

April 23rd—May 1st
2005



Tales from Italy

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Arrival in Rome

Welcome to Italy...or so we thought. How about there is no customs in Rome. We walked off the plane, waited an hour for bags that did not arrive with us, and then just walked out of the airport without so much as a how do you do or a by your leave. Good thing we're not on the wanted list.

Our flight out of Philly left an hour later than planned, so we arrived in Paris at the same time our connecting flight to Rome was boarding. After an OJ Simpson run through the airport, we made it to the gate as the doors to the plane were closing. They let us on, but doubted our bags would make it. They did not.

So we get to Rome, and stand around with a million other people arriving in Rome to see the inauguration of the new Pope trying to find our luggage. Lots of priests and nuns from all walks of life/nationalities. While standing there waiting for the luggage, I felt a hole being burned into the side of my face by some man. I turned to look at him in hopes that he was the Italian Stallion, and found out that I was being visually molested by a priest - an American one at that. We exchanged pleasantries, but it was quite obvious that he wanted to take the collar off for a moment or two of carnal knowledge.

An hour later, no luggage and our "private car" left us. I managed to get someone to call the agency and get them to come back to get us. We then put our lives in the hands of the "holy see" as the driver took off like a bat out of hell through the narrow streets of Rome.

The Westin Excelsior is beautiful. We arrived looking appropriately exhausted and were treated to a free cocktail on the house while we waited for our heavenly beds. We finally got our room and decided to go out for a walk. We walked to the Spanish Steps where there were artists and street vendors doing paintings and portraits. We plan to go back to get our portraits done like we did in Paris.

Then we braved the Metro - which the Romans call "The Underground" and went to St. Peters Square and the Vatican. It is much more beautiful in real life than on TV. Standing in the center of St. Peters Square - which is round - was breath taking. You don't notice the beautiful columns surrounding the square on TV. The throngs of humanity was intense. People from all over the world just walking around, hoping to have a space to stand for the 1st Mass on Sunday. They had chairs set up for the VIPs. We have a tour on Monday so we didn't stand in line to go inside. We did some window shopping and mom added some Roman Soldiers to her Fontanini collection.

We mosied back to the hotel. Took longer since the travel fatigue started to kick in and we realized that going back was uphill. Do not daydream or gaze off while walking the streets of Rome or you might wake up next in the hospital. You are taking your life into your own hands in the streets here.

We arrived back at hotel - still no luggage - and had dinner in the bar where we sang along with piano guy who played all American songs. There must be some VIPs besides us staying in



Arrival in Rome, cont.



The Heavenly Bed at the Westin Excelsior in Rome

Westin, since there are camera crews and lots of body guard looking people hanging around.

We passed out in the Westin Heavenly beds. I managed to get my ear plugs in before mom started sawing down entire forests. We received a call at 3 am, announcing our luggage had arrived. We had some XS Energy drink explosions in our luggage but no damaged. Lost 5 can of liquid crack. We might be able to ration

- doubtful.

Well, we are going to try and go back to sleep for an hour or so before we have to get up. Off to Naples and Pompeii tomorrow. Stay tuned for the continuing saga of "Sandy & Lisa Do Italy"

Naples & Pompeii

Today we went on a day long tour to Naples & Pompeii which is a two hour drive from Rome. Our tour guide picks us up and takes us to meet the group. We load up on a bus at 7:30 am and off we go. We are immediately humbled by our ignorant American status when we realize the tour guides all speak a minimum of 3 languages. One of the guides (we had 3 in total during the course of the tour) spoke English, Italian, Spanish and Japanese. It was just downright embarrassing. Most everyone on the bus spoke at least their native language and English - "ugly Americans." We ought to be ashamed that we barely can speak 1 language....Anyway...I digress.

The tour bus takes highway A1, known as the Highway of the Sun that parallels the Apami(sp) Mountains - also known as "The Backbone of Italy." The ride was very scenic and green. Seemed as if every home had its own garden of grapes, oranges and olives.

Two hours later we arrived in Naples - City of the Arts and a major port. We were a tad deceived about the tour. I thought we would be able to walk around Naples a bit before we went on to Pompeii...NOT...a quick drive through as the guide pointed out some major landmarks and we watched the Napoli Marathon. Then we were off to Pompeii.

We stopped on the way in Torre de Grecco and learned how Cameos are really made. They are made from shells from the sea, mostly Conch shell. We watched on of the artists work on a new cameo and then went into the display area. The craftsmanship was superb. Sandy was eyeing the most expensive pieces in the cases, but after doing the conversion, we decided we could not part with 5000euros = \$7000+ US Dollars. I did find a beautiful miniature cameo outlined in gold filigree to put on my charm bracelet at a significantly more reasonable price.

We moved on to Pompeii where we stopped for lunch first. The minestrone soup was excellent yet different. Clear broth, not red. The spaghetti was good but the sauce tasted kinda like spaghetti-O's. The veal was fantastic. We were partnered up with a 28 year old Australian girl named Maria Schiavello, traveling alone on "holiday" for 8 months around Europe. Mom and I were impressed with her tenacity.

Next we took a two hour walk through the excavated city of Pompeii. It is huge - 65 acres of



Pompeii

The Mt. Vesuvius eruption of 79 AD buried the city of Pompeii with ash & Rock, that allowed an exceptional preservation of the whole Roman City



which only 45 have been excavated. Excavation officially started in 1748, almost 150 years after Pompeii was rediscovered in 1600. Pompeii was buried under the ash from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius on 24 August 79AD.

I was in awe of how many metric tons of lava and ash had to be removed to uncover this city. The soil was moved to locations all around the mountain to make this the most fertile soil in the region.

Hanging in the street market outside of Pompeii were lemons the size of your head. I've never seen a lemon so huge. They cut them in half, sprinkle salt and olive oil on them and serve them to eat as if you are eating a hunk of watermelon. Wish I could upload these pictures.

Another 2 hour bus ride and mom and I were back in Rome around 8:30 pm. We visited the bar - AGAIN - and had a nightcap and snack.

Tomorrow we have a tour of the Vatican and Sistine Chapel followed by wandering around and a dinner cruise.

Vatican & Sistine Chapel

We picked the second day in over 2 weeks that the Sistine Chapel was open for our tour. In fact, it was also the 1st day after inauguration of the new Pope. So just imagine the number of people that came out today to visit. the crowd and line was UNBELIEVEABLE. The line went around 3 walls of Vatican City and was as thick as the sidewalk was wide. We thought we had a prepaid, private tour - NOT. I wish I could have captured the look of shock and awe on peoples faces as they walked down Via Vaticano, turned the corner and realized they have almost 1/4 mile more till they get to the end of the line.

We were entertained by street vendors working the line selling "blessed" rosaries 5 for 10 Euros (approx \$13). Little wooden rosary beads on a string in a plastic case with the picture of Pope John Paul II on it. After about an hour and a half we finally made it to the entrance. Vatican City is the smallest state in the world with the Largest church in the World - St. Peters Basilica. The Vatican Museum is the 2nd largest in the world behind the Louvre and has 4 miles of corridors to explore. The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is the 1st painting Michelangelo ever painted. He was 38 years old and it took 4 years to finish. The restoration (which was actually only a cleaning - nothing was changed, altered or repainted) too 20 years and was finished Christmas of 1999. At 60 years old, Michelangelo was called back to paint The Last Judgment on the walls of the Sistine Chapel. It took 6 years for him to finish The Judgment.

We jostled, pushed, and strained our way through the museum, which is absolutely amazing. You are allowed to take pictures without flash in the museum, so mom and I fired off a few rolls. It was so hard to decide what to take pictures of. We



Vatican City

Vatican City— the smallest state in the world (440, 000 sq. meters) and was established in February 1929 after the signing to Lateran Treaty



Vatican & Sistine Chapel, continued

finally decided that if it moved us, film it. Took almost 5 rolls between the two of us. When we got to the Sistine Chapel - you are not supposed to take any pictures whatsoever. Now, with thousands of people shoving their way through the museum and chapel and about 10 guards the entire 4 miles, who do you think won that battle. It wasn't the guards. I managed to get a few good pictures in the chapel before I got busted. "No comprendo Italiano" seemed to get him to just shake his head at the "ignorant American" and tell me to move on. Never mind that the instructions were given by an English speaking guide. Yeah - Whatever. Ma says I'm going straight to hell with gasoline draws on and will hang out in that middle layer of hell - Purgatory. Well, make sure none of you ask to see my illicit pictures - wouldn't want you to turn to a pillar of salt.

After the tour ended, we nearly collapsed outside the gate.

Mom followed the red rag on a stick (the tour guide), while I got us some water. We regrouped on the tour bus and decided to have the bus drop us off near the Spanish Steps again. This is the shopping district - Ferragamo, Burberry, Fendi, etc. etc. We saved that the stores were closed today due to some type of holiday. After a perusal and orientation of the map (I am the keeper of the map), we decided to mosey over to the Piazza Augusto Imperatore where "The Best Food Piazza in Rome" is located as described by Food & Wine Magazine, May 2005. 'Gusto', Rome's only food emporium, houses a restaurant, wine bar, pizzeria, osteria (a neighborhood trattoria), and a cheese shop. We ate at the Wine bar and had the most wonderful ham and cheese sandwich. You don't know ham and cheese till the Italians do cheese. They sure do get it right.

After the wine and snack. I marched mom through the shopping district and up the Spanish Steps. At the top we ran into the street artists again and we had our portraits done. They look great and will be a nice addition to the ones we had done in Paris. After the portraits were done, we went back to the hotel for a little rest before our Dinner Cruise down the Tiber River.

Okay, this sucked. We had to had to walk down a staircase to the river to catch the boat and almost choked on the stench. The staircase smelled like a urinal in Port Authority Bus Station. I thought I was going to gag. We get to the boat and it is delayed a half and hour due to some "accident". While waiting we were attacked by killer knats and had to keep swatting and running away from them. The staff finally allowed us to wait on the broke boat for the dinner boat. There were a whole whopping total of 4 couples including us on the trip. Little did I know that there was no real scenery and the food would be so.

The best thing was the wine - when you think your asking for a glass you get the whole bottle. Best Part.

Worst Part - walking back up those stairs.

After a super quick ride in a Roman taxi, we made it back to the hotel and our heavenly bed.

Fountains & Ancient Rome

Our last day in Rome and we technically oversleep. We woke up to the maid coming into our room for cleaning. I guess it would have something to do with the room darkening curtains and the force marches around Rome that I've been putting mom through. We jumped out of the bed (well, I did) at 10 am and I announced that we would be doing a "short" walk in our neighborhood to see the fountains. Using our "Jeanne Oelerich's Rome Walking Guide" - Map D (www.walkingguides.com), I marched mom down Via Veneto toward the Piazza Barberini where we found Bernini's Triton Fountain - pictures taken. Next we made a hard left and walked uphill on Via Quattro Fontana to the Corner of the Four Fountains where from this corner you can see the Acqua Felice Fountain (with Moses in the center), St Maria Maggiore - one of Rome's four major basilicas, the Spanish Steps with the boat fountain by Bernini, and Piazza Quirinale - the highest of seven hills of Rome. - pictures taken. We made a right turn down a very narrow road (Via Del Quirinale) past the Presidential Palace to the Piazza Quirinale - there is a beautiful statue there, the entrance to the Presidential Palace where we saw the changing of the guards, and you can see St. Peter's Basilica in the background (see enclosed pics). We walked down a very steep staircase to the Trevi Fountain where you are supposed to throw a coin over one of your shoulders to be sure we return to Rome. Since we did not know which shoulder, we did both (see enclosed pics).

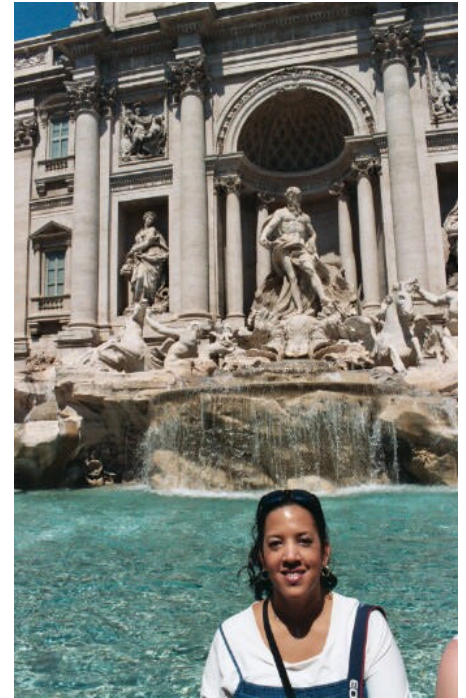
As I can see that mom is about to pass out - I did not allow for breakfast - we marched back uphill to the hotel where we decided to eat at the Cafe de Paris - also known as "Il Café della Dolce Vita" - the Cafe of the Sweet Life". I'm not sure if I can come back home to a boring ham and cheese sandwich and no alcohol at lunch. It is just standard here to have a little something with a meal - it's cheaper - and it makes for leisurely people watching. (see enclosed pics).

After lunch we went on the Ancient Rome tour which took us to the Roman Forum, the Colosseum, Circus Maximus, the Arch of Constantine, The Arch of Titus, and St. Paul's Basilica Outside the Walls. (see enclosed pics). We now can say we have done Rome.

HOWEVER, we had to finish it off with an over indulgence of food and wine and chose probably one of the most expensive restaurants in Rome - Harry's Bar (www.harrysbar.it)

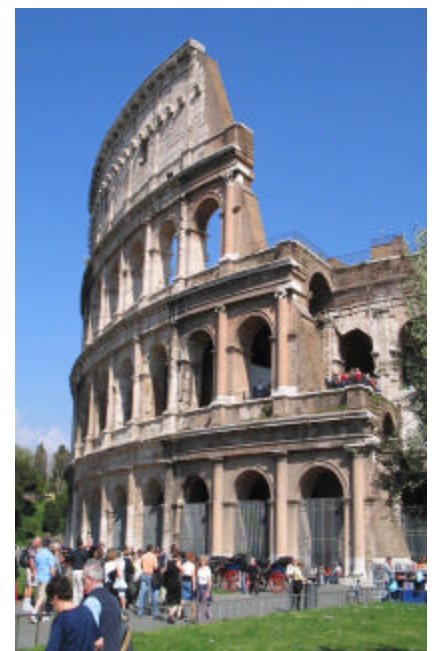
Quote: Fashionable society gravitated around the "in" places along the Via Veneto such as Doney, Harry's Bar, the Café Strega, Carpano, the Pipistrello and, the most famous of all, the Café de Paris, exclusive haunt of pleasure-loving dandies and film personalities.....Legendary Harry's Bar is the unique place that evokes the "Dolce Vita' as if it were a clip from the film, creating a vivid flashback to the golden era of the Via Veneto, when Frank Sinatra sang at the piano and all the stars made their appearance in this bar/restaurant full of glamour and style. As in the roaring sixties, you can still sip an aperitif, enjoy the live piano bar every evening and dive into the magic of the Via Veneto from the exclusive and fascinating Harry's Bar.

You can not rush dinner here. The first reservation you can get is at 8pm. We were one of the 1st people in the restaurant. You don't go to your table (even if it is ready) right away. You have a cocktail first. Once finished, you are escorted to your table where we were given a menu that has 4 courses. You also don't order wine by the glass. When you ask for wine, it comes by the bottle. Make sure you ask "quanto costa" - how much does it cost - or you could be in for a big surprise. Mom and I had all 4 courses - like the pigs were - and the final tab came to a shocking 250 euro - YOU DO THE CONVERSION. Holy cow. However, the food was to DIE for. Absolutely scrumptious. I think I was able to get a picture of the cappuccino with HB writing in the froth.



Trevi Fountain

Legend has it that if you throw a coin over your left shoulder into the fountain—it guarantees your return to Rome...





Fountains & Ancient Rome, cont.

Well we are back in the heavenly beds....our train leaves for Florence at 1pm tomorrow. Moving on the second leg of the adventure.

Traveling to Florence

It started off as a wonderful day.. We get up leisurely and go for a morning stroll and then for breakfast at an outdoor cafe. While at the cafe, we decided that Wednesday's is the day when crazy people are let out of the asylum to air out. We had several people walk by that talk to themselves, one man that stopped in front of the cafe and cursed, ranted and raved for about 10 minutes in Italian (too bad we couldn't understand a word he yelled) and you assorted unusuuls. It was one of the most entertaining mornings we have had.

We loaded up our luggage to the train station, where once we were dropped off, we were completely clueless. Out ticket is in Italian and the train board is in Italian. I got the trusty HP out with the translation software on it and proceed to slowly but surely, decipher our ticket and what platform we needed to be on. 30 mins later, I figure it out and we hustle to catch our train. We get to the front of the train and now I can't figure out which car to get on. It is not marked Coach or First Class. Looking like a deer in headlights, this seemingly kind woman takes us under her arm and escorts us to the right car, helps load our luggage, gets us to our seats all for the bargain price of 5 euros each. It was worth it. I was on the verge of a melt down. The train ride was very pleasant and scenic. We arrived in Florence, found a taxi and arrived at the "hotel".

Okay, call me snob, diva, WHATEVER. This hotel is not the Westin- not even close. We get up to our room and we can barely get our bodies let alone the luggage inside the room which consists of two twin beds, a mini bar (thank God) a bathroom that you can't sneeze in or you'll fall into the bidet and a desk. There is about a 2ft corridor separating the desk from the bed and the bed from the wall. OKAY. I'm trying to deal. No heavenly bed. OH MY GOD - what is a diva to do. SHOP.

I hauled mom out of the hotel and we proceed to do a



two mile march toward the Ponte Vecchio which is a bridge lined with jewelry and other shops. I was so distraught I had to buy myself this beautiful red leather jacket. After a sob story about how we were suffering and giving a couple of kisses on the cheek, we knocked off 60 euro for a nice bargain. Mom says that if I had let him touch the girls, he might of knocked of another 100. He certainly was eyeing them.

We strolled the two miles back. (I really didn't know that I was dragging mom on a four mile trek). The dogs were talking. We had two beers in the lobby, when the tour buses arrived. This place just sucks. Even the cartoon channel is in Italian. The lobby is supposed to be wifi. NOT. Intermittent at best and they wont let you buy a computer card for the computers sitting in the middle of the lobby for more than an hour at 5 euros each. Can you say not even Holiday Inn. OKAY so we only have to sleep here.



Traveling to Florence, continued..

We went next door for dinner (pizza) which was pretty good by the way, but to ruin the moment in comes 2 more 'yucky Americans' who demanded that the Italian waiter explain the entire menu to them in English. I thought I was going to die. Mom held me back from throwing the translator at them and cursing them for not even trying-no wonder they talk about us. We finished and left.

We are now killing time on the computer in the lobby so we don't have to go to our room. Tomorrow we will be up for an all day tour to Pisa-and yes I'm making mom climb the thing.

Till tomorrow for the continuing saga of the Diva's do Italy.



Leaning Tower of Pisa

The symbol of Pisa throughout the world... it stands 60 meters tall and is inclined 5 meters off perpendicular.



Leaning Tower of Pisa

Today we took a tour to Pisa to see the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

It was much more impressive in person than anything that I have ever seen in pictures. I took a wonderful video of a guard singing in the Baptistery, which has a "perfect" echo due to the architectural design. I signed my mother and I up for a climb to the top of the Tower and she was such a trooper. Mom made it all the way to one level below the top and I of course climbed all the way to the top to touch the flag. What a spectacular view of the Cathedra, Baptistery, surrounding town of Pisa and the Alps in the background. Just plain impressive.

We had some time to kill before we had to get back on the train, so we shopped the booths along the wall - mom bought a really nice leather purse and I've added to the snow globe collection. We then decided we need a few more pounds on our body and went to the gelato stand. OH MY GOODNESS.... this was the best "ice cream" I have ever had. So good I was trying to lick the little bowl, but mom held me back and made me pace myself. That stuff they are selling in the mall IS NOT gelato. Must have more before I get back to starvation, workouts, and my personal trainer from hell.

We arrived back in Florence and did some more shopping for gifts for our friends and family so I can't tell you what I got or it would not be a surprise. After dropping off our bags in the hotel we were back out to go to a restaurant that came HIGHLY recommended call "Il Latini". When we arrived, there was a line outside that went up the block or rather piazza. Well, being the travel snobs we are - WE HAD A RESERVATION - we went right to the front of the line and I almost had to kick off the Murano walking shoes and hand my jewelry to mom in order to commence the Ass Whooping this group of ladies from NY were about to get for getting hostile about us going to the front. They DID NOT have a reservation and wanted to swear that the restaurant does not take reservations. They proceeded to tell us to get in the end of the line. I promptly let her know that I DID have a reservations, that they needed to be made IN ADVANCE (see the damn crowd idiot) and that we were staying put. Mom steps up behind me as if she has my back (she did) and put an ominous look on her face. Obviously, the NY ladies did not realize that an angry black woman, backed up by an angry white woman is nothing to mess with. She promptly backed down.

We get in the restaurant and to our surprise there really isn't a menu. The waiter tells you what your choices are for each course and that's what you get. He gets mad and down in the mouth if you decided you don't want a course - heck, I was about to burst after the antipasti course. (Would have helped if I slowed down on the Chianti). Nevertheless, for all the hoopla, the food was okay. The restaurant was a huge tourist trap. No locals,



Pisa, continued...

almost everyone was American. It was entertaining, the company was good, but for all the talk I thought it was going to be more authentic. Harry's Bar was much more real (expensive) but worth it. iL Latini was cheap (50 euros for two) but average and touristy. Oh well. The Chianti bottle we killed definitely made up for it.

Tomorrow we are off for our Tuscany "Italian Immersion" Advanced Cooking Class. This should be a hoot.

Good Tastes of Tuscany

With only 2 more days left in the Italy Adventure, Mom and I were off to our Good Tastes of Tuscany Italian Immersion Advanced Cooking Class. All day of cooking, eating, and drinking. We were picked up at the Hotel Hell, and driven out to the 13th-century Villa Pandolfini, which is surrounded, by olive groves, vineyards and gardens. Native Florentine Chefs Lisa Banchieri and Maurizio Moretti greeted us. After having a cup of espresso and visiting the gardens, we were presented our menu that we would prepare.

Fettunta (meaning oil sliced) - an type of Toscana crostini Stracchino & Sausage Crostini Artichoke and Ricotta Ravioli

Stuffed Chicken Thighs in Crust

Dolce Forte - Caramelized Cipolini (Caramelized Small Onions)

Tiramisu (meaning pick me up)

'Nuff said. We learned how to make everything from scratch, including making pasta and pizza crust, making a dough to cover meats, making the best tiramisu in the world and drinking a whole lot of wine. We received an apron and all of the recipes to make at home. Can you say "Dinner Party!"?

We were dropped off at the Cathedral of Santa Maria Del Fiore, called The Duomo. There is a painting of Dante with the Divine Comedy inside. We did some shopping around the plaza looking for Fontinini statues and found a small store that sold them but not a lot of selection. Found some Murano and Venetian glass. Bought some doo dads, had another gelato and headed back for the hotel.

I thought I was going to get beat up by a street vendor for stepping on her sheet that she had laid out in the middle of the sidewalk.



Mom and I ignored here as she ranted and raved about me stepping in her territory. Whatever. We arrived back at Hotel Hell to be greeted by 3 tour buses of people. Retreating to our room, I tried to order room service, but they didn't answer the phone. I ended up walking around the corner to a little booth that sold snacks. We ended our culinary adventure with two beers and a can of Pringles.

Tomorrow is our last day. We are going for the full Florence Immersion. We have a tour of the Accademia Gallery (the art of Michelangelo) in the morning, a guided visit to the Uffizi Gallery (works of art by Botticelli, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and more), and then end our day with Florence by night with dinner, music and dancing.



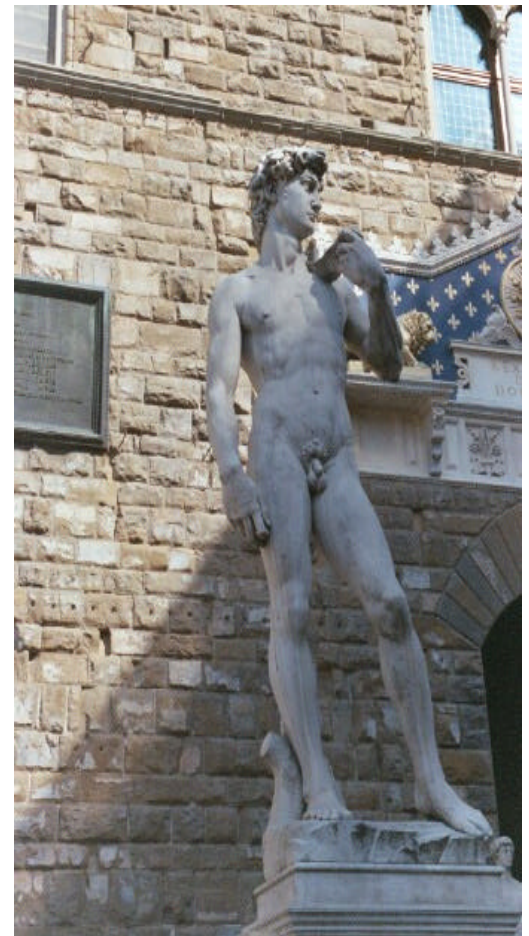
Grand Finale: Accademia, Uffizi, Dinner & Dancing

Well, we just had to make our last day an action packed day.

We started with a tour of the Accademia Gallery (gallery of sculptures) where you can see the original sculpture of David. Another awe inspiring moment. Nevertheless, it is the about the only thing impressive in the home gallery. After the Accademia Tour, we stopped at a cafe for lunch. We watched people devour a calzone the size of a small country, while we had a salad and fruit bowl. We thought we might end up with scurvy, so we decided we had to add some green leafy veggies and a fruit or two to our carb loading, wine drinking diet.

We (or rather I) resumed the force march through the streets of Florence, looking for the elusive trinket to take home. We saw some great stores but everything was very expensive due to our exchange rate. We make a snack stop to have some gelato again. We sat on the steps of some church near the Uffizi Gallery (I can't remember the name), watched the sea of humanity pass by, admired the backside of a copy of the statue of David and wondered about the statue of some god with the head of Medusa in his hand. You could sit and watch people for hours.

Unfortunately, we had another tour of the Uffizi Gallery (gallery of paintings). Our tour guide turned out to have a Napoleon complex and went on and on about paintings no one had any interest in. We all wanted to see the Leonardo de Vinici's, (he really didn't paint that many- most famous being the Mona Lisa and that is in the Louvre), the Bottacelli's (Birth of Venus) and the Michelango's. He wasted so much time on some obscure stuff that mom and I sat and waited till we could move on. I learned so much about why people study the paintings so much and so long. There are often illusions, hidden signatures (self portraits), and other symbolism, that you have to sit and stare and think about the paintings for a long time to get a sense or understanding of what these geniuses where trying to portray.



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After the tour, I marched mom back through the city to our next final excursion - Florence by Night with Dinner & Dancing. What a hoot! We made it back to the train station (probably a mile walk from the Uffizi) and boarded a bus to the highest point in Florence - The Piazza de Michelangelo - where you can see another copy (in bronze) of the statue of David. We sat at a café and watched the sunset over Florence while drinking a glass of champagne. You could see the whole city. It was beautiful.

We then got back on the bus to go to dinner at a "local" restaurant. It was a huge tourist/tour bus trap across from a beautiful Monastery; however, we had a wonderful time.

There were about 4 tour buses (ours was a mixed group, 2 buses of people from Peru, and 1 bus of young Americans). We ate, drank numerous bottles of Chianti, sang and danced. It was a great way to end the trip.

Now we have to go and pack for our return. How in the world I'm going to go back to work and not be able to have a bottle of wine with lunch. Alas.

With that, we end our trip to Italy. We hope you enjoyed the adventure with us.

Sandy & Lisa

