ITALIANO SOLO

By Janelle Muntz Lassonde

The fact that our hotel had two names should’ve been a tip-off. Twenty-one hours and five pieces of lost luggage after leaving Denver, with one 11-month old in tow, my husband Pierre and I arrived in Pragelato, a village situated in the snowy Italian Alps about 1.5-hours’ drive west of Turin. We checked in with hand luggage and the Gore-tex jackets on our backs at the Hotel Villaggio Dorf – or the Pragelato Spa & Resort, whichever name you fancy. We had no hats, no boots and no well-rested bodies. We did have Laurelle’s half-empty diaper bag, her gripping books entitled Busy Park and Baby Animals, and a selection of airplane-friendly (reasonably quiet) toys. We had a few toiletries (that my pessimistic self had taken onboard the aircraft for this very reason) and our novels, each with a smooth, unbroken spine (that our overly optimistic selves had planned to read while Laurelle slept). Fortunately we also had our Olympic spirits. It was evening-time on Friday, February 17, halfway through the XX Winter Olympic Games in Turin. Hours earlier, the tired-eyed man at Turin Airport’s lost baggage desk had promised our luggage would rejoin us at the hotel that evening. He had grabbed two sacks from a large pile and slid them across the counter. Consolation bags of goodies – toiletries, a T-shirt, and laundry detergent.

In its “spa and resort” format, the hotel was new – brand new. Hoping to capitalize on the Olympic crowd, it had opened three weeks ago, a large cluster of wooden cabins set in the rambling mountainside. Visible from our window was the Olympic cross-country ski track; light glowed from the ski jumping competition over the hill. The view was nice enough, but in the foreground was a chain fence covered with an Italian blue “Torino 2006” banner. It almost hid the muddy, snow-rimmed tractors that had just completed construction there.

“It’s Italy,” Pierre said. “You always know you’ll get something, but you’re never sure exactly what it’ll be.” Milan was the hot spot for fashion, Rome for business. Venice was the quintessential European holiday city. Naples was exuberance and chaos.

But what of Turin? The poor cousin to these better known, more flamboyant cities, Turin was the Juventus football (soccer) team and a shroud. Spurred on by its Olympic bid, the city sought to re-establish the glory it had enjoyed in the early 1860s as the first capital of the new Italian kingdom. Its rejuvenation stretched from baroque palaces to smart, new hotels, from contemporary art galleries and concert halls to endless piazza, a brand-new metro system and the seemingly mandatory cocktail hour that preceded a gastronomic feast of restaurant options.

The theory was fine, but first things first. Saturday afternoon: Our luggage still hadn’t arrived. The lost baggage telephone helpline worked Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. That hardly helped us. I remembered learning ages ago that the Italian postal system once had been clogged up by five years of undelivered mail. The government had dealt with the problem in a unique way – by burning it. That story may have been a joke, or even an enormous exaggeration, but such cracks are a glimpse of reality. I thought of our luggage.
Worse, we had a diaper issue. The hotel staff kindly offered to drive us to the pharmacy in Pragelato, but it was closed for 3.5 hours in the afternoon. Viva Italia! Commerce stopped for an extended coffee break. It didn’t matter that the world had taken up residence in the region. These Olympic Games would bear a relaxed, chicly Italian hallmark. Surely our baby girl would understand.

We dipped into our depleting diaper stash and decided to pass the time by visiting the mountain hub of Sestriere, site of the alpine skiing events. While we’d rented a car for our visit, using it within the mountain venues was complicated by a rash of permits and road barriers. So we sludged through slushy mud and gravel, marginally protected from the elements by our everyday shoes and warm pockets. At least Laurelle was happier. Snug in her baby backpack, with a hat and mittens to boot, she was ready to meet the world.

“Where’s the bus stop?” I asked one of the flocks of volunteers. Easily identifiable in navy and flame Olympic anoraks, the volunteers directed tourists from far-flung countries (80 of which were represented at the games) through the tangle of streets and public transportation in Turin and its western mountain area.

“Italiano solo,” she said, her breath visible in the chill air.

I should’ve been more flexible. Turin is a short hop from the French border.

“Français?” I offered.

“Italiano solo,” she said again. So much for helping the foreigners. We found the bus stop on our own, waited 40 minutes for a single, overloaded bus to pass us by, and turned back. Never mind. We didn’t want to see the events anyway. And at the hotel we were rewarded with our luggage. Better late than never. Much better.

“Ah, bella!” “Piccola!” “La principessa!” the waiters cooed as we entered the hotel’s swarming restaurant for dinner. “Prima bambina!” Laurelle was the first baby at the hotel.

We inquired about a highchair for our squirming girl. The smiling duty manager approached our table. “We ordered 30 high chairs,” he said, “but they haven’t arrived yet.”

Forget calling it “relaxed chic.” A better name for the Italian stamp on these Olympic Games was “jolly pandemonium.”

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Sunday: Pierre and I entrusted Laurelle to her nanny and ventured from Pragelato into Turin, the 1.5-hour drive largely maneuvering tagliatelle-like streets. “Where can we find an internet café?” I asked at the city information booth within a bustling Porta Nuova, the main train station. The attendant had no idea. Okay, second chance. An Italian friend had purchased some event tickets for us that we wouldn’t use. “How about a place to sell tickets?” Again, nothing.

We stumbled on a whirring internet shop two blocks away. We continued asking about ticket re-sales, visualizing the huge maze of cubicles staffed by bookies at the Salt Lake City Olympics four years ago. “I don’t know,” a clerk at the four-star Jolly Hotel Ligure told me. “It’s a new question.”

The ice dancing competition that evening was poetry on ice as couples whirled to salsas, rumbas and cha chas. The Italians cheered their dancing pair, ranked first at
the opening of the evening. The couple performed second to last. He dropped her at the end of the routine, she suppressed a left hook across his jaw, and a few of the Italian crowd left early. Regardless, most spectators in the packed arena observed a most admirable quality of the Olympic Games: They applauded the winners – no matter their nationalities and performance flaws – and all those athletes who ranked behind them.

“Where’s the 18 bus?” I asked a volunteer at the exit, glad to have done a bit of transport homework.

“Italiano solo,” he said. I should have known. We played a finger game.

“Bus,” I said, and I pointed. “One,” and I held up a finger. “Eight,” and I held up eight. “No, no,” he said. “Otto, due,” he said, holding up eight fingers, then two. He indicated that we should walk several blocks west to the 82 bus. He didn’t even know where we were going.

It was 11 p.m. We needed to find our car. We then faced the mountain drive on dodgy roads and the knowledge that we’d see Laurelle’s happy face at sunrise. Pierre and I trampled through freezing-point slush and caught a packed 18 tram which conveniently shared number 82’s stop. On a dark street halfway to our destination, the tram halted abruptly. We could go no further. A car was parked over the tramlines.

But that didn’t stop Italian transport. The tram doors opened, and a large gang of male passengers piled onto the pavement, pushed the car off the lines in one huge heave-ho, and rejoined the tram. Viva Italia!

Monday morning: The manager of the so-called Pragelato Spa & Resort proudly told us the spa would open later in the day. Or so he expected anyway, if the inspector approved the operating permit. The indoor swimming pool would open, too, but the water wouldn’t be warm enough to swim for days.

But who cares? With the Olympic Games finishing in less than a week, it was better late than never.

We chatted with guests leaving the neighboring room. “The hotel staff picked up our laundry,” the mother of three told us (and there were wicker laundry baskets and plastic laundry bags in the rooms), “but there aren’t any laundry machines to do the wash.” This family’s clothes were missing.

Pierre and I returned to Turin to work on selling our extra tickets. Perhaps official word was that re-sales were impossible. But this was Italy. Lots of impossible things were possible. We arrived early for the women’s hockey final at Palasport Olimpico and loitered. Within minutes we had two offers. The Canadians then took home gold, outmaneuvering the Swedes to the great delight of my Quebecois husband.

Tuesday: Having sold some tickets, what about buying second-hand ones for events we were unable to purchase outright? Also banned via the official routes, we arrived early at Palasport Olimpico, ready to root on the Canadian men’s hockey team. Standing still with no particular motivation seemed to indicate we were looking for some action. A tall, lanky man in an Amsterdam cap said he could find us tickets for the women’s figure skating final on Thursday. Shortly we met a podgy British man chatting on a cell phone and hustling tickets at an admirable speed. He entered Pierre’s cell number on his Italian phone as “Pierre2” (since we weren’t his
first) and advised us to ring the morning of the skating event. He vanished into the
crowd. The Canadians went on to beat the Czechs in a ferocious and ear-splitting
match.
Wednesday: The men’s giant parallel slalom snowboarding event outside
Bardonecchia and our chance to remain in the mountains on a bright, crisp day.
Having researched the web of road barrier, driving permit and parking issues ahead
of time, we chose to drive part way along the twisting mountain road. En route from
Pragelato Pierre and I counted scores of police and army and Carabinieri (who, we
gathered from several detailed and exacting explanations by Italian men, were like
overt FBI agents). “By the number of police,” Pierre said, “we’re well protected.”
In Oulx town center, we asked a volunteer for directions to the park-and-ride
parking lot. Shockingly she said something other than “Italiano solo.”
“Turn around and go right,” she said, signalling left.
“You mean left?” I asked.
“No, right,” she said, again pointing left.
“Right,” I said, pointing right. Then I showed her left.
“Okay, I mean left.”
We turned the car around. “Lots of police and you’re well protected,” Pierre said.
“Lots of volunteers and you’re well directed?”
A shuttle bus took us from Oulx to the snowboarding event. It drove a couple miles
beyond the entry gate, turned around and retraced part of the journey, dropping us
at the mouth of a snowy passage some distance from the gate.
“Is this where we get the bus back to the parking lot after the event?” Pierre asked a
volunteer.
“Yes, right here,” he said. “There will be one line for buses to Bardonecchia and
another line for buses to Oulx.”
Clear information – even more than we’d requested. “You’re sure about that?” It
was a learned reaction.
“Yes. I hope there’s a bus,” he said with a perfect middle England accent. “I want to
get home to Oulx.”
It was the first good information we’d received from a volunteer. And this chap was
a Brit. “Your English is pretty good,” I said.
We watched the Swiss dominate the giant slalom, realising that we brought the
average age of the crowd up several notches. Afterward a shuttle bus did, indeed,
drop us back in Oulx. We walked along a sloppy path that led to the vast, muddy
field where we had left our car. A smell of fresh tar tinged the brisk, alpine air. With
only days left in the games, a roller was laying new pavement alongside the mud.
Better late?
That evening as I carried Laurelle along a snowy path to dinner at the self-
proclaimed Pragelato Spa & Resort, we stopped at a cabin in the hotel complex
named “Casa Pinocchio”. The lights were ablaze; the door was open. The air
smelled of freshly cut wood. There, amid the workings of a construction site, were
rows of wooden, child-sized chairs. The hotel’s kids club would be ready for service
in a few weeks.

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Thursday: With the remainder of our tickets at Turin-based venues, we avoided the late night commutes back to Pragelato and found a last-minute hotel vacancy 10 kilometers west of the city. Four stars, close to Turin, available baby crib and half price. That, too, should have been a tip-off. We checked out of the hopefully named Pragelato Spa & Resort and checked into the curiously named Hotel Motel Prestige in Grugliasco. We drove past the Bertone mechanics complex, boxy warehouses and parked semi trailers to unearth this "prestigious" accommodation smack in the middle of a depleted cornfield. The room smelled of fresh carpet. The neat creases of the bed sheets indicated they had been in plastic hours earlier. This hotel, too, had been built specifically to accommodate Olympic visitors. We were still isolated but somehow less so.

Having phoned the podgy Brit about figure skating tickets earlier in the day, he rang back with an update on the action. "I haven’t seen anything like it, mate," Chucky said. "A pair of tickets – that's tough. Singles are no problem, but a pair.... I just saw a pair of Category As go for EUR 2,000." We scraped together our cash and agreed to pay EUR 800 ($950) for a pair of Category B tickets, if Chucky was lucky enough to find them for us. He did – for EUR 850, plus his EUR 50 fee.

Half a dozen phone calls later, Pierre and I met a jovial but jumpy Chucky in a taxi downtown and did the exchange. He counted the cash twice, put EUR 350 in one pocket and slipped the remainder into another.

"I had to move," he said. "I’ve been working at Palavela [the figure skating venue] all day, and I didn’t want the cops onto me. They’d confiscate the tickets."

Chucky came from near Twickenham, a London suburb, where he DJed for parties and had a 3-year-old daughter. "Talking about her makes me feel all tingly," he said. Scalping tickets at the Olympics was something new for him and two buddies. He hoped to clear EUR 500 after two weeks in Turin but still had to find a flight back to England. "We’re a bit behind now," he said, "but we eat all the good food."

Despite the exorbitant price we paid for the tickets, I felt guilty that this hardworking father cleared only EUR 50 on our transaction.

The ladies free skate was full of the energy, grace and drama queen stature that we had expected, even from our nosebleed seats in the very last row of the arena. A battery of telescopic-lensed cameras lined the ice rink, following each skater like a row of sunflowers.

An Italian-based US Air Force family sat next to us. The young mother asked me, "Out of curiosity, what did you pay for your tickets?" I disclosed the EUR 850 plus EUR 50 price.

Her eyes widened. "They were ours. We sold them for just under par – for EUR 350. It was this guy with a British accent, sort of husky. He said he wasn’t sure if he could get rid of them."

I had known scalpers would massage the prices, but I hadn’t realised they’d rip off an appendage in the process. Pierre, the more worldly-wise in this arena, remained unflustered. With our cash already gone, I didn’t let Chucky ruin our evening.

Shizuka Arakawa, a willowy Japanese woman, skated her personal best performance to excerpts from Puccini’s Madame Butterfly. Her graceful and effort...
routine sent chills down my spine. She earned a standing ovation and vaulted from third place to the gold medal.

Friday morning: Chucky phoned. “Hey, how’s it going? What can I do for you guys today?” He was eager to sweat his guts out all day for another EUR 50. We weren’t bitter. But we took a pass.

Instead Pierre, Laurelle and I ambled into Turin with a backpack and stroller that shuttered along the city’s maze of wet, cobbled streets. Iron balconies, some as delicate as lace, jutted out from tall windows of ornate stone and brick buildings. Horns blasted and a police car screamed down the street past a rainbow parade of umbrellas. Another art museum to the left and one more historic church to the right. Little shops offering dozens of flavors of gelato, each tub dressed up as its own sundae and protected under a glass showcase. “Ah, bella! Bambina!” chimed the Italian ladies as Laurelle grinned and waved. Cappuccinos and marocchinos and bicerins. Breadsticks and country loaves and crème anglais-filled pastries. On the fringe of the famed Barolo wine region, it was difficult to find a bad bottle of red. Turin delighted our senses.

The second-hand ticket market may have been chaotic. Shops may have remained closed for a long stretch of the afternoon. Construction may have been last minute, or late, or even never. But a tour of Turin’s streets demonstrated a special piece of these Olympic Games that few places could match. The organizers dubbed it the “Cultural Olympiad” and directed spectators to oodles of operas and dance, painting exhibitions and museums. There was a wealth to experience. Just strolling the city’s streets, we partook. We perfected our “ciao” and “grazies” with each encounter.

Saturday night: The Russians or the Czechs? Pierre and I rooted for the Czechs in the men’s hockey game for the bronze medal. Our Canadians had beaten the team only four days earlier, so a win by the Eastern Europeans somehow would redeem the North Americans, who had missed out altogether on medals. One fan from Winnipege hung a banner over the railing: “I scored more often than Team Canada.” The stadium was filled with people who, like us, had purchased advance tickets expecting their teams would be good – but not good enough for the gold. Canadian flags, US flags. Italian flags and Swiss, British and German ones. Some Swedish and Finnish fans underestimated their teams (who became gold and silver medallists, respectively). The Russian-Czech game was fierce and sometimes dirty, and the Czechs took the bronze. Yet unlike the battle inside the rink, the fans cheered good hockey. Nationalities and allegiances intermingled in the bleachers, surmounting the strictly policed, fan segregation policies of European football, the sport that normally dominated Turin. The real winner was Olympic sport.

Sunday: The final day of the games, just as the sun began to poke through the cloud layer. We needed a few souvenirs. The central Olympic Store on Via Giuseppe Garibaldi was all but bare, so Pierre, Laurelle and I visited the Olympic Superstore along the River Po. We weren’t alone. The blue and white Team Italia racks remained well-stocked, but the Torino 2006 Olympic shelves were an old Soviet market. There were either lots of an item or none of it. We shopped by size rather than design. For large-sized men there were turquoise rugby shirts. Small women were limited to lycra, sleeveless tops. Babies got shorts.
With Torino 2006 gear disappearing from the shelves, Pierre and I headed toward the XX Winter Olympics’ closing ceremony. We grabbed sandwiches and marocchinos at the buzzing Matricola Café near the Olympic Stadium and shared a table with another couple. He sported a maple leaf jersey. A neatly groomed, silver-haired Italian man approached our table and played the waving and pointing game that we’d grown to love. He wanted the Team Canada maple leaf jersey off our new friend’s back. How much? The Italian and Canadian flashed their fingers in a Stone Age bargaining routine, and for EUR 100 the Canadian peeled off his outer layer. The Italian man grinned. He pulled the jersey over his head and strutted back to his companions at a nearby table. Several minutes later the maple leaf bedecked Italian returned. More hand waving and pointing. Soon we understood. His wife wondered how to wash his glorious, new prize.

No need for grand parades and fireworks. We had just witnessed the closing ceremony in a single, poetic gesture. As the Italian man donned the maple leaf, Turin passed the Olympic flame onto Vancouver, host of the XXI Winter Olympic Games in 2010.

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A native of northern Illinois, Janelle Muntz Lassonde was an investment banker living in London and Johannesburg for over a dozen years. The lifestyle took her well off the beaten tourist track – from Angola to Ethiopia, Iceland, Uruguay and Uzbekistan. She left banking recently and moved to Denver. She also moved to the right side of her brain, as a freelance writer and a director of Lighthouse Writers Workshop, Denver’s largest, non-profit writing organization. Janelle looks forward to the Vancouver Olympics in 2010 – and to discovering the true essence of Canadian society.