

Failure to Communicate

by [Jerry Olivas](#) (November 2024)



View of Perugia (Antonio Donghi, 1939)

This was going to be a fabulous adventure. I had been to Europe a couple of times before, but not to Italy to experience all of its marvelous art, culture, and history. And my girlfriend was studying there so I had somewhere to stay

and someone to show me around, and she was studying Italian, so no worries about that.

I didn't have much of a travel budget, so hitchhiking was pretty much my only option when I got to Europe. I hitchhiked before in France, Belgium, and Holland so I knew that was easy. However, in the early 1970s there were a lot of young people hitchhiking around Europe which meant there was often a good deal of competition. Yet being a solo traveler would increase my chances of being picked up.

My final destination was Perugia, Italy, but I knew that getting a cheap charter flight to Southern Europe from the US would not be easy. My best bet was to get a charter flight from Los Angeles to Northern Europe then hitchhike from there to Italy.

With my aluminum framed backpack all crammed full, including my tied-on mummy bag, I was all set to go. It was winter so I included a sweater in addition to a lightweight jacket, but it really couldn't be that cold. My previous trips to Europe were in the summer months and all I needed then was a t-shirt and a windbreaker, so a sweater and jacket would be plenty. As it turned out I was very wrong about that.

I had a friend drive me from San Diego to the Imperial Terminal at LAX. This is where most of the cheap charter flights going to Europe would leave from. I had taken flights from there before so I was sure that it wouldn't be a problem although I might have to hangout a while. However, the Terminal was almost deserted, and I didn't see anything on the departure announcement boards or planes at the gates. I asked a couple of people if they knew when any flights to Europe would be leaving and someone told me they thought a flight to London might be departing the next day. I wanted a flight to the European Continent, perhaps Paris, Brussels, or Frankfurt, because having to hitchhike in the UK and then take a ferry to the Continent would slow me down some and add to the cost of

my Italian adventure.

I sat around for a while in the Imperial Terminal trying to figure out what to do. Funny thing was as I was sitting there a Boeing 707 showed up from Tokyo. I briefly thought maybe I should try to get on that plane and go to Asia, but I was fixed on all the great things I was going to see in Italy so my Asia adventures would come later in life.

As I was sitting there, I remember that Icelandic Airways was a cheap option to get to Europe. The problem was I needed to first get to New York, but I could do that on a normal commercial airline. I walked over to the main LAX Terminals with my first stop being United Airlines. Sure enough I was able to get the red-eye night flight to New York's JFK Airport, and flying economy was cheap enough.

After a big meal and a few beers, I slept most of the flight. As we landed, I noticed it was all white outside, but I just needed to get over to the International Terminal. I was sure there was a shuttle bus so I would pretty much be in a heated to over 100 degrees bus to do that.

Next stop was the International Terminal JFK and right up to the Icelandic Airlines ticket counter. They had a flight that night and the price was right. The flight would stop in Iceland then on to Luxembourg. This was perfect. I would just get to Luxembourg, put my thumb out heading south and I would be in Italy in no time.

I hung around inside the International Terminal and as evening approached, I made my way to my gate. This is where I started to notice some of my competition, several other younger people with backpacks on their way to Europe. I also noticed they all had big coats and laced up hiking boots.

I chatted with a few people who were headed to various places, but no one seemed to be going to Italy. Amsterdam seemed to be on most people's agenda, and I did think about maybe going

there for a few days. They had auditorium size sleep-ins there that were cheap and there was plenty of weed in Amsterdam to help you to relax. But I was on a mission to get to Italy and experience all the great art.

Soon I was in flight again, eating, drinking, and sleeping. The next thing I recall was landing at Reykjavik Airport. I instantly noticed out the window of the plane that there were huge snowbanks all along the runway. It seemed like we landed in a snow tunnel.

We all departed the plane using an outside mobile stairway, quickly entered a door to the terminal, and headed directly to another gate to catch the ongoing flight to Luxembourg. My short walk from the ramp to the door felt like I was inside a freezer. There was snow everywhere and it was still dark outside although it was midmorning. But despite this gloomy setting everyone seemed to be in good spirits, which may have been because I and a few others had gone in on purchasing some cheap vodka that we were all sharing.

The flight was a little delayed but soon we were headed to Luxembourg. After a big meal and more drinks, I was fast asleep again. I was certainly eating and drinking well and getting a lot of sleep on this trip.

Soon we arrived at Luxembourg International Airport and after passing through immigration and customs, exchanging some dollars to Luxembourg Francs, and having a coffee and a couple of marzipan croissants I was off to downtown Luxembourg. It was late in the day by then so I figured I would find a youth hostel and stay the night before starting my hitchhiking journey south. Before leaving the airport, I got directions to a youth hostel where I could stay the night and information on how to use public transportation to get there.

Yes, it was snowing in Luxembourg, but not like the snow I saw in Iceland. Before leaving the airport, I put on a second pair

of socks, my sweater and jacket. It didn't seem too cold until I was waiting outside for the bus to downtown. Within about five minutes I was jumping up and down, and moving like crazy to stay warm, which didn't help much.

The bus I got took me within a few blocks of the hostel and I ran most of the way there. This was serious ice-cold weather, and my Southern Californian bones were feeling it. My nose and ears turned red, yes red, which I could see through the windows along the sidewalk. Soon I got to the youth hostel and checked in for the night and luckily, they served food there, so I didn't have to go outside.

Another good night's sleep there although I had a nightmare about what it would be like to freeze to death. The next morning, I got some good directions on my best route to hitchhike south through France then cross over to Italy near the Mediterranean Sea. Ah, the Mediterranean, which must be warm. Luckily too, the sun was out, but there was snow on the ground.

My first direction would be towards Metz, France, then on south from there. I took a local bus to the outskirts of Luxembourg, found a sign that said Metz, rechecked my Michelin map to make sure that was the right direction and put my thumb out. I also made a little cardboard sign to hold that said Italia.

It was cold but the sun was still out, so it didn't seem too bad. Within about 10 minutes a man driving a small delivery truck picked me up, and I was off on my first ride. The driver didn't speak much English and my French, German, and Italian were very limited, but I figured he saw my sign and was headed in that direction. I was worried that this ride was not going to take me too far, and I was right. We did cross into France, and shortly thereafter he let me out because he was turning off the main road.

It was about midday, and the sun was now gone with light flakes of snow falling. The temperature seemed to drop dramatically and within a few minutes my body had gone numb, and it felt like my internal organs were freezing. This was not the kind of skin surface cold I experienced from surfing in the winter in Southern California, which I could shake off in a few minutes. My mind went into panic mode with thoughts of how stupid I was to think I was going to hitchhike around Europe in the winter. I began to walk as fast as I could towards what looked like a small restaurant with my thumb out.

Then a stroke of good luck happened, a car pulled over in front of me. I rushed right up and a woman on the passenger side lowered the window and said something in French that I did not understand at all, and I said *oui, oui, oui* and she shook her head up and down, and I hopped in the back seat.

To my surprise there were a couple of kids sitting in the back seat that scooted over and I put my backpack on my lap. After about a hundred mercis I deduced that this was an entire family, dad driving, mom in the front passenger seat, and two kids in the back seat—with me. Most importantly the car was like a toaster oven, and I began to thaw out.

Everyone was very friendly and the kids, two boys, could speak English fairly well so they translated most of what I said to their parents. We drove for an hour or so through Metz and towards Nancy; I was watching the signs. We stopped to eat once and it was all paid for by my new friends including a full bottle of wine that dad, mom, and I split. I wasn't sure, but I thought one of the kids mentioned they had been in Belgium visiting their grandparents.

I could tell these people liked me, and I liked them too, and they seemed genuine and nice enough. Somewhere, just past Nancy, the father asked me, through one of the kids, if I wanted to stay the night at their house and the next day they would take me to the main road to continue hitchhiking. It was

late afternoon and getting dark by then, so I accepted. Actually, I was really glad they asked me because it looked like full-on frozen white tundra outside.

Soon we got to their house which was south of Nancy a little way off the main road. It was a really nice two-story country house which seemed like it had been restored from an old palace and it had a big wood burning fireplace. I recall there was a huge kitchen and a big outside pool, but the pool was covered for the winter months.

The kids went to bed and the two parents, Jacques and Cristine, and I, stayed up for a while sipping on some more wine and communicating as best we could, which was mostly by nodding our heads and smiling. Eventually we all went to bed, and I had my own private room and bath.

The next day I slept in until about 9:00 am. When I came downstairs an entire spread was laid out for breakfast including fresh fruit, yogurt, croissants, and coffee. I noticed there was some back-and-forth discussion in French between the kids and parents but didn't think much about it. Then while enjoying a second light and flaky croissant one of the kids said why don't you stay for the day; we will take you for a walk in the nearby woods and dad can show you around the area in his sports car. I looked over at Jacques and Cristine and they both smiled with approval. Without even thinking I said yes! I wasn't in any hurry so why not hang out with these people for a day; the food, wine, and accommodation were 5-stars, and they were so nice.

It was a super day with the kids. For our walk in the woods, they dressed me in some heavier clothes of their father's, although my feet did get a little wet. During our walk the kids told me they were 12 and 14 years old, both liked school and played on the school's football team. Mostly I was impressed with their knowledge of nature during our walk. I couldn't remember their names from the day before, so I asked

them again. The 12-year-old was Pascal, and the 14-year-old was Alexis. Easy enough to remember, but in French, word seem to be said so fast, as if it is just one letter, I figure it's best if I just say 'hey.' But they did remember my name, Jerry, and used it a lot.

The father took me for a wild ride in his two-seater MG sports car. It was a British right hand drive two-seater MGB Roadster solid yellow convertible. He kept the top up fortunately, but he scared the heck out of me showing off especially because as cars passed us going the other direction, they seemed within inches of me. The ride was like we were in some sort of racing time trials in rural France on wet and snowy roads with Jacques providing me with a description of all we were passing by in French.

As the day went on, I kept wondering are these people trying to impress me regarding how well French people live or were they just curious about me. They asked me a lot of questions about my life and America; my family, where I went to university, what my hobbies were, and about sports in the US.

That evening we all sat down for a big meal with all the trimmings. I wondered how the mother made everything herself. We started with some champagne, followed by soup, roast pork with cooked vegetables, a lettuce salad, a yummy pear tart for dessert, a selection of cheeses, and a Brandy to finish off with. During the main meal we drank red wine that was so, so smooth. The kids drank some too.

After the meal as we were sipping on our Brandy the older of the two boys asked me if I could stay a few more days. He further said his parents had made a reservation a while ago at a Ski Resort for a couple of days that was not too far away. A few days ago, the person that was going to babysit them canceled and they couldn't find anyone else on such short notice.

As we were talking both of the kids were conversing in French with their parents and translating to me what was being said. The parents said they would make sure we had plenty of food, the keys to the MG to use in case of an emergency, and good contact information. Also, and here was the clincher: for my two days and three nights, they would buy me a first-class ticket to Milan, Italy. Once again, without hesitation, I said yes.

This was a good deal, no more hitchhiking until Milan, Italy, a warm and nice place to stay, excellent food and drink, and I liked the kids, they were a lot of fun and smart too.

It was easy to see that Jacques and Cristine had got in a bind with their other babysitter cancelling and I accidentally came along, and they somehow, in just a short period of time, trusted me.

Early the next morning Jacques and Cristine were off to somewhere south for a brief ski holiday. For the next couple of days, the kids and I made our own meals, took more walks in the nearby woods, watched some sports on TV, and just generally hung out. The weather was pretty nice, so we even played basketball outside and had a few football practices. Both of the kids played Chess, and so did I, so that took up most of our evenings. I do recall I did not win one game, and I did try to cheat but they were too smart for that. Of course, I was consuming plenty of great French wine so I may have not been at my peak playing performance.

I expected Jacques and Cristine would check in by phone, but they didn't call. I figured they were just having a good time. I expected to see them around noon the third day after they left. I packed up and was ready to catch my first-class train ride to Milan. I think the kids were missing their mom and dad too.

As the day went on no one showed up. That evening I had Pascal

call the Ski Resort. They told him that there had been some severe storms in the mountain and his parents had stayed there but checked out earlier that day. However, they may have been delayed due to road closures and there were communications and power outages too. I was certain they were postponed for some good reason and couldn't contact us.

I tried to assure the kids that their parents were fine and would probably be home tomorrow. But tomorrow came and no parents and no calls. They were now one full day and one night overdue. Maybe heavy snow closed the roads or there have been a avalanche.

There was still plenty of great eats and wine so no worries about that, but this babysitting gig was not going as planned. We waited out a second full day and night and on the next day I told the kids we needed to figure out what was going on. The kids suggested we use the MG to drive them to their grandparents. But that was a hundred miles or more away and the weather had gotten bad with snow everywhere. Pascal suggested we go to his friend's house, but we would call first to let them know we needed some help. He called and they said come right over and they would feed us and help us figure out where their parents were. I was relieved that it looked like we were going to get some help.

All three of us piled in the two-seater and I put my backpack in the little trunk thinking these family friends would probably not have a place for me and I would be on my way hitchhiking south again. Although that first-class ticket sounded good, I was ready to hit the road, snow or not.

It was about midday as we headed off with both of the boys giving me directions. It seemed a bit complicated where we were going. It was a bunch of small country roads with a lot of turns and sitting on the right-hand side of the MG driving was strange, along with my two passengers one sitting on the lap of the other in the passenger seat.

We had the heater on, but that didn't help much. We had plenty of gas and the MG was running like a charm. The revving sound of that little four-cylinder was so sweet, and it was fun watching the tachometer needle go up and down as I shifted.

After driving around on small roads for a while, around 15 minutes, we pulled out on to a main road, and I accelerated some to pick up some speed. We went only a few miles when I noticed some flashing blue lights behind me that I was certain was a police car. I pulled right over and stayed in the car.

After about a minute a policemen approached the car on the passenger side thinking it was the driver's side. He quickly realized that the driver, me, was on the other side and walked around to that side. I rolled down the window and he said something to me in French and I responded in English that I couldn't speak French in English. At this point I thought one of the kids would speak up, but they didn't say anything. The policemen motioned me to get out of the car, which I did.

At this time in life, I had long hair pulled back into a ponytail, a full beard, wore a puka shell necklace, Levi 501s jeans with an American flag sewn on the back pocket, and generally my attire was not very clean cut. The policemen sized me up quickly and I am sure determined I was one of those American hippies, and he was right.

I could tell he was angry as he motioned to me to go back behind the MG. He began talking to me again in French, and I replied in English once again that I couldn't speak French. This seemed to agitate him even more, so I just stopped talking. But I was wondering why one of the boys didn't hop out of the car and tell the policemen what was going on. They must have been too scared, and these were 'good kids,' meaning, unlike me as a kid, they were respectful of authority.

As I stood there the policeman went back to his car and used

the radio. I kept thinking why did he stop me anyway? Maybe I was driving too fast, but no faster than Jacques the other day. Soon the cop came back with a pair of handcuffs in his hands and promptly put them on me. I had been in handcuffs before with my hands behind me, but this policeman cuffed me in front, but maybe that is the way they do it in France. Also, I recall the cuffs were heavy metal and seemed too big for my wrist, so they laid over on the back of my hand, which hurt.

About that time another police car showed up. A policeman got out of that car and went over to the passenger side of the MG, making the same mistake as the first policemen. I figure the other policeman would get the straight story from the kids and I would be continuing on to the kid's friend's house. But no such luck.

The first policemen put me in the back of his car and the next thing I knew we were in a town, not sure where, but there was a police station there. I was escorted out of the police car and into the station, with the policemen just pointing to where I was to go. We went into the office area of the station and up to a counter. The policeman that arrested me took everything out of my pockets and gave it all to a woman who was behind the counter, and she looked it all over. She spoke some English and asked me for my Passport. It then dawned on me that no one had asked for my driver's license when I was stopped, but maybe the policeman asked me in French. Anyway, my Passport was in my backpack in the MG. I tried to explain to her what was going on, but it wasn't translating very clearly. She did find my California driver's license in my wallet because I saw her holding it.

Near the counter was a wooden bench where they told me to sit, pointed to, that is. I held up my hands with the handcuffs trying to ask in sign language for them to be removed. By this time I could see the dark bruising on the back of my hands from the heavy metal cuffs. But by that point I was not

popular with anyone. It was easy to see that my 'free love' appearance was not winning anyone over.

As I was sitting there a young woman walked by me and kind of smiled so I said, "Can you help me?" She said in clear English, "What's wrong?" and I quickly said, "I don't speak any French and I don't know why I am here." She looked at me rather perplexed, like you must know what you did to be sitting there with handcuffs on. Anyway, she said, "okay," and walked over to the counter and talked with the woman there for a minute. She then came back over to me and said, "You are being charged with abducting and transporting minors." Oh shit, that is a nice way of saying kidnapping. I told her that was totally wrong and tried to explain to her what was going on, but she said, "I'm sorry, you will get an attorney to handle your case."

I was good at talking my way out of trouble but that wasn't going to work here because I couldn't speak French. I needed help fast because this whole thing was quickly going sideways, and my appearance wasn't helping me either.

I just sat there wondering why the kids hadn't explained to one of the policemen what was going on, but maybe they had, and I was just being punished for looking strange. But why not just let me go, and I would as quickly as I could, get out of town and out of France.

I was allowed to use the bathroom a couple of times and the woman from behind the counter brought me some warm soup, cheese, and a baguette, but no wine. It was a little awkward and hurt eating with the handcuffs on, but I managed. I do recall how good the soup, cheese, and airy light baguette was. Also, the woman that I had asked to help me showed up again and handed me a fresh French pastry. It was like a croissant but in a different shape and it had chocolate in it. Once again, I thought, these French people eat really well.

I kept thinking, how am I going to get out of this? Maybe I should demand one call. I guessed French Napoleonic Code Law allowed that, but I wasn't sure. But who would I call anyway?

After about three hours in the station, I began to think I was totally screwed. But this wasn't some far out backwater place, so there must be a way to get some help. That's when it came to me, and I hollered out "American Embassy," which I thought would bring some sort of respond. But either no one heard me, no one cared, or maybe hollering out anything about America was not a good idea.

As I sat there, every once in a while someone would come in the door from the outside and I began to think that maybe I was going to be taken from there to another location that had a proper jail. Also, every time the door opened a burst of icy cold air would hit me, so I thought about trying to ask for a blanket. This was not going well for me at all, and I wasn't coming up with any solution to my situation. I just sat there thinking how bad my circumstances were and if it was going to get even worse.

I closed and opened my eyes a couple of times trying to rest and thinking maybe this was a dream and I would wake up in Italy sitting in an outside café dipping a biscotti into a cappuccino while taking in all the art in a piazza. About that time the door swung open and in comes Jacques, Cristine, and the two kids. I almost cried; okay, I did water up just a little.

The policeman that arrested me was right behind them and he quickly took my handcuffs off. He then asked for a bag from the woman behind the counter that had my wallet, some change, and my Swiss army knife, and handed it to me. There was a lot of French back-and-forth between everyone and I could tell Jacques and Cristine were not happy.

Soon we were out of the station and on the road, I first

thought we were going back to their house, but instead they took me to a train station. During the drive no one said anything. I was thinking I would get some sort of explanation as to why Jacques and Cristine were held up, but everyone was silent.

Within about 15 minutes we were at the Gare de Nancy. Jacques quickly hopped out of the car and went around back to the trunk and got my backpack that he had retrieved from the MG. I got out of the back seat and walked around to meet him. He then reached into his front pocket and handed me a pretty thick stack of folded up French Franc notes. I promptly took them and stuffed them into the front pocket of my 501s.

Jacques put his hand out, I grabbed it and gave him a firm shake, as he said something in French. He may have been apologizing and thanking me, but I wasn't sure. He quickly got back in the car and as he drove away, I noticed Pascal and Alexis looking out of the back window at me. I raised my hand with a peace sign.

Once I stepped into the station, I pulled the folded up notes out of my pocket. There were eight 100 French Franc bills. At first, I thought, wow \$800, but I very quickly I realized that converted to about \$150. But that seemed fair to me.

It was about 7:00 pm by then and I figured I could probably get a train south somewhere and eventually on to Milan. I bought a one-way second-class ticket in Nancy that went first to Strasbourg, then a change of trains to Basel, with another change of trains, then on to Milan. I handed over one 100 French Franc note and got back some change, which meant I still had over 700 French Francs. I then picked up some food including a couple of French pastries, sprang for a good bottle of wine, a red Cote du Rhone, which is what I remembered I drank at Jacques' and Cristine's and, within an hour, I was on my way.

As I sat in my seat looking out the train window eating a ham and cheese sandwich on a nice airy baguette, devouring a couple of delicious super sweet palmier pastries, and sipping some Cote du Rhone, I thought to myself, what the hell just happened? How did such a great encounter with some really nice people go so wrong?

Within an hour or so we were in Strasbourg where I changed trains to Basel. I got right on the train and fell asleep. The next thing I knew I was in Basel, Switzerland. I exchanged some of my French Francs to Swiss Francs and picked up some more supplies including a large loaf of multigrain bread, some soft Swiss cheese, and most importantly two big Toblerone chocolate bars. After a couple of tap beers in the Basel Station I found my train to Milan, and I was soon on my way to Italy.

It was a day light ride through Switzerland which was 100% different than Southern California with snowy huge mountains, raging rivers, and lakes. Occasionally I would spot a hitchhiker or two out the window of the train. I thought, poor saps trying to hitchhike in the winter in Europe! Who would do that?

Later that day I arrived in Milan, which was grey and cold. I exchanged all of my French Francs into Italian Lira. It was kind of strange because all of my French Francs converted into thousands of Italian Lira, which gave me the false illusion that I had thousands of dollars. With my wind fall payday money I decided to stay the night in a Pensione near the main train station. For dinner I celebrated with a big plate of pasta and plenty of red wine.

The next morning it was snowing lightly and icy cold so I went straight to the Central Train Station, and after a couple of Italian pastries and a cappuccino, I was soon on the train going south.

I took the high-speed train to Arezzo, near Perugia, and hitchhiked from there. I got a ride fairly quickly and was soon walking on the main medieval promenade of Perugia, the Corso Pietro Vannucci taking in all the fabulous art, culture, and history of Italy.

I got directions to where my girlfriend was staying near her school, Università per Stranieri di Perugia (The University for Foreigners of Perugia) and found my way there. I knocked on the door and my girlfriend opened it up. Her first words were, "What happened to you? I thought you would have been here sooner." I replied, "I got detained for a short while, I think there was an avalanche." She just looked back at me with a puzzled expression. Later I explained what had happened, which I don't think she ever totally believed; I didn't believe it either. But I had put on a couple of additional pounds, had some nasty bruises on the back of my hands, and thousands of hard earned extra Lira to prove it.

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Jerry Olivas writes creative non-fiction stories and travel articles that focus on "do-it-yourself" adventures worldwide. Some of his work can be found online at [Short Édition](#) and [European Travel Magazine](#). He has lived and worked in England, Italy, and Israel and is based in Carlsbad, California.

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