

The Delights of Tuscany & Umbria 17th – 22nd September 2012

I would like to start my report by passing on the grateful thanks and appreciation from everyone on this holiday to Denise for all the thought, time and effort she put in to both the beforehand planning and the day by day organisation of this wonderful trip.

At our appointed departure time of 7.15 am on Monday 17th September I, along with 17 other members of our U3A, waited anxiously aboard the coach to Gatwick with Denise's oft repeated warning at our meeting the previous week of "we can't wait - so don't be late" fresh in our minds. Luckily the coach did wait - for the 19th member of the party who had to rush back home to find her boarding pass! Then a brief stop at Rustington to pick up 7 members of Arun U3A and, thanks to Denise's meticulous planning, all 26 of us arrived at Gatwick in good time to check in our bags, have coffee and even do some shopping before boarding our flight to Rome.

Feeling somewhat jaded after the early start and a very long wait for our cases at Rome airport it was a relief to find our delightful Italian coach driver, Roberto, waiting for us as we emerged into the warm afternoon sunshine. The final leg of our journey was a two hour drive to Chianciano Terme in the heart of Tuscany.



The beauty of the landscape that unfolded as we rounded each and every bend in the road was stunning. Stone farmhouses nestling between rolling hills under a cloudless blue sky, tall Cypress trees dotted around them, bunches of deep purple grapes hanging from vines in terraced vineyards, flocks of sheep grazing in lush green fields interspersed with freshly ploughed fields with rich brown furrows following the contours of the hills and mountainsides.

These first views of the Tuscan countryside certainly surpassed my expectations and I am not alone when I say these are among my most treasured memories of the holiday.

The staff at Hotel Ricci were friendly and efficient and on arrival we were soon checked into our rooms with time to freshen up before dinner. The food was good and the servings so generous that, hungry though we were, many of us couldn't manage to eat all 5 courses on that first evening!

Day 2: After a good night's sleep and a leisurely breakfast we were back in the coach and on the



way to a guided tour of the Abbey of Monte Olivieto Maggiore. For me the lasting impressions of this monastery will be its lofty hill top position, surrounded by forests and the beautiful early 14th century frescoes in the main cloister depicting thirty-six scenes from the Life of St Benedict. Our guide brought these to life for us as she pointed out some of the jokes the artist played on the abbot in revenge for the poor payment he received for his work. For example in this scene depicting 'Benedict sending away the harlots' the artist originally shocked the monks by painting the ladies naked – not at all the sort of temptation that the abbot wanted to expose impressionable young monks to!

Back to the coach and off to Bagno Vignoni for lunch. The town is still exactly as described in a document dating back to 1334 as a "thermal spa arranged and surrounded by buildings and taverns with a chapel in the middle. It has a very beautiful square layout, with the spring divided in two parts and a roof for protecting the infirm."



The public are no longer allowed to use this pool but some of the more adventurous members of our party threw caution to the wind and dipped their feet in the warm stream that trickled gently down the hillside.

Another short coach ride and we were in the delightful small town of Pienza, where the main square was used to film part of "The English Patient". We had free time to explore the narrow streets and shops, sample delicious Italian ice cream or just sit and people-watch or admire the wonderful views across Tuscany from the city walls.



Back to the coach and, with just a short stop to see the magnificent Church of Madonna Di San Biagio at Montepulciano, we were soon back at our hotel and ready for another splendid five course dinner. Some of the more energetic members of the party stayed up long after the meal was over, some chatting in the bar and making new friends, others playing bridge. But I think the majority of us, tired out by a long day of sightseeing, went straight to bed!



Day 3: After the blue skies of the previous two days we were rather disappointed to wake up to cloudy skies. But it was still warm enough for short sleeved summer clothes as we were once again helped on board his coach by the ever cheerful Roberto. First stop today was Assisi and Roberto drove us to the top of the city giving us free time to walk down the hill to the coach park. For most of us our first stop was entry into the Upper Basilica of St Francis, where a gallery of magnificent frescoes by Giotto

shows 28 scenes from the life of St. Francis. The tomb of St Francis and St Clare are in the equally impressive Lower Basilica along with some of their clothing.

In the afternoon we visited the medieval town of Perugia, where most of us had opted to join the guided tour Denise had organised for us. We were met by our guide, Maura, who set off at a brisk pace leading us underground down a series of escalators. This was rather surprising as we could see the town above us, but we were amazed to find ourselves in part of a well preserved underground city. Our guide recounted some of the horrors perpetrated by the infamous Baglioni family who ruled Perugia in the 15th – 16th centuries. In revenge for the assassination of a papal legate in 1538 Pope Paul III conquered Perugia, exiled the nobility and had a huge fortress, the Rocca Paolina, built on top of the houses where we were now standing.



After this unexpected and very interesting experience most of us didn't find modern day Perugia as interesting as Assisi, Siena or Florence. In part this was possibly due to the rather lack lustre approach of our guide, her main interest seemingly was to give us plenty of "free time to explore" rather than show us around and point out things of interest. But there were fine views of the city and the surrounding countryside as this

photograph shows. We returned to the coach just in time to miss the rain which had been threatening all day and arrived back at our hotel in time to have a soak in the hotel spa or a glass of wine in the bar before dinner.

We arrived in Siena which looked fantastic under a blue sky and bathed in warm sunshine. Our guide, Nicolette, led us into the town, pointing out many landmarks along the way to ensure we could all find our way back to the coach later. She was an excellent guide, informative, humorous and patient. She made a point of waiting for everyone to catch up at each stop before she spoke, which was much appreciated after the casual approach of our guide in Perugia the previous day. As we entered Siena the enormous, brick built, Basilica of St. Dominic dominated the skyline. Founded by the Dominicans in 1125 the church is dedicated to St. Catherine of Siena and contains her mummified head and finger along with some lovely frescoes describing the miracles she performed.



Siena also boasts a magnificent black and white marble Duomo, built to its present size around the start of the 13th century. Siena was a very profitable place in medieval times and work began in the 14th century, to double the size of the cathedral. This was left unfinished

after the black death wiped out over half the population and with it the prosperity of the town.



This photo shows our party in the Campo, the main square where the Palio horse race takes place twice every year. Nicolette is describing the excitement of this event when about 4000 people stand in the centre of the square while the horses run round the outside. Our guided tour ended here and most of us enjoyed a leisurely lunch in one of the many restaurants around the Campo before returning to the

coach. All the places we visited were interesting and picturesque but I loved Siena best and this morning was the high spot of the whole five days for me.



That afternoon we visited San Gimignano a medieval village perched on a hill top in the heart of the Chianti growing region of Tuscany. The village is famous for its thirteen towers, as the picture on the left, taken from the tourist information guide shows.

The narrow cobbled streets were very picturesque to walk around and we took the opportunity to shop for presents and souvenirs to take home. The



village was very much a 'tourist trap' and it was difficult to imagine actually living there, especially in the winter when it must sometimes be cut off for days by ice and snow.

Day 5: An early start from the hotel meant that we arrived in Florence at about 10 am and started with a guided walking tour that included the Duomo and Santa Croce church. Our tour guide, Anna, was good but not quite up to the high standard of Nicolette in Siena. For example I felt she wasted time making us stop to listen to this person dressed (presumably) as Dante reciting from heart two fairly lengthy pages from 'The Inferno'. I was more interested in the marvellous buildings, statues and squares with which Florence abounded. The only problem was that the city was very busy with many tourists.





After the guided walking tour we had a whole five hours of free time to explore the city. I enjoyed a wander through the less crowded back streets to meet an old friend. We had a splendid lunch in the Teatre del Sale then a walk through the Santa Croce area and across the famous Ponte Vecchio to visit the student area of the city.

As we left the city Roberto stopped the coach at Piazzale Michelangelo giving us a chance to see and photograph this great panoramic view of Florence.



On way back to our hotel we made the most of our last evening in Italy with an excellent dinner at Hotel Villa Casagrande. The chef was rightly proud of the traditional Tuscan cuisine they served us and I rather wished I had not eaten quite so much lunch as course after course arrived.



Then it was back to our hotel to pack ready for our departure the following morning.

Day 6: Alas the day of departure had arrived. But the holiday was not yet over as we were able to spend the morning visiting Orvieto before setting off to Rome airport. This delightful town is built on a large hill and we approached by cable car rather than face a long climb up by footpath.

For such a small town Orvieto has a magnificent Duomo with many beautiful frescos. Built as a result of the 'miracle of Bolsena' in the 13th century when during Mass, the bread bled, staining a linen cloth. The cloth was brought to the pope, who was visiting Orvieto at the time. The pope commissioned this magnificent cathedral to commemorate the miracle which is now illustrated in the Chapel of the Corporal and in the enamel panels of a silver reliquary inside the chapel. Due to social and economic circumstances completion of the Duomo itself took over 300 years.

In spite of some obvious tourist attractions Orvieto seemed to be more of a 'real place' than the touristy town of San Gimignano we visited two days previously.



As we wandered up and down many scenic small streets and lanes we came across a busy market square full of local people buying fruit, vegetables, clothing and cheese. It would have been easy to spend the whole day here but, after lunch outside a busy café on the main street, it was all too soon time to return via the cable car to the coach.



Soon we were bound for Rome airport where we said goodbye to Roberto and expressed our grateful thanks for his consistently careful driving throughout the five days and for his help with getting on and off the coach at each and every stop we made. I liked the way he did this for all of us, whether we needed help or not he was always there. On

that final coach journey I asked people if there was anything they would like me to include in this report and I hope that I have paraphrased all the responses somewhere in this report. The only 'criticism' was that the holiday was over and we would have liked it to last longer – a feeling that was reinforced when I returned to my home late on Saturday evening and woke up to cold wet weather on Sunday morning.

I hope that reading this will encourage other members to take part in future U3A holidays. My husband died last year and, although I have been away with friends and family, this was the first holiday I have taken alone. Hence one final big THANK YOU Denise for organising all this, I am so pleased that I plucked up the courage to go and I am sure we will all treasure the memories of places we visited and the new friends we made on the trip. Part of the enjoyment of this holiday was the company of like-minded people and getting to know about their varied and interesting lives.

MA, West Sussex September 2012