

# An Italian Adventure Part 2

## An Italian Adventure

### Part Two – The Grand Tour

May 16, 2011

**Dateline: Rome, Italy**

**Latitude at Rome 41.13 degrees North, 12.28 degrees East**

Our final port of call on the Celebrity Equinox was Rome, which we had visited several times before, but we always find it to be endlessly entertaining (maybe that's why they call it the Eternal City). There are only 2.6 million residents, but when you add in an equal measure of tourists in the summer months – it could not be anything but entertaining, and this visit was no exception.

We disembarked the Celebrity Equinox at the port of Civitavecchia and took a shuttle to the Oeste Train station in Rome and from there a taxi to our hotel at the Hotel Villa Del Parco on Via Nomentana, just outside the old city walls (all that is left now is an old city gate called le Porta Pia). We had said goodbye to friends headed to other places and continued our journey with Paul and Kathy. Our plan was to leave our sparkly clothes at the hotel while we toured other parts of Italy and we had to find a big taxi to accommodate us and our luggage. We left our bags at the hotel, and upon the advice of our concierge, we caught the #62 bus for one Euro – approximately \$1.40 (although it seemed that only tourists bought a ticket called a *bigletto*.) The #62 line ran from our street, Villa Nomentana, to the Piazza Barberini and Via del Corso de Vittorio Emmanuel, (Corso for short), ending at the Vatican. The deal was that you had a little ticket you put in a machine to be scanned and it spit it back out for you to keep as proof of payment. There didn't seem to be any sort of

enforcement . We wondered what happens at the end of the day when it looks like the bus had only half a dozen riders. Our hotel clerk told us it's sort of a wink-wink thing. Officials know what is going on, but don't want to throw Grandma off the bus for non-payment. We were told by another resident with whom we were chatting that Romans really like to see tourists pay the fare so it doesn't appear that we are freeloading, although with the prices charged here, I can't see how they could possibly think that. We assume that freeloading is reserved only for residents.

The history of Rome in a nutshell is this, starting with myth and going to documented history: Romulus and Remus were twin sons of the War God, Mars, and Rhea, one of the Vestal Virgins (thus dramatically shortening her career). Vestal Virgins lived in a temple and were keepers of the holy flame. They were able to retire after 30 years, but Rhea's time was far from up. The babies were abandoned (we were wondering if this was part of a cover-up so she could keep her job as a Vestal Virgin ) and were adopted by a she-wolf. They grew up to lead a band of outlaws and according to legend, in 753 BC Romulus and Remus attacked the nearby Sabine tribe and kidnapped their women and thus founded Rome, but eventually Romulus ending up killed Remus so you don't see anything named after him. From 800 to 600 BC Rome was ruled by 7 Latin and Etruscan kings, but in 509 BC the Romans revolted and established a Republic which expanded all over the Mediterranean. A long Period of Civil War ended when Julius Caesar defeated Pompeii in 48 BC. Later he was killed by Brutus and then Octavius Augustus became emperor and started a dynasty and a building binge that included the Coliseum, the Arch of Titus and the Forum of Trajan. In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century Christianity took hold and the Papacy became increasingly powerful. Rome became top heavy with its own bureaucracy and succumbed to over-expansion and in 385 AD, it split into two and subsequently fell into decline. The 5<sup>th</sup> Century saw the

Dark Ages and invasion by barbarians – Goths, Lombards and Franks. Then the Renaissance began and flourished in the 15<sup>th</sup> century under a system of powerful city states. The area was annexed by Napoleon in 1814, but in 1870 the various city-states took it back and it was unified as Italy. In 1922 Mussolini came into power for 20 years with his Fascist regime, but he was executed by his own people after Italy abandoned the Nazis and joined the Allies, who coincidentally were in the process of conquering the country, so it was an opportune time to make the flip-flop. Later of course, came a series of prime ministers, including Berlusconi and his bunga-bunga parties, and he emerged as sort of a head cheerleader for old-timey Roman decadence and moral decay, living proof that the “orgy” gene has continued to thrive in modern Romans.



Babington's  
Tea Room at  
the Spanish  
Steps

We got off the bus at the Piazza Barberini and walked to the Spanish Steps which we admired with thousands of other tourists and locals on their lunch hour (or hours – they take long ones here) Here we also saw the famous Hotel Hassler (one of Rome's premier hotels and lodging for the rich and famous and those who can pretend they are for a night or two) It is a very understated building (nondescript really) at the top of the steps off to one side. At the bottom of the steps is the equally unassuming Babington's Tea Room, which was a hangout for young wealthy gentlemen doing the requisite Grand Tour of

the Continent to round out their educations, including many of Romantic poets and writers in their day (Keats, Wagner, Goethe, Byron. Apparently it was not that good for their health. The house where Shelley died at the age of 30 is just on the corner and Keats died near here of tuberculosis at age 25. Byron lived on the square as well, but he managed to travel to Greece to die at the ripe old age of 36. There were some writers who did the Grand Tour and lived to tell about it such as Wagner and Goethe. An unlikely visitor, not in the English Gentleman mode, was Buffalo Bill. No word on how well he blended here. In keeping with the ritzy Hotel Hassler, the most exclusive shopping street in Rome Via Condotti, which is sort of the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue of Rome, dead ends here. There is a steady parade of shoppers and window-shoppers mingling with the tourists and vendors. We found that it is not just the shoppers and tourists who walk here, particularly late in the afternoon. The *passeggiata*– the ritual of an evening stroll through interesting places – is practiced throughout Italy.



## The Spanish Steps

Even the McDonalds here is upscale or so we are told, but we skipped this stop in favor of a more traditional lunch. We had a simple, yet extravagant lunch (simple food – big price tag) close by the steps. It was very crowded, but very picturesque and the best place in Rome (second only to the Vatican ) to get your pocket picked – but perhaps they were seeking more prosperous looking tourists because we had no incidents. The

scene was both charming and lively, with a mingling of tourists, shoppers, vagrants, lolly-gaggers, roasted chestnut vendors, souvenir hawkers, and knock-off designer goods peddlers. The local name for the Spanish Steps is the Piazza Spagna (Spanish Plaza). They were built between 1723 and 1725 at the site of the Spanish Embassy. There are 137 steps that ascend in 3 tiers from the Piazza de Spagna at the bottom to the Trinita dei Monti church at the top. From here you can see Rome's 7 hills and it draws a large crowd at sunset. There is a boat shaped fountain designed by Bernini in the Piazza Spagna called the Barccaccia Fountain. He was quite prolific and is much on display around Rome.



Trevi Fountain

After lunch we continued walking to the Trevi Fountain, completed in 1762. It was designed by Nicolo Salvi in the typical Baroque style. The fountain features Neptune (a.k.a. Triton) trumpeting on his conch shell, standing on a chariot with winged horses. The source of the water for the fountain was, and still is for all fountains in Rome, a series of gravity-fed aqueducts, first designed and built by those most clever of humans, the ancient Romans. This fountain has water spouting from 24 different places. Tradition says that if you throw a coin in the fountain, you will return to Rome, so of course we all did this, along with thousands of others. After all we had all seen the movie, *Three Coins in the Fountain*. There are guards scattered about to make sure little ragamuffins (or financially distressed tourists) don't dive in after the coins since there's a veritable fortune tossed in there every day. We are told that they clean the fountain out

at the end of each day and the money goes to charity, but this being Italy, we suspect that maybe some coins find their way into other pockets along the way.



Tossing Coins  
in the  
Fountain to  
Ensure our  
Return

From Trevi, we walked along the Via del Corso, the main street of Rome named for the Berber horse races held here during Carnevale. The races were held with no riders and things got kind of wild and unpredictable and the races were stopped in the late 1800's due to an annual trampling of bystanders, which came to be considered a bad thing. (The country had come a long way from the Coliseum days in terms of sensitivity.)

We continued our walk to the Pantheon, built in 27 BC by Marcus Agrippa and reconstructed by Hadrian in the early Second Century. It is the most complete ancient building in Rome. It was originally intended as a place to worship all the gods and thus the name, Pantheon. It was also a burial place for notables including the painter Raphael. It survived the onslaught of the barbarians largely because it became a church dedicated to martyrs just after Rome fell and thus it escaped being used as a quarry. The dome is 142 feet high with an oculus (a hole open to the sky) at its center and at different times of day and different seasons, small niches are illuminated by sunlight. The entrance is somewhat sunken since the Rome of today sits on 20 centuries of rubble. The Pantheon has the distinction of being the only building from

ancient Rome in continuous use since its construction.

We continued our leisurely walk, (a.k.a. *passeggiata*) experiencing “La Dolce Vita – which translates as “the sweet life”, which is the very essence of Italy. And we found it to be pretty sweet actually. We ran across several piazzas of note including the Campo del Fiore and the Piazza Navona. Piazza Navona , built in the Baroque Period in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, is the quintessential Italian piazza, built on the site of First Century AD stadium and race track built by



The Fountain  
of the 4  
Rivers –  
Piazza Navona

Domitian, which gives it its rectangular shape. Bernini’s Fountain of the Four Rivers (that would be the Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi) dominates the site. In the Four Rivers Fountain there are 4 River gods, mounted on horses plunging through the spray, that represent the 4 continents that were known in Bernini’s day and the associated flora and fauna from those places. The Nile, the Danube, the Ganges and the Plata in South America are represented (The Amazon, must not have gotten much press in those days since the Plata is very puny by comparison). An interesting thing about the South American piece of the sculpture is the presence of an armadillo – no word on where Bernini got that idea. The fountain is topped by an obelisk taken from the Appian Way, which was stolen from Egypt centuries before. There are several obelisks from Egypt

around the city including one from the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC that was taken as a trophy of war by Augustus when he defeated Antony and Cleopatra. (Seems like taking her jewelry would have been a lot easier).

There are two smaller fountains, the Fontana del Moro (the Moor's fountain) which depicts Neptune (Triton) as a dark skinned man (thus the title "Moor"), riding a rather diminutive dolphin, which gives the impression that he is torturing the poor thing. The other fountain is also of Triton, called the Fontana del Nettuno (Fountain of Neptune) which was begun centuries earlier, but only completed a few hundred years ago.



A Michael Vick sighting at the Piazza Navona

People watching is at its peak here. There are vendors selling knockoff purses and sunglasses, artists, musicians, mimes, tourists and so forth. We saw a guy who was a dead ringer for Michael Vick in a Number 7 jersey selling knock-off Louis Vuitton purses. We had been wondering what he was doing in the off season. Apparently people watching in the Piazza Navona is nothing new. Up until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it was a common practice to stop up the fountain outlets and flood the piazza and the rich people would splash around in their carriages while the poor made do with paddles and crude rafts.

From the Piazza Navona, we walked maybe 500 yards to another



piazza, the Campo De Fiori, popular with locals and tourists alike, where there are markets by day and street performers, evening strollers, and restaurant goers by night. We arrived roughly in between when there was a major sweep-up taking place rounding up the day's detritus. The translation of Campo del Fiori is Field of Flowers, but the image of tranquility it evokes is deceiving. Reportedly the painter, Caravaggio, killed his opponent after losing a game of tennis on the square, and the famous goldsmith Cellini reportedly murdered a business rival here. The east side of this square is built into the actual wall of the Roman theater of Pompey, where Julius Caesar was assassinated. Today there is a controversial statue of Giordano Bruno, an intellectual type who had the temerity to suggest that the earth revolved around the sun. He was burned at the stake as a heretic on the same spot where his statue now stands. The statue was erected in 1889 but the Church demanded it be removed given his status as a heretic. However local rioters turned out in force and triumphed over Vatican protests and thus Bruno still stands in the square today.

From Campo de Fiori we walked to the Piazza Campidoglio and Capitoline Hill, one of Rome's famed 7 hills, and the belvedere atop it. Capitoline is named for the site of the capitol. Italian cities seem to be fond of the "belvedere" which translates literally as beautiful view. It is an architectural structure, often a terrace designed to take advantage of a view. The belvedere at the Piazza Campidoglio, was designed by Michaelangelo in the 1550's to house the Capitoline Museums, veritable treasure troves of Roman sculptures and Renaissance paintings. There is a flight of steps called the Cordonata leading up to the Piazza from the street. Although each step is only a few inches high, there are plenty of them to burn off more than a few pizza calories. The belvedere here offers a sweeping view of the ruins of the Roman Forum which we planned to explore the next day. Two of the most famous iconic sculptures on the belvedere are Marcus

Aurelius on his horse and the legendary she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus. Another famous hill nearby is Palatine Hill, which also overlooks the Forum, and was the site where all the palaces of the wealthy stood (the English word “palace” comes from Palatine, just as capitol comes from Capitoline).



Victor  
Emmanuel  
Monument

From the Campidoglio, it is only a short walk to Piazza Venezia and the mammoth Victor Emmanuel Monument – larger than anything the Romans contemplated, but then again it was built in 1930 to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of unification and they had the benefit of more modern building technology. Prior to 1870, Italy was a country of often warring city-states until Victor Emmanuael became Italy’s first King. There is a statue of the king on horseback (43 feet long) and to give you an idea of the scale – the King’s mustache is 5 feet across. This was the site of many of Benito Mussolini’s Fascist rants in the late 1930’s, however, his glory was short lived. In 1945 in a display of extreme disapproval ratings, Mussolini and his girlfriend were shot and hung from meat hooks in Milan.

From Capitoline Hill, we trekked over to the Corso Vittorio Emmanuel (named after the same hero – sort of an Italian George Washington with a mustache. We had some fabulous bruschetta in an outdoor café called La Locanda de Tempio on a small side street. The name translates as temple place and

there was a part of a temple, but we were never clear as to whose it was. It stands in a little side street in the shadows of an ancient church in the Piazza San Ignacio. Rome has a gracious plenty of piazzas and since the onslaught of Americans so we fancy, we noted that there are pizzas to be had in all the piazzas. We first visited Rome in 1975 and found pizza to be scarce in these parts – it was primarily a Neapolitan thing – but that is no longer the case. We took the #62 bus back to the hotel and fell into bed and into a deep sleep, only slightly shy of comatose.

**May 17, 2011**

**Dateline: Rome, Italy**

We set out this morning today for the Vatican on the #62 bus, which was mobbed with people headed to work. We met a Canadian scholar who was working on a research project at the Vatican library who gave us a time management tip, saying that we should get off the bus one stop early and walk across the Tiber River, rather stay sandwiched on board as the bus sat in traffic trying to cover the same ground. We walked past the Castel Sant' Angelo which sits fortress like guarding the entrance to Vatican City (or at least it did in the old days). Castel Sant' Angelo was built by Emperor Hadrian as a tomb in 139 AD. It later became a fortress, and now it is a museum. It has been featured prominently and quite dramatically in Dan Brown books and movies such as Angels and Demons and The Da Vinci Code, supposedly providing secret passageways into and out of the Vatican for assorted heroes and villains.

Gary and I had been to St. Peter's Square a few times before and have always encountered throngs of people, but because St. Peter's Basilica, is one of the most spectacular sights in the world, it is always worth another visit. On today's visit it seemed that at least a million other tourists agreed with us on this and they were all in St Peter's Square that morning waiting to get inside. The Vatican is the smallest

independent state in the world and is governed by the Pope, who is protected by Swiss Guards in colorful traditional medieval era costumes (replete with scarlet and gold bloomers and halberds), although we are told he also has his own Secret Service types who dress and are armed more along the lines of a US President's protective detail. The square itself is massive, holding an estimated 400,000 people. There are 284 Doric columns designed by Bernini, forming two semi-circles with an obelisk in the center. There are 8 Vatican Museums housed in the surrounding buildings and acres of private gardens. The Vatican stands on the former site of the Circus of Nero (no animals, no clowns. A circus was in those days essentially a racetrack as seen in the movie, Ben Hur). St. Peters Basilica, consecrated in 1626, features the world's tallest dome, and it is indeed a marvel both structurally and artistically. It is 448 feet tall and somewhere in history it was decreed that no buildings in Rome may be higher, and thus Rome is thankfully spared a modern skyline.

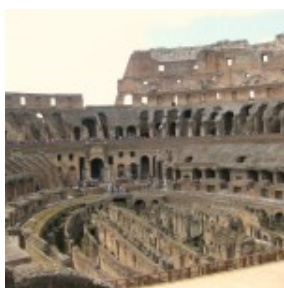
Paul and Kathy decided on a tour since this was their first time in Rome, but, we decided to savor our memories and "go walkabout" as the Aussies would say, and through the miracle of text messaging, we would rendezvous later. We had no particular destination in mind, but over the course of a few hours we ended up walking from the Vatican to the Coliseum, which is no small walk by anyone's standards. This stroll enabled us to observe the smaller things, like for example the city's manhole covers. They are have the letters " SPQR" , which in Roman times was an abbreviation for the Latin phrase, Senatus Populusque Romanus, which translates as



## The Bocca della Verita

“the Senate and the People of Rome”. We also had the opportunity to stop by a small church to see the *Bocca della Verita.*, which translates as “the Mouth of Truth” at the Church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin. I had somehow retained an image of this gaping mouth in my Repository of Useless Knowledge from a National Geographic photo and article from my childhood and had always wanted to see it. The “Bocca” was also featured in a 1953 movie starring Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn called Roman Holiday. Legend has it that if a liar puts his fingers in the mouth, the said liar’s hand will be gobbled up. I am pleased to report that both of us emerged with all digits intact.

We had lunch at an excellent restaurant overlooking the Coliseum and then took a short stroll to a park where we had a short nap alfresco, but since we had last toured the Coliseum in 1975, we decided it was worth revisiting and we had never done a guided tour of the Forum so we signed up for both.



Inside the  
Colisseum

At the Coliseum we had a tour with Paolo, a Fabio look-alike with even a Fabio accent, but he projected none of the Fabio air-headedness. The Coliseum – *the Piazzale del Colosseo* in Italian – got its name from a huge 100 foot high statue (Colossus) of Emperor Nero, which has long since “gone missing”. Its real name back in the day was the Flavian

Amphitheater, named for the Emperor Flavius. It is a free standing amphitheater and a marvel of engineering, made possible by the Romans mastery of two essential things – arches and concrete. The 3 types of columns used here were borrowed from the Greeks. It was able to seat as many as 50,000 people who came to watch gladiator contests and public spectacles. It was begun in 72 AD by Vespasian and inaugurated in 80 AD by his son Titus. The idea was to keep the populace entertained so they don't cause trouble. The entertainment was in the form of combat between men, between animals, between men and animals, and even between ships since the area could be flooded and ships floated. Simply put, killing was a spectator sport and the Romans wanted to share the fun with the average Joe in productions that were lavish and sophisticated. Animals were held below the Coliseum floor in cages and lifted to the arena elevator. Christians were occasional combatants, but not so much as modern day lore would have you believe. The Romans wanted a good battle for their blood sport and the Christians were not typically much competition for their adversaries. The Romans did execute Christians along with other "enemies and undesirables", but it was usually done at lunch break (sort of a yawner half-time show) versus being a headliner event. And reportedly the lions were over-hyped as well and were more bewildered than ferocious. Lions and Christians notwithstanding, it was the scene of incredible brutality and outlandish spectacle – I am thinking this may where modern "sports" such as demolition derbies and mud wrestling have their roots.

Another myth debunked on this tour was the iconic thumbs up or thumbs down by the Emperor to determine the post-combat fate of a gladiator. Paolo told us that the fans got to vote and it went like this: If they wanted the gladiator to be killed, they stuck a thumb up and gestured, much like an umpire calling a base runner out. It is believed that the thumbs up as a gesture of approval came from American GI's liberating Europe in WWII. If Romans wanted the gladiator spared .they

would make a fist and press their thumbs against the index finger. A further note on Romans and fingers – much of their customs align with ours. They used the index finger for pointing and the ring finger for rings. They believed the middle finger was connected by veins to the genitals, so we can surmise that they used it for their individual obscene gestures as well. No word on what they did with the pinkie – maybe it was for dainty gestures, as it is for us, like when you extend it skyward while sipping a cup of tea.

We also saw where another unsavory custom may have originated. There is centuries-old graffiti on the Coliseum walls that Paolo pointed out to us, including a pictorial advertisement for a whore house. Or as Paolo suggested, tongue in cheek, you could argue that it is an advertisement for a lunch special since the “artwork” could be interpreted as being two grapes and a hot dog. One other interesting note – the exits were called “*vomitoriums*” from the Latin word for “issue forth at a great rate of speed”.

As the Roman Empire went into decline, the Coliseum was neglected for centuries and consistently ransacked for building materials. (sort of the Roman Home Depot for stone and iron). Many of the hundreds of Christian Churches in Rome contain recycled stone from the Coliseum. Today only 1/3 of the building remains with three tiers of columns and 4 levels only on one side, but considering these ruins have been standing for 2,000 years, you can't help but be in awe of the remnants.

As we continued our tour, we walked across the street past Arch of Constantine toward the Forum. The arch was erected in 315 AD to honor Emperor Constantine's Victory over pagan forces and Rome's conversion to Christianity. It seems that on the battlefield Constantine had a vision of a cross which caused his conversion and since he was Emperor, Rome converted right along with him. The Romans were very big on building arches to celebrate military victories – after all a parade is

forgotten an hour after the band marches through – but an arch, well it's still there.



Ruins of the  
Forum

We were fortunate to have a guide for a tour of the Forum named Rachel (a UNC graduate and NC native) who was on a work-study program in Rome. While it is often referred to as the Forum, there are actually two here – the Roman and the Imperial. The forum was the political, religious and social center of ancient Rome, comprised primarily of temples and halls of justice. It was the site of speeches, processions, elections, parades and demonstrations. The Arch of Titus is here, commemorating his victory over Israel in 70 AD. Also there we saw the Arch of Septimius Severus which was 6 stories high with battle scenes carved on it. The Roman Forum is the older of the two and is mostly in ruins. The highlights here include the Umbilicus Urbis, the center (or bellybutton) of Rome and by extension the bellybutton of the world. There is not much here, just a circle of bricks, but this is supposedly the site which Romulus established as the Center. Of course the Greeks had their own belly button in Delphi, long before this bellybutton was designated, but that's a different story. There are also the ruins of the Curia – the home of the Roman Senate, along with the ruins of a number of temples to Roman deities.

Perhaps the most important temple here was the Temple of Vesta, home to the eternal flame that the 6 Vestal Virgins had to keep burning. They were priestesses, recruited from the



ranks of the nobility, some as young as 10 years old. They took a vow of chastity, but could retire with a large dowry and marry after 30 years of service, but by that time, most decided not to bother. Besides 40 in Rome isn't anywhere near what 40 today is. If they should slip up and lose their virginity – the punishment was, well , a bit harsh. A fallen virgin would be strapped to a funeral wagon and paraded through the streets of the Forum, followed by a one way trip to a crypt where she was given a loaf of bread and a lamp and then was then interred alive. Reportedly many of the Vestal virgins did succumb to temptation and suffered this fate. The belief was as long as the sacred flame burned Rome would stand. Priests would whip the virgins if the flame went out which, strangely enough, was apparently was less of an offense than a mere dalliance or two.

The Imperial Forum was started by Julius Caesar (who lived from 100 to 44 BC) as a show of power . He replaced many wooden huts with great structures that stood for centuries. He found he really liked being Emperor and gradually took more and more power for himself. Consequently, he was stabbed to death on the Ides of March (the 15<sup>th</sup>) by Brutus (who was his adopted son) and other Senator-co-conspirators. He reportedly said as he was dying, "et'Tu Brutus?," meaning "you too Brutus?". Julius Caesar was warned by an Etruscan priest to "Beware of the Ides of March", but apparently did not understand just how badly things were going to go that day. However his followers, including Augustus and Trajan triumphed over the assassins in the end.

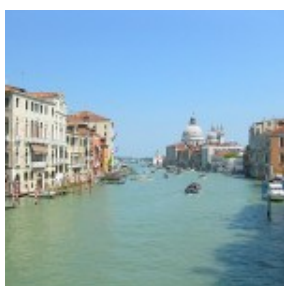
We met Paul and Kathy upon our exit from the Forum and we walked up to the Via Cavour where we briefly watched a movie being filmed, but since they didn't seem to be in need of any American tourist type extras, we moved on to find an outdoor restaurant with pizza and wine. We met a friendly waiter from Egypt who has lived here for several years. He says he can make a much better living here in Rome than in Cairo and so he

taught himself Italian, English and a few other useful languages and emigrated. (no word on his legal status). We headed back to the hotel to pack our bags. We leave for Venice tomorrow on the train with much of Rome still waiting to be explored next time.

**May 18, 2011**

**Dateline: Venice, Italy**

**Latitude at Venice 45.25 degrees North, Longitude 12.20 degrees East**



The Grand Canal of Venice

We arrived in Venice by train in the late afternoon via Florence and Bologna. The station for Venice, Santa Lucia, is connected to the mainland by a causeway. Nothing in the guidebooks prepares you for the sight you behold when you emerge from the train station. It is as if you walked through a time warp and stepped back a few hundred centuries or else onto a movie set. There are a series of steps from the train station down to the water line where the *vaporettos* (water buses) dock and more than one bedazzled tourist has taken a header while gawking at the dazzling Renaissance era tableau spread before them. We boarded a *vaporetto* bound for the Piazza San Marco at the other end of the Grand Canal as it snakes through the city – abuzz with boat traffic around the clock. This is Venice's Main Street. It is two miles long lined with centuries -old palazzos, which are protected by

laws against modernizing or otherwise changing. The canal itself is shaped like a backwards “S” and runs from the Santa Lucia train station (or *Ferrovia*) to the San Zaccaria stop at the Piazza San Marco, which is the heart of this old city full of elegant decay. The Grand Canal is 15 feet deep when the tide is in and 50 feet wide. Despite everyone boating at full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes, there never seemed to be any crashes.



A Residential Canal – Venice

Venice, sometimes called *La Serenissima* (rough translation is “the most serene one”) was a republic and major world power for close to 1,000 years. Venice of today is built on approximately 100 islands in a marsh formed by a river silted up centuries ago. Buildings were built on pilings, driven into the clay below the silt. The city has 400 bridges and 2,000 labyrinthine alleyways, making finding your way a challenge, but then losing yourself in Venice is not such a bad thing. The city itself is around 1,500 years old, originally built as a refuge to escape the barbarians who were looting and having their way with things on the mainland of Italy, putting the finishing touches on the decline of the Roman Empire. For hundreds of years *La Serenissima* was at the center of East West trade until new routes were established. In the olden days each dukedom had its own currency and they traded in ducats, named after dukes, long before the Euro and the Lira.

As their wealth and importance declined, along with the population (from 200,000 to 60,000 residents today), the city

partied itself from decadence right on down to decay. Today Venice's only means of support is tourism and the decay is part of the charm. The city has a lot of practice at tourism since they have been playing host to tourists for over 400 years. The city itself is the attraction with its museums, churches and palazzos lining every street. During the day, especially during high season (April-October), hordes of tourists descend on the city, but most come just for the day, so early morning, late afternoon and evening are the best times to be here.



A Vaporetto  
and Water Taxi  
Stop on the  
Grand Canal

Venice is divided into 6 districts and is pedestrian friendly, and since there are no motorized land vehicles, walking is the only way to get around unless you take some sort of watercraft which include:

*Vaporettos* – which are like ferries or buses on the water

Water Taxis which are classic Chris Craft type antique boats comparable to limousines taxis and are quite exorbitant

*Tragehettos* (in Italian the word means “ferry”), which are smaller versions of gondolas. These are free and ferry people across the Grand Canal at various places. Tragehettos serve as training vessels for aspiring gondoliers

Gondolas, which are also exorbitant, but rides on them are a

must if you are to have a true Venetian experience.

All freight coming and going to Venice has to be transported by water so there are all sorts of working boats plying the canals during the day.



St Mark's  
Basilica

Turning our heads this way and that to take it all in (Venice is literally an assault on the senses), we took the vaporetto to the Piazza San Marco and schlepped our luggage to our hotel, the Violino d'Oro (Golden Violin). It was 380 Euro for 2 nights, but at least we've heard the gelato is a bargain here. We set out exploring, which was more like wandering, since we had no clear destination in mind. We strolled by the Caffé Florian and the Caffé Quattro to hear the dueling violins in the Piazza San Marco which is the heart of Venice. These are two outdoor cafes on opposite sides of the Piazza which have formally attired orchestras playing classical music. Each has a hefty cover charge and even heftier drink prices, but it is a lovely place to sit and contemplate St. Mark's Basilica. The Church itself has 5 domes and is classically Byzantine in style, inspired by the Church of the Apostles in Constantinople (modern day Istanbul). The current structure is the third Church on this site. The original burned down and the second was torn down to make room for the current church, which has been standing in its present form for close to 900 years. The basilica was built as the final resting place for the relics of St. Mark, whose body was allegedly smuggled by two merchants out of Alexandria Egypt in

828 AD (but of course after all those hundreds of years, who would know for sure whose remains those might be?) Other Venetians also swiped the 4 giant bronze Horses of the Apocalypse called the Quadriga (out front above the entranceway into the basilica) from Constantinople in 1204. Interestingly enough, there was actually a law passed in 1075 that all ships returning to port had to bring a treasure (precious gift) for the church. Many treasures came in the form of looted mosaics. It gives one pause to reflect on that "thou shalt not steal commandment. Is it okay when you are swiping something for your church? To be on the safe side, the horses of the Quadriga on display are replicas. The originals are locked up in case anyone gets any ideas about decorating their own churches back home.

Several paces in front of St. Marks Basilica is the Campanile (bell tower) which is the tallest structure in Venice. It was originally built in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, but it collapsed in 1902. When it was rebuilt they added an elevator which makes it much more popular with tourists nowadays. There is a strong Byzantine influence here in its architecture and in the elaborate mosaics inside depicting Biblical scenes.



Happy Hour at  
the Rialto  
Bridge

They no longer sell pigeon food in the piazza, which is something of a blessing since the pigeons could get aggressive with their dive-bombing and poop dropping on tourists. They seemed more subdued on this trip, not so bold or surly, but

this proved not to be true at the Rialto Bridge bistros where you had to mind both your pocketbook and your peanuts .

We enjoyed seeing the Torre Horologico (clock tower) which was covered and being restored the last time we were here in 2004. It was built in the Renaissance in the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century about the time Columbus was setting sail. It is decorated with phases of the moon and the signs of the zodiac on its blue and gold enamel face. It has two figures (the locals called them Moors since they were cast in dark bronze) taking turns striking a bell on the hour with little hammers. At the top is the symbol of Venice, a winged lion, representing St. Mark. The other evangelist disciples when they are symbolized in art are represented by other winged creatures: St. John an eagle, St. Matthew a man and St. Luke an ox (no word on why Luke got stuck with such an unglamorous creature.) The clock has an interesting history. There was an accident during a 17<sup>th</sup> Century maintenance effort which resulted in what was probably the first case of death by robot attack when the clock started up unexpectedly and knocked a worker off the tower on to the piazza below. It is also part of Venetian lore that the two inventors of the clock's mechanism had their eyes gouged out upon the completion of the project to ensure they could not ever replicate their feat in a rival city. The Venetians really know how to put the "horror" in horological.

We did some strolling through the older quarters, seeing dozens of chieras (churches), shops, restaurants, and galleries and countless palazzos, many dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Some palazzos became hotels, others galleries and museums. One of our best discoveries was La Boutique de Gelato where fabulous gelato could be had for 1.50 Euro – a real bargain in these parts.



## The Grand Canal at the Doge's Palace

We walked by the Doge's Palace for a quick look. The doge (pronounced "dohzh") was roughly equivalent to a duke and each doge was elected for life (rather than through primogeniture, where a title is inherited by the eldest son). The Bridge of Sighs (Ponte dei Sospiri) connects Doge's Palace to the prison (Palazzo dei Prigioni – here even the prison was a palazzo). An appointed Council of Ten did the judging and condemning in the Doge's Palace where there was an official courtroom, which doubled as a torture chamber. The accused were hung by their wrists from the ceiling and confessions followed in short order. After extremely brief deliberations, it was off to the Bridge of Sighs and the Palazzo dei Prigioni and thus stern and swift justice was dispensed.

The Bridge of Sighs was so named because condemned prisoners would pause at the tiny window and take a last look at Venice and sigh for their loss. There were not many ex-cons in those days since prison sentences seemed to be permanent. The Doge's Palace also contained living and working quarters, the Hall of the Grand Council, Senate Hall and an Armory. While the Doge was the ruler of Venice, he was not solely in charge. There was the council that he had to answer to and in fact there was one doge that the council ordered executed and they removed his portrait from the Palace as if he had never existed. In those days only the Doge's Palace could be called a Palazzo. The rest no matter how grand, were simply Casa or "Ca" for short.





## Approaching the Rialto Bridge by Gondola

We walked from there to the Rialto Bridge, which takes its name from the Italian words, *rivo alto* (high bank). It stretches across Grand Canal and is home to shops and more shops. The Erberia (Herb market) and Pescheria (fish market) are here by the bridge over the Grand Canal as they have been for centuries. The current bridge was completed in 1591, replacing a series of earlier, lesser bridges. It was the only bridge across Grand Canal until the Accademia Bridge was built in 1854. Rialto used to be a separate commercial area, whereas the San Marco area was for government and religion, but the two grew together long ago. The quays on either side of the bridge were used to load and unload goods. The two areas are connected via a winding series of streets called the Mercerie. Today the quays have tiny little outdoor restaurants which provide an excellent place to sit with a glass of wine and watch the action on the Grand Canal. In the shops above, there is a great deal of bartering and bantering going on – commerce still is king at the Rialto Bridge.

**May 19, 2011**

**Dateline: Venice Italy**

Today we decided to dedicate to leisurely strolling and seeing new things, particularly a much photographed church, Santa

Maria della Salute, directly across the Grand Canal from St. Mark's Basilica. Despite several previous visits to Venice, we had only admired (and photographed) it from afar. We used the Accademia Bridge to cross the Grand Canal and



Bridge on a  
Walk in  
Dorsoduro

stopped in a picturesque neighborhood called Dorsoduro for a leisurely lunch. We wound our way through small passageways and bridges, doing a quick walk by the Guggenheim museum, housed in what was a palazzo belonging to founder Peggy Guggenheim. She left the city her vast collection of modern art when she died. We decided to forego exploring the collection, but did take time to watch with fascination an art "installation" in progress. It resembled a giant bird's nest – a round palazzo sized ball formed with dogwood trunk sized pixie sticks lashed together. The "artists" were crawling around the superstructure adding more layers. I thought I would Google the Guggenheim to see the finished product, but had no luck, so I'm wondering if a strong breeze may have de-installed the installation.

After more circuitous walking we reached the church for a brief visit. The name Santa Maria della Salute translates roughly as the Church of St. Mary of Good Health. It was built as a thank you to God for sparing the city in the Plague of 1630. Venice used cisterns in the olden days and collected rainwater that ran off the various piazzas and filled wells with it. Changing over to piped-in water from the mainland no

doubt improved the “Salute” in Venice in addition to the church building. The church was complete in 1687 and features the large dome of the classic baroque style. It sits at the end of an island and is one of Venice’s most recognizable landmarks. It was built on marshy ground at the mouth of the Grand Canal and is supported by over 1 million timber pilings. Despite the external grandeur, it is actually simple inside by Venetian standards. This is contrary to most Venetian construction which tends to be shabby or plain on the outside and sumptuous on the inside.

As we left the church and continued to explore Dorsoduro, we made a serendipitous find on a narrow street just off the canal. It was a woodworking shop for gondolas. There were craftsmen working with chisels and planes shaping the various parts, and were making oarlocks on the day we were there, and gladly showed us their work. We took a traghetto back across the canal to our hotel to get ready for dinner and a twilight gondola ride, preceded by a few drinks at Harry’s Bar, a classic, if pricy, watering hole favored by Hemingway in days gone by. Harry’s Bar was founded by Guiseppe Cipriani and his friend named Harry in 1931 ( a new establishment by Venetian standards). We had been to Harry’s on previous visits, but believe that inflation has set in since our last visit. This is the home of the original Bellini – a wondrous concoction of white peach juice and champagne, but the price is equally wondrous at 15 Euro – roughly \$23 and the martinis were 20 Euro or \$30 each. So we sipped slowly and decided we had best hit the Euro Store (ATM) before we ordered another round.



Sunset on the

## Grand Canal

We set out in our gondola just before sunset on the Rio de Barcaroli. Our gondolier was Roberto, who gave us a wealth of information about the buildings along the canals, gondoliering and the canals themselves. We learned that the back canals, (25 miles of them ) of which there are 150, are called rivers (rios) and feed into the Grand Canal with their depth being tide dependent. There 2 tides a day here and they provided the original sewer system for the city, but were long ago overwhelmed by demand. Today they use pumps and pipes which is a much more agreeable solution for everyone.

We had borrowed wine glasses from our hotel and brought wine along and sipped it as Roberto expertly propelled us along with a single giant rudder-like oar as he pointed out these highlights:

The house where Marco Polo grew up and later died after his wanderings abroad to the Orient and other exotic places. He left Venice (a married man at the time) at 17 and did not return until he was 41. No word on how Mrs. Polo felt about that. (Polo is another name for Paolo, which is Italian for Paul).

The home where Goethe lived and wrote for several years

The house where Mozart lived and died as well as the house where the composer, Richard Wagner lived and died in 1883. This is now a low profile casino –no Vegas glitz allowed here. Casino means “little house” in Italian and most casinos started in houses such as this.

The house where the poet, Byron lived in 1818, as well as the places where Robert Browning and Henry James stayed for a while as part of their respective Grand Tours.

The Ca' de Oro (translation is House of Gold), built in 1420 is a fabulously ornate Byzantine Gothic structure – opulent

beyond belief, with priceless works of art and Bernini sculptures. Today it is a museum

La Fenice Opera House (Gran Teatro all Fenice) where 5 Verdi operas premiered. It was an 18<sup>th</sup> Century structure gutted by fire in 1996 and since restored. There is an excellent book by John Berendt called The City of Fallen Angels about the fire and restoration, filled with whodunit intrigue.

The house where Napoleon lived for a time. His first visit was as a tourist, his second was as a conqueror.

The Church of the Pieta – where Vivaldi worked as a choirmaster for an orphanage.

Roberto, a gondolier for 30 years, told us that the striped barber poles along the canal signify private boat docks where many palazzos have their own gondolas and boats tethered. He also told us that gondoliers have to be licensed and they have to serve an apprenticeship. There are only 400 allowed to work at a time. The trade is handed down from father to son over



At the Gondola  
Workshop

generations. Roberto had to wait until his father retired before he could become a gondolier. Prior to that he worked the traghetto for 13 years for tips. Each gondola is handmade and costs around 50 thousand Euros ( 75 thousand dollars) and each gondolier must own his own gondola.

Gondolas are built to tilt to the right to counteract the weight of the gondolier who stands and steers on the left

stern. They are all black and have essentially the same brass decorations on them, most with brass seahorses on the gunnels and the characteristic brass comb-like ornament called a *ferra* on the prow, with each of 6 “teeth” representing one of the districts of Venice. In 1562 it was decreed that all gondolas be black to keep people from ostentatiously showing off wealth, but of course they found other ways.

For centuries, Venice has had to battle high water, and increasingly so during the last century. The city floods about 100 times per year, typically October through late winter. This period is called the *Acqua Alta* (high water). There are several problems contributing to this situation including global warming causing rising oceans, and the fact that the city was built on sediment from which increasing amounts of ground water have been pumped out over the years. The surrounding Adriatic is quite shallow and a strong wind can whip it ashore quite easily. When there is a high tide and a *sirocco* wind (from Africa), tourists and locals alike find themselves on catwalk planks supported by cinder blocks crossing the Piazza San Marco. Everyone is hoping that an engineering consortium can come up with a solution. Right now there is one being worked on called the Moses project. It involves underwater gates being built to shut out the sea when it rises, and is expected to be operational in 2014. Everyone who loves Venice is praying that it works so we don't have to visit it at some point in the future wearing scuba gear.

**May 20, 2011**

**Dateline: Lake Garda, Italy**

**Latitude at Lake Garda, 45.6 degrees North, Longitude 10.7 degrees East**



Lake Garda,  
Northern Italy

This morning we caught the vaporetto to take us to the train station for our short ride to Lake Garda. We had reservations as far as Verona, but had to go rogue for the Verona to Lake Garda segment due to a small mix-up in our reservation-making the day before. We arrived at the tiny train station at Desenzano on the southern end of Lake Garda, the largest of Italy's Alpine lakes, and were met by our driver, for whom I had arranged in advance. It was a good move since it was at least an hour to the hotel in the town of Gardone Riviera on the western shore of the lake. We checked in to the Hotel Florida – a fabulous hotel beautifully landscaped and perched on a mountainside with great views of Lake Garda. We found we were definitely off the beaten path for American tourists, but there were still a lot of European tourists. Many wealthy Italians from major cities use this as their private upscale getaway. Unfortunately most of our upscale clothes were in a suitcase in Rome, but we tried our best to blend.

Our hotel is family owned and run with the most hospitable people imaginable. It was built in the Belle Epoch Era in the late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries and has hosted many of the aristocracy. Of course nowadays they are hosting us duffle toting, guidebook wielding tourists, but the Old World ambiance remains. The hotel is about 150 yards from the water, but the angle of the hill is somewhere between 45 and 60 degrees so it's not so easy to stick your toe in from there. We found the panoramic views to be as advertised, from not only the lobby, but from the balconies



## In the Village of Gardone Riviera

and terraces of the 22 suites as well. The furnishings were very elegant in a Laura Ashley sort of way, with a lot of chintz and florals. The walls and ceilings had hand painted designs – subtle and tasteful of course. There were fresh flowers and artsy touches everywhere. We decided to walk into the town of Gardone Riviera, which despite our perched location, turned out to be even higher on the mountain – straight up , and so we arrived hot and thirsty. It is always dicey to quench your thirst with wine, but it was really good as was the lunch that we had at the Taverna del Borgo.

After lunch, we explored the town on foot – and found it spotlessly clean and right out of a storybook in every sense of the word. There was a small train like vehicle (i.e. a train with rubber wheels) with the grand name of the “Orient Express “, but it was also called the Trentino or little train and we found it reminiscent of a Disney World shuttle. We took the Trentino back to the waterfront for 2 Euros each, but we still had a good walk to our hotel, which because of its perched locale, is always a good walk from anywhere along the waterfront.





Waterfront  
Gardone  
Riviera

Lake Garda is ringed by lemon and olive groves, as well as vineyards ,with the well-known Bardolino and Valpolicella wine producers just across the lake from us. It is also ringed with the villas of the fabulously rich and quite often only locally famous (old money versus new). Lake Garda is not only the largest, it is also the balmiest of all of Italy's Alpine Lakes, situated at the foot of the Alps. There are some very pricey hotels here – sort of an Italian Lake Tahoe, however our Hotel Florida was both reasonable and beautiful with its own gardens. We noted that the whole area seems to be one big garden and we were lucky enough to be here in peak bloom season.

We spent the next few hours relaxing by the hotel pool (relaxing includes napping and reading). It was an infinity pool with the lake and islands at it edge. The climate here is reminiscent of Southern California at its best, with abundant sunshine and moderate temperatures. No bugs – just right. A small and timely rain shower drove us indoors so we could get ready for a fabulous dinner at the lakeside Ristorante Casino.

It was a very elegant place – no longer a casino, but it had several rooms for catering to large parties and special events requiring a high degree of elegance with great views of the lake. There was good wine, impeccable service and delectable food, and the price was commensurate with all of the above, so it looks like we need another trip to the Euro store tomorrow.

**May 21, 2011**

## **Dateline: Lake Garda, Italy**



### Sunrise over Lake Garda

Just when we thought things couldn't get any more beautiful here, we awoke to witness the sun rising in exquisite splendor over the lake. Fortunately we did not draw our drapes the night before or we would have been snoring away (Gary would anyway – I only sleep out loud from time to time – or so he claims). We had the hotel breakfast alfresco on a terrace with a view of the lake and the pool.

We left the hotel to go to the ferry dock where we found the city was hosting a Vintage Design and Fashion open air market. We had a little time before the ferry was due to depart, so we strolled around on the promenade amid the oleanders, hydrangeas and palms. Above us on the hillside were the more formal gardens of the villas, accessed via narrow cobblestone streets scented with star jasmine, cascading over stucco walls and wrought iron fences. This is definitely a town evoking a bygone era – Jay Gatsby would be right at home here. We stopped for a bit and admired the fleet of old wooden pleasure boats (like Chris Crafts, but of Italian design). Then for 22 Euro per person, we took a ferry from Gardone Riviera to Sirmione, via the villages of Garda and Bardolino on



Village of  
Bardolino on  
Lake Garda

the Navigazione Lago di Garda ferry. This one did not take cars, but they have one called the Traghetto Autoveicoli which does. The auto ferries cross the lake in two places, point to point, whereas the people ferries make loops at either the north end or the south end of the lake. I fancy the lake is shaped like the head of an elephant with its trunk fully extended toward the northeast. The south end of the lake is the elephant's head with one ear showing. Unfortunately, part of the head is missing, but with a glass or two of Bardolino, you can envision it. Desenzano would be at the neck, Sirmione right where the ear attaches to the head and Gardone would be where the trunk meets the head on top. Bardolino and Garda are along the edge of the ear. To the north toward the Alps is the tip of the elephant trunk and the town of Riva. We chose the fast ferry, although the slow ferry makes more stops, since we wanted to ensure we had some pool/nap time later.



Castle at  
Sirmione

Sirmione is built on an island 2 miles off shore and is a pedestrian only town with a medieval atmosphere. The town is centuries old and served as a summer getaway for Romans, particularly Catullus, the poet. The ruins of his villa are still here, but having just been in Rome, we were pretty much over seeing any more ruins for a while, so we stayed in town. The main attractions at Sirmione are the sulfur baths (Romans were nothing if not ultimate spa people), the Roman ruins and the Rocca Scaligera which is a fairy-tale like castle surrounded by the lake, complete with swans in the moats. It was built by the Scali (or Scaligera) Princes of Verona. The town, adjacent to the castle, has narrow cobble stone streets lined with shops and restaurants, with flowers everywhere you could possibly put a pot or flowerbed.



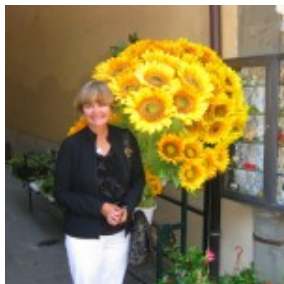
Mountains of  
Gelato

We strolled the streets, shopped for a few mementos and stopped for a snack, bypassing the mounds of pastel gelatos tempting us to find a fresh fruit stand where we gorged on local berries and melon. We stopped at a hotel for cocktails on their lakeside balcony before re-boarding our ferry back to Gardone Riviera. We decided our pool side relaxation interrupted yesterday should be continued, and so we disembarked the ferry and walked to our hotel and assumed our positions. We eventually roused ourselves to walk down the street to a small lakeside pizzeria. We feel we are starting to get the hang of this lounging around business.

**May 22, 2011**

**Dateline: Cortona, Italy**

**Latitude at Cortona 41.8 degrees North, Longitude 12.56 degrees East**



Sunflowers at  
a Flower Shop  
in Cortona

We had a long series of train rides starting at 6:30 to get to our destination for the next few days, the Tuscan village of Cortona . Our trip took us from the Veneto at the foot of the Alps through the rich farmland of Emilia-Romagna and into the hills of southernmost Tuscany where it borders Umbria. Tuscany is awash in vineyards and olive groves, farmhouses, villas and castles, cathedrals and churches – all in those stereotypically Tuscan colors such as burnt sienna and umber, tastefully faded and oozing character. Cortona is an ancient city in a country of ancient cities, founded by the Etruscans who were the predecessors of the Romans. They were apparently interesting people, and highly developed intellectually, aside from the fact that they believed you could tell the future by contemplating the entrails of animals. Historians believe them to be artistic and cultured, as evidenced by the pottery and jewelry they left behind. The name Tuscany is a derivative of their name. Tuscany, as in all of Italy, was really a loose confederation of city-states and was called Etruria going back to the Ninth Century B.C. Around 400 B.C. the Romans started taking over, but still maintained the tradition of feasts and revelry – in fact taking it to new heights, with the last Etruscan city captured in 256 BC. Cortona was a major power in

medieval times, but because it later fell into obscurity, modern warfare thankfully passed it by and left much of the old city standing over the centuries.

We arrived on Sunday at the train station in Camucia and it would have been a long strenuous walk to Cortona, even without our luggage, and thus we understood why the guide book called for a bus ride; however the guidebook failed to mention that there are none running on Sunday– and there were no taxis there either. Fortunately when I called the hotel, they sent one of only a few that operate in the town at all, much less on Sunday and it took us up the hill in only a matter of minutes to the Hotel Santa Lucia on the Via Guelfa. The taxi delivered us to the doorstep of the hotel , and thankfully so since the street runs at about a 45 degree angle. We left our luggage at the hotel and set off exploring.



Tuscan  
Countryside  
beyond the  
Walls of  
Cortona

The town, constructed out of a crumbly sort of sandstone, sits on a 1,700 foot hill perched above the dramatic fields and vineyards that look as they have for centuries (as long as you can ignore the strip of highway and the train tracks in the distance that is). However in pre-Roman times, it was marshland so we don't really see what the Etruscans saw. Our view is only of ruins, wells and tombs remaining from their ancient settlement .The main street of Cortona is the Via

Nazionale, which is the closest thing to a flat street in this town. It starts at the Piazza Garibaldi and continues through to the Piazza della Repubblica. This piazza is the heart of town where City Hall (the Palazzo del Comune) stands. Cortona today remains a walled city (built atop walls from the Etruscan era 2,500 years ago) with gates called "portas", with many stepped streets to accommodate the steep hills. Cortona was made famous most recently by Frances Mayes in her book, *Under the Tuscan Sun*. There was a movie by the same name, but they chose a heroine about 30 years younger and 50 pounds lighter than the real Frances, and made her svelte and single, presumably to add some credibility to those steamy love scenes that sell movie tickets and DVD's.



Piazza della  
Repubblica

Only a block away from our hotel, we found the Piazza della Repubblica and City Hall, which is a strange mix of medieval towers and a bell tower with a staircase much grander than the structures it leads to. There are many wooden balconies around the Piazza, which of course are reproductions of those from medieval times. We saw evidence of many more where there were holes visible in many buildings where the stone has lasted, but the wood has long since rotted. You can picture servants in the olden days throwing stuff off them onto unsuspecting commoners below – but today the pigeons do the honors. We enjoyed seeing the benches with the town elders (all men) sitting and visiting and they were gracious enough to move over to make room for us tourist types, but the cigarette smoke was so heavy, we couldn't tarry long. In Etruscan times



a street led from this piazza up the hill to a temple, then in Roman times it became a forum. We particularly enjoyed sunset here with the changing pastels of the town's buildings, swallows darting around the square, and the local townsmen trudging up the steep and narrow winding streets leading from the piazza. We had



Giant Calzones  
at Fufluns

dinner at Fuflun's Tavern Pizza (Fuflun was the Etruscan name for the god Dionysus), where we sat at the outdoor tables right on the street just a block off the Piazza Repubblica on the very steep Via Ghibellina. To accommodate the slope of the street, they had built small decks to make the tables sit level. Fuflun's served the biggest calzones I have ever seen – about the size of a hubcap folded in half. With great regret, Gary had to abandon his a little more than halfway through. A note on the rather intriguing names, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. In the Middle Ages there was an ongoing feud between the pope and various secular rulers of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. They each had their own warriors – the Guelphs who backed the Pope, and the Ghibellines who favored the secular factions. The basic argument was over who should rule over the other. This battling between the warring factions went on for years and was good for keeping life interesting in between bouts of plague, famine and various natural disasters.

**May 23, 2011**

**Dateline : Cortona, Italy**





## Along the Way of the Cross Above Cortona

There are a number of great walks in Cortona, so we ambled around town, and eventually made our way up to the Santa Margherita Basilica just below the peak of the hill that Cortona occupies. En route we passed the Stations of the Cross (commemorating the 14 different places and events that took place as Jesus carried the cross to Golgotha). This basilica (also called the Santuario) is named after the patron saint of Cortona, Santa Margherita (no relation to the beverage of the same name) and she is buried here in the Santuario.

Margherita was a 13<sup>th</sup> Century rich girl (and reportedly an unwed mother who took care of the poor. There were reports that a 13<sup>th</sup> century crucifix that “talked” to her. She was also a follower of St. Francis from nearby Assisi. Many believe she protected Cortona



## Basilica of Santa Margherita

from WWII bombs, but then again, it would have to be a

severely off-course bomber which would drop a payload here.

We only had a quick peek inside the basilica, because a cleaning lady banished us from the church since she was mopping. She didn't speak English, but we got the message from her brandished mop and so we wisely moved on. At the very top of the hill is the the Medici Fortress which is advertised as a 30 minute climb from town, but this does not include stopping and panting for air periodically. The Medici Fortress, used in medieval times to defend the town, occupies the highest point on the hill above the Basilica. The views were great, but a documentary crew was doing some sort of filming so we didn't spend much time.



The View from  
the Piazza  
Garibaldi

We walked back down to the village, taking care that our feet didn't run away with us on the steep down slope, and found ourselves under the sycamore trees at the Piazza Garibaldi. There is a belvedere here, a park like promontory on the city wall that didn't exist in medieval times. It was built in the Romantic era during the Age of Napoleon just so people could sit and enjoy the view. It is named after Guiseppe Garibaldi – a General who helped unite a greatly diverse Italy in the 1860's. From here you can see a bit of the village of Assisi (home of St. Francis) and a small lake called Trasimeno where Hannibal defeated the Romans in 217 BC with 15,000 dying in the battle, shortly before things ended badly for Hannibal and his elephants. Off to the right are the vineyards and the town of Montepulciano.

We walked through the tiny Piazza Signorelli whose main attraction is the Casali Palace which was the headquarters for Florentine nobles who controlled the city at one point. Every 6 months or so Florence would send a new captain to be in charge, who would add his coat of arms to those who preceded him, and they are still on display today. Signorelli is the name of two famous artists (religious themed paintings of course) from Cortona who lived in medieval times, with the most famous being Luca Signorelli. It seems that there are unassuming "chiesas" (translation chapels or small churches) on every corner, many of which house priceless paintings.

There were several museums which we skipped in favor of just walking since the weather was fabulous and much too good to be inside. We also missed the Etruscan tombs in an area called Il Sodo which are called "melone" for they are said to be melon shaped. There is quite a bit of excavation still going on and with special permission, tourists can visit the site and watch.

We also did a stroll by of the Piazza del Duomo where another big church, the Cattedrale stands, which is no longer considered a true cathedral since they no longer have a bishop. The Cattedrale is very unassuming and in fact a bit "underwhelming", compared to cathedrals in Sienna and Florence, but there were beautiful views from here. We could also see the town cemetery which was moved from this area where the Piazza del Duomo is now in Napoleons' time due to hygiene concerns – something to do with high ground and gravity and porous rock presumably, although some say it was just their excuse to reclaim this prime real estate.

The plan was for Paul and Kathy to return to Rome for their flight home tomorrow, and Gary and I would proceed through Rome and on south to Sicily. We decided to book a reservation since it was a lengthy trip . We also decided to break up the trip with an overnight stay in the city of Salerno along the way (more on that adventure in the next segment of the Great

Adventure Travelogue). We stopped into a local travel agency called Tuscan Magic and encountered an agent who spoke little English. She told me (or so I thought) that she was getting ready to close for lunch and I should come back in an hour, which I did. It was close to two hours later that she came strolling up the street licking a gelato, but the good news was that I was first in line to see her. (The other people behind me must have known that one o'clock doesn't mean one o'clock in Italy.) As we proceeded with our transaction, I was a little alarmed that her English seemed to have melted away with the gelato and so we were going total Italian, plus I had to explain to her what a rail pass was, what a Social Security number was (needed by Citibank to confirm that I was really me using this Master Card number) and most alarmingly where Salerno was. I thought I was missing something when I understood her to say that the train cars are actually put onto the ferry and hauled across the Straits of Messina to Sicily. But as it turned out – my Italian must have been at least passable at this point because that is precisely what happened – but I digress.



Under the  
Tuscan Sun at  
Bramasole

After a few hours booking with Tuscan Magic (well with a casual lunch thrown in, it was more like 3), we had a few hours of daylight left, so walked out to Bramasole (which means “yearning for the sun” ), the house that Frances Mayes and her husband Ed bought and renovated as described in *Under the Tuscan Sun*. It is built on a hillside that has morning sun

and is in shade for most of the afternoon. The house is very plain and rectangular, and sort of an ocher color, but is nevertheless charming and the gardens between the house and the road are beautifully manicured. We understand the Mayes family hires a number of year round gardeners to keep things looking so good.



Al Fresco  
Dining in  
Cortona

For our last night in Tuscany, we treated ourselves to a great dinner – and found ourselves in the midst of a birthday party at Ristorante La Bucaccia, located in a rustic medieval wine cellar. They offer cooking classes, but are booked way in advance so we had to settle for just eating. We ordered Chianina beef, a specialty in Cortona, which was delicious. Chianina is a breed of cow, closer to an ox than a cow actually, which is one of the oldest and largest breeds in the world. We also enjoyed our hosts, Roman and Agostina, who made us feel like their personal guests. He liked to talk and she had to keep dragging him away to serve other guests from the birthday party, who were their regular customers, so we felt we must have been exceptionally witty and charming that night. It was perfect last night in Tuscany.