations, we learned, and perhaps they all had some time on their hands. But that alone didn't really explain the brass-band welcome. Nor did the famous postcard, which I finally presented to Gina over sorbet laced with a lethal dollop of grappa. She glanced at it, remarked that it was from a customer and packed it away in her purse, not to be referred to again. The postcard was merely the message. Making friendship was the medium.

And what was a little translation technicality among friends? By the time the check was paid -- the family refused to take our crumpled lire notes -- we were all feeling punchily pleased with our ability to leapfrog over the language barrier. A tour of the town was proposed. Bassano is actually a gem of a place, with a spectacular Palladian wooden bridge spanning the Brenta River and a sinister castle on its banks -- the home, Luca explained, of Ezzolino da Roma, a bloodthirsty tyrant so infamous that he was cited in Dante's "Inferno." Then we strolled on a bluff above the river past a row of lollipop-like trees. Bassano was notoriously active in the Resistance, Gina told us, and in 1944 the German army hanged 31 of the town's young men in retaliation -- one for each tree. "I wrote a poem about it once," Gina added shyly. How nice,

I thought with the genteel condescension of the professional journalist, a pharmacist who expresses herself in poetry. We tramped around to churches, Roman ruins, even a Museum of Grappa, where Gina insisted on buying us not one but three bottles of the stuff -- regular, honey and blueberry -- as souvenirs

Certainly we would also like to see a little of the region? *Si, si, certo*. Into the family station wagon we piled, Luca trying to drive and riffle through the dictionary at the same time. By then, we more or less had our schtick down. The Italians spoke slowly, with infinite patience and maximum hand-jive. Dictionary pages flipped like decks of cards. Somehow we managed to progress beyond cuisine to pets, gambling, art, birth order, the weather in Miami, the allure of Venice, Edda's arthritis, my bad knee, our feelings about spirituality vs. organized religion, even politics and politicians (for that one we all used the international sign of stuffing one's finger down one's throat). We took pictures of each other in the main square of Marostica, where the residents dress up as bishops and queens every fall and enact a days-long chess game. We climbed to the fort above the town. By then it was getting dark, and, alas, we had a train to catch.

But it was decided that we would meet the family cats and dogs. At Gina and Edda's house we got another surprise. Gina had written poetry, all right -- she brought us out copies of all her books, as well as a CD on which several of her verses had been set to modern classical music and sung by the soprano Isabella Frati. These, she insisted, were gifts: one set for us, and one for Miranda ...

By now we were sagging under the weight of three bottles of grappa and a small library of books, plus the CDs and a multilingual guidebook to Marostica that Gina had impulsively bought after Luca and I had exhausted our dueling dictionaries in the search for words to describe chess pieces and military architecture -- all in exchange for one lousy postcard. Nor would the sisters dream of letting us take the train back to Venice. They drove us all the way to Piazzale Roma, the last nibble of mainland before one has to switch to a waterbus or gondola. We kissed, cried, offered our respective spare rooms any time, promised to be fluent in each other's language the next time we met.

And indeed, with the help of my dog-eared dictionary, I am slowly reading Gina's poetry. The one about the 31 martyrs is a favorite, but there are also sexy, smoldering love poems. Pamela has been stockpiling South Florida culinary goodies to send the ladies. Luca and I have become e-mail pen pals. I correct his English, he corrects my Italian and tells me what the family is up to. Edda was recently in Australia. Somehow I feel certain she made

herself understood.

Meanwhile, the postcard I mailed home to Pamela from Floreana hasn't turned up yet. I find myself getting oddly excited at the idea of meeting whichever stranger, speaking whatever language, eventually shows up with it. I may have been the one who went to the Galapagos. But it was Gina and her family who taught me about real adventure travel.

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Lindsay van Gelder is chief writer at Allure and co-author of "The Girls Next Door."

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