

Chapter I - Getting There

Our flight schedule is a bit odd because we used frequent flyer mile time to get the airline tickets and credits are accepted only for certain flights. We leave at dawn from Eugene to Los Angeles with a stop in Medford, then wait 9 hours at LAX for a 10-hour red-eye flight “over the pole” to Heathrow in London. The wait at LAX is sort of cool because we buy 1-day passes to the “Admirals Club” – a quiet atmosphere, Vibrachairs, LAN ports, a big-screen TV room, free snacks and a decent bar! Eventually we take off for London, where things go awry. The plane arrives late and we’re the last ones off, as usual. We have to go through customs and we need to take a shuttle to a different terminal. Heathrow is huge! We miss our connection to Milan and get rescheduled on a flight that arrives at the Malpensa airport at 10:30 pm instead of 6:45 pm.

The later flight gets to Malpensa even later than scheduled, at about 10:45 local time. We gather up our luggage and are escorted to the rental car office just after their normal closing time of 11 pm. The rental car staff has stayed late so we could get our car, a small manual-transmission Ford station wagon called a “C-Max”, which is a big car in Europe but not so “max” for us. Fitting the luggage and Paul’s wheelchairs inside was like doing a jigsaw puzzle. We have the normal two suitcases each but we also have to pack Paul’s wheelchair and his shower chair, the [e-motion power assist wheels](#) with their batteries and the battery charger, the manual wheels, and a number of spares in case of failures or flats. Each piece needs to be in exactly the right spot or it won’t all fit. Two women from Hertz help us load it up and refuse a tip, even though it keeps them at work until after midnight. Nice folks.



The [C-Max jigsaw puzzle](#)

We take the autostrada to town, 60 kilometers, about a 45 minute drive. As soon as we get off the autostrada we become completely lost. Italian street naming conventions are different than ours. The street names are on the sides of buildings and are hard to see in the dark. The map is nearly impossible to read in the weak illumination from the roof light. It doesn’t show the streets that are one way. We are tired and cranky and have only a vague idea where we are. We know we are not near where we need to be but don’t know how to get there.

After a couple of hours of driving around with no luck, Dee is at a bus stop, standing on the bench trying to find the “you are here” sign on the route map -- without actually knowing the Italian for “you are here” -- when a taxi approaches. Paul yells "TAXI!" He stops and Dee pantomimes “we’ll pay you to lead us to our hotel.” He agrees and Dee gives him the address. He rolls his eyes and shakes his head then nods that he knows the

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hotel. He leads us several kilometers across town to our hotel, finally arriving about 3 am. The hotel is literally across the street from the central train station. We check in and dawn breaks as we unpack.



The [train station](#) at dawn. The view from our hotel window.

We're not off to a good start. With Paul in a wheelchair and Dee with a bad ankle and chronic neck spasms, we have tried very hard not to overload ourselves. There is so much to do and to see in Italy it is easy to try to cram too many activities into the time allowed and end up exhausted or sore, which makes for an unpleasant trip. Our plans include a healthy amount of "free" time that can be used to rest up, or to see something else if we're feeling up to it. We should have gotten into Milan when it was still daylight and gotten to the hotel by 8 or 9 pm so we could have a nice dinner and get a good night's sleep. Things have got to improve.