

How I spent my Italian vacation

By Mike Wavada, age 54

Day 0 May 11 Sunday Enfield – Newark - Milano

We managed to get all of our stuff in the required containers – Sue’s double-decker backpack and a small backpack and my IBM bag for me. I decided to bring the laptop in hope that I had or could get everything that I needed to make it work. We photocopied all of our documents. We left one set with Sue’s sister, Karen LaPlante, and packed the second set. We put on our money belts. They felt funny at first.

Karen drove over to pick us up at 10 a.m. on Mother’s Day. We arrived at the luxurious Amtrak stop in Windsor Locks by 10:45 for the 10:58 train. We were surprised to see quite a few people waiting for the train. I didn’t expect anyone to be riding the train on Sunday. In fact, however, the train got more and more crowded. A lot of passengers got off in New York, but so many more got on that there was not a single empty seat in our car for the ten minute stretch between New York and Newark.

Sue by this morning was running on fumes. She had been very busy the previous few days – packing, making arrangements, and preparing for her dance competition Friday and Saturday. She had had no time whatever for sleep. Before we reached New York, Sue had moved across the aisle so that she would have both seats on which to try to sleep. Meanwhile I translated some of the material that I had printed out from the Internet about Orvieto, the city in Umbria that is built on a hill that has cliff faces on all sides. You have to take a train just to get into the city. It sounded really cool, but Rick Steves is not too enthusiastic about it. I also read in his book about Civita, the old city that is even more remote. They have a donkey race on June 1. We will be in Roma then. Civita is two or three hours from Roma. We might consider going. Unfortunately, that is our transition day between hotels. <We later heard from our tour leader, Kat, that the donkey race is a thing of the past.>

The conductor would not accept my Veterans’ Advantage card. He said that they have to punch it into the computer, and he couldn’t do that on the train. He said that I would have to go to a train station with the receipt to get them to mail me a refund. The Newark airport has a station (although at the time I did not see any sign of it), but I did not want to take the time to fool with this until we were checked into our flight. So, I will have to save the receipt for the better part of a month.

I made a list on the train of the things that I had to do when we arrived in Milano. I anticipated that by the time that we landed I might be too tired to think straight, and Sue was already in that state. I figured that it was my job to get us to the Hotel Gritti. Then we could plot together how best to spend our day in Milano.

The monorail from the Newark airport train station to the airport was free, fast, and easy. It took us right to terminal 2, which is where the Alitalia counter is. We checked in without any difficulty whatever. I doubt that the agent spoke Italian. Spanish was more likely.

We then set up camp at a table in the food court for terminal 2. The sandwiches at Charley’s Steakery were not bad at all. Sue could barely keep her eyes open.

The security in the international terminal at Newark seemed much lighter than the domestic security I have become accustomed to. We never had to show ID's. All of our carry-ons went through with no problem. Many people had to be searched, but I suspect that they did not know the sneaker trick. Most leather shoes have metal plates that set off the metal detectors.

Our flight, which was scheduled to depart at 6:45, finally left the gate at about 7:30. No explanation for the delay was ever proffered. It was another half hour before we took off. That would make it 2 a.m. Milano time. We are happy just to be able to leave. It was sunny and pretty hot when we got on the train in Windsor Locks. By the time that we left Newark it was windy, chilly, and raining. The visibility was not very good either.

The airplane was crowded and uncomfortable. It was hard to find a way to sit in the seats without inducing pain somewhere. The light for my seat didn't work. Sue's did, however, and it was already aimed toward my seat. I got a little reading done. A big disappointment was the fact that for some reason Alitalia does not allow any passengers to use CD players. I cannot imagine the reason for this.

All the announcements were delivered first in Italian and then in English. I tried to follow what they said in the first set, but with only limited success.

We didn't expect any food on the flight. Our ticket said that there would only be beverages. However, they actually served us a pretty decent meal with complimentary wine.

After dinner both Sue and I tried to sleep. I succeeded to some extent, but every few minutes I would find myself waking up with a sore neck, knee, or back. Sue had similar problems.

Alitalia also served us a snack for breakfast. Before we knew it the flight was over. The exciting moment was when the Alps peeked through the cloud cover that had escorted us all the way from Newark.

Day 1 May 12 Monday Milano

Malpensa airport is 48 km from Milano. It is closer to Switzerland!

Nearly all of the rest of the people on our plane were scheduled to transfer to connecting flights to other places. Since we arrived almost 90 minutes late, many passengers were quite stressed out. One man, who was evidently going to Cairo, was so irate that he walked up the aisle with the intention of talking to the captain. One of the flight attendants, who was easily the burliest that I have ever seen, made him sit down. We overheard another flight attendant remark that 53 people on our flight were scheduled to transfer to a plane to Tel Aviv.

We were surprised to find that there seemed to be no jetways at Malpensa. The airplane parked away from the gate. A bus came to meet the plane and transported the passengers to the gate. The advantage with this approach is that it takes much less time to park the plane. The disadvantages include the fact that you have to walk in the rain and the time that the bus takes to get to the gate.

We got through passport control (easy) and customs (non-existent). There was a long wait for my bag, but it finally came. Now the adventure begins.

The first step was to get some euros. A paragraph Rick Steves' Italy book described the location of a bancomat (ATM) at the airport. I located it (or one of its many siblings) and extracted 200 euros. Then we needed to find the train into Milano. It was not too difficult once we found the biglietteria. My first conversation in Italian was successful!

The ride on the light rail train into Milano was extremely smooth. The same train is used both by commuters and people coming from the airport. It goes through a fair amount of countryside and then the northern suburbs of Milano. These, for the most part, did not seem like nice places to live, which surprised me. My mental picture of Milano was a metropolis of rich stylish people.

I twice saw a weird-looking bird – grey with black head and wings. We saw it many times subsequently and spent weeks trying to find out what it was. On one of the last days we finally determined that it was just a crow. Crows have slightly different coloring in Italy.

The morning sky in Milano was overcast. The sprinkling started shortly after we left Malpensa. A few minutes later came hard rain. However, just before we reached the end of the line, the rain ceased. Would this be an omen for the weather on the trip?

The end of the line is Cadorna station, which is also a stop on the Metro, Milano's subway. It was a little difficult to find the biglietteria, but I managed to do it. I bought us each a ticket, and I figured out where the Metro tracks were and which direction we wanted to go. The third stop was Duomo. So far we had seen nothing spectacular, but we were excited at the prospect of seeing the famous façade of the Duomo as we emerged from the Metro. What a disappointment! The whole façade was covered by scaffolding. The rest of the cathedral, which is fascinating in its own right, was still visible.

We easily found the Hotel Gritti. There were actually signs directing us there. We checked in. Sue collapsed on the bed out of exhaustion and relief. It was now a little after 1 p.m. I went out on two missions. The first was to mail the payment for the opera tickets to the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma. The guy at the desk tried to talk me into taking the check to the Banca di Roma, but I wanted to make sure that the people at the theater knew that the check came from me. So he told me where the post office was. He also gave me an envelope. The second mission was to find a three-pronged Italian adapter for my Radio Shack surge suppressor. The guy at the desk told me that I could probably get an adapter from the electrical repair store about a block away.

I decided to mail the payment first. I really had no choice. In Italy many businesses take a siesta between 1 and 3:30 or so in the afternoon. I had already been warned that the electrical store would be closed from 1:00 until at least 3:30.

I followed the instructions for finding the post office as well as I could. I found a place which had a yellow sign with "Poste" on it. I went in. There was an information desk. The guy told me that I had to buy a stamp at a tabacchi. I don't know exactly what they do at the Poste establishments, but they don't sell stamps or mail letters.

I had to find a tabacchi and then a post box. The first was no problem. There are tabacchi stores on practically every corner throughout Italy, and they have unmistakable white signs adorned with a large T. These places are governmental monopoly stores. They sell tobacco, salt (?), stamps, and, usually, tickets for the bus and subway. The post office, which had mail slots outside, was within sight of the tabacchi at which I bought the stamps. I mailed my payment.

Now to get back to the Duomo. After wasting a few minutes trying to retrace my circuitous route I realized that I was lost. The streets in Milano are very confusing, and I did not have a street map with me. I should have gotten one before I left. The sun was directly overhead. Fortunately I knew that I was only a few blocks from the Piazza del Duomo. My salvation was a sign pointing the way to the Burger King on the corner between the Duomo and the hotel.

When I reached the Piazza del Duomo I still had more than an hour to kill until the electrical store opened. I almost bought something at the BK out of gratitude. Instead I walked around the Duomo admiring the incredible number of statues affixed to the church. I then crossed the street and walked through the Galleria, a shopping mall which features many upscale stores and a McDonald's sporting signs advertising the "Greek Mac." Right in the middle of the Galleria was a car wreck surrounded by guys in black tee shirts – performance art, I guess.

I went back to the hotel and joined Sue napping for a few minutes. Then I went to the electrical store. I explained what I wanted – in Italian (I don't think that he spoke any English at all). He pulled out an adapter. It fit. I bought it for a couple of euros and brought it back to the hotel.

For our first bit of tourism Sue and I decided to take the elevator to the roof of the Duomo to explore it in the late afternoon light. The view was spectacular. I guess that it would have been even better on a perfectly clear day. I had read that one could see the Alps from up there under ideal conditions. We could see all of Milano, and that was impressive enough. The main

attractions are the thousands of statues and spires on the cathedral. It is hard to imagine all of the work that must have gone into making all of these things, many of which are totally invisible from anywhere except the roof. Someone had placed a hat on one gargoyle/drain figures. Sue took a photo of it. In fact, we took a lot of photos.

After we descended back to terra firma we then went through the Galleria. We spent some time in a bookstore. I was surprised to find both a Jack Vance book and a Gene Wolfe book in Italian. Sue bought a book on Italian birds at an off-priced store. We then went by the La Scala opera house, which is closed for renovations. We sat for a few minutes in the shade of Leonardo's statue in Piazza della Scala.

We ate our first cena in Italy at a place called Pizzatito Pastatito. We were the only tourists there. Both of us ordered pizza. Sue really liked hers. Mine was pretty good, but I expected a pizza with anchovies would taste more like anchovies. We both had delicious desserts. We were both dead tired but excited to partake in a different culture.

The stroll back to the hotel was leisurely even though we were eager to test out the electrical adapter which I had just bought. Our highest priority was to get Sue's CPAP machine to work. I, of course, also wanted to use the laptop. We affixed the adapter to the surge suppressor which I had brought from home and plugged the whole unit (without anything plugged into it) into the electrical outlet nearest Sue's side of the bed. The lights went out! Sue got out her tiny flashlight, and – incredibly – she found the circuit breaker. We flipped the switch and tried again. Same result. We tried the plug on my side of the bed. Same result. Would the third time be a charm? We tried a plug on the wall. This time the lights stayed on. We crossed our fingers and tried plugging in Sue's machine. It worked!

Next we tried plugging in the computer's power supply. All the lights went out. Sue checked out the components of the power supply. The unit itself supported 220 volts, but the AC cable only supported 110 volts. If the guy at the electrical place cannot help us locate a replacement cable tomorrow, we will probably be out of luck as far as the computer is concerned.

Sue stayed up to wash out her clothes. I hit the hay at 10 p.m. I was dead to the world in a few seconds. I slept straight through until 3 a.m. Then I was too excited to sleep. In the bathroom I wrote up day 0 in my journal on the blank side of some of my Internet printouts. I fell back asleep at 5 a.m.

The Hotel Gritti is a tolerable place. The room was small. The shower was certain the minimal allowable by law. We couldn't figure out how to use the shutter on the window. The room was not very noisy because the hotel is set back at least 30 yards from a street which is not a main drag. However, the light coming in from the street bothered me. It took me at least five minutes to find the flush mechanism for the toilet. The best thing about the hotel was the staff, who were very helpful to us.

Fashion notes: People in the Duomo area dressed very well, even though many of them rode Vespas (small motorcycles). I surmised that many of them must work in the banks. Every bank in Italy seemed to have a huge office within three blocks of the Duomo. The footwear fashion

for women here was high heels with extremely pointy toes. The men wore dark shirts and suits. Ties were optional.

Day 2 May 13 Thursday Milano - Varenna

I got up at 6:15. Sue got up a little before 7. We were tired, but not as exhausted as we expected to be. We got to colazione in the hotel's basement at around 7:30. They served some mixed fruit, yogurt, toast, rolls, cheese spread, and jam. We had been told to expect very little for breakfast, so this was a little above our expectations. For the first time in years I had some coffee. I took it machiato – with a little milk. It was OK. The waiter served some kind of orange colored drink. Also in attendance were a couple, a lady eating by herself, and a woman who was obviously well known to the waiter.

The plan for the morning was to see Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece "The Last Supper," Il Cenacolo. Our reservation, which I made in Connecticut was for 9:30 a.m.

We took another Metro ride back to the Cardona station. We walked from there to the Santa Maria delle Grazie church. The painting takes up on one of the walls of the former refectory of the church. Unfortunately, my map had the site slightly misplaced. I panicked for a few moments before we found the Piazza. We arrived with about three minutes to spare. They had our reservation. We bought our tickets and the audio guide.

In the waiting room I was surprised to see the lady (the quiet one, not the one who conversed with the waiter) from the hotel. There was also a couple waiting there. One of them – the woman – pulled out a copy of Rick Steves' book on Italy. I couldn't help but wonder if they might be in our tour group. We were joined by about 15 Japanese. Only 25 people are allowed in to see the painting at once, and you can only stay 15 minutes. I think that we were a few people short of 25.

It is very difficult to describe the painting. The first impression is definitely one of disappointment, but the longer that you look at it, the more impressive it becomes. The eye is eventually drawn from one apostle to another as each reacts to Jesus' words that one of them will betray him. You can only wonder what it would have looked like 500 years ago when the colors were fresh and vibrant. During World War II the church, like much of Milano, was bombed. For a considerable period of time the painting was exposed to the elements. It is miraculous that it is still in reasonably good shape.

Il Cenacolo takes up one short wall of a large room. The other short wall contains a painting of the Crucifixion by Donato Montorfano. This painting, which employs traditional fresco techniques, is much brighter than Il Cenacolo, which was done in tempera. One long wall of the refectory was destroyed by bombs and is now white plaster. Much of the other long wall must have also been damaged. It is also mostly white, but it contains four high windows. Il Cenacolo seems very realistic because the light source in the room is the light source for the painting, which appears to extend the refectory itself behind the table of the Last Supper.

Afterwards we sat for a few minutes in the piazza outside the church. Sue tried to get a vendor there to sell her some 20 euro slides for 10 euros. He was insulted by her offer. We considered going into the La Scala Museum, which is temporarily located in a building exactly across the

street from Santa Maria delle Grazie. Instead we decided that a better use of our limited time would be to take the Metro back to the Duomo to visit the interior of the church.

The Duomo is staggeringly huge. The columns that support the massive stone roof that we had walked on the previous day are each about nine feet in diameter (talk about seats with obstructed views). There is a column every 35 feet or so. The inside of the church contains at least ten huge paintings, none which did anything for me, and hundreds of statues. By far the most striking statue (a woman said that it was Santo Bartolomeo) to us was that of a man who was literally skin and bone. He had something (an Internet sight said that it was his own flayed skin) slung over his shoulder. It looked like a bearded head upside down. It blended in with his cloak, which, where it reached the ground, looked just like a third leg. It was a pretty weird thing to see in a church.

The Duomo has many side chapels. One is reserved for the daily masses. In others people pray or light candles. All of this is going on while the tourists mill about the premises looking at statues and paintings. It will be hard for me to get used to the juxtaposition of worship and tourism, but that's the way it is in Italy.

After visiting the Duomo we went back to the electronics store, where we got the expected bad news about the cable. Now I get to face lugging a worthless computer around for three weeks.

We checked out of the hotel at about 11:30. A couple from (I think) Israel was preparing to check in. Sue told them that it was a nice hotel. They were going to examine a room, but on Sue's recommendation they decided on the spot to stay there. If asked I would not have been quite so effusive in praise of the place. We made our way to the train station, Il Centrale. It is very large but not very appetizing. The man selling tickets did not understand me when I said "Due biglietti per Varenna." Maybe he just wanted to make sure that I did not mean Verona or Ravenna. I had to spell my destination out for him. I choked and forgot to use the Italian pronunciation of the letters. Oh, well, at least I got the right tickets. I then had to go to the information office to find out that the next train was at 2:15, one hour and 45 minutes later. So, I found a place to sit and started work on day 1 of this journal while Sue went out snooping in the various shops. Twice my concentration was disrupted by smokers who came up and sat in the vicinity. The mendicant birds were also distracting. I began to get nervous as the time approached 2 o'clock. Finally Sue showed up. She said that she knew where the train was. We lugged our stuff down to binario 7.

We had quite comfortable seats on the train. We deliberately sat on the left – the Lake Como side. Sue took quite a few pictures of the lake. I don't know how well they will come out. I saw the same couple that I had noticed consulting the Rick Steves book at Il Cenacolo board the train. I wonder ...

No one on the train collected our tickets. If I had bought tickets for Verona or Ravenna or even the veranda, it wouldn't have made any difference.

There were two taxis waiting at the train station in Varenna. We had been warned that the hike from the station to the hotel was a pretty long one. Nevertheless we disdained using the taxis

and hoofed it to the hotel. Thank goodness we did not make any wrong turns. By the time that we got to Villa Cipressi I was exhausted, and Sue, who got to pull her wheeled backpack through the narrow streets, was also tired. A lady bearing a large backpack followed us all the way from the station. The couple also got off the train in Varenna. Then we lost track of them. They must have taken a taxi. I wonder ...

We checked in and got our room – number 220 right next to the elevator. The key, like the key at the Hotel Gritti, has a large weight attached to it. In Italy they like you to leave the key at the desk when you leave the hotel rather than carry it around with you. I am not sure why.

At 5:15 we met our tour group. The lady that followed us from the train station is named Paula. She runs a clinic in Seattle. The couple, however, is not in the group. I attached too much significance to their Rick Steves book. It is the best-selling travel book in Italy. I saw dozens of people consulting it over the course of the trip.

The tour group consists of two younger couples, five couples who seem older than us (all of the men have hearing aids), a mother and daughter pair (who ended up missing the trip because the mother fell down and hurt her hip at the Varenna train station), a pair of sisters from Florida, six single women, and us. One lady, Marva from San Diego, seemed very familiar to both Sue and me. We thought that we may have seen her on TV. Several of the other tour members indicated that they had been on other ETBD tours. The first person that we met was Lou Dagen, who poured us a glass of wine. He and his wife Grace are the youngest people in the group.

The leader is named Kat Reno. She has worked for ETBD for five years. Previously she did something in archeology and architecture. Not a lot of information was given out at the meeting. Not a lot of food was given out either. They served finger food and one glass of wine. I snuck in a second glass of wine, and more than my share of hors d'oeuvres. We learned that many of the people had spent a day or two in Varenna before the tour. I am glad that we went to Milano instead.

After the short presentation Kat offered to take us on an orientation walk of Varenna, which has essentially one street and one passarella connected by numerous alleys. The walk ended at the pier, where we noticed a functioning Internet kiosk. We could not use it because we had neglected to get a phone card. Since it was too late to get a card that night, we resolved to purchase one on the morrow.

At the end of the orientation it started to rain. It had been beautiful all day in Milano, and it was lovely in Varenna until about 6. Then ominous clouds descended from the Alps. The wind picked up, and down came the rain. We made it back to our hotel just in time. A few minutes later we were treated to the stunning sight of a severe hail storm. The whole street was literally white with marble-sized hail. A few minutes later, however, it was all over.

It seemed ridiculous to go out to eat, but that was what we did. We went to a small restaurant/bar, whose name I did not note. Sue had pasta fagioli and bruschetta with extra cheese. I had pesto. It was pretty good, but there was too much olive oil for my taste. Mark and Anne Caban from our group were there. Mark was celebrating his 41st birthday. I wished him

“Buon compleanno.” Mark works in the EPA in Colorado. Anne is attending the University of Colorado at Boulder. I think that she said that she was in ethnic studies, whatever that is. She is the only person of Italian ancestry in the group.

The alarm of a car parked on the street went off at about 7 p.m. It was still sounding until the time we got back to the hotel room at 10 p.m. Then, *mirabile dictu*, it stopped. It would have been a long night if we had had to listen to it throughout.

I found a car made just for me. It is a two-seater called a Smart. It looks like a regular compact which has been sawed in two, but they have an ingenious method of allowing a two-color scheme. It is just about exactly as long as it is wide. We saw people park them perpendicularly in parallel parking areas. I want a maize and blue one. Bad.

Day 3 May 14 Wednesday Varenna - Fiumelatte

I slept straight through until well after 6 a.m., which is quite late for me. Sue slept even longer. We stumbled into the breakfast room. About half of our group was there, and no one else was.

We had decided to do a little hiking. Sue and I planned to walk up to the source of the Fiumelatte, a “river” which flows at a 36 degree angle for about 800’ from a hole in the side of the mountain down to Lake Como. It only flows from April through October, but when it flows, it really flows. The stream runs so fast that it appears white all the way down. Fiumelatte means “milk river.” I guess that from a distance it might look vaguely like milk.

The hike to the stream was pleasant and not too difficult. We passed a cemetery which was literally chock-full of monuments and crypts. It was extremely well tended. People were working on graves all day long.

Along the way we took a few scenic photos. We learned later that this was a waste of film. Much better opportunities for shots were yet to come. We came upon a picnic area with a shrine to a guy called “Zio” (uncle) who was evidently largely responsible for making the area accessible to the public.

They have constructed an iron footbridge over the river at a spot where it is ten or 15 feet wide. You can take cool snapshots both up and downstream from the bridge. From there you can climb an iron staircase which allows you to go right to the source of the river, which is a small – maybe 3 feet square – hole in the side of the mountain. The water doesn’t seem to be coming from anywhere. Actually, the hole is the outlet for a large cave which is apparently connected to an underwater reservoir in the mountain. It must freeze in the winter. When the ice melts, all of the overflow comes out as the Fiumelatte. This is all speculation. No one has found the reservoir. There are several bottlenecks that prevent exploration.

We then went up to the Baluardo, which I think might be near another entry to the Fiumelatte cave. I am not sure. What we found there was a strikingly beautiful picnic area surrounded by ten cypress trees. Sue absolutely loved the place. She and I spent some time bird-watching. We saw some raptors which Sue identified as fisher hawks. We heard a cuckoo and lots of other birds of which we could only catch glimpses. On the way down we encountered another couple just outside of a cave which had escaped our notice on the way up.

Sue and I walked back towards Varenna. Just after we met a very unfriendly dog which was, fortunately, on the other side of a fence above the cemetery, we decided to split up. I almost immediately discovered a hotel near there with a 20th century artillery piece in its front yard. I had Sue snap a picture of me next to it. Then she headed back to Varenna, and I hiked up to Castello di Vezio.

I soon ran into the couple whom we had encountered near the Baluardo. They told me that they were from St. Paul. We stayed together a little ways, and then I went on ahead. The path was a little tricky in a couple of places, but I managed to make it to the top. When I got there I

discovered a large group of kids at the “Bar.” I started to walk into the castle. A lady came out of the shed and made it clear that I had to pay to get in. I did, of course.

The views from the castle were spectacular. I took some great shots of Varenna and the lake. The castle employs a falconer with three raptor birds. I guess that he puts on demonstrations, but I didn't get to see one. Inside the tower are a couple of suits of armor from 16th century Italy. On the second floor were about 16 pages of write-ups about various kinds of weaponry, torture equipment, and siege engines. I spent 20 or 30 minutes translating them with the help of my dictionary. Hanging in the middle of the third floor were two weird-looking black metallic things that might have been chastity belts. I took a photo of them.

When I got to the top of the tower I rediscovered the couple from St. Paul. I spent some time quizzing them about the two days that they had spent in Venezia. They went to St. Mark's and Murano. They also visited the Jewish Ghetto and some modern art museums. I was surprised that they had ignored the Palazzo Ducale, which is at the top of my list. They wanted to recommend a restaurant, but they could not think of the name. These people had about five days (she was here on business and was flying to Denmark next) to spend in Italy, and they picked Venezia, Verona, and Varenna as the top spots. Not my choices.

On the way down I had to pass through three groups of children out on field trips. The direct way back to Varenna is very steep. I was surprised that I could not find the trail on which I had come up. I wasn't looking particularly hard. Once I got down to the main road in Varenna I was disoriented. I turned right instead of left. After only a few strides I realized my error. On the long trek to the Villa Cipressi I had to pass a group of slow-walking German tourists who had apparently just arrived at the train station.

Sue and I treated ourselves to a delicious late pranzo at the Victoria Grill. I had spaghetti with sea food (frutti di mare). Sue really enjoyed her salmon-flavored pasta. The grissini were much better than Stella d'Oro breadsticks.

I spent the rest of the afternoon sunbathing and writing in my journal. A young lady named Maria was working on her tan on the gravelly spot that passes for a beach. I made a little camp of my own, did a little translation, and got just enough sun. However, when I started to arise, I felt a horrible cramp in my left thigh. I could not seem to work it out. I could barely manage to get on my shoe and sock. I couldn't even tie my shoe. I doubt that Maria was much impressed with me. Fortunately by the time that I had limped back to the hotel it had worked itself out.

Sue was not in the room, and I was very thirsty. I walked down to the passarella intent on finding a Diet Coke (“Coke Light” here as in Greece and Turkey) and a bench in the sun. I succeeded. I spent some time sitting on the bench translating the bird book and watching le anatre (ducks) near the shore. One female got brave and came up on the passarella. A dog on a leash chased her away. After the dog left, she came back up and strolled around.

I met Sue back at the hotel. We decided to buy some phone cards and then to try to use the Internet terminal at the dock. We bought one local card and one international card for five euros each at the tabacchi. That part was easy. However, when we got to the Internet kiosk, the PC

had a big sign “Guasto” on it. Oh, well. We later learned that the hotel itself had Internet facilities.

Most of the tour group went out to dinner together at a place which Kat recommended. It seemed a little pricey to me. Instead we went to dinner at the Nylus Bar, a place run by a young guy and his English wife. The inside seating was full, and the sky was dark and threatening, so we had to wait for a table. While we were waiting, a duck waddled into the bar. Evidently she did not have a reservation. When they tried to chase her out, she flew into a wall and knocked an unlit candle over. She tried to come in again later, but her effort was sternly rebuffed. I know how she felt.

I ordered a beer and a panino. Sue had a beer and asparagus crepes. We shared chocolate cake (torta al cioccolato) for dessert. On the whole it was pretty good food in a nice friendly atmosphere.

At the hotel we tried to use the international phone card to call the office. You have to punch in about 30 numbers. I couldn't get it to work. Sue tried the local number – as opposed to the 800 number which I had been using. She got through on the first try.

The weather was absolutely perfect all day. Nothing came of all of the dark clouds.

Day 4 May 15 Thursday Varenna – Verona – Seiser Alm / Alpe di Siusi

Hurry, hurry, hurry. The bus leaves at 8:15. Sue was actually up and ready early. She went down the stairs to determine what the drill would be. The stairway near our room in the Villa Cipressi did not lead to the lobby area. It led to a small corridor with doors to the breakfast room and the garden. Sue got stuck. The breakfast room door was locked. So were all of the back doors accessible from the garden. She came back to the room exasperated.

We ate breakfast, and then the whole group assembled in the narrow street. Each of us had to pick a “buddy.” Kat explained that it would be our obligation to check to see if the buddy has made it to each stop. Mine was Grace Dagen. Sue’s buddy was Mark.

In Varenna we pulled my grey canvas bag out of the big IBM bag. We put the computer into it inside of Sue’s CPAC bag. On the bus I stupidly tried to set the grey bag down behind our seat. It fell down the stairs in the back end of the bus. I hoped that the computer survived the fall. We would not be likely to find out for several weeks.

We had a fairly pleasant bus ride to Verona. The first stretch gave us a nice view of Lake Como. We then drove through the towns of Lecco and Bergamo, the birthplace of Donizetti, before stopping for our first break at an Autogrill. Kat told us that these rest stops are run by the Benetton family. They have restrooms in which you are expected to kick in ,50 euros each time. They also have small restaurants and a fairly large shop for buying snacks and miscellaneous stuff. The policy (and maybe the law) is for the bus driver never to drive for more than two hours without a break. The bus has a restroom, but evidently it is very difficult to empty it in Italy.

Verona has some sights, but nothing that seemed overwhelmingly attractive to Sue and me. So we decided to spend our short time there at the elegant sculptured gardens called the Giardini Giusti. I managed to find the way there, and I only went one block out of the way. To get there we went through the Piazza Erbe, so at least we got to see Dante’s statue (both the real one and the guy dressed up to look like a statue) and the tower.

Sue did not appreciate the pace that I set. Well, in my defense, we did not pass anyone in our group, and the people that started out with us were out of sight by the time that we reached the Piazza Erbe. I was afraid that if I made a mistake, we would need time to find the place. At any rate once we crossed the Ponte Nuovo, found the gardens, and paid our entrance fee, we slowed down to a crawl.

The garden was very peaceful. We climbed up to the upper level to try to replicate a picture which we admired in Frommer’s. We stopped and ate a little snack that Sue had pilfered from the breakfast table. We encountered a few couples with babies in carriages and, at the end, a group of teenagers. When we went back down to the lower level of the garden, I walked through the little maze. Since the hedge was only two feet high, it wasn’t much of a challenge.

We walked back at a more leisurely pace across the Adige River and then through the old town to the designated meeting place near the Arena. This time I noticed that most of the names on

the garden's side of the river seemed to refer to places in Pakistan. When we reached the Piazza Bra, we only had time to grab a quick bite to eat. I was sitting on the curb eating my panino when we had our buddy check. Grace looked over my head three or four times before I caught her attention.

On the bus Kat told us that she had attended an opera in the Arena in Verona. Four or five operas are performed there every summer. She passed around the program for Verdi's Nabucco.

Verona was settled in the very early days of the Roman empire. Its 2,000 year-old age is about average by Italian standards.

The highway follows the Adige river from Verona north. The view is pretty interesting. There are 29 castles in the valley. The architecture changes gradually from Italianate to Germanic. The further north that you go, the more dominant the German language becomes. The last few miles before we got to our destination in the Dolomites, Pension Seelhaus, were spectacularly scenic. The bus abandoned the river valley and then snaked its way through the mountains. The huge snow-covered rock named the Schlern (2,564 meters high) dominates the view to the east. The meadows were filled with grass and wildflowers. It was impossible not to think of "The Sound of Music."

Seelhaus is really a ski lodge. It is within 100 yards of a ski lift. The month of May might be its least busy time of year – the skiing season has ended, and the summer vacation season has just started. The accommodations were very nice. Our room even had a balcony from which both the meadow and the valley were easily seen. The owners had a German Shepherd named Rex (II), which seemed very fond of tourists. Many of the people in the group seemed to be extremely taken with the dog.

There was still a little snow in the shady places here. Sue gathered up a handful and dropped it down the back of her "buddy," Mark. He retrieved some of it and threw it back at her. Rex was rooting for an all-out melee, but there was not enough snow for even a skirmish.

Dinner was excellent (and free). The salad bar was magnificent. The soup was very good. The main courses were just OK, but by the time that we got to them the quality was almost irrelevant. Sue and I split up. I sat with Paula, Patty, and Fred and Catherine Johanssen. We had a pleasant conversation. Patty is a nurse in Colorado, and Paula, a former nurse, runs a clinic in Seattle. They have strong opinions on health-related issues. Catherine said that Fred claimed that his kids are older than he is. Fred has a throat problem which makes it difficult for him to project his voice. I guess that he has had this since he was quite young. I told everyone about the duck that kept trying to get into the Nylus Bar in Varenna. Catherine said that she knew a joke about a duck in a bar, but she could not remember the punch line. I made one up.

A duck goes into a bar and orders a scotch. The bartender, knowing how stupid ducks are, brings him his drink and tells him, "That will be \$50." The duck looks at him and then gives him a two tens and a twenty. "You know," the bartender says, "we don't get many ducks in here." The duck replied, "At these prices I'm not surprised."

It did not go over that well. I should have told it in dialect. I can do both Donald and Daffy Duck, and I can manage a passable Irish bartender. Next time.

I was at one end of the table facing west. No one else was seated in that direction. By the end of supper the sun was right in my eyes. Patty came to my rescue with an adept maneuver of the drapes.

Our table split a bottle of white wine. I did not bring any money with me, so I had to go back to the room to get some. I spent five or ten minutes looking for my money belt. I finally found it in a place which I had searched two or three times.

After dinner we all went down to the bar. Kat gave us maps and a briefing on the hiking available the next day. She basically said that the trails were well-marked, and that it was a good idea to stay away from the Schlern. Then we had a round of “diesels,” a horrible drink that makes your entire body feel like fire. We were asked to interview our “buddies” to introduce them to the group. I found out the Grace Dagen was born in San Francisco, moved to Taiwan as a little girl, and then moved back to the U.S. when she was 10. She speaks Taiwanese, Mandarin, English, and Spanish. Wow! She works for the consumer products area of Clorox, where she is a product manager in graphics design.

The bar had a peculiar thing in it. It looked like a box maybe two feet square. Out of the top of it protruded something white which looks like the blunt end of an egg. I never did find out what it was.

The weather was perfect all day.

Day 5 May 16 Friday Seiser Alm / Alpe di Siusi

Hiking day. Breakfast was at 8. Most of us met at 9 to walk up to Compatsch, which is a touristy retail center. Not much was open. Everyone else in the hiking group wanted to take the ski lift up to the Panorama area before hiking. I wanted to hike as much as possible and to go as high as possible. So I set out on my own. I later learned that the ski lifts were not running. The group had to come up with a new plan.

I wore my trail running shoes, shorts, nylon pants, a long-sleeved wicking shirt, a tee shirt, and a nylon jacket. The weather was very nice, but it was cool when the sun went behind a cloud. I had hoped to be able to get down to shorts and a tee shirt. I later doffed the jacket and the pants, but I was never tempted to remove the wicking shirt.

I waved good-bye to the group and headed out on my own. My route had three legs each way. The longest leg was from Compatsch to Saltria. It was up and down through some meadows. I found a ,10 euro piece and a small blue bird's egg in the path. I put the egg in a zipped up pocket of my jacket. I saw groups of cattle and some farm houses in the meadow. It was unbelievably invigorating. I even got a fleeting glimpse of a deer which I surprised when I turned a corner.

At Saltria I almost got lost. The marker for the turn from the road onto trail 7A was weird. The sign pointed toward the Saltner-Schwaige hut, but there did not seem to be a trail. I continued up the road. After about 100 yards I consulted my map, reversed course, and returned to the sign. Like all of the other huts, Saltner-Schwaige seemed closed. I could not find anything that looked like a path, so I just walked alongside the hut and through the meadow behind it. I kept the ski lift in sight on my right. I also kept looking for trail markers, but I never saw any.

Two donkeys and a beautiful brown horse were grazing in the pasture near the hut. The two donkeys brayed at me. The horse must have thought that I had food, because he came over to see me. I was too afraid to try to pet him, but I got a pretty good photo of him. A little farther up I came across a mixed flock of sheep and goats. I got very close to them and took a family photo. Somewhere between the horse and the flock I lost my handkerchief. The fact that I found it on the way back down was evidence that there was no appreciable wind that day.

I walked straight up (and up is the right word) the meadow and never saw the turnoff into the woods a little more than halfway up. My route was shorter but much steeper. Near the end I had to stop to catch my breath several times. I never resorted to this in the Cinque Terre. The snow became a problem, too. I was greatly relieved to find some footprints that I could follow. I soon became amazed at the length of the stride of whatever made them. Pretty soon I realized that the footprints could not have been human. I think that they belonged to a rabbit. While I was engaged in this folly, I was subjected to a constant rain of derision from the cuckoos in the nearby woods.

I was pretty tired by the time that I got to the end of the second leg, Williamshutte. I stopped, sat on the bench, and drank some water. From this point on the views were beyond spectacular.

I easily found the path for the third leg up to Plattkofel-Hutte. I took several photos of the quaint little church in Zallinger before heading up the steep part. The road – I know that it was a road because there were lots of chain-covered tire treads – was adorned with several of the stations of the cross. They were wooden, and each had a little bench next to it. I cannot conceive of an explanation for this. I also was surprised to see some bicycle tracks on the road. As I got higher, the mud was pretty much replaced by snow. The going was steep and pretty difficult, but not as bad as the last 200 yards going up to Williamshutte, and the constantly changing scenery was definitely rewarding.

I felt triumphant when I reached my goal of Plattkofel-Hutte. I had not see a single human from the time that I waved good-bye to the group. However, as I advanced to the far side of the hut, I noticed a guy eating lunch on the only bench in the place. He had a bicycle with him, so he must have made the tracks which I saw. I waved to him, but he gave no indication that he wanted to share his bench, so I respected his privacy.

I took photos from every angle. Plattkofel-Hutte is on a ridge which affords it startling panoramas in all directions. I even took a photo of the thermometer on the door of the hut. It registered 7 degrees centigrade. It felt chilly, but not cold. No one seemed to be at the hut, but the key was in the door. Needless to say, I did not try it.

On the way down I soon found a decent walking stick. I used my pocket knife to remove the spiky edges. Use of the stick made the steep descent a lot easier. I put on my headset and listened to “La nozze di Figaro.” I figured that it was perfectly appropriate in this setting to listen to Italian words put to music by an Austrian. It was great to be able to sing along without worrying about amateur music critics.

Near Williamshutte I found the trail entrance for 7A. When the trail reached the spot where it left the woods and entered into the meadow, it was easy for me to understand how I had missed it on the way up. The marking is not really visible from the meadow at all. I saw no sign of the flock, the horse or the mules in the meadow of Saltner-Schwaige. When I walked down the road from the hut to Saltria I was surprised to see most of the hiking group from our tour sitting at the bus stop waiting for the 2:00 bus. Lou was the only one who was missing. He had decided to walk back about an hour earlier.

The people there assumed that I would take the bus with them, but I had no interest in doing so. I talked with them for a few minutes and then took trail #3 back to Compatsch. The two legs that I had just finished were both downhill. I felt as if I had plenty of energy. However, the path was considerably more difficult than I remembered. What had seemed like small rises and drops on the way to Saltria loomed as serious hills on the way back. There were lots of ups and downs – mostly ups – and it was long. When I got within a half mile or so of Compatsch, I discovered that the previously peaceful meadows were at this point crawling with overweight German (or maybe Austrian) tourists.

The parking lot at Compatsch was littered with tour buses. I found a stand which sold bratwurst. It was run by a German-speaking lady who was also reasonably fluent in English. I had to wait for five minutes for my sandwich, but it was enjoyable to lean against the fence and listen to the

music from her radio. I think that it was from Sibelius' "Finlandia." While I was eating my bratwurst a small group of German tourists asked me – in German – where Marmolada was. (Either that or they were asking about jelly. The only words that I understood were "bitte" and "Marmolada".) I was getting out my map to show them when the bratwurst lady came to my rescue. The expressiveness in her voice when speaking in German was entirely different from her tone when speaking in English.

Grace and Lou came by while I was just finishing the brat. Grace asked me how the sandwich was. I told her that it was pretty good. She said, "Just pretty good or real good?" I said that it was just pretty good. They decided to dine elsewhere.

I made my way back to Pension Seelhaus. I was a little shaky about which path to take, but I didn't make any mistakes. I found Sue sitting out on the deck. She had spent the afternoon moseying around the meadow with Bob and Kathy Woods. I tried to show Sue my egg, but it unfortunately had broken and was now all over the inside of the pocket of my nylon jacket. Kat joined us, and I showed her on the map where I had hiked.

I took a shower and a nap. Sue came in and napped for a few minutes, too. Another meeting of the tour group was scheduled at 6 p.m. in the bar of the Seelhaus.

Kat announced that on the following day we would be making a side trip to Bolzano to visit the museum there which has the mummy of the "ice man" which was found in the Alps a few years back. Then we had to introduce our buddies to the group. I learned that Doug McClain, who seemed pretty taciturn, has three degrees from the University of Michigan. He is a former oceanographer. Somehow Barbara and Ray Stewart had neglected to get buddies, and they never told anyone about it. Kat was aghast to learn this. Ray and Barbara had to introduce each other. Barbara said that Ray was retired and that he was a good artist. Ray said that Barbara was a wonderful person because she put up with him. HmMMMM.

The big news was that Judy Henry had broken her ankle. She fell in the grass quite close to Seelhaus. She was transported to the hospital where she would have to stay for at least five days. Her friend Monica Green agreed to wait for her. That means that our group of 28 is now down to 24. We lost one pair at our first stop before the tour even started and one pair at the second stop in the Alpe di Siusi. It was eerily reminiscent of "Ten Little Indians." One strange result of the latest mishap is that the two sisters from Florida, Pat Collier and Marcene Reiter, suddenly needed buddies. They got paired up with the Stewarts.

We also learned that Lou has a spreadsheet which outlines his tour plans.

Supper was in the same format and quality as the previous evenings. Sue and I sat with Marva and Elaine. Elaine is a social worker in Los Angeles. I think that Marva works at the University of San Diego. Elaine said that she was really looking forward to Venezia. She went on and on about how romantic the gondolas were. Marva finally had to pour a glass of cold water over her head.

Notes: No upper sheets in the Alpe di Siusi. Instead you use a large puff. All the signs here are in both German and Italian. However, I never heard anyone speak Italian or use any of the Italian names. Mussolini evidently came up with all of the Italian names. The people here do not seem to consider themselves Italians.

Kudos is due to my shoes. I was worried about whether these “trail running shoes” would be suitable for fairly strenuous hiking. In fact they turned out to be just perfect. They are impermeable plastic. Not a bit of snow leaked through. They are much lighter than my hiking boots. Furthermore, since they, like all my running shoes, are one size too big, I had no problem whatever with my toes getting jammed into them on the steep descents.

This is the life. I could do this every day. Forward my mail or just throw it away.

Day 6 May 17 Saturday Seiser Alm / Alpe di Siusi – Bolzano - Venezia

I woke up early and caught up on my journal. Kat had warned us (mistakenly as it turned out) that this was probably our last substantial breakfast. Mark and Anne were both sick to their stomachs all day. This promises to be an exceptionally tough day for Anne, who suffers from motion sickness any way. Sue thought that they might have drunk some waste water which some people were calling a “spring.” Incidentally, the tap water in Italy is perfectly drinkable. Even the water in public fountains is usually potable. We saved a small fortune by refilling our water bottles from taps at every opportunity.

I have no idea how Peter maneuvered that bus up and down the steep sharp turns. It would be an extremely harrowing drive for me even in a tiny car.

We drove first to Bolzano to the South Tyrol Museum of Archeology. (If Mussolini were a little less dead, it would be the Alto Adige Museum of Archeology.) There is a little more Italian influence here, but it is still basically an Austrian town with Italian signs. This museum has the mummy of Ötzi, the nickname given to the 5,300 year-old man found in a nearby glacier in 1991. The corpse is distinguished by the fact that one arm is bizarrely stretched tightly across the chest. It also has several tattoos, which were allegedly done for medical reasons. I guess that they did not have high-tech medical treatments like magnetic bracelets and aroma therapy in those days. Much more interesting to me than the mummy itself were the clothes and instruments found with Ötzi. He had a bronze hatchet, some grain, a goatskin loincloth, leggings, boots with bearskin soles, an elegant patchwork tunic, a grass overcoat, and a bearskin hat complete with fur. Sue was very interested in the sewing kit which he carried with him.

The museum was pretty enjoyable. The audio guide was very helpful. I devoted quite a bit of time trying to read the Italian version of the signs on the exhibits. For some reason, however, the museum seemed to make both Sue and me very sleepy. We picked the wrong time to go to the bookstore, which offered comfortable benches. It was overrun with kids.

After we left the museum, Sue asked me to take a photo of her with an old fiddle player stationed outside of the museum. He had previously scolded her for photographing without tipping him. This time she had change, so she made up for it.

Bolzano was in the middle of a “Spekfest” while we were there. Spek is a type of sandwich meat – it’s probably best not to ask. Near our meeting point was a small beer garden with a stage on which an oompah band performed.

The drive from Bolzano to Verona retraced our path down the castle-strewn valley of the Adige River. The drive from Verona to Venezia was uneventful – just highway driving. Nevertheless, Sue and I did not doze on the bus. Our lethargy was evidently limited to the museum. Or we might have just been excited at the prospect of seeing the Queen of the Adriatic.

Kat told us to be careful about our gestures in Italy. She told us that the OK sign made by joining the thumb and forefinger is a sexual insult in this country. This could be a problem. I use this gesture all the time.

After Peter parked the bus, we had to take the vaporetto to our hotel on Dorsoduro. To me this is not a pleasant way to travel. Essentially it is a bus on the water. No one asked us for a ticket. This experience was consistent with one of our two train trips. Public transportation in Italy seems to combine the honor system with random checks. I can't imagine how this can work. We had to change boats once. I am not sure whether we got on the wrong one the first time.

There are, of course, no motorized vehicles in Venezia. So, we had to hoof it to the hotel Domus Cavanis, which fortunately was only two blocks from the vaporetto stop at the Accademia Bridge. We went up to our room and soon discovered that we were back in Italy and out of efficient Austria. We had to disassemble the toilet to get it to flush. Otherwise the room was tolerable. We could definitely tolerate it for two nights.

The orientation walk was basically limited to a quick trip to Piazza San Marco. This essentially involves only one turn, but there are enough small zigs and zags that it seems much more difficult. The first emergence into the piazza was a thrill that was only slightly diminished by the scaffolding in front of the Torre dell'Orologio.

Kat informed us that Mark Twain had called the basilica of San Marco a bulbous insect. From the outside it does resemble one. It has six columns in front and some ill-placed domes on top.

14 of us plus Kat and Peter ate that evening at a restaurant named Agli Artisti, not too far from the Piazza San Marco. I even put on my tie for the occasion. It was the focus of many comments. The meal consisted of salad and pasta con frutti di mare. It was good, but no better than the pasta we enjoyed at lunch in Varenna. However, the wine was free. The tourists sat at a large table in an open-air area of the restaurant. Kat and Peter dined inside. It was a festive occasion.

At 9 p.m. we took a gondola ride. This was pretty good – better than I expected. Kat made the arrangements to hire four boats. One had a tenor named Angelo and an accordion player. We made our way single file through the side canals for a few minutes. Then for ten or 15 minutes our gondolas floated four abreast in the Grand Canal while Angelo sang “O sole mio” and several other Italian songs with which I was not familiar. Our gondolier's name was Livio. I think that he was a rookie. He seemed to speak little or no English. He spoke plenty of Italian, however, to the other gondoliers. I could pick up little bits of it – just enough to get an inkling of the racy stuff that I was missing. The guy who helped us out of the boat demanded a tip. I found this extremely irritating since Kat had made it clear that she had already tipped them.

Sue and I then strolled over to Piazza San Marco and listened to music. Three quintets consisting of two violins, a viola, a piano, and an accordion played in front of competing cafes. Marva attached herself to us, and we definitely enjoyed her company. We eventually procured a table, ordered some expensive so-so Leonardo Chianti, talked, and laughed. Sue and Marva had a great time. I enjoyed the conversation and some of the music, especially “Nessun dorma” and “Eine kleine nachtmusic.” At midnight the bells sounded, and the cafes closed. A lady sitting at a nearby table came up to us and informed us that she had wanted to join our table because “You are having too much fun.” I don't hear this a lot.

Finding our way back to the hotel was a challenge. Both Marva and Sue were certain that we had to go left when we reached Campo Santa Maria. My conviction that we had to keep going straight was based on my reading of the map. Theirs was based on a statue of a fat cat. They mistook the one here for the one in Campo San Sebastian, which was near the bridge. Marva found a guy with long hair and asked him where Accademia was. He led her and – at a distance – us exactly the way that I had proposed.

There are a lot of black guys on the “streets” in Venezia selling handbags. In Milano there were groups of black guys selling all kinds of crap. I noticed that they speak Italian even among themselves. I don’t know whether there is one big group or many small ones. I wonder who they are.

The weather was, of course, perfect.

Day 7 May 18 Sunday Venezia

The day got off to a pretty good start. Breakfast was much better than advertised. We had to walk across the street to the Hotel Belle Arti, the real hotel associated with the Domus Cavanis. The hotel has a breakfast room. Our domus doesn't. Because I made the mistake of reading a sign which was left by a previous ETBD group, Sue and I were 15 minutes late for breakfast. Fortunately there was still plenty to eat, and it was good. We had expected no more than a brioche and coffee, the usual prima colazione for Italians. The lady that manages the breakfast room runs a tight ship. If you plan on using your fingers at some point in the future, do not try to touch her coffee machine.

Sue and I decided to go to the nearby Accademia art gallery first. We used "Mona Winks" as the guidebook for the visit. This seemed to be a pretty good way to do an art museum if you don't know much about art. Information about all of the paintings is readily available in the museum, but it would be pretty difficult to figure out how to get much understanding about what you are looking at. The book, on the other hand, focuses on one or two paintings per room and does a good job of explaining each picture's artistic or historical significance. It was definitely a good idea to both start and end the journey with the boffo Titian called "Presentation of the Virgin."

The museum contains an abundance of paintings by Bellini, Veronese, Titian, and Tintoretto. We noticed one painting which definitely seemed to have used Pee Wee Herman as the model for St. Louis. In fact St. Louis somehow got into an awful lot of these paintings. This was not the French King. He was a Franciscan, I think. I had never heard of him. <Later I tried to research who he was. The only other St. Louis that I could find was St. Louis of Toulouse, who was indeed a Franciscan. However, he died when he was 22, and the only memorable fact about him which I could locate was that he was already a bishop at the age when I was tooling around in college.>

Most of the paintings at the Accademia have a similar theme. At the center is Jesus or Mary or both. Around them are aligned some whacky collection of saints from diverse eras. I guess that the scenes are supposed to happen in heaven.

Sue's favorite painting was Veronese's massive "Feast of the House of Levi." The thing that she liked the best about it was that they let a few protestants into the party.

One of the last major artists who was featured was Tiepolo. His painting mostly hang on ceilings. He was a master of the technique of portraying angels and saints in the sky so that it really looks as if one is viewing celestial activity. I found these really intriguing.

Venezia claims to have a relic of the true cross in the basilica San Marco. One entire room is devoted to various paintings of the supposed miracles attributed to it. In one case the cross fell into the Grand Canal. The cross only allowed one guy to retrieve it.

Another room is filled with paintings by Carpaccio about St. Ursula. The weird thing about these paintings is that some of them contain more than one episode. So the same person –usually St. Ursula or her husband Ereo – can be in the same painting several times.

Afterwards we went back to the hotel to get our day bags. I wanted to visit the Palazzo Ducale. Sue thought she might go to the basilica. We split up. To avoid the lines I went to the Correr museum to buy my ticket. One ticket gets you into four museums. The Palazzo Ducale is the only one to which most people go.

The Palazzo Ducale is a U-shaped building with three stories. The fourth side of the U is the wall of the basilica. The doge lived on the second floor. There were dozens of lavish rooms, which I toured using “Mona Winks” once again. Nearly every wall in nearly every room in the place is covered with paintings, many of which are acknowledged masterpieces. I was particularly interested in the map room. The Adriatic Sea was called the Gulf of Venezia. In some cases the maps seemed quite accurate. In other cases they were wildly fictional.

The doges had short brutal regimes. It is hard to understand how Venezia was able to be so powerful for such a long time. Its only natural resource is water. The people are not naturally bellicose. They supposedly turned out one warship per day at one time. Maybe so, but how could they turn out one crew per day?

The main reason that I went to the palazzo was to see Tintoretto’s “Il paradiso,” the largest oil painting in the world. The huge room, la sala di consiglio, is impressive, but Tintoretto’s painting didn’t overwhelm me. The 501st saint which he added at the end definitely seemed out of place.

One blessing is that there are a good number of benches in the Palazzo Ducale. The place requires a good bit of walking, and it is very tiring. I had a hard time finding my way out. I guess that I was supposed to have checked my backpack at l’entrata. No one said anything to me as I went in, but a lady directed me to the check room as I tried to find l’uscita.

After I left the Palazzo Ducale, I wandered around looking for something to eat that cost less than TSI’s daily rate. I found a place that sold panini, and I bought one. The woman was very surprised when I said that I needed nothing to drink. She pretended to grill my panino. It was ice cold when I opened it less than five minutes later.

I ate my panino and drank from my water bottle in a niche at the bottom of the campanile in Piazza San Marco. It was fairly pleasant to sit there watching the people and the pigeons. I especially enjoyed eavesdropping on the Italian family next to me and watching the pigeons battle their deadly enemies – children. One down side was that at some point in the afternoon I got a significant amount of pigeon shit on both my backpack and my shorts.

After I had had my fill of eating and people-watching, I ambled across the crowded piazza to the Correr museum. This was pretty much a waste of time. There were a few interesting paintings, but by now I had seen so many masterpieces that it was hard to be impressed. They also had a selection of guns and other armaments that was a match for the Palazzo Ducale’s. In retrospect I wish that I had gone into the basilica.

At 5 p.m. I was to meet Sue in front of the basilica. I took a seat on the steps of the basilica to watch for her. She actually showed up at 5:15. I was so sleepy by then that I could scarcely keep my eyes open. We walked back to the hotel and crashed for a while. Then we went out to eat at a restaurant on Dorsoduro called Locanda Montin, which was recommended by Frommer's. The atmosphere was nice – open-air seating in the rear of the restaurant. We had shrimp and arugula as an appetizer. I had spaghetti. Sue had fish. The food was not bad, but it was much too expensive.

Sue went back to Piazza San Marco by herself after supper. When it closed at midnight, she had a very difficult time finding her way back to the Ponte Accademia. She didn't make it back to the hotel until an hour later. By then I had been asleep for three hours.

The weather was perfect again.

You can have Venezia. I found it almost intolerable by day – crowded, dirty, and horribly expensive. At night it is much better, if only because the crowds have dissipated and it is more difficult to see how dirty and dilapidated it is. You can call that romantic if you want.

Our hotel was somewhat difficult to find. There is no name on the door. To get in after 10 p.m. you had to go across the street to the Belle Arti to get the key.

Day 8 May 19 Monday Venezia - Firenze

I woke up at 5 as usual. Sue struggled to get out of bed at 7. We had to be at breakfast at 7:30. I did not want to miss a free meal, so I left without her. I sat with Larry and JoAn Ames. I pigged out – three sandwiches. Sue joined us at about 7:50. After we finished breakfast, we then went and got our luggage. We were the last ones out to the departure assembly at 8:15.

Stephen King might have written the script for what happened on our walk to the vaporetto stop. Our waiter from the previous evening at the Locanda Montin walked silently next to our group most of the way to the vaporetto stop. He then got on the vaporetto with us. The boat was crowded and uncomfortable. He sat near us and read a paper. What made it creepy was that not once but twice I saw him out of the corner of my eye just as I started to talk about our experience at the restaurant. He got off at the same stop that we did, but, thankfully, he did not get on Peter's bus with us.

We had a “lunch break” at an Autogrill. It wasn't even 11 a.m. yet, and I had overindulged at breakfast, so I wasn't hungry, but supper was still eight or nine hours in the offing. I bought some cookies and some water. I went outside and ate a few cookies by myself in the sun. No one else wanted to sit in the sun, and if there is sun, I am there. I saw a guy, presumably a bus or truck driver, who had the most gigantic mustache that I have ever seen. I meant to ask around on the bus if anyone else had noticed him, but I forgot.

Our only other stop was at the Piazzale Michelangelo overlooking Firenze. We were able to view this most photogenic city from the best possible angle. We also all got together for a group photo. Elaine was not there for the photo, but she returned minutes later.

The bus made great time. Our scheduled arrival time in Firenze was 3 p.m., but we made it there before 2 p.m. The pedestrian portion of the journey to the hotel could have been worse. Peter, our Belgian bus driver, let us off within a couple of blocks of the hotel. We then trekked single file up the Borgi Santi Apostoli up to the medieval tower which houses the Hotel Torre Guelfa. The tower is a medieval building with a huge door and an iron gate. I looked, but there does not seem to be a murder hole. It really is a tower, and it affords a striking view of the city from the roof. The hotel is quite unusual in at least one respect. Reception is on the top (occupied) floor. The highest-numbered rooms are on the lower floors in the tower. In fact, the hotel seems upside-down to me.

Many of the rooms were nice, but our room was the best of all. It was enormous. The bathroom was as big as the bedroom in our other hotels. The room also had remote-control air conditioning/heating units. Best of all it had a bathtub with a Jacuzzi!

Our first act in Firenze was to take an orientation walk in the city. We went to the Piazza Signoria and the Duomo. I had to put on my nylon pants to get in to the Duomo. Lou posed an interesting question about who might the figures be in the eight alcoves above Christ in the painting in the cupola. I took out our binoculars and spotted books between each alcove. I thought that the inscriptions in the books, which I could not readily make out from the floor, might identify the figures. I hoped to find out by climbing to the top of the cupola later.

I was somewhat disgusted with the inside of the Duomo. Its primary purpose now seems to be to attract tourists. I wondered if they even held services there any more. It did not seem equipped for it. Most of the other popular churches at least keep up the appearance of a religious purpose.

Kat told us the story about the attempts of the Pazzi family to assassinate Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici inside the Duomo. Giuliano was killed, but Lorenzo escaped. I later learned that this attempt was probably orchestrated by Pope Sixtus IV.

I think that Giotto's bell tower is the most attractive building that we saw in Italy, and I found it to be very nicely complemented by the Duomo with its cupola and new façade and the Battistero.

Sue and a few other people dropped out of the orientation walk after the Duomo. The rest of us went out to San Croce. The church was closed. Its façade is beautiful enough to grace the cover of Rick Steves' book. Kat pointed out two restaurants in the vicinity. She has spent a good deal of time in Firenze.

We then trucked across the river. By now only Paula, Marva, Lou, and Grace remained. We went past all of the jewelry stores on the Ponte Vecchio and then onwards to the Palazzo Pitti. The Palazzo and the grounds were closed. We learned that there are secret passages which connect the Uffizi, which was the offices for the Medici, with the Palazzo Pitti on the other side of the river.

The orientation group disbanded. I sat in the sun for a few minutes nursing the blister on the second toe of my right foot. It was not serious. The sock bunched up, and I did not notice it in time. I also spent some time working on my journal.

Upon my return to the hotel I found Sue in the bathroom soaking her feet. I could hardly believe that she had not taken a nap. When I last saw her a couple of hours previously she was dead on her feet. She insisted that her only problem was that her feet hurt. Soaking helped.

I tried out the Jacuzzi right before supper. These things have always seem to have a very salutary effect on me. Sue said that she could not get it to work. She turned on the jets too soon. It worked fine for me.

We (actually Sue) decided that we should get a drink at the top of the Torre Guelfa's tower. Two glasses of wine and a few peanuts cost us ten euros. Fred and Catherine came up, but they did not spend any money. They told us that for supper they planned to go to the cafeteria which Kat had singled out in the orientation walk as an economical place to eat. I thought that it would be a good place for lunch, but I would want a little more for supper in Firenze, which is justly famous for its food.

Sue and I searched for an open air pizzeria. We found one near the Duomo. Sue ate half of her pizza. I ate all of my calzone. We shared a nondescript "salad" of tomatoes, lettuce, and mozzarella with a smattering of seasoning. The meal was pretty good, and it was cool to eat so close to the Duomo. I especially enjoyed the fact that the waiter did not seem annoyed by my

attempts to order in Italian. He understood what I said and replied in kind. The only real problem with the atmosphere was the noise. Vespas and small busses zoomed past us all evening.

The weather was quite good throughout the day. It was a little hazy, but the temperature was very comfortable.

The air in both Venezia and Firenze is filled with swallows at dusk and dawn. They materialize to feed on the gnats which also appear out of nowhere at those times. The sound of morning in Italy is the cheeping of swallows eating breakfast.

We watched a little TV (pronounced tee voo) here. The quality was, in my opinion, poor. The news recycles every ten minutes. Our favorite shows were two game shows – “Passa Parola” in which participants must guess a word from the first letter and a short clue and a quiz show which seemed similar to “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.”

Day 9 May 20 Tuesday Firenze

Both Sue and I had a great night's sleep. Once again the breakfast was much better than expected. There was plenty to eat.

Most of the group walked up to the Accademia art gallery together. The primary reason to go to this gallery is to see the statue of David by Michelangelo. The rest of the exhibit – except for a couple of paintings by Botticelli – is unexceptional. However, the David is definitely worth the price of admission. It is by far the most awesome statue that I have ever seen. The copy in the Piazza Signoria can't hold a candle to it. The gallery doesn't allow photographs of it, but Sue snuck a couple of shots.

I didn't think much of the other incomplete statues of Michelangelo's. I am not sure what I was supposed to get out of them.

After the visit to the Accademia Sue and I split up. I went to climb the cupola of the Duomo. I was surprised to find people lined up to get into the Duomo – groups on excursions – but no one lined up to climb the cupola.

There were an awful lot of steps. My favorite part was walking along the inside. You can see the massive painting of the last judgment which occupies the entire cupola. This painting, which was begun by Giorgio Vasari and Lorenzo Sabatini and finished by Federico Zuccari and helpers, is not that highly regarded. Nevertheless I enjoyed looking at the tribulations of the people in hell. The devils were eagerly putting flaming torches up the asses of the sinners. They were doing worse things, too. An interesting fact – which I also noticed in San Gimignano – was that the saved were all fully clothed, but the sinners were all naked. I bet that over the centuries the damned have received more attention from altar boys than their celestial counterparts.

Here are the inscriptions of the books on the top row clockwise, starting to the left of Jesus:

| | |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| In Principio | First words of St. John's gospel |
| Fuit in Diebus | First words of St. Luke's gospel |
| Paulus Servus | St. Paul |
| Petrus Aposto | St. Peter |
| Initiu Evangel | St. Matthew? |
| Liber Genera | ? |
| Iacobus Dei Edo | St James |
| Iudas Servus | Judas? |

When I got to the top of the cupola, I found it nearly empty. I was even able to claim a spot on a bench. I foolishly abandoned it after a few minutes to take some photos. I was horrified to discover that there was only one photo remaining in my camera. I took a shot of Giotto's beautiful campanile. It might have also included the Torre Guelfa. I did not pinpoint the hotel's location until later.

The walk down was less pleasant than the ascent. By then the crowd was pretty heavy. In fact the reason that I left was that it had gotten crowded up in the observation area. Prior to that I had

spent 15 or 20 minutes catching up on my journal. By the time that I reached the ground I was quite surprised to see a long line waiting to go up to the top of the cupola.

Firenze is quite crowded and noisy in the daytime. I decided to cross the Ponte Vecchio and to continue until I found a little peace and quiet. I had to go all the way outside the city walls. I walked up the Viale Nicolo Machiavelli perhaps $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile. I found a pair of benches set back from the wide (especially for Firenze) street. A guy who was maybe in his 60's and who wore a tie and a sports coat was sitting on one of the benches. He had a bicycle with him. I sat on the adjoining bench, ate my cookies, and just relaxed. I could not find my pen (again – I had now lost three or four hotel pens), so I could not write in my journal.

As I went back over the Ponte Vecchio I saw the Shimps shopping at one of the many jewelry stores there. Uh oh.

I decided to go over to the Duomo to see if I could find a postcard or some other picture that had the upper ring of the inside of the cupola. I could not find anything that was even close. I then went over to the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. I came close to going in, but in the end I was too cheap. Instead I just browsed in to the museum's bookstore. I found a book with approximately one page describing the painting. It says that the top row consists of "prophets" without identifying who was who. It didn't say anything about the mysterious inscriptions. If the book is right, then the books must refer to something or someone else. <I later read on the Internet that Sabatini painted the "Tabernacle," the innermost circle of the cupola. That is why it looks so different from everything else.>

I then commenced a search for a cheap writing implement. Lots of the souvenir stands sold pens, but they were all three or four euros. A taccagno (cheapskate) like me is not likely to pay that much for things that are give-away items in the U.S. I will have to think of something.

I met Sue and the rest of tour group at the Piazza Signoria. Kat had made a reservation for us at the Uffizi Galleries, which are right off of the piazza. The piazza features a statue of Cosimo De' Medici on a horse and a copy of Michelangelo's David. On one side is the loggia, which would probably be famous anywhere else for its sculpture. Next to the loggia is the courtyard of the Uffizi. It contains statues of various Medici as well as famous Italian artists and authors. There is even a statue of Amerigo Vespucci, the most famous person who never did anything of note. Two people dressed up as statues evidently wanted to be paid to be in photographs, but they were not very convincing.

Sue was there on time! She explained to me how she had gotten the hotel guy at the desk to make reservations for four for 7:30 at the Trattoria Sostanza Troia. Lou and Grace had agreed to join us.

We finally went in to the gallery. Kat warned us that she could not guide here. She did sort of explain a few of the paintings in the first few rooms, but she was going much too fast for us, so Sue and I dropped out of the group. Instead we went through at our own pace, which is somewhere between a snail and a turtle.

The first painting that attracted my attention was by Giotto. That guy was really ahead of his time. <A fresco, allegedly by Giotto, is one of the key elements of the plot of “The Miracles of Santo Fico,” which I read shortly after returning to the U.S.>

It was a little tiring seeing so many steps in the development of the ability to add perspective to paintings. I started to get interested again in Room 8 with Fra Filippo Lippi’s “Madonna and Child with Two Angels.” The faces of the frisky angels were the first interesting ones which I had seen in the gallery.

We spent a good deal of time in the Botticelli room. Most of it was in contemplation of “Allegory of Spring” and “Birth of Venus.” Both of these paintings are much larger than I thought that they would be, and both of them are much less bright that I expected. It takes a few minutes of observation to pick up on everything that is going on in each canvas. I think that these two paintings would be enough to justify the cost of admission. The “Slander” painting is so strange. It makes you wonder what would have been going on in the minds of Botticelli and the other artists during the times of the bonfires of the vanities.

The paintings by Leonardo were impressive in their own way. His unique ability seems to be the power of enhancing beauty by use of subtle mathematical precision. I can hardly believe that I have seen a significant percentage of the extant Leonardo’s in a few short weeks.

We walked through the rest of the museum and got as much out of it as we could. Nothing overwhelmed us until we reached Michelangelo, Raffaello, and Caravaggio. During this time Sue completed her survey of toes in Renaissance art. Her bizarre theory of life is that people with oversized club-like big toes like hers (“This little piggy went to market and bit the heads off of all the other little piggies, and they all went wee-wee-wee-wee all the way home”) are good, and people with long graceful second toes serving as an axis of balance and symmetry thus enhancing both esthetics and functionality, like mine, are somehow evil. She kept careful track of how many saints and sinners fell into each category.

There isn’t much reason to pile more praise onto Michelangelo and Raffaello except to say that the latter’s portrait of the Medici pope Leo X was stunning. This is the guy who had to deal with both Raffaello and Martin Luther. He looked like a really hard case. I wouldn’t have wanted to try to sell him something. <I read on the Internet that he was made a cardinal at the age of 13! He became pope 25 years later. That would explain the confident look.>

A few rooms were closed. I guess that is always the case.

I was very disappointed that the museum had lent out all but one Caravaggio – the shield-like head of Medusa. It was pretty amazing, however. It was hard to take one’s eyes off of hers. I guess that that was the objective.

We saw two stunning paintings of Judith slaying Holofernes. The more famous one is by Artemisia Gentileschi, but I was more impressed with the other one by Palma Il Vecchio. In it you don’t even notice Holofernes at first. He is down in the darkened lower left corner of the painting. The attention is drawn to Judith’s face, which is distractedly turned away from what

her hands are doing – slitting Holofernes' throat. This latter painting has the misfortune to be placed in the same room as Titian's "Venus of Urbino," so very few people notice it. At least very few of the men.

After the walk through the gallery, Sue and I had no energy for anything more strenuous than the walk back to the hotel. We changed our clothes and got ready for dinner. We met up with Lou and Grace. Shortly thereafter we encountered Marva and invited her to dinner with us.

Sue had researched this restaurant, which was a few blocks from the hotel away from the touristy areas. She navigated us quite well within half a block of the restaurant. Then, because there were two contradictory sets of numbers posted for each door, it became confusing. At that point Lou asked a signore who was about to launch his Vespa where the restaurant was. The guy pointed, and we found it. We were 15 minutes early, but for some reason Lou insisted on being seated. This restaurant has two sittings for supper. They are just not equipped to seat people early. The regulars waited outside patiently. Sue, Marva, and I waited in the street. Marva went into an Internet place across the street and sent some e-mail. The proprietor invited me in, too. I said "Dopo la cena." I should have added "forse," because I forgot about it after dinner.

Italians dress for dinner – and just about everything else. Sue wore a skirt. I had on a shirt, tie, and sweater. Marva wore a skirt and a top held up by straps. Lou and Grace had on shorts and tee shirts. The rest of the people in the restaurant – all locals – seemed to be dressed for work in suits and dresses.

Lou ordered four or five antipasti. Grace, Sue, and I had Bistecca Fiorentina. I also ordered a contorno of fagiolini. Marva for some reason ordered boiled chicken. The steaks were absolutely scrumptious. I was surprised that the beans were served cold, but they were very tasty. The antipasti for the most part looked horrible to me. I know that Marva hated her chicken. Nevertheless, I think that everyone had a pretty good time. I for one had a great time dining in a non-tourist setting.

Lou tried to pay the check with a credit card. No dice. He and Grace had almost no cash with them. Fortunately I had enough cash with me in my money belt to cover the whole bill, which was over 140 euros. Everyone paid me back the next day.

Lou and Grace insisted on going straight home after dinner. They are evidently not night people. Neither am I, but Sue, Marva, and I crossed the Arno and walked back on the other side of the river. It is hard for me to understand how Lou and Grace could pass up this opportunity to stroll through a new neighborhood in this charming city. We only went a block or two out of our way. The journey was uneventful but fun.

When we got back to the Torre Guelfa, I used that wonderful Jacuzzi again. I wish that there was some way to have this room every night for the rest of the trip. I doubt that we will see it like again. The Hotel Torre Guelfa was a fabulous place. It was, however, a nuisance to have to go up to the top floor to get your key and to eat breakfast. I wonder why they arranged it this way.

Sue loaned me a Pinocchio pen which she had purchased as a gift in Pisa. It cost 80 p.

Perfect weather again.

Day 10 May 21 Wednesday Firenze – Lucca – Pisa – Vernazza

Travel day. We ate breakfast and then met downstairs to make the treacherous hike through the narrow streets of old Firenze to our pickup point. We had to wait a few minutes in front of the Gianni Versace (not yet open) store until Peter showed up.

The bus made an unscheduled stop for a couple of hours in Lucca. It seemed to be a nice little town and not as touristy as the other places that we have hit. They have the usual cathedral, tower, and squares. Sue and I decided to try something different. We went to the Puccini house, which is not exactly a top destination. Puccini grew up in Lucca. Although he lived mostly in Milano, he returned to Lucca to see his family on a regular basis. Like most opera lovers I will never forget him for leaving *Turandot* unfinished.

It was not a great museum. They had only a few artifacts – medals, letters of commendation from foreign countries, etc. The most interesting ones were the pieces of paper on which Puccini wrote down his thoughts. He smoked cigarettes constantly his entire life until he died – surprise – of lung cancer. The last thing that he wrote was “un po d’orzo.”

Sue and I then split up. I decided to take a lap around the city on top of the city walls. I had enjoyed doing this in Rhodes years ago. However, after I had gotten a few blocks away, I realized that I had walked off with the museum’s typed guide in English. I backtracked to return it to the lady at the front desk. She was very grateful. She explained how to get on the wall, which was really more of a park between two walls. There was an asphalt road up there for biking and skating and in most places a dirt path for running or walking. I walked a little and jogged a little. Jogging with my backpack was not that easy. The view of the city was not as good as in Rhodes, but it was a pleasant experience – quiet, uncrowded, and verdant. It was nice to learn that parts of at least one Italian city are not jam-packed with tourists.

I got off the wall at the cathedral. I did not go inside. <Later on the bus after I had read the write-up in Frommer’s about this church, I regretted the decision.> I was a little short on time. I found a panini shop, bought two sandwiches, and met up with the group at the city gate.

Our second stop was Pisa. We parked our bus and took a very uncomfortable orange city bus into town. I had to stand up and hold on to the lighting fixture.

The tower, the cathedral and the baptistery are surrounded by a very nice lawn. The entire area, however, is fronted on all sides by stands selling all kinds of cheap crap. I decided to pass on the tourist aspect of this experience in favor of the exquisite lawn. I took the obligatory photo of the tower. Then I just lay on the lawn and vegged out for a half hour or so. Barbara Shimp came and lay a few meters from me. She asked me to make sure that she didn’t oversleep, but it was unnecessary. She was up before I was.

On the bus ride back to the parking lot we got to sit down. A group of school children got on our bus at the last minute. Each child had a name tag. I tried to talk with one of them named Silvia, but she seemed shocked into silence when I called her by name.

Because it is not possible to drive the bus into any of the Cinque Terre towns, Peter drove to Levonte, the town just north of the Cinque Terre. We disembarked to take the train into Vernazza. We had about a 45 minute wait, so people used the restroom. At first I didn't feel the call, but then I decided to go. I went up to the urinal and did my thing. I was pretty shocked when first Grace and then Barbara Shimp came out of the stalls. Evidently the ladies' room was out of order. These things happen in Europe.

Finally the train came. Kat purchased the tickets, but she didn't distribute them to us, or maybe she got some kind of group ticket. She told us to indicate to the conductor that our "capogruppo" had the tickets. We never saw a conductor.

Vernazza was the second stop. We all trooped down from the train station to the Hotel Gianni. Then we had to make the climb up several score of stairs to the hotel. I offered to help Sue with her bag, but she would have none of it.

We had to share a bathroom with Kat and another couple, Bob and Kathy Woods. I can't say that I was happy about this arrangement. The room itself was nice enough. You could see the Ligurian Sea from our balcony.

Sue and I decided to have a harborside picnic supper. Sue had purchased some ham, cheese, and Valpolicella at the Autogrill. We walked up to the Co-op Cinque Terre and acquired some tomatoes, chips, and bread. We then had a little picnic on the stone wall down by the water. I had bought a pocket knife at Wal-mart before we left. It had a corkscrew on it. I purchased it expressly for this type of occasion. Sue screwed it all the way into the cork. I tried to pull it out. It wouldn't budge. I had Sue hold the bottle while I pulled as hard as I could. The corkscrew broke off of the knife and remained in the cork. I spent a good 20 minutes struggling to dig the rest of the cork out with my knife's blade. The sandwiches were delicious, and the wine was also quite good especially if you liked the taste of cork.

The best part of the experience was watching the colors of the buildings in Vernazza seem to change ever so slightly minute by minute as the sun set. Each one has a slightly different pastel color, most in a reddish hue. We heard that Vernazza has a committee which controls these colors.

The weather was perfect again. However, in the Cinque Terre the temperature drops precipitously when the sun sets.

I stopped at the Internet Caffè in the early evening. I read and sent e-mail. They charged me one euro. On the way out I saw Kat, Peter, and Marva at the bar. I had a beer and a few laughs with them. I took a picture of the three of them, and Kat took a picture of the three of us with my camera. Sue couldn't believe how late that I was out (about 10). I later deduced that I must have left a pen in the computer room of the Internet Caffè. It was now Pinocchio or nothing.

Our bed was about an inch or two higher in the middle than on the edges. Both Sue and I had to struggle to stay on the bed.

Day 11 May 22 Thursday Vernazza – Cinque Terre

No breakfast in Cinque Terre. Instead Kat credited everyone with four euros per day for two days. I was determined to hike the length of what my “Walks in Italy” book calls the blue trail. It is now just called trail #2. It connects the five towns with four trails of dramatically different difficulty. Since Sue could never make all four legs, our plan was for me to hike the last leg first, then take the train to Riomaggiore to hike the two easy legs with Sue. Then I would do the third leg while she took the train back to Vernazza.

I took off for Monterosso al Mare, the northernmost of the villages in the Cinque Terre, at about 8:15. The trail began with a climb up a fairly large number of steps up to the checkpoint. No one was there to collect my money for using the trail. Within the next half mile or so I encountered a dozen or so local people working either on their gardens or on the trail itself. Then, after I left the vicinity of Vernazza, I did not encounter anyone for the better part of an hour. I spent the time enjoying and photographing the spectacular vistas, smelling the wildflowers, and listening to the birds and the sea. I also admired the terraced farming techniques of the locals. It must be extremely difficult for them to farm on such steep terrain, but they have adapted. I saw lines of steel cable evidently used for transporting equipment and harvested stuff up and down.

I finally ran into a group coming the other direction well after the trail started to descend. They were Germans hiking with ski poles. From that point until I reached Monterosso I encountered group after group of hikers. Most of them were fairly elderly Germans with ski poles. I had to make way while they passed. There were few spots in the trail wide enough to accommodate two-way traffic.

Near the end I confronted a group of roughly 30 school children – maybe ten years old. They were led by a man. I was about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the way down a steep staircase when he started up. I called out, “Aspettate un attimo.” He looked up and then retreated a step so that I could get down. I then waited while the group passed. I overheard one red-faced girl talking to her friend. “Sono stanca,” she said. I said to her “E’ lontana, la cima.” She looked shocked and asked me, “E’ lontana?” I nodded and said, “Sì.” She asked me, “E’ difficile?” I wish that I could have come up with a better answer, but all that I could think to say was “Sì” again. Later, of course, I mentally composed much more elegant and charming replies.

After I completed the descent into Monterosso al Mare, by far the most touristy of the five villages, I wove my way through the open air market – a lot of junk as far as I could tell – and made my way down near the beach. I found a chair near a raised platform, which I used as a table. I consumed the breakfast that Sue prepared for me and nearly emptied my water bottle.

I then decided to try to find the train station. How hard could it be? I was starting at the sea. I reasoned that I would eventually have to come across the tracks if I headed inland. This logic seemed irrefutable to me. I therefore walked all the way through town. The road started to get steep and then curvy. I began to realize that, as hard as it was to believe, I had somehow missed the train tracks. I saw an elderly woman and asked her, “Puo dirmi dov’è la stazione ferroviaria?” She understood me even though I should have used the more polite “potrebbe”

instead of “puo.” She gave me pretty specific directions, which I actually comprehended. Every word! She told me to go into the village. She said that the station was after (“dopo”) the tunnel. So, I turned around and went back into the town looking for the tunnel. No luck. I asked a waiter the same question that I asked the lady. He gave me virtually the same instructions, adding that it was on the right. He pointed me back toward the sea. I finally found the tunnel that the train went through. I don’t know why I did not see it before; perhaps I had already passed it before I started looking. However, I did not see the station.

Fortunately I then spotted Pat Collier and Marcene Reiter, who had just arrived in Monterosso. I asked them where the station was. They told me that I had to go up a road and then **through** a tunnel to find it. Neither of the natives whom I had solicited for help had used the word “attraverso.” They had both said “dopo.” I followed their instructions. Even after the tunnel had been identified, it was a little difficult to find the station. By the time that I actually found it, I had wasted about 30 minutes. I bought my ticket for Riomaggiore. I asked the ticket agent when the train left, and he said, “ora.” I hurried to the sottopassaggio. Just as I reached binario 2, the train arrived. Someone must have been looking out for me.

I boarded the train. The only excitement on the trip to Riomaggiore was when the conductor came around to punch tickets between Corniglia and Manarola. He forced a family wearing NY Jets attire to get off at Manarola. When the train got to Vernazza, I looked for Sue on the platform, but I was on the wrong side. I could only see the heads of tall people. I got off in Riomaggiore. Sue was in the car right behind me. She was surprised when I told her that I was on the same train. I don’t know how she thought that I got from Monterosso to Riomaggiore. There are no flights as far as I know.

Sue and I did a quick up and down tour of Riomaggiore. It seemed like a nice pleasant place. If we came back to Cinque Terre, I might want to stay here rather than in Vernazza. We then mounted the “via d’amore,” the path between Riomaggiore and Manarola. Sue told me that she had purchased a combination pass which covered her admission to the trails. I had to buy a ticket. The trail was almost flat. Much of it was paved. It even had a bar. By this time of day, unfortunately, it was too hot for Sue. We had to stop whenever there was shade. The path contained a long man-made concrete shelter which afforded plenty of shade and a nice view of the sea. The side near the cliff face was covered with graffiti, which spoiled the atmosphere.

In Manarola we found a gelateria which sold panini. We both had a mediocre panino, a beer, and an excellent two-scoop gelato. I liked Manarola well enough. It also seemed more peaceful than Vernazza or Monterosso.

The walk from Manarola to the Corniglia train station was only a little more difficult than the via d’amore. The views were a little better. By the time that we arrived at the station, Sue was pretty well spent, and I was tired of having to stop every five minutes. So I filled my water bottle from the tap at the WC and headed for Vernazza on foot by myself. I later discovered that Sue had used her pass to take the bus up to Corniglia. I walked up the same road that the bus takes. Unlike the other four towns Corniglia is set high above the water. The climb to reach it from the train station is somewhat imposing. I did not explore Corniglia at all. The road comes

in above the town and intersects the path quite a ways from the center of the village. If I had taken the stairs up instead of the road, I would have had to hike through town.

The trail to Vernazza was very crowded. Since the going was pretty steep, and the weather was pretty warm, most of the people were going at a moderate (at best) pace. I suspect that many eventually gave up and turned around. At any rate I easily passed more than 100 of them on the way up. Most of the way there was little to see on this leg of the trail other than thick brush and a few hillside gardens. There were, however, five or six great photo ops of Corniglia and Vernazza. I stopped and snapped pictures each time. Near the end I passed a family of Italians. I could piece together enough of what they were saying to know that they were making fun of Germans.

I arrived in Vernazza at 3:35. I hiked up to the room, but it was locked, and no one had seen Sue, who had the key. I killed some time by getting a little sun. At one point while I was sitting near the harbor the wife of an Italian man pointed out to him that there was a string hanging off of his shoe. He tried to tear it off with his hand, but he couldn't. I reached into my backpack to offer him use of my pocket knife, but by the time I found it, they had both moved on.

The only thing that I accomplished in this period was to retrieve some of my clothes which I had hung from our window to dry. They had fallen into the courtyard outside of the hotel. I would have written in my journal, but I didn't have a pen. It is probably just as well because my mood wasn't too pleasant after about an hour.

Sue finally showed up at 4:55. I got the key and went up and took a shower. While I was in the shower stall, however, the lights went off. I reached outside the shower and waved my hand around. The light came back on. We had been warned that the bathroom had a motion detector (in Vernazza!).

The whole tour group went out to dinner together at the restaurant associated with the hotel – pesto on tortellini, salad with egg and tuna, and a cake dessert with a dessert wine. The food was pretty good, and everyone seemed to have a good time. Sue was about 15 minutes late for supper, but I covered for her.

The low point for me was when the waiter did not understand what I meant when I said “metà,” which means half. I picked up a liter bottle of wine and made a cutting motion on it. He nodded immediately and brought us half a liter.

After dinner Sue went to the bar with Peter, Kat, and Marva. I went upstairs, packed, and went to bed.

One disappointment with the Cinque Terre: I love pesto. I was hoping to sample the offerings in several of the villages, but I didn't get the chance. If I come here again, I will try some pesto in other villages. I would also like to attempt some of the more difficult trails.

Near disasters: (1) Sue left her sandals in Firenze. She called the Hotel Torre Guelfa. They assured her that they would put them with Kat's laundry, which is being brought to Siena. (2) I

could not find my wallet just before supper. I was really upset about it because I was positive that I had not taken it out during my hike or during my wait for Sue. I finally found it in my IBM bag inside a folded shirt. I had searched the bag twice previously.

Day 12 May 23 Friday Vernazza – San Gimignano - Siena

This day started calmly enough. I wanted to get in and out of our shared bathroom before the competition from the Woods' and Kat. Consequently I went in to shave at 5:50. When I had scraped the shaving cream off of half of my face, the lights went out. I started doing the Freddy to try and get the attention of the motion detector. It didn't work this time. I gave up, opened the door, and shaved in the dim light coming from the hallway.

I went back to the room and discovered that it was dark in there, too. Sue had evidently blown the circuit when she unplugged the CPAP machine. The mishap affected not just our room but the whole hotel. The whole group had to get dressed in the dark. Some people had to shower and/or shave in the dark with cold water.

Sue and I packed all our gear and toted it down to the street and then uphill past the train station to a Sicilian bakery/coffee shop which Elaine had discovered the previous day. Practically everyone in our group was there. The cappuccino was very good. Sue was disappointed that they had sold the last of her favorite pastry before we arrived.

We all got to the train station early enough to catch the 7:32 train, which was late. Peter then drove us to San Gimignano, a hill town with 14 towers (of the original 72). Along the way we passed the marble works at Carrara. I twice spotted ostriches in ranches near the highway. I never suspected that I would see ostriches in Italy.

In San Gimignano Sue and I spent a good bit of time in the main church, which is a "collegiale." It was a cathedral for a short period of time, but San Gimignano lost its bishop some time back. The church was very nice. There were frescoes on both of the long walls depicting bible stories of the old and new testaments. The frescoes were all done by Simone Martini or his assistants. This gives the church an artistic and thematic coherence which is lacking in the better-known cathedrals. We had fun trying to decipher the Latin inscriptions. There was also a large fresco of the martyrdom of San Sebastian by Benozzo Gozzoli and a perverse one by Taddeo di Bantolo depicting life in hell.

The part of the church which impressed me most was the chapel of Santa Fina. It contains two beautiful frescos by Ghirlandaio as well as the rather eerie reliquary, which features a bust of Santa Fina.

I am not sure that I have Santa Fina's story completely right, but it is something like this. Fina was an adolescent living in San Gimignano. She did something (or maybe she only thought about doing something) wrong which somehow involved oranges, I think. She was apparently reprimanded. She was then so mortified that she went into a coma for five years before St. Anthony called her to heaven at age 15. A pope was somehow involved in this, too.

After the visit to the church Sue and I grabbed some pizza (by far the worst pizza which I had in Italy, but one would not complain about it in the States) and had lunch in the alcove across the piazza from the church. We speculated that this may have been the baptistery at one time. A

sign there advertised that the 750th anniversary of Santa Fina's death would be celebrated on the upcoming Sunday.

At this point we split up. Sue took our bird book and went to the Ornithological Museum to look at stuffed birds. I tried to walk the city walls. I had heard that this was possible, but I think that the information was erroneous. Neither of us had a memorable time. I bought a couple of postcards, one of which depicted our luncheon spot. I took a wrong turn outside of the gates and was almost late getting to the group's meeting point in front of the Co-op.

The rest of the drive to Siena was uneventful. We stopped once to get a panoramic view of Siena. I did not waste a photo on it.

We cruised into town about 4. We walked from the bus past a McDonald's to the Cannon D'Oro Hotel. This is the second hotel in Italy in which I have noticed an artillery piece near the entrance, although this one is definitely just for show. I bet that the Torre Guelfa had artillery at one time also.

Kat forgot to tell us when the orientation walk would take place. Sue decided that she did not want to come any way. She doesn't like the brisk pace of the walks. After we finally got everyone together at about 5, we walked together down Banchi di Sopra to Il Campo, the central piazza in Siena. It is a large square with buildings on all sides. It slopes gently down to the city hall, making a natural amphitheater. It is my favorite urban spot in all of Italy. I really enjoyed just hanging out there. U.S. cities should have piazzas.

I then walked to the Duomo. I ventured inside for just a few minutes before they kicked everyone out for the service. The Duomo features busts of 172 popes. I searched out and found Pope Formosus and his nemesis, Stephen VI. I also looked for John XII, the teen-aged pope, Alexander VI, the notorious Borgia pope, and Sixtus IV, but I could not find them. It is difficult to see the busts that are near the altar because that section of the cathedral is roped off. I vowed to return to look at the rest of the artwork in the church. Both Doug McClain and I had only been in the Duomo about ten minutes when they threw us out. It was just as well. I did not have any of my books, so I did not know what I was looking at.

The Duomo in Siena is high tech. The turnstiles at the entrance and exit feed a computer which posts on a video display near the entrance how many people are currently in the cathedral.

The big news of the day was that Andrea Bocelli would definitely be giving a free concert in Il Campo, which is just a few blocks from our hotel, on Saturday at 9:30. The setup for it was in progress when the orientation walk I got back to Il Campo. I lingered a few minutes, but they were showing a mindless video of extreme bicycling and playing some awful music while I was there, so I went back to the hotel. Dirty clothes called me.

When I got back to the room I found Sue in bed. She was completely devoid of energy. I decided to do laundry in the sink. I asked Sue where the detergent was and got no response. I ended up washing everything except what I had on using the hand soap.

I found a hotel pen in my black nylon pants, so I was able to return the Pinocchio pen to Sue before it joined all of the other pens which I brought.

I fell asleep at about 7:45. Sue and I had talked about going out to eat, but we never did. I woke up about 11, ate my remaining cookies, changed clothes, and went back to sleep. I don't think that Sue ever budged until morning.

Day 13 May 24 Saturday Siena

Sue and I both woke up feeling better. We went into breakfast at 7:30. There we learned that Andrea Bocelli had shown up at Il Campo on the previous evening to rehearse. He and a baritone had sung several songs. Several members of our group – Kat, Elaine, Peter, and Bob and Kathy Woods got to see and hear them close up. I grilled Elaine about what they sang, but “something from Carmen” was the best that I could get out of her.

Sue and I did not have much planned for the day at all. We wanted to see Siena’s Duomo and go to the concert at 9 p.m. That was about it. After breakfast, therefore, we walked down to the Duomo, which is famous for its zebra-striped (except the stripes are horizontal) marble motif. They wouldn’t let us in. So we walked all the way back to the hotel to make a pit stop. En route we ran into Larry and JoAn Ames. They recommended a fruit store. We planned just to see the Duomo and the Piccolomini Museum in the morning, have a nice lunch, relax in the afternoon, and have a picnic at the Campo before the concert.

There were over 900 people in the Duomo when we got there the second (third for me) time. It was difficult to see too much at first. They keep the church pretty dark. In order to see something clearly, e.g., the pulpit, you have to put 50 p in the box to turn on the lights. As tight-fisted Yankees we naturally stood near an attraction until a free-spending tour group approached. The guide always sprang for the 50 p.

One of the big attractions of the Duomo is the floor, which consists of inlaid mosaic tiles. They used alternating black and white marble tiles perhaps ½” square. Many of the works were covered up with cardboard so that people would not damage them by walking on them. The most intriguing uncovered one was called “The Slaughter of the Innocents.” Several mosaics in the floor outside the church used a different technique. Holes punched in the white marble outlined figures there.

We spent some time in the Duomo’s Bernini Chapel. It contains two of Bernini’s statues – one of Mary Magdalene and one of St. Lawrence playing a cross as if it were a musical instrument. They were both very impressive. <I later read that Bernini’s technique was decidedly different from Michelangelo’s. Bernini was much more intuitive. He would evidently start with only a sketchy plan. He often changed his mind halfway through a piece.>

We went into the Chapel of St. John. It contains a statue of John the Baptist by Donatello. It also contains a reliquary box which supposedly holds the arm of John the Baptist. You can see the box but not the arm. I have difficulty taking these relics too seriously. Right before the trip I finished Umberto Eco’s “Baudolino,” in which one of the characters made his fortune by manufacturing heads of John the Baptist and then selling them to churches at widely dispersed locations.

I went back to looking at the busts of the popes. I found John XII. After I thought about it, I wasn’t so sure that he was the teenaged pope. He certainly didn’t look like it. <I later looked it up and discovered that John XII was indeed pope while he was 18-27 or maybe even 16-25. People are not sure of his date of birth.> I looked again for Alexander VI and Sixtus IV, but I

think that perhaps the exhibit did not include busts of popes from later eras. It is also possible that they are down in the roped off areas. Even with binoculars I could not make out the inscriptions on the busts back in the corner.

By the time that I had had my fill of looking at the popes, the population in the church had decreased by at least half. It was nearly as pleasant as it had been the previous evening. Sue and I decided to go into the Piccolomini “Library.” How could we pass it up? We had learned an audience-participation song years ago from a 5’12” songstress friend of ours who performed in bars for a living. The song had only one word, “Piccolomini.” Until this trip we had no idea to what it referred.

Pope Pius III and his brother commissioned the library as a tribute to their uncle Pope Pius II. All three were named Piccolomini. Once again we had fun trying to translate the Latin inscriptions beneath the frescoes depicting the major events of the life of Pope Pius II. His big accomplishment seems to have been the arranged marriage of nobles from two of the most powerful Christian families. The idea was to unite the forces of Aragon and the Germans through matrimony to create a united Christian front. He later called for a crusade. When he could not get the Holy Roman Emperor or anyone else to respond, he tried to lead it himself. However, he died just as the Venetians arrived with their fleet to support his army.

We bought a book which explained in considerable detail the happenings in the paintings. In some of them the artist took great liberties. For example, he sometimes shows the wrong pope in critical scenes. The book also explains all about the huge illuminated choir books on display here. They are the only books that this “library” has to justify its name.

We longed for a good lunch. We picked a small restaurant named Il Capitano on the other side of the Duomo. It had some interesting artwork inside – portions of the red image of its namesake the captain on a horse. We both had panforte for dessert. The only other couple in our section of the restaurant was conversing in readily audible English. He seemed to be trying to impress her with his credentials in the show business industry.

After lunch we walked back to the hotel and rested. We were not certain how early we needed to get to Il Campo in order to insure a good position. I wanted to be in the middle. I decided on 6:30. The right answer was 8:00 or even a little later. Evidently old Andre is not the draw he once was.

On the way to Il Campo we stopped by the market recommended by the Ames’. Sue picked up some weird pork stuff, some wicked-tasting risotto, alcune fragole fresche, and some bread. We already had some ham (cotto, not crudo) and cheese. We walked to Il Campo and staked out a spot right next to the fountain. This was as close to the middle as one could get, and we would only have people on three sides of us. As it was, we had Germans (four plus an incredibly well-behaved dog), Japanese, and English neighbors. The Germans and the Japanese smoked, but they weren’t obnoxious about it. All in all, it was a pleasant international scene.

We were smart enough to bring blankets to sit on. Others pressed used pizza boxes into service as makeshift cushions. Even with blankets the stone floor of Il Campo felt pretty hard after over five hours of sitting.

No one from our group was there when we arrived, but a few minutes later the Stewarts set up camp perhaps 20 yards to the right of where we were sitting. They were joined by Paula and Grace, who had been abandoned by her husband in favor of the new Matrix movie dubbed in Italian.

We had our picnic and played a rather boring game of backgammon. I won, but just barely. Simply sitting there and soaking in the atmosphere was enough to keep us happy until the orchestra and the singers came out and rehearsed between 7 and 8. Andrea Bocelli had his son Matteo with him. For a while Andre held Matteo in his arms. When Andrea sang a duet, Matteo, who must be at least 6 or 7, rode his dad's back. This part was great.

The other singers were Soo Kyungh Ahn (baritone), Maria Luigia Borsi (soprano), and Lucia Dessanti (soprano). The orchestra, which was from Pisa, was conducted by Marcello Rota. There was also a solo violinist named Ruth Rogers.

In addition to the abundant free seating at Il Compo, you could buy a reserved chair up front for 100, 200, or 300 euros. Peter and Kat bought tickets.

Behind the stage was a large screen on which they projected images, mostly close-ups of the soloists. It enhanced the experience, at least a little.

Four numbers from Puccini's *La boheme* were featured – “O soave fanciulla,” “O Mimi,” Musetta's waltz from the second act, and the quartet from the end of the third act. Ahn's performance of “Largo al factotum” from Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, was for me the highlight of the evening, at least until the encores. The orchestra started with the overture from *Nabucco*. They also played the overture from *Carmen*, the intermezzo from Massenet's *Thais*, and one piece which I did not recognize. The soloists sang a lot of other opera songs and a few pop songs which I did not recognize. I did recognize “Sorrento,” which Bocelli sang near the end.

Toward the end of the concert a very strange thing happened. Air horns (very loud) could be heard every so often from various directions. Then in the corners of the Campo one could see huge black and white checked flags being waved enthusiastically back and forth. We did not know what to make of these things. The show went on.

The first encore was “O sole mio.” Ahn sang the first verse. Bocelli sang the second. Everyone joined in for the chorus. It was great.

Everyone came out for the second encore, too. They sang the famous il brindisi (“Libiam...”) from *La traviata*. Then Andrea Bocelli finally sang “Con te partirò.” It probably would have been a truly magic moment if not for the air horns, which by this time came from all directions and at increasing frequency.

The end of the concert was a mad scene. Thousands of concert-goers tried to evacuate Il Campo through the handful of narrow exits. An equal or greater number of juiced up soccer fans struggled to get through the same small portals to get into Il Campo. We managed to mimic salmons and fight our way up to the Banchi di Sopra, which was now full of people regaled in black and white. We were overwhelmed by the roar of Vespas and car engines. We later discovered that A.G. Siena, the soccer (calcio) team, had won or maybe tied its final game. By doing so it was guaranteed promotion to the A division. This was the first time since 1906 that the team has made it to the A division, and the fans were rabidly enthusiastic. Their shirts proclaimed "Finalmente in A." Practically everyone had an air horn or a black and white flag. A few may have already had a drink or two. Who could blame them. Not even the Red Sox have had that long of a dry spell. Could this be their year, too? Naaaaaah.

The celebration continued until 3 in the morning. Sue watched the televised coverage of the concert and the soccer in the hotel room. I hit the hay at midnight and slept right through it.

Day 14 May 25 Sunday Siena – Assisi – Civita - Umbria

I was stunned to learn at breakfast that a few members of our group had left the concert early. On the one hand that meant that they had missed the air horns, the flags, and the horrible shoving match trying to return to the hotel. However, they also missed the most thrilling part of the show. How anyone could leave an Andrea Bocelli concert before hearing “Con te partirò” is beyond me.

Siena was fun, but it was a madhouse. It is a combination university town and tourist town. Unlike Venezia and Firenze, the tourist areas of Siena are heavily used by the local populace. I noticed that just about everything in Siena was more expensive than in the other locations that we have visited except perhaps Venezia, where I was terrified even to look at prices.

Things are looking up. I have not lost a pen in several days.

I told Kat that I had a copy (actually two versions) of “Con te partirò” on CD with me, and that she could use it for departure music on the bus if she wanted. She already had a good plan, however.

I really enjoyed the video that Kat played on the bus. It explained Il Palio, a horse race which is held twice a year in Siena. Ten of the 17 contrade are represented by horses and bareback riders in a wild no-holds-barred race three times around Il Campio. Even after spending hours in Il Campio I could not envision what a horse race in this stone-covered piazza in the middle of the city might be like. The video helped immensely.

Our first stop was at the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli just outside of Assisi. This is where St. Francis and his men lived and worked in the 13th century. While we were visiting, quite a few Franciscan monks were in the church. I guess that this would be fascinating to the people in our group who may have never seen a monk before, but my uncle was a Benedictine, so it did not mean much to me. Near the church there is a rose garden in which the roses have no thorns. Legend has it that the roses divested themselves of thorns to keep from pricking St. Francis.

Next we drove up to Assisi, my least favorite stop on the entire trip. The town is very steep. It is a long walk from the gate to the Duomo of San Francesco, and the return trip is uphill. The town seemed to be crowded with pilgrims. Maybe the fact that it was a Sunday made it worse.

We walked to the Duomo. Along the way we encountered Doug McClain. He was looking for his wife. We told him that we had not seen her. A little later we came across Ginny McClain sitting on a bench. We told her that Doug was looking for her. She said, “Isn’t he sweet?” A little later Sweetie showed up.

By the time that we reached the Duomo Sue was completely wiped out by the heat. Her knee was also swelling up on her. The heat, the pain, and the exhaustion left her severely down in the dumps. By now we were both tired of dealing with groups of tourists, and the ones here seemed the pushiest. We tried to get into the upper basilica, but there was a mass going on. We went down to the lower basilica. There is a large piazza just outside of it. At that time Sue was

desperate for shade and a place to sit. We found a little of both on the edges of the piazza, but the benches were pretty much full. Sue finally found a place where she could at least get some air.

We had come this far. I wanted at least to visit the lower basilica. Sue by now had lost all interest, so I went in by myself. There I saw Francis' paten and chalice, his hair shirt, and his tunic. I also saw his tomb, which is, to all appearances, just a big rock.

Both Santa Maria degli Angeli and the basilica were free, but there were plenty of places to make offerings. Hordes of nuns and monks were hanging around both places. They still look like nuns and monks in Italy. Others may have been undercover for all that I know.

After my disappointing visit to the basilica, I went looking for Sue. At first I could not locate her. I found a seat and almost immediately spotted her across the piazza. She was pretty much unmistakable in her red overalls. This look has not yet caught on among Franciscan pilgrims.

We walked a few blocks toward the gate looking for a shady spot to eat our picnic lunch. The best we could find was a park bench overlooking the parking lot of still another church. A couple had just gotten married. Two Assisians shared our bench. I could understand enough of what they were saying to know that they were gossiping about various members of the wedding party.

After lunch we struggled to make our way back to the gate to the city. It seemed as if we had to go up and up and up and up. Sue was convinced that I was disoriented. The names on the street signs did not seem to match any of the names on the map. I was pretty sure that we had been consistently going in the right direction, but even so I was wondering where we might be – Assisi is just not that big. Finally we staggered into the Piazza Communale. We had made no wrong turns at all. Assisi is just that steep.

Sue bought a gelato and settled into a shaded spot at a caffè in the piazza. I shared a little of her treat. We then walked down (thank goodness) to the Porta Nuova to join the group. No one in the group seemed that enthralled with Assisi, but Sue was totally disgusted – but not for long.

We then made an unscheduled stop in the bizarre town of Civita, which is the oldest portion of what is now called Bagnoregio. Sue decided to sit this one out. They don't allow anyone to stay in the bus, so she found a place where she could lie down with her feet up. Raising her feet always seems to help.

Only about half of the group went to Civita, but I decided to go. It was a fairly long walk. The first part was downhill, but the part leading up to Civita was decidedly uphill. There was a bus that would have eliminated the downhill half of this walk, but for some reason we decided not to take it. The only way to get the rest of the way is via a pedestrian bridge.

I can't say that I thought much of Civita. It seemed to me mainly just old, although I must say that I was extremely pleased to find that the snack shop carried potato chips, which are not that common in Italy. Only a dozen or two people actually live in Civita. The views of the

surrounding countryside are excellent, but by now we had seen so many stunning views that scenery alone had ceased to be a reason for going out of our way.

The parts of Civita that I found the most interesting were the caves which were reachable at the far end of town. I saw a chicken coop with a pair of roosters in one cave. In another was an abandoned motorcycle.

I did not go into the church. This seemed like a real church, not just a tourist attraction. I thought that it would be disrespectful to go in wearing shorts, and I did not feel like putting on the nylon pants in my backpack. I did not go into the private gardens either. I understand that the owners are friendly, but they expect to be tipped. This approach leaves me cold. Don't ask me why.

When I got back to the bus, Sue told me that she had been resting in the vicinity of some Bagnoregian men playing a serious game of cards. They snapped their cards down furiously. Sue said that she thought that they viewed her presence with suspicion.

I never did find out for sure how to pronounce "Civita." It is probably derived from the Latin word civitas, which I think would be accented on the first syllable. Kat puts the accent on the second syllable. On the other hand, just about every Italian word that ends in "ita" is accented on the last syllable.

The bus transported us the short distance from Civita to our agriturismo hangout in Umbria, called Le Casette. It is near the towns of Baschi and Montecchio. Everyone seemed thrilled with the spacious rural setting – a welcome relief from our recent experiences. Someone spotted a herd of cattle grazing on the side of the hill just on the other side of the fence from us. All of the cows were horned. Most of them were white, or maybe light grey. I took a few photos of their placid grazing.

The farm also offers a swimming pool, a tennis court/soccer field of artificial turf, and a bocce court. Sue wasted no time taking off her shoes to feel the cool grass on her feet.

We ate dinner together at the Le Casette dining room. The meal was quite good. We were served bruschetta, an excellent pasta, some pork ribs (great) and beef slices (fair), salad, dessert, and wine. I had seconds on pasta. We sat with Elaine, the McClains, and the ladies from Florida, whom I was horrified to learn attended Ohio State. Lazaro, the patriarch of the establishment treated everyone to a glass of his delicious "fortified" wine. He also posed with several of the ladies, especially Marva.

Kat announced that we would have a wine and cheese tasting party at 4 on the following afternoon. She also set it up so that the people who did not want to go to Orvieto could get a sandwich for lunch. I agreed to buy wine and cheese and other stuff on behalf of Marcene and Pat. Ugh. Tonto take-um Scout into town and buy-um supplies.

The weather was right to my tastes again. Needless to say, it was too hot for Sue.

Day 15 May 26 Monday Umbria - Orvieto

The weather today was not quite perfect. It was a little cloudy all morning, and I actually felt sprinkles for five or ten seconds a few times during the day. I couldn't help but feel betrayed by the gods.

Sue and I were careful to keep the screens and the door in our room shut. Nevertheless, as soon as I had rubbed the sleep from my eyes, I discovered that I had been sharing my bed with a black moth with a two-inch wingspan. I took Mothra between my fingers and reintroduced her to greater Umbria.

I had sufficient energy to run five or six miles before breakfast. On the driveway from the road to Le Casette I was surprised to see Mark out before 6 a.m. inspecting the olives on the trees there. We exchanged pleasantries.

I wore my headphones and listened to my CD of Italian songs while I was running. The road followed a ridge, thereby affording me excellent views on both sides. I selected an excellent route. It was almost impossible to get lost, and it was not as hilly as I feared. I saw a couple of lethargic dogs, some horses, and several agricoltori getting an early start on their chores. What a great way to start the day!

Incidentally the dogs in Italy seemed to me uncommonly lazy. Not counting Rex, who is actually an industrious Austrian, I can only recall one dog out of the dozens which I saw which moved with any sense of purpose.

We went in to the dining room for breakfast – coffee, juice, cereal, and some kind of bread or cake. I set down my cereal bowl and reached for a box of orange juice. A few seconds later my bowl crashed to the floor. I picked it up as well as I could. A little later I dropped one of the pieces. A few people gave me a hard time about having “the dropsies.” I did not think that I had knocked the bowl off in the first place, and two ladies told me that they saw someone else accidentally hit it. I certainly set it too close to the edge of the table. Oh, well.

After breakfast 11 hearty souls (including myself) went to Orvieto, the city on a sheer cliff which I had read about on the journey to Italy. The other 13 (including Sue) stayed back at the ranch.

It was a short drive to Orvieto. I was a little disappointed that there was no good place to get a good photo of the town from a distance. It has a striking profile. Peter parked the bus, and then we all took the funicular railroad up to the town. The funicular has two cars, one at the top and one at the bottom. When the one on top comes down, it pulls up the one at the bottom. So it uses very little electricity. There is also a road that you can somehow drive to get to the top. I was somewhat surprised to see quite a few cars up there. The drive up must be really exciting.

As usual we started with an orientation walk, which ended at the Duomo. The main attraction of the cathedral in Orvieto is the façade, which is widely considered the most beautiful in all of Christendom. Unfortunately the middle half of the façade was covered by scaffolding. Che peccato!

After the orientation walk I visited the nearby WC. I went inside a stall and did my business. There was a bidet and a toilet paper container. When I finished, I looked in the TP container. Empty. I cleaned myself up as well as I could, but it was still disgusting.

I then visited the ufficio d'informazioni turistiche. The lady there gave me a map and showed me the location of an Internet caffè. The other side of the office sold tickets to the Capella di San Brizio, the other primary attraction of the Duomo. I tried to buy one, but they would not or could not change a 20.

My other mission was to buy wine, cheese, and other goodies for the afternoon wine-tasting. So I went looking for likely stores. I was hoping to find a place that sold panforte, but this is a Sienese specialty, and I could not find it in Orvieto. Instead I found an Orvieto round fruit bread called a fruttino in a little shop and a bottle of wine in another shop. I then happened onto a real grocery store with carts, a checkout counter, and everything. I purchased some sale-priced pecora cheese there.

I now had change, so I went back to the cathedral. I put on my black nylon running pants. I bought a ticket and went inside. The interior is fairly stark. There are a few frescos, but most of the action is in the two capelle. The one on the left has the blood-stained cloth, which is the result of the alleged miracle for which the cathedral is dedicated. The one on the right, the Capella di San Brezio, is fantastically decorated. I took a seat and lingered for quite a few minutes contemplating the artists' (Fra Angelico and Luca Signorelli) visions of heaven and hell. The painting of the anti-Christ showed the devil whispering in the ear of a person who looked just like Jesus. Interesting concept.

There was supposed to be a pietà in the Duomo, but I did not see it. The Ames' told me about it later. Rats.

I went to the Internet Caffè, but they said that the DSL line was down. Kat had already informed me that the proprietors of the other caffè told her the same thing.

I walked down to the less touristy end of town and bought a couple of pieces of pizza. I was a little leery since the price marked was 8.65. I only had to pay 1.68 euros. The pizza was sold by the kilogram. I found a bench and had some pizza and water. An Englishman and his wife shared the bench with me. They seemed to be concerned about the value of their investments in the FTSE.

I joined up with Marva and Paula on the way back to the meeting place. Several members of the group were already sitting in the park nearby, so we joined them. Orvieto was a surprisingly pleasant place just to hang around in. Orvieto was my kind of place. It was by far the cheapest place that we have yet visited. It was also the least hectic of the real towns.

We drove back to the farm. I took a nap before the wine-tasting. Then I jumped in the pool just to be able to say that I had done it. At 3 p.m. Sue, Marva, Grace, and I had a friendly game of bocce before our marena. We made up some rules based on Grace's vague recollection from a

previous match. Grace and I won due to a burst at the end. Afterwards Kat told us the real rules. We realized that it probably would have been more fun to play the right way.

The wine-tasting was fun. I didn't much care for the wine which I had purchased, but it was one of the first bottles that was empty. There was an awful lot of wine and cheese available. I sampled everything. I must admit that I overindulged a bit. Mark had, for reasons known only to himself and his creator, took it upon himself to acquire a bottle of grappa. He had a hard time getting anyone to drink any. I sampled a little bit, but I certainly didn't want any more. Its taste to me was halfway between wine and diesel.

The Dagens had the foresight to pick up some bread. There was a lot of cheese on the table, but without the bread we would have had nothing to eat with it.

After the party Sue for some reason gathered up all of the leftover cheese. She had thoughtfully bought me a beer, but I did not feel like drinking it when I got back from Orvieto, and I certainly could not face it after all that wine. So, we were forced to cart around quite a bit of extra foodstuffs for the remainder of the trip.

Fred Johanssen, who is not a teen-ager, demonstrated conclusively that he can still do at least one pull-up. No one matched him. I remember having a great deal of difficulty the last time that I tried it, and that was probably ten years ago. Fred had also cut a pretty dashing figure at the pool earlier in the day.

There was an incredibly huge colony of ants on the porch of our building. I traced a continuous line of them from one end of our casetta to the other.

Dinner, which started at 8, lasted until 9:30. It was Paula's birthday. We all sang the song for her, and Lazaro gave her a big hug. He dropped Marva like a bad habit. Lazaro has a Polaroid camera with which he takes pictures of special occasions like this.

The dinner had the same structure as that of the previous evening, but with chicken instead of beef. The group was very close at the end of supper. I think that the two nights in the country had been to everyone's, or at least nearly everyone's, liking.

The conversation at our table for some reason turned to the subject of propositions of marriage. Mark related how nervous he had felt before he proposed to Anne. He father asked Anne if Mark was Italian. She sheepishly admitted that he was Polish. "Well, is he at least Catholic?" Anne was able to reply in the affirmative.

Lou related two stores – his nervousness at proposing to Grace and his anxiety about approaching her father, the emperor. He was taken aback when Grace's dad had asked Lou what his own parents thought about him marrying a Chinese woman. Lou, who actually had never considered their reaction, replied that they were supportive. This was the first time on the trip that I was able to identify with Lou.

Day 16 May 26 Tuesday Umbria – Pompeii - Sorrento

A lot of driving today. We had to leave our bags near the bus at 6:45. Breakfast was at 7. Departure was scheduled for 7:30. Sue and I, who both insist on our postprandial dental regimens, arrived at the bus at 7:25, and we were the last ones aboard the bus. Then Kat yelled at (well, OK, calmly reprimanded) us for not using the mat to get the dust off of our shoes. Later she told us that she did this to appease Peter. At any rate, the day did not start well. To make matters worse, I was already feeling weak and cranky from the overindulgence of the previous afternoon.

The drive to Pompeii was the first boring stretch of scenery that we had yet encountered. Italy's spine, the Apennines, was on our left. At first we saw nothing but farms on the right. Eventually we hit the outskirts of Napoli, which was really the first Italian community that we had encountered that appeared to be down on its luck.

Napoli – or at least greater Napoli – is much larger than I thought. It seemed to just go on and on. Kat said that it had spread out so much that people were now living on the side of Mt. Vesuvius.

We reached Pompeii shortly before noon and parked the bus at a restaurant. For lunch we could have anything that we wanted as long as it was pizza. We also got salad and a drink. It cost 10 euros. A priori this seemed like a rip-off, but it wasn't. We got an entire pizza and a small bottle of wine – if, as I did, that is what you selected to drink. I was once more absolutely stuffed.

At this point I was down to three pictures on my last Wal-mart disposable camera. I had been looking to purchase one more disposable camera. Sue, who is a much more accomplished shopper than I am, told me that 10 euros for 39 exposures was a reasonable price. They charged 17 euros at the Autogrill. I saw a stand selling Kodak disposable cameras with flashes. I picked one up and looked in vain for a price tag, a rare item indeed in Italy. A man approached me and asked me if I wanted it. I said "Quanto costa?" He called out to the owner, who said "Quindici euro." I said "Troppo caro" and left. He ran after me and showed me an entirely different camera – not even in a box. I again asked, "Quanto costa?" The guy in the back said "Nove," and the guy that I was talking to said "Otto." I asked him, "Otto?" He nodded. I looked at the camera more closely and told him, "No. Soltanto ventisette posi, non trentanove." He pulled out another Kodak with no flash but 39 exposures and said "Dieci." I noticed that there was no flash, but I didn't really care. So, I said "Dieci? Bene." I gave him a 20. He gave me 10 back. I resisted the impulse to wonder if he would have taken 9.

Pompeii was our only guided tour. Gaetano, who speaks pretty good English, has been making this type of presentation for 22 years. He explained that he learned the business from his grandfather.

We learned lots of interesting facts. Pompeii was buried in 35 feet of ash by Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D. At that time the settlement was 600-700 years old and was home for roughly 20,000 people. The inhabitants evidently died of suffocation from poisonous gases discharged by the volcano long before the ash buried them. The structures of the buildings are in pretty good shape

because no lava came in Pompeii's direction. Most of the good stuff which was found inside had long been removed to the museum in Naples. Nevertheless, a great deal remains in Pompeii. The site was in such good shape when they discovered it that they even have a pretty good idea of who was who and what they were doing. When they encountered an air pocket in the excavation, they injected plaster or some similar kind of material which filled the pocket so that they could remove the impressions of the corpses.

Gaetano wore long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and a sweater around his neck even though the temperature in the 80's, and there was no relief from the sun. Like most southern Italian men he has dark hair and a heavy beard. His command of English was impressive. He exhibited a large vocabulary and had pretty good pronunciation. He made a few sexual references, but he was careful to keep the presentation in good taste. He was a big hit with the ladies.

He told us about the layout of the typical house, the way that the plumbing worked, and other mundane aspects of life in a Roman resort town. He showed us two plaster casts of bodies. On one of the corpses on display in Pompeii, all of the teeth are still there. The other one is considered a slave because of his belt.

I noticed that I could not understand a word of what Gaetano said when he was talking with his friends. I think that they were conversing in the Neapolitan dialect, not Italian. When he spoke to a bunch of kids from Milano – I don't know how he knew where they were from – he used recognizable Italian to give them a hard time about their soccer team, AC Milano, which won the Coppa Europea the next day.

After the guided tour we had about an hour of free time. It was not as hot as it had been a few minutes earlier, but Sue craved shade and rest. We found some shade near the amphitheater and sat there a while. We then peaked into the amphitheater before heading back.

On our Greek islands cruise Sue and I had previously visited plenty of ruins. The most nearly analogous site was Acrotiri on the island of Santorini. Acrotiri is a much more ancient site than Pompeii. Because Acrotiri is still actively being excavated, they do not let the tourists interact very closely with the ruins.

Sue needed to use the ladies' room, but the one by the entrance to the site was too crowded. We managed to find the Hotel Vittoria, the designated meeting place, and, saints be praised, there was a WC nearby. Sue went in. Elaine was still inside when Sue came out, so for once we were not last.

Peter maneuvered the bus around the bay of Naples to our penultimate stop in Sorrento. On the way I saw a large Auchan supermarket in Naples. I have seen these stores in Houston.

Sorrento is essentially a vertical town. Because the roads were too narrow and serpentine, the big bus could not get down to the Hotel Del Mare, which is located just off of the Marina Grande. The plan was to park the bus and to load the people into one small bus and the luggage into a smaller vehicle. However, the bus for the people arrived at the parking lot before the one for the luggage. We therefore did not get a chance to designate which pieces of luggage should

be brought. So all of our luggage ended up in the hotel. We had planned to leave the grey bag in the bus, but I guess that it did not make much difference at this point.

Our room was quite small. The hotel had a weird key card system. The card is necessary to open the door from the outside. There is also a slot on the inside. The electricity does not work unless the key is in the inside slot. I guess the objective is to prevent people from leaving the lights on when they leave.

I was the first one to try the “Jacuzzi shower.” It has two shower heads and four jets. It is a quarter cylinder with sliding panels. It resembled my idea of a teleportation chamber. It was the same shape, and it had roughly the requisite number of controls. You have to get into the shower to turn it on in order to avoid flooding the bathroom. I could not figure out any way to shower comfortably without turning off all of the jets and the waist level shower head. I may just not be smart enough for European plumbing. I have had a hard time figuring out how to flush the toilets at several WC’s, too.

I went on Kat’s orientation walk. Sue stayed home. Tenth verse same as the first. It seemed relatively easy to find one’s way around in Sorrento. The sea is down. There is one main road. Kat told us about a musical performance which would be held on the next evening. It didn’t interest me much, and I forgot to tell Sue, who probably would have liked to go. We are also scheduled to have a lemoncello tasting that same evening at 6 p.m. on the roof of the hotel. Lemoncello is a local liquor made from lemons.

The highlight of the walk was when Kat showed us the store at which Peter shops for shoes.

Sorrento had, among other things, several English pubs and a six-story disco/Internet cafe which one enters on the top floor because it is built into the side of the cliff just below the Piazza Tasso, which is the center of town. Another upside-down establishment.

Sue and I went to Zi’Ntonio’s Al Mar (there is another Zi’Ntonio’s in town) for dinner. I selected pasta with seafood, and she had risotto with seafood. We both thought that the dinners were delicious. We were a little leery of the bug-eyed creature which was mounted atop the hill of opened shells and pasta (or in Sue’s case risotto). Sue opined that in all likelihood only the tails of the monster were edible. She nevertheless devoted a good bit of time trying in vain to get some meat out of the claws. Mark and Anne, Doug and Ginny, and Lou and Grace also dined there.

A group of very sophisticated people – doctors or scientists – were seated at a table near us. The men all had on dark crew-necked shirts with blue blazers. I have a feeling that one of them is famous. He looked familiar.

I worried that we might have to use a fire-hose on the couple seated nearest the door. The guy pulled his chair over to the girl’s side of the table, but they were facing in opposite directions. They then proceeded to suck face for a good four or five minutes. They both must have been adept at breathing through their noses. I was half expecting them to sweep the dishes onto the floor and go at it on the table.

Sue did some laundry in the sink after I went to bed.

Perfect weather again.

Language note: Italians use the word “prego” in many social situations. It literally means “I beg” or “I pray,” but the Italians use it to mean please, thank you, you’re welcome, or good morning. Another heavily used word is “allora.” About half of all sentences seem to start with it. It has as little intrinsic meaning as its English counterpart, “so.”

Day 17

May 28

Wednesday Sorrento - Capri

I woke up at dawn and went searching for the northwest passage from our hotel to the Marina Piccola. The two seemed pretty close as the crow (or maybe gull) flies, but you have to walk all the way up to Piazza Tasso and then descend a large number of stairs to get down to the harbor.

On my way I chanced upon a lady (Carolina, I guess) setting out the fresh fruit at Da Carolina, a small store overlooking the Marina Grande. Her apartment is next door to the store. She generally seemed to leave the door open, which allowed pedestrians a view of her kitchen, not often a common practice in Connecticut.

I discovered that some classy hotels monopolize most of the side of the cliff overlooking Marina Piccola. There seemed to be stairs going down from the hotels to their private docks, but I found no public staircase down to the marina except the one in the middle of town. I did find a little palm-filled piazza which looked like a very nice place to relax. I also noticed that a cruise ship was pulling into port. That pretty much guaranteed that Capri would be crowded in the afternoon.

The breakfasts in the Hotel Del Mar were quite good. It was also nice to be able to eat at our own pace. No meetings this morning.

The walk to the Marina Piccola was not very difficult. We bought tickets there for the hydrofoil to Capri. We didn't even see a place to buy tickets for the ferry. We also didn't see anyone from our group.

We got in a long line to board the boat. A guy called us over to the boat in the next slip. The sign said that the boat was bound for Napoli, but he assured us that it was actually going to Capri. So we ended up on a nearly empty boat instead of on a standing-room only boat. They both left almost simultaneously.

Both Capri and Sorrento have a strong British influence. Many signs are in English. There are several British pubs and a "Foreigners' Club" in Sorrento.

Once we landed in Capri we found the ufficio d'informazioni turistiche, and got a map (from which I learned that Capri is not named after the Latin/Italian word for goats but for the Greek word for pig: κάρπος). We wasted no time in leaving the marina area. We ran into Bob and Kathy Woods. We took the funicular railway with them up to Capri Town. They stayed there. We took the bus to Anacapri.

The distance between the two towns is not great, but Anacapri is much higher. We got off the bus there, and then we walked around a bit until it was time for pranzo. At one point I went exploring down one of the narrow lanes between buildings. I was surprised to discover that a very large number of residences were tucked behind the retail/tourist area.

We decided to eat lunch at a second floor pizzeria, Ristorante Barbarossa. We liked its name and its view. Sue and I shared a salad which actually had iceberg lettuce. I had Pizza Barbarossa,

and Sue had a different type of pizza. It was expensive, but they took credit cards, and the food was very good and plentiful enough that we decided to skip supper then and there. Instead we resolved to try to finish up the leftover cheese.

After lunch we split up. Sue went to a “museum” which she had located. One could view there a miniature representation of Capri in ceramics. The exhibit was evidently floating in the middle of a swimming pool. The museum also featured several dioramas portraying historical events in the history of Capri.

While Sue was looking at miniatures I took the chairlift up to the top of Mt. Solaro, the highest point on the island (589 m.). I had never been in a chairlift before, but I bravely went to the booth for the seggiovia and bought a ticket. The guy sold me a round-trip ticket. He then started talking on the phone. An elderly gentleman took over the booth. I told him “Soltanto andata.” He knew what I meant, but he did not know how to exchange tickets. The other guy had to intervene.

The ride on the seggiovia was a little scary for a boy from Kansas even though the lift only passed about 20 or 30 feet above terraced gardens. At one point I saw two interesting birds – like partridges but with zebra-striped heads – walking on the ground directly beneath me. I would have liked to take a photo, but my hands were gripping the bars very tightly. In fact, I had a little trouble dismounting when I got to the top.

I walked around the summit for a few minutes. My first priority was to locate the path back down to Anacapri. A few dozen people up there were engaged in various activities – taking photos, lounging around, or eating lunch. I was surprised to find a restaurant. There are no roads. I thought about how a business establishment could survive in a place that is accessible only by foot and by chairlift. I speculated that they could have brought in the building materials by helicopter and that they could use the chairlift for day-to-day supplies. I saw a crate being sent back down this way via the seggiovia. Nevertheless, this hardly seems a reliable way to run a business.

I sat down, drank a little water, and then I used the WC. I took photos looking down the mountain from many angles. The huge rocks in the ocean near Capri town seemed very small from the mountaintop. I sat in the delightful sunshine for a while and wrote in my journal. I began to notice the wide variety of wildflowers up there. I suddenly noticed that most of the people around me seemed to be in their 20’s or 30’s.

Suddenly I was startled by what sounded like distant thunder. I looked toward the mainland and saw thick clouds gathering over Sorrento. It was very nice up on the mountain, but the possibility of hiking down the steep trail in a thunderstorm did not appeal to me. I was not scheduled to meet Sue for an hour and a half, and the guidebook said that the walk would only take 45 minutes, but I decided to leave early.

The descent down the trail was one of the most enjoyable parts of my whole Italian experience. If nothing had happened, the fantastic wildflowers and breathtaking scenery would still have made it one of the best. However, within 50 yards of the top I encountered a red-faced female

tourist who was hiking up. I considered proposing on the spot, but instead I only offered her some words of encouragement. A few paces later I passed three Italian ladies going down. They were having a very difficult time of it because their attire was poorly suited to the rather rough trail. One was wearing flip-flops; one was barefooted – she carried a pair of cork wedgies; the third, who was some yards ahead of the other two, was wearing leather flats. She wished me “Buona sera,” and I responded in kind. She then said in Italian that the path was “duro” (not “difficile,” as I would have said) I replied that it was “non troppo duro.” She understood me and replied “Ma Lei è vestito bene, ma io ...” I didn’t get all the words after that, but it was clear that she meant that she and her companions did not have on the right clothes for the hike. I said, “Ha ragione.”

I wish that I had taken a photo of these ladies, but it did not occur to me until days later. The story of my life.

I then encountered a couple who were dawdling. I passed them, went around a switchback and saw a goat in the path chewing some leaves on a flowering bush. I took a photo of him. He stayed right in the path. I then noticed a second goat at the same point in the path but eight or ten feet up the mountain from the first one. I moved up close to them and took another photo of the two of them. My activity was beginning to make them skittish, so I moved on.

This encounter buoyed my spirits. I had seen wild goats while hiking in Kauai, but they were hundreds of yards away. I actually interacted with these guys.

About halfway down I encountered someone’s donkey tied to a stake near the path. He was not afraid of me at all. He let me shoot a good close-up of him.

I found the first turn with no difficulty, but when I neared Anacapri there was an X intersection. I took the best-looking path which went down. It quickly became an extremely steep road. I probably should have taken the other downward path. I ended up some distance from the base of the seggiovia. I walked to the meeting place which Sue and I had established, drank the rest of my water, and vegged out. I had 45 minutes to wait. I considered purchasing a gelato, but I decided to pass.

Sue rejoined me at the appointed time. After a bus ride and the return trip down the funicular we got to the pier just as the hydrofoil to Sorrento was boarding. We managed to get two of the last seats in the highly desirable open air section in the rear of the boat. Lots of people had the same idea. We could take parting photos of Capri. And we did. However, a little later the wind picked up and it started to sprinkle. For the first time on the entire trip Sue put on her new rain-proof jacket. Within a minute or two it started to rain, but because of the speed of the boat we were still pretty well protected. Then it rained hard, and the built-up water poured off of the roof onto us. Everyone but Sue sought shelter. I got a photo of her grinning like a lunatic in the downpour.

When we got to the Marina Piccola, we decided to take the city bus. It was already full when we got in line behind a handful of people, so we were pretty sure that we would have to wait for the next one. Wrong. Not only did they squeeze us in, but the ten (I counted) people behind us

jammed their way in. We got off at the first stop. It was the wrong piazza, but at that point the rain had stopped, and we had had our fill of Sorrento's approach to mass transit. We walked back to the hotel. Fortunately it was downhill except for the very end.

Sue took a nap. I had noticed in Umbria that I had lost both my pocket comb and my emergency comb, which I had stored in my shaving kit before I called it up for active duty. I reckoned that I lost them because of my habit of putting maps in my pocket. My theory is that when I pulled out the map, the comb came out with it. At any rate I had resolved to try to buy one in Sorrento. I had been looking for combs at Autogrills and other stores, but I hadn't seen one. I determined to suck it up here in Sorrento, and actually ask a salesperson if they had combs.

On the way from the hotel back to the center of town I happened on Doug and Ginny McClain. They were the only customers at a harbor-side restaurant. The lady proprietor was practically begging passersby to eat there. I talked with the McClains for a few minutes about Ann Arbor, university life, Crazy Jim's Blimpy Burgers, and the Gilbert and Sullivan Society. Doug has three degrees from U-M. They told me that they had not enjoyed Capri at all. They made the mistake of staying at the harbor level. There is little to do there, and the restaurants are evidently overpriced and of dubious quality. They told me that they should have known better than to eat near the water. In Monterrey, they told me, they knew better than to go to the restaurants near the water. I did not mention that the otherwise empty restaurant which they were currently patronizing was also right on the water as was the restaurant in which we had seen them dining the previous evening.

I resumed my heroic quest for a comb. I first stopped at the grocery in the Marina Grande. The lady could find brushes but no combs. She asked the guy in the back if they had any. He told her to sell me a brush, but I demurred.

I then walked up to the center of town and entered a profumeria. I asked the lady, "Avete dei pettini?" She said, "Si," and went over to a shelf which was covered with scarves. Beneath them was a nice pocket comb with a vinyl case. I asked her the usual "Quanto costa?" because there was no price on it. As usual, she had to yell to a guy in back. He said "Uno." I said "Bene." I am sure that we could have done this in English, but it was more fun in Italian.

On the way back to the hotel I saw a bunch of kids who had organized a volleyball game in the dusk in the small square in front of the church by the harbor. They were using some kind of a brown ball – a small basketball or a soccer ball. For a net they had strung a rope between a pair of light posts. One of the kids had evidently screwed up. Someone threw the ball at his head. It looked as if they were having a lot of fun. I wanted to play with them, but I doubt that a 54-year old was what the game needed.

I saw the McClains again. They were still dining at the same restaurant. Doug tried to get me to eat some of his sardines, but I declined. The lady at the restaurant was still actively trying to recruit diners with no luck.

Sue and I skipped dinner. We settled for leftover cheese and crackers. It felt good to go to bed without the usual bloat.

Day 18

May 29

Thursday

Sorrento – Amalfi Coast - Roma

We learned at breakfast that the Woods had not enjoyed Capri too much either. Most people in the tour group had stayed in Sorrento. Lou and Grace had attacked Napoli and Herculaneum. Elaine took the bus to Positano and Amalfi. I think that Sue and I definitely had the best plan of operations, at least for us. “To each his own” would be a suitable motto of the BBB approach to touring, and it seemed to work for our group.

After breakfast we all piled into a small bus to take a drive up the Amalfi coast. This was our first encounter with rush hour traffic in Sorrento. There were some close calls with some school buses and civilian vehicles, but in a city of incredibly narrow steeply sloping streets, close calls are to be expected. Mark and Anne passed on the Amalfi drive. They instead accompanied Peter to Pompeii.

Our driver’s name was Giuseppe. The purpose of the drive was to enjoy the scenery out the right-side windows, and it was fairly good. The highway ran right along the cliff, which is hundreds of meters above the sea. This provides some startling views. We stopped for photos above Positano, a beach town which is roughly halfway to Amalfi. It was hazy, and the sun was in exactly the wrong place for photos. Nevertheless, I got off and took a couple of photos with no confidence that any would be of much value. As I was returning to the bus I realized that I had collected droppings from pigeons or some other bird on both of my hands. It was disgusting, and I did not want to get it all over the bus. I had no time to wash, so I rubbed my hands together vigorously.

The scenery on the second half of the drive was as dramatic as that of the first half. There was some kind of miniatures place on the left side of the bus. Sue wanted to take a photo of it, but she was not able. By now we were pretty much tired of the scenery. We pulled into Amalfi for a lunch break, which, since it was only 10 a.m., was a little ridiculous. As we were getting off the bus I was extremely disconcerted to notice that I did not have my camera. I looked through my backpack and under the seat. I could think of nothing else to do. We all had to get off.

Sue and I sat at a table at an outdoor caffè which was not yet open. We could see the bus from our seats. I was morose about losing my camera. I wracked my brain to try to figure out where it could be. I determined that I must have set it down when I cleaned my hands at the stop above Positano.

Sue and I had no real interest in exploring Amalfi. We decided to just sit at the caffè. At about 10:30 the owner of the caffè came by and asked us what we wanted to order. He did not bother any of the ten or so locals who were sitting nearby. We each ordered a cappuccino which cost us three euros. They were good, but not that good. We also bought some carry-out panini from the same establishment before we left.

We got back on the bus at about 11. My mood improved dramatically when I quickly located my camera. It had fallen between the seat and the window. I don’t know why exactly, but what upset me the most about the prospect of losing my camera was not having the photos of the goats which I had encountered on Capri.

The bus returned us to Pompeii after a long climb up the steep cliff. We all gave Giuseppe a round of applause when he opened the doors in Pompeii. We immediately took a 20-minute bathroom break before boarding our regular bus.

Sue and I each bought a lemon ice for 2,50 euros. It was horribly overpriced, but it really hit the spot. We finished the ices just before we got on the bus. This was important because Kat made it clear to us that Peter had just cleaned the bus, and he does not like passengers to have sticky stuff on it in any case.

The last leg of our journey was on the A1 from Napoli to Roma. More than a million people live in Napoli, and millions more live in Roma. However, hardly anyone seemed to live in between the two metropolises. We saw a considerable amount of industrial activity but no settlements to speak of. I do not understand this at all.

As we passed it, Kat told us the story of Montecassino – the village and the abbey – in World War II. Evidently the abbey was finally taken for the allies by a group of Polish soldiers. The abbey is the highest point for many miles. It must have been an easy place to defend and a nightmare to attack.

Most people took photos of the last Autogrill, where we stopped for a do-it-yourself lunch. I was not feeling so sentimental about the rest stop.

I had heard many terrible things about Roma, but as the bus made its way right through the most touristy parts of the city, it did not seem imposing at all. It was not nearly as crowded as New York. People actually were parking on the street. The streets for the most part seemed much wider than those in other cities which we had visited. There are different rules of the road – very few stoplights, and the Vespas do not even have to stop at any of them. However, once you learn the rules, being a pedestrian is not that bad for someone who has spent any time in a metropolis such as London or New York.

Peter somehow drove the bus all the way to the Hotel Aberdeen. This is saying a great deal since the bus barely fit on Via Firenze. Moreover, the hotel is right across the street from the police headquarters.

Sue and I were assigned room #36 in this very nice hotel. We noticed that they even had a PC for free (limited) Internet access in the sitting room. It was only 4:30 p.m. Kat had earlier warned us that she could not guarantee that we would make it here in time for the opera at 8:30. I sought out the opera house and the Hotel Fiamma on the map. Each was only a few blocks from the hotel.

Sue and I walked to both places. We picked up our tickets at the opera house just before the box office closed at 5 p.m. We were both pretty psyched. We then went over to the Hotel Fiamma and made sure that they were expecting us. No problem.

I went on the orientation walk with the group at 5:30. As usual Sue passed. The most important thing that I learned was that it might be possible to walk through the Metro station to get to the Hotel Fiamma. If true <it wasn't>, we would be able to avoid the nightmare of trying to get from one side of the Piazza Repubblica to the other without wading through the traffic with our luggage. Orienting myself in Roma seemed pretty easy. The key seemed to be to keep track of where the Via Nazionale was.

When I returned I was surprised to find that Sue had not started getting dressed yet. We both put on our best duds. Sue wore her white dress, which she had taken pains to keep clean and, as much as possible, wrinkle-free. Unfortunately when she put her money belt on (don't ask me why), she got lipstick on the dress. She was a little put out, but I couldn't see any trace of lipstick on it after she washed it out. I wore my (originally) white pants, my one and only tie, and Chick's sweater. I sure got a lot of mileage out of that sweater. I wore it almost every evening.

We ate a light supper at the little sidewalk caffè on the corner of Via Nazionale and Via Torino. Many tourists eat there, but I doubt that many return. The best that one could say about it was that it was quick.

On the way to the opera we passed an English language bookstore. It had an opera game in the window. We couldn't check it out at this time, but we resolved to return when we had more time.

The opera was not very crowded. We need not have fretted about getting tickets. We could have just walked up and bought tickets and saved a good bit of money. We could even have gotten good seats. On the other hand, I would have been probably been stressed out about the possibility of missing the only chance of ever seeing an opera in Italy.

Il Teatro dell'Opera di Roma is a great place to see an opera. This is the place in which Verdi debuted *Otello*! European houses were built for opera and nothing else. Even the balcony seats are close to the stage. The sound was magnificent.

The opera, *Don Pasquale* by Gaetano Donizetti, was not what I expected, but the production was very well done. I should definitely have taken more time to study the libretto. I had read a synopsis before I left, but I could not remember a few key elements. Sue purchased a program for 12 euros. It was, of course, in Italian. It included a fairly detailed synopsis as well as the entire libretto. I stupidly tried to translate the relevant portion of the synopsis on the fly before each act. This helped a little, but it would have been a lot more useful if I had just turned one more page and seen the synopsis in English.

At any rate much of the opera seemed pretty confusing to both of us. Our frustration was augmented by the fact that all of the familiar music – and the most memorable melodies – were all in the last act.

It was a little weird sitting in front of a row full of teenagers. One was British. The rest were Americans. At the operas that we had attend in America we were considered youngsters due to

our lack of canes. Somehow I doubt that these kids shelled out as much for their tickets as we did. European opera is heavily subsidized.

The production moved the setting to 1930, about a 200 year update. It was extremely professional. The performance in many ways seemed more like a Broadway play than an opera. The four lead singers – Alfonso Anoniozzi, Inva Mula, Antonino Siragusa, and Alberto Rinaldia – were all excellent. The orchestra with its 27 year old conductor was also good. We had unbeatable seats in the ninth row orchestra right in the middle.

The set divided the stage into three parts – a large middle flanked by two smaller sections. Each had an independent curtain. This allowed for rapid scene changes, and it gave the opera a sense of very fluid motion. The scenery was mostly art nouveau. The use of bright colors created lively contrasts. The choreography was intriguing especially the scene in the secretarial pool. The singing of the chorus in the opening number of the third act was outstanding

However, I noticed one major problem with updating this opera. Don Pasquale must be portrayed as an unsympathetic character at the beginning of the opera. In the original he is a rich old horny fuddy-duddy with few or no redeeming qualities. His wealth is inherited. The audience easily understands that he needs to be brought down a peg. This Don Pasquale seemed more like a hard-working successful businessman, older but not grotesquely old. The tricks played on him by Dr. Malatesta and Norina therefore seemed just plain mean.

After the opera Sue and I had trouble sleeping. I guess that we were both excited about attending the opera. Sue dug out her Listerine-flavored Scotch to ease our passage to the Land of Nod. She even found the hotel's ice machine – the first one we had encountered on the entire journey. We shared a drink and then hit the hay.

Day 19 May 30 Friday Roma (Catholic)

Breakfast at the Aberdeen Hotel was reasonably plentiful. They offered cereal, yogurt, ham, cheese, and rolls. This makes it unanimous. I found 100% of the breakfasts to be a good basis for starting the day. All of the warnings about a roll and coffee proved to be groundless.

The hotel definitely seemed to cater to English-speaking tourists. Some of the staff much preferred to converse in English rather than Italian. The person who spoke the best English had a British (or at least not American) accent. I was therefore surprised to hear him say “You’re welcome” in response to a “Thank you.” I have never heard a British person use the phrase, which is, of course commonplace in the U.S. I later deduced that he probably was actually Italian. I heard him conversing perfectly fluently in Italian with other employees.

The group’s plan was to do the Vatican first. There wasn’t much choice. It was scheduled to close early on Saturday, and everyone wanted to go to the Vatican. We left the hotel at 8 o’clock. It is an easy Metro ride – the fifth stop on the A line with no changes. The exit for the Vatican is Ottaviano, and Via Ottaviano takes you right to both the Vatican Museum and St. Peter’s. The best strategy seemed to be to do the museum, which includes the Sistine Chapel, first. We got there at 8:15, and the line was a block and a half long even though the door did not open until 8:45.

After standing in line for 15 minutes Sue got the idea to go across the street to buy a disposable camera (or, as it happened, two). After successfully negotiating the purchase she attempted to cross back on a yellow light. No one mistook her for Marion Jones, but it has been a long time since I have seen her move that fast. The Vespa drivers and the autisti gave her dirty looks (and maybe even the dreaded malocchio) for robbing them of precious driving seconds.

The Vatican Museums are dumbbell shaped. The ancient museums and the Pinacoteca are near the entrance. The Sistine Chapel and the Raphael rooms are on the far end. They are connected by a very long two-story corridor. Traffic is one way. One goes to the Sistine Chapel on the first floor and return on the second floor (or maybe vice-versa). I had the bright idea of skipping the ancient museums altogether. We would instead move through the upper corridor as fast as possible so that we could beat much of the crowd to the Sistine Chapel, the great prize. Afterwards we could, in theory, investigate further whatever interested us. This would have been a good strategy if I had known what I was doing. I meant for us to skip the Raphael rooms, but I took a wrong turn. Having done so, we should have just appreciated the rooms while we were there, but I was determined to get to the chapel early, so we just forced our way through the crowds as fast as possible.

We finally burst into the Sistine Chapel, and, wonder of wonders, we actually found precious seats on a bench. Sue hated the rushing to get to this spot, but she surely appreciated the seat. This allowed us to pore over the material in “Mona Winks” in a comparatively comfortable environment. We cricked our necks to get a look at each of the segments of the ceiling. The room is so huge that you cannot possibly get a decent look at the entire ceiling from any one place. Nevertheless, we probably sat for at least half an hour. It was good fun identifying the

individual sections. I was surprised that the famous “Creation of Adam” section is no more than 5 or 10% of the ceiling. It doesn’t jump out at you at all.

“The Last Judgment,” on the other hand, occupies the entire wall behind the altar in much the same way that Tintoretto’s “Il Paradiso” takes up one wall of the Palazzo Ducale in Venezia. Unfortunately we were too close to it to be able to get a good view of Michelangelo’s gigantic masterpiece. We felt pretty well rested after having spent so much time on the bench. Sue wanted to wait and give our seats to someone from our group, but we never saw anyone whom we knew. We reluctantly joined the mass of humanity swarming around in the middle of the chapel. It was quite easy to forget that this is supposed to be a place of worship even with the resonant voice of the almighty issuing continual and insistent calls for “silenzio.” “The Last Judgment” was nearly as striking to me as the ceiling. The aspect that most drew my attention was Michelangelo’s depiction of himself as a deflated skin-bag. What a powerful statement.

The rest of the paintings in the room are done by masters such as Botticelli. In most places they would probably be the center of attention, but in this chamber no one pays them much mind at all. When Michelangelo’s acknowledged masterworks were around, it was hard to get too excited about the other paintings.

After we departed the chapel, Sue and I ambled down the long hallway filled with papal knickknacks. I was struck by how much in this chapel and in all of Roma is dedicated to or by one of the popes named Pius. There have been well over 200 popes. 12 have been named Pius. It seems like at least half of the time that a pope is mentioned by name in an inscription, his name is Pius. Few or none of those mentions were of Pius X, one of the few canonized popes. There may be a lesson here.

Not much in the knickknack corridor seemed noteworthy, but Sue made the discovery of the day – a really tacky looking life-sized statue of a robin next to a flower. It was a gift to the pope from Richard Nixon, of all people.

Our last stop was the Pinacoteca. There were some impressive paintings there, including an unfinished work by Da Vinci. My favorite was the Caravaggio which depicted Christ being carried after the Crucifixion. I think that it is called “The Deposition.”

Afterwards we stopped at the museum’s Caffeteria. Sue got a cappuccino, and I rested my legs and drank a little water. Bob and Kathy Wood joined us for a few minutes. They, however, were eating lunch.

We went back to the entrance and then made our way to a huge courtyard. Sue agreed to meet me here later. There was a bookstore nearby to occupy her attention. I wanted to see the Raphael rooms, to which we had paid no attention on the first pass. This was not that good of an idea. By that time of the day the museum was jammed with people. We heard from Kat that it had been closed on the day before, Thursday. On the next day, Saturday, it would close early. I suppose that everyone figured, as we did, that the best bet would be to come on Friday.

I began the long trek to the other end of the museums. This time I spent a little time examining the statues which were mentioned in “Mona Winks.” Nothing overwhelmed me. The fig leaves were truly ridiculous. This time I also spent more time looking at the ceilings. There seem to be bas reliefs on the ceilings of most of the corridor, but they were actually just painted to look like bas reliefs. They certainly could have fooled me.

When I arrived back at the Raphael rooms for the second time, I went through at a leisurely pace. I most clearly remember the room called la Stanza della Segnatura, which features the mural of “The School of Athens.” I have seen this work depicted in books, but the original is so much more powerful. It is hard to believe that two of Raphael’s best known works (the other is called “Dispute of the Blessed Sacrament”) take up two opposing walls of one small room in the Vatican.

I had no choice but to go through the Sistine Chapel again. At that point it would have been impossible even to attempt to swim upstream through the doors of the Raphael rooms. Someone would have killed me. The walk to the chapel was painfully slow. The corridors were chock-full of shuffling tourists. When I got to the door of the Sistine Chapel I was surprised to see a lady standing just outside the chapel speaking in Russian. No one seemed to be paying any attention to her. Kat explained to me later that she was probably broadcasting commentary to her tour group inside. The members of her group would be using radios with earphones.

I went through the chapel as fast as I could, which was at an arthritic turtle’s pace. It was much more crowded than before. In fact, it was wall-to-wall humanity. Even after I got to the chapel’s exit, it was still painfully slow going through the second “long march.” When I got to the end, I could not for the life of me find the piazza in which I had left Sue. So, I tried to go through the Pinacoteca again in the hope that it would jog my memory. Unfortunately the big room at the end was blocked off “for a few minutes.” So I backtracked. No luck. I tried going down the huge circular staircase. I did not think that this was right, but I was hoping to scoot over to the entrance. No chance. So I went back up a second set of unmarked stairs. I had to push aside the rope to get back to where I started down.

Then a muse inspired me to go through the place where you return the audio guides. Bingo! From the audio guide room I could see the entrance and quickly found Sue. For the first time on the trip she boasted more energy in daylight than I had, which was approximately zero. We decided to get out of there and get some lunch. We ate pizza at a crummy little sidewalk caffè across the street from the museums. As usual, I sat in the sunshine and Sue sat in the shade.

By the end of lunch it was pretty hot – mid 80’s or so. We made the long walk to St. Peter’s. By then I felt refreshed, but Sue was wasted by the heat. We stopped and rested on the grass at one of the few shady place en route. It was not exactly pleasant, but Sue got up enough energy to walk to the Piazza San Pietro, where she took another breather at the foot of one of the columns. I went out to the obelisk to check out the view. I stood in the spot in which all of the columns on the right lined up. Then I retrieved Sue, and we went into the basilica together.

The main thing to know about the basilica is that it is huge beyond imagination. We used “Mona Winks” as a guide to make sure that we saw all of the mandatory sights – Michelangelo’s Pietà,

the painting of St. Peter, Bernini's Baldacchino, St. Peter's statue, and the many statues and mosaics. I had hoped to get a close look at Bernini's throne in the apse just beneath the dome, but that entire section of the building was roped off. I spent a little more time inspecting the marks on the floor which indicated the dimensions of other churches. I read somewhere that 95,000 people can fit inside the basilica at once.

Sue rather quickly tired of the oversized and ornate church. We temporarily split up so that I could spend a little more time exploring. Even so, I decided that I needed to return to St. Peter's to climb the cupola, to go down into the crypt, and to see if I could get a better look at St. Peter's throne. Sue was afraid to go down into the crypt. She had heard that they let Methodists go down there, but they never come up.

When I had finished exploring the basilica, I met Sue outside. We set off on the long trek back to the Metro stop. Sue was just miserable. Her feet and her knees were killing her. I tried to get her some pain relievers and anti-inflammatories, but the two farmacie which we encountered were both closed for the siesta. We finally made it back to the hotel. I immediately sought out the farmacia on Via Nazionale and bought her some ibuprofen. Sue napped, and I worked on my journal in the hotel's sitting room. A couple of American kids were in there taking turns on the Internet. They told me that their family had been in France and Cinque Terre for the last few weeks. When I was their age, my family drove to Iowa for our vacation.

I saw Bob and Kathy return to the hotel. I asked them how their day went. They said that they did really well, but now their dogs were barking. Evidently they had mushed them all the way back from Vatican City.

Sue and I ate at Da Giovanni, a nearby restaurant recommended by both Rick Steves and Mark. It was inexpensive, but I did not enjoy it very much. I had abbacchio, the Roman lamb dish. It tasted pretty good, but the service was poor. A group of panhandling musicians came in at one point. They played tolerably well, especially the penny whistle player, but their singing was beneath even my meager standards. I had assumed that all Italians could sing. Sue, who dearly loves all kinds of live music, enjoyed the entertainment much more than I did.

As usual I had a very difficult time getting the waiter to bring me the check. The Italians have a word for check, "il conto," but I got the distinct impression that they consider it a foreign concept.

The most disturbing aspect of the day in the Vatican was the presence of the beggars. The ones in Rome tend to sit on the steps of churches right in front of the door. In the Vatican they sit on the sidewalks used by the tourists going to the religious sites. They put their sores or deformities on display.

Day 20 May 31 Saturday Roma (Ancient)

About half of the group met after breakfast to go to the Colosseum at 8:00. Catherine and Fred decided to go to Ostia Antica on their own. Elaine went out wandering by herself. A few people overdid it on Friday and elected to sleep in.

We took the Metro (linea B this time) from Termini to the Colosseum stop. We were surprised to discover almost no one at the Colosseum itself. What a contrast with yesterday's sardine factory tour of the Vatican! The Colosseum opened at 8:45. We got there at about 8:25. We walked nearly all the way around the place before we finally found the entrance. There was no line, so we started one. By the time that it opened, a few people had queued up behind us. We were absolutely the first people in. The Colosseum was completely empty.

JoAn Ames taught Sue "The shuffle off to Buffalo" on the floor of the Colosseum. They had placed a wooden floor over about a quarter of the floor and had spread sand over it.

I got little out of the Colosseum. I have seen it on TV a hundred times. Being inside seemed like a waste of time and money to me, but if you make it to Roma, you have to go there once, I guess.

As we left the Colosseum we passed by guys dressed in cheesy gladiator costumes. They want tourists to pay them to pose with them. The thought came into my mind that kids would probably enjoy that. I looked around, but I didn't see any kids at all. Come to think of it, we have encountered few children in three weeks in Italy. The birth rate in Italy is very low, well below the replacement rate.

A stone's throw from the Colosseum is the Forum, which is free and, to my way of thinking, much more interesting. "Mona Winks" was invaluable here. It provided interesting information about what all the buildings were used for. I found that it was really pretty easy to visualize the missing structures – the Senate, Constantine's Basilica (hall of justice), the temples, the palaces, and the homes of the vestal virgins. The virgins only had two responsibilities: to keep the vestal fire burning and to keep their legs crossed. They generally succeeded at the first task, but the second one was too much for some of them – with deadly consequences.

After we finished with the Forum, we decided to go to the Palatine Hill, which is really a park containing some mildly interesting ruins of the palaces in which the emperors lived. At the top of the hill is a museum. We went in the lower level, mostly so that Sue could cool off and use the ladies' room. There was some extremely old stuff there, including some finds from Etruscan huts. The museum also had a second floor, but Sue was wilting in the heat, so we passed on it. We walked to the railing to look at what is left of the Circus Maximus, the location in which the chariot races were staged. It could supposedly hold 300,000 people in its day. It is mostly just dirt today.

We then retraced our through the park and the Forum toward the Metro stop. We followed the advice of Rick Steves' book and went a couple of blocks past the Metro stop to eat at a place named Cafe dello Studente which caters to students. We ate out on the sidewalk and had their

special – beer, pizza, and coffee for 9 euros. Sue sat in the shade of an umbrella – the last shaded spot available. I was half in the sun and half out. The pizza was pretty good. The waitress even brought us a little complimentary dessert treat. We passed on the coffee. Nearly everyone else there was a student. Most smoked.

We had seen several signs for the zoo. They seem to point in conflicting directions. There were signs just outside of the caffè. Sue asked one of the employees if the zoo was nearby. They assured her that it wasn't.

We took the Metro back to the hotel and rested up for our last dinner together. Kat had made reservations for the whole tour group at the Target restaurant, two short blocks from the hotel. We took up five tables of five people each. Sue and I sat with Kat and the ladies from Florida, Pat Collier and Marcene Reiter. We ordered off the menu. I had pesto al Genovese and a steak. At least I tried to have a steak. I asked for it twice, but they never brought it to me. It was just as well. I was absolutely stuffed after Sue gave me a few bites of her salmon. It was a very nice time. There were several toasts amid general acclaim about what a great tour it was. Marva arrived just in time for dessert, but Elaine missed the dinner entirely.

After dinner we repaired to the sitting room. Kat went around and asked tour members to describe where we had been on consecutive days. It was surprisingly difficult to do. The day assigned to me was the low point of the tour for Sue and me – the bus trip between Siena and the farm in Umbria with two stops in Assisi and one at Civita di Bagnoreggio. At first I could not remember the stops. Sue had to prompt me. Several people had trouble remembering anything.

Next each person was asked to describe her/his most memorable event of the tour. Only Barbara Stewart picked the Andrea Bocelli concert. In all likelihood I would have selected it, too, if it had not been punctuated by all of those air horns. Instead I described my walk down Mt. Solaro in Capri. Sue said that hers was when I found my camera on the next day. Later at my insistence she admitted that her best time was listening to the music on Piazza San Marco in Venezia.

We then coerced the desk clerk into taking photos of the group. Sue and I had used up all of our flash cameras. Maybe someone will send us a copy of one of their pictures. Once again, as at the Piazzale Michelangelo in Firenze, Elaine was missing from the group photo. I had been careful to take a snapshot of everyone in the group, even Elaine.

Shortly after the group photos Anne received bad news about her father's health. He had already been in the hospital, but he was now evidently being moved to intensive care. She and Mark had planned on flying home to Denver on Monday. They wanted to try to change their reservations so that they could fly to Vermont on Sunday instead. Anne hoped to use the PC to access the Internet to do so, but someone not from our group was already using it. There was a minor altercation. Some people in our group thought that the other lady was unreasonable or worse. Even after she got to use the PC Anne was able to concentrate on the task. She soon decided that it was not possible to make the arrangements in the evening. Lufthansa's web site may have been down.

Kat, Marva, Paula, Sue, and I went to the Irish Pub (which was nothing of the sort) for a beer. Kat was taking medication for a cold which she had picked up halfway through the tour, so she limited herself to water and Fanta. We talked for a while about the trip. Then the talk started getting smaller. I found it impossible to think of anything to add to the conversation. Sue and I left after one beer. I did not have a good taste in my mouth. Nothing serious. Nothing specific. Just a bad feeling.

Fred and Catherine Johanssen spent the day at Ostia Antica. They were disappointed with the place. Kat had raved to us about what a fascinating audio guide was available there. The Johanssens, however, found that they no longer offered the audio guides.

The weather was not perfect. It might have sprinkled for about 15 seconds in the evening. It was cloudy in the morning, but sunny and hot in the afternoon.

Day 21 June 1 Sunday Roma (Ostia Antica)

We got down to breakfast in time to see the first group off to the airport – Larry and JoAn Ames, Patty Roche, and the Johanssens. Sue and I really liked JoAn and Larry, the oldest people in the group. They seemed really to be in great shape. They seemed to have no trouble keeping up at any point. The same was true of the Johanssens. For some reason my path hardly ever crossed Patty's after the first night at Seelhaus.

About half of the group – Paula, Marva, the Dagens, the Woods, the Shimps, Sue, Kat, and I – met after breakfast at 8:30 to go to Ostia Antica. Kat had agreed to fill in for the discontinued audio guide.

We took the Metro to the Piramide stop. Then we switched to the Lido train. It was jammed with teens going to the beach at the Lido, the stop after Ostia Antica. The ride took about 30 minutes. It was quite hot, but thanks to a very good decision by Kat, we all had seats. We couldn't complain too much.

Although we were still in the outskirts of Roma, it seemed as if we had arrived on another planet when we got to Ostia Antica. There was no one on the train platform except us. We traversed the sottopassaggio under the tracks and then the cavalcavia over the highway. We still had to walk a few blocks to the parking lot. It did not seem like much of a hike in the morning, but our appraisal was decidedly different on the return trip a few hours later.

The admission fee for Ostia Antica was actually one euro lower than it said in the guide books. The area was not in great condition, and, as the Johanssens had said, the audio guides had gone the way of the dodo. I could not believe that the ticket office could not make change. Half of us had to play bankers for the others.

Sue and some of the other ladies went to the WC. There was no toilet paper. Sue, as always, had brought her own. She made a lot of friends by offering to share what she had.

We got inside and walked by the ruins of one or two buildings – little shops in the surprisingly large port town of roughly 60,000. The town itself was basically abandoned during the imperial times for lack of interest when silt from the Tiber ruined the port. In fact, the sea is now several miles away.

Sue got hot after about two minutes. She decided to go back to the ladies' room and put on her shorts. I was to stay with the group. I did this for ten or 15 minutes, but then I held back and saw Sue coming. We rejoined the group, but we lost them again a few minutes later.

Sue and I wandered around for a few minutes trying to make sense of the ruins on our own without much success. Then Sue got tired and hot. She found a tree and borrowed some of its shade for a little while. I climbed the highest building in Ostia Antica to try to get a glimpse of the group, but I was unsuccessful.

We did, however, eventually locate the cafeteria. We made a beeline for it. Lo and behold, the rest of the group was exiting just as we arrived. They had just finished lunch. Sue decided to stay, get something to eat, and nose around. I hooked up with the group.

Our afternoon adventure had two highlights. The first was when Marva posed behind a headless statue. Paula took the shot. It should come out pretty well.

The second occurred quite a bit later at the Terme del Mitra, one of the many bath houses. Marva found a hole – or rather a trench – that was large enough for a person to descend into. The passage was blocked to the left, but it led to an underground passage to the right. I doffed my backpack, set down my Italian dictionary, and jumped in. Lou was right behind me. We followed the underground passage around three or four turns. It was pretty well lit because of the skylights every 20 feet or so. After we went around the bottom of a large round brick cistern we turned one more corner. From that point we could see the wide exit in the distance as well as a life-sized statue of a man about to slit the throat of a bull from behind. Or at least so it appeared. The human's arms were broken off. It must have been a copy. Iron rods were sticking out of the arms. It was certainly cool to find this unexpected little treasure hidden away like this.

We also spent some time in the Caupona di Alexander e Helix. This tavern contains a floor of perfectly preserved mosaic design. Alexander evidently was a former boxer who ran the place with three other boxers. Two of their names are easy to read in the mosaics. Helix was one. I don't remember the other.

There are lots of mosaics in Ostia Antica. In a few locations even the frescoes have been preserved and are on display. There is quite a bit of stonework. All in all Ostia Antica seemed like a pretty nice place to me – much bigger than Pompeii. It is not as well maintained as Pompeii, it does not have anything as spectacular as the theaters and the arena, and there are no preserved corpses. However, it is much more pleasant, has much more shade, and is much less crowded.

I found Sue luxuriating in the shadiest spot in Ostia Antica, not far from where I had left her at the cafeteria. She had decided that a gelato would be enough food for her until I returned. She had found a little gated enclosure with a marble picnic table totally shaded by a vine-covered arbor. One could not even see the table without going inside the enclosure. None of the group members had noticed it even though we had all passed within two feet of it. Sue shared her private spot with two cats.

Sue and I went back to the cafeteria, got lunch on trays, and took them brazenly back to the arbor. We had to share the table with another couple, but they were quick and quiet eaters. My selection was a nondescript lasagne. Sue chose a salad with some shrimp, which she shared with her new feline friends. One of the cats loved the shrimp. The other one would not touch them.

After lunch I managed to find the underground statue in the Terme del Mitra again. I showed it to Sue, and then we hiked back to the train station. It was a long hard walk in the hot sun. Sue

had to rest several times. Once I went on ahead to make sure that we were going in the right direction.

We climbed back over the highway. We got to the station and bought our tickets. The train was there! Was it going the right way? At first I thought that it was. Then, at the last minute I decided that it was going the wrong way, so we did not get on. I was mistaken. We had to wait 30 minutes for the next train. We saw some horses and jockeys across the train tracks in the distance. We never did figure out what was going on there.

The train finally arrived, and it was completely filled with Roman youth who had spent the day at the beach. The ride back was torture – hot, smelly, and airless. One girl near us got very faint and almost passed out. The temperature was in the mid-80's, but I did not notice any other people in shorts. Needless to say, no one connected our tickets. How could they?

We got back to Piramide and then took another crowded train back to Termini. We walked to the Hotel Fiamma and checked in without any trouble. We now had to face moving all of our stuff from the Aberdeen Hotel a few blocks away. This would probably be the longest distance which we would have to port our stuff, and it involved crossing some wide, heavily traveled streets with no stoplights.

Sue was already exhausted. I volunteered to go get our luggage by myself, but she insisted on helping. Fortunately I had left my quite full backpack at the new hotel. Sue took care of her big backpack, which had wheels. I carried her little pack, my black bag, and the grey bag with the computer. Sue spelled me on the grey bag for a while. By the time that we got to the Hotel Fiamma I was nearly exhausted and dripping with perspiration. This was the most tired and sore that I felt during the entire trip. I may have pulled something in or around my left elbow also. <Indeed. It hurt for a month.>

After resting a bit I went for a walk before dinner. I did not have any of the telltale accoutrements of the tourist – shorts, tee shirt, hat, sneakers – and I knew where I was going. A young Italian gentleman stopped me with “Scusi, signore,” and asked me an elaborate question in Italian. He thought that I was a local! I couldn't understand him, so I just said, “Non parlo italiano bene.” I spent most of the rest of my walk thinking of better ways to respond in such a situation. Of course it never happened again.

Imagine how embarrassed the poor fellow must have felt not to have been able to smell out a turista.

Sue and I walked about a block to La Famiglia, the trattoria which Lydia, my Italian teacher, had recommended so heartily. I ordered pasta and a steak. Sue had the antipasto bar and a pasta. It is hard to believe, but I did not get my steak again. I had to ask for it fairly insistently. I know that I told the waiter about it, but he somehow neglected to write it down. However, he brought it to me in short order.

Something about this trattoria really appealed to me. It had real food and a genuine Italian atmosphere. Everyone in the place was smiling while they ate. The restaurant could, however, use another employee or two.

At the end of our meal a French couple came and sat at the table next (an inch or two away) to us. He spoke English well enough. We told them that we thought that the restaurant was pretty good. I don't know why, but I found it very exhilarating to be dining here among people from various countries.

I am sure that Sue wanted to go out to have a drink after dinner, but I was whipped. I don't know where she gets her energy late at night.

Day 22 June 2 Monday Roma (Villa Borghese)

In the morning we decided to return to the Aberdeen Hotel to say goodbye to the rest of the people in the group. The desk clerk was not surprised to see us. He started telling me something about a dress. Then he realized that I did not know what he was talking about. He explained that Sue had left her opera dress in Room 36 of the Aberdeen Hotel. Paula had been nice enough to hold it for her. Now Sue had to retrieve it.

The young (all right, younger) couples – Mark and Anne and Lou and Grace – were in the process of leaving. I had to help them with one suitcase. The Dagens had acquired so many books in Italy that the handle of the suitcase had broken under the strain. When it had finally snapped, Anne, of all people, was trying to pull it. I picked it up and carried it out to the cab for them.

We also said goodbye to the McClains, who were eating their last breakfast. They graciously told us that if we were ever in Monterrey we should look them up.

We then went back to our own hotel to eat breakfast. Prima colazione there was even better than the ones at the Aberdeen although it was much less fun to eat with strangers. We decided to spend the morning at the Villa Borghese, a large park just four Metro stops away. It also has a world-class art gallery, but it wasn't in our plan this time. I planned to return to the Vatican in the afternoon.

We took the Metro to the Flamminio stop. We exited through the Villa Borghese door and started climbing into the park. Our destination was the zoo (or Il Bioparco, as they call it). We had a map which showed some of the streets in the park, but no matter which way we went we kept running into Via David Lubin. We eventually found the so-called lake without much difficulty, but then we must have gone the wrong way. We ended up at the Piazza Siena, where they were evidently preparing for some kind of equestrian event. Since I had already backtracked twice, I turned navigation duties over to Sue. She eschewed the map and instead followed her nose right to the zoo.

As we went through the gates, we were treated to a display of flying by a peacock not 20 feet in front of us. He ended his fight perched up in a tree. I have seen plenty of peacocks, but I cannot remember one flying more than a few horizontal feet, and I have certainly never seen one in a tree. The zoo was full of families with small kids. Evidently this day was a national holiday in Italy. For us it was a pleasant change. We had seen almost no children on the entire tour. The Italian kids seemed much better behaved than their American counterparts.

I got in the incredibly slow-moving line for a ticket. They offered a discount for groups of 12 or more. One guy, who was already at the counter, made everyone wait while he assembled an impromptu tour group.

The zoo was not spectacular, but both of us had fun, and we saw everything. It reminded me of the Kansas City Zoo, which my family often visited in the 50's. Most of the animals were still displayed in cages, something one almost never sees in the states. We spent the most time at the

island inhabited by the macaques. People were throwing peanuts to them. One young monkey was continually frustrated. He would position himself perfectly for a thrown peanut, reach out for it – no! A big paw from an adult would come over his shoulder and grab it every time. He never got a treat in the entire time that we watched.

Sue got the obligatory pictures of me with giraffes and camels (Bactrian this time). I took a shot of her with Suzy the chimpanzee.

One of the featured items at the snack bar was a “real American hot dog.” Lots of piccolini clamored for them. We had no interest.

We had nearly as much trouble finding our way back to the Metro stop as we did finding the zoo. This time I came to the rescue and found a path to the “lake,” which was our landmark. People row boats on this little pond and pay three euros per person to paddle for 20 minutes. We also discovered that they rented multi-person bicycles somewhere in the park. If we had know about them ahead of time, we speculated that it might have been fun to rent one.

The park has a large area in which owners are allowed to let their dogs run free. Near there we came across a guy who was holding his very young daughter in the bushes so that she could pee. I guess that if it is good enough for the dogs, it is good enough for the people.

We ate lunch on the Villa Borghese side of the Piazza del Popolo. We should have gone into the Santa Maria del Popolo church on the piazza, but it wasn't yet on the agenda. Lunch for me was pizza, and it was plenty big. A girl at the next table ordered a pizza and a salad. She started after I did and finished before. I have no idea where she put so much food so fast.

After lunch Sue went back to the hotel. I revisited St. Peter's. I put on my nylon pants in the piazza. I went inside to see if it was possible to get into the apse. No, it was still roped off. I think that it must be reserved for services. So, I went back outside and got in line for the cupola. Most people bought an elevator ticket. I took the 150 stairs to the roof of the basilica. That is where the elevator stops. The remaining 320 steps – in very confined spaces – to the top (almost) of the cupola. At one point you get to walk around the inside of the cupola. Frankly, the cupola of the Duomo in Firenze seemed much more interesting to me.

I passed many out of shape tourists on the way to the top. After you leave the roof, there is really no way to turn around.

The view of Vatican City from the cupola was quite impressive. I was pretty certain that I got some pretty good photos. <Actually my best shot was ruined by the massive intrusion of one of my fingers.> The view of the city was not as stunning. I finally was able to identify the Colosseum. I pointed my camera in that direction.

The way down was much easier. After I got to the ground, I went back into the basilica and got in line to go down to the crypts. The crypt of St. Peter and the burial spots of several popes was only of passing interest to me.

I hiked back to the Ottaviano Metro stop and took the Metro back to the hotel. Sue and I decided to skip supper. I was still stuffed from breakfast and lunch. It was Monday, which is riposo settimanale for many establishments. Instead we finished up the cheese and crackers. We also consumed the complimentary wine from the hotel.

In the afternoon while I was climbing St. Peter's, Sue had found two Internet places. She used one then. She showed me where the other one was, and I used it in the evening.

Sue also had visited the ufficio d'informazioni turistiche at Termini to discuss our plans for the next day. They convinced her that the walk to Piazza Navona was easy. They tried to persuade her to go all the way to Castel Sant'Angelo. I remained skeptical.

In the evening we took the Metro to Piazza del Popolo and then strolled to the Spanish Steps. We picked a bad night to do so. It was Monday and it was Republic Day. Practically none of the stores was open. We did some window shopping. We decided that 960 euros was a little steep for a pair of sneakers even from Dior.

We reached the Spanish Steps at twilight and perched there for a while doing a little people-watching. It was pretty nice but not magical. We seemed to be the oldest people there by about 20 years. Sue was proud that she was able to acquire a PACE flag from a street vendor for only 4,10 euros. She told the guy that that was all that she had. The flag is pretty nice even though it has an extra purple stripe on it.

Perfect weather for me; too hot for Sue.

Roman fashion notes: Out: shorts, sneakers, and headwear of all kinds. In: bowling shoes.

Day 23 June 3 Tuesday Roma (Pantheon, etc.)

Not much scheduled for our last full day in Italy. The most important thing on the agenda was to make sure that we had a reliable plan for catching our plane. After many attempts Sue got Alitalia to confirm our reservation. I did not think that this was necessary, but better to be safe than sorry. We decided to hire a car for 42 euros rather than devoting a lot of time, effort, and worry to getting to the airport by train. I later read in the paper that a strike had been scheduled (and later cancelled) for June 4, our departure day.

Bad news on the TV: The Alitalia flight attendants staged a sick-out on Monday and Tuesday. Aaaargh! Over 200 flights affecting 13,000 people had already been cancelled. We wondered if anyone else in our group had difficulty. We might be the only ones flying Alitalia.

We called Alitalia again. They said everything would be fine on Wednesday. The unions here have one-day strikes all of the time. Italians think of strikes the way that Americans think of thunderstorms. The right to strike is in the Italian constitution, and the union still have a lot of clout.

Our plan for the day was to start with a walk to Piazza Navona from the Spanish Steps. We then planned to hit the Pantheon, the Trevi Fountain, and the Santa Maria del Popolo church, which has two paintings by Caravaggio. In the afternoon I hoped to return to the ancient Roma area to visit the sites which we had skipped on Saturday.

We made it to the Piazza Navona without too much difficulty. The going was mostly downhill, it was not too hot yet, and we managed to stay in the shade. I took several photos of Bernini's fountain of the four rivers. I wonder who picked the rivers.

Our route down to the piazza passed a number of government buildings. A soldier or two was stationed here and there, but there was nothing like the bunker mentality in Washington. Europeans visiting America must consider us paranoid.

I was not that impressed with the Pantheon, although I certainly appreciated that the engineering was remarkable for the time period. I had not understood that it was a church. I had my shorts on, but so did many other people. Nevertheless, I felt a little uncomfortable. Two Savoy kings and Raffaello are entombed there. We stopped for gelato at "the new champ," the Della Palma. We enjoyed the treat, but we were not floored by its quality. The selection of flavors cannot be faulted, but I always order pistacchio anyway.

The Trevi Fountain was actually nicer than I thought. A good crowd of people was gathered there. I took a few photos. Sue was tired, but she said that she was game to make the walk to Piazza del Popolo. I promised to seek out shade wherever possible. We made it up Via Corso as far as Via della Croce. At this point Sue was completely pooped. It was hot even for me.

We decided to split up. I outlined for Sue on the map how to get up to Piazza Spagna. I continued up Via Corso to Santa Maria del Popolo. When I got there, I was surprised to find that the church was closed. I thought about going in any way, and I went so far as to put on my

nylon pants, but in the end I decided to return after 4. I stripped back down to my walking shorts and headed for the Flaminio Metro station. Bringing the nylon pants on the trip was a great idea, but I should have brought my white ones. They have zippers at the bottom. I could have put them on and take them off without removing my shoes.

I reluctantly took the Metro back to the Colosseum in order to finish the tour of ancient Roma outlined in “Mona Winks.” I found the four maps on the side of the forum. They showed the expansion of the Roman empire in a clear and impressive manner, but a sheet of paper with the four maps on it would have served as well. I then tried to follow the suggestion in the book of re-entering the Forum area through the side entrance. No dice – closed for construction.

My next destination was the Mammertine Prison. I had to go about ¼ mile out of my way because I could not go through the Forum. When I got there I discovered that it, too, was closed for construction.

I climbed the steps from the Forum up to Michelangelo’s Campidoglio, walked all the way through it, and took some photos looking back. I had a good bit of time on my hands, so I decided to go to the Capitol Hill museums. Guess what. Closed, this time for a union meeting.

I still had nearly two hours before the Santa Maria del Popolo church reopened at 4. I pulled my guide books from my ever-present backpack to see if there was anything of note nearby which I had not seen yet. I decided to visit two churches – San Ignazio, the baroque extravaganza, and Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, Roma’s one and only Gothic church. Both of these churches are near the Pantheon.

As I walked over to the Pantheon I took a few photos of the Victor Emmanuel monument. I then headed out to find the churches. I visited San Ignazio first, because it opened at 3. It was wild. From the outside it looks small. On the inside it looks gigantic. The ceiling uses the effect of showing saints and angels from beneath. I doubt that it is humanly possible to ignore the effect. It just seems to go up and up. I found that very impressive. This is also the church with the phony dome. From the door up to a yellow spot on the floor, there is every appearance that the central area of the church is capped with a large dome a la the Duomo in Firenze or St. Peter’s basilica. Past that spot it becomes obvious that the “dome” is just painted on the ceiling, and it looks patently ridiculous.

I had a little time to kill between churches. I found a grocery store and bought some chips to serve as my lunch. They were labeled “più gusto,” which means more flavor. Actually they were barbecue flavored, which is not my favorite. Nevertheless I consumed a handful in the piazza near the Pantheon and the rest later.

Minerva was beautiful – much simpler than the other Roman churches, but I liked it as well as any. Once again it looked like nothing from the outside. The only thing external of note is the piazza in front of the door. It features a bizarre Bernini statue of an elephant with a huge obelisk on its back. The first thing that I noted inside the church was the dark blue star-studded ceiling. It also had a Bernini pulpit, a large (what else?) scroll-like decoration on a column by Bernini, and two statues by Michelangelo. One statue was very hard to see and is apparently of

somewhat dubious provenance. The other, much more prominently displayed, was a statue of Christ. The body definitely appeared to be Michelangelo's work. It was reminiscent of the David although not, of course, as large. A student probably did the head. I don't know who added the bronze loincloth.

After leaving Minerva I decided to walk to the Colosseum Metro stop to take the Metro back to Piazza del Popolo. I don't know where I went astray, but it took me forever to get to Colosseum. Then I had to ride two jam-packed trains. I should have just walked up Via Corso the same way that I did in the morning.

The church was open when I got to the Piazza del Popolo. I checked out the Chigi chapel designed by Raffaello. It did not do much for me. However the two Caravaggios were sufficient reward for my effort. The Crucifixion of St. Peter was even more stunning than in the video that I had watched before we left. The other one shows St. Paul having just been struck from his horse on the way to Damascus. I did not understand what it was at the time. I had to look it up.

I was too scared to try to reuse my Metro ticket. They only cost 77 p. I bought another one. I got off the train at Piazza Repubblica to investigate the opera game at the English language bookstore near the opera house. I could not find the game inside the store. I did find a book about Raffaello by Iain Pears. I considered buying it, but there is always the library. I went back outside. The box was no longer in the window, although the gameboard was. I read the directions printed on the board. It sounded absurdly simplistic – like Chutes and Ladders. I decided not to pursue the question of whether the store had any copies left for sale.

Incidentally, despite the fact that all the employees in the bookstore seemed to be Italian, and they spoke nothing but Italian to one another.

I went back to our room. Sue was just about to leave. She planned to go look for the game and had just finished a note to me to that effect. I told her not to bother, but she had other errands, so she went out any way. I took a shower and then racked out while she was gone. I was still vegetating when she returned over an hour later.

We went to La Famiglia again for our last Italian supper. We had a good time, but the food was nothing special. I ordered pesto spaghetti and a mixed grill of fish. Sue, who admitted to having had a big lunch near Piazza Spagna with some suave but smoky Italian businessmen, had only the pesto. I had to beg the waiter for my secondo piatto and for the conto. Again.

We stopped for dessert at a rip-off place near Termini. They had tasty desserts, but the prices were outrageous. Sue had been looking for a gift for her friend Doris Jean. She found a box of chocolates marked 13 euros, but the proprietors insisted that she would have to pay 19 for them. "Troppo caro."

At 11 p.m. we went to the libreria at the train station in a desperate search for a gift for her friend Doris Jean. Sue ended up getting her a calendar with Italian recipes. By then I was asleep on my feet.

A note about crime in Italy: We had been warned often about the prevalence of pickpockets and gypsies throughout Italy and especially in Roma. Kat pointed out a gypsy or two in Firenze. As far as I know, however, no one in our tour group encountered any untoward conduct from anyone in Italy. I don't think that anyone's losses surpassed mine – three hotel pens and two pocket combs.

Day 24 June 4 Wednesday Roma – Newark - Enfield

Departure day. I set the travel alarm for only the second time on the trip. Sue also asked the hotel desk for a wake-up call. I did not sleep that well, and I was wide awake at 5 a.m. I got up and packed and then waited for Sue, who got up just a few minutes later.

We were scheduled to leave the hotel by private car at 7 a.m. Because this would cause us to miss breakfast (which opened at 7), the hotel packed a bag of food for each of us. It consisted mostly of toast and a role. I traded my roll to Sue for her toast, which she was afraid to eat with her loose tooth. Neither one of us ate our food at that time. We decided to wait and see what we got on the plane.

We turned on the TV to learn about developments in the sick-out by the Alitalia flight attendants. We learned that more flights were cancelled on Tuesday, but the consensus seemed to be that things would probably be OK today.

I went down to the lobby at about 6:45. I checked out without any issues. Sue got there just before 7. The desk clerk told us that our driver was already there. He helped us load our luggage, and then we were off. It was quite something to see the way that he maneuvered through the light early morning traffic. He ran at least three red lights. He stopped once and bought a paper from a roadside vendor. I thought that we were going at an outrageous speed when we got to the highway, but he had to pull over from the fast lane a few times to let official taxis pass him. He got us to the airport by 7:30.

We went into Terminal B and got into the Alitalia line. After a few minutes of inactivity I got suspicious. I left Sue in line and went scouting. I discovered that our flight left from Terminal C and had several lines of its own. I returned to terminal B and got Sue. We walked over to Terminal C, and we got in line for our flight. The family next to us had five gigantic red bags – so big that they could not fit on the conveyor belt. They had to carry them around to the side. We checked in without any difficulty. This was a pretty big relief.

We found our gate – C1, the closest gate – and we set up camp with our carry-on luggage. I went to the caffè and bought us each one last cappuccino. I also used my last Italian phrase, “Posso portar via?” Sue then took our remaining euros to buy some olive oil at the duty-free shop. She had one euro left. I used it to buy a copy of *La Stampa*.

We expected the airport to be a riot. Over 200 flights had been cancelled in the previous two days. More than 30,000 people had been affected. However, there was no sign of any problem whatever.

The boarding for our plane was about 45 minutes late. Leonardo da Vinci airport has jetways. We got on the plane and found our seats. The MD11 was, thankfully, only about half full. Even after we boarded we sat motionless at the gate for quite a while. It seemed that they must have closed the doors by that point, so Sue moved over to the empty seats in the middle aisle and lay down. A little later an Alitalia official came down to our row and asked to see my boarding card evidently because I was sitting in seat #38L. He seemed a little surprised when I showed it to

him. He went up a few rows and then talked on his walkie-talkie. Later the captain announced that one passenger had checked in but had not boarded the plane. Our flight could not take off until his baggage was removed. I got a little worried that they might remove my luggage by mistake. Best not to think of it. We did not take off until almost 11.

The flight was quite pleasant. They showed two movies. The first one, “La finestra di fronte,” was in Italian with English sub-titles. Sue tried to watch it, but she kept nodding off. I enjoyed watching it, a story about a young married woman who encounters an elderly man who cannot remember anything. It cleverly interweaves the plot about the man rediscovering his identity with her dissatisfaction with her marriage and her interest in a young man in the apartment across the courtyard. I really enjoyed it.

I worked on catching up on my journal during the second movie, “Chicago.” Sue had already seen it, but she watched it again because she liked the dancing scene. She told me that they had made at least one change. Richard Gere had in the original said “If I had been Jesus’ lawyer, it would have come out differently.” In this version he says, “If I had been Joan of Arc’s lawyer, it would have come out differently.”

The flight attendants brought us lunch. I had chicken and wine. Later they brought us a snack. For the first time since Varenna I had a Diet Coke. This is saying something, since I ordinarily consume two liters per day. I also ate most of the toast in my breakfast bag.

We flew up the coast of Italy, then along the Riviera, and then over the French Pyrenees. Sue got some good shots of the snowy mountains there. We then flew north across France. The skies were clear all of this time, but by the time that we got to the English Channel it clouded up, and the cloud cover persisted all the rest of the way.

We landed in Newark at about 2. My recollection was that the train from Newark to Windsor Locks would leave at 3. I could not locate the train schedule that I had printed before we left. We had not yet missed a single connection on the trip, and we definitely did not want to miss the last one.

We went through the passport check without any hassle. For some reason you can go to any other country without any hassle whatever, but to get (back) into the US, you have to fill out all kinds of forms. The guy from the agriculture department stopped us and asked us some questions. Then we had to get our luggage. It took quite a long time to arrive. We were greatly relieved when all three bags showed up. We then had to go through the agricultural guys (again). For some reason they insisted on x-raying our luggage. Did they think that we were smuggling farm implements?

We then had to find our way to the train station, which we did without too much trouble. The “air train” takes one from the terminal to the parking lot, rental cars, and the train station. At 2:49 we picked up an Amtrak schedule, which said that the train would arrive at 2:54. I bought the tickets at half price with my Veterans Advantage card. The lady checked and said that the train was either five minutes or 12 minutes late. It was actually 16 minutes late. This gave us enough time to get to the track. We even had time to go to the bathroom – complete with actual

toilet seats and no plate for a tip. We called Sue's sister Karen to tell her when we would be arriving. We also called Denise at the office to assure her that we had not extended our trip for another month or two.

The rest of the train ride was uneventful. We both got a beer from the café car; Sue had pretzels, and I had chips. We hopped over to the Springfield train in New Haven. We arrived in Windsor Locks just as Karen pulled into the parking lot. We took our last snapshots. As Karen drove us home we told her of a few of our adventures. We got home a little before 7. The grass was cut, and both the garage door and the outside door to the cellar had been painted. Our cats Woodrow and Rocky were a little stand-offish at first, but they eventually remembered who we were. They had not invited any friends over in our absence

We decided to have anti-Italian food for dinner. Sue went out and picked up some Kentucky Fried Chicken. While she was out, I plugged in and booted up my computer. Thank goodness it still worked.