

What is the farthest you have ever traveled?



In the nineties, I was working in a pharmaceutical manufacturing plant in Sanford, North Carolina. When I started at Praxis Biologics we were a startup with a great product but not enough money to bring it to the market. We were purchased by Lederle Pharmaceuticals which was in turn owned by American Cyanamid, a Fortune 500 company that made everything from Old Spice to Light Sticks. They wanted to expand our manufacturing capacity, and they already had a plant in Catania, Sicily that wasn't being used to its capacity. There were political pressures that I didn't completely understand. The local Contessa was a part owner in the plant and was unhappy with the poor return on her investment. If we could make the plant in Catania work for our vaccine, it would be a win-win. I had been a manufacturing manager familiar with our production requirements, and I had just created a new department, Manufacturing Services, so I was responsible for supporting

Jesse Hulse

manufacturing. That made me the logical choice for a trip to Sicily along with the director of engineering.

We flew from Raleigh to Catania via New York and Rome. It was a long flight, but the company paid for first class. Dinner was the best I've ever had on a plane: caviar, filet mignon, and creme brulee. We were flying East so time was compressed; the hours went by at a surprising rate, and meals came on clock time. From Rome, we had a short trip to Catania and were met by Oliviaro, a director in the plant who was our guide and host while we were there. He took us to our hotel across the street from the Mediterranean so we could rest awhile, then picked us up for sightseeing and dinner.

He showed us points of interest on the drive to the ski lodge on the top of Mount Etna, where we would have dinner. The only thing that stuck in my memory was being able to look down one side of the mountain at the ski slopes and the other side at the orange glow of lava.

On the way drove all over the road with no attention paid to the lines, which seemed odd to me. Tom, the engineer, asked him about the speed limit. Oliviero told him, but added, "But it doesn't matter. We are in Italy and laws—the rules of the road—are suggestions. A stop sign, a suggestion. A red light—an opinion." We laughed at what we thought was a joke.

Jesse Hulse

After a pleasant breakfast, even with some small language difficulties, Oliviero picked us up to take us to the plant. When he dove into traffic we immediately realized the joke the night before wasn't even exaggerated—that's how they drove. Sometime later we were in a long line of cars waiting to make a left turn with no traffic light. A car drove up the shoulder as though making a right turn, but instead, this intrepid driver accelerated, and cut everyone off with a left turn. We Americans were amazed, "If that had happened in the US somebody would have shot him." Oliviero explained: "You have to understand. We are Italian, and driving is a game. We want to get there first because that is how you win the game, but we don't care if we are early or late." Suddenly, an oncoming car turned left in front of us and we had to stop; that allowed three other cars to turn in front of us. Oliviero said: "Did you see? When that driver made eye contact with me he knew if he cut me off I would stop. I can't be angry—he simply played the game better than I did."

Most evenings Oliviero and his wife took us to dinner, sometimes with other people from the company. He always had a banquet planned with various courses, the only thing we had to decide was whether we preferred fish or beef, fish or flesh as he put it. Not being fond of fish I always chose flesh—until the last night, when he said: "No, you will have fish. Jesse, we are on the Mediterranean Sea; our beef is not very good, but our fish is

exceptional.” We had sea bass in a wonderful sauce—he was right.

Along with the incredible food, there were several bottles of wine, and at the end of the meal, a bottle of grappa. When asked what grappa was, our gracious host explained that it was distilled from the waste of winemaking, grape seeds, and skins. He went on to say, “We are Italian, we can make alcohol from lava rock.”

Given the amount of alcohol consumed in the evening, the way they drove at highway speeds ten inches from the next car, and their indifference to traffic laws, I was amazed that we saw evidence of only one auto accident. On the way to work one morning, the freeway lane divided, and guardrails came together making a point anchored by sloping concrete. Apparently, a driver the night before couldn’t decide which lane to take because the relatively undamaged vehicle was suspended on both guardrails with all four wheels hanging in the air.

By the time we left Catania, I was ready to sign up to come back with my family to help start up the manufacturing plant. Over the next month or two I had phone calls with Oliviero, and he came to North Carolina for a meeting. It was a little embarrassing when my boss insisted we take him for lunch at Sanford’s only Italian restaurant. Little Italy was alright for

Jesse Hulse

central North Carolina, but it didn't compare to the places to which he had treated me.

There seemed a chance our family could spend a couple of years in Sicily, but suddenly American Cyanamid was purchased in a hostile takeover by American Home Products, a much larger corporation. The first mention of the takeover was on a Friday and it was over and done on Monday. The new owners thought it would be too costly to have a plant in Sicily, and they didn't care whether the Contessa liked it or not.