

The European Adventures of Andy Steves and Alex Matteson

Graduation summer, 2005



Alex (left) and Andy (right) ready for Europe.

Hi from Andy

Hello everybody! My name is Andrew Steves. Yes, son of the Rick. Thank you for your interest in my trip. To save up for this trip, Alex and I put in long hours after school. We have budgeted somewhere between \$3000 and \$4000 for this 45-day trip. We plan to stay in hostels, and sleep on trains to save on hotel costs. We'll use a two-month Eurail pass to take care of all our transportation. We'll fly in to Amsterdam a day after graduation on June 21st, and fly out of Rome on August 5th, in time to get ready for college. So, let's get our seat backs in the upright and locked position, and rock and roll! Hope you enjoy it. — Andrew

Alex's Pre-Trip Thoughts (June 1, 2005)

What's up? My name is Alex Matteson and my friend, Andy Steves, and I are about to go on the trip of a lifetime. I honestly can't fathom that I am going, let alone with my best buddy.

It's annoying how people keep asking over and over again where in Europe we are going. It has been interesting to watch adults' reactions when I mention we fly into Amsterdam. They can't stop smiling or laughing. I wonder why... The other annoying thing is girls getting all worked up and worried when I tell them I am running with the bulls in Pamplona. They get scared that I will get gored and die. But I'm getting stoked beyond belief to do it—regardless of what women say. Guys just tell me to take a picture and see how close I can get to the bull. That is probably a good reason that men for the most part have the accidents all thanks to that most dangerous phrase, "Watch this!"

Most likely the trip won't sink in until I am sitting on the plane with Andy. However, I am rather scared about how we're going to eat. I mean Andy and I aren't really cooks, I can make a mean PB&J sandwich but beyond that I'm kind of useless. That's why my mom is trying to teach me to cook. I tried to make bean dip today and it literally took me over an hour. I'm hoping that when we get over there either Andy will turn out to be a five star chef, or the better

option is we meet some hot girls in the hostels and they "teach" us how to cook. That would be sweet! - Alex

The whole idea of this trip started early this year at lunch. We were talking with our friends (Alex, Drew, Garrett, and Patrick) about what would be a fun trip of a lifetime. I jokingly brought up back-packing through Europe like our parents had done when they were our age. We talked about it a little bit, but not seriously. Then, after the college search and application process slowed down, we realized our dream of a European trip was feasible. And we made the decision.

As we had limited time before college, we needed to be selective. We chose countries that Andy hadn't been to yet, trust me there are only a few...actually only Spain. Then we listed countries that we both loved. Because I've only been to Europe once before and that was to Italy, it was a no brainer: Italy was our focal point of the trip. Rick made a good point that we should start in a country that was more 'travel friendly' for first time travelers and then work our way to the "harder" countries to travel in. So we started in the Netherlands and finished in Italy. The other countries were chosen because...well it's hard to describe what made them stand out...they just seemed right: France, Switzerland, and the Czech Republic and even their names sound cool. Now the problem was how to finance it.



Trip planning with our parents.

Andy and I got a pretty sweet deal with our parents who agreed to pay for our plane tickets as a graduation present. We had to cover the everyday expenses. Our goal: \$50 dollars a day. I know, bold move. Therefore, we had to make around \$2,500 in about 4 months while juggling classes, college stuff, girlfriends, and most importantly, senioritis. I worked at Lexus of Seattle and Andy taught piano and worked at his dad's travel business.

It's such a relief to finally have the necessary money for the trip in the bank. I worked my tail off at Lexus of Seattle washing cars. Every time I'd get sick of the work, I'd pull out a picture of the Cinque Terre from my wallet and think of trip and suck it up. Every car I washed brought me one step closer to Europe. - Alex

Packing — Andrew

Right now, we're in the final stages of preparation for our trip. Because we are young and impressionable, we don't want to nail down too many hostel reservations. We could hear about one thing

or another that would draw us in the opposite direction of where we think we want to go now. The two-month rail pass we have will be perfect for any last-minute decisions like that.

This last weekend, Alex and I had a meeting with my dad to discuss our packing lists. We've decided on these items to last us through our 45 day trip: 5 pairs of underwear and socks, 4 pairs of undershirts, 3 T-shirts, 1 long-sleeve shirt, 1 dress polo, 3 pairs of light shorts, 1 pair of nice cargo khakis, 1 pair of running shoes, 1 pair of hiking sandals, 1 pair of flip-flops, 1 evening sweater, toiletries, notepads, guidebooks, reading material, a camera, mp3 player, and power adapters. That pretty much takes care of everything we plan on bringing. We have one week left before Alex and I depart and everything seems to be coming together.



Day of Departure, June 21 - Alex

Well well well. Today is it. Andy and I are about to leave for the airport and I have that feeling that I forgot something but I can't remember what it is. I hate that, but I'll let you know what it was when I think of it. I just called all my friends and made them save a message from me so they could listen to my voice if I die running with the bulls or something, ha-ha. Well actually I am getting rather scared. I think it's the bulls—maybe it's the trip. Whatever. I am about to get into the car so, until Amsterdam, see you later!



Alex (middle), Andy & the Steves family (Jackie, Rick & Anne—left to right) at the airport.

Amsterdam BABY!!!!!! - Alex (June 22)

The 8 hour flight to London went by fast because we each had personal TVs with 8 different movies to choose from. However, at the end of the flight it got rather bumpy and I left the airline 2 nice little presents in the form of barf bags.

When we landed in Amsterdam it was a breeze. We got off the plane, validated our train tickets at the train info booth and

purchased phone cards. We then took the train and I noticed for some reason a lot of people here don't wear shoes in public; it's kinda weird. The train ride was fine and at the one station we had to switch trains and ended up following a guy, who had no idea we were following him. We followed him because we heard him say Haarlem — and that's our destination. Once in Haarlem we went to the tourism office and asked about the cool night spots and good day trips. They gave us addresses and information for free.

I swear, all the bikes that people throw away and don't use end up here; I've never seen so many junky bikes in my life! Also, while walking in town I smelled my first marijuana smell. As I was typing this email in the cyber café, I got a bad headache because it smelled so much of pot. Well, we are about to eat dinner and then lay low for the night and have the comforts of MTV put us to sleep.

First days in Europe—Andy (June 24)

These first couple days I've grown an appreciation for my dad. From coaching on transportation to having friends in nearly every corner of Haarlem (the first town we're staying in). I thought his book was just another guidebook. But now I really can see where all his hard work goes.

Anyway — yesterday Alex and I went into Amsterdam. While there, we visited the sex museum (quite an interesting exhibition of the history of pornography...haha), walked through the red-light district, and had a high-class tour through a diamond polishing factory. Back at our hotel, we ate apples and peanut butter for dinner. I wonder how much weight I'm going to lose on this trip. At around 8:30 we fell asleep until midnight, but couldn't get back to sleep until around 4:30 a.m. Jet lag sucks.

Today, we rented bikes at the train station in Haarlem and biked to the beach with the tips from Hans, a local B&B owner.

To Smoke or Not to Smoke? Here I am, in the center of the marijuana universe, the Mecca of hippies, and one of the best places in the world to party. Why aren't Alex and I out there in the clubs and bars? That's one of the most profound questions I've had in my head since the minute we arrived in this place reclaimed from the sea.

I'm an 18 year-old kid that's grown up in suburbia with probably about 80% of my friends who have smoked at least once. I, on the other hand never have; this is something that confuses me a little. And when I can finally do it legally, I just don't feel the need to.

Why, you may ask? I don't know for sure, but there are several possibilities that come to mind; jet lag, being in a strange land, or...my dad. He has an interesting pro-legalization stance on marijuana, and when I think about it, this could have also pushed me farther away from trying it. I admire him for many things, but at the same time, I believe he has some characteristic quirks that make me want to deliberately do just the opposite. He drives a 1991 car. Mine is 2003. I like to be at home, he spends a third of the year away from it. He likes orange juice, I hate it. These are some of the things I've noticed over the years, and the subject of marijuana and whether or not to smoke it here in Amsterdam may be yet another subconscious need to contradict my own father's actions. — Andrew



Hello Europe!

Ethnic T Shirts—Andy (June 27)

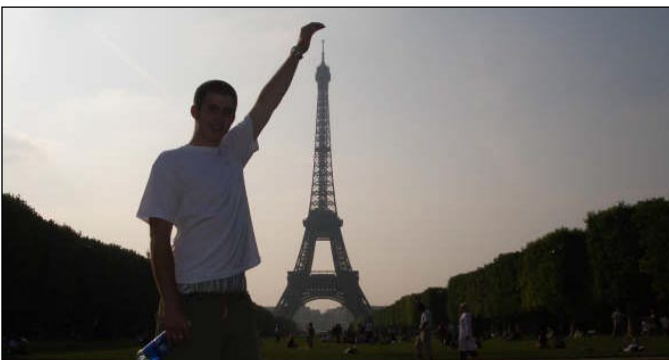
Hey everybody! I'm writing on a French keyboard so I apologize for any typos. Over the past couple days, I've noticed something interesting: American stores sell shirts with French phrases on them, and French ones do just the opposite. It's kinda funny. Today I walked past a young French girl — her T-shirt said "kiss me." And I can always tell people who are American when they wear a shirt that reads "je t'aime" (I love you). I'll write more when I find a good keyboard.

Finishing Amsterdam, starting Paris - Alex

A highlight in Amsterdam was the brewery tour. Andy and I took the Heineken Experience tour at the Heineken factory. It was the best 10 euros I've spent so far. It included 3 beers, a self guided tour complete with rides and cool stuff, and a free Heineken glass—well worth the money. Oh, and the best part is that a lot of American tourists our age take it so there are young people to talk to in non-broken English. You have no idea how refreshing that is.

We left Amsterdam yesterday at 9:56 on a bullet train to Paris. It took four hours and we met some interesting people. There was a couple from South Africa sitting next to us and we got into a discussion about Christmas trees and snow of all things. (We learned that they grow Xmas trees down there as well and the woman hadn't seen snow in more than 20 years.) It's random stuff like this that makes the trip even more interesting than I expected.

When we arrived in Paris, we took the metro to our hotel and walked right to the Eiffel Tower where we paid 3 euro to walk up 490 stairs to the second observation deck. Let me tell you, it is amazing! I swear this is the spot where I will propose. (I guess Tom Cruise got it right.) Across the street there was a half pipe and grind park for skaters. It was pretty cool to watch. To save money for dinner, when we got to our room I just ate out of my peanut butter jar for like four minutes and that was dinner!



Bike Tours in Paris — Andy (June 29)

Last night, Alex and I went on an evening bike tour. We met at the base of the Eiffel Tower. During orientation, I was handed a neon jersey and deemed "ass-man" or "derriere," the one who rounds up the back of the group. This three-hour tour of the City of Lights was quite enjoyable. I'd recommend it if you think running red lights and stopping at green ones in the middle of downtown Paris at twilight while it's raining is having a good time. I do, so I had a blast. There were infrequent stops at famous places like the Notre Dame and the Louvre. The tour finished with an hour-long cruise of the Seine. That was fun, especially since they handed out wine to all their guests. I, personally, am not a fan of wine, but Alex downed enough for both of us. For €28, I thought it was a good value for a night of fun entertainment and light exercise.

Something I gotta mention —one of the most random things ever in my life happened to me. As Alex and I waited for the tour to start, two Arab men cam up to us and said "D'dop d' wah'tuh" or what it sounded like to me. After a moment of gestures and deliberation, I realized he wasn't asking for some water but a "G'doup photo". So we said OK and one sat in between us while the other took a couple steps back and took a picture. While they were saying goodbye, I checked my pockets, for my watch and anything else I had on me. Nothing was missing and it left both of us just stunned by how out-of-the-blue the whole ordeal was. Tonight we leave for Madrid on a night train.



Parisian Pick-Pockets—Andy (July 8)

Here we are, Alex and me in the Paris Metro after a long day of museums and walking. So in this slight daze, we made our way through the underground system. We got to our platform uneventfully. Exhausted, we stood there in silence. Suddenly, I see this kid of around 16 running at me. This shook me out of my daydream. The words "He has my wallet!" seemed to be chasing him towards us. Out of instincts and reflexes I may have gained from football or attending a public school, I swung my right fist and connected with this young man's forehead — similar to Barry Bonds' bat with a baseball destined to be driven out of a ball park. He reeled back, dropped a hunk of folded leather and crumpled to the ground. With my class ring a little bloody, situated on the middle finger of my ride hand, I gave the wallet to an overweight American man and his wife. They thanked me profusely and then gave me a couple of €20 bills.... I wish.

Everything happened as I said, but instead of reacting, I found myself just watching this kid run past me well within an arm's length and right off the platform. All the while, this man was screaming that his wallet had been stolen. Before those words connected with me, the kid was gone. You gotta have quick reflexes over here if you wanna be a hero. Andy



Paris sight-seeing (July 1)

For those of you interested, Here's a list of the sights we saw when we were in Paris:

Sunday: Eiffel Tower (Quite enjoyable and bigger than I remembered), Trocadero (fun skating competition, great Eiffel Tower views).

Monday: Military Museum and Napoleon's Tomb (cool WWII section), Arc de Triomphe (Wish I was here during the Tour de France), Champs Elysees (nice shopping, in other words boring 'cuz we don't have any money to spend!).

Tuesday: Notre Dame (really pretty, but we didn't get a chance to go upstairs), D'Orsay (eh), Bike Tour (funny information with wine on a boat cruise later).

Wednesday: Sewers (smelly and long), Louvre (saw Mona and the Crown Jewels, then left), Catacombs (kinda creepy), another pass on the Champs. — Andy

Goodbye Paris, Hello Spain - Alex (June 30)

The best part of our Paris bike tour was the boat ride that was included in the package—and that included wine. As it turned out, Andy and I have been really boring the past few days and I needed to spice things up. No one was drinking the bottles and our bike guide, who is 25, told me to help myself...so I did. After several glasses it was time to get off the boat and take the three mile ride through heavy Parisian traffic in the pouring rain back to the bike shop. Let's just say it was an experience I'll never forget!

Last night, Andy and I took a night train to Madrid. We left at about 11:00 p.m. and when we got on the train we settled in and finally found a place to squeeze our bags. Then a guy came in and wanted to put a surfboard—of all things—on the floor. Long story short, I ended up sleeping with a backpack next to my head and a bag the size of a small person at my feet on a miniscule bed that seemed about 18 inches wide. To top it all off, I woke up

in the middle of the night to the smell of old rotten goat cheese, which was actually the man above me. I didn't get much sleep in the middle bed of that triple bunk. After 8 hours we hit the Spanish border and (because tracks are different widths) had to switch trains. That second part of the trip to Madrid was 5 hours of torture. They had American movies playing and you could see what the actors were saying but it was dubbed in Spanish! It drove me crazy, so we both decided to go to sleep because we were getting headaches due to the fact that no one spoke English and we couldn't understand anything.

Looking out the train window, I have decided that Spain is like desert. It's nothingness until you reach a place where someone figured it was a good place for a city...that would be Madrid.

Madrid

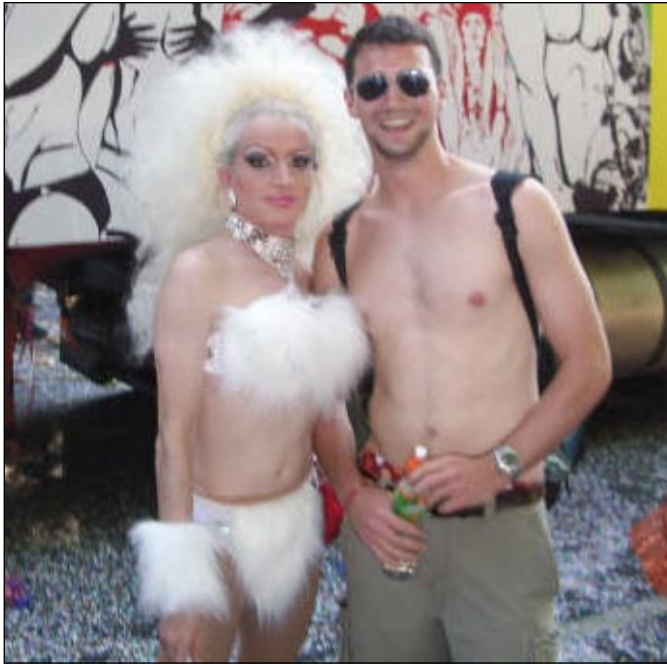
Well, we made it to Madrid! Both Alex and I were quite intimidated by Spain because neither of us had ever taken a bit of Spanish in school, and also, coming from Seattle, the heat around here could be quite intense for us. It's our first full day in Madrid today, and we visited the Royal Palace, the Prado Museum, and the Royal Botanical Garden. I'd say all of them were worth while. — Andy

Big Gay Festival and parade (July 2)

Madrid welcomed us with a huge Gay Day festival. The president here just legalized gay marriage and adoption and you can feel the enthusiasm here. We were just chilling in a park when we heard drums, and walked down to the sound. First we saw a little boy with his mother who was carrying a small rainbow flag, then turned the corner and there it was: well over 150,000 people in the streets of Madrid. Standing on the street we saw around 50 party floats parading by. A non-stop line of flamboyant gays, black leather and chains gays, pretty-boy gays, big gays, big drag queens, freaks dancing on stilts, pretty ladies in cars (or so I think), sailor-boy gays, girly gays, and so on. There were huge firecracker blasts in random places in crowd, the loudest music I've heard ever— techno with American words. Sensing tonight is not the night for heterosexuals, we're heading to Barcelona on a night train.

Madrid - Alex

Yesterday we met up with 2 girls from the University of Oregon (Yazman and Marie). We actually met them when I was doing my last blog entry. They were sitting next to us and we started talking. We were going to go out for a drink that night but when we met up at 10:30 we were all so tired we decided to get ice cream instead and call it a night. We all went to the market yesterday and bought enough fixings for breakfast, lunch and dinner for €7.24. Not bad! The funniest thing was we went to eat lunch in a park in the middle of the city and the guy sitting next to us was definitely smoking a joint!!!! He explained it's no big deal here. I expected that in Amsterdam, but not in Madrid. I suppose it makes sense because these people literally party 24 /7. They don't really start until midnight but go until 6 a.m. They are crazy! We all sat down at a garden and had a discussion about pot in Amsterdam and I learned that weed in food gives you a different type of high. I did not know that! :) We took the metro to get ice cream and I was



Alex's memories of Spain are kind of fuzzy.

wedged in between a sweaty, hairy, old man and an old woman with bad BO and very, very, hairy arm pits!

Yazmen had a family friend that lived in Madrid. He is about 65 or so, and wanted to take us around and show us the city. Andy and I were a little bit apprehensive about it because we figured it would be walking and him saying things like, "this was an old church..." and boring things like that. As it turned out, we all met at 8 and had one of the best times so far. He brought his 24-year-old daughter along and we went restaurant and bar hopping all night! The coolest place we went to was a little Celtic restaurant that was tucked back down a narrow alley that only locals know about. When we got inside we sat on old wooden stools in a corner and drank wine out of what appeared to be soup bowls all while munching on fried squid and mussels. It was great.

We then walked around the main drags in the city and it was really funny because the daughter didn't speak English that well and the dad and daughter would get in fights in Spanish over what streets to take and they would both walk in different directions while the four of us didn't know who to follow. It was interesting.

We said our goodbyes and the four of us went to a main street and sat outside drinking beer, rum and coke, and eating pizza. We stayed out there until about 2am. The funny part though was drinks are really expensive in main restaurants (rum and cokes for €5.70!) so Andy and I went looking for bars on side streets. We were a little tipsy and got into what seemed like a long conversation with a slimey looking guy trying to get us to go into a strip club. All we wanted was some alcohol, nothing else, but he didn't understand and kept trying to push us into the club! They get pretty forceful over here! We finally found a bar and as soon as we gave the non-English speaking bartender our order everyone stopped talking and just stared at us—I swear! It all worked out and I ended up taking shots next to what looked like an 8-year-old kid sitting at the bar wearing Harry Potter glasses. Weird night!!!!

Barcelona - Alex

Well, I have to say that the one city I wish we could have more time in would be Barcelona. What a cool city. We took a night train from Madrid to Barcelona and it would have to be one of the worst rides so far. We had to sit up the whole time in lumpy chairs next to a traveling couple that had just finished sleeping in hostels filled with mice and what not and they smelled. Anyway, I probably got about 3 hours of total on and off sleep that night. We arrived in Barcelona at about 8 that morning and made it to our hotel but of course it wasn't ready because it was too early. So they said come back at 10, but the problem was my mom's friend had a son (Ryan) who spends the summer in Barcelona and we were meeting him at 10 to tour the city (he speaks fluent Spanish and is going to be a sophomore at a liberal arts college in Ohio). So, I hadn't showered in 2 days and had been in the same clothes as well. Needless to say, we were both gross. We finally were able to get into our room at about 9:40 and showered, changed and made our rendez-vous with Ryan. We saw some of the sights but the best part was he took us by train to his host family's house in one of the suburbs of the city.

It had to of been one of the best days so far. The family doesn't speak a word of English so there were a lot of hand motions between them, Andy, and me. But Ryan acted as our translator. They offered us lunch and we accepted thinking it would be a taco or something small. As it turned out they made a huge deal out of it and went out and bought fresh ice cream and new bottles of wine. We had a great meal! The only problem was we were so used to eating light that when we finished we were starving for dinner because our bodies were not accustomed to that type of meal—that sucked! But besides that it was great learning about their culture and travels.

After the meal the father invited us to see his gun collection. Wow, wow, wow, wow—is all I can say! At first it was impressive because he had a small case with old pistols from pirates and from the 1600's. It was cool stuff but we had seen all that in museums before. Then, after he showed us his book collection dating back to 1602, he pushed a button and the bookcase moved out and there was a secret room filled to the brim with guns. Then came his gun tour. He had rifles from the Napoleonic era, the Spanish civil war, grenades from WWII and loads of other things, from pistols to assault rifles! We weren't allowed to take pictures or really talk about what we saw because he said he could get in a lot of trouble with the government. All I will say is he could have his own army and invade a small nation with what he had.

After the guns, Ryan, Andy, and I then went to the beach and swam and laid out for a few hours. Andy and I caught the train back to our hotel, read a little and went to bed because we had an early train to catch to Nice in the morning.

Nice and Monaco - Alex (July 5)

Well, I have a new favorite place—the French Riviera! Andy and I arrived yesterday in a town called Beaulieu. The coast is full of small towns like this, and it is beautiful. We were only able to get a day train from Barcelona so we missed an entire travel day but it wasn't too bad. We had a pretty mellow evening last night. We

checked in to the hotel, walked around a little, ate some peanut butter for dinner, read and went to bed. Today we got up at like 8 so we could get out and see stuff. We first went to a fresh market where we bought the day's food, apples, bananas, and peppers. Then we caught the train to Monaco! Wow! Just walking out of the train to the train station is amazing, all marble with views of the harbor and ocean everywhere. We walked outside and the first thing we saw were yachts that could be small ocean liners. Some were at least 200 feet long (they had 2 smoke stacks!).



Monte Carlo—pick a yacht, any yacht.

This is a very, very, very, very rich town—it has the highest income per capita. We walked around the harbor and gazed at million dollar boats and cars. Andy and I agreed that we would never bring our wives here if we didn't have money because we would feel like failures compared to some of these guys. The town itself is beautiful though. We bought a bus ticket and went to the royal palace. Um...to me I found the Bentley and Aston Martin parked outside to be more interesting. Ha ha! Actually, there were more guys taking pictures of the cars than of the building and views. We are in Nice right now because it has the cheapest Internet connection; Monaco wanted €9 euro for half an hour! We're about to meet up with a group from our old high school. It will be fun to hang out with Americans besides Andy for a while.

Budget examples - Andy

For all of you interested or wondering, here's a sample list of our expenses over these last couple days.

Thursday June 30 in Madrid: €19 train tickets, €41 half of our hotel room, €5.50 dinner, €1.50 ice cream, €1.50 Internet.

Friday July 1 in Madrid: €1 Botanical Garden visit, €1.80 Ice cream, €3 Prado museum, €3.50 Royal Palace, €1 Internet, €6.67 food for the day, €6 Tapas, €8.50 Drinks, €41 half of our hotel room.

Saturday July 2 Barcelona: €2.50 Internet, €8.50 food, slept free on night train

Sunday July 3 Barcelona: €35 half of hotel room, €5 sandwich, €5 metro, €8.50 food, €9.50 train.

Monday July 4 Nice: €6.50 McDonalds, €1.50 Internet, €32 half of hotel room.

Tuesday July 5 Nice: €8 food, €3 bus, €32 half of hotel room, €1.80 Internet.

So (with a Eurail pass and groceries rather than restaurants all the time) it can be done! Andy

Cinque Terre - Alex

Ok, well Andy and I ended up taking 6 hours of train rides to get from the French Riviera to the Cinque Terre, even though it looked like half an inch on the map. Anyway, we are staying in one of the five towns that make up what you know as the Cinque Terre. The town is called Monterosso. We got in rather late and settled in our hotel room and then went out. The funny thing was, on the train ride over, by complete luck, we ran into one of the tour guides we met up with back in Amsterdam and we got invited to dinner for free! If there is any place better place to propose to someone I want to see it; the vistas from where we ate were breathtaking at sunset. Just picture sitting on a rock terrace eating pesto in its birthplace on perfectly cooked pasta all while looking at the sun set into the sea. That's kind of sappy, but it was awesome. After dinner, we went back to our town, and as it turned out there is live music every night for this entire month. We were still with the tour guide, Ben, who is about 28 or so and one of the coolest guys ever. We went to a bar and got some drinks and listened to the music. After we had sucked our glasses dry, Ben and I bought a bottle of wine and shared it. Andy hates the taste of wine with a passion so he didn't really have any.



Andy riding the wine pickers' train in Cinque Terre.

At this point it was about 11:30 and most places were closed. We didn't want to go to the bars because a rum and coke was 5 euros! (much cheaper to buy your own stuff at a store and mix it). So we went into the only place open and we ran into a group of 7 or so kids from Ohio studying in Florence and taking a break. We all bought beer that looked like the size of a liter of coke for like 2 euro and went on a walk on the beach. Andy got tired and went back to the hotel while I stayed out and chilled with our new friends. When we parted ways we set up a meeting spot for the next day and we were going to meet at 1 p.m. but we went there today and no one showed up. I'm hoping that they were just drunk and didn't remember because otherwise it's rather sad that they ditched us. Well, that's about it for the exciting stories so far. Tonight Andy and I are headed to the Blue Marlin. Playboy rated it the best spot in Europe to meet girls, which is just a few minutes away in the next town. Hopefully I'll have some more stories for you then :)

P.S. I really hope anyone reading this doesn't think that we are drunks and all we do is drink, because we go to a lot of museums too, ha ha.

Looking forward to the Tour de France - Andy

For those of you that don't know, I'm a huge cycling fan. I've spent many a Sunday afternoons watching cycling races. We are about half a days travel from the southeastern part of France. And fortunately, the Tour will be making its way through that area in several days. This morning I spent over an hour working out train reservations, and the tough hotel reservations near the French ski resort town of Courchevel. I've been so fortunate to meet Matteo, one of my father's friends, at Hotel Pasquale in Monterosso. He spent much of his time talking in Swiss, French and a little Italian to help me out. I was prepared to spend near 150 euros a night, but Matteo landed us a place for only 50. Lucky! Ah well, we leave the day after tomorrow from the beautiful Cinque Terre at the ugly hour of 5 o'clock in the morning. We hope to get quality pictures as well of extraordinary experiences to relate to all of you reading. Thanks, Andy

Long Train Rides - Dirty Alex (July 11)

Well, Andy and I left Spain for the the Cinque Terre and now we're back in France to catch part of the Tour d'France bike race tomorrow. After this long series of train rides we are really tired. And, when we got into town today I looked in the mirror and I couldn't stop laughing. First of all, for some reason I had goat cheese all over my shirt and yogurt on my shorts and enough crumbs in my beard to feed a starving family. I looked like a homeless man! Actually this would explain all the strange looks I got when we passed through Milano today—the fashion capital of the world. I can't even begin to explain how much I am looking forward to a hot shower in my own bathroom and a haircut. - Alex

Tour de France - Andrew (July 15)

We made the long journey from the Cinque Terre in Italy up to a small town called Brides-les-Bains in SE France. The train took a good day as we had our first train at 5:19 in the morning, but we made it, and what we were about to see was all worth it.

Last night, as Alex and I were out exploring the town and looking for dinner, I noticed a strange thing. As in all of Europe, the menus of restaurants are posted outside. But the menus in Brides-les-Bains were different, next to the prices on their menu, each item had a calorie count. As the night progressed it became more and more apparent to me that we had stumbled upon a diet town! From the expansive recreation center to the spas on every corner, all the signs were there. While this doesn't seem so bad to most people, it's kind of a scary to a hungry 18-year old young man. In the end, however, we survived.

The next day, Alex and I got ready for this once in a lifetime chance - to see Lance Armstrong in a mountain stage in probably the last Tour de France of his career. Our town an alpine ski resort: the world famous Courchevel. I guess. Haha, I never heard of it. Anyways, we were about 20 kilometers from the top of the hill, where the stage ended. The riders were expected to pass around 4 pm, so we started hiking up at noon with a couple baguettes,

nutella and bananas. We set out hitch-hiking. One guy told us that what we were doing, putting our thumbs straight up, meant f-you in French and we should point it down. Not knowing any better and hoping for a change in luck we tried that. All that resulted was funny looks, so we decided to point them sideways and play it safe. After around 40 minutes of hitchhiking, we were picked up. Two Belgian brothers, and two Taiwanese invited us into a 5-seater car. The older of the two brothers, a 24 year-old Belgian spoke flawless English and translated everything said in the car into two languages as soon as he heard it, including announcements and other information on how the race was going that was being broadcast from loudspeakers along the course.

After 20 minutes we stopped and found a place next to a switchback, so we could watch the riders both coming and going. Once we got settled, everybody broke out their food and shared it all around.

All of a sudden, they started speaking rapidly back and forth until they told us "On y va," "Let's go!" We piled back into the tiny car and headed farther up the mountain, into the final kilometers passing the 10, and 5 Km balloons. All the while we two Americans added significant weight to the already over-loaded car and the older brother was much better at speaking English than using a clutch. They were blasting some Beethoven symphony while the two brothers sang along. I was just chilling in the back, taking up half a small European back seat, smelling burning clutch, singing along to a wordless song, passing rainbows of bike fans and enjoying glimpses of the French Alps.

Aww man, I still get chills thinking about our Tour de France experience. So we parked the car, and took two gondola rides up the mountain to within a kilometer of where the stage was going to end for that day. All this time, we were talking about everything from our new friends' bike trip they planned to start the next day, to how Bush is messing up the world. It was actually the older brother's birthday as well. We found our «home base» on a high bluff giving us a view of several switchbacks down the hill, as well as an opportunity to get right along the barriers for a close up photo. We got there around 2 pm so we had about 3 hours to kill before the actual riders came by. You could feel the tension and excitement in the air. All over there were campers with crowds around them watching the fast-approaching race on satellite TVs. At other times, we would just relax with our friends and learn more about French culture they never taught me in French class in school.

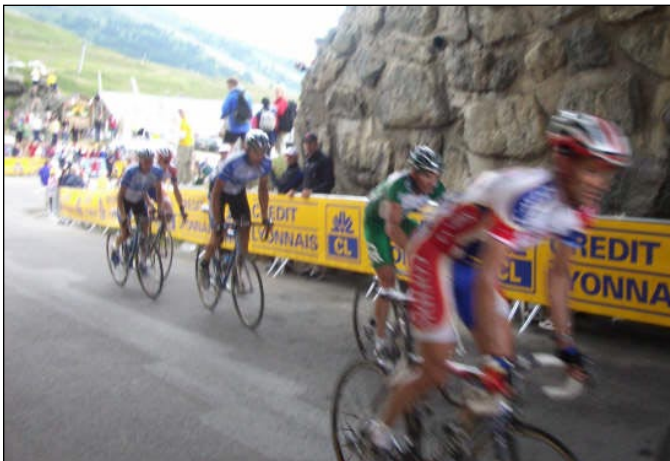


Waiting for Lance.

Finally, the publicity caravan started making its way past our positions, letting us know the race was about an hour away. The Belgians explained to us that the more noise you make, «zee better to chance to get som-fing.» We gladly followed their hysterical examples—with great success. By the end I personally had 4 noise makers, 3 hats, 4 water bottles, cheese and crackers, 2 pieces of dark chocolate, and several key chains. All monetarily worthless, but hey, this is the Tour de France!

Then came what we were waiting for, I could see the bikers passing where we first stopped, earlier that day on the satellite TV, and I heard the TV helicopters in the distance, slowly making their way towards us. The excitement levels of the crowd were directly correlated with the volume of the helicopter blades. From our perch, we finally saw 8 motorcycles speed around the corner, and then several cars stacked with bikes blaring their horns. Then came the first group of cyclists. Among them was the king, Lance Armstrong. As soon as I saw them, I took off to get a spot along the fence, with my camera ready. I got an unbelievable view of these riders' sweat-salty faces. And within 15 seconds they were gone. I was close enough to see the color of Lance's eyes. Lance was doing his dance, with a kind of concentration I've never seen in a person before, but for which he is famous. Five hours of waiting was so worth the 1.5 seconds I may have been within 10 feet of this hero. Aww man, I hope to never forget this either.

Armstrong went on to easily win the yellow jersey that day, and further declare that he is still no old fogy to the world of cycling.



Tour de France, Tour de Switzerland - Alex

Well, in the last couple of days, Andy and I have seen the Tour de France, gone biking up mountains, paragliding, and hiking up the Swiss Alps. The Tour de France was so cool We ended up getting a great spot a kilometer from the finish line and had to wait about five hours for them to go by us. It was just a huge party all around. They had caravans going by all day just throwing free stuff out and getting the crowds pumped. When they finally rode by us Andy almost had a heart attack! I mean Lance Armstrong was about one meter away! It was a great day all around. On the ride back we all started singing songs and talking politics. Oh, the first thing I told them by the way was that we didn't like Bush. Having said that, everyone lightened up and relaxed. That was a key move!

Next we headed over to Interlaken, Switzerland where we stayed for only one night. But that one day was the most intense

so far. We arrived late, got a bite to eat and hit the town. Someone told us that there was a good nightclub to go to and we went about midnight. As it turned out, the club itself was amazing (it used to be an underground military bunker but now has a bar and dance floor). But there were about 4 girls and 30 or so guys that all had the same mission as Andy and I, so we didn't really stay long. It probably would have been great on a Friday or Saturday, but not a Tuesday.

The next morning I woke up late, missed breakfast, and was only able to grab a piece of bread before we started the day. The owner of the hotel, Fritz, took Andy and me out on a 4-hour bike ride through the mountains. We gained about 3,000 feet of elevation. That may not sound impressive, but for someone who doesn't bike at all it was intense. When we stopped for water at the top, I was sweating so much that it had turned to salt and I had white lines of salt all over my face and basically everywhere on my body. You might think that after a ride like that you could stop for something to eat or a shower, but no, that wouldn't be the Swiss way. As soon as we got back we hopped in a car and went to the top of a mountain and went paragliding.

Wow! It was amazing. Andy and I were each strapped onto a pilot and started running down a grassy meadow and right before the meadow hit a cliff you sat back and let the air just lift you up. I've never experienced anything like it. We flew—lashed safely to our expert pilots—for about 45 minutes and had the time of our lives.

Once again, as soon as we landed we started out on a hike up one of the Alps looking for Ipex (goat-like animals that are about 100 pounds and have huge horns). We hiked for a few hours, it was after 8 pm by this time. At the top of a mountain, we just sat there...looking at groups of these animals grazing and listening to the beautiful sound of silence.

We hiked back down and Andy and I went to a neighboring town, Gimmelwald where we are staying in a really cool hostel. I was woken up this morning to the sound of cow bells and goat cries and looked out my window and had a perfect view of the icy mountains all around us all while listening to Bob Marley's greatest hits playing in the background. Life is good.

Fun day in the Alps with Fritz - Andy (July 17)

A couple days ago, we arrived in Interlaken, Switzerland from Brides-les-Bains in France. As we checked in to our hotel, Fritz at Hotel Lotschberg recommended a place to eat, as well as one to socialize. So we set out to check them out at around 10:30. We had a great dinner (one of the best beef fajitas I've ever had) and then started our crawl to Hooters (very American I know), and to Balmer's Bomb shelter.

When we got to Balmer's, there were 3 bouncers on the way in, all pointing us in the direction of muffled bass beats. The tension grew as well as my excitement as I looked forward to a scene my dad has raved about for years. We descended into an old bomb shelter with foot-thick walls, and dark passageways, turned a corner and we were there! There were disco balls turning and a live DJ as well as TVs and a full bar. Great! Except we soon realized Tuesday night is not the night to find a bumpin' party. The selection was great, if you are a girl—around 25 guys and maybe

4 or 5 girls. So after a bit, we turned around and returned to our comfortable hotel at around 1:30, looking forward to the next «day of fun» Fritz had invited us on.



Fritz promised us “a little bike ride, with some gliding, and maybe a little hike after.” Neither Alex nor I had any idea how hard could be. We took our time getting ready, because our appointment with Fritz was at 12. Alex skipped breakfast, and I caught the tail end getting some bread, and some real Swiss cheese (Fritz actually has a cow he collects milk to make his cheese from). I cycle a little bit. But that’s on a road with a nice-fitting bike. Fritz met up with us decked out in spandex, biking cleats and an actual wrist watch altimeter. This was the first sign that this may not just be a “little ride” like he said. We saddled up and started making our way out of town. He says “Yes, today, we do one thousand meters, up the sdjokedeberdenhilkly and around the somethingorotherm ountain.” “OK, I say.” Long story short, we go all the way up a gosh darn mountain in the thin Swiss air. We made it, but just barely.

He hurried down the mountain for our paragliding appointment. We had time to pick up a Snickers candy bar but nothing else. Many times, Fritz has offered to take my dad up, but he’s either too busy or chicken. Missing out! This was one of the most incredible things I’ve ever done. You just take a couple steps forward and WOOSH, you’re up in the air as free as a bird. It was a beautiful 40 minute ride with 360-degree-big-as-you-can-get views. I only wish I could do this over my home town, so I can see everywhere like a bird. Anyways, I learned from Fritz that you can tell where the thermals are by looking at the clouds forming above



Alex very high in the Alps.

a point of a mountain. So we would circle around the same area and gain up to 20 feet per second. Fritz said any more, and “We would risk a collapsed wing,” something I’d take his words for.

The only thing not beautiful about our flight was our landing. Fritz told me to run when we touch down, so I tried but was tugged back and into my seat. I quickly fell over, turned over, was stepped on by Fritz, and then dragged by a re-inflated parachute. So if you go parasailing—run.

In Fritz style, we quickly packed up the ‘chute and we were complaining of hunger so much, he said “fine, I take you to eat.” (We stopped for maybe eight minutes in the bottom floor of a supermarket.) We walked back to Fritz’s place and “now we go on a hike.” By this time, it was around 6:00 with the sun starting to hover over the horizon. We loaded up his car, and left town, again heading up a trail.

During our 45-minute drive, I learned that Fritz is an interesting pile of contradictions. We started talking about his aggravation with farmers’ attitudes towards everything from tax-refunds to roads. I asked him “do you consider yourself a city person or a country one?” “Oh, nobody knows these hills better than me, I grew up out here.” Yet he owns a hotel in the city, and every five minutes he’d say “look as this grass, you know, farmers are paid not to cut it, then cut it; not to make milk, to make milk, etc.” As he says this, we pass some fundamentalists. “Ah, earth-mamas, always trying to tell us what to do, wool socks and wool dresses.” This leads us to his explanation of his new gun license. It took him four years to earn it, and he is already preparing for his first season of hunting starting in September. This lead to discussing the private farming roads that the state paid for. I’m a little confused about the issue, but I guess you’re supposed to have a license for driving on these back roads. But Fritz says, “I have not and will not ever pay to drive on these roads tax-payers like me paid for. Look at these farmers—how much taxes have they paid? And they get to use them.”

Ah well, regardless, Fritz is a warm guy, with so much energy it has earned him a reputation region wide.

Later we arrive at a little grassy spot, park and head up yet another mountain. We reach the summit just in time for sunset, with a herd of Ibex not 15 yards from us. It was a surreal scene with Interlaken far below us, with a man that can name every mountain in sight and brag he’s climbed up and skied down nearly everyone of them too.

Fritz later drove us to the gondola station below Gimmelwald. Exhausted and hungry, we arrived at our hostel, grabbed our sheets and dove into them. If you’re going to have a “day of fun and adventure” with Fritz, make sure you’ve had good sleep and a lot of food in your belly. Something of which Alex and I had neither, but nonetheless, I will never forget our day with Fritz. - Andy

Mountain Hostel Switzerland - Alex (July 16)

Well, we are staying in a great hostel called mountain hostel in Gimmelwald high above Interlaken. It has been great hanging out with people from all over the US, and hearing stories about their travels. For example, Andy and I got back from a day excursion to the top of a mountain where we took some pictures and did some sledding and had a good time, but we got back at around 7 and



our friend, Rich (who sleeps below me and always seems to end up with my blanket in the morning—we both have no idea how that happens) had met some hot twins earlier and invited us to go hot tubbing (yes, the hostel has a hot tub!). It ended up being 5 guys and 2 girls, not the best ratio—but fun considering we were all packed in a four-person hot tub. We all just talked about where we came from, school, where we had been, and where we were planning on going in Europe.

After that everyone sat down for dinner in what looks like a summer camp dining room. I guess everyone but Andy and I pitched in 10 Swiss francs for a huge dinner that a chef that is staying here cooked. But Andy and I had food from the store, like a salad, pizza, and bananas and we survived. We ate with Rich and had a great talk about business trends, religion, school (he is 23 and graduated from school in Texas and had a lot of college advice for us).

After that, people cleaned up and just chilled. People were playing the piano, drums and whatever they could find and just singing and having a blast. I ended up getting involved in an intense game of hearts, 13, and an hour-long UNO game until we all just about fell asleep on our cards. We went to bed and woke up this morning once again to the sound of flies and those freakin' goats who I swear I want to kill because they wake me up every morning at 6:00. They just won't shut up! I decided to stay at the hostel today because it was overcast and rainy. We have been reading, playing chess, and talking to people passing through. It's been great relaxing day and a great stay over all.



Friends at the hostel.

Layover Day - Alex

Today Andy and I had basically an entire day to just chill. We are taking a night train to Rome, and are staying there for a day and then catching another night train to Sicily. So, we got up and left the hostel with two new friends, Missy and Kristen, and we headed down to Interlaken. We said our good-byes and Andy and I headed over to a swimming pool that we had seen on the train ride up. It was awesome! It ended up being a large workout place that had a 30-foot-high dive, volley ball court, tennis court, restaurant and lots of space to lie out and play soccer.

We got there about 11:30 or so and it was overcast so not many people were there so we had the pool to ourselves. While sitting and eating some bread we met 2 guys from Texas who had just graduated college and we started talking about the Tour de France for like an hour. So, by this time it was 1 and the high part of the high dive (it is split into 6 sections at different heights) didn't open till two and so we spent the rest of that hour psyching ourselves out by looking at how high it was.

We did a couple practice rounds on the 15 footer and got our confidence up. 30 feet may not sound very high, but when you standing at the edge of that looking down into the water and look around and see 20 people watching to see what you do, you get nervous. When we got to the ledge, there were 6 or more kids just standing there deciding whether or not to jump. So...I just literally pushed them all aside and took a running leap off. I swear I was going at least 25 mph because right before you hit you could feel the wind running through your hair and the impact of that water hurt bad if you didn't have your feet pointed and arms at your side.

We all jumped about 3 times and got a snack at the bar and some random kid came up to us and asked if we wanted to play volley ball. We walked with him over to the sand court and embarked on an intense game of 6 on 6 verses some German guys and a girl that looked like Big Foot's daughter. She was a machine and when she would spike the ball you would just step aside to avoid the pain. We played for about 45 minutes and then decided to go for another swim and then we went our separate ways. It was a really, really nice day of nothing!

Rome to Sicily - Alex (July 19)

Last night, Andy and I took a 15 hour train ride from Rome to Palermo, Sicily. That train ride was one of the most uncomfortable nights so far. We had a layover day in Rome where we just grabbed a bit to eat at a pizza place (by the way, pizza prices are really good—for €5 you get a great full-sized pizza) and walked around the Spanish steps and down all the fancy shopping streets with Gucci, Fendi, Prada, and so on. That made us feel really poor. Also, we dropped by the Colosseum and the ancient Forum and walked around a bit and listened to some guided tours as we pretended to tie our shoe for five minutes—haha. We caught the train at about 9 the evening and after a long day in hot and muggy Rome we were so sticky and gross. This, and the fact that we had taken a night train and still had sweat from the day before didn't help. When we got to the train station we saw shower signs that looked to be connected to the bathroom. Like a cruel joke, the shower signs directed us all around the station and we could never find them. That was really really annoying.



Sleeping on the train.

I got so desperate that I decided to take a shower on the train in the sink. This is pretty funny because as soon as I went in the bathroom a nun started a line behind me to use the same bathroom. Well, needless to say I made kind of a mess because the sink was on a 5 second timer and I had to splash water on me and get in some really weird positions that I think yoga would have helped with. By the time I finished there wasn't a dry spot in the bathroom. I proceeded to dry myself off with toilet paper and when I got back to our compartment I had bits and pieces of toilet paper all over my body because that stuff falls off easily when wet.

Andy and I spent our first day in Sicily on the beach. We met a guy named Paul, who graduated from school in Mississippi or somewhere down south. The 3 of us chilled on the beach all day. Well, actually, the way the beach is set up there really isn't much public area because the tide comes in really far and there are mini shacks that private owners rent out. So—there is only about 4 feet of public beach, which meant we had our back against a fence and feet in the water, but we still had a good time.

That afternoon we caught the train to Messina (still in Sicily). We got in and spend a good part of our evening searching for an internet place. Our two hour search could have been cut in half if people down here actually spoke a word of English, or if we spoke a word of Italian. We kept getting send on wild goose chases. At about 8 or so we split up. Andy went one direction in search of one more lead for an internet place and I went in another direction in search of food. Andy had the map and I—with my horrible short term memory—had forgotten the name of our hotel. So, I went in the direction of where I thought our hotel was, but in retrospect missed it by one street! I ended up being lost for 3 hours in the city and must have walked five miles searching.

I actually passed the same couple 4 times while they ate dinner and by the 3rd and 4th pass they just laughed and stared at me. It was horrible. Now that I think about it, I must have appeared scary to people walking by me because I was swearing, punching my fists in frustration, and wearing clothes with holes all over. I was nearly in tears and ready to sit down next to a gang of stray cats when I decided to try one last time at asking someone for help. I went into a hotel and found probably the only person in Messina who speaks English. She ended up calling all the hotels in town and asking for a reservation under our names. I would probably still be on the streets now if not for her help. I got back to the hotel, bought and ate two full-sized pizzas, and just crashed.

European Driving - Andy

I've been thinking about European drivers recently. Everybody drives with a sense that "of course there is no one around this corner on a one-lane road with rocks on one side and a cliff on the other."

Also having to do with traffic, something I thought was quite funny happened last night. Alex and I were now into our second hour looking for an internet cafe, when I decided to ask a Sicilian police officer where I might find one. Because he didn't speak English, I made the motions of fingers on a keyboard. Shortly after, we arrived at a piano store. On the way there, this officer accompanied us while we blatantly walked when the little guy was red as well which subsequently stopped lots of traffic. Just one of those things that can only happen outside the US!

Why Sicily?- Andy (July 21)

Alex and I are in Sicily right now. Maybe around six months ago, I spent a good week out of school being sick—so like any other kid in their right mind, I made my way to the video store and picked out a couple movies. I chose Godfather I, Godfather II and, of course, the third. This quickly got me hooked, and it wasn't much longer before I went and bought the original book. It was a great book, and I later found out that the author was on the set of nearly every scene in the movies so it mirrored it almost perfectly. So, this got me thinking about "Sicilia." Currently, I'm reading a book about the "maxi-trials" that took place in the early nineties that were designed to cripple the mafia, and eventually do away with it.

When I think about why I am fascinated by the mafia, I realized these events happened when I was alive. Consequently, I can almost relate to it, as opposed to studying about Louis the Whatever in European history. On the other hand, these "Mafioso" had a very strong influence all the way through the end of the '80s and there are even some small cells operating today. That kind of stuff is amazing to me.

While working to pay for this trip, I spent a lot of time with a lady in my dad's office who guides his Italy tours. She explained to me that the mafia is so secret that many people live their whole lives in Sicily never knowing exactly what it is and how it works. She said to watch for all the freeways in Sicily and how they're all on stilts. The reason for this was that the mafia secured contracts from the government, and put them through tough building terrain to inflate prices and get more money.

More Sicilia (Palermo and Corelone) - Andy (July 23)

Let me talk a little more about the Sicilian culture I've learned over the last couple days here. In a couple of the books I've read about the island, they've all mentioned one word: "Omerta." Basically, this means "silence." In other words, people in Sicily keep to themselves and mind their own business.

They take this to the extreme. In the late '80s and early '90s, there were even cases of dead bodies that were left to rot in open truck beds in Palermo. Several days passed with nobody contacting the police, and eventually the only reason they were contacted is because some construction workers were having a hard time working through such a stench on their site down the block. Crazy!



The Godfather's hometown.

Also, kids were taught never to talk to strangers—even to offer directions. This was because somebody could be asking for the house of somebody they were about to murder, and consequently the family of whoever told them where they lived could all be killed off. The mafia here was pretty extreme.

This brings up another interesting point. The word “mafia” is almost never uttered. Instead, people refer to the phenomenon as “Cosa Nostra,” or “our thing.” As with many other things, Sicilians have pride, especially when it comes to this, and to title organized crime with such a euphemism is amazing. Members of the mafia were never called that. Instead (if ever talked about) they were called “men of honor” or “a friend of the friends.” There’s so much I don’t even know about or understand about this, especially because I’m an outsider. I have a hard time imagining what lays in the dark and the recent history of Sicily’s “Cosa Nostra.”

Club Searching in Palermo - Alex (July 24)

The past two days have been pretty low-key for us. We took an uneventful night train to Naples last night but that’s about it. However, on Friday night Andy and I decided not to be losers and go to bed at 11:30 again so we ventured out onto the city.

We had a tip from a guy that was passing out fliers on the beach a few days earlier about a club 40 minutes away on the beach so we hopped on the train at 10:45 and we were off. No sooner had we boarded the train when 6 local teenage boys (probably about 15 years-old) got on and basically started hitting on anything with breasts. The Sicilian guys are very, very aggressive and from what we have noticed act pretty immature. But, we started talking to them in our very limited Italian and they tried to talk to us in their English that mostly consisted of “son of a bitch” and F-YOU, but they seemed to be nice. We showed them the club we wanted to go to and they told us to get off at a certain stop. We hopped off and seemed lost so they got off as well and helped us out. We were walking for a good 15 minutes before they looked at the club address and realized we were going the wrong way and headed back to the hotel. So, now it is 11:30 and the last bus leaves at midnight but we have a taxi number so we aren’t too worried if we stay longer down here and miss it. We finally get to the club and what would you know...it’s closed!

Our little tour guides leave us because they have a 11 o’clock curfew so we are on our own again. We keep on walking and decided to ask some cops for directions (remember no one speaks English so there are a lot of hand signals involved) and they tell us to go the best club in town; they walk with us for a few blocks and...it’s the exact same club that we just came from that was closed! We then started walking down all the streets and asking people our age on the street where the parties are and they just kind of look at us funny and sometimes they would tell us but it would result in a dead end. We tried soooooo hard that night to find some place to dance and meet pretty ladies but all our hopes were shot down hard core.

By that time, we gave up and managed to catch what we thought was the last bus back to town. But it only took us 2 blocks and the driver said that he felt like being off of work so the ride was over. He said he thought there should be another bus coming but he didn’t know when or if it even was going to come. So, we waited at a bus stop for 30 minutes until a group of nurses from the US who were interning here offered to share a cab ride with us. We took them up on the offer and one of the women had been living here for 6 months and recommended a really lively hang out spot and told the driver to drop Andy and me off there.

By this time it was 1:15 and we got to the ally and it was just packed with bars and people sitting in the street and drinking. We walked the ally for a while and actually found 2 clubs but for some odd reason they were completely empty. We were both really tired from this entire day and didn’t really feel like starting up a conversation with people that didn’t speak English so we walked back to our hotel and crashed. Interesting evening though. - Alex



Naples and the big rip-off - Andy (July 26)

So let's talk about Naples. For some reason, the name reminds me of "armpit," I don't know why, maybe it's just the sound of it. I don't like it much. For these past couple nights, we've been staying in Sorrento, about an hour by train outside of the big city. Today, we decided to take a day trip to the city. As we were coming in, we could smell it as well as see the smog before we could even see the towers of the city. We spent an exhausting day just walking around. We saw the aquarium as well as did the guided walking tour in my dad's book. Of course we stopped at the gelato place he recommends at the end, which I guess is the oldest in the city. Besides being incredibly regular, the ice cream wasn't even that good. The only thing that set it apart was the goofy white and pink stripe uniforms the scoopers had to wear.

When we were finished with our sightseeing, we turned toward the "Stazione Centrale." When we were about 150 meters from the station, we stopped at one of the street vendors you're never supposed to.

This one was cool though, they had 3 cell phones, 2 nice cameras as well as a video camera. And each was top of the line. So we stopped and started talking to the guy. He starts off at 150 euros, but we get him down to 100 euros total for 2 phones. This was a real nice deal, especially considering the same phones were being sold in the store at the end of the street for 6 or 7 times as much. Skeptical, I even called my friend's mom in the USA. She answered and I talked with her for about a minute, then I said I'd explain later. So Alex and I were like, "let's do it." Alex had the fifty euros on him, but I needed to stop at the corner for an ATM. All the signs were there, he was attempting to put everything in a small box, cell phones with the cords. Which made sense; he was just trying to keep a low profile. So we three made our way down to the corner. By this time, he had put the box in a plastic bag and was tying it. We hadn't given him the money yet. I eventually got my money, and both Alex and I paid him. We shook hands and he gave us the box and we walked our separate ways.

We stopped into a small bar to get a sandwich before catching the train, Alex popped the box open as I was ordering. All he saw was a water bottle fitting snugly in there. Awwwww mannn! It sucked sooo bad! Imagine being a giddy kid, after what you thought was an honest deal between us and him, getting a real nice cell phone they don't even sell in the states. I don't even care about the 50 euros that much. It sucks, but I mean I had it coming; I just wanted to play with my new phone that had bluetooth, mp3, 1.3 meg camera, color screen, video camera, and everything! Then, besides the financial slap, it's the whole mental one too. You're just stunned, and thinking, "damn!"

But no, I ain't going to be one of those freakin' idiots. I know he's gonna be on the same corner tomorrow morning. Alex and I both agree it's time to be a man. I'm gonna get that phone back, and Alex will get his back. We got a long train ride tomorrow, and I wanna have the phone I paid for.

So guess what Neapolitain, you got a couple American boys coming for you tomorrow. I know this isn't smart—of course he could have a knife—but I want that phone. I got my big class ring on my middle finger, and I'm about to leave a "2005" in someone's

forehead. Of course, I'm not looking for violence, Alex and I are just gonna go on a jog around the neighborhood, and pick up some phones. Hopefully, he'll have gotten too drunk—courtesy of us—the night before, and will sadly get a sideache in about one city block. Oh well, I'll tell you how it goes. Andy

P.S. I don't like Naples. Save money as well as time and spend it for better things in the Cinque Terre or Sicily.

Palermo, Naples and Florence— Andy (July 28)

Alright, so we went back into Naples with an entire plan of how we were going to swipe the phones, as well as how we were going to get away. We spent a while looking for him, but never actually found him. This is the kind of thing that I know I'll be squirming about when I'm 50. I have a hard time when someone gets the better of me.

In the last week we've been in Naples, Amalfi Coast, Sicily and now Florence. The changes in culture have been interesting. I've heard people tell me that the farther south you get in Italy, the crazier it gets. However, I really enjoyed Palermo. It had just the right number of people running red lights, and the right combination of crazy and nice people. One thing I noticed during my time there was the reaction of people when I asked them if they spoke English. Instead of shaking their head no, a little out of shame, like it seems some Northerners do (in Cinque Terre, Rome, Florence) these Sicilians would laugh at you. Several even proudly proclaimed "Dees ees Sicilia! No Speeka Anglaize!" Despite the inconvenience, I ended up enjoying their pride, finding myself admiring it. Again, they have a very deep culture, and it makes itself evident in a million ways.

We took a night train from Palermo to Naples. The difference was like day and night. Naples was much dirtier, much darker, and much more impersonal. Maybe my opinion is tainted by my experience of being conned, but in the end, I don't care. The only reason I think I would return is to come with a group of my buddies and find the dude that made a fool of me.

"The Amalfi Coast is so beautiful, though!" you might say. In reality, it really isn't. The smog in the region seems to rival LA. And the only way to really enjoy the area, I'm sure, is to drop more than €500 a day, something I wasn't about to do.



In our Florence hotel, the lady at the desk was a nun.

Yesterday we came into Florence. Big change. Immediately I noticed people obeying traffic signals, and even yielding a few times! People were more considerate. But I also noticed the tourists. The place is full of foreigners. I don't know yet what I think of that, because I always enjoy speaking English. So it's all good. I'll let you know if we see the David.



Hunger - Alex

Andy and I are on a budget and that means we have to have limits and can't just buy everything and anything our hearts desire. Also, part of being on a budget means knowing how to make a penny scream by pinching it so tight. A perfect example of this is food. It's easy to go out to a restaurant and spend 20 euros on a meal that will last you 3 hours or so and you'll be pretty fulfilled. However, in our case we go to the store and spend 9 euros and have enough food to last us the whole day. We'll eat little things like crackers that we can snack on all day long and it costs a fraction of a restaurant. Usually I will buy apples, bananas, pre-made sandwiches, a loaf of bread, cookies, and once in a while peanut butter (a jar lasts days). Once in a while we can buy meat for some good protein. That is pretty typical and we hit most of the main food groups.

Breakfast is a different story. We Americans love our large, full and hearty breakfasts—one as meaty and big as a dinner. However, Europeans prefer a piece of bread, maybe some butter, water, and if you are lucky another piece of bread. So as you can see, a meal that's important to us, just isn't that important to them.

Sometimes I wonder if we have been malnourishing ourselves. Andy and I have become very accustomed to eating a piece of bread in the morning and due to the budget we sometimes won't eat until the afternoon—that is, until our stomachs start to hurt. This may sound bad, but we've become used to this pattern. When we haven't eaten in 6 or more hours, we know we need to eat but the sight of food sometimes makes me sick and I just can't eat it—or if I do I have to in small doses. I dare say that we may have had malnutrition to a degree because we would sleep up to 12 hours a day (including naps) and eat small meals and most of the time only 2 main meals a day. But now we realized that this was a mistake and by spending an extra 5 euros a day for food, we were living normally again. But hey, you live and learn and we are young enough that we can bounce back. Getting old will really, really suck.

Friends in Other Places - Andy (July 29)

One of the aspects I've really enjoyed about our trip is the people we've met—both those we already knew and new friends we've made along the way. We've had good people experiences in each city—some were planned, and others were pure accident. For example, on our 2nd day in Europe, as I was leaving the hotel, I ran into Ben, one of my father's tour guides. In Paris, we met up with a family from Washington state and spent a day with them. In Madrid, we made friends with a couple girls attending the U of O. Next, in Barcelona, we met up with the son of Alex's mother's friend who was doing some foreign study. In the French Riviera, we met up with a school group from our high school. The day after we left them, we bumped into Ben and his group again in the Cinque Terre. After that, we made friends with the couple of Belgians and Taiwanese kids in France as we watched the Tour de France. When we got in to Interlaken, Switzerland, we spent a whole day with Fritz, a hotel manager recommended in my father's guidebooks. In Sicily, we met some people from an American cruise that docked for the day in the town we were staying in. Naples was the only city we didn't see people we knew in, and also it has been the only city I didn't like (correlation?). Now, in Florence, we've met up with my mom and sister and spent the last few days with them.



Good travel is all about people.

It's amazing when I think how big this world really is, but around every corner there's someone I know. It really makes this world seem less huge, as it should, and consequently, the borders between "us" and "them" are blurred more and more. As technology also works to make this a smaller and smaller world, I believe it's important to experience, through travel, how each of us is in this life together and how every one deserves the same respect. — Andy

Night Life - Alex

The nightlife in Europe is very fun. We never really went out at night until we got to Madrid and since then we've been having a blast. The most recent example was two nights ago when we did what is called a Florence pub crawl. You pay €15 and get into 4 bars and a club at the very end while getting great drink specials at each bar.

We met a whole bunch of new people, but everyone we meet is in their mid-20s and most of them have graduated college already. Therefore, I tell most girls that I am 20 or 22 depending on how much they've had to drink and how long my beard is. So it's kind of weird at first to talk to them because our lives are in such different places but they are all really easy to talk to and the age difference doesn't affect anything in the end.

Anyway, the Florence pub crawl ended at a club and the majority of the people dancing there were from our tour because it was a Thursday night and not many locals were out. Now, this isn't something that I am proud of by any means, but I feel comfortable enough saying it on the web because no one can laugh at my face (at least until I get home). So, here's the story: We get to the club at about 11:30 and everyone is drinking and having a great time and just dancing. (FYI, Europeans dance very very strange. Basically think of how you would dance in your room with no one watching and that's basically how they dance.)



Scuzi, would you care to dance?

So one of my friends, a high school teacher from Australia, and I started working the dance floor. The first person I tried talking and dancing with was a 5 foot 7 Italian bombshell that was dancing very provocatively by herself so I figured why not give it a shot...I was wrong. I went up to her and of course she didn't speak English so I tried dancing with her and she just gave me a blank stare like "what are you doing, do you realize how hot I am?" So I tried my pick-up line, roughly translated it means you are the prettiest girl in the world, and I basically was digging myself into a ditch and ended up getting pushed away.

I went back to where Andy was sitting and sat for a while until I got enough confidence built up again to try my luck. To make a long story short, I was rejected by 14 girls that night (and there probably were only 10 there, so think about how desperate I was). That had to be one of the darkest days so far. But the pub crawl was awesome in general; I would highly recommend it.

Andy and I have been really enjoying the nightlife in Europe. We've met great people all along the way—many who we've stayed in contact with. It will be a real change of pace to go back to our little old hometown of Edmonds and not be able to go out onto a heavily crowded street and find something to do. But college is only a month away so I'll manage.

Italians Behind the Wheel - Andy (July 30)

When I think of Italians, I see rolling hills, and deep green valleys covered with the stripes of vineyards. I see relaxed people, killing time with a bottle of wine, cheese and some bread. I see others relaxing on the beach getting ever closer to the color of dirt, in more ways than one (through skin cancer as well as the desired skin tone). I can hear them saying, "Don'ta worry abawt eet. Enjoya da beecha."

But everything completely changes when they get behind the wheel of a car, or take a seat on their little mopeds. Horns seem to make up a constant and angry symphony. When they see a hesitating pedestrian, they aim for them. When a light has been red for too long, they decide to take the "logical option" and run it. Speed limit signs are rare...and rarely followed. Aggressive driving attitudes are universal too—bus drivers to old ladies—everyone needs to get where they're going 5 minutes ago. Just another curiosity of Italia.

Girls - Alex (August 1)

OK, let's touch on a topic that we haven't mentioned much so far: girls. They are a beautiful thing and seem to be even more beautiful in Europe. However, it is probably the scariest thing in the world to go up to a gorgeous Sicilian woman who doesn't speak any English and try and talk to her. But, we seem to manage just fine. Andy has a girlfriend back at home (I feel bad for him because they are really hot over here) so I usually fly solo. But he comes along for support sometimes.

But...one thing I've learned is that all girls really are is trouble. Take last Saturday night for example, Andy and I were going all out because it was our last night not only in Florence but also our last Saturday in Europe. So we went back to the same club that had put me to shame the other night.

As soon as we walked in the door (around midnight) I saw these two beautiful British girls. So naturally I was scared to death to talk to them. The fact that they had literally a line of guys following them didn't help my confidence. Also, I was still recovering from the night that I was rejected 14 times, so I gave it about 30 minutes and got warmed up. We started talking and they seemed nice enough, but as soon as they asked me to buy them a drink I should have walked away...but they were just too pretty and every guy there wanted to be me at that moment so I had to. It wasn't that bad though, we got some drinks and started dancing for a while and had some "fun" and about 30 minutes into it I had to go to the bathroom so I left and told them I'd be right back. Well...when I got back (remember there is about 8 or 10 guys dancing around us just waiting to cut in so I had to just glare at all of them and fend them off like savage dogs) my girls were of course dancing with other guys. I went up to one of the girls and touched her shoulder and she slapped me! She turned around and looked at me and said no! I'm still a little confused about that but they were just using me in the end for my money. Also, I got in a fight because some guy tried to cut in and I told him no and he pushed me. Well, I don't take that sitting down, so let's just say I let him know how I felt. In general that whole night was just drama and I suppose I always knew that anytime you mix girls, alcohol, dancing, and money it will lead to trouble.

That was two nights ago. Last night we went out again on Rome Pub Crawl put on by the same guys who did the one in Florence. I met some more pretty ladies and we also had some more “fun” and met some great people. They were the same type of girls—I can spot them a mile away because they are the ones that when you go up and say hi and try and shake their hand they just look at it and give you that look like “excuse me, what do you think you are doing?” But as soon as you pull your wallet out they are your best friends. But I avoided them and just hung out with the people that were actually nice to us. I think tonight I’ll stay in and actually sleep—that sounds like a great idea.

Last Day in Europe - Alex

Today is our last day in Europe and I have mixed emotions. To start with, I have loved every minute of this trip and am really, really not looking forward to going back to little old Edmonds where on a Saturday night when you get bored you go to the mall. Contrast that with everywhere we have been where you can walk the streets in some of the biggest cities in the world and always find something interesting to do. It’ll be quite the shock to go back. The trip has seemed to go by so fast that I feel we just arrived in Amsterdam yesterday. Everything in-between is a blur. On the other hand, I do want to go home because all my friends are leaving for college in about 10 days and I want to hang out with them before they leave.

And I of course want to see my family. It is rather odd, though. For being gone for 45 days I never got homesick. All I missed, to tell you the truth, was my dog (as soon as my mom reads this I’m a dead man, haha). Writing on the subject of leaving Europe is for some reason, at least for me, difficult because every time I try and write about leaving I have retrospection on a certain place we visited. My mind will wander to a fond memory of a fun night, great friends we have met, and everything in-between (think of Switzerland: paragliding and drinking 3 liters of beer out of a glass boot, think of Sicily: the most beautiful women and a melting pot of the world, think of France: Tour de France and hitchhiking while meeting some great people from around the world and what more is there to say than just PARIS). I’m so glad it’s that way though. This trip has been more than I’ve expected. I can’t imagine going to college without going on a trip like this, really learning about so many things but especially really learning about me. And learning to be independent. I’ve LOVED every minute of it.

Trip Highlights - Alex

This trip had a full itinerary and was filled with great memories. However, the one place I regret not spending more time in was Barcelona. We only stayed for one night because of a prior engagement in Nice. I wish we would have cut Naples out of the trip and had those days in Barcelona. Here’s what I’ll do, I’ll list all the cities / countries we visited and give a quick overview.

1. Amsterdam: WOW!!!!!! I think that pretty much sums Amsterdam up, haha. Actually Andy and I were really mellow there because we had bad jet lag and would go to bed at about 10 every night and wake up at 2 in the morning. Also, we were in a town outside Amsterdam (Haarlem) and not much was going

on at 2 a.m. So I would play cards while Andy watched MTV—that seemed to happen every night. In spite of the “nightlife,” Amsterdam was awesome.

2. France: Umm...well Paris was interesting—but it didn’t meet my expectations for being “the city of love.” Actually it was a dirty city and the closest thing to love I saw was teenage guys, like in Italy, yelling at girls as they walked by. However, as nerdy as it sounds they do have some really interesting museums and historic places. Monaco and Nice were amazing. Monaco reminded me exactly of Maui, Hawaii. When you looked out of the city from certain vantage points you’d see all the high-rise apartments and beautiful harbor and water. Money is a huge driving force there and for that exact reason I loved it. You could walk down the street and see ten Bentleys and countless Ferraris and Lamborghinis; it was great!

3. Spain: To tell you the truth, I hated Madrid at first. All it really is is a town in the middle of a desert that gets freakishly hot and for some reason some jackass decided to build a city there. However, after we met some people to hang out with—two girls that were studying there—the city was great. And how could I forget the incident when I was attacked by a hooker late one night coming back from the bars. I was walking down the street and Andy was on the other side of me and all of the sudden a huge figure came at me and well...there was definite cuppage. Barcelona was great. I loved it because it was on the beach and, again, because I had a friend there. Ryan, who is studying there, made a lot of things easier because he spoke fluent Spanish and actually knew what to do in the town. The best memory by far, though,



Summer sledding atop the Jungfrau.

was when we visited Ryan's host family and they put on this huge meal in our honor. When we were watching EuroSport TV, Andy and I fell fast asleep and from what Ryan tells me the family would just point and laugh at us and poke us, but then we woke up! Kind of random, but it was great—all part of the experience. After dinner the dad showed us his gun collection. I'll never forget Andy holding a gun from the Napoleonic wars in front of a trap door with enough guns for a private army? It was amazing, some of the guns dated back hundreds of years.

4. Switzerland: What else is there to say about Switzerland besides outdoor sports? The people that live there are freakin' crazy! Our first full day, we went on this very intense outdoor activity day with Fritz....we went mountain biking for 4 hours, paragliding, and hiking, all literally right after each other while not stopping for food. Everyone there is so fit I wouldn't be surprised to hear the life expectancy is 200 years. That was in Interlaken and then we went to the hostel in Gimmewald where we basically chilled and hung out with new friends all day long. Quite a different experience and I loved it. I kind of wish we would have stayed in more hostels along the way but then again in cheap hotels you don't have a curfew and you don't get kicked out in the morning.

5. Italy: Let's start with Cinque Terre. By far the most beautiful place we visited. I don't know how else to describe it besides WOW, and that's every person's reaction. Also we met some great people when we would roam the towns at night. Good memories. Sicily...in a nutshell Sicily is a birthing place for the hottest women and a melting pot where Africa, Europe, new and old all come together. Andy really is into the whole Mafia thing so that made it an interesting experience. The funny thing is, every time we told a local Italian we were going to Sicily they would do the hand motion of slitting the throat...every time. People think we are crazy for going there, but you have to go looking for that kind of trouble and be really stupid to get involved in it. It felt as safe as most other places we visited. Naples...All I will say about Naples is a third of the people there are unemployed. Florence... everyone seems to say this is their favorite city in Europe. Florence was amazing mainly because we met up with Andy's mom and sister (Anne and Jackie) so we got a lot of free meals and good company. The sights were cool but having new people to talk to was really important also. We did the pub crawl there too; I would recommend that to anyone around my age (18-28) which was great and we have a lot of new friends and probably places to stay around the world for free. I liked Florence, but I liked Rome more. I will sum our trip: GREAT.

Reflections - Andy (August 6)

Yes, so our trip is finally, and sadly over. Now, it's time for me to enlighten my audience with an especially profound idea or new outlook on life. Thing is though, I don't have just one single thing to say. That's what you begin to realize when you're overseas. Sure, you may spend an hour in this museum, or see that attraction,

but you're in Europe 24/7 not just during museum hours. It's the people you meet, the random things you see, different cultures you experience that make up the real substance of a foreign adventure, and that's what makes you a different person when you return home.

While I was over in Europe, I thought a lot about time itself. It's a strange thing. Every time I start trying to understand time, I end up more confused about it. For me, the middle of the trip, like in Switzerland, seems farther away to me than saying good-bye to my parents at the airport back in June. Then I consider how people save up for years for a month-long vacation, putting in extra hours, and waiting on buying something like a car. Our vacation was over in a snap. This almost seems depressing, and that's why I usually stop thinking about it there. But really, it's the memories that last in your mind. You wish you could share them, but in the end, only you were at a spot in time as well as space. No one can ever be there the same way you were. That's life though, and that's what makes it special; people must make the most of every second of every day. Otherwise, you start regretting time wasted like standing in lines for 2 hours for a special attraction (that's why you need good guidebooks ;-).

Also, now I know what the travel bug is, and yes, I consider myself a victim. I look forward to my next trip, and while I enjoyed this trip to the fullest extent, I also considered it a practice one for subsequent adventures. Thanks for reading, and hope you enjoyed it.

For those of you that are curious, I leave for the University of Notre Dame in about a week, and look forward to studying at there. I have a wide range of interests including Business, Architecture and Mechanical Engineering. By my graduation, right now, I hope to have worked out some kind of combination of two of those subjects mentioned. However, while I was over in Europe, the idea of studying romance languages popped in to my head. Because I already got French mostly under my belt, I've been planning to study Italian in college, and possibly Spanish after that because it has so many speakers across the world.

Thanks again, and enjoy your own travels! Andy



And now we go to college...