

The Alternative Line

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for Publication in CNY-PCA Redline Report

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Been There... Done That...

On Tuesday morning 9/19/00 my passport showed Brazil and Mexico, the result of having vacationed in the “third world” a few years back, plus a recent business trip for a week to Mexico City, which was much like Rio. If you remember my writeup on why Brazil produces so many Formula One race drivers, you can be sure Mexico is only behind because of fewer people in total.

At noon on Tuesday I was informed that I had to go to Zurich that night to witness a test of high-voltage circuit breaker equipment. I was to meet an expert in the field (I had never even SEEN one at the time) from Scotland on Wednesday, and we were to go to the vendor Thursday morning. Oh, and by the way; could you pop over to Slovenia on Friday, and Italy on the following Monday & Tuesday to qualify a couple of new supplier plants? Despite the language barrier between us (Scottish and English have never really reconciled one another), it went very well and I learned a lot. It helped that the Zurich vendor knew their jobs VERY well.

So I arranged flights and scurried around to find the necessary paperwork (to qualify a plant, they must have a specific job, and then must demonstrate they can meet all the required specs for the job. So I have to collect all the specs before I leave and carry them, since few vendors bother to read that THEY are supposed to produce all those documents for my arrival, and I HATE to waste that time). Anyway, the flights required me to go from Albany NY to Boston, then to Zurich on the redeye that evening. I would arrive Wednesday mid-morning, but had no confirmation from the Scotsman before I left that he knew the place we would meet, and would be incognito once I hit the first plane. Oh well, trepidation is not my strong suit – onward! It worked.

After looking at a map, I realized I had no idea where Slovenia was, but I had this sinking feeling I had to fly through Bosnia to get there. Thankfully, such was not the case; I was going via Klagenfurt, Austria, with barely a half hour ride by car further southeast. It was then I realized I was to be within 100 miles of Gmund, but had NO chance to see it. Then the ultimate irony set in; I was to be BETWEEN the two Formula One tracks in Italy; Imola and Monza, exactly two weeks late and on the one weekend when THEY were to be in the USA for the first time in nine years. As I write this, Michael Schumacher and Ferrari have won the race at Indy, while Hakkinen and M-B have suffered frustrating setbacks, making the championship a real uphill battle to wrest from Michael in the last two races. But not impossible, yet. I note this especially, as I am sitting in the Firenze, Italy airport, waiting to board a flight which has now been delayed past my connection time at Paris for my flight back to the USA. As you might guess, sitting in a little pasta shop in Ponte e Poppi (about 40 miles SE of Florence in the Appenine Mountains) on Sunday night, surrounded by people who spoke no English, while I spoke no Italian and therefore could not understand the commentators, was a trip. But there was NO DOUBT who they wanted to win, and the cheering was wild when Schuey passed Coulthard THROUGH the esses following his jump of the start, and then when Hakkinen's car caught fire. When Barricello finished second to Michael at the end, I thought they were going to enshrine the TV right there! And I found no problem figuring out a LOT of Italian words the next day in the paper (can You say “Up In Fuma?”). Gratsie.

Before I ramble away with the real point of all this, I must tell you that I was back in Zurich for Friday and Saturday nights, so decided on a lark to take the day train to Stuttgart and back. Once there, I paid a cabbie to take me to both Porschestrasse and the M-B (excuse me... DaimlerChrysler... Yeah, right) works. And he was ALMOST the hit of the trip. We arrived to find everything closed except the soon-to-open world marketing showroom, where I spent the

few precious moments available praising the capabilities of the Tiptronic, and my anxious anticipation of the AWD Turbo Cabrio with Tip, due in 2002. It will be almost the perfect car. Beating the cabbie by a slight margin was the pair of farmers with beer-hall accordians who provided impromptu entertainment of the polka variety for the train riders, and whom I could not resist buying beers for, in keeping with my experience with the guitar in Canada. The pretty young woman who interpreted for us was a nice treat for the eyes as well, though the scenery is excellent in the area.

But NOTHING could compare with my travels to and from the plant near Poppi. In keeping with corporate rules, I had a mid-size car with air. It turned out to be an Opel Astra station wagon. I only realized it was a diesel when I topped it off before returning it to Hertz, and read the flap door. At least that explained the throttle response (none) and redline (five grand). Reading Italian road signs is an exercise in futility – they are by no means consistent, and are usually covered by trees anyway. So here I am pulling onto the A1, which is their “interstate”, but has few good road identifiers, and short run-up lanes to merge. I am about to run out of lane when I see in the left mirror a black Ferrari closing at OVER 100 mph ABOVE my speed. Just before I thought I was about to die, he flashes the right signal, and so we swap lanes as he SCREAMS past me on the right and off the ramp. I have just been introduced to the Italian equivalent of “cojones”. I saw many other incidences, from the motorbike riders passing on the center lines, to the flat-out style of driving they use even for the mundane ratboxes they call “cars” there.

So, “... when in Roma...”, I started to drive the same way. I think I know what it is about Italian men that women seem to like; they don’t expect them to be around for long! But the ride is wild while they are! Even with the Opel, I was doing 160-180 km/h most of the way down the A1 (that’s about 115 mph!), even through the tunnels! The best was yet to come. It turns out I went to the TOWN of Arezzo, which is actually at the southern edge of the AREA called Arezzo, which includes the city of Firenze (Florence), and is about 40 km south of my objective at Poppi. After I took at least three wrong turns, I finally found the place, then drove past the motel three times each way before I noticed the small sign on a post directing me BEHIND a row of stores. A nice enough place, and terrific at \$40 US for bed and continental breakfast. Then I drove up to the castle overlooking the town, and SQUEEZED between the narrow streets and poorly parked cars to boot! Not fun. Monday morning I was met at the motel by a woman named Mariella, who took me to the plant, where we were able to get all we could accomplish there done by mid-evening. I was again on my own for dinner, but muddled through with sign language and good humor. With my departure flight scheduled for 1 PM out of Firenze, and based on Mariella’s comments about the mountain roads north of the plant, I decided to leave some time for safety and drive that route back to my flight.

It was a HOOT! Having been told that the road could be fun, but would be less so because of my never having driven it, I was having a BLAST catching and overtaking locals and passing through curves as I was slapping the valves off the piston tops and sliding the poor Opel through most of the turns. I don’t think Hertz will want me to take such an under-tired car again! The Travel Agency was apologetic about ONLY being able to rent a car with a manual gearbox. Obviously, they have NO idea what I do for laughs!

Once I got to Firenze, the fun stopped as I figured my way to Michaelangelo Plaza, or whatever it is called. So they had a Renaissance. Big deal. What were their lap times? Get on with it! (You could tell I was a cultured child, couldn’t you?). Anyway, my passport will now have the addition of Switzerland, Germany, Italy, Austria, Slovenia, Belgium and France to round out my “hemisphere-centric” expertise (that is IF the flight ever leaves here for Paris, to connect to Boston). I WILL be back, and my wife will likely INSIST that she join me.

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