

Editor's Note

The following excerpt is the second example of contemporary Slovene travel writing in as many volumes of the journal. Alojzija Zupan-Sosič furnished a brief but comprehensive introduction to the genre in *Slovene Studies* 22.1–2 (p. 43–47), entitled “The Boots’ Journey.” Professor Zupan-Sosič’s overview prefaced Mate Dolenc’s story “The Role of My Boots in the Angolan Revolution,” translated by John Cox.

Gradišnik himself describes *Strictly Confidentially around Sicily* as

a book of travels and travails of a middle-aged family man ... that extracts from the well of experiences of different ages and should appeal to all generations alike. It is meant to be used by

1. parents spending holidays with their children and needing to get them interested;
2. children spending their holidays with parents and needing a book to divert their parents’ unwanted attention;
3. adults without children and therefore having time to read on their holidays;
4. people that don’t have the opportunity to spend money on Sicily but are willing to spend money for a book about it;
5. Sicilians longing to get in touch with their inner middle-aged man;
6. people that love travel-books.

It is a second book of a series. The first one, *Strictly Confidentially in Ireland*, has been a major success in Slovenia (4 reprints; .0026 copies per capita sold).

Gradišnik’s self-ironic and urbane book about Sicily has much to do with literature as well as tourism as most of us experience it. Yet some readers will wonder whether it is, strictly speaking, travel literature, or rather mock travelogue, or something else altogether. So *Mladina* (12 July 2004 issue) reviewer Bernard Nežmah makes mention of A.C. Robin Skynner and John Cleese’s *Families and How to Survive Them*. Gradišnik himself refers to the question in comparing his accounts of Ireland and Sicily, concluding that this is a “family travelogue, with all the corresponding good and bad traits” (94–95).

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIALLY AROUND SICILY

Branko Gradišnik

Translated by Maja Visenjak Limon

Prologue

Health before Duty—New circumstances call for new whatnot—Literature for Readers

Those readers who know me from the book of my travels around Ireland would probably like to know how such a nervous wreck could recover sufficiently to be able to set off on another adventure. The story is an educational one. You may remember that in Ireland, my heart monitor conked out, but as I thought it was my heart that had conked out, I became the proud host to what a famous Slovene cardiologist approvingly described as “the most precisely recorded false cardiac arrest in the history of Slovene medical science.” My heart refused to calm down for months after this dramatic event and even if I, as a rational being, soon realized that there was nothing wrong with it, my heart unfortunately was not aware of this and kept doing summersaults. I must admit I contributed to this myself by being convinced for several years that the fairly common spasms of the esophageal hiatus (described by the aforementioned cardiologist to his female patients with the words “It’s as if a manly hand grabbed you somewhere near your heart, isn’t it, dear?”) were actually the final gasps of my heart muscle.

After that, I had no problems until last year. When the FIFA World Cup was on (more precisely, during Slovenia’s first match, against Spain) I measured my blood pressure, just for fun. It was 190 over 130! During the next match (against Paraguay) I intended to repeat the experiment, but gave up half-way, as I could tell from the beeps emanating from the machine that I was suffering from serious extra-systole (erratic heart beats). I took no notice of this, as it was obviously caused by the tension your average football fan experiences during an important match, and abandoned the measuring of my heart rate and blood pressure—so as not to add unnecessarily to my aggravation.

A few days later, whilst nicely reclining in my armchair, I felt what I refer to as a “flutter” in my chest. After a few moments I realized that it was extrasystole and checked my pulse. I was right. Approximately

every 30 beats, there was one missing. I did not get too stressed over this, or at least I did not think I did, but when I went to see my doctor about some other matter, I mentioned it to her. She scolded me and said I needed at least an E.C.G. Off I went, had one taken the same day, received the results on paper, grabbed hold of a specialist in the corridor and showed it to him. He said: "That's nothing. There's no need to worry about such innocent extrasystole."

"Can I run marathons?"

"Well—not on a full stomach."

"Can I fly?" It was a week before our departure to the Lake District. (I have written no account of this holiday as it rained for two weeks)

"By plane? Why ever not?"

"A few years ago, when I had a similar episode, my psychiatrist prescribed this for me, and I still have a few tablets left..." I pulled a battered packet of Valium out of my pocket. After my "arrest" I had been carrying it with me, "just to be on the safe side." "Should I take half a tablet every morning so that if I get any strange sensations in my chest I can console myself that they are from the tablets and not from my heart?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, not tranquilizers! Don't start taking that poison! You're as fit as a fiddle. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen a fifty-year-old man with such a healthy cardiogram!"

So I thanked him, said goodbye and walked out into the sunshine with an easy mind, when suddenly I was struck by the real meaning of the doctor's words.

There was no hope for me. I was terminally ill and medical science had given up on me!

But of course!—why would any doctor spoil his or her statistics and budget with such a moribund patient? In Germany, they are drafting a new law on health care, according to which they will no longer treat the elderly, only alleviate their pain. Isn't this pain relief just another white lie used to lull patients so that they can spend their last hours in blessed ignorance? And when I finally kick the bucket, they will dismiss my demise with a dry diagnosis of sudden death—and *finita la commedia!*

I am also a man of reason, so I blamed these thoughts on my, how shall I put it, over-heated imagination, and did not mention them, not even within the walls of my own home, though my wife became slightly suspicious of my glumness during the following few days.

In such a mental and physical state I then managed by pure miracle to get through four plane flights, two customs searches and two visits to Blackpool.

During the first visit to the Blackpool Pleasure Beach I only guarded the rucksacks, whilst the twins and my wife enjoyed various rides on the “attractions.” However, during the second visit, so as not to arouse any suspicions, I let my family persuade me to loosen up a little. On seeing what good spirits they were in after what looked like torture to me, I allowed them in spite of serious doubts to take me on a ride called the *Millennium Bug*—it seemed the least dangerous to me, as I saw that no-one on it bothered to fasten their safety belts.

Let me describe this “attraction”: the victims, standing, lean their backs on the inner wall of the periphery of a large steel wheel measuring about 30 feet in diameter. They do not use their safety belts because there is no need to: the centrifugal force itself makes sure that they cannot fall, even if they wanted to. The wheel then starts to rotate, faster and faster, until the centrifugal force reaches a six-fold “g-force”—six times the gravitational pull of the Earth. Now that the victims are no longer able to breath because their lungs have been flattened, the wheel starts leaning at various angles: just to make sure that the victims realize that suffering, when really well thought out, has no upper limit.

The only thing my failing brain was still capable of producing was the following thought: “If I survive this, I’ll know to the end of my days that I’m a hypochondriac—no, not a hypochondriac—a hypochondriac!”

As you might have guessed, I survived.

After this, I really did get less stressed out. During the day, I managed to forget about my heart, but when trying to go to sleep, I would often be aware of the extrasystole and would have to fall asleep in a special position—with a pillow between my ear and my arm.

Then in the autumn, I got a hernia. A pretty unpleasant condition. I was up a mountain when it made its sudden appearance.

During the descent, I felt like one of those action film heroes who decide to stay behind their comrades in order to delay a deadly pursuer. Yet lo and behold, when I came away from the doctor's with a proper diagnosis, I slept peacefully for the first time in months, even though I had an operation to look forward to. Somehow, I could no longer feel any extrasystole, which prior to this had sometimes even woken me in the middle of the night.

In the morning, I said to myself that now, since due to this new illness my heart trouble seems more remote, I can start measuring my blood pressure and heart rate again. Yes, throughout this time I had abstained from this, even though such monitoring is actually very useful for a runner, but the mere thought of being aware of gaps between the monitor's bleeps had made me so nervous that it only caused additional stress. Anyway, I now attached the contraption and—my pulse and blood pressure were perfectly normal! Just to make sure, I checked my pulse manually: 48 (very good for me). Two hundred beats and not a single one missed. It was something I had suspected all along: a true hypochondriac cannot devote himself to two illnesses at once!

Anyway, I am telling you all this for two reasons: firstly, to explain why I am still alive and, secondly, so that those of you who do not know me realize just how honest I am. Thus these confessions provide proof of my character, which in turn serves as a confirmation of the truthfulness of everything that follows. This is very important because following my travel book on Ireland, some people said I had made things up. But I ask you, who wants to fabricate such things? Especially when you have one foot in the grave.

This book differs from my "knight-errant" Irish travelogue with regard to both form and content. In addition to the fact that this time we went to Sicily rather than Ireland, the main factor contributing to the difference in content was that, at the end of 1996, my wife suddenly went into hospital and returned a few days later with the twins that had been handed to her there. Their smallness made my surprise even bigger. For whatever reason we called them Ana and Klemen. For the next five years they exhibited a pronounced organoleptic and olfactory disapproval of travel, so that a holiday following an itinerary was not an option. And when it became an option it proved to be different—no longer a "knight-errant" holiday but a family one instead. Consequently, the focus of my attention changed. In *Strictly Confidentially in Ireland* I had to hold back

all the time so as not to mention my co-travelers, for fear of being sued and sent to the cleaners. In *Strictly Confidentially Around Sicily*, however, not only do I no longer need to restrain myself, on the contrary, it would seem strange not to mention who was with me and what they got up to. So, this is a family travelogue, with all the corresponding good and bad traits.

Another difference is that this book is stricter with its author in a structural sense. It does not allow me to jump around in time and space. Instead I have to describe places and events diary-fashion, in sequence. Of course, I did not write this on the actual journey. If I had tried to write down everything that I experienced and observed on the way, I would have nothing to write about because I would have had to spend all the time writing and would not have seen or experienced anything at all. Consequently, if I had had nothing to write about, I would have had plenty of time for sightseeing and wandering around and would not run out of things to write about, etc. I tried to resolve this paradox by jotting down momentary impressions on the back of the itinerary folder, sometimes a mere word or two, and on my return home I reconstructed and supplemented my jottings—as far as I was able to decipher them.

I did not allow myself to be a general after the battle. Instead, I jotted down my revelations in the same order that they occurred to me during all the bitter trials and tribulations—and I can tell you, they often came at quite a price. If something occurred to me on, let us say 14th June or even later, I do not insult the reader by putting it in the chapter devoted to 7th June, even though the hind-sight may actually refer to that day—I really do not know why the reader should know more about my journey at a particular moment than I knew myself at the time.

Although in this sense objective, the book, by and large, consists of my own personal views and opinions. I know that these days we are sick to death of the opinions of others—facts, give us facts! —that we are constantly being fed by the media. However, in the case of a book like this, it seems to me they can do no harm.

The theory of reader response claims that humans as a species enjoy reading mainly about two things:

- mostly, they are interested in reading about extraordinary things happening to ordinary people (thus members of that large

majority of “ordinary people” can, at least in spirit, participate in the adventures of one of their kind)

- if need be, they are satisfied with descriptions of quite ordinary events provided they are presented in an extraordinary fashion.

As the Mafia neither kidnapped nor murdered me, I had to decide to write more or less with the second group in mind and offer them an out of the ordinary account of a not-unordinary holiday—as far as holidays can be ordinary at all.

And herein lies the answer to the question of why the book has been written in a humorous way. I do not know of any writer who would find it appropriate if their psychological portrait—that is, what is consciously or unconsciously revealed to the reader irrespective of the writer’s intentions and choice of theme—were to display personality traits befitting the inmate of a psychiatric institution or a protagonist in a soap opera, in other words, characteristics ranging from homicidal paranoia to susceptibility to hysterical male pregnancy. In short, I did not want to be considered insane.

Thus the only angle left to me as a narrator was humor. Perhaps another factor that made a slight contribution in this regard is that I was in the company of my wife who, thirteen years ago, turned me into a *joie-de-vivre* lover and a moderate feminist (hail the difference!). If one is feeling good about life then it is easier to look at the little inconveniences that we all encounter along the way through the somewhat rose-tinted glasses of humor.

The origins of my specific sense of humor date back to my childhood when, thank god, there was as yet no dividing line between literature suitable for grown-ups and children and I was thus able to read anything I could lay my hands on in my father’s library. I quickly came across *Three Men in a Boat* and *Three Men on the Bummel* by Jerome K. Jerome, which I used to re-read every year. A comparison might show that *Strictly Confidentially Around Sicily* (and even *Strictly Confidentially in Ireland*) is a brilliant but cleverly disguised imitation of Jerome’s writing—without any of his jokes. Thus I can only recommend that readers who would like to read yet something else by yours truly read something by Jerome.

Against the background of the general historical and topographical facts that I draw upon, I only describe what we saw, heard or

experienced ourselves. You will find nothing in the book that does not comply with this rule. A few days ago, an acquaintance told me about a nice custom in Palermo, according to which, when you order a coffee, the waiter asks you how many more coffees you intend to pay for. It seems that it goes without saying that those who can afford it pay in advance for coffees that will be drunk by those less fortunate than themselves. The financially disadvantaged can see whether a free coffee is available as soon as they enter an establishment, as the number is chalked up on a special board. I find this custom endearing, and it is another indication of a culture which is used to both giving and receiving (a special openness is needed for both). However, it would not be right for me to make up personal anecdotes connected with this custom, as I myself failed to observe it, even though as a writer I may regret missing the opportunity.

I do not regret missing a free coffee as I do not drink the stuff.

There is no conscious lie in the book—no untruths written with the intention of misleading the reader. Now and then I have, however, added some color to an image which had faded in my memory. I also lifted two anecdotes from the not-to-be *Strictly Confidentially in the Lake District*, which was pushed aside by a commission to translate Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* until it aged and faded too much in my memory.

The individuals appearing in this book are all real and alive, with one exception who has since died. Two of these individuals are disrupting my writing at this very late hour of the night, whispering in their beds even though they will have to get up early in the morning. It does not matter, though, as they will get up before me anyway and jump around my head, shouting at me to open my eyes at last, so that they can show me another refinement in the technique of pillow fighting.

The irremediable and unpredictable reality of the protagonists may, hopefully, endear this book to a sympathetic readership, and add a considerable live weight to its topographic revelations and their authenticity.

Ljubljana, September 2003

Preparations: February–March 2003

On Pointlessness of Holidays—My Revolutionary Packing Method – Three Laws on the Squashing of —Let It Be Sicily! —Even Shakespeare Was a Sicilian! —The Short Happy Life of Li'l Sammy Clemens—White Lies, Dark Secrets

I do not care for holidays. As a freelancer, I have to work like crazy in the weeks running up to any holiday in order to make up for the lost time in advance. So, when I finally get to our destination, I end up having to recuperate from the extra work I would not have had to do if I was not going on holiday in the first place.

Holidays would actually be quite tolerable if only we really spent the time resting at home. But for some obscure reason we feel that this precious time has to be filled with the enjoyment of “getting away from it all.” As if this did not really just boil down to not having to look at or listen to our boss. But no! We obviously feel that we cannot get a proper rest unless we are away from home. However, as we go on holiday with our family, we are like a snail trying to get away from the shell or even the chip on its shoulder. No wonder people come back from holiday even more irritated than they are when they leave. At normal times, they are at least able to escape domestic tyranny by going to work for eight hours, and then retreat from the boss by going home again, thus achieving at least a daily change of scene.

Holidays are a paradox in yet another way. People spend years paying off the mortgage, tightening their belts and sweating blood just so that they can create a beautiful home for their family. But when they finally have one, they move out each year precisely during those precious few work-free weeks when they could really enjoy the blessings of the comforts of life they have acquired.

Do you really think a doctor who tells his patient that a change would do him good is talking about a temporary move to unknown places, where all sorts of dangers lurk? That would certainly be in defiance of the Hippocratic oath. It is much more likely that the good doctor has in mind that people soon miss their home when they are away—their perspective changes and suddenly they realize that their everyday life, under their own humble roof, is still better than holidays under someone else's. (Needless to say, this effect wears off again after a few weeks back home).

The whole concept of holidays, travel and tourism is thus based on a neurosis feeding off our longing for that which we do not have right now. So, is it really necessary to blow a few months' salary for this transient feeling? If you are fortunate enough to come from my part of the world, you can create an illusion of earthly happiness simply by moving to the cellar, which since the war in 1991 is sufficiently well-stocked with drinking water, a chemical toilet, tinned meat and crackers.

I also have serious doubts about the idea promoted by popular magazines that a holiday can revitalize a flagging husband-wife relationship. It is a well known fact that women, out of the sheer anxiety about getting lost on the way, immediately after successful arrival at the destination enter that happy state which the TV ads refer to as "feeling relaxed and confident," a feeling without which jumping across mountain streams, doing gymnastics in a night club or riding a camel simply would not be any fun. Whatever, contemplating the idea of spicing up your marital routine in this state is, as a rule, not really on. At least not for both parties. As for male auto-erotic proclivity, I recently read it has been clinically proven that this is a very healthy activity, as indulging in it on a regular basis very effectively flushes out carcinogenic substances, and that those who frequently engage in it have their risk of developing a locally-based cancer slashed by a third. But it is doubtful that your wife will accept such a clinical explanation with any genuine understanding, notwithstanding her Ultra Always. Thus, it is no wonder that most husbands prefer to focus on drinking, smoking and playing cards while on holiday.

I do not play cards or drink or smoke or, indeed, enjoy any other artificial stimulants. The only joy of this kind left to me on holiday is the unintentional inhalation of the pyrethrum (*Chrysanthemum cinerariaefolium*) contained in various insect repellents which, in my case at least, brings on very vivid and extended dreams. But should one really limit one's holiday destinations to moors and swamps? Would such a change be refreshing enough? One thing is certain—such habitats are not very welcoming to joggers like me.

No, as far as I am concerned the only even remotely convincing reason for going on holiday is the next-door neighbors, who invariably forget to turn off their digital alarm clock when they go away, so that in their absence it makes an awful noise for at least an hour every morning—long enough to drive even a person who actually likes getting

up early insane. This is also the reason why people go on holiday en masse—in order not to listen to next-door's alarms. And then we wonder why there is no room on the beach!

“OK,” said the wife. “You can spend your holiday at home, if you wish. The freezer is over there and in it is that petrified lump of pork, brought to the twins' christening by your aunt from Croatia, because of which we had to buy the freezer. I dare say half a pig should suffice for your needs.”

I could see her determination and said I was coming along. “But where will we go? I chose last year and I'm sure you wouldn't want to repeat the Lake District experience.”

“The North of England might've been a good choice for anyone trying to avoid a fire at all costs. But this year, I think, we as a family would benefit more from going somewhere South. The twins are still having to go for regular check-ups at the lung clinic. Besides, all my woolens shrank in England, I couldn't really wear them again. So, I think we should go somewhere below the 40th parallel. An appeal shall not stay the execution of this order! But to make you feel a bit better, I'll let you choose the country and draw up an itinerary.”

I rebelled: “No way. Drawing up an itinerary means that I'll spend the next two weeks at the computer, collecting prices of flights, apartments and rent-a-cars, reading tourist guides and reference books on the natural and historic sights, acquainting myself with the local customs and dialects and studying supermarket prices, until it feels as if I've already been there. What's the point in coming along then?”

“It's the end of February. You'll have forgotten it all by the summer. And we'll avoid the panic we'd be in if we were to try and decide at the last minute. We can, of course, swap: I'll draw up the itinerary, and you take care of the luggage.”

Much better writers have already covered far too many pages on the subject of packing. Still, my love of truth demands that I summarize the reasons for consenting to do the itinerary after my wife's alternative proposal.

As is apt to happen to young creative individuals without any practical experience in a particular area, I used to imagine that I had had the incredible good fortune to have come up with an invention that

would revolutionize the science of packing, provided I could find somebody to listen to me. But, as is also wont to happen to the aforementioned individuals when their discoveries go beyond the predictable, I could find no appreciation of my momentous discovery in the ossified society of the former communist regime. Until I met my wife.

I am thirteen years older than her. When we met, I already had 2743 white hairs whilst she was still young and innocent. (“When the roof is covered with snow, it is time to light a fire in the fireplace.”) In her naïve, loving state during that first year, when I charmed her with my innate wit, she let me seduce her also with respect to what I liked to think was an earth-shattering solution to the problem of packing.

The following were the main points of my theory:

1. Always take with you only enough luggage for the first day of your holiday.
2. Buy everything else as the need arises.
3. This way, you will also satisfy the shopping fever from which every normal holidaymaker starts suffering a few days before the end of the holiday. Whatever you have to spend on things you do need, you will save on souvenirs you do not need.

Equipped with this theory, a few years ago my wife and I set off for the Maldives.

It looked as if the theory was working until the very last day, when it was time to pack everything we had acquired.

I tried to save face. I said that this was what I had expected, nay, what I had planned, because “there’s a great difference in packing before the holiday, when every little thing you’re taking has to be in the right place so that it’s accessible while you’re there, and packing at the end of the holiday, when you can just shove everything in, no system required, knowing very well that at home you’ll have to take it all out again and arrange it in the appropriate drawers and on shelves.”

But, for some inexplicable reason, my wife was not much satisfied with this explanation. Perhaps she realized that from then on there would be a double load to iron on her arrival home.

I did not go as far as taking my theory to its extreme and suggest that we only take what we could not do without on the first day home and

leave everything else on the Maldives. My wife had to pack everything, for which she needed to buy four new cases. Upon our arrival home we donated most of what we had bought to people who needed it more than us—not only did we not need it because we now had two sets of everything, but keeping it would also mean having to buy more furniture to hold the extra things. Only the four cases stayed with us, stored in the cellar, as a permanent memento of a holidaymaker's fate and when we traveled again my wife entrusted me with carrying all four (neatly stacked inside one another—it was a set, you see), with only the smallest case actually containing our things, whilst the others had to be carted along just in case they were needed as a result of another brilliant idea I might have.

So I never again prevented her from packing. I accepted with resignation the realization that the orthodox putting of things in cases and taking them out again is a skill for which men simply do not possess a genetic predisposition. The reason, of course, is evolutionary. My ancestors went hunting, where the process of natural elimination taught them, generation by generation, better orientation skills, whilst my wife's forebears neatly arranged the bits of meat and roots the men had brought back in various crevices around the cave so that they were accessible to them, but inaccessible to saber-toothed rats. Those women who were not successful in this were killed by my forebears who with this method of artificial selection ensured that the increasingly dominant sorting gene became so widespread among women. (Instead of by forebears, some women were also killed by bears, of course). My wife is now, of course, a near perfect packing machine, while I and other husbands have a natural predisposition for drawing up itineraries and for driving in foreign lands. I believe that when Friedrich Engels wrote about the basic division of labor he was referring precisely to the above.

A year ago, when my ingenious system was nearly forgotten, I was psychologically recovered to the extent that, in a moment of megalomaniac madness, I offered to make a partial contribution to packing. In the end, my wife consented and the agreement was that I collect all of my personal objects I felt I would not be able to do without.

Because I could sense that it would all get too complicated if I went too far, I soon gave up on writing tools, books and toiletries. The only thing left were my glasses. In addition to the ones that are usually on my nose, there was a pair of reading glasses and a pair of sunglasses.

During the next few days I gave an empirical demonstration of the fact that, at least in our household, there was no-one capable of keeping an eye on three pairs of glasses.

Any scientists looking into this will have to consider the following three laws on the squashing of glasses applying in our part of the universe:

1. The first (and general) law: "If two objects, one of which is a pair of glasses and the other a backside, appear in the same spot, the mass of the latter will squash the former."
2. The second (or special) law says that the possibility of "glasses being squashed by their owner's backside increases in proportion to the cube of the number of glasses." That is, if you have one pair of glasses, the possibility of them getting squashed by you sitting on them is 1 to 1 (or to put it bluntly, it is bound to happen sooner rather than later). If you have two pairs of glasses, the possibility increases to 8:1 (or to put it bluntly, it will happen eight times sooner). If you have three pairs of glasses, the possibility is 27:1 (i.e. twenty-seven times sooner). A similar exponential growth depends, of course, also on the number of buttocks; however, in our particular case this is not relevant.
3. The third (or restorative) law talks about the possibility of glasses surviving the "squashing by their owner's backside" to such an extent that a reasonably skilled optician can still return them to something like their original shape, and says that the possibility of this falls with a square of the number of squashings. That is, after one squashing, it is 1:1 (the optician manages to mend the glasses), after two squashings 1:4, after three 1:9, and so on.

In short, only a complete idiot would keep three pairs of glasses.

Thus the only option remaining to a short-sighted person with age-related long-sightedness such as mine, was to get bifocals through the top part of which it is possible to see things in the distance, whilst through the bottom part you can read. And that is what I did. I also added clip-on sunglasses, which consist of two dark lenses and a frame with four hooks that fasten on to the frame of the regular glasses. The expression clip-ons can also, of course, include the flip-over variety, which can be flipped up onto the forehead or at a right angle to the main lenses. These, however,

are much less elegant and give the wearer a striking resemblance to a maybug.

The possibility of squashing my glasses was thus greatly reduced. However, the clip-ons had to be put somewhere safe. Initially, I was determined to carry them in my trouser pocket. Not the one at the back, of course—not me! I got myself a pair of combat trousers with a knee pocket. When the trousers went in the wash, the clip-ons went with them, because the pocket extended so far down the trouser leg that my wife did not encounter them.

I can attest that lenses themselves endure equally well pre-wash, soak, main wash, rinse and spin. But due to some sort of chemical reaction, the clips do become covered with a slight patina. So, after the first wash I decided to find them a new home. But of course they started disappearing. I then introduced an internal video control system through which activity in the whole of our flat could be monitored. But even during the phase of initial enthusiasm when I recorded everything and had every tape neatly stacked, I was unable to locate on the tape the precise moment when I put them away, so during the subsequent phase of resignation, when books were moved back to the shelves they rightfully belonged on, and recording was limited to just one cassette, I did not stand a chance of finding them.

I went back to a more primitive method and started noting down the locations of the clip-ons on little scraps of paper.

Now it was the scraps of paper that kept disappearing.

I started storing data electronically.

Files disappeared.

In the end, I bought a safe, had it permanently built in and locked the clip-ons in them.

In the morning, I could not remember the combination of the lock. And it infuriated me, since I couldn't remember whether I had previously been prone to forgetting or not.

So, this was the end of my packing contribution for 2002. Although by February 2003 I had managed to restore my mental health sufficiently to start feeling that I could tackle a new pair of clip-ons, I chose instead to focus on all the preparatory work connected with choosing the destination and with planning the itinerary.

As early as mid-March I was able to present my wife with a neat folder, containing the following:

- my correspondence with the selected hotels and hostels
- their promotional material and price lists
- plane tickets and hire car reservations
- an itinerary
- a list of obligatory reading (*The Rough Guide to Sicily*, RoughGuides.com 2003; *Two Birds with One Stone—Due piccioni con una fava*, a phrase-book, Mohorjeva, Gorizia 1995; *Nach Sizilien Would Ich Like to Aller*; multicultural edition, Kleinweinverlag 2003)
- map of Sicily (Freitag & Berndt), stuck to the folder, with the route clearly marked.

The itinerary itself was the result of careful study and thorough consideration. It applied to the period from 1st to 13th June 2003 and went as follows:

Itinerary for Sicily

We fly 1 June (Sunday) at 9.30 a.m. from Venice with VolareWeb. (Return tickets only € 370; parking for 2 weeks € 85.) We will use our car to get to Venice and leave it at Car Park No. 7.

Arrival at Palermo in the NW of the island at 11 a.m. We hire a car from Thrifty, economy class, with air-conditioning, radio and unlimited mileage – all for only € 208 (plus petrol) for 2 weeks!

We immediately drive to Villa Zottopera, that is Hacienda Agrobiologico Rosso (called after the owner) in the SE of Sicily. 170 kilometres of motorway, 120 of main roads and 15 kilometers of side roads...

1 June to 6 June: Villa Zottopera, 5 days at € 70. Breakfast € 2, dinner € 14. A course in Sicilian cookery and tasting of olive oil! Visits to old towns in the South East of the island. Total cost € 670.

6 June: in the morning, drive to Mount Etna (NE of the island, 130 kilometers) and ascend it; overnight stay in Nicolósi, € 100, breakfast included.

7 June: to Messina, where we look at Shakespeare birthplace and then we rush off to Palermo. We spend this and the next night at Casa Giuditta. (Right next to the port - Ğ 160). There is a supermarket under the room. We will cook ourselves (by that time, you will be fully proficient in cooking Sicilian food, mmm!). Sightseeing in Palermo and surroundings: Monreale.

9 June: we drive towards Sciacca (SE of the island, 150 kilometers), sightseeing on the way (ruins in Selinunte). Arrival at Sciacca late afternoon, stay in a self-catering apartment at the agricultural hacienda Verdetecnica until 14 June (5 days, Ğ 300), and following your cookery course, you keep making Sicilian meals. Only 800 meters to the sea! From here, visit Agrigento, Caltabellotta and Minoa Eraclea.

14 June: we drive to the airport next to Palermo (120 kilometers, plane departure at 11.55 a.m.) In the afternoon, perhaps a sightseeing tour of Venice, where we feed the pigeons with almonds (Sicilian specialty!).

Total estimated cost 2600 euros.

I explained to my wife that I had decided on Sicily, because it had many treasures belonging to different cultures, one being the Sicilian culture, and on the beginning of June because then the average temperatures on that beautiful island only reach 29 degrees (84⁰ Fahrenheit), as opposed to 34 (93 F) or more in July and August.

“And what about school?”

“What school?”

“The children’s school only breaks up on 24th June.”

This came as a surprise, but all I said was I had thought that now the eight years of primary education had been extended to nine years, holidays would be starting at least by the end of May. And anyway, the children would get much more out of outdoor lessons than from sitting at their school desks. They would be able to see the bath in which Archimedes sat when he discovered his famous principle of buoyancy; and the crater into which Empedocles threw himself and discovered that his own famous principle of levitation no longer applied.

“Just think,” I said, “of I’m not sure which artist who spat in I don’t know which tyrant’s face because everything in the whatsitsname palace in you know where was so beautiful that there was nowhere else to spit—these are the sort of living examples (well, dead in fact) the children will be learning from and be able to take after for the rest of their lives!”

“I see. And how did the house Shakespeare was born in get to Messina?”

“It’s always been there. Since Shakespeare’s birth, that is. One finds these things on the Internet. You see, a distinguished university professor of literature, *commendatore* Martino Iuvara from Ispica in Sicily, has recently discovered that Shakespeare was a Sicilian, born in Messina as Michelangelo Florio Crollanza, and became Shakespeare only after running away from the Holy Inquisition to England. Crollanza means Shakespeare, of course.”

The story really is interesting. The parents of the young Crollanza were Calvinists. They had to escape from the Inquisition to Treviso. There they bought Casa Otello, named after its previous owner, a retired Venitian legionnaire, who—yes, you are right! —killed his wife in an attack of unjustified jealousy. The young Michelangelo (not to be mistaken for Buonarotti, the famous painter), studied in Venice, Padua and Mantua and traveled around Denmark, Greece, Spain, and Austria. He was friendly with Giordano Bruno who was burnt at the stake in 1600 and this Bruno (before being burned, of course) was friendly with William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, and the Earl of Southampton. Under the patronage of those two, Michelangelo in 1588—at the age of 24—fled to England, where his mother had a relative in Stratford, who gave him lodgings. The Stratford branch of the family had by that time been Anglicized. The couple had a child christened William who, however, died when still a young child. As Michelangelo was the same age and reminded them of their William, they started calling him by that name. When it became clear that he would not return to Italy, where he would have been persecuted, he took on William’s name and the rest is—literary history.

“Basically, it’s a reenactment of the life story of Mark Twain (born Samuel Clemens), who in his infancy had an identical twin brother. Only a few days old, they were both taking a bath, when Mark Twain accidentally drowned. The parents mistook the baby that had survived for ‘Li’l Sammy’—and this ‘Li’l Sammy’ who wasn’t ‘Li’l Sammy’ at all, subsequently grew up into Samuel Clemens (aka Mark Twain)! Which is, perhaps not surprisingly, a variation of Shakespeare’s play *Twelfth Night*. That takes place on the coast of Illyria, which is the old name of—Slovenia! No wonder that ‘Twain, Mark,’ and ‘*Twelfth*

Night, The,' are printed side by side in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature!*" I concluded triumphantly, if somewhat out of breath.

My wife was so taken aback by these revelations that I did not even have to delve deep into my very own theory that Shakespeare was actually a Slovene. Slovenes are, as some of our farther-fetching historians claim, descendants of the people of Venets (=Slovenets), who were forebears of all the subsequent major Roman, Slavic and (some) German peoples and nations. Messina is originally a Slovenian toponym, meaning – meat sticking to the bone! And there is a theme from Othello in our lore, not mentioning the name, I admit, and conveyed through the eyes of his beautiful Slovenian bride (called Beautiful Vida, instead of Desdemona). In our poem of *Beautiful Vida and the Blackamoor*, Vida escapes her gruesome fate by jumping through a window and consequently drowning in the Venetian Bay below¹. This is deemed by the Veneti School of Slovene scholars to be another proof of superior intelligence of our race! "How much more dramatic would Othello be," I told her, "had Crollalanza only chosen to move from Treviso to near-by Slovenia and change his name into our Peršak (after Pear-Shake)! But alas, as the Bard said, the new-made honor doth forget men's names!"

My wife was dumb-struck by these revelations and this was not uncalled for, since in this state she forgot to ask why—or even to notice that—the itinerary was completely at odds with any common sense with regard to the sequence of destinations: instead of going around the island in some orderly way, my itinerary envisaged us going here and there with no obvious pattern. "Why, for example, don't we have a look around Palermo, which is close to the airport, right at the beginning and then maybe again at the end, instead of going back there for two days in the middle of the holiday?" was the sort of question I had been expecting. But as it did not come, I did not reveal the dark intentions guiding me. I shall uncover them when it becomes impossible to deny them any longer.

And as for clip-ons, I had asked my wife before our departure to put them in the glove compartment of our car so that they would be handy on that initial journey. That is where they remained, awaiting our return in the long-term car park at Venice airport. My wife had forgotten

¹ Not unlike Mark Twain's twin baby-brother or, to be more precise, the original Mark Twain baby itself.

to remind me of them before we left the car. But as she had also, just in case, put my flip-overs in the suitcase, I decided to forgive her.