

In the autumn of 38 BC the poet Horace took a trip lasting almost three weeks, half the length of Italy. Luckily for us, he kept a diary, or so he'd have us think, which he turned into a poem of just over one hundred lines. In it he records, in cleverly varied daily detail, the fifteen stopping places between Rome and Brundisium, a distance of about 370 miles. Much of the journey was clearly very enjoyable, some of it was not—except perhaps in retrospect. Horace seems to have been one of those excellent raconteurs who can entertain us even with his own misfortunes, and there were not a few of those to recount. The main group of travellers numbered seven besides Horace: Heliodorus, Maecenas, Cocceius, Capito, Vergil, Plotius and Varius. How many slaves or humbler companions went along we can't tell. Certainly this important diplomatic mission (Maecenas was to act as intermediary between the two quarrelling members of the Second Triumvirate, Antony and Octavian) would have travelled in due style, with plenty of baggage, servants, carriages and mules.

Overnight stays were as varied as the daily incidents. The first night out, at Aricia, found Horace and Heliodorus alone in a modest inn (hospitium modicum). They had stopped there so as to take it easy along the tiring, jolting and no doubt crowded Appian Way, although more businesslike travellers would make Forum Appi in a single day. This community, packed with bargemen and mean-minded innkeepers, saw Horace onto a canal boat for the twenty miles across the Pomptine Marshes towards Terracina. Poor Horace, only on his second day of the trip, had digestive problems already (the water was very bad), but Heliodorus and their unnamed companions apparently took their time over dinner.

The night trip on the boat was not a success. First came a brawl between bargemen and slaves loading the luggage, then an over-crowded boat and time wasted over the fare and harnessing up the mule who would tow the barge downstream. Next mosquitoes, and frogs whining and croaking, and worse, a drunken boatman singing about his girlfriend. Not much sleep for anyone except the exhausted drunks, and the mule: when day came, the boat wasn't moving at all, and mule and boatman both got a thrashing from an infuriated traveller.

At Anxur, Horace developed sore eyes (he doesn't say whether his digestion had improved). His lodgings aren't mentioned either, perhaps because Maecenas, Cocceius and Capito were to meet him and Heliodorus in the hilltop town, and Horace was feeling a little overawed at the sophistication of Antony's intimate friend Capito. Nor do we know where

they stayed in Fundi, though they had a good laugh at a local bigshot, who dressed to the nines to receive such an important deputation, and welcomed them all with a formal sacrifice. Next night, at Formiae, they enjoyed the luxuries of a private villa (Murena's).

At Sinuessa Plotius, Varius and Vergil joined the party, much to Horace's pleasure. Again, he tells us nothing of the night's lodgings, perhaps to emphasize how much more important people are to him than places. Next night the party stayed at official lodgings, where the local magistrates in charge provided the expected fuel and salt. (We may wonder whether they had been warned of their important visitors ahead of time, as the pompous mayor of Fundi obviously had been.)

On to Capua—Maecenas energetic enough to play some handball, Vergil and Horace tired, sore-eyed and suffering from indigestion—and the next day, a welcome overnight stay in a private villa again, this time with Cocceius as the host. A certain tone of gloating, perhaps, in Horace's voice, at the contrast between their comfort in the well-stocked countryhouse (plenissima villa) overlooking the taverns of Caudium? The group stayed late over their dinner, with entertainment provided by another pair of brawlers—less drunken and altogether wittier than the bargeman in the marshes—who end by dancing the "Cyclops". Horace doesn't reveal whether everyone joined in and the evening ended in a rowdy romp.

Not so pleasant a time at Beneventum. A fire in the kitchen first scorched the travellers' supper, then had them all joining in to save it and the kitchen too as the flames spread. Nor did the next night bring much better luck: the villa near Trivicum had no dry wood for the hearth, and the smoke made

the tears run. Poor Horace: the sore eyes were hardly going to improve with the hot mountain sirocco (the locals, of whom Horace was one, as he'd been born at Venusia nearby, called the storm wind the Atabulus), the gritty dust it must have raised, and the two smoky evenings after the days' uphill crawl. His temper was perhaps not improved by his sitting up half the night waiting for some local girl who stood him up (mendax puella). At least he describes himself as a big fool for doing so!

The next village or town we don't know the name of (its syllables wouldn't work in hexameter verse). But we know that its bread was excellent—and its water expensive. We can at least hope the water was better at the price than the swampy liquid at Forum Appi. "The sensible traveller carries his bread on to Canusium from here," Horace tells us, as the Canusians' loaves were full of grit—nor were they any better off for water, it seems. It sounds as if Horace was beginning to find the journey less and less fun: everyone was sad to say goodbye to Varius, and arrived in Rubi worn out, after a long day's journey made even more exhausting by the rain.

The weather improved the next day, but apparently the road to "fishy Bari" (Barium piscosum) was even worse. Horace was by this time clearly too impatient to arrive in Brundisium to report on the lodgings at any of the last five stages. His spirits seem to revive slightly at an interestingly ridiculous local tale at Egnatia about spontaneous liquefaction of incense—but the water was once again bad news for the dyspeptic: the water-nymphs had obviously been angry when the town was founded.

The last two stages were evidently a hard push (Barium to Egnatia, 37 miles; Egnatia to Brundisium, 44 miles; the usual day's journey was not more than 25 miles or so) and we can hear the relief Horace felt at the party's arrival in the harbour town from which the diplomat could take the closest ferry-crossing to Greece: *Brundisium longe finis chartaeque viaeque est.*

Over the centuries, this all-too-human poem about the pleasures and pains of two and a half weeks' worth of travel which took place over two thousand years ago has entertained many sympathetic readers. The Latin isn't too hard, translations are easily found (try Niall Rudd's in the Penguin series) and the poem's fascination is still as powerful as ever. Try it! (Note: National Geographic, June 1981, has an amusing modern version of most of the trip, titled "Down the Ancient Appian Way".)