

2009 PALERMO BRIDGE WEEK

Tuesday, September 29, 2009. I walked into the Elite lounge and dominating the view was a huge Northwest Airlines 747¹ with its nose almost in the room. I had never been nose to nose with one before and spent some time watching the very mechanized and efficient way they had to handle the freight. It was all containerized and bubble wrapped. My seatmate on the flight to Rome was an Italian businessman. During dinner I watched a very funny Dana Carvey monologue² and then put on my shades and went to sleep.

Wednesday, September 30. We came into Rome on time and I was taken to a wheelchair waiting room and left. My Italian isn't so hot so I was happy when they returned about an hour later and took me on a grand tour of Rome's Leonardo di Vinci Airport³ to my flight to Palermo I could never have walked it on my own.

Airline Bridge week is held every fall in a different resort. An affiliation of airlines participates for a week of fun and fellowship. Representatives came this year from Aer Lingus, Alitalia, Austrian Airlines, British Airways, Delta Airlines, Icelandair, Lufthansa, SAS and El Al. The last Bridge Week I attended was also in Italy on the Gargano peninsula⁴. Elizabeth Cerulli is my entree into this gathering for her son is a pilot for Delta. She was afraid she couldn't get on my flight last night so she came to Rome Monday night and we will meet today in Palermo.

The flight to Palermo was only about an hour but I worried because my seatmate coughed and blew her nose the whole way. I don't want to get the "swine flu"⁵ that is sweeping the world! Elizabeth had told me her Easy Jet flight arrived in Palermo within minutes of mine, so after I cleared customs I sat down to wait for her. And I waited...and waited.

After an hour I concluded that she must have arrived before me and been whisked away with the group to the Citta del Mare⁶. I got a cab for €35 (about \$53 at today's rate of exchange).

The Citta del Mare is a large complex built on the side of a hill There are steps everywhere and no elevator. Our ground floor room is fairly basic but has a patio overlooking the pool. I lay down on the bed for a nap and after a time Elizabeth appeared. Her flight had been late leaving Rome. We went to the terrace off the lobby at 6:30 for the welcome cocktail party. I renewed my acquaintance with some of the players I had last seen over a year before when British Air came to Atlanta for a small tournament. The punch was not to my liking and I went to her bar and asked for a glass of wine. Everything is on a cash basis in the hotel. The wine was €2.20 a glass.

We went to dinner at 7:30 and found everyone in the hotel had cued up there before us. We finally got to the door where they swiped our card. The dining room is huge with various areas for hot dishes, salads and the like. The bridge group is shunted off to an area near the back. We shared our dinner with Ann Monk. The best part about dinner is the unlimited free wine.

Then we played our first session of bridge. There were three sections and 38 tables in play. It is a large group dominated by the Italian team of 75 players. Delta has 16 on their team. We only played 20 boards of the 34 boards in play so it was not really a fair game. However we did come in 12th overall out of 64 pairs, despite the jet lag. We didn't get to bed until almost 1:00 am and I slept like a log.

Thursday, October 1. I woke up when the maid burst in to our room about 9:30 quite startling us. Elizabeth was in the bathroom. Then we discovered there is no dead bolt on the door so anyone with a key can get in! There is also no safe box in the room so I have locked our valuables in my roll-on and hope for the best.

We had missed breakfast so wandered over to the arcade where we found a shop that carried a little bit of everything. I found a sort of sponge cake treat for breakfast and was able to get batteries so we can make both our alarm and Elisabeth's flashlight work simultaneously instead of sharing a battery!

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boeing_747

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dana_Carvey

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonardo_da_Vinci-Fiumicino_Airport

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monte_Gargano

⁵ <https://www.google.com/health/ref/H1N1+%28swine%29+influenza>

⁶ <http://www.sicilian.net/cittadelmare/>

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Today there was a two-session event. The first session was again 20 boards long and we were in a section that had to sit out two boards because of a half table so we only played 18. We thought we had had a terrible game but to our surprise ended up with a 57% game and sixth. In the middle of the game a very bad storm moved in. The rain came down in sheets and ruffled the palm trees so they danced in the wind. The lights failed momentarily several times. Our excursion for tomorrow has been postponed to Saturday because of this bad weather.

Before dinner we had happy hour in the lobby. Peggy Hayes had filled her water bottle with wine at lunch and invited me to share. I went back to our room to retrieve some rain gear and found the hallway outside our door was flooded, but fortunately not our room. Ed and Joan Pengilly did find their room had been flooded. Then we went to dinner and some others got the idea of filling their bottles with wine but the restaurant caught on to them and confiscated the bottles!

We put together another 57% that night and ended up 5th overall out of 76. Not enough to get a trophy but we were pleased. This is a fairly tough field.

Friday, October 2. It started raining again during the night but we set our alarm so we wouldn't miss breakfast. It turned out to be a Continental breakfast with ham and cheese in addition to delicious croissants. The food hasn't been as good as we had hoped for but it is far better than the fare we had five years ago at Peschichi⁷.

I wanted to buy an Internet card, even though I consider €9 per hour, a rip-off, but could not do so without my passport. Went back to the hotel and caught up the journal and will try later.

The rest of the day turned into a two-session Swiss team game. It didn't begin auspiciously for we couldn't find our table and when we did an Italian couple that did not speak much English confronted us. We blew several hands; even taking an 1100 set, but fortunately our teammates Joan Braender and Mike Whittaker pulled us through with only a small loss. For our second session the computer pitted us against another Delta team. This didn't seem fair and we creamed them making me feel doubly bad. The third round we lost by a small margin. Then it was time for dinner. In the evening session we had one small loss, one big win and another small loss. By the time it ended I was very tired and wanted to go to bed so I didn't even wait to find out how we finished. Five sessions in two and a half days is more than I can do anymore. It turned out we were 12th out of 39 teams.

Saturday, October 3, 2009. Finally it stopped raining! Today we had an all day excursion to see some Greek ruins. The tour had been postponed from Friday because of the weather. Sicily is supposed to have the best Greek ruins after Greece itself. They loaded us onto two buses. The first for the Italians the rest for the English speaking people. We drove about an hour to Selinute⁸ and were given a guide named Salvatore who showed us the ruins. This ancient town was placed between two rivers in order to have a good water supply. On a high hill was the reconstructed Temple E. No one knows to whom this temple was dedicated to because no inscriptions or statues have survived. It was a beautiful example of Doric architecture. Nearby were two other temples that had not been reconstructed. One was undoubtedly dedicated to Zeus for the columns and capitals scattered around proved the temple was enormous. Salvatore was an excellent guide with a notebook full of pictures to show how it must have looked and also how the huge stones were raised using pulleys. Although the site dates from the 4th century BC it only thrived for until 250 BC when the Carthaginians came, conquered and destroyed the site. Earthquakes also did their part to bring down the columns.

Then we went to the acropolis. I listened to the introductory lecture and saw the ledge with the measures for the market. However as they started out into the ruins I decided the heat was getting to me and so I rested in the shade. I struck up a conversation with an Italian woman who lives in Nottingham England. She has children living in the United States. She told me how her family had immigrated to the US. For some reason they decided to return to Naples and her mother was born on the boat. She herself married an Englishman. She invited me to visit her any time. She also introduced me to her brother and sister. I walked back to the bus and soon the rest of the group appeared.

⁷ <http://www.initalytoday.com/apulia/peschici/index.htm>

⁸ http://www.gstraveladvice.com/gallery2/main.php?g2_itemId=12150

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We headed to Sciacca⁹ whose thermal springs were known to the Greeks. There was supposed to be a lovely park in which to have our picnic lunch. As we drove into town the heavens opened making the park impossible. We decided to eat our picnic lunch in the bus. It was a pretty miserable lunch. A dry cheese and Prosciutto¹⁰ sandwich plus a somewhat squishy apple and a tart that was mostly crust. I didn't try the peach juice drink. After lunch the rain had stopped and we decided to walk up into town. Everyone siestas in this part of the world so there wasn't much to see but the park in the center of town was lavishly planted with bright colored zinnias and there was a cool breeze blowing in the shade. It was so cool that Elizabeth got cold so we walked to where the rest of the group was enjoying the patio of a bar. There was another park on the other side of the road and we went and saw a huge banyan like tree and a pond with swans preening themselves. One even hissed at us!

We went back to the bus and drove to Agrigento¹¹ that overlooks the Valley of the Temples. I was here with Mary in 2002 and was pleased to see it again. It is the major archeology site in Sicily. A guide named Nicollet showed us the three temples on the sacred way. As in Selinute no one knows to whom the temples were dedicated to but the highest one is presumed to have been dedicated to Zeus. It was built to commemorate the Battle of Himera¹² in 480 BC where the Syracusians defeated the Carthaginians. It is believed to be the largest Doric temple ever built. We then walked down the sacred way past some old Byzantine tombs to see the other two temples. The second Concordia temple is the best-preserved Doric structure in Sicily because it was salvaged during the Byzantine occupation to be used as a church. The Christians later used it as a catacomb and you can see the remains of tombs hewed out of the rocky cliffs. We passed Alexander Hardcastle's¹³ villa. He was an Englishman who lived here from 1927-1933. He took a great interest in the site and was the one who reconstructed the third and oldest temple on the site. It is called the Hercules temple although there is no proof it had anything to do with Hercules. Only a few columns survive for the rest were quarried to build the adjacent town. Back on the bus we settled down for a two-hour drive aback to Palermo. It had been a long day and I was exhausted.

Elizabeth and I caught our breath for a few moments before going down to dinner. For once there was no line! We found the rest of the Delta group in a far corner. This is when we presented Suzanne Avoth with our gift necklace to thank her for all the organizing she has done. Also Peggy Hayes and Carole Miller have been busy writing a song for the sing sing. After watching the rehearsal I concluded I was too tired to attend the event. I went back to our room and had a wonderful shower, washed my hair, did a little laundry and went to bed.

Sunday, October 4. At last a day of rest! Elizabeth & I spent the day napping and reading. We did walk down to the end of the complex and found soccer fields and health clubs, even an old olive grove. However when we got to the Pizza place found it did not open until 7:30. After lunch again I slept and read. For cocktails we joined Barbara Crenshaw, Betty Walker, and some of the rest of the Delta group for cocktails on the terrace of the hotel with beautiful Palermo bay and mountains in the background. This night was the mixed sex pairs. Lily, who organized many of the partnerships, paired me with her husband Tor Johannessen from Norway, although they now live most of the time in Hawaii. He was a very pleasant partner and taught me the Mexican 2 diamond bid. With 18-19 and a balanced hand open 2 Diamonds. Responder then can bid hearts to transfer to drop dead in Spades. Two spades transfers to no trump and then all systems are on. So often a new convention doesn't come up but lo and behold this did and we reached a 3 no trump contract, making four for a very good result. The rest of our game was sort of up and down but we ended up 12th EW while Elizabeth and Ole Fredricksen were 12th NS. The way they figure the overall here is that 1st NS and 1st EW are 1 and 2. 2nd NS & 2nd EW are 3 & 4. I think this is much more equitable than the way we do it at home. It meant we were 23 & 24 out of 74 pairs. I am to play with Ole in the mixed Nation pairs tomorrow. We didn't get to bed until almost one am.

⁹ <http://www.bestofsicily.com/sciacca.htm>

¹⁰ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosciutto>

¹¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agrigento>

¹² http://www.livius.org/hi-hn/himera/battle_himera.html

¹³ http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Hardcastle

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Monday, October 5. We woke to the telephone ringing at 8. It was Barbara Crenshaw and Betty Walker telling us they were catching the bus to Terrasini at 9:00am. We threw ourselves together and hastily ate breakfast. Pam and Curt Barbee, Dianne and Paul Poirier and Bob and Kim Roethler also went into town.

Terrasini¹⁴ is the small town near Citta del Mare. We walked downhill to find the Palazzo d'Aumale¹⁵ near the water. Prince and Duke of Partanna of Florida, Don Vincenzo Grifeo built it in the nineteenth century. The Duke of Amale, son of Louis Philippe, King of France and Maria Amalie of Bourbon, later acquired it. He used it as a wine warehouse. In April 2001 the building opened as a Regional Museum. Its objective is to promote the culture of the area, particularly through teaching.

The first section was devoted to the history of the area and there were old amphorae on display as well as ship models to show the development of transportation. Upstairs was the Natural History section that even included a small nature walk, where in a dark room they used lights to point out the various stuffed animals. The last part was devoted to how they constructed and painted the colorful Sicilian carriages. Many old carriages are on display in the arcade of the main courtyard.

We then started back up town. It had become quite hot and by the time we reached the piazza outside the main church I was becoming tired. Elizabeth wanted to do some shopping but I headed back for the 11:30 bus. She managed to make it as well and we came back to the comfort of our porch where I finished the book I had been reading.

This night we played mixed nation pairs. My partner Ole Frederikson from Denmark and I managed to place 10th overall. He taught me a new way to interfere with opponents no trump, somewhat akin to Helms2 although he called it something else. Double means a minor or both majors. Hearts is hearts and spades is spades. Of course it came up and of course I got it wrong! Even so we came in 12th EW and 24th overall. I seem stuck in this range.

Tuesday, October 6. The last day. There was an excursion but Elizabeth and I decided to relax instead. The hotel had the best lunch of the trip. Quail and a pesto pasta. I also snuck into the regular part of the dining room and managed to snag some shrimp salad. It is irritating that we have a shortened menu in the bridge section.

This afternoon we played mixed nation Swiss teams. Alan Coulstock from British Air was our Captain. My partner was another Dane, Lau Nielsen. He is Ole's regular partner but plays a simpler system. He is very good however and in the first two rounds we won big. Then we hit a team with Torben Rolsted and Gustavo Belforte. Gus is the Italian man in charge. Torben is a handsome flirt from Denmark and he announced he was VERY good. Alas so he was and they almost sank our team. Fortunately we came back in the last game to finish 10th overall.

We adjourned to freshen up a bit and then came back for the awards. The first people in line grabbed bottles of champagne to take to their teammates. We decided to find seats first. As a result some people did not get any champagne because they ran out.

Delta didn't do so great in the awards department except for Curt Barbee in the Mixed Nation pairs and Joan Braender who was first on the Mixed Nation teams. The Barbees had already left so Mike collected their picture frame for them. Then instead of a banquet it was back to the regular dining room for the same cafeteria meal. They did have a band walk though and they did have a cake for us but it was nothing special.

Wednesday, October 8. We got up at 5:15am and finished packing. I dragged the bags up the 25 steps to the lobby. Here we met Louise and Ann. They had a taxi and we decided to go with them instead of waiting for the van. We were afraid the van wasn't going to be big enough for eight of us along with our luggage.

I checked in with Alitalia taking Elizabeth's bag as well as my own so she wouldn't have to cope with it. I also put myself into the wheelchair contingent. This was a big mistake. When we got to

¹⁴ <http://www.lifeinitaly.com/tourism/sicily/terrasini.asp>

¹⁵ <http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=it&u=http://www.regione.sicilia.it/beniculturali/museodaumale/homepage.htm&ei=zvLRSrODBYeGIAfNvZGpCg&sa=X&oi=translate&resnum=1&ct=result&ved=0CAsQ7gEwAA&prev=/search%3Fq%3Dpalazzo%2Bd%2527aumale%26hl%3Den>

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Rome they offloaded the regular passengers while we waited for the two wheelchair vans. When it came most of us wheelchairs walked down the steps and boarded the vans. Unfortunately there were two cripples who had to be carried off the plane. This took a half hour! Why they couldn't have taken those of us making connections in one bus and let the other wait for them I do not know. The upshot of it is that I missed my connection.

I also somehow became disengaged from a wheelchair. A man brought my roll-on and we went to the transfer desk. They told me I had missed my flight. My escort then led me to the British Air counter but they had no interest in my problem. We next went up an escalator to Alitalia's counter where a lot of Italian was exchanged as the clerk pounded away on his computer. He finally said there was room on the 12:30 flight but I would have to see Delta. What a surprise! Finally after another long walk and even a train we got to Delta! They were already boarding the flight but they put me on. They said they would notify the limousine of my later arrival

My seatmate was a UN employee who also lives in Atlanta. In New York. I had a three-hour long layover in the JFK Sky Lounge and finally got to Atlanta about ten pm. However my troubles still weren't over. When my wheelchair got to the limousine parking lot there was no one there. The nice woman who pushed the chair went back into the terminal and found a limousine person who called Carey Limousine. Twenty minutes later it arrived. I walked into my house at 11:30pm. It had been a long and stressful day.

And then I found that my dear cat Gandalf had died on Tuesday.