

Sixteen days in Italy (chapter one)

Visiting Milan, Venice, Rome, Florence, and many more in 16 days. It was good to get away. It was good to forget about the Ruby Hill towers, Denver City Council, and the Iraq war. It was tiring and exhausting but a worthwhile experience to see a different country and culture again. This was my second trip to Italy. Back in 1998 I spent 12 days in Italy. Many things have changed and many things are the same. Italy is a nice country. However, a trip like this reminds me how fortunate I am to live in the United States and enjoy the freedoms and technology of this country.

Dee, my wife and I departed Denver, Wednesday, September 19 Th at 10:20 in the morning and arrived in Milan Italy at 9:00 am Thursday September 20 Th. You lose 7 hours traveling east from Denver to Italy. The trip was very tiring. I have not figured out how to get any good sleep on a plane. I just dosed now and then. Landing in Milan we meet up with the tour director, Remo. There were 34 participants in the tour group. Most were from Denver. However, there were ones from Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Tennessee, and Pittsburgh. Our first stop was the resort town of Stresa. This is a town on the shores of Lake Maggiore in northern Italy. Since you are tired from the long trip the day was very relaxed. We changed American Dollars for Euro Dollars, got a bite to eat at a local café and relaxed on the shores of the lake. We then drove to Nebbiuno and checked into the Tre Laghi hotel. Nice hotel, we had a terrific view from our room's balcony.

On the third day we went to downtown Milan. We saw the famous Duomo, (cathedral church of Milan), with 2300 statues. You start to realize the detail and splendor that will be visited in the following days. Also, Italy is not as modest as America and total views of the human body are common. Near is the luxurious Galleria, (shopping mall). Inside the Galleria there was their famous but funny "bull". Tradition is to crush the bull's genitals and good luck will follow. That area of the floor sure shows a lot of wear. My wife and I ate lunch there and I must say the prices were way to high for what we received. The bull's good luck did not follow us. In the afternoon we drove onto Venice. We stayed at The Holiday Inn. Looks like any Holiday Inn in the States.

On the fourth day we got a taste of Venice. Seeing and reading about this city is not the same as actually visiting this fantasy city. It is amazing how humans can use and adapt to the surroundings they live in. San Marco's square with the world famous pigeons is quite a site. They have corn there you can buy to feed and enjoy the pigeons. They show no fear to humans. We visited Rialto Bridge, Bridge of Sighs and Doge's Palace. Again, the detail and splendor is obvious. This time we did not ride a gondola. We did that ten years ago. This time we went into the narrow dark streets and visited the fish and fruit market and many shops along the way. We started to realize that the number of tourists this time was much more than ten years ago.

On the fifth day we drove to Padua and visited the 800 year old Basilica and tomb of Saint Anthony of Padua. This also gave the travelers who wanted to a chance to attend and experience a Sunday mass spoken in Italian. We then continued our drive thru the Po valley and at Bologna you begin to climb the green Appennini Mountains and enter

Tuscany. Many areas in Italy are similar to Colorado with mountains and peaks. The vegetation is different. Italy's mountains do not have as many evergreens as Colorado Mountains. We stopped for lunch at Da Carlo's Restaurant near Florence. This was a restaurant that catered to Remo tour groups. We had a very nice lunch with lots of wine and fun. This gave us a good taste of the Italian culture and food. Late in the afternoon a local guide took us through the city of Florence to see Ponte Vecchio, Piazza Signoria, Duomo, Gates of Heaven, and others. This tour gave you a good experience of the Renaissance era. We stayed at the Novotel Hotel in Florence. The hotel was nice; however, from the location you could tell that it was a hotel that catered to the business traveler.

Day six started in Florence. Florence is a shopping paradise. Florence is known for its leather and gold products. There was this wonderful leather jacket that said, "Buy Me." How could I resist? The atmosphere puts you in a weak state of mind. My wife also found a gold necklace she could not resist. After we made our wallets lighter, we visited the cathedral church Santa Maria del Fiore also known as Duomo of Florence. This is a beautiful church with marble of white, rose, and green colors. The Uffizi museum was closed. The same thing happened ten years ago. Therefore, we were unable to see the statue of David by Michelangelo. We had to settle for Danny, which is an exact replica of David out in the square. Lunch in Florence was a delightful experience. In the afternoon we traveled to Pisa and viewed that famous tower there. Why does that structure continue to stay upright? Historians say that the reason it started to lean is that the structure was built on sand and the sand started to settle unevenly. About half way through the construction they tried to correct the settling and you can see where the tower has a minor banana shape to it. Ten years ago no one was allowed in the tower because of fear that the tower would fall. They also had great big blocks of lead opposite the sinking side in hopes of stabilizing the tower. It appears to have worked because visitors are now allowed to go into the tower and visit the top. By the way there is also a beautiful Basilica and Baptistery right next to the tower in Pisa.

On day seven we went to San Gimignano also known as Gimmy Gimmy. The ride through Tuscany countryside was very enjoyable. San Gimignano is an attraction because of its towers. In the Middle Ages there were 72 high towers. The rich and noble families built their own tower for defensive reasons and for showing off their power. Kind of like keeping up with the Jones. Only 14 towers remain but the city looks the same as it did 1000 years ago. On the trip to Assisi we stopped at a winery, that was on the agenda. There we got to taste about 6 different types of their wine. Naturally, they wanted to sell you some of their wine. At Assisi we stayed at Villa Verde Hotel.

I have come to the realization that these sixteen days are going to be quite lengthy. Therefore, I have decided to break this up into chapters. I am anxious to share my experience with the world, I can't wait to finish the story, before I publish it. I will continue in chapter two, three, and maybe four.

Sixteen days in Italy (chapter two)

In the first chapter I covered the flight over, Milan, Venice, Pisa, and Florence. This was the first 7 days of the trip. So far the weather has been very tolerable, not too cold or too hot. Typical fall weather for this area. This chapter will continue on with the next 6 days of our journey.

On day eight we left Florence and drove through more Tuscan countryside and arrived at Assisi, which was the “religious renaissance city”. We walked on the same streets as Saint Francis and Saint Clare walked and preached some 800 years ago. We visited the Basilica and the tombs of the saints. I must say after a period of time, all the churches, cathedrals, and basilicas start to look all alike. One of the members was able to speak Italian and Toni found a quaint out of the path of tourists and we had a very enjoyable lunch. This is what makes memorable memories. The times spent where you can see how and where the everyday resident spends their time. During lunch it started to rain and rained for about 45 minutes. This hampered our afternoon activities; however, this was the only inclement weather we had in the 16-day trip.

Loreto and Pescara are on the agenda for day 9, September 27, Thursday. We crossed the Appennini Mountains and drove by the Adriatic Riviera. Remo, our guide said this is where the locals go to vacation and relax with a limited number of international tourists. We stop at Loreto and visited the Santa Casa (the Holy House) of Nazareth where the holy family lived. The story is when the Muslims invaded the Holy Land; angels moved the house from the Holy Land to Loreto. The construction materials and dirt is totally foreign to the materials available in the Loreto area. Did the angels move the house to Loreto? You can come to your own conclusion. We stayed at The Serena Majestic Hotel at Montesilvano. This was a hotel right on the beach of The Adriatic Sea. Nice hotel, with a beautiful view from our balcony. The first thing we had to do was take a walk on the beach, where we seen local fisherman.

Day ten takes us to the small village of Pianella in the Abruzzo region where Remo, our guide, grew up. Nice little town, with no tourists, only our group. This was a nice experience to see how common people live in Italy. For lunch we went to Il Vecchio Silos Café Lunik. This was like an Italian wedding dinner. They had a DJ, lots of food, and plenty of home made wine and after dinner drinks. We danced and had a barrel of fun. After a big meal in the early afternoon, you don't really feel like doing anything. On the way back to our hotel, we stopped at an olive oil factory and saw how olive oil is pressed out of the olives.

On day 11 we traveled through the mountains of Abruzzo. They make you feel like driving in the mountains of Colorado. Mt. Majella is near by. This is a peak of about 10,000 feet high. The vegetation is different than Colorado Mountains. We have more evergreens in our mountains. We stopped at the quaint little city of Sulmona, which is also known as the “Capitol of confetti” the wedding candy. There were many items you

could buy all made from the confetti candy flowers, baskets, animal's etc. It was Saturday shopping day for them, so we seen their outdoor market. They had everything there, clothes, tools, vegetables and fruit most anything you would need. A lot of Italian Americans have roots from this area. Judy, a fellow traveler has ties in the town of Gioia Dei Marci. We stopped there and it was very touching to see the emotion she expressed when the bus stopped by the town's sign and photos were taken of Judy by the sign of the town that she had family ties to. Also, the feast of St. Michael was going on that day and there was a band playing in the Town Square when the bus arrived. Judy said that the band was for her return. We also went to the town of Isola Del Liri. We had four cousins on the tour Kathy, Mary, Sandy, and Susan. Prior arrangements were made to take them to this town and they met relatives that live in the area and they broke away from the tour and spent a night with their Italian relatives and then met up with the tour the following day. I forgot to mention that Gene and Kathy, another couple did the same thing earlier. This is a nice thing about a small tour. Special arrangements can be made and the tour customized to fit the travelers' special interests. In the evening we checked into the Novotel Hotel in Caserta which is near Naples.

The Aisle of Capri greeted us on day 12. A boat ride from the port of Naples took us to Capri. This is the land of beauty and enchantment. "Fantasy Island" visited. You come here to see nature's beauty, not churches, museums, or manmade attractions. There is an overlook of The Blue Grotto. It is just a magnificent and breathtaking view. The ocean is a blue that photos don't show justice to. In my opinion, I feel it is the prettiest and most spectacular sight I have ever seen. Ten years ago the view was just as spectacular. Pompei is near and you had the option, Pompei or Capri. We picked Capri, others picked Pompei. In the late afternoon we continued to the City of Fiuggi, which is known for its mineral water that is suppose to have health benefits. People go there to drink the water and become cured of their ailments. There are over 200 hotels in the small town and we stayed at The Silva Splendid Hotel.

On day 13 we spent a leisure morning walking through the town of Fiuggi. The chestnut trees were starting to drop their chestnuts. My wife and I had chestnut trees just outside our hotel balcony. I attempted to pick some pods from the tree and immediately found out that those pods are very prickly. You can not handle them with your bare hand. You could see where the pods were starting to crack and allowing the chestnuts to fall out. I took a towel from the bathroom and pulled a couple of pods off the tree and pried them open for the chestnuts inside. I never knew how chestnuts grew, now I do. Naturally we had to go down to the hotels ground and pickup a collection of chestnuts to bring home. In the late morning we started our trip to Rome. The Rome experience will begin in chapter three.

Sixteen days in Italy (chapter three)

Here it is October one, the thirteenth day of a sixteen-day trip. You are beginning to tire from all the past activities. You are starting to realize that the adventure is near the end. However, you continue to enjoy the last days of the trip. We arrived near St. Peter's Square around noon today. It is time to eat lunch. On the street going into the square is a café that gives a glass of champagne while you are ordering. Nice gimmick, however, the prices are high and the food not worth it. Being a dumb tourist most of our fellow travelers and us had lunch there and we all complained about the high prices.

After lunch we gathered with Remo and received some highlights of St. Peters Square, the Vatican and toured the insides of St Peters Basilica. We learn that the Vatican is a separate independent country from Italy. He takes us to a spot in the square where the pillars on the outside of the square line up perfectly and the columns of four pillars appear to be one. You see the balcony where the pope comes out to greet the audience and the Sistine Chapel. This is the place where the cardinals vote on a new pope and emit white smoke or black smoke to show the voting success. To go into the Basilica you have to go through a security check. The insides of the Basilica are huge. All the statues and marble work is overwhelming. It is hard to imagine the number of man-hours that have spent on all of that handiwork. As we leave the Basilica there are two Swiss Guards in their unique uniforms.

Later in the afternoon we start touring some of the sites of Rome. We see the Monument to King Victor Emmanuel II where the tomb of the Unknown Soldier is located. Many Americans call it the "wedding cake" because of the way it is shaped. We then walk through Roman ruins of 2000 years ago. This was the center of ancient Rome. Then, in front of you stands the majestic coliseum. It could seat 73,000 cheering Romans. How many gladiators and Christians died to entertain those ancient Romans? Next to the coliseum stands the arch of Constantine. In the year 312 Emperor Constantine granted freedom of religion to all. It was getting late and we then drove to our hotel. We stayed at Hotel Principe, it was about 30 minutes away from downtown Rome.

On day 14 we continue to visit the sites of Rome. Our plan was to tour the Vatican museum and the Sistine Chapel. However, when we got there the line was staggering at least a two hour wait. Remo, our guide commented that "he has never seen the line as long as it was this morning." Since we saw the museum ten years ago, my wife and I elected to go up into the dome of St. Peters Basilica. Naturally you have to pay to go up there. Just like you have to pay to go to the Vatican Museum. This is quite a moneymaker for the Catholic Church. After lunch we continue to see other sites of Rome. We go to Navona Square, The Pantheon, and Trevi Fountain. This is the fountain that was used in

the early 1950's movie, "Three coins in a Fountain". Tradition is that if you throw a coin over your shoulder into the fountain, you will someday return. We then walk to The Spanish Steps. There were so many people sitting on the steps, you could not enjoy the beauty of this site. The day is pretty much over and we return to the hotel.

Day fifteen takes us back to Saint Peters Square for an audience with the pope. I could have missed this segment of the trip. You do not get very close to the pope. They have 4 Jumbotrons placed in the square to give you a closer view of the pope, just like sports arenas. Most of the speaking was in a foreign language which we could not understand. Lunch was at Convento Ristorante. This was a nice place and we had a good time. We return to the hotel to start packing and preparing for the trip home and our final wine party and farewell dinner.

Thursday October 4th, the last and final day of the 16 day adventure starts at 5:30 in the morning. After a stressful and agonizing period at the Rome airport we finally leave Rome and fly to Cincinnati and then to Denver. After 22 hours of being up, traveling, waiting, and standing we are finally in our own bed at home. The trip is over!

This trip was a very enjoyable and exciting trip. We covered many areas that we visited ten years ago. Even if you see something again, your perspective changes and you see things you don't see the first time. We also covered areas that were not included in our first trip. Our first trip was a tour from Trafalgar, which is the largest Tour Company in the world. This tour was by The Italian Heritage Tours. This is a gentleman that has been doing this for over thirty years and loves his work. He was born in Italy and was a professor at a university in Ohio. I do not know how he got in the tour business. He is small, he is able to customize his tours according to his customers. Trafalgar has a set routine and does not deviate from it. It was difficult not to compare the two tours while we were on this current tour. We would catch ourselves saying the way it was the last time we were here. Both tour companies have good points and not so good points. I would say the most inconvenient difference was the luggage. On the Trafalgar tour the hotels and bus driver handled your luggage. All you had to do was have it out of your room by a specified time. This time you had to manage your own luggage by taking it down to the bus so the driver could load it on the bus. This procedure got very old very fast. I was a little disappointed in the food this trip. One of the highlights of the trip ten years ago was the food. It was wonderful! I cannot say the same for this trip. On both trips we had to do a lot of walking. Because of the narrow streets and bus restrictions, you must walk to the sites and this may be a far distant. We had more time to ourselves this time. In the previous tour we rushed many times so that all the events could be fit in the tight schedule. In conclusion, this was a very enjoyable trip. It was just as enjoyable as the trip ten years ago. I enjoyed both trips and would not be afraid to take another trip from either tour company. I am almost finished with this story. The first three chapters contained the events of the trip. However, I am working on another chapter. Chapter four will consist of my comments about different events and items that were unique to the area and how we handled and adjusted to the changes.

Sixteen days in Italy (chapter four)

The first 3 chapters dealt with the day to day activities of our 16-day trip. There are many other things that you experience and learn on a trip. Many things are taken for granted in America and you quickly learn that they are not guaranteed in other cultures. This chapter will deal with events and things that may be different to the customs we know and accept. Some of these things you will never see in a travel brochure.

First, you have to exchange American dollars for Euro dollars. When in Stresa on the first day of our trip we go to a bank to exchange money. We encounter a funny door. It looks like a revolving door only without the revolving doors and smaller in size. Anyway, you have to press a button outside and the outside door opens. You step in and there is only room for one person. When you are in, the outside door revolves shut. After a delay of 4 or 5 seconds the inside door opens and then you can enter the bank. My speculation is that this arrangement is to slow down or discourage bank robbers. Also, we saw guards at various banks dressed out in body armor. It appears that bank robbing is a problem in Italy. Anyway, you are in the bank and you get in line. Hopefully, you get a teller that can speak some English. To exchange money you need your passport with you and they take a copy of your passport. I guess that is in case you are passing counterfeit money. This is slow and cumbersome. I have an ATM card from my bank and there are ATM's all over the place. The next time we needed money, I tried an ATM. I put in my card and then you are asked what language to use. Then, something got lost in the translation. The next screen said, "speak your password". I thought it was voice recognition ATM. I spoke my password and a short period of time a screen came on, that the password is not recognized. I tried a couple of times, to no avail. There was another ATM near and I thought that maybe it was the ATM. I moved to the other ATM and tried it again. Same thing happened at this one. I then noticed the keyboard below and keyed in my password and it worked fine. That speak your password confused me. After figuring out the ATM, that is all we used for the rest of the trip. When we were there the exchange rate was floating around 1.42 American dollars for one Euro dollar. One bad thing about using the ATM I did not know what exchange rate I was getting because you just get the Euro dollars you ask for. However, when I got home I checked my bank account and the exchange rate was somewhere near 1.42 with a one- percent international transaction charge. Ten years ago we had to deal with the Italian Lira. The Eurodollars are so much easier to use than it was dealing with the fifty thousand Liras for a coke. Also, the taxes are integrated into the price of an item. The price you see is the price you pay. No more additional taxes are added on. This would be nice to see here in America.

The voltage over there is 220 volts. You have to be careful when you attempt to use your American 110-volt items. Some of the women travelers commented that their hair dryers or curling irons stopped working. They then said that they had the adapter. However, they just had the adapter to change the flat spade type plug to the European round type plug. Just doing this injects 220 volts into your appliance and burns it out. I brought a small Converter I bought from Radio Shack. This converts the 220 volts to 110 volts. However, this is only a 50-watt unit and could not handle a 750-watt curler or dryer. I was able to use my electric shaver, laptop, and battery charger for my re-chargeable batteries. I did have a problem one night. I had to recharge my batteries for my camera and then I plugged in my laptop and the converter started to overheat and smell. Fortunately the converter had a protection device in it and shut down before it burned out. After 45 minutes it cooled down and returned to working. In checking, I saw that the battery charger was rated at 45 watts, just 5 watts below the converter rating and then immediately plugging in my laptop it was just too much for that little converter. I then read the instructions for the converter, and it stated to use it for only a period of 30 minutes and then let it cool down. The moral of this paragraph is, "be careful with the electricity over there and your 110 volt American equipment." All of the hotels had hair dryers in the rooms' bathrooms. I am sure they have heard of many women burning out their dryers and attempted to rectify the problem by installing wall hairdryers.

Another surprise was Internet access over there. It is very limited over there and you have to pay for it. Vodafone has a network of wifi hotspots. However, I found the signal to be very weak and you had to be in the lobby to use them. Also, it cost 5 Eurodollars for 30 minutes. Another hotel had wireless connection and I was able to get the site on my laptop in the room but I needed the user name and password. I went to the desk and asked for the user name and password and they said their Internet is broken. They then took me to the lobby computer and showed me that it did not work. I tried to explain to them that it was the lobby computer and not the Internet access. I had no success and never got the password. In the sixteen days, I got on the Internet very little.

If you don't have international access on your cell phone don't plan on using your cell phone over there. I found out that I could make international calls from my cell in the U.S. However, I could not use it over there because I did not have international access and the phone just kept looking for a network and never found one. Some people had international access on their cell phones and could use theirs. Cell phones over there are just as popular as they are here. In Rome, I took a picture of an ancient Roman Soldier using his cell phone. That was a funny looking site. I wonder was he calling Julius Caesar?

The street vendors are very aggressive. If they happen to catch you looking at an item they sometimes follow you and keep pressing you to buy. Also, they attempt to put jewelry around women's neck. One time a vendor attempted to put a piece of jewelry around my wife's neck and I had a water bottle in my hand and I pushed it away with the water bottle. He said something to me in his native language. I'm sure it was not very complimentary. At least he didn't stab me! Street vendors must be illegal. They always laid out their items so that they could be picked up very quickly. When the police would

come around the street vendors would disappear. It was kind of like shooing flies. The police would come and the vendors would just move to another area. The police did not act like they were really interested in arresting any of them. It appears that they just tried to keep the vendors to a minimum.

We encountered many people that were very nice and congenial. On the other hand we met more rude people this time. Ten years ago I can't remember of any bad incidents of being treated rudely. This time was different. I don't know if the tour group kept us more filtered last time and this time we spent more time on our own. Or that ten years made the difference. The rude people were in the normal tourist attractions, not the small towns and local residents.

Both times the tour guide recommended avoiding downtown Naples. They both said too many Americans experience financial loss in Naples. In fact the tour ten years ago avoided Naples completely, they took the boat from Sorrento to Capri and not the port of Naples. There are professional thieves in all the attractions and I suggest keeping your pocket money and credit cards in two separate locations on your body and carry an extra credit card in you luggage. If you are a victim of a financial loss you will have something to fall back on. Also, have a list of your credit card numbers and the toll free numbers to use if you need to notify them of a loss. Take care of your passport. These passport holders that go around your neck are very nice. They have a compartment for your passport and additional compartments for money or credit cards. That is what my wife and I used.

Another luxury we take for granted is toilet access. Expect to pay for the use of a toilet in Italy. In some areas the fee was one Eurodollar for use of the toilet. That equates to about \$1.50 to relieve you bodily functions. You learn to go to a small café or bar and purchase some small item and then use their toilet facilities. Many toilets are unisex toilets with an attendant directing the person to the stall to use. I also noticed that many toilets were missing toilet seats. Many times I appreciated the fact, that I was a man. The tour guide also suggested to the women to carry a Kleenex, napkin, or toilet paper just in case there is none in the toilet.

Here are a few other things that were encountered. Graffiti is not just a problem in America. It is very common in Italy. Many places look like there is no attempt to clean up the graffiti. The freeways are not free. To get on the freeway there is a tollbooth waiting for you and when you get off there is another tollbooth to collect your money. Freeways always appear crowded. They are well maintained though. The price of gas is around \$7.00 a gallon. I saw prices at stations for \$1.20 Euros for a liter. There is about 4 liters in a gallon, or \$ 4.80 Euros for gallon times the exchange rate of 1.42 and you come up with price of \$6.81 a gallon. I asked Remo why is it so high and he could not give me any specific reason. My speculation is high taxes and tariffs. Oil is a necessary part of Italy's economy too. Our tour guide told us someone is always on strike. The unions go on strike for anything.

In conclusion, my wife and I enjoyed the trip. It was tiring and exhausting. It took close to 4 days for our biological clocks to adjust back to Denver life. We are now back to normal. I really enjoyed writing about our experience and reliving the adventure as I wrote. I never felt unsafe or threatened over there. But, you should be aware of your surroundings and who is next to you. The group was a terrific blend of people. All appeared to get along and there were no grouches. Before we went our separate ways we discussed a possibility of having a reunion in Las Vegas at a later date in 2008. E-mail correspondence has become common among the group. I took 794 pictures on this trip. Oh, the beauty of digital photography. Are there any award winning photos? I doubt it. However, I enjoy amateur photography and we have a DVD with all these memories to enjoy at future times. Will another opportunity come up to visit another foreign country? I hope so. I have been eyeing a river cruise up the Rhine River and Danube River. Maybe this opportunity will come up next year.

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