

Weigh to Go



"Art Holidays in Italy" offered Margaret and John expert art tuition from their former teacher from the Art Courses at Strathclyde University's Centre for Learning in Later Life.

They would be based in Bedogno, a tiny hamlet nestled in the solitude of the Secchia Valley, in the Emilia Romagna region, on the eastern slopes of the Apennines, the long range of mountains that is the spine of the Italian peninsula.

David and Pheona also offered rock climbing and trekking, so Jim and Sheila signed up to join The Bonthrons for their September sojourn. There was no need to worry about car hire, buses or trains. David would meet them at Bologna Airport to whisk them to Bedogno with the prospect of two weeks of bliss, all meals included.

Margaret and John would do Art with Pheona, and Jim and Sheila would intersperse reading and 'chilling' with strenuous outings to the Vie Ferrate in the nearby mountains, under David's expert leadership.

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The big day arrived. Margaret made sure that she and John were up early, breakfasted, and did the final packing, keeping to her schedule. Later they would collect Jim and Sheila, drive to Edinburgh, park the car and Check-In. Only then would Margaret be able to relax.

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It was always the same with John, who dithered. Margaret knew she had to 'drive' him, and she was becoming anxious, watching the clock. There was just time to do a final check of everything and lock their Green Bag, pre-booked for hold-baggage with Ryanair.

The hard choices about what Margaret should take or not take had already been made. Given the 15 kilo baggage limit and with just the one bag between both, she had been hard on herself. Luckily John was sanguine about what he would take, happy to cede space and weight and do another 'wash and go' holiday. For their break to Spain in May it had worked out fine, and Margaret was comfortable with this approach.

Sheila had expressed surprise that The Bonthrone had only booked one bag. She and Jim would take one each, partly because of their extra rock climbing gear and heavy boots but also because Sheila liked to have 'choices', especially in the footwear department.

'John, bring down the Green Bag, please', Margaret shouted as she dowsed the downstairs loo with bleach. 'And bring the two small rucksacks as well', she added, knowing that it would not occur to him to do this without 'firm direction'.

Currently the Bathroom was his favoured seat of learning, and because he seldom bothered to close the door, she often heard him chanting his Italian from above. When John got focused like this, he could drift off into his own little world. This 'drifting away' to a place where time did not seem to exist, had definitely increased since he retired and consigned his watch to the bedside drawer.

She waited, but he made no reply.

She stormed upstairs to find him on the WC, naked, reading "Teach Yourself Italian Grammar".

'John, I asked you to bring down the bags *first*. Please, before you do anything else!'

'*Si, certamente Principezza, of course*', he replied, 'is it OK if I wipe my botty first and wash my hands?'

'Oh do hurry up, please!'

Suddenly he was in the bedroom, still naked. He grabbed the Green Bag.

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'Arrrrgh! Abbiamo un problema, forse. Questa valigia e' troppo pesante!'

'What are you trying to say?'

'I think our Green Bag is overweight. What on earth have you got in here, the Kitchen Sink? What's the Ryanair limit again?'

'It can't be too heavy, it's the same bag we took to Spain in May, with more or less the same amount of clothes in it!'

She could hear the anxious edge in her voice.

'Can you weigh it on the bathroom scales?'

'OK. Boun idea, certamente, la mia capo.'

'22 kilos!' he shouted from the Bathroom.

'**What? No!** It can't be! How can it be heavier than when we went to Spain?'

'Well look for yourself Margaret, there it is!'

The bag hung over the edges. It was hard to read the scales, she had to crane her neck to see, but it was 22, or even a wee bit above.

'Oh for Goodness Sake! And look at the time!'

'Margaret my dear one, are you sure the limit isn't 20 kilos? Would you check the e-ticket *paicere, cara mia*', he asked.

She sped back to the bedroom, opened her rucksack, got out the tickets and there it was:

'1 bag only, maximum weight 15 kilos. Penalty over this limit: £20 per kilo.'

'Oh for Goodness Sake!'

She returned to stare in dismay at the Green Bag. She had spent ages selecting her clothes and shoes and then helping John choose what he should take. He had been so good about, saying repeatedly that she should leave out his stuff and

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take more for herself. She had virtually forced him to take another pair of shoes and two extra shirts.

'Guarda, cara mia, I'll take some of my clothes out. I've got way more than I need, really.'

'Shhsss! John, please, I'm thinking. Just be quiet for a minute.'

How on earth this same bag, with almost the same clothes, could be so much over the limit, she thought. Admittedly she had added a few extra tee-shirts, another cardigan and an extra pairs of shoes, but surely that would not add 7 kilos.

'Allora, che pensa tu sia, cara mia?'

'Please, John, stop that stupid Italian. Just stay quiet, please.'

'Si, Princepessa, come un topolino nella chiesa.'

Her blood was boiling. How could he stay so calm and be so annoyingly reasonable! She needed all these clothes and shoes. All of them! She did not want to leave out any of them. You could not predict what you might need when you go with another couple. When they were alone, just the two of them, like Spain, she could wear the same thing more often, especially when self-catering. Pheona's place was full board. All those nights dining together, and with other people there too, not just Jim and Sheila. Now she regretted allowing John to persuade her that only one Hold Bag would be enough?

'Look Margherita, don't get upset. Let me take out some of my stuff.'

He reached forward to take the key.

'No! Don't open that bag! It's carefully packed, properly. It just can't be overweight! It's almost the same as we took to Spain. Check it again! These scales must be wrong!'

'I know Margaret, I know. It does seem wrong. But look, it does show about 22. Look, we could just pay the excess.'

'No! No! No! Don't be so stupid! I'm not paying £20 per kilo!'

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'Right enough *cara mia, e' molto, molto costoso*. Is it too late to try to book on another Hold Bag? Could we go online now and try to do it?'

She had stopped listening to him, and kneeling down, reluctantly she used the little key to open the padlock on Green Bag. Doing something she really did not want to do, she lifted her things out in layers and placed them up on the bed.

'*Guarda Princepessa, non preoccuparti. Piacere*. I'm sure I can do without lots of things, those extra shoes of mine, and these socks. And surely I don't need all those shirts and shorts. Look, let me weigh them and we'll see.'

He went off downstairs, still naked, to get the new electronic kitchen scales. This new 'device' had been acquired because John had decided he would start making bread again, planning to measure every ingredient with scientific precision.

She stared at all the stuff now removed from the Green Bag. It had taken her hours to decide. How can this bag suddenly be so overweight? It just did *not* make sense.

He returned, kneeled beside her, zeroed his scales, and began a litany which gave the individual weight of each of his own items, lost again to his own world of boyish wonder.

'That is amazing! This so-called light-weight jacket of mine weighs 653 grams. These shoes stuffed with socks weigh 1.95 kilos. These three shirts are almost'

She snapped!

'**Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! I can't think,**' she shouted, shutting her eyes against the tears welling up.

Right, she thought, although it doesn't make sense, we *must* be overweight. I have to accept it and re-pack everything from scratch.

'John, get me that blue carry-on bag and your big rucksack. NOW!'

His little extras including two pairs of binoculars, compass, whistle, iPod, back-up phone, associated chargers, Bluetooth keyboard for the iPad and so on would just have to stay behind, whether he liked it or not.

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'Margherita, look, this wee shoulder baggie of mine is almost a kilo with all its bits and pieces in it. I'll just have to leave it behind and stuff my pockets. And I suppose could wear a few extra layers to get us through Check-In.'

She ignored him. It just did not make sense. Had they had a 20 kilos limit for that Spain trip? No, she was sure it had been just 15 kilos.

It took twenty minutes of juggling between the three bags. John continued to play with his scales, weighing everything as she discarded it. The things being left were mostly John's, but he seemed unperturbed at his 'loss'.

At last she was finished.

The bags were packed and a small mound of items that could not be taken was piled up on the landing. The Green Bag looked half-empty, sad, floppy, but now it was an acceptable 15 on the bathroom scales.

'Come on, John! You need a shower! Hurry up!'

'But, look at this.....'

'No! **NOW!** Stop playing with those scales. Quick, get showered and get ready to go. **NOW!**'

'OKAYDOKALAY Princepeessa. Faccio una doccia io, immediatamente!'

'Idiot!' she said softly, closing the bathroom door behind him and heading downstairs to do the last checks, getting back to where she had been before all the hassle. 'Bedogno here we come!'

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As John lifted Sheila's case into the boot alongside the Green Bag he said, 'This one seems so much heavier than ours! Are you sure you are under the 15 kilo limit?'

'Yes, of course we are! We weighed it on our bathroom scales,' said Jim.

'It's difficult to read the scales with the bag on, isn't it,' said Margaret.

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'Not really,' said Jim, 'I stood on the scales with and without the case and did the subtraction. Hopefully we got it right. My big bag has the balance of Sheila's stuff, and of course we had to fit in our climbing gear. But we just made, I hope!'

'Ah', said John, 'that was a good idea. Wish I'd thought of that.'

'I don't know how the two of you manage with just one bag like that, and it looks half empty', said Sheila. 'We think we've done well with just two bags at 15 kilo each. I brought six pairs of shoes, 25 tee-shirts 6 pairs of shorts, four cardigans, two jackets, two pairs of longer trousers and of course my climbing gear and my big boots. We decided to leave our climbing harnesses and other really heavy stuff because we know Art Holidays have them for us to borrow. And clever Jim worked out how to take our walking poles too, laying them inside the webbing, beside the retractable handle on his big roller bag.'

'Ah, you had a cunning plan, Jim,' said John, swinging Jim's huge bag into the boot.

'Yes, John. Jim's excellent at packing, actually. I just lay out everything I want to take and he does the rest. What a clever man my husband is!'

As they drove off Margaret recounted what had now become the "Saga of the Green Bag".

'You're getting me worried now,' said Jim, 'If we're wrong this could be expensive. Is it really £20 excess charge per kilo?'

'Yes,' said Margaret. 'How on earth did we manage with that same Green Bag going to Spain? It was packed full, I'm sure of it. Now it's half-empty and my old Blue Bag is so full I can hardly lift it.'

'Don't worry Princepezza, Gianni the Donkey is here for you', quipped John, adding, 'Jim, I was wondering, maybe our scales are not so accurate at such a low part of the range. I must have a go at testing them when I get home, use kilo bags of sugar and big bottles of water - they weigh two kilos each, more or less.'

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The Check-In queue was long but moved quickly.

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John commented that almost everyone else had bags that looked much bigger and heavier. One chap took his various pieces of Hold Baggage over to an empty Check-In desk, weighed each piece, including a very large bag and returned smiling.

Soon there was a stream of others doing the same. Many of these bags looked larger than Jim and Sheila's.

'They must have booked 20 kilo bags, surely', said John.

'Well looking at those folks, I'm sure now that we must be OK!' said Jim, but he still had a worry edge in his voice.

'*Che sara, sara!*' quipped John.

'No John, look at our pathetic little bag. You must have got it wrong again, sniped Margaret. 'Why does this always happen to us? I took out three tee-shirts I really wanted to bring. Worst of all, everything will be slipping and sloshing around in there and getting crushed. How **do** you manage it? Eh?'

'Quoting a well-known phrase or saying', smiled John, 'I have absolutely no idea!'

Just ahead of them a very smartly dressed Italian husband and wife with two coffin sized cases and various other bags and jackets moved up to the Check-In desk. The wife also shouldered a very large designer handbag.

'They *must* be over the limit!' Margaret hissed to John.

The green digits settled at 20.1 kilos for the largest of their cases.

The cheery girl at Check-In said nothing.

Nor did she comment on their various carry-on items, which seemed excessive, both in size and number. Combined they must be too heavy as well, Margaret thought.

'They must have booked 20 kilo bags. We should have done that', said John.

'Mmmm!' said Margaret, feeling the tension rising again.

Sheila and Jim stepped forwards to the same girl.

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'Good Luck!' said John.

Over her shoulder Sheila mouthed, "Thanks".

Jim put Sheila's case on the scales. Four pairs of eyes peered as the display rose slowly and stopped at 13.9 kilos. Jim beamed a big smile back to The Bonthrons. Jim's bag weighed in at 14.7 kilos.

'So', said Margaret quietly to John, 'we **must** have got it wrong then. Agreed?'

'Yes, I was thinking about it. Maybe we measured in pounds instead of kilos?'

'What! How do you manage to do it? I knew that the Green Bag was about the same as when we went Spain. I **knew** it! Look at it, it almost half-empty.'

'Or it's half full, depending on your point of view.'

'Oh do shut up!' she snapped.

Jim and Sheila stood over to the side, watching to see how it went.

The Check-In girl smiled and said, 'Just the **one bag** between you then?'

'Yes,' said Margaret, 'and I think we have made a mistake when we weighed it, at home.'

'Looks light, let's see', she said cheerily, 'lift it on for me please.'

Again four pairs of eyes watched.

8.6 kilos! About half what they were allowed!

'Captain Bumble strikes again. Oops, sorree!' said John.

'Nit-wit! I **told** you it was all wrong!' said Margaret. 'Well it's your own fault you have only three pairs of socks and one pair of shoes with you. Half-wit!'

But Margaret was laughing, and Sheila and Jim were laughing too.

As they walked away from the Check-In, John was strumming an air guitar.

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' Travellin' light, travellin' light, I just can't wait to be in Ital-ee, tonight!'

'Weigh to Go, Folks! Ha, ha, ha! Weigh to Go!