

ITALY

DAY ONE: Arrival

At 9:50AM our plane from Paris landed. If everything went according to plan, we would meet with others arriving from the States and catch a ride to the Hotel and the start of our tour. It wasn't definite that we could join the group at the airport. We had called the Tour Company, Grand European Tours, and explained our travel plan. We were told Grand European would not guarantee pick up because we were not arriving by a flight arranged by them even though we were arriving exactly at the same time as the flight they had arranged for other members of our travel group. As you can imagine we were not too pleased by the non-logical response. We couldn't believe this lack of customer service. Maybe it was just a fluke. Maybe we got the wrong person on the phone. So we called several times, talked to different people, and got the same response. This trip was shaping up to be our first and last with Grand European.

When we exited the Customs area, the local tour director was waiting for arriving passengers. We spotted his blue Grand European sign and went directly to him. Sure enough, the company had not forward our arrival times to him. He had us listed with the tour, but he had no instructions to pick us up. It was no concern to him. He was happy to see us and showed us where the rest of the others on the tour were waiting.

Everyone looked pretty tired. The flight was a least eight hours for most the people. Everyone was sitting quietly while trying to stay awake. There were still about a half dozen people left to arrive. Some we met in the luggage area. Their plane had arrived about ten minutes before ours did, but their luggage was no where in sight. In fact it took nearly 45 minute longer for them to get their luggage and to get through customs.

After the last passenger was collected, we all filed out of the terminal, walked about 50 yards dragging our bags, and deposited them on a waiting Motor Coach. That was the last time we had to worry about those bags. They became the responsibility of the Tour Director. All we had to do was to get them outside our door whenever we were leaving a hotel. He got them from there to just outside our door at our destination. There was no hauling them up and down elevators, no hauling them across parking lots, no shoving them into trunks of cars, and no worry about them disappearing along the tour route.

The ride from the airport to the hotel took about fifteen minutes. Our tour director took this opportunity to introduce himself and to tell us a little about the plan of the day. His name was Frank. He asked that we call him Franco. He normally didn't handle the Grand Tour of Italy, but was called by Grand European to fill in. At first, this substitution had us concerned. However, Franco was a true professional. He did an excellent job. Everyone on the tour later concluded that we were extremely lucky. Whereas Grand European started with a less than commendable sensitivity to customer needs, Franco knew what customer service (or client service as he liked to call it) was all about. He was a master. He knew exactly how to "work" a crowd and did it with skill.

While in route to the hotel he asked us to try to guess his Nationality. Well, he was about 6 foot two, blonde, blue eyed, and spoke four or five languages. He looked and acted like someone from his homeland. This challenge was not too difficult. He was from Holland. That was Beth's immediate guess. Nobody was swayed by his moniker Franco. There was no Italian heritage in his bloodline.

We arrived at our hotel, the Grand Hotel Beverly Hills. It was north east of the center of the city and about a ten-minute walk from the ancient Roman brick walls surrounding the old city. Although the name of the hotel does not sound like something representative of Rome, several major tour groups were using it while we were there. I think the name of the Hotel was selected to attract the American tourist. There were no other nationalities present when we were there.

We arrived about noon, too soon for any of our rooms to be ready. The lobby was full of weary travelers waiting on rooms. We had to wait about two hours. Although this situation did not make anyone happy, particularly being tired after a long time on several uncomfortable planes, it was unavoidable. There is no way one should expect the hotel to be ready. Nevertheless, it seemed a shame to waste so much time in Rome sitting in a hotel lobby. Most of our group arrived before 10AM. We essentially lost one whole day in Rome. The Tour Company could have had an optional tour for those arriving this early, rather than have them just sit idly in a hotel lobby for two hours.

Finally around 3PM everyone got a room. Since orientation wasn't until 5:30, we decided to do a little exploring on our own. As we were riding on the bus, Franco identified some places to visit. Five minutes away was the Villa Borghese. It was one of the major park areas of Rome. So we were off to the park.

Several of us had just come from Paris where we visited the exquisite garden areas in and around the city. They were fabulous. When we entered the park area around the Villa, we were very underwhelmed. It looked like our overused city parks in the States. We didn't see much reason to stay in the park. We walked through it in about fifteen minutes.

At the other side, we asked Doug Depew to take us to some place interesting. He had been to Rome and was familiar with the city. He became our leader. With map in hand he headed out. The rest of us followed. He had a mission and seemed to know exactly where he was going, although his several stops to ask directions did have us a little concerned. We went through a portal in the old Roman wall, walked up and down a few old streets, and ended at the area of Piazza Spagna, otherwise known as the Spanish Stairs.

They were gray stone, three flights high and fifty feet wide. At the top was the Piazza Trinita Dei Monti named after the old chapel that was there. At the bottom were the Piazza Spagna and Piazza Mignanelli. Spagna was twice as large as the other two. It was two city blocks in length and one block wide. On the stairs were two rows of planters dividing it into three passages. Normally, these planters are filled with colorful flowers. Today there were no flowers. Instead there were hundreds of people on the stairs, sitting, talking, reading, or just staring into space.

It was our first experience with an Italian Piazza. At first we couldn't understand why all these people were here. In upper piazza there dozens of artists displaying their works. In the lower two piazzas people were just standing shoulder to shoulder and talking. I asked Doug "what going on? Why is everyone here?" He said, "it is because it is a happening place." What in the world is a "happening place"? We later found that every Piazza was full of people at every hour of the day. Most have small cafes. Many have a large water fountain with statues. All are always full of people, just standing around and socializing. I guess these places are the Italian version of the American Shopping Malls.

Having seen "the happening place" we decided to head back to the hotel. The time for the big meeting was approaching. We got back with time to grab a quick beer at the bar before joining everyone in a

small meeting room just off the main lobby. Franco had set up trays of wine and snacks. In about a half-hour he gave us our instructions.

We were "on our own" that evening for dinner. Franco suggested a place to eat - the Sorrento. It was just around the corner from the hotel. The food was average and very inexpensive. The dinner including wine cost about \$25 a couple.

DAY TWO: Touring Rome

The typical morning schedule was "wakeup call" at 6:30, breakfast at 7:15 (with your bags in the hall), and departure at 8:00. This morning we were taking the optional tour of the Vatican for a tour of the Sistine Chapel. Franco told us we were meeting our local guide at the "back entrance". Here we could get in and out quickly. We were to miss the crowds. Ha! It was a great plan. Every tour group in Rome thought so. When we arrived at the "secret door", there were four tour buses in front of us and a line of people a block long. Nevertheless we queued up and waited about 1/2 hour just to get into the door. While we stood there, harassing Franco about his secret door, tour bus after tour bus dropped its load of visitors. By the time we worked our way to the entrance the line behind us was four blocks long. No doubt this stop was very popular. The question that went through all our minds was "if it was this crowded at an entrance reserved for tours, what would a person on their own do to get into the chapel." From what we saw, it didn't look like they were getting in.

Once inside the "back door" we rode an elevator up to a courtyard just outside the Vatican Museum. This courtyard about the size of a football field. All around it there were display boards setup on tripods. There were about forty stations where the groups could stop and receive a brief lecture about chapel and the magnificent Michelangelo work.

Rita was our guide or as Franco called her RRRRRita. She was a small, square built woman in her fifties. She had been leading this tour for at least fifteen years. I think she said she had written one or two books on her research of Rome. We stopped in front of our tripod. She told us all about how the Sistine Chapel got painted and explained the artwork that we were about to see.

We left the courtyard and entered one corridor of the Vatican Museum. Rita warned us, "Do not get lost or you may never find your way out of the Vatican." I am not sure what was in the museum itself. We only walked down one very long hall toward the chapel. There were collections of statues, frescos, tapestries, and paintings, all collected by the popes. They did not have any apparent religious significance as one might have suspected. The artwork was everywhere on the ceilings, walls, and floors.

As we walked down the hall, Rita explained exactly how the Frescos that we were admiring were prepared. A Fresco was a painting on "wet plaster". An artist would first cover the ceiling or wall with mortar in order to get it relatively flat. He then applies several coats of plaster until it was very smooth. The last coat was left wet and the artist applied the pigments to it before the plaster had time to dry. The pigments bonded with the plaster and formed a permanent picture for generations to admire and enjoy.

At the end of the hall was the Chapel. We entered through a set of double doors and joined hundreds of people staring at the ceiling. We were given forty-five minutes in the room. The ceiling was 133-ft long and 55-ft wide. The Frescos were completed in 1512 and took four years of effort. On the ceiling Michelangelo presented his interpretation of Genesis in nine scenes of the Creation and of Noah and the

flood. On the altar wall was Michelangelo's famous "Last Judgment". What made this work so impressive was its representation of three-dimensional forms on a two dimensional surface. He made you believe that you were viewing structure. While I sat there analyzing the masterpiece, the lady next to me asked her tour guide how they were able to suspend all those statues on the ceiling. Why hadn't they fallen? Besides his three-dimensional magic, Michelangelo was a stickler for detail in the human form. Every little muscle and every little bone was rendered exquisitely. They looked lifelike. It was such a dramatic departure from the flat and pasted look of his contemporaries.

The "Last Judgment", completed in 1541, is powerful. A muscular and youthful Christ sits at the center on a large stone chair. He is sending hordes of naked, full figured people either to heaven or to hell. The people sometimes appear grotesque due to the massiveness and detail of their musculature. Just looking at it, makes you want to drop to your knees and repent. I suspect that was the intent of Michelangelo.

Originally the artwork had nothing but nude figures but a prudish Archbishop thought it offensive. He directed Michelangelo to cover-up. He refused and belligerently added the Archbishop to the work, placing him in the lower right corner, in hell, with a snake wrapping around his middle and claspng the cleric's genitalia in its mouth.

At the end of our visit we got the unique opportunity to experience papal engineering. Whereas the entrance into the room was a double door, the exit was less than half that size. It was only four feet wide. Furthermore, there was always one or two tour guides standing in it and waving their flags trying to direct their busload of people out of the room. I really don't know what would have happened if there was an emergency. There was no other way out. When we tried to leave, we battled hundreds of people of all nationalities with the same intentions. Some of our group described a few skirmishes they had while maneuvering out of the chapel.

As soon as we thought we had extricated ourselves from the mobs, we regrouped with others of our tour who chose to bypass the optional Sistine Chapel. We then congealed again with the masses and headed for the Basilica of St. Peter's.

Besides being the papal seat, its claim to fame is its size. It is the longest church in the world. To demonstrate that feature, they marked the lengths of other "long" churches on the floor. St. Peter's can hold 30,000 people. Fortunately, today we weren't setting any attendance records. The squeeze in the Chapel was enough for one day. Just being able to lift your arms without hitting someone else was a welcome feeling.

Besides being a great painter, a great sculpture, Michelangelo was also a great architect (and fabulously wealthy). He designed St. Peters but never got to see its completion. After he laid out the last details for the construction of the great dome, a month before his 89'Th birthday, he died.

His great sculpture, Pieta, is on display inside the church. It was now behind glass. You could look but not touch. It seems a crazy man took out after it with a hammer and broke a finger. They were taking no more chances. The statue like all of Michelangelo's carvings was remarkable. The intricate detail made it appear lifelike. You could almost feel the sorrow and pain that was evident Mary's eyes as she held the crucified Jesus in her arms. Michelangelo had a special gift of translating his feelings, emotions and religious concepts with stone. He captured in time for all posterity to share. His paintings, his sculpture, his architecture were like a projector from his soul illuminating everyone with his innermost beliefs. He was truly the master.

We left the Basilica and entered the square, just in front of St. Peters. Surrounding the courtyard were white marble pillars and cornices so typical of Roman architecture. On top of the cornices there marble statues, about one for each pillar. I suspect they were saints and popes of the church. These perimeter walls symbolized the open arms of the church welcoming, protecting, and nurturing its flocks. It opened out on to Via della Concilazione. You could stand at this end of the street and look down it into the heart of Rome.

One thing was quite evident as we left the Vatican. The local tour directors were very critical to managing the flow to the people. Each guide seemed to be acting in concert and cooperation with the other guides. They orderly moved their groups through major crowds in and around the buildings. They made sure we saw what was important and available for viewing at the time. They controlled the noise. They protectively watched the street vendors very closely and advised their clients like mother hens. I am not really sure it is wise to try to "do the Vatican" on your own.

For the next two hours we drove around Rome for a short "look see". We finished with a stop at the Coliseum. The trip was fairly brief. We viewed from the bus the Monument to Vittorio Emanuel, the Palazzo di Giustizia, Castel Sant' Angelo, and the Forum. The bus stopped at the Coliseum and we walked through it. Rita provided a short lecture on its use in Ancient Rome.

The Coliseum was large enough to hold 50,000 spectators. It is about the size of our typical football stadium. In the center there used to be a wood floor covered with sand, known as "rena". It was there to absorb the blood from the competitions. Below the floor, which had long since rotted away, were two stories of rooms. They housed the gladiators and animals. The Coliseum used to have across its top a huge cloth awning. Slaves was raised it using a rope and pulley system. In this manner all spectators were able to sit in the shade while viewing the events. Here again the Romans set the standard for stadiums. They had the first "domed" arenas.

Considering that this structure was over 2000 years old, it was in remarkable shape. It really wasn't the "test of time" that did the most damage to it. It was thieves. They stole all the metal that adorned the walls, leaving holes that make it appear it was once barraged by artillery. I am sure in the Dark Ages there wasn't any Historical Preservation Societies protecting antiquities. I am sure we probably also saw pieces of the Coliseum as parts of other buildings in Rome.

The first Arc of Triumphs were erected around the Coliseum and are still in pretty good shape. The Arco di Constantino stands near the entrance to the Coliseum. It is quite picturesque and is commonly used as backdrop for photographs. While we were there, several wedding parties pulled up and took pictures of the Bride and Groom around this Arc. Some even brought their own fully costumed gladiators to make it more authentic. The Arco di Tito stands between the Coliseum and the Forum. It was built by Rome to commemorate its victory and destruction of Jerusalem. Until the formation of the State of Israel after the Second World War no Jew would walk through the arc. Then in celebration of the rebirth of Jerusalem hundreds of Jews marched through the Arc. Rita said there was a third Arc in the area but I couldn't find it.

About noon the bus was scheduled to return to the hotel. There wasn't anything to do back at the hotel. We took a look at the map and told Franco that we would find our own way back. We were at the southern edge of the old city and our hotel was just north of the city. At the worst it looked like a five-mile walk. Franco seemed a little concerned and gave us some last minute advice. We waved to the others and headed towards the hotel that was on the other side of the town.

We walked back toward the Coliseum, through the Arco di Tito and explored the ruins of the Forum. When the bus passed it, we got only a quick glance through a window. Now we had a chance to see it, "up close and personal." It was fairly large. Approximately square in shape it was about four city blocks wide. There really wasn't a lot to see though. Most of it was reduced to rubble no higher than six foot. There were three of the original 40-foot columns still standing. This area once represented the power of Rome. I suspect that it became the focus of attack as warring barbarians destroyed the Roman Empire. To destroy it was to destroy Rome itself.

We left the forum and walked down Via dei fori Imperial toward the Monument to Vittorio Emmanuel and the Palazzo Venezia. It is four story high, bleached white marble, and relatively modern building. It covers an entire city block. Today the Romans are not too pleased about this building in the old Rome. Its alabaster appearance makes it unusually prominent. It definitely didn't blend well with the more muted marble and stone colors of the rest of the city.

Across the street was the Foro Traiano. It was the first market area of Ancient Roman. The whole area, about 50-ft by 100 ft is recessed about 10 feet below its surrounds. Only the pillars remain. There were lined up in four or five rows about twenty feet apart. In each row there were about a half dozen, 3-foot diameter, 30-foot high pillars in a line. Many of those were patched and reconstruct with brick filling in the section of marble that disappeared. Again like the Forum there was not much to see. You had to use your imagination to fill in the missing details.

We took pictures, examined the map, and headed toward our next stop - the Pantheon. We walked through little back roads and alleys, walking on the original cobblestones probably laid by slaves during the time of the Empire. There were little stores, ristorante, and offices shoved into every available granny. There were storefronts on every street and in every alley. If there was a break in the wall, either by design or by accident somebody put a sign over it and was selling something. No space went unused. Every little corner that had a few feet of sidewalk had several tables and chairs and the symbolic umbrella with some Italian scrawl on it. Some of these establishments are so far out of the way, I have no idea how anybody would know they were there, let alone find them.

In old Rome no building material ever seemed to get scrapped. The old was assimilated into the new. Closely examining buildings you could see the advancement of history captured in the structure. It was not unusual to see old Roman pillars and walls still bearing the marks of Caesar embedded into a medieval stone wall which was later patched with turn of the century brick walls. Imagine digging through the attic of your grandparents and perusing all their intriguing memorabilia. Now imagine digging through remains in some of the back rooms in those buildings that have stood there for two centuries. Wouldn't that be an experience?

When we reached the Pantheon, it was time for a lunch break. What did we have? A Pizza? Spaghetti? Some special Italian dish with a bottle of Vino? Not quite. We had a Big Mac, not even Italian style. It looked and tasted exactly as it looks and tastes in every McDonalds in the US. Most important, we recognized the selections on the menu. Italian food is great if you have an idea what you ordered. We didn't bring our translators with us. We weren't feeling too adventuresome in selecting food on the back streets of a strange city. It was too early to get sick. Beside the food, we must also commend the service. A little girl tried her best to understand our ordering in "broken" Italian (probably sounded more like pig Latin). She was very patient, even when Beth said she didn't get the drink she ordered, with a smile on her face she replaced it. The Italians don't have all these diet products common in the States. We couldn't explain what a diet coke was.

The only thing we risked doing which was Italian was to sit on one side of a Piazza, under those colorful umbrellas and observe the marble pillars of the Pantheon on the other side.

Our next stop was the Tiber River. We were almost back to the hotel. It was a mile or so away. We still had about an hour and a half left before we had to be ready for this evening's event. Some of the group wanted to see more sights; some wanted to see the nearest foot doctor. So we compromised - one more stop, the Castel Sant' Angelo, and then "call it a day". Anyway the Castel was only four blocks away.

After the Castel it was a mad dash for the hotel. On our way we passed the Piazza Augusto Imperatore, Piazza de Spagna (again), and the Villa Borghese (also again). Nobody was stopping to observe the sights. I would try to stop to read the placard and take a few pictures. I would then have to jog to catch up with the group. As far as they were concerned, the tour was over for the day. The comfort of the hotel and getting off sore feet was now the priority. There was a huge sigh of relief when the Beverly Hills was spotted. When we walked through that front lobby door we looked like a platoon of soldiers just back from a campaign carrying our lame, wounded, and injured.

The plan for the evening was dinner and a tour of the lights of Rome. Franco (or GET) selected the Ristorante. Many of us were looking forward to Italian fare rich in garlic, oregano, and basil. The food was bland and average. It was typical of Italian menu - pasta, veal with a vegetable, and a small desert. The quality level was kind like that, which you get off a buffet steam table. There was ample wine that helped us ignore the food. There were also three guitarists who entertained us with Italian songs. They took requests. We tried to get their version of "Rocky Top", but even after we hummed a few bars we still got something Sal Minio must have sung.

After dinner we re-boarded the bus and went to the "Trevi Fountain". It is the mandatory stop when visiting Rome, especially at night with all the lights. You throw in a coin, and make that wish. The tourists wish to return someday. The Italians wish the Tourists would go home. We lined up the ladies, had them face away from the fountain, and flip their coins over their shoulders. Cameras flashed and saved this memorable moment for all time.

The Trevi Fountain wasn't at all like I had envisioned. I had pictured a large courtyard with this large round fountain with statues at the top piddling little streams of water over multiple tiers of bowls. I expected it to look like the huge Buckingham Fountain just off Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago. Instead the Trevi was in one corner of a rather small Piazza. It wasn't round. It was rectangular. It was fifty feet long and had a pool of water in front of it. Behind the pool were statues spurting water into the pool. In front of the pool there was several rows of seats, much like a stadium. The seats were full of visitors watching the coin flipping spectacle. I am sure the stadium seating was an efficient way to view the fountain, but it certainly extinguished the romance one was supposed to feel at this special Roman icon.

Before we left, Sharyn asked me to buy some roses from a roaming street vendor. She wanted to give one to each lady in our group in celebration of Mother's Day. Well, she finally convinced me to make the purchase. Using finger signals, I negotiated a price. I then gave one to Beth, Betty, and Marsha. Sharyn didn't get one. Beth then convinced Larry to buy roses for Sharyn. She got two roses. I suspect that was her plan all the time.

Once we got back on the bus, Sharyn's extra rose was bothering her (now she feels guilty for scheming). Early that evening she had a conversation with a younger woman, Sondra. She was traveling with her

mother, Adele and it was Sondra's birthday. Sharyn got her Tennessee rowdies to sing Happy Birthday. I got to present another rose. Who knows? This setup may have been Sondra's elaborate plan. Before she got back to the hotel, she received two more roses from Franco and a promise of a special treat.

The last stop this evening was the Piazza Navona. It also had a fountain and a lot of people gathered just enjoying each other's company. There were street booths selling souvenirs and artwork. There was a street entertainer performing a little puppet show with his fingers outfitted like various celebrities.

There were little outside cafes around the perimeter. Here people sat, ate, drank, and watched those milling around in the center of the courtyard. All of it was kind of peaceful and relaxing. We roamed the Piazza for awhile, then sat on the edge of the fountain for about twenty minutes, and finally participated in the "people watching."

Tomorrow we are going to leave Rome. I really wasn't too disappointed. Rome wasn't what I had expected. Most of my impressions, I suspect, were formed in childhood by Hollywood images of a romantic city. I can't say exactly what I found to be unsatisfying. It was just a combination of events that generated that feeling. In the past two years we had the opportunity to visit the three major cities of Europe, London, Paris, and Rome. London was overwhelming in its majesty. You could feel that this city was once the center of a great Empire. Big Ben was a fitting symbol of a big city. Paris was overwhelming in its opulence, fashion, and art. The museums, the gardens, the grace and sophistication of its people promulgated a feeling of grandeur. The Eiffel Tower almost appeared to be an elegant lacy version of Big Ben. Rome, on the other hand, appeared run down, tired, and second rate. At first I thought it was because of its attempt to retain the ancient ruins of a long gone civilization. I don't think so. Rome was far less expensive than either London or Paris. I suspect that there just isn't the money to maintain the infrastructures necessary for a great city. Whereas London and Paris continue to play a major role in world affairs today, Rome has had its day.

DAY THREE: Mountecassino, Pompeii, and Sorrento

At 7:15 put your big bag at your door, go down and have breakfast, the Motor Coach departs at 8:00. That was the routine every travel day. It was pretty convenient. It was great not to have to worry about the luggage. No hauling down to elevators, down to cars, squeezing it into pint-size European car trunks or straddling it inside a car. The other positive is you could take a large bag. When we were traveling on our own in England we had four adults per car. Four large bags do not fit into the "boot". Even with the largest car in England we could rent. I do not remember seeing a car that size in Italy. If I did, I did not want to be driving it.

I remember when we were in Paris someone joking about assassinating the person who introduced cars to the Italians. After a while in Italy I can understand the comment. They go wherever they wish. They park wherever they want. There were many times we tried to walk a sidewalk in some Italian town only to have occupied by a line of parked cars. Where did the pedestrians go? They shared the street with other traffic. That other traffic was an assortment of cars, motorized scooters, and bicycles. The cars at least obeyed the traffic signals. Those other vehicles did whatever they wanted. They even traveled down a sidewalk when it wasn't already blocked by parked cars dodging pedestrians. They would also weave among the cars on very business streets and at any speed. Virtually every car we saw was banged up in some fashion. We also witnessed on a side street in Rome a car hit one of those scooters. I think we were rooting for the car.

There was one positive aspect of Italian driving. It appeared that the pedestrian had the "right of way", no matter how precarious that privilege seemed to be. When we were in England, that was not the case. If you stepped out into the street, you became hood ornament. In England the cars would also sneak up on you from the wrong direction. In Paris the pedestrian appeared to have first rights to a street crossing, although I suspect they would argue who was in the intersection first.

Today was also the first day of the "Franco Shuffle". Everybody had to rotate seats. Counting your current seat, you moved in clockwise direction three seats. Yes, there were good and bad seats in the bus. This little maneuver kept you from having to get stuck in the bad seat throughout the trip. On the side of the bus behind the rear door the leg room was about four inches less than it was just across the aisle. These were the "knee knocker" seats. The front seat behind the bus driver, aka Nell, was the "death seat". It even had seat belts, to protect the passenger from those times in which Nello got too adventuresome. The view from this seat, however, was fantastic. You could see the taillights of every vehicle that Nell nearly squished or every scooter that nearly became a temporary bus passenger.

Franco sat in a little pull down seat on the opposite side of the driver. He had full view of the street. His job besides entertaining his clients was to display various forms of hand signals to the drivers of the other vehicles that got too close to the bus. He did this assignment well. Franco also operated the tape deck, the intercom, and the cooler from this seat. In the tape deck he liked to play softly Italian opera as we roamed through the cities and the back roads. It was a real nice touch and added to the ambiance. In the intercom we got a running commentary on the passing points of interest, he shared his opinion of the European Community, and once in awhile he would sing a little song to Nello. Sometimes, we thought those boys were a bit too close. In the cooler Nello had a stock of bottles of chilled water or coke which we could purchase for a pittance.

It was also in Franco's job description to deliver the water when we were moving. At times the passengers in the back of the bus would torment him by ordering water one bottle at a time. In other words, they would order one bottle then wait until he walked up to the front and then order another.

Those narrow seats on the back right side made you downright cranky. Nevertheless, Franco would make a joke of the dozens of times he would go back and forth with just one bottle of water in hand. He was a good sport. It was typical of Franco to maintain a very positive tone throughout the trip, even when we nearly missed catching the ferry to Venice. His mood was the barometer for everyone else. He made our vacation very pleasant.

Today's destination was Sorrento with stops at Montecassino and Pompeii. Our first stop was the Abbey at Montecassino. It was a two-hour ride south of Rome. As we approached it we could see it at the top of one of the peaks in the Apennine Mountains. Our first thought was, "he wasn't going to take the bus up there." Yes, to the chagrin of some of our passengers with fear of heights, he did take the bus there. Up we climbed, back and forth through hairpin turns and switchbacks until we reached the top. We also learned another Italian rule of the road. When you approach a "blind" switchback the first vehicle that blows its horn on the approach has the "right of way". You better stop if you missed your opportunity. Those buses took every inch of road between the wall rising to the top and the cliff falling to the bottom. Betty and Ron were sitting in front of us on the way up the cliff. Betty was lying on Ron's legs, face down, on the way back. She didn't enjoy the great view we got from the bus of the countryside in the valleys.

The Abbey is famous because it was the site of a major strategic battle in the Second World War. The Germans had bunkered down in the area around the Abbey. There was no moving them out. Finally, in one of the more controversial decisions of the war, the Allies leveled the Abbey in bombing runs. The Germans weren't in the Abbey, but the bombing was sufficient for the Allies to get a foothold on the mountain and move the Germans out. On one of the mountaintops near the Abbey there is a large cemetery for Polish soldiers that sacrificed their lives in that battle. It can be viewed from a balcony at the Abbey.

The Abbey is a Benedictine Monastery. There are still 30 or so monks in residence. In a relatively small chapel about the size of your standard American church, there are daily services. When we were there, the monks were conducting a High Mass with all the ceremony including incense burning. The only light came from the flame of nearly hundred candles as they burned around the altar and from their illumination as it reflected from the gold clad that covered over 50% of the ceiling. There were gold clad mosaics throughout the church. The chapel glowed a bright yellow as if something miraculous was about to occur. The strong smell of the incense added to aura of the solemn proceedings. The brown robed monks and a few towns' people were attending the mass. Then it happened. The soft yellow glow and deep religious prayer was interrupted by a bright blue-white blast of light. A moronic, over-weight tourist, right out of Bevis and Butthead flashed a picture with his camera (he wasn't on our bus, but was wearing an American sweatshirt). I can see at times how the patience and hospitality of the Italians can run a little thin at times which you have to deal with the ilk of that kind of visitor who has no respect for you.

The Monastery wasn't very big. In addition to the Chapel there were four or five little courtyards with gardens and grottos with statues of saints. Here the monks could retire in prayer or religious contemplation. There also was two or three story building that was the living quarters for the monks. Around all there was a stone wall with several balconies that were great spots to view the valleys and the other mountain peaks. It was easy to see why this abbey became a stronghold for the Germans during the war. One could easily see for miles in all directions.

After a brief walk around the Abbey we were off for Pompeii. As we continued to drive south, the countryside became more mountainous. We were moving into the Apennine Mountains. They run down the center of Italy and form its "backbone". They start in the Tuscany area and run down the center to the "foot" of the Italy boot. The Apennines are nowhere as majestic as the Alps which run along Northern Italy. Its highest peaks are only seven to eight thousand feet high. At the "angle" is the infamous Mt Vesuvius which in 79 AD buried Pompeii and the area around it in 25 feet of ash. Mt. Vesuvius is about three thousand feet high. However, since we are looking at these peaks nearly from sea level, they look pretty high.

The Apennines appear similar to our Appalachian Mountains. They have rolling peaks and are covered with green grasses, scrubs, and a few scattered trees. What makes them appear different are the buildings. In Italy every-thing is built from stone or stucco. Virtually no wood is evident. Cement was one of the greatest inventions of the Romans. They continue to make good use of it. The colors are earth tones - gray, pottery, creme, tan, etc. The roofs are always red clay tiles. In the valleys or hollows you usually find a gray stone building with a red clay roof. Fences are also made from stone or brick. On selected peaks you might also find a stone tower or a small medieval village surrounded by a stone wall.

Contrast this view with that which you would expect to see in the Appalachians. Here there are white clapboard houses with tin or asphalt roofs and wood or wire fences. The primary construction material is

wood, asphalt shingles, maybe some vinyl or aluminum siding. On selected peaks at home you are likely to see a Forest Fire tower or a cellular phone tower.

The other predominant feature is the tall Cedar and Umbrella evergreen trees. There are few forested areas. I don't remember seeing any of America's ubiquitous Pine trees. The other thing I don't remember seeing is trash, no litter along the road, no junk cars, no dumps.

The expressways in Italy are comparable to those in the States. They are four lanes divided highways. Along the way there are frequent stops for fueling the car or the body. Franco had the Coach stop about every couple of hours for necessary breaks or snack breaks. The restaurant in the service station demonstrated the Italian expertise for organization. First you pay, and then you pick out what you want to buy. Everybody is running back and forth, first trying to figure out what they want, then trying to pay for it at the cashier. Imagine what happens when several busloads of senior citizens, who don't understand Italian and have Alzheimer's disease, arrive - total chaos. Fortunately, Franco wasn't any more enamored with this system than we. Whenever he saw more than a couple of buses at a service station he would drive through and hope for better luck at the next stop. Several times I was in line behind him while he mumbled non-complementary phrases about this Italian system.

About noon we spotted Mt. Vesuvius. Prominently, it stood by itself in the distance - a fitting tribute for such misbehavior. No mountain dared approach it. Otherwise it might also be subject to its wrath. It no longer had the cone shape typical of volcano. It had "blown its top" about two thousand years ago. About three-fourths of its peak had exploded high into the air and rained down on the people, first choking them in poisonous gases and then burying them in twenty-five feet of fiery ash. It turned the seaport town of Pompeii into a land locked archeological dig with the Mediterranean now over a mile away. On August 24th, 79 AD it permanently trapped the inhabitants, their buildings and monuments, and their way of life in a time capsule that wasn't opened again until 1750.

What surprised us, was how expansive the excavation was. Everyone had seen pictures of the ruins and imagined it to be a few city blocks in size, with most of that taken up by the forum or the center of the city. What we saw was over a hundred acres of spectacular history and a third of the city still buried. We saw a small town with numerous side streets, shops, and private domiciles. We saw the remains of a remarkably advanced civilization. It had virtually all the amenities of a modern town. About the only thing they lacked was "MTV", but they had other forms of entertainment.

Everybody is familiar with the Coliseum and what went on at that place. Pompeii had its version. Less familiar, at least I assumed that to be the case, is the brothel. We all know what goes on here, but few of us have never visited one. Our guide treated us to a stop at one. It had many rooms and above each was a very explicit, colored drawing of the sexual specialty, conducted therein. These signs were in remarkably good shape and easy to interpret.

Apparently these houses played a major role in the commerce in the city. The Pompeians advertised their location indelibly and prominently. Our guide also pointed out large phallic symbols carved in the stone blocks that comprised the streets. These images were markers for their brothels. That last thing that they wanted was drunken sailors crawling along the streets to stumble accidentally into a good citizen's house or to get out of town with any of their gold pieces left in their purse.

We also explored several of the typical homes. They appeared to have been remarkably comfortable. Their layout was very similar to a Spanish hacienda. From the front door you entered into a center

courtyard. The rooms of the abode surrounded it. Over the courtyard there would have been a roof or cloth awning that both provided shade and collected rainwater. The water was stored in cisterns below the house. The house also had drains that funneled wastewater into the streets. The rooms were prolifically decorated with paintings - much like for which today we use wallpaper. Many of these homes connected to gardens and to other "out buildings", probably for servants and slaves.

Unfortunately, as they started to uncover Pompeii in the 18'th and 19'th centuries, much of it was stolen before more forward thinking people acted to protect it for posterity. For example, the Forum was a football field size area covered with marble block flooring, with large marble pillars and cornices, and with marble statues. Little of that remains. Mt. Vesuvius didn't destroy it. Modern day thieves removed it. We can only image what Pompeii would be like if it was just being uncovered today and everything could be put back into place just like it was two thousand years ago. Pat Calo found and purchased a book that just that. First, it showed you how the ruins appear today. Then with a transparent overlay, it showed how it probably looked before Vesuvius buried it. It is a great book to have if you plan to visit the excavation.

Pompeii is worth an all day visit. We were given only two hours. Our guide took us a very few of the special points of interest. This short time was very unsatisfying to nearly everybody. I think many felt cheated and would have liked to stay longer. A tour guide is convenient, but those guide books (most of them are excellent) make a self-directed tour a good alternative. I think a better approach to seeing Pompeii would be: purchase the guidebook that Pat Calo found, spend the time we wasting riding in the bus and staring out the window to study the book, and then roam the area for a half day at you own pace and leisure.

Prior to our stop at Pompeii we had lunch at a ristorante in a local hotel that was recommended by the tour. It is worth noting in journal because it was probably the worse meal and experience we had on the trip. The did a good job in feeding a bus load of forty-six people in about a half hour for a very low price of \$9 each, including wine or beer beverage and a desert, but you get what you pay for. The food was not good. Some of us left major portions of our meal uneaten. To make matters worse, we also had to tolerate a very rude musician. He picked at a mandolin shaped instrument for about five minutes while almost jogging from table to table. His singing was more irritating than entertaining. He then laid it down and picked up a tambourine with which he returned to our tables. He went from table to table sticking it in everyone's face and demanding to be tipped for his performance. He wouldn't leave until you dropped something into his collection plate. I don't think we needed lunch that much. Even one of those ill-organized service stations would have been more acceptable and palatable. As this "musician" moved around our tables, the thought went through my mind that we were now in Naples. This guy probably had a Mafia union card.

As we left Pompeii, Grand European was not getting high marks for our visit thus far. At the best it could only be categorized as average. I even heard some grumbling from people who were less than satisfied. The experience at lunch and the very quick trip through Pompeii really emphasized the negative "herd-ing" and quality aspect about Motor Coach tours that many of us abhorred. Fortunately, we got the least favorable parts of the tour over on the "front end". From this point forward it got a lot better. By the end of the trip we forgot about what had happened thus far and everyone was giving the tour high marks.

We drove along the East Side of Naples. Franco quoted an old Italian adage that said, "you had to see Naples and die". None of us knew what that meant. Was it supposed to be a complement on its beauty or

did they have all the country's morticians? We never got close enough to Naples to find out. When planning the trip, I noticed that none of the American tours stopped or spent much time, if any, in Naples. Another interpretation of Franco's statement might have to do with the fact that tourists are warned to be wary of Naples. There is a high criminal element.

As we passed Naples on either side of our expressway were stucco apartment buildings. Most of them were about four stories tall and not very attractive. They looked a lot like our low-income housing projects in the States. Doors and windows were wide open. I guess that was their only method for cooling. There were few window fans and no air conditioners. Laundry was hanging on ropes across their little balconies and sometimes across to another unit. This housing was fairly common in this section of Italy. Here the economy is primarily agrarian. The people are relatively poor. Unlike the North there is little industrialization or tourist trade. This financial disparity is a constant point of antagonism within Italy. The North feels it earns all the money and the South spends it all on the social programs. Political movements have started in the North to separate from Italy and eliminate the financial "sink hole".

When we reached the coastline, we overlooked the Bay of Naples. On the right side was the City of Naples. Just behind us stood Mt. Vesuvius high in the background. On the left side and at the very end of the bay was Sorrento. We traveled toward Sorrento along a narrow two-lane road, perched on a cliff hundreds of feet above a shoreline. The Bay was a brilliant, blue watery inlet, dotted randomly with hundreds of boats. From our vantagepoint these boats were nothing more than little white specks. The sight was definitely one those "Kodak Moments". Franco had the bus pull into a little turn-off at the side of the road, so we could get out and make photographs.

The Bay was horseshoe shaped. We were high up on the backside of the horseshoe. On the right side at the port of Naples the land ran down to sea level. On the other side and on the backside, where we were, the mountains rose out of the sea. Nestled in the cliffs was the city of Sorrento. As we looked out into the distance toward Sorrento, we could see prominently perched on one ridge white hotel with numerous, large semi-circle seaside verandas. It truly had a grand view. We knew we were staying in Sorrento. We knew that nearly all the tours use the same hotel. Was this it? Could we be so fortunate?

Our hotel, the Sorrento Palace, was not so strategically positioned as the one we saw from the bus, but it still overlooked the bay giving us a "picture postcard" view. One side faced the sea and the other faced the mountain. It a new, modern, building with large spacious lobbies. It was up in the mountains and overlooked both the bay and the city of Sorrento that lay below it. Nobody was disappointed with its selection. As we waited for our room assignments we started the "pool". Who is looking at that great view and who is staring at the backside of the mountain? Everybody was a bit tense in anticipation. We reconciled ourselves, based on the way the tour had gone thus far, to be staring at the mountain.

We were wrong. Everybody got a wonderful room. We all had adjoining balconies that overlooked the bay and Mt Vesuvius. The bags didn't get unpacked. Everybody went immediately to his or her balconies. There was a small table and chairs on it. We just sat there transfixed by the view and our unexpected good luck. We conjectured if there was a way to get the bed out onto that balcony. No one wanted to move.

Beth and Larry had a surprise waiting for them when we arrived at the hotel. Their daughter, Jean, had a bottle of Champagne delivered to their room. She must have been psychic. Had she sent this gift to Rome, it would have not had the same effect. In Rome our accommodations were "wine" class. In Sorrento they were "champagne" class.

After the dinner in the hotel that evening, everyone hurried back to his or her rooms just to sit on the balcony. The sun had already set. Stars brightly dotted the sky. In the distance Mt. Vesuvius was still vaguely visible in the dark as it blocked some starlight and marked its outline. The mountains behind the hotel competed with the spectacle in the sky. On it there were small clusters of lights. Their terrestrial image appeared like a large reflecting mirror returning the heavenly glow. Along the shore across the bay there thousands of little white dots running at the water's edge. They glistened like pearls on a string around the dark neck of the Bay.

We could not sit out there all evening. Reluctantly, we finally moved to the bed but left the balcony doors wide open. We laid there remembering forever this ambience provided by the sights and the sounds of Italy. As we gradually fell asleep we could hear a chorus of dogs off in the hills echoing messages back and forth. This serenade we could have done without.

DAY FOUR: Sorrento and Capri

After trying to spend most of the night looking at the Bay of Naples, morning came all too soon. The same Opera Company of dogs, whose barking was the last thing we remembered as we went to sleep, was the first thing we noticed at first light. This time several roosters syncopated on the downbeat. Although at 6AM it is light enough to awaken the deepest sleeper, the sun does not become visible. It stays hidden behind the mountains until around 7:30. Then it pops out abruptly like a submerged cork leaping from a hidden location under water. I had hoped we could get a good picture of Mt. Vesuvius as the sun rose over it. Unfortunately, it was veiled most of the morning in a haze.

Today we go by boat to the Isle of Capri. After breakfast everyone gathered in the lounge to be transported to Sorrento Harbor. A couple little twenty seater buses were waiting for us. They were a good choice. There was no way our Motor Coach was going to handle the winding narrow roads that lead down from our Hotel, through the town of Sorrento, and into the harbor area.

We boarded one of those triple-decker people ferries and traveled along the Sorrento coastline. As we rode along, thoughts of Homer's Iliad and of all those Latin stories that I translated into English while in High School came into mind. This shore was the same one that was popular with the Greeks and Phoenicians. The ancient mariners in my Latin translations sailed along this same coastline thousands of years ago. They studied this same jagged, mountainous shore looking for a place to dock their boats. I tried to image how unusual rock formations and inexplicable shadows could have generated outlandish stories of battles between gods, of attacks of demons, and of triumphs of heroes. I tried to see past the obvious limitations of my scientific, skeptical mind and let my imagination transcend me into the mythological past. However, no matter how hard I tried I never spotted the Cyclops.

The Isle of Capri was unlike most islands that gradually rise out of the sea. It is a 300 to 400 foot hundred foot high, large rock plateau thrust straight up out of the ocean. Tall vertical walls and cliffs totally surround it. It has three levels: the harbor, the town of Capri which is about halfway up, and the

town of Ana Capri which is at the very top. Capri is where all the tourists go. Ana Capri is where the people live.

Our boat transversed one side of the island and found a small section of land where the rise was only at a sixty-degree angle rather than straight up. Here on about a 1000 feet of shoreline was the very small harbor for Capri. It had a long dock with room for only eleven of these ferries. Our boat pulled up to the dock and we disembarked. On shore there were a two outside restaurants and the Venicola.

You have a choice of how to get to Capri. You can walk the switch-backing roads and trails along the cliffs or you can ride the Venicola. The decision was easy. This tram is the fastest way from the harbor to Capri. Everybody has heard the song about the Venicola. I never knew what a Venicola was and why the lyricist chanted it in various declensions. After riding it, I now know what it is, but still don't understand its use in the song. It is a cable drawn train that rolls up the side of the cliff at a sixty-degree angle. Each car is mounted on its wheels at a sixty-degree angle, so we go up while standing straight up and down. In fact there are two trains one at each end of a cable that loops around a pulley at the top. While one set of cable cars travels upward, the other set travels downward. When they reach their destinations they reverse direction. They share the same track except around the middle where they must pass each other. Here the tracks spit for a short length.

Capri is primarily a collection of small shops that cater to the enormous tourist trade. I expect the prices are out of sight. As a perspective on the price markup, we stopped at the main piazza in Capri to reconnoiter with a small glass of wine. That drink cost \$5.50 each. The same selection typically costs \$3.00 in the hotel and \$1.00 in an out-of-the-way cafe. We didn't even consider stopping in one of those shops to see what banditry was practiced. More than likely, they charged almost whatever they wanted.

Our local guide took us to a small garden, Parko Augusto, on the opposite shore from whence we landed. It was a short ten-minute walk. The island is not very wide. Here we over-looked the Bay of Salerno. The park was small, about one city block in size. It was very well manicured with little sculptured shrubs and colorful floral arrangements. The view was fabulous. On the right were the Cliffs of Insanity (we were never provided with an explanation of this unusual name). Like most of the island they rose right out of the sea, two hundred feet below us, to Ana Capri, two hundred feet above us. On the left the same topology was the same. On this side down in the sea there were two, hundred-foot high rock spires separated from Capri and each other by 50 feet. The Ancient Romans used these structures as a lighthouse. They hauled wood to the top and at night set it ablaze.

After our walk to the park, we were on our own. We only had to meet Franco in three hours back at the ferry. Everybody scattered. Sharyn, Doug, Marsha, and I decided we wanted to see the famous Blue Grotto. It used to be an optional tour, but Grand European had a passenger seriously hurt on the last visit. They decided the trip was just too risky. No matter, we still wanted to see it. We went back to the harbor and caught a small eighteen-passenger boat to take us to the other side of the island where the grotto was located.

The trip takes about fifteen minutes and interesting. The boat travels close to the edges of the vertical cliffs. The sides of the island are really tall when you sit on the sea and look straight up, three or four hundred feet, into the sky at Ana Capri. When we finally got around to the backside of the island, there were about twenty, little, four-passenger rowboats bopping up and down in the sea near a hole in the wall. The only way into the grotto is by one of these tiny watercraft. The big boats wait in line, dodging each other, until these little ones can unload its passengers.

If the seas are rough, this transfer from the larger boats into the rowboats can get challenging. There is no foolproof method to get from one boat into the other. The boatman holds the boats together and shouts directions in a combination of Italian, English, French, Japanese, etc. Polite, patient, courteous they are not. Do exactly as you are told or expect a major growl or refusal to unload you. In the rowboats everyone sits on the very bottom, except the boatman. He gets to use the one seat in the middle.

After the boat is loaded, it heads for the "ticket gate" boat. Here you pay 8000 lire for the rowboat. It then stops again at the "ticket gate" boat. Here you pay a second 8000 lire as an entrance fee into the "park". Only the Italians would do it this way. Remember we had already paid 9000 lire for the larger boat to ferry us to the grotto. Why couldn't we just pay for one ticket while on firm ground? They could then divide the proceeds. Instead they would rather have people struggle to exchange money while bobbing and rocking in a rowboat. The total cost for this visit was \$14 a person. It seemed a little high until we remembered that Grand European wanted to charge us \$42 a person for this same trip! I am not sure what they did to justify the additional \$28 a person. At the grotto there was no evidence that the tours received any preferential treatment.

After we paid all our tolls, we headed for a small hole at water level in the side of the cliff. It is only five- feet high and five-foot wide. Everybody had to duck low to enter. If the sea is rough, there is no passage. There was a chain running along the top of the entrance. In the gap, the boatman grabbed that chain and pulled us into the grotto with one quick motion.

The grotto was really unique. The water had an eerie blue glow, like something from the "X-files". The bottoms of the boat glowed, the oars glowed, and, when you stuck your hand in the water, it glowed. What the Chief Scientist (aka Dr Tom) in the group conjectured, was that there was a white sandy bottom. It reflects the blue skylight after it passes through the clear seawater. Except for the reflected blue light, this cave was dark. No other light entered. Above us it was pitch black and below us the sea glowed azure blue. The cave itself was about a hundred feet in diameter and about twelve feet in height.

As we floated in this cave, our boatman did his imitation of a Venetian gondolier. He sang a few bars from some Italian song. Other boatmen, paddling around with us in the dark, joined him. Their voices echoed in the cave. We went around the perimeter back and forth a couple of times across the center and headed out the same way we came in. We were probably in the grotto for not more than ten minutes.

We returned to the harbor with plenty of time to explore more of the island. We decided to get adventuresome and see the parts of the island where the tourist do not typically go. Instead of going back up to Capri on the Venicola, we took the "long way" - a small two lane road along the face of the cliffs. We kind of roamed around tiny side streets or scooter paths until we found the little ristorante Paolini. It was in a lemon tree grove. Except for three waiters there was absolutely nobody here. We found a small table under some trees with real lemons hanging from the branches. It was remarkably cooler in this grove (I assume from the evaporative cooling from moisture of the leaves).

We had only planned to make a brief stop, to have a glass of wine, to use their facilities, and to rest a little before doing some more exploring. However, when we sat down, they set up the table for dinner, and brought us water and bread. We didn't know enough Italian to explain we only wanted wine, not dinner, so we "went with the flow". It turned out to be a good move. We ordered what we recognized on the menu. It was inexpensive, but the food was excellent. The quality was what we expected in Italy. It was not the tasteless, "steam table" food were getting with the tour group.

Because much of our tour time was spent eating, we had no more time to explore. Sharyn and I had to return to the harbor area and meet the others for the ferry back to Sorrento. Doug and Marsha did not plan to return with the tour. They took a bus ride up to Ana Capri. It was quite a ride. The homes were luxurious, as one expects for the rich. The ride was scary. It moved rapidly on narrow roads along the edges of cliffs. They reported that keeping their lunch in their stomachs was a challenge. They then returned on a ferry later than ours and explored the town of Sorrento. They had a good time on their self-directed side trip.

For the rest of us this evening's optional dinner was a fish dinner in the Old Sorrento Harbor. It was almost deserted. We almost had the whole area to ourselves. Our ristorante had a portion on the shore and a large seating area out back floating on the sea. Our seating area was in the back in the open air. It was large enough to hold a couple of groups our size. The Mediterranean Sea beneath us and from our dinner table we could look out over the harbor. A several fishermen floated by in beat up old wooden rowboats. On the shore there were multicolored old boarding houses sitting on the side of the mountainside catching the fading light of the setting sun. The ambiance was "made to order".

We sat there drinking prodigious amounts of wine and enjoying Italian appetizers as the sun was setting. Just before dinner an old fisherman rowed up to the side of the ristorante. He pulled a big octopus out of his boat that he had just caught and held high for everyone to see. Was that our dinner? The ladies were hoping it wasn't. Not to worry. The chef brought out the evening's dinner for all to observe before he cooked it. He walked around the room holding high three, thirty-inch fish on a platter. He never told us what kind of fish they were. He left and more courses of the meal and wine followed. Finally, he returned the tonight's entree cooked in a dark sauce. He filleted the cooked fish and placed portions on plates for everyone.

Unfortunately, the flavor of fish cooked with its head, skin, and bones is very strong. It was not to the liking of anyone at our table. By the time the fish landed on our table Betty was feeling no pain and she did not like the fish. She started the chant "one for the tummy and one for the sea". She put a small piece of fish in her mouth and started to toss a much larger piece over her left shoulder and into the water just behind her. We managed to catch her hand as she was lofting the first piece of fish into the air. We told her we would move her plate so she would have to eat it.

Our next topic of discussion was the little graphical symbols on the doors of the convenience rooms. Betty had made several visits by this time. It seemed she didn't agree with the rest of us who had observed the same symbols. She was quite serious about her interpretation. I took quite a bit of explanation to convince her that her visits were to the wrong rooms. We never determined whether she had company during her several previous trips. The coup de Gras was still to come.

Before we left the Hotel, we made a brief visit to the gift shop. They had an assortment of music boxes. Sharyn loves music boxes. We were lifting the lids and listening to the songs. One song was the Venicola tune. Everybody had been humming it since our ride on it on Capri. Another tune was the Isle of Capri song. When Sharyn heard it, tears came to her eyes. That was her father's favorite song. He used to sing it when her family took their car outings. Obviously, we had to buy this box. Pat heard the same song. It was also Betty's favorite, so he bought her one also. Since the bus was leaving, we had no time to run the music boxes back to the rooms. The boxes went with us to dinner and later became a big part of this evening's entertainment.

At the end of the meal we figured we had Betty in control. Then Sharyn got the bright idea to show everyone what we purchased at the Hotel just before we left. She pops out of her chair with her music box. She had been listening to it several times that evening. Now she decided that everyone in the ristorante should also hear it. There was no convincing her to the contrary. Off she went to the table on the other side of the dining room with her music box. Betty thought this was a great idea. Before we could tackle her, she grabbed her box and was off in a different direction. The two of them moved from person to person, from table to table, opening the box, and letting it play its tune. They were gone for a half an hour; the rest of us just pretend we didn't know them.

What they were trying to decide was "what was the tree in the song Isle of Capri". There were almost as many opinions as there were people in the ristorante. We had oak, walnut, apple, olive, lemon, fig, and so on. We had a virtual forest but no consensus about the tree. One lady in our tour group even wrote out the entire song and gave it to Sharyn the next morning. However she was still guessing about the identity of the tree.

Our little bus rocked on the way back to the hotel. It seemed that most of those who chose to ride with Betty and Sharyn had also been "over served". We were hearing words to songs that Sharyn and Betty never asked about. Probably every song in the mid-fifties and popularized by Perry Como, Frank Sinatra, Tony Benet and any other singer with an Italian surname, was attempted.

When we finally made it back to the hotel, the party wasn't over. There was no putting Betty and Sharyn to bed. They charged into the lounge, right up to the piano player, asked him the now infamous phrase "Do you know the words to the Isle of Capri?" Of course he did. He promptly sang it to the audience in Italian. It was a nice rendition, but was no help resolving the controversy about what the tree was.

Both Pat and I decided to cut off the supply of fuel that was keeping these two going. We just had to wait until their "batteries ran down." The lounge had a big dance floor and Betty and Sharyn decided it was too empty. They corralled Franco and had the musician play the "Chicken Dance" - that hideous song that they play at American weddings, that makes every man in the room groan in agony, and gets every teenage girl under the age of 16 to run to the dance floor. Franco was a good sport. He jumped right in and even encouraged these two to continue with their antics. We were hoping to slow them down and Franco was winding them back up again. In the meantime the lounge musician played every crazy song he could think of. The two ran around the room trying to encourage every person watching the partying to join them on the dance floor. It took another hour to get them to retire for the evening.

DAY FIVE: Assisi

Today's schedule was a long bus ride to the other coast of Italy and Assisi. Everyone was up and on the bus at 8:30, even after last night's partying. Franco then states "we can't leave Sorrento until 9AM," as if it was some sudden revelation of which he was previously unaware. There was some kind of traffic control. All tour buses must stay off the expressways until after "rush hour". The rule is certainly logical, but why didn't he know this last night and give us an extra half-hour of sleep? We found out.

We had a brief visit to a local retailer and manufacturer of inlay wooden furniture (including the music boxes we found at the hotel). Either Grand European had some commission arrangement or it was another one of those Mafia arrangements similar to our tambourine man in Pompeii. We stopped there

and got a very brief explanation about the uniqueness and quality of their craft. For another half-hour we sat while the women roamed the shop. We even saw the girl's music boxes there.

The entire day was spent traveling on the bus. Except for the regular convenience breaks, there wasn't any stops planned until we got to Assisi. It was a good time to read a book, write a journal, to rest your eyes, or enjoy the unique Italian scenery. We went over, along, and through the Apennine Mountains. This area of Italy was very picturesque and relatively uninhabited. The most notable sight were the little villages and towns at the peaks. From what we could see from a distance, they all appeared medieval and were surrounded by the requisite wall for protection of the denizens. There were also stone towers, abbeys, and little groups of houses nestled in the hollows. There were very few forests (I think trees are at a premium in Italy). Most of the land was covered with tall green grass and dotted with red potty flowers. One could see a lot of detail for many miles in all directions. We didn't see farmland in this area of the country - mostly olive, nut, and lemon trees. The olive trees grew everywhere, but not organized in commercial orchards. They were low like a large bush. Many of them had nets under them, that was used to harvest the fruit. They simply shook the tree and gather the droppings in the nets.

We arrived in Assisi around 4PM. Our stay for the evening was at the Hotel Subasio. It was a medieval home built around 1230 and located next to the Franciscan Abbey containing the tomb of St. Francis. We had to park the bus several blocks down the hill on which Assisi sat and walk to our Hotel. Car and especially bus traffic was prohibited. The town was just too old to handle them. The walk was just fine. It got us right into the heart of this old town that we essentially had to ourselves. Assisi is a "day tour" town. It has no accommodations for lots of tourists. By four o'clock it is almost abandoned. We walked by ourselves along medieval cobblestone streets stopping at little stores that were closing up for the evening. If you wanted to get a feel of what it might have been like 600 years ago, our stay was the way. Our tour group arrived just after the town of Assisi was filled with 14,000 Albanians for some special religious ceremony. However, they were all gone. We walked through abandoned stone block streets and up to its piazza. The town was a stark contrast to that which we experienced thus far. It was very old, very medieval, and very poor. Most of the larger buildings and all the churches showed signs of the earthquake that shook the town about six months ago. There were large cracks in the fascia, scaffolding, wedged-in reinforcement everywhere.

Typical of very old converted hotels, every room was a little bit different. Part of the game is to guess who is going to get the palatial accommodations and who gets St Francis's cell. In general all our rooms were pretty good. Doug and Marsha had a special room. It opened onto a semi-private, 20 by 50-foot veranda that was on the roof of another building. It had two tables with red table clothes plus chairs. The edge was marked with pots of flowers. We commented that this arrangement would never get by in the States. There would have had been railings all along the edge with stern warnings as a protection from someone falling off, either intentionally or unintentionally, and suing the proprietor. Are we really from the "land of the free" where we have to cage the innocent to protect them from the criminal? I think the liberal element has finally driven the States to match the new zoos where the people are behind bars and the animals run free. Everywhere in Italy that contrast was apparent. Even with all the tourist, everything appeared open and available. Except for a few of their great art treasures that they finally had to put behind glass, I don't remember seeing things "chained down". I don't remember seeing graffiti or the more obnoxious commercial graffiti known as billboards. You can travel pristine countryside without seeing the tops on barns painted with the hideous "See Ruby Falls".

Some of us had rooms above Doug and Marsha, so we could overlook their large patio. The others in the tour were scattered about the building. At first we (and Franco) were concerned that there were not

enough rooms. We overheard the discussion that they had on this matter. Somehow everyone got situated without incident. Franco did a good job in putting people traveling together in rooms next to each other. You could travel with the large tour group and still have your own little private tour.

After we checked into our rooms, the first stop was the Abbey that was just around the corner. The Franciscan order of monks built it around 1250. It was a stark contrast to the abbeys and basilicas that we had seen before. The mission of the Franciscans was selfless service to the people. Their poverty was striking. The church was dark and almost moribund. There was no gold gilding, no fancy statuary, no majestic paintings, and no wealth of any kind. The monks and priests wore the simplest of garments - a dark brown wool cloak. They looked terribly uncomfortable.

The monks went about their duties somewhat oblivious to the crowds. It was very disappointing to see the general rudeness and disrespect of the visitors in monk's home that was opened graciously to all. The visitors ran along side the monks during their service and flashed pictures. The generally accepted courtesy was no flash, no noise, and no commotion in the church. When we visited the church, the monks were moving a wooden statue of the Madonna from church to church as part of a religious tribute to Mary. As the Monks carried their charge into the church, visitors pushed and shoved and ran along the procession to get a good flash picture. The monks very patiently ignored them. I imagined hearing one say, "Forgive them Father for they know not what they do". I even saw a visiting Monk with a flash camera around his neck. I hope it was because he "beaned" one of the rude spectators and took the offending instrument and not because he was also engaged in this disrespectful behavior.

To make matter worse, these visitors stole handfuls of candles that were supposed to be part of the offering of the faithful. There were a couple of small boxes of candles in St Francis's tomb room. Visitors were supposed to leave a small monetary offering and place a candle in another box for use on the altar by the monks. It didn't happen this way. People were carrying out of the church handfuls of candles. My only thought was that I hoped the poverty of these people was greater than that of the monks.

Dinner that evening was at the Hotel. The quality was improving. It continued with the standard fare of pasta, veal, and a small desert, but there was a little more flavor. I think our Veal Parmesan even had a tiny brush of garlic, but I wouldn't swear to it. Afterwards we joined with members of another tour group that was staying in our hotel. There was a piano in an anteroom and a member of the other group found it. He could make it perform in grand style. He played all the "oldies" and I mean "oldies". Both tours joined in singing and dancing to his improvisations. The party went on for a couple of hours.

The Tennessee party retired to the veranda outside the window of Doug's and Marsha's room. They had bought a couple of bottles of Chianti when they were in Sorrento. We helped them empty the bottles. The evening was very quite. The only sound in the town appeared to be our conversation or the voices of others on our tour as they leaned out their windows and talked to us on the patio and to others in adjoining rooms. It reminded me of the Molly Goldberg series that was on TV a very long time ago. We sipped the wine, watched the few lights in the valley below us, the few medieval structures around us. It almost seemed somewhat sacrilegious to be drinking while we sat alongside the Franciscan Abbey.

DAY SIX: Furlo, San Marino and Venice

After a light breakfast we walked down to the parking area where the Motor Coach was waiting. However, we didn't have to haul our luggage. Franco and Nello had that job. I think I saw them hauling bag after bag up the hill until we were all fast asleep and then reversing that task at first light in the morning. They would like us believe that, but they commandeered a small truck to move the luggage.

Our destination today was Venezia (aka Venice) after a short visit of San Marino. We would transverse the Apennine Mountains again. The scenery and landscape was the same. I had plans to work on the travel journal and read the book that I brought with me. I didn't. The landscape was so interesting so different from that which we see in the states, that I spent that time staring out the window. The same types of sights that we saw on the ride to Assisi continued as we left it.

On our way we made a brief stop at Furlo for a coffee and necessary break. Mussolini used to stay in Furlo with his mistress. We visited the room where he ate his dinner before he retired to more intimate activities. The rooming house was very small. It was a two story building with probably no more than 5 to 6 thousand square feet of living space. It was right across the street from a small town square and it backed up against the mountains. It was a private location where one could escape from the commotion and the insanity of the time. The town is still far off the "beaten" path. The business district is about two blocks in length. It is in one of the forested hollows of the Apennines. It is very quaint and everyone appreciated the stop and the little bit of history. It was one of those stops that you like to make on your own that allow you to get "up close and personal" and "feel" the country that you are visiting. Except for us, there was virtually no one to be seen in the town. It was a great place to stop, to stretch our legs, and to enjoy a shot of caffeine.

The dining room Mussolini used was about 12 feet square, about enough space to get a small dark brown, wooden table with chairs. The walls were covered with framed, black and white photographs of Mussolini. Franco gave us a brief history lesson of this area and how Mussolini used to use the rooming house. It was informative and brought these otherwise stone and inanimate surroundings alive for all of us.

On our way out of Furlo we traveled through Passo Furlo, a small gorge formed by a river. It was very narrow, probably the width of several buses and the length of a couple miles. It was a nice view, but not too much out of the ordinary. We were, however, surprised that Franco and Nello would take this bus down these little winding roads. I suspect the people we met driving the opposite way of these roads were equally surprised. Later on we discovered that Nello took this bus wherever he wanted. He put it on boats and down trails not much wider than a footpath (at least it seemed they were that narrow).

Throughout the area the dominant tree was the cypress. It is a tall, narrow, evergreen about fifty feet tall and six feet wide in diameter. In the States they are common around cemeteries. The legend is that the trees are a conduit for souls passing out of the ground and into heaven. They look like arrows pointing skyward. They are also found frequently along both sides a long drive way. Here they resemble Roman Columns on either side of a forum. The other indigenous tree is the Umbrella tree. Its form is just the opposite of the Cypress. Whereas the Cypress is long and narrow, the Umbrella tree is short and broad. It is also an evergreen and has a canopy similar to an umbrella from whence it gets its name. There was no discussion why it was so popular in Italy. My best guess is because it makes an outstanding shade tree.

In thirty minutes past Furlo we were out of the Apennines. The mountainous landscape transformed into rolling hills. The buildings transformed from medieval stone structures into stucco Latin designs with

earth tone colors of gray, brick, pottery, and yellow. Roofs were pitched and covered with clay tiles. The road changed from winding two lanes passes to a four lane super highway. Nevertheless, every so often we could still catch a glimpse of a lone stone castle perched on a high hilltop. We were now approaching San Marino that is on the northeast coast of Italy and on the Adriatic Sea.

San Marino is the smallest republic in the world. It is also totally within another republic, Italy. It is only 23 square miles in area and has 30,000 people. It is on a 2400-foot high plateau overlooking the surrounding Italian communities. How this little community remained independent is not clear to me, especially during the periods of unification in Italy. About all I have been able to determine, is the government of San Marino has always been an oligarchy of some of the wealthiest and influential families in Europe. By means of strategic alliances these families have had throughout history with key political and religious figures, they have managed to maintain San Marino's separation from Italy.

We spotted San Marino from several miles away. Its location on top of the plateau makes it very prominent. There is one road leading up the side of the wall. Like similar roads that have to climb up the side of a mountain, this one weaves back and forth with hairpin turns at either end. Once at the top the bus dropped us off near the entrance to the republic. San Marino is a fortress. It is surrounded on all sides by a twenty to thirty-foot high stone wall. There are towers every several hundred feet. This topology certainly makes it easy to defend against invaders. There is one entrance into the republic, the "Crazy Gate". The popular theory about the origin of this name is "You are crazy to ever leave San Marino". We had another alternative theory about the meaning of the name "You are crazy to think that duty-free means lower prices." We were on our own to explore San Marino.

Our first stop was the Palace. Like the republic, it was small and only needed one guard. He was dressed in a brightly colored uniform and brandished a rifle with an attached bayonet. He didn't look like he was having fun. A couple of students tried to stand along side him for a photograph. Other similarly dress guards came out of the palace and dispersed the students. They weren't heartless though. They walked out into the courtyard and let everyone take their pictures. Ladies took turns nestling up to their sides for that special snapshot.

We sat briefly in the Palace Piazza with a glass of wine addressing postcards we had just bought. Besides being the smallest republic, San Marino is known for its colorful stamps. I remember as a kid getting bags full of free stamps. It was full of San Marino stamps. At that time I had no idea what San Marino was, but I had pages upon pages of stamps in my collection from this mysterious government. Beth bought cards with the backside covered with stamps. There were at least ten of them. She was mailing it to herself. There was no room left on the backside to tell herself that she was having a good time and that she wished she were there. Even with all those stamps she found out the card was still 800 lire short of the fee necessary to get it to the States.

As we sat they in the Piazza, Sharyn started to sulk about not having any lira to make any purchases. I told her there was a definite reason for my apparent stinginess. I told her that the rarest document in the world is a lira note in her wallet. Nevertheless, I relented. Certainly it was her vacation and she should have "mad" money. Off she went like a child receiving her first allowance. In a few minutes the rest of us left the Piazza to follow the women down the street. I met her about a half block away carrying a bag full of white china dolls. She bought these for the grandbabies. Her lira where gone again. So a lira note in her pocket book remains a rare and seldom seen artifact.

From San Marino we drove back northwest toward Bologna. Then at Bologna we headed northeast to Venice. This region of Italy is flat. It is known as the Po area after the river that forms the valley. Gone were the mountains and hills that were with us since we started our trip in Rome. Here the land is fertile and almost everything grows well. There was acre after acre of vineyards and orchards. The plants were trellised in neat rows to facilitate harvest. Some stood ten-foot high with branches spread out 3 to 6 feet on each side. Unfortunately, vineyards and orchards are a bit boring. After the first five minutes of inspecting their agricultural techniques, sleeping seemed more exciting.

We approached Venice about 5PM. Franco was noticeably concerned. We had to make a few detours on our way due to road construction and we were running late. The last ferry was supposed to leave in five minutes and we were still five minutes away from the dock. The next ferry didn't leave for another three hours. Franco got on his PA system and notified us of our potential dilemma. Franco was more worried than his clients were. We were on vacation. It really didn't matter where we sat. We were, however, curious how Franco was going to feed and entertain forty-six of us for three hours while we sat on the dock waiting for the next ferry. We never got to find out. We made the ferry with several minutes to spare.

While in Venice we stayed on the island of Lido. It is one of the long narrow key islands that protect the Laguna Veneta in which Venice and nine other islands are located. Lido has no historical importance. It was built in the 19th century as a resort community. It has beaches, golf courses, a casino, airport, and hotels. It is only five minutes away from Venice by boat taxi. We stayed in the Hotel Biasutti. It was a collection of elegant old buildings in a residential type neighborhood that looks as if, at sometime in the past, they were someone's private villas. Our room was in two-story, stucco building across the street from the main hotel building.

The dinner that evening was in the hotel. The entree was veal marsala or something like it. The quality of the Grand European provided meals was continuing to improve, although nothing has even come close to matching the meals one gets at a first class Italian restaurant in the States. After dinner there wasn't much to do. We took a walk into the business area and along the shoreline. We found a little park along the canal. We sat for a while and watched the lights on Venice before heading back. All around our place where these large houses or villas. They had iron fences around the small yards. It was the Italian version of cluster homes for the rich and famous.

DAY SEVEN: Venice

Venice is a tribute to the ingenuity of man. It is difficult to believe, as you ride around the islands by water taxi, that all these enormous stone buildings and tall bell towers are built on nothing more than wooden pilings - millions of them driven into the marsh land in order to create a firm base. However, the bell and clock towers provide credibility. They all lean - one way or another - as if a drunken architect laid out all the construction drawings. Not only were the towers at an angle, but upon closer at all the vertical lines in the city, such as the sides of the building, we saw that they pointed in every direction except straight up.

There was little space on Venice that did not have a stone structure of some type. Many of the buildings were five or six stories high. All of them were interconnected, separated only by canals and walkways. Stone walkways ran right along the water line. All the piazzas were paved in stone. There was so much

stone, that one quickly forgot that all of this weight rests on wooden stakes, driven hundreds of years ago into the mud. It was also hard to imagine why this whole island doesn't just sink. It had to be as heavy as cities built on firm ground. As it turns out Venice is sinking. Not fast enough for the tour guides to hand out life preservers to the visitors; but fast enough for the city planners to be concerned. The rate of submersion is 1 centimeter per year.

We had one day to explore Venice. In the morning we caught a private launch from Lido and cruised for five minutes to Venice. Our guide met us at the boat. We landed in Venice about two blocks away from St. Mark's square. Located at the entrance of the Grand Canal, it was the central meeting point for all activity on the island. As we approached from the water we saw the Bell Tower. It was at best guess a hundred and fifty foot in height. The current version was a relatively modern brick structure built around 1912 after the previous one fell down. The way some of those bell towers leaned, it is my best guess that it tipped over. Immediately to the right of the tower was the Doge Palace and behind it was St. Mark's Basilica. Continuing into the piazza was the Clock Tower. We really couldn't see Clock and its unique bell ringers. Reconstruction had everything covers with tarps. The cloth covers were painted like that section of the building was supposed to look, but it was not the real thing.

The Doge Palace was open to touring and would take nearly a day to appreciate. It was on everyone's "must see list", but we were also only able to examine it from the outside. Its architecture was very unique and almost bazaar. It was an ostentatious combination of Gothic, Byzantine, and Islamic styles. There were three floors. The middle floor was lined with Gothic arches in marble. The fascia was adorned in Byzantine sculptures. Much of Venice originated in the Middle East around the time of the great Crusades. It was stolen. The conquerors dismantled their conquests, piece by piece, and brought the booty to Venice, which at that time was the major port and a concentration of wealth. Fortunately, the ships were only 100 to 150 feet in length; otherwise they might have brought back entire buildings.

We walked through St. Marc's Basilica. Originally it was a church of simple construction built in 883 to house the remains of the city's patron saint St. Mark, but the politics of Venice, one of the greatest sea powers of the middle ages, could have it that way. It was demolished and rebuilt. It was adorned with mosaics of gold, precious marbles, and war spoils. It is a mix of Byzantine, Gothic, Islamic, and Renaissance materials. There was about 300,000 square feet of walls and ceiling covered in with gold. However, all that gold was somewhat misleading. As a contest I asked people in our tour to guess the value of all that gold. I knew the value since our guide told us how many pounds of gold were used. The guesses ranged from tens of millions to billions of dollars. Actually, 65 pounds of gold were used (reference our guide.) Because gold is the most malleable of all material, one cubic centimeter can be flattened into a square meter of leaf. I estimated the value at around \$400,000. Nobody's guess was even close.

After our visit to the Basilica we walked to a local glass craftsman just off the square. Since it was a freebie to them, it was a common stop for all tours, and, I suspect, a source of commissions on any purchases we make. We received a fifteen-minute demonstration of glass blowing. They crafted a small vase and then a little glass horse. We exited through their show room where they hoped we would purchase glass products. Venice is known for its crafted glass. We were really tempted to buy the articles with 24-carat gold leaf, but we had no perspective as to what it should cost. Furthermore, this finely crafted glass would have looked totally out of place in Sharyn's "country" home were clay pottery was the dominant theme.

We now had two hours to roam Venice before meeting again for a Gondola ride. It was time for the women to souvenir shop. We left the glass shop, walked along St. Mark's Piazza, and went up the walkway under the Clock Tower. The guide told us to watch our pocket books down this avenue - for many reasons, what merchants didn't steal in the shops the gypsies would steal in the streets. Our destination was the Rialto Bridge.

We were pretty adventuresome. We had no map and no idea where we were going. We did find little arrows up on the corner of several of the buildings that said Via Rialto. We assumed it meant "follow me to Rialto". These avenues in Venice were laid out like a maze. They were narrow and circuitous. Sometimes they were no wider than six feet and appeared to be going down passages not safe for visitors. Any place they were broader, a street vendor set up shop. We dodged hordes of humanity and junk dealers.

Contrary to popular belief not all the streets in Venice are made out of water. There were many footways. Only the big, main drags were water. We were able to get around Venice just fine, using shoe leather, provided of course, you know where you are going. VERY important advice - get a map. Regardless, we found the Rialto, even without asking directions (with men in the group you knew that would never happen). It wouldn't have done us any good anyway. We probably would have gotten one of those "over yonder" in Italian dialect. (We rationalize well also).

The Rialto was the oldest of three bridges spanning the Grand Canal. The current bridge was completed in 1592. It spans 90 feet, is 24 feet high, and has 24 shops on it. Michelangelo submitted a design for this bridge, but he wasn't selected. The bridge has a double arcade upon which you can walk out. It gives the best view of the Canal.

The waterway was about a hundred feet across and is very busy. There were delivery boats, water taxis, gondolas, and recreation boats of all sizes going every which way. Fortunately, there weren't any jet skis. It was the major thoroughfare through Venice. About every couple of blocks a tributary would connect up with the Grand Canal. There were no traffic lights on the water, so travel got a little chaotic. Several times we would see boats backing out of a side canal, then a larger boat exit in the forward direction. All of this action, of course, was accompanied by the standard Italian hand gestures.

On either side of the Canal were 20-foot wide (my best guess) walkways on which multicolored portable shops, cafes with street tables with large umbrellas, ticket booths, outdoor markets, and so forth were set up. We found one of those little cafes, sat down, ordered a glass of wine, and watched all traffic pass us by. We also had to do some planning. How were we going to get back to St. Mark's in the next half hour for our gondola ride? Again we were fortunate. There were also signs with arrows saying Via San Marco. We made it back with five minutes to spare - good planning or good luck.

Everybody met by the Bell Tower and walked over to the gondola pier. It was on one of the minor canals a couple of blocks from St. Mark's. Franco had arranged for six gondolas and four musicians. We boarded the boats, placing one singer and accordion player in every third boat. Our floating party then headed for the Grand Canal.

These smaller canals were only about ten feet wide and for the most part deserted. For forty-five minutes we wandered between buildings and under little footbridges. As the oarsman propelled the boat, we were serenaded with popular Italian opera songs. People on the bridges would stop to watch us and take our pictures. It was quite an experience. Contrary to popular belief, we did not have to hold our noses

during the ride and we didn't see gross objects floating in the water. Even ole Doug, who we had to drag along, kicking and screaming, finally said he enjoyed the ride. How can anybody go to Venice and not take a gondola ride? It is not the boat ride; it is the experience.

The afternoon was free. A very big mistake our little entourage made was not to have done the proper pre-planning. We just roamed around Venice with no definite objective. Afterwards we reviewed the guidebooks and saw how much we missed of this very unique place. So many people had told us that one day was enough in Venice. They were wrong. We listened to their advice and missed out. We wasted our afternoon. I don't know how many others did the same thing. I didn't hear of any great adventures from any one.

When we finally found a map of Venice, we walked down the coast to the park. We were trying to get away from the "maddening crowds". The further we got from St. Marks, the fewer the people, which suited us just fine. We walked down one sidewalk along the shoreline into the residential area of Venice. On our way we passed a sculpture of a large hand sticking out the sidewalk with four fingers pointing in the air. Each finger must have been ten feet long. We had no idea what it meant or why it was there, but it was an opportunity for the group to harass me again for the last tour on which I led them. Every time we had to walk any distance I told them it was just four blocks away. It became the joke.

We walked to a small park at the side of Venice that was directly across from Lido. I was the last stop for the water taxi. We didn't have to retrace our steps back into the tourist section of the city. Then we walked up a residential canal, not on the water but on some side walks next to the canal. We found a "one table" bar and were able to buy a glass of wine for a buck - not a bad price for Venice. We sat on a table on the sidewalk and watched how the people who have to live with this commotion every day go about their daily tasks. While we were sitting and waiting on the next taxi to return us to Lido, Betty Calo found a gambling machine in the backroom of the bar. It was just one little machine, but it was like a canteen of water in the desert for Betty. She descended on it. She had no idea how it worked, but that was not going to discourage her. In order to get her out of the bar in time to make the boat, I had to tell her about the Casino on Lido. Now she had to get back to Lido to back plans for her evening.

Betty had to put her recreation plans aside for awhile. We were catching a boat that evening for dinner on the island of Burano. It is an escape from the marble and concrete and from the crowds of Venice. A tiny little community, not bigger than a quarter of a mile in diameter, it is located 5-1/2 miles northeast of Venice and forty-five minutes away from Lido by water. It is fishing island but is also famous for its lace products. The story is that the women took up crocheting to keep themselves occupied when the men are away for long periods of time on their fishing excursions. Lace became a popular byproduct on many of the Venetian islands.

Burano is a great place to pictures. The buildings are rainbow colored single and two story structures. There are little canals filled with wooden boats and transversed by with arched walkways. The island even has its own leaning tower. The bell tower on the Church of San Martino lists so far to one side, it is hard to imagine how it continues to stand.

When our boat docked, it looked like they were "rolling up the streets". There were boys playing soccer in the church courtyard and towns people milling in the streets discussing the events of the day. As we passed the children, Franco stole their soccer ball and batted it around while commenting in Italian about the Dutch Soccer team. That got them all chanting some Italian cheer. Except for our entourage we didn't see any tourists - just empty streets with little booths selling lace.

Dinner was at the Trattatoria Locande Al Raspo. It had two rooms with seating space for about 150 people. When we were there, we were the only diners for the evening. Beside the production of lace Burano is an island of fishermen. So tonight's menu was a collection of seafood. There were no complaints. Even Betty, who in Sorrento Harbor tried to return her meal to the sea, enjoyed everything served.

One of the topics discussed at dinner was the absence of garlic. Everyone in the Tennessee group loved garlic and was quite disappointed. The meals had very little of it. We thought garlic was the national fruit of Italy. When we brought up the subject, we received a huge frown from Franco and the proverbial "squeeze of the nose". He told us garlic was not used much in real Italian food. All of us found this claim incomprehensible. Beth mentioned how her son-in-law with family from Northern Italy used it extensively. What we also didn't understand, is how quickly the owner of the Trattatoria, who overheard our conversation, was able to bring out bowls this rare condiment chopped up in olive oil. I think that although Grand European didn't water down the wine, they did neuter the food.

On the way back to Lido and our hotel, Betty was planning her trip to the Casino on the other side. She had even encouraged a couple of ladies that they should go also. She told Franco to pick her up in the morning at the Casino. Now Franco had to do some quick talking. I can imagine what was going through his mind at this time. Here he had his clients, who couldn't speak Italian, who had never played in an Italian Casino, and who were "three sheets to the wind". When they got to gamble, they might have bet away our Motor Coach. I don't what Franco told them but they decided not to go. Instead Doug and Marsha pull out some more wine and we had a nightcap in the lobby of our rooming house.

DAY EIGHT: Verona and the Lake Region

Today we ferried back across the bay and met the bus and Nello on the main land. We headed for the land region in northern Italy. We had one stop at Verona. It was made famous by Romeo and Juliet.

The guidebooks say that Verona is one of the most beautiful and romantic of all, northern Italian cities. It goes on to say that there is so much to see and do in Verona that one should plan to spend two days there. It then lists a dozen different sights to see. We didn't see much of Verona. We drove in, got off the bus, walked to the balcony of Romeo and Juliet, and had two hours to room around the city. Most of us never left the area of the Piazza.

Verona was like most old Italian cities. There was a central area surrounded by the ancient fortifications. There was the surrounding area where most of the people live. In this outer part the real business was conducted. Verona had over a quarter of a million people. You enter the first-century section by passing through the twentieth-century section.

The visit to the balcony was an anti-climatic event. The main streets in town all led to the Piazza - kind of like spokes on a wheel. They were full of people, as one might expect. We headed down one of them, walked several blocks, made several turns, and we were standing just outside the court yard where Juliet uttered those famous words "Romeo, Romeo where art thou Romeo?" Certainly he wasn't in the courtyard. If he was like us, he couldn't anywhere get near the balcony. It was jam packed with people.

The courtyard was a small garden area about fifty feet on side. It was hidden from the street by buildings. You had to pass through an arched, fifteen-foot long walkway to get to it. At the end of the walkway you can look up on your right, to the second story, and there she stood on a small six foot long by three-foot deep stone veranda just outside a single pain window. Well maybe it wasn't Juliet. It was one of a half dozen ladies squeezed on the little grand stand pretending to be. Seems logical. There were several hundred Romeos in the courtyard. Everybody tells me there was a statute of Juliet in the courtyard. I didn't get to see it. Furthermore, they tell me that a part of her body has been rubbed smooth.

After our visit to Juliet's perch, we returned to the piazza. It was just inside the gate of the stone wall that surrounded the old city. On one side Verona's version of the coliseum stood. It's Arena was built around 30 AD. It was approximately 450 feet in diameter. Unlike the Roman Coliseum this Arena was in good repair. They still used it to put on music and theater festivals. When we were there, they were getting it ready for another big event.

We left Verona and drove west to Milano, then north to Lago Maggiore. This area of Italy was also in the Po Valley. It was where Italy works and it looked like any other industrial area in the world. Not much to see, so I decided to read my book and nap. The view didn't get interesting again until we were about an hour north of Milano. Here the flat land turns mountainous. We were in the foothills of the Alps and traveling along the lake. This area was the land of big bucks. It was where the rich and famous go to vacation. The little stucco homes in the south were big stone villas in the North. The random red potties that dotted the fields in the South became expansive flower gardens in private yards of the North. There was quite a contrast.

All during our drive today Franco kept warning us about the rooms that we were going to have this evening. He said that the place was old and after our stay they were going to tear it down and replace it with a new hotel. We didn't know what to expect. The name of own Hotel was the Hotel Spenidid. That didn't help encourage us. It sounded like a rooming house in the low rent district. When we finally got to Baveno we passed an old hotel on our left. It looked like a bombed out Holiday Inn. Nobody had stayed in it in years. If Franco was going to play this ruse to its limit, he should have had Nello pull in to the parking lot. We went passed it drove a couple of blocks down the road and into the parking lot of a very nice and new hotel. It was Splendid. It was also right on the Lake.

Well here we go again. Did we have rooms facing the bombed out building up the street or did we have rooms overlooking that great lake? We were lucky. Again we all had rooms with balconies right over the lake. The Alps were to our back and the water was right outside our window. Everybody had rooms either on the third or fourth floor facing the lake. As we stood on the little patio outside our window on our right was the rounded foothills of the Alps, to the front of us was the lake which was about a half mile wide at this point, and to our left was the rest of the lake. We could hear the water splashing the shoreline. Directly below our room was a small dock for boats.

Unfortunately, not all of us were feeling so good. A strange malady had overwhelmed Doug Depew. He really looked and felt bad. The ladies dug into their purses and pulled out all kinds of antibiotics. Nello took the bus to the Chemist in the city and got more medication. Doug took his pills and went to bed. He was going to stay there for the evening and the following morning. At this time he was the only one who

manifested any symptoms. However, before the trip ended, another quarter of those on the trip would get ill. However, I don't think anyone got as sick as Doug did.

The dining room in the hotel was also very nice. It had high ceilings and large windows that overlooked the lake. We decided this evening's meal deserved sport coats. Afterwards we walked down to the little town of Baveno. It was about a half-mile away. It was a scenic little stroll. The Alps rose a couple of miles to the back of the city. There were villas with massive iron fences and gates and shopping areas along the sidewalk.

In front of the town was a park on the lake. As we entered the town from the side of the park, we stood, looked across it, and enjoyed the special view. Up from the stone retaining wall at the edge of the lake there were several dining areas with those umbrella tables areas. Between them was a bandstand. Off in the distance across the park were the mountains again. About half way up the green, forested side was a church. We could barely see the tall pointed bell tower standing above the trees. It was another one of those "Kodak moments". It was dusk and too late to take any pictures, but I promised to return in the morning at first light. We explored the small business district and park for awhile before returning to the hotel and our patios.

DAY NINE: Borromeo and Lugano

The day didn't start too well. When we awoke it was overcast and was raining. We had been watching the weather reports. There was a rain cell moving across our area. We were not too sure how long it was supposed to linger. If weather reporting in Italy was as accurate as it was in the States, the inclemency could last a day or a week. We were all optimistic. We decided it must be gone by noon when we planned to visit Lugano in Switzerland.

This forecast was great for Doug. He was in no mood to leave his bed. After his night's rest he still wasn't feeling well. It was bad for the rest of the tour. The plan for the morning was a boat ride to the Borromeo Islands. They were three little tourist stops, probably no more than a half mile in radius, just off the lakefront at Stresa, a town we passed on our way to Baveno. The Isola dei Pescatori was an old fishing village, the Isola Bella had the Palazzo Borromeo with its terraced gardens, and the Isola Madre was noted for its villa and gardens with exotic birds. I am afraid this was an optional trip that I had opted out of. About a week ago, I had anticipate that there would be rain this morning and decided to stay on shore. Nevertheless, those that did go described what they saw and dropped souvenir guidebooks on my table in the lounge as I sat and watched them return.

The words used by those making the trip as a general description were opulent, garish and a bit damp. I looked at some of the pictures in their books. They weren't kidding. It was the first time I had seen wall and ceiling treatment that stood out about foot. They were massive, white carvings that looked like lace. There were numerous Venetian chandeliers, mirrors, and ostentatious furniture. It appeared that the intent of the Borromeo family, who once called this place home, was to overwhelm their guests with an exhibition of their self-importance.

Today we had a day trip to Lugano, Switzerland. There wasn't much to see in Lugano and less to do, except shop. When you have a busload of women, this objective never disappoints. The real purpose of today's itinerary wasn't to go to Lugano. It was just a logical stopping point. What we really wanted to

do was view the countryside around the lakes. Winding two lane mountain roads passed through tunnel after tunnel. The beautiful stone and stucco villas with prolific flower gardens and the pristine valleys captured on all four sides by high ridges make this area is very popular to roam. We rode along the west side of Lago Maggiore, stopped a couple of hours in Lugano, and rode down the east of the lake. When we were on the side of the lake at Laveno, opposite Stresa, we put the bus on a ferry and rode across the lake. While we were moving across the lake we watched the sailplane hovering around a tall mountain peak to the east of Laveno.

It was a relaxing excursion, except for Nello. He had to maneuver that bus down roads intended only for car traffic. It was always interesting to see the surprised look on the faces of the drivers in the cars heading toward us after the rounded a blind turn. There was no argument with Nello. He wasn't taking prisoners. He was going around those narrow bends without stopping. A few challengers got the opportunity to ride in the berm. We had no worry. Over the past week we had watched him maneuver this tank in tighter spots. We just laid back, enjoyed the great scenery, and left the driving and jousting with on coming traffic to Nello. Anyway there was Franco along side of Nello.

The front window of the bus ran from the ceiling to the floor and wrapped around the entire front of the bus. Franco was center stage. He carried on conversations and exchanged hand gestures with the other drivers. There were also a few "stare downs". Sometimes he just sang to them and to Nello. It was like those old family car trips were mom and dad sat in the front seat and kids were lined up in the rear seats.

In Lugano our planned shopping stop was at Bucherer, a major retailer of watches. Everybody must have a Swiss watch, didn't he? As we entered, we received a little spoon as a souvenir. A few of us even bought watches and Grand European received a nice commission, I suspect. If you bought a watch, they gave you a whole bag of those little spoons. I told Sharyn that she could give them away as souvenirs instead of buying more. Why not? They had the Bucherer name and crest on them. I received my usual Scrooge lecture. What were we going to do with all those little spoons?

The other purchase to make in Switzerland was chocolate. We roamed the stores buying small pieces here and there. We had to do a real scientific evaluation - random sampling. We also stopped for lunch at a cafe that was supposed to serve real German food. Not quite. I spent fifteen minutes trying to explain to three different waitresses what REAL German beer was and asking if they had any. I explained about the live yeast in the bottom. At least I thought I did. As soon as I thought the waitress was nodding in affirmation, she sent over another one and I had to repeat the explanation from the beginning. Either they were going to run out of different waitresses or I was going to get tired. I gave up. I assumed they didn't have what I wanted. Next I had the opportunity to repeat the exercise with the guy cooking the sausages. I already learned my lesson with the beer ladies. I took whatever he was serving. We walked outside to enjoy our lunch. Here next to our table was a street vendor selling real German sausage for half the price we just paid.

Our last stop in Lugano was the cigar store. Pat Calo and I saw Cuban cigars for sale and, like the story of the forbidden fruit, we had to have a few. Anyway I always heard how good Cuban cigars were supposed to be. Why would anyone pay \$25 for a cigar if they were not any good? Sounded like a good argument to me. I had to be. Sharyn used that very same argument on many occasions to explain purchases that she made.

I smoked my first after dinner that evening. When I pulled it out of my pocket and inhaled its aroma under my nose, I noticed the look of a lynch mob on everyone's faces. I decided I had to enjoy it by

myself as close to the lake and as far from the hotel as possible. Even when I sat in the lawn chairs by the lake, they were still complaining about the smoke drifting in their direction. Also for you "inquiring minds" they weren't any better than American. There had to have been some larcenous culprit who pulled the labels off American cigars and replaced them with Cuban counterfeits

DAY TEN: Pisa and Firenze

It was Sunday morning and we had a long ride to Firenze (aka Florence). We were going to make a stop at Pisa along the way. We left at our usual 8 AM departure time. As we drove south out of the lake region. Everything looked deserted. It was like we were clandestinely slipping out of town. Nobody was about. It was Sunday morning and everybody was probably sleeping in.

As we drove, we did notice that there were an unusually number of traffic cops and people with those phosphorescent yellow jackets. Our first guess was that when these people finally do wake up they go en masse to church. They needed all these people to direct church traffic. After all, we were in Italy and Italy is Catholic and Catholics must go to mass on Sunday. We were wrong.

As we approached a blind turn, police cars burst around it with sirens blaring. The bus came to an immediate stop. Something serious had happened. We were certain there had to have been a major traffic accident. Fifteen seconds after the police surprised us at this corner; bikers rounded it - hundreds of them. Helmeted and attired in skin tight, brightly colored, spandex clothing, they erupted into view from behind the building at the corner. We sat and watched them pass by us for fifteen minutes. Franco was excited. It was the big Tour de Italia (or something like that).

The bus drove initially in the direction of Milano and then turned toward Genoa. We didn't plan to stop there, just to pass it at a distance. Around Milano the land was flat again - very flat. It was a great place to put a few thousand acres of rice fields. Franco called it "little Saigon". He said he was told it looked like Vietnam. As far as the eye could see in all directions there were terraced blocks of flooded land. We didn't see any coolly hats.

About a half-hour past the rice fields we were back into the Apennine Mountains, more specifically the Ligurian Apennines. We were still a half-hour away from Genoa. This time we weren't going to view the mountains from a distance. We were going to drive right through them. We drove through tunnel after tunnel. Most of them were only a quarter-mile long, but a few extended for several miles. Supposedly, there are 180 of these tunnels around Genoa. We weren't arguing with the count. We visited many of them. For brief moments between the tunnels we could see Genoa on the coast on our right side. On our left side there were high rise apartment and office buildings strategically positioned on rare stretches of flat ground. We spent as much time blindfolded by tunnels as we did observing the cityscape between them. For an hour we drove in this manner.

When we finally exited all the tunnels, we were in the marble mining area of Italy. Marble has been extracted from this area since the time of the ancient Roman Empire. They get the stone by cutting up the peaks of the mountains. As we approached the area, the mountains looked like they had snowcaps. Not so, that was the white marble. It was one of the few mining operations that I have ever seen that enhanced the appearance of the landscape. Off in the distance to our left there must have been fifteen

miles of marble capped peaks. To our right were the seaports and inventories of the cut stone ready for shipping.

We arrived at Pisa around lunchtime. Due to the crowds, Franco couldn't park the bus in the usual spot by the front gate into the old section of the city. Instead we had to go around to the backside. In our opinions this alternative was preferred. At the front gate there were acres of small street vendors, peddling junk. There were virtually none where we parked. It was also just a short four-block walk to central point of interest, the Campo dei Miracoli.

The circular Baptistery, the Duomo, and the Campanile or Bell Tower which was leaning a bit, were constructed of bright white marble. They were a stark contrast with surrounding structures that were made of gray stone. There was a stone wall that circled Pisa. These buildings were in a park-like area just inside the gate to the city. There were also street vendors inside the gate. They lined the street that ran along the side of park. Although there were signs saying, "keep off the grass", people were sitting with blankets on the Duomo lawn, snacking, reading, or conversing. The tourists were also walking on the grass and standing so someone could take their picture in front of the tower. Naturally, everybody was imitating the tower's lack of vertically.

The tower which most of us came to see is 179 feet tall and 50 feet in diameter. Unlike most bell towers that we saw on this trip, this one is cylindrical in shape and it leans approximately 15 feet off of vertical. For you non-engineers, it means that the critical center of gravity is still over the base, but not by much. Another ten feet of tilt and Pisa builds themselves another one. The tower didn't just start to tilt after they built it. It started tilting immediately as they were building it in 1174. They chose very unstable ground upon which to build it. Did that stop them? No. The architects had the surname, Pisano. Need I say more? I can imagine the conversation. The city fathers standing at the edge of the Campo with the weight of a very large bottle of vino in one hand hanging at their side saying, "looks straight to me".

The tower continues to lean one millimeter more each year. So ignoring wind, earthquakes, and fat tourists in the bell chamber, it will topple in 3000 years. That schedule would seem sufficient for us to climb the tower, but we couldn't. They have closed it indefinitely until they have a solution to stop the progression of the tilt. There was a large counter-balancing weight strapped to its backside as a temporary measure.

It also rained on us a little while we were in Pisa. Fortunately, it picked the time during which we had crowded into a cafe to have lunch.

After lunch we all boarded the bus for the trip to Firenze, all of us except Amanda. She was still staring at the tower. Franco did his usual head count, once, twice, then said, "Who is missing?" Since it had just started to rain again, he grabbed an umbrella and headed back to the Campo. Most of us were concerned. There were hundreds of people in the Campo. How was he going to find one person? Also maybe something serious happened to her. It was evident on Franco's face that he was also worried.

In fifteen minutes later he returned with his missing sheep. The tour group empathized with Amanda's embarrassment. Everybody chanted "Amanda buys wine". She was a great sport. She did buy wine that evening for everyone, although she tried to pretend it wasn't from her. We knew better and everybody applauded her gift.

We arrived in Firenze around mid afternoon. Our hotel was on the south side of the city and five miles away from the attractions. Although there were trains and bus lines into the city, we were provided with no travel instructions so we spent the evening in the hotel. It was a large modern and comfortable hotel. It was part of the Hilton chain, but it was miles from anything we came to see. No one asked Franco why Grand European chose this hotel. We would have preferred to be in Firenze, even if the accommodations were less comfortable. There were certainly lots of alternatives. This selection was a disappointment.

DAY ELEVEN: Firenze

This morning we had a half-day escorted tour of Firenze. Our first stop was the Piazzale Michelangelo. It was on a plateau that overlooked the city. It was a good place to start. We could see all the points of attraction from this vantage point. We asked Franco to explain what we saw. He said he couldn't. Apparently you have to have a local guide do that. There must be a Tour Guide Union in Italy, aka the Mafioso. However, we had our maps and could identify most of the buildings. While we were getting the lay of the land, Franco was off getting a photographer to make a group picture of all of us. We all lined up with Firenze in the background and recorded our trip for posterity. Everybody took a good picture.

There was a replica statue of David in the Piazzale. We took turns lining up directly beneath that pointy thing on David making snapshots. Beth had used that term when we were in Paris to describe the cone shaped evergreen trees. She was the photographer and when she wanted Larry to "get in the picture", she told him to go stand by the "pointy thing". Under David that term took on a different meaning. The ladies quickly surmised that the Italian men do not have any bragging rights, but I still don't understand why they were taking pictures from so many different angles - something about young Italian tushes.

We then drove across the Arno and met our local guide in the Piazza Santa Croce. He was waiting for us we had another commercial stop at visit the Misuri fine leather goods store. We did some shopping and we did buy a coat. Our guide started by telling us to be very careful. The gypsies were working the piazza that morning. He pointed out three young ladies and one male sitting over by the church that were trying, unsuccessfully, to pretend they were just a typical Italians. There was one tour group ahead of us for a visit to the church. The minute they moved up the stairs of the church, the gypsies moved right into their assembly. You could watch the eyes of the girls casing the purses of the ladies, waiting for a chance to snatch and run. The guide for that group spotted them and yelled some non-complimentary words at them. They left the area after some less than friendly retorts.

Santa Croce was originally a Franciscan church built in 1295. It was a simple brick structure - too simple for the town. In 1863 they had it outfitted with a new marble facade. It has a slim Gothic bell tower made of old stone. It appeared incongruous with this facade. Its basic monastic interior was, however, consistent it's stone tower and the self-inflicted poverty of the Franciscan order. Michelangelo is buried here. He lived in Firenze and this church was were he worshipped.

From Piazza San Groce we walked three blocks to the Piazza Palazzo and Loggia della Signoria. It was essentially the center of all activity in old Firenze. From here the family of Medici led Europe out of the Dark Ages and into the Renaissance. They had the money, the intelligence and appreciation for human actualization, and the influence and power. They provided the critical financing that catalyzed the Age

of Reason. The Palazzo was their home before the family moved to Pitti Place. In front of this building were three statues: Judith and Holofernes, David (another copy), and Hercules and Cacus. Inside its antechamber was the Graceful Winged Cupid by Verrochio. This area was decorated with elaborate stucco on the marble columns and with frescoes on the arches. It was the location for the wedding of Francesco de' Medici and Joan of Austria. Outside and to the left of the building as you face it was the Ammannati Fountain with a statue of Neptune. This was much to see in the Palazzo, but we didn't go any further.

On the right side of the Palazzo was the Loggia. It was a building that appears like a large stone display case with an open front with four arched entrances. Inside were the sculptures: Persius, the Rape of the Sabines, Hercules and the Centaur, Menelaus supporting Patroclus, and lesser known works. Our guide didn't give us a clear reason for this building. It was very unusual.

Our next stop on our walking tour was the Duomo, the Baptistery, and the Bell Tower. They were about six blocks to the north. Construction on it started in 1300 and it wasn't consecrated until 1436. The buildings were covered with white marble with elaborate carvings on its entire surface. It was quite an enormous undertaking. The building itself was a fantastic work of art. No wonder it took nearly a century and a half to build. The inside of the Duomo was no less majestic. It was nearly 500 feet in length and 300 feet wide at the transept. There were enormous gothic arches and pillars. 300 feet above everything was a large, 150-foot diameter dome with the painting of the Last Judgement by Giorgio Vasari. If you wanted, you could have climbed to the top of the dome and walk around a small, stone platform on the outside. We "book-marked" that climb on our schedule for the next day when we returned, but never got around to it. Sondra made the climb - a feat of which she reminded us too often.

Later that day another person made the climb, but bought only a one-way ticket. At the highest precipice, they took the fast way back down and made a mess on the stone courtyard. When we visited the Duomo again, we couldn't see any splat marks on the side of the dome or on the ground. I certainly can conceive of an unlimited number of ways to leave this life that are better than leaping from the top of this dome.

That was the end of the escorted tour for the day. We walked several blocks to the train station. Nello was waiting with the bus for those taking the optional afternoon tour.

That afternoon we lunched at the 16th century castle of Vicchiomaggio and visited San Gimignano. Both were a short ride into the Tuscany countryside and were very enjoyable. When we arrived at the Castle, the owner, garbed in 16th century attire, greeted us. He dressed like a court jester but didn't look too friendly. He was carrying a long "pointy thing" (not the same as David's) with which he was most willing to jab you if you didn't follow his instructions. We all filed out of the bus and moved into the keg room just inside the castle wall. Here there were rows and rows of kegs of wine aging prior to distribution.

A young lady from the vineyard gave us a short talk on how they prepared the different grades of Chianti wine. About the only thing I remembered was that they have two primary grades: a dinner wine and a sipping wine. The latter is more fully bodied and has more bouquet than the former. It is left to age at least a half year longer in oak kegs and one year longer in bottles. The amount of tannic acid in a wine depends on the quality of the oak used in kegs and the length of time the wine is left therein to mature. The oak neutralizes the acid. A good sipping wine is aged about a year in wood. The table grade wine is generally in wood no longer than six months. The bouquet is enhanced by the length of time the wine is

stored in bottles. Sippin' wine is in the bottle for three or more years. Table wine is in the bottle no longer than two years. We noticed that the wines we drank in the Tuscany area were distinctive from the Italian wine available in the States. Virtually all of them were light, had a good bouquet, and had very little acid. I guess that is why our crew drank so much of it any time they were given a chance.

Our lunch was upstairs in one rooms of the castle. We had it all to ourselves. It really added to the ambience. The brochure from Grand European described this lunch as a buffet. It was not. It was a full meal served family style. We all sat at long, twenty person tables, and the kitchen help brought plates of side dishes and wine to the tables. We passed these up and down the tables. They served the entree individually. There was a lot of food and we sat and ate for over an hour.

While we ate, a chamber matron and page visited us. Again dressed in the costumes of the 16th century Ms Beth, matron for hire, and Mr. Franco, whatever, graced our dining hall. Apparently they were up doing their duties (and other mischief) and wanted to see what all the commotion was in the dining room. Later, Monsignor Rex also visited. He blessed the gathering by shaking holy water on all of us using a gizmo that looks like a baby's rattle. Some of the group needed more blessing then others. When the gizmo didn't spray enough, he dispersed more water by other means. Our guess was he had to stop by to hear the confessions of our matron and page.

After lunch we visited other portions of the castle and the courtyards. The castle was small, as castles go. It was probably no larger than a typical villa. Even with its walls, it certainly would not of withstood a serious assault. They were probably meant only to keep the "riff-raft" out. Nevertheless, it met your basic criteria for castles. It looked like a castle, it was on the top of a hill, and it was very old.

After lunch we took a leisurely drive through the Tuscany country, traveling all the little back roads. Again none of these roads were meant for bus traffic. Nello effortlessly maneuvered his vehicle through some tight spots. We appreciated ride. It was truly a case where we could sit back and enjoy the view.

As we approached San Gimignano, we could see it from several miles away. It was another medieval walled city, but it had all these bell towers. I counted eleven of them that stood taller than the surrounding buildings. The town itself was only about a half-mile square. Why all these towers in such a small place? Crazy Italian ego was the only answer I was able to find out. I guess one family built a bell tower, and, of course, everyone had to keep up with the Pisano's. (I think this guy also spent some time in Pisa).

When we visited San Gimignano, every store had hundreds of little Pinocchio puppets. The obvious thought was since Pinocchio is an Italian Fairy Tale that we were in the little wooden guy's hometown. I got a copy of the story of Pinocchio and read it. There was no mention of San Gimignano nor of anything that would had led me to this town. The only thing that came close was Jiminy Cricket. It sounded like a play on the name of the town.

San Gimignano was typical of a small medieval Tuscany town. There really wasn't anything usually about it. Old gray stone buildings, gray stone streets, and a gray stone wall around it. We walked around it for awhile and visited some of the stores. It was a pleasant visit, not overrun with tourists, but not anything I would go out of my way to see. There was one thing I did notice about these little towns. The walls and the buildings run together. There was one large wall that circles the habitation. Then there were walls that connected to the outer fortification and ran along on either side of the street. Stone walled rooms were then connected to these street walls. They were the places where the denizens

worked and lived. There was always a church with bell tower and or a piazza near the center. The church with its tower was disconnected from the city walls.

There were no formal plans for dinner that evening. Our afternoon meal was more than just a lunch. Nobody was really too hungry. Although we had talked about going back into Firenze to get a good Italian meal and had searched the travel guidebooks for a place, we were too far away to get back into it conveniently. Moving a dozen people by cab was too much trouble. We decided to stay in the hotel. While in San Gimignano, we purchased all the makings for an evening meal: bread, cheeses, salami, chocolates, and so forth. We also had many bottles of wine that we had purchased earlier that afternoon at the Castle. We threw the Hotel keys in a hat, picked the couple with the largest room, and set up a buffet using all our collections.

DAY TWELVE: Firenze

We had a second day in Firenze. Many with the tour group had booked an optional visit to the Accademia to see the real David done by Michelangelo, rather than the numerous copies we had already seen. Many of us had already seen enough of David and felt that the quick "run in" to see one particular sight, that typified these optional tours, was neither an economic use of time or money. So we studied the guidebooks, shared the bus ride with the David people, and took out on our own.

Our list of stops/visits included: the Piazza & Church of Annunziata (nice church but we couldn't get in it because they had services scheduled all morning), Ponte Vecchio (aka the silver bridge over the Arno), Pitti Palace and the gardens (we spent a couple of hours touring), the Princes Chapel (a small Medici museum which we chose not to tour), and Santa Maria Novella. We were done around noon. The ladies still had obtained their requisite tonnage of souvenirs for everyone on the family tree or in the Hender-sonville phone book, so we spent the remainder of our time in Firenze getting the last minute gifts.

We spent most our morning touring the Pitti Palace. It was a short walk across the Ponte Vecchio and just outside the center of the old town. Like much of the sights in Firenze, the Pitti Palace was the home of the Medici family. It has rooms full of paintings and sculptures collected by them. Outside were the palace gardens that we also chose to explore. They were getting them ready for tourist season. Although the gardens covered many acres, we were too early and they were nothing out of the ordinary. At the highest point in the gardens, there was a small museum of china.

With a little hindsight I think the time allowed for Firenze was too long, especially when you are staying in a hotel five miles away from any activity. Except for Assisi, Grand European could have added a day to any of the other stops or maybe included some time in Lucca. The optional tours were great and compensated for an otherwise disappointing stop.

This evening there was an optional meal in a small ristorante out in the Tuscany countryside. The brochure gives the name of the place as the Restaurant Il Mulinaccio. However, I don't think that was where we went and I don't have its name. Regardless of where we went, we had a good time.

As drove out to the restaurant we passed a large war cemetery for Americans. In tribute, Franco stopped the bus, turned off the engines, and had a moment of short prayer for the American soldiers that never made it back home. I know it was a special moment for some of those with us.

The ristorante was in the middle of nowhere. It sat by itself in a field. Franco called it a farm. We drove up a quarter-mile long, pebble driveway and entered the gate of a short brick wall that surrounded the establishment. They were waiting for us in a small covered courtyard in front of the ristorante. They had set up a before dinner cocktail and simple appetizers. The cocktail was champagne with real bitter red juice added. It did a good job of puckering up the face with each sip. We made the requisite salutes to our hosts and tour manager. Did it improve our appetites? I don't know. However, I know it didn't ruin it. We didn't drink enough of the bitter juice.

Tonight's dinner was steak, ala Tuscany. Beef was the specialty of this area of Italy. Franco had announced the menu several days earlier using a lot of superlatives. However, when you have a tour of Americans with many from Texas, this dinner is like "carrying coal to Newcastle". The Texans were already issuing challenges on the dinner and nothing was served yet.

The ristorante had two major dining rooms for large groups. We occupied the outermost one with the entertainer. About a half-hour after we entered, a busload of Brits arrived and took the other room connecting to ours. By the time they walked in, we had already disposed of several bottles of wine and were getting rowdy. The Brits only watched.

Several people from our tour were taking turns dancing on a little eight by eight-foot space in front of the musician/singer. When we recognized a song, we also joined in with the singing. It was all Franco could take. He could take no more. He grabbed a spare microphone and joined in with the singing. He wasn't bad, but he wasn't ready to give up managing tours. He didn't empty the house like the rest of us would have, but we knew why he sang most of his time on the bus just to Nello. The real treat came when a waitress, who was dancing with Pat, took the microphone and sang. She had a great voice and did a great job. We all acted like we were her first audience.

The Brits still sat there and just watched. Even when a Conga line weaved in and out of their dinner tables, they didn't join. Finally, Franco challenged them to a contest - our gladiator against theirs. Pick your most inebriated warrior or the one who could hold his liquor the best and come center stage to meet our warrior, Pat Calo. Duel until the death or until we declare a winner. What was the contest? Drop a ring tied with a string to your belt over the narrow end of a wine bottle sitting on the floor, using only leg squats. No one succeeded. We decided we would all be dead before either of these two would get that ring over the end of the bottle. Franco had to have a run-off contest.

The spouses were to join the warriors. No so good for us. When Betty has a little to drink, she is lucky to find the correct "necessary room", as we discovered in Sorrento. The contest was one of those balloon breaking things where two people place it at various locations between themselves and squeeze together until it breaks. It was no contest. It was wham, bam, thank you mam with the Brits. They were ready for this one. Betty was lucky to find Pat. No balloons were breaking. Pat had to pinch them with his fingers to avoid being totally humiliated by their performance.

Well the Brits won, quite decisively. They were now "ready for bear" and had loosened up sufficiently to join us on the dance floor.

DAY THIRTEEN: Seine and Rome

Today was our last bus ride. We were returning to Rome with a brief stop a Seine. Grand European had a special farewell dinner planned. Franco said he had a surprise for us. Everybody started guessing. The general consensus was that he was going to sing several Opera songs. He had been practicing throughout the trip. His one and only audience was Nello. The second most popular guess at the surprise was that Grand European was going to treat everyone to an evening at the Opera. Both guesses were wrong, but also very close to being correct.

Seine is another medieval walled city, but much larger than San Gimignano. It has well preserved, four-mile long walls, with towers and bulwarks. It was built in the 13th through 15th centuries. Around the 16th century Seine had much of the majesty of Firenze, but after it was conquered by the Medici, it was not permitted in significant source of income and declined in prosperity. Like many of these old cities automobile traffic was banned. We parked the bus and walked to it. There wasn't much to do in Seine, except just appreciate its history as exhibited in its buildings and streets. Because of its old charm it was very popular with the tourists. There were crowds everywhere.

Our first stop was the Piazza del Campo. It was essentially the center of town. It was unusual in that it slopes to one side. Circular and about 200 feet in diameter, it was paved in stone and designed to collect rainwater as run-off at the lower end and to pump it to the upper end for use in the Fonte Gaia (gay fountain). Consequently, the fountain only runs when it rains and we got to see nary a dribble.

Around the outer edge of the Piazza was a racetrack. Horses run medieval style twice a year in the Palio. The race was three times around the circle and lasts for only ninety seconds. When we wondered, "what's the big deal for one, ninety-second horse race", we remember all the hype about the Derby in Louisville. It lasts only 120 seconds. It was all the pageantry leading up to the big event that was the source of the excitement. Today the outdoor cafes were using the outer circle.

The Sunto Bell tower was at the low end of the Campo. You could climb 400 steps in a very narrow, winding passageway to the very top and stand underneath the bell itself. We did it. There was a rumor that Sondra was training for this climb. We were not about to be surpassed a second time. So Larry Bucklin and myself jogged up the tower. Sondra didn't make the climb.

The other point of interest was the Duomo. It sat on the highest point in Seine. Where else do you put a church. The climb up the streets was nearly as challenging as the climb up the Bell Tower. Not too many from the tour group managed to make it there. We met Harry struggling to get up to the Duomo. He wasn't pleased with the climb and wondered if it was worth it. We assured him it was.

The architecture was extraordinary. The construction used layers of black and white marble, with each layer being about a foot in thickness. It looked like a stack of Oreos. It was the Zebra church. They were called Balzana stripes whatever that means. Both the interior and the exterior of the church were striped. It was built between 1200 and 1400. Along a ledge near the ceiling in the nave were busts of 172 popes and 36 Roman emperors. The graffiti and inlaid floor was a succession of scenes from the Old Testament. Most of these are also done in black and white. The Duomo was built as a matter of pride in response to Seine's chief rival Firenze. They had all kinds of expansion plans for it, but after Seine became a conquered city, these plans were never carried out.

We returned to Rome about mid afternoon, too late to back into the city. We were staying again at the Beverly Hills Hotel. We gathered in one of the bedrooms and finished off the wine and food we had left from Firenze. There was also more speculation on what Franco's surprise was.

Dinner that evening was at the La Talia ristorante. Our surprise was waiting for us. There were members from a local Opera Company and in our dining room. We had a piano and we were treating to an evening at the opera while we dined. It was "up close, personal, and private." It was a very unique experience and a grand way to climax a grand vacation. The whole evening was a class act - great food and great entertainment. When you were in a small room, the power of these voices and their song was very moving.

Grand European brought the tour to a crescendo. It started in Rome at a relatively low note and ended again in Rome, but on a high note. I suspect no one will remember our first ristorante in Rome, but no one will forget our last. The finale was the requisite "Arrivederci Roma" sung by everyone while waving the dinner napkins. Definitely a little hokey, but since everybody had a great time, this gesture seemed like a justifiable tribute.

DAY FOURTEEN: Back Home

A city bus was waiting to take us to the Airport at 8AM. Some people in the tour were staying over in Rome for the weekend. They either had friends they were meeting them or they just wanted to see more of Rome. We really did get too much time to explore it in great detail. The rest of us were on the bus saying our good byes to new friends.

Robin and George, and Amanda were joining the Tennessee contingent on their flight back to Philadelphia. Most of us had no problem, Doug and Marsha had a lot of problems. First of all their booking back to Nashville was not confirmed. Something we could not understand since they had booked with us and Franco said he had confirmed everyone's passage home. The problem was with the connection in Philadelphia. They were told to get on the plane in Rome and to resolve this issue in the States. When they got to Philadelphia, they were the only ones that customs chose to inspect. They were worried if they even had a seat to Nashville and customs was looking at their dirty underwear. Everything worked out fine. Doug and Marsha got through customs and had a seat on our plane to Nashville.

Others with our tour group had worse problems. Flights out of Rome were delayed several hours due to the now common excuse for somebody screwing up, "equipment failure". They obviously missed connections back in the States and had much longer "lay-over" than planned.