

An Unusual International Tour

Seeing Italy from a new angle

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Ugh! *You've got to be kidding*, I think, then shrug my shoulders, smile, and inhale deeply to keep the stomach acid (that I'm suddenly keenly aware of) from bubbling up my esophagus. I firm up my grip on the straight stick of the Mudry CAP 10 and ease it forward to make airspeed, lock my eyes on the mountain aim point in front of me, add just a hint of power, and pull back smoothly (I think) until the nose rising makes the mountain disappear.

"Head back!" barks the voice of my instructor, Luca Salvadori. I comply (what else can I do?), my neck bent and my eyes searching for any reference at all as I begin to ease up on the stick in a desperate attempt to make this loop a little rounder than the preceding one. We seem to pause inverted, and I can feel the pull of my five-point restraint. My eyes bulge at the astounding view of the Northern Italian countryside spread out like an undulating patchwork quilt of iridescent greens and gold and brown sparkling in the buttery late afternoon light below me.

What a way to tour Europe!

I came for a Women in Aviation European Chapter Conference, and despite all the fascinating lectures and chances to network, I must admit I had spent the past days lamenting the low clouds and heavy rain. On this, the last day of my trip, the clouds finally lifted, revealing the stunning vista below me. I was lucky enough to be offered this informal training flight with Salvadori, an engineering consultant to the Polytechnico de Milano, designer and builder of his own one-off competition aerobatic airplane, and a world-class aerobatic pilot. So,

exactly what was I thinking when I decided to hop into a parachute and go fly after a long day of meetings and touring?

I manage to giggle at my sorry judgment just before the nose falls through inverted, and I find myself busy again juggling airspeed, power, and g-forces as I attempt to round out my loop on altitude without raining aircraft parts down onto the lovely pastoral setting below.

"No. No. No!" Salvadori sighs. "Do it again!"

I swallow hard and try to remember how many hours it's been since I last ate—seafood salad was it? Not exactly the luncheon of champions. In a second I glance over and note Salvadori's focused, insistent demeanor. Suddenly I'm thinking the one phrase no pilot ever wants to utter while airborne—how in the heck did I get myself here?

My musings are clearly taking too long, and Salvadori, once a member of the Italian World Championship Aerobatic Team, is losing patience with his new American protégé.

"You aren't done, are you?" he asks, a little amazed. We've been in flight and in the aerobatic box he commands south of Milan, Italy, for less than 10 minutes.

I take another quick assessment of my gut and resign myself to one more attempt. "I have the controls," I say in my best command voice.

"You've got the controls," Salvadori echoes.

"Now, do it right!" I mutter and push for airspeed, then pull. The nose wobbles as I jitterbug on the rudder pedals—Argh! This time we pull out well right of my mark.

"No. No. No!" he rants. "Again!"

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"Not again!" I counter emphatically.

"All done?" he questions, one eyebrow cocked.

I look out over the stunning vista—farms and factories rolling below me to the base of the snow-dusted Italian Alps. In 10 minutes headed north I could be in Switzerland, I think. And when am I going to get another chance like this? But there is no way my stomach, in its compromised state, can handle even one more loop.

"How about a roll—a nice, slow barrel roll," I counter. Done correctly it is a 1g maneuver. I know. I've read the books.

Salvadori grins and deftly narrates his way through a perfectly executed 1g roll. Well that felt fine. "You have the controls," he barks.

"I've got it," I smile. Mark my reference point—30 degrees up—stick hard left—left rudder smooth...then less rudder—stick still hard over, I think, oh....

"No. No. No!"

Crap. Where's my mountain? Bill Kershner, in his treatise *The Basic Aerobic Manual*, makes it sound so easy. Nose down to entry airspeed, then nose up to 30 degrees, relax back-pressure to maintain pitch, left aileron and rudder applied smoothly, full aileron, but progressively less back-pressure as you roll through perpendicular, then continue releasing until the stick is nearly neutral at inverted. Back-pressure is reapplied somewhere around the three-fourths point in the roll, when the elevator ceases its morph from pitch controller to yaw controller. And all the while, there are the rudders, which must be fully actuated at the beginning of the maneuver, progressively lessened through inverted, and then reapplied three-fourths of the way through in sequence with the elevator pressures. It is a lot like rubbing your belly while patting your head—and I'm not real good at that, either.

The CAP 10 is nonchalant about my butchering of the maneuver and bobbles through it as if it has been punished by far rougher novices than

I. With its fingertip handling and harmonized controls you would think it was squirrely, but in fact it recovers rock-solid to stable flight on whatever heading we seem to roll out on.

I make a knife-edge turn back to my initial heading (at least I can do that!) and look sheepishly over at Salvadori. I know what he's going to say next.

"And again! This time with your feet!" he implores.

I inhale deeply, imagining myself tracing the perfect lines in the diagrams of Kershner's book, and begin. My aim is to avoid rushing through the maneuver, and I can feel my feet on the controls, but the nose is sliding down throughout. We don't split-S out, but we aren't on altitude. Doesn't matter—halfway through the maneuver, as I desperately sought out my mark, I felt my eyes begin to jump, and my stomach swooned in sympathy.

Salvadori opens his mouth to speak, but stops at the sight of my raised hand. I point at the Sic-Sac that is conveniently clipped to the instrument panel just below the altimeter. Then I swallow the bitterness and manage not to have to grab it.

"Luca," I say, "It's going to take me 2,000 tries to get this right, yes?"

"Of course!" he agrees.

"Well," I smile weakly, "We aren't doing 2,000 tries today."

Finally, Salvadori gets it. I had gone up hoping for a quick bird's-eye look at the place I'd landed a few days before and gotten much, much more than I bargained for. He laughs with me, and we head the machine home as the first rays of the setting sun begin to burnish the Alps with vibrant oranges and magentas.

Later, as I turn down a late dinner with the crowd, patting my stomach and bemoaning its still slightly sloshed state, I realize that despite the poor planning, that late afternoon jaunt was an opportunity I would take without hesitation if offered again. In my book you haven't been somewhere until you've flown there, and seen it from the air. 