

Cathi Kern Borushek

THE Gelt Trip

My in-laws were insatiable travelers. At home on the road, they were immigrants from Argentina with a past just a generation removed from the mass Jewish European exodus to safer ground. Their last few trips had been at a breakneck pace for people in their 70s: a month in India; a trip to Israel; then a tour of Eastern Europe that was cut short due to exhaustion. It was as if they knew trouble was around the bend and they were trying to outrun it with stamps in their overcrowded passports.

Six months after their return my father-in-law was gone from brain cancer. My mother-in-law mourned her loss for six weeks before dying from a self-diagnosed broken heart. My husband was crushed by their passing, filled with guilt from past regrets and trying to imagine a future without them. Still reeling from our winter horriblus, we understood the allure of the road and couldn't get out of town fast enough. Emotionally, physically and mentally spent, we cashed in their miles and used some inheritance money to flee to Europe.

What we thought would be a welcome escape from our winter of discontent proved instead to be a constant reminder. We embarked on an historical death march with a decidedly pilgrimage air, following a path my in-laws took years ago through London, Paris and Rome.

It started innocently enough. Europe is all about history and royalty and rulers, oh my! Here's where they chopped off Anne Boleyn's head. And this suit of armor with an abnormally large steel private part belonged to her dead husband, Henry VIII. The kids, still shell-shocked from their first major losses, gamely tried to absorb all the historical importance while searching for effective Wi-Fi.



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My husband, never a religious man, was on a different sort of search. He dragged us to every church, cathedral, prayer house and temple he could find. And for those of you who have been to Europe you know that there are plenty.

We followed him on this spiritual ghost hunt, marveling at his resourcefulness. After days of trudging through the cold and damp London streets, we landed at Westminster Abbey, Britain's walk of fame for the rich and famously deceased. There, while the rest of us strolled through the tombs filled with English history, he wrangled a private prayer service with the Abbey's head dean. We were led behind velvet ropes to an off-limits sanctuary and held



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hands as we prayed around Edward the Confessor's chair. "Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name . . ." Having been raised "free range" on the religious spectrum my boys were at a loss. They didn't know whether to snicker or join their father in silent weeping.

In the City of Lights the great cathedral of Notre Dame beckoned. While we guarded our purses and electronics from the omnipresent pickpockets and beggars, he embraced all the gothic wonders and read each plaque with martyred intent. As we made our way through Europe he spread money like fairy dust, donating to every house of worship regardless of denomination. Alms as a cure. His personal gelt trip.

It wasn't until Rome that my own demons began chasing me. In the cradle of Catholicism I struggled to remain supportive. From our damp and rainy beginnings in London to the spreading warmth of Rome, his cloud began to lift while my mood darkened. Long estranged

from the religion of my upbringing, at odds with their edicts on nearly everything, I dragged my personal baggage through church after church. The art. The opulence. The hypocrisy.

But in Vatican Square for Palm Sunday mass, as thousands of believers shouted "Il Papa," we were both swept away by the collective joy and celebration. Surrounded by people from around the world releasing their own demons, we reveled in the pageantry and embraced the hopeful spirit. That was the day we stopped tripping over history and began to look forward. Our voyage through Europe's great cathedrals had served as a spiritual exorcism for us both.

On our last night in Italy a powerful earthquake struck Abruzzo. Its shockwaves flew east to Rome, shaking us out of our sleep. It was our final wake-up call.

Time to go home. 🌍