

THE MARTIN FAMILY

SLIDING THROUGH THE SCREE IN ITALY

SWITZERLAND

September 25, 2011

Dear Reader,

I hope that you are happy and well. Here, I'm pleased to report that Nazy and I are safe and sound after an unconventional trip the Dolomites.

The Dolomites are a mountain range in the German-speaking part of Northern Italy. Americans tend to assume that the European countries have been around, unchanged, for centuries. In fact, until the end of World War I, the Dolomites were in the South Tyrol province of Austria. When the Austrian team lost the war, the border changed. In spite of the change, the locals continue to speak German. The buildings also have a German (almost) Swiss look to them.

Our weekend excursion was organized by the AWCZ (American Women's Club of Zurich.) The event touted the gourmet food at the La Tandra hotel in Corvara, Italy. (Mussolini changed Germanic names to *Italian*.) A series of guided hikes (category: easy to intermediate) was also featured. Our excursion began inauspiciously. Claudia, the navigation computer, was petulant and, it turned out, prescient.

"She doesn't want to go to Italy," Nazy observed.

"Are you sure that you've spelled the city correctly, my dear?" I courteously replied.

I detected a low growl before Nazy responded. "There are five cities in Italy with the same name."

Luckily, I had consulted with Google™ Maps before departing, so I headed for the A1: direction Austria. Nazy struggled to communicate with the recalcitrant Claudia.

"Please make a legal U-Turn," Claudia chanted as soon as Nazy finished programming.

"Too late, Claudia," I mumbled as I headed toward St. Gallen.

We eventually reached the normal traffic jam in Bergenz, Austria. "*I can't believe that the traffic hasn't cleared since our Easter trip to Bratislava,*" I thought.

Remembering an anniversary trip of a few years ago (when we received a €150 fine), we stopped at a petrol station to buy a vignette, i.e. a sticker that allowed us to drive on the Austrian motorways without being fined. It's not very expensive (10 days of access costs €7). The main purpose is to trick non-Austrians.

As we entered the A12, we were reminded that road construction is the Austrian national pastime. The work is funded by..

"Toll booths, Nazy." I proclaimed as I spotted another one.

"I thought that the vignette paid for the roads." Nazy replied.

"The vignette pays the salary of the people who collect the tolls."

We entered a long tunnel and just as we exited from gloomy darkness into bright sun, I spotted a blue **Fiat backing up** on the motorway. Luckily, I was able to slam on the brakes and shift to the passing lane.

"Maybe they should use the tolls to train the population to drive," I noted.

Tolls and motorways vanished when we entered Italy. The 'road', through mountain passes, narrowed and became steep and winding. Nazy pointed to the craggy peaks.

"That's beautiful," I replied taking my eye off the road for $\frac{1}{3}$ of a nanosecond.

"Expletive!" Nazy shouted. "Watch what.."

"You told me to look," I replied as I deftly repositioned the car onto the paved portion of the road, eh, trail.

"Now I'm telling you to look at the road."

"Of course, dear. Do you see that 2500 meter drop-off on our right?"

"Dan.."

"I think that's on your side of the car."

"Attention! There are traffic restrictions on your route." Claudia interrupted.

"*My route?*" I thought. "You picked this route, Claudia" I replied.

The last 50 kilometers of road covered a distance of about 4 kilometers (measured as the bird flies). We arrived in time for a stroll through the town of Corvara where I was able to secure a suitable supply of **Coke Zero**.

The next day featured an 'easy to intermediate' hike. Although it was cloudy, we were undaunted as we boarded a cable car to the 2200 meter level. We followed our guide to the 'beautiful view of a mountain lake.' The trail narrowed and the climb steepened as we progressed.

"Isn't this where we were driving yesterday?" I asked Nazy when she pointed toward a very craggy mountain peak.

"Keep your eyes on the trail," Nazy replied.

"*Good idea!*" I thought. "*I don't want to look toward the drop-off!*" "What trail?" I replied. "This looks like a strand of spaghetti made of limestone pebbles."

"Just grab this cable," Nazy replied.



I used the thoughtfully supplied cable (affixed the mountain) to pull our way up.

“Easy to intermediate?” I thought.

We reached the lake view area and Nazy was enthusiastic about the clear mountain air.

“It’s clear because it’s thin,” I replied. The elevation was over 2500 meters.



The guide, who had been scouting ahead, finally returned.

“I brought us up the wrong trail,” he explained. (*“Really?”* I thought - panting.) “We can’t continue up from here, that’s an expert trail. We need to get to the lake. After that the hike will become short and flat.” (*“Really?”*)

Unfortunately, the direct route to the lake was not a trail. We went anyway. We began by skirting a ridge that disappeared about ¼ of the way down. Nazy continued into a bowl-shaped slope covered with glacially strewn debris, scree and boulders of various sizes. Utilizing skills developed when she climbed the Alborz mountains while growing up in Iran, Nazy made her way downhill. I followed somewhat less

adroitly, but fully aware of Nazy’s helpful commentary.

“Why are you sitting and sliding down the mountain on your....”

“It is important to have multiple contacts with the ground, Nazy. A low center of gravity improves stability.” [*“I’ll topple through the rocks and into the lake if I stand up,”* I thought.]

“Watch out!” Someone shouted from behind us. I heard a boulder rolling downhill and then saw it accelerate as it turned in Nazy’s direction. I shouted. Nazy looked up. Too late! The boulder hit her thigh and knocked her completely off her feet. I slid through the scree to her side. She was bruised but otherwise undamaged. We accelerated our pace and made it to the lake before any other clueless tourist could attack us.

To be continued: Will we make it back to the hotel? Which weather forecast will be accurate? (Snow? Rain?) Did we learn anything about insurance coverage? Does dynamic traction control on a BMW get you out of every tricky situation. Find out in the next edition of The Weekly Letter.

Take care and Cheers,

Dan

