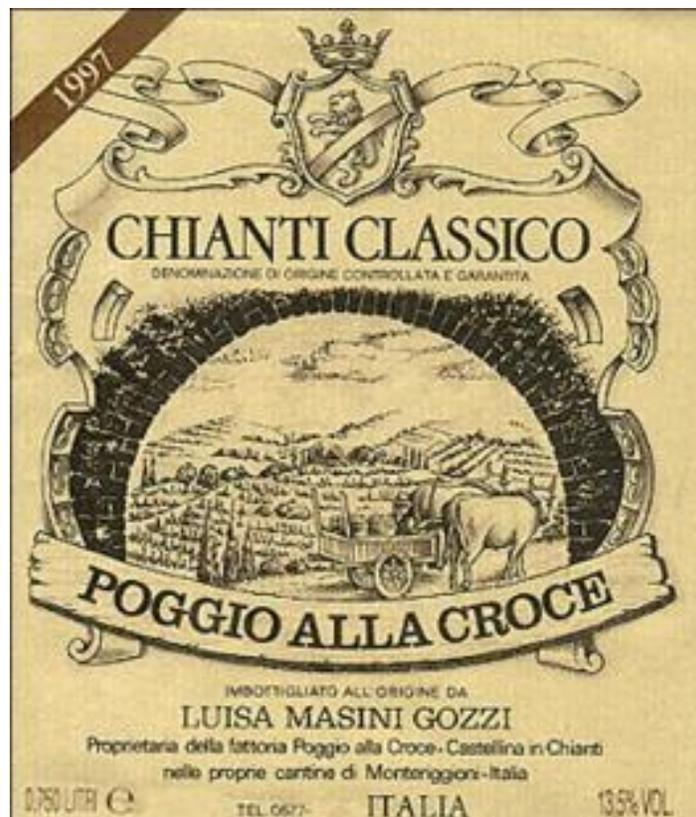


A Trip to Italy

...Che Bello!



Two Years of Planning

*Two Weeks of Fun, Food and Mayhem
In Rome, Umbria and Tuscany*

A Trip to Italy

Che Bello!

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Two Weeks of Fun, Food and Mayhem
In Rome, Umbria and Tuscany*

.....by John Perides



...for the dreams of my parents, Assunta and Steve...



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A Trip to Italy... Che Bello!



Tuscany

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A Trip to Italy... Che Bello!



Il Duomo Firenze

Part 2

***Touring with Professional Guides in
Umbria and Tuscany***

Chapter 10

Assisi and Spello

Assisi



Spello

The Plan... Monday, August 23

7 to 8 a.m. Breakfast (included) at L'Antico Forziere.

8:30 a.m. Depart for Assisi.

9 a.m. Rendezvous with Love Umbria private tour guide for morning tour of Assisi (included).

12:30 p.m. Depart for Spello.

1:00 p.m. At your option you may join us for a special lunch and wine tasting in Spello or go off on your own and rendezvous with us at an appointed location for our tour of Spello.

2:30 p.m. Rendezvous with Love Umbria tour guide for afternoon tour of Spello (included).

6 p.m. Depart for L'Antico Forziere

7 p.m. Dinner (freelance) Perbacco or Hostaria del Matto during return to L'Antico Forziere.

The Reality... In our first full week in Umbria we planned to visit several nearby ancient Umbrian, Etruscan and Roman [hilltop cities](#) with one long-distance daytrip to Florence in Tuscany. I had also planned in days of rest and relaxation on Tuesday and Thursday so our ancient bodies could recuperate

from the heat and the hills. Some of our troop wisely took advantage of those in-between days while others of us tossed caution to the wind greedily seeing as much as we possibly could of this mystical land. Assisi and Spello were the first up in our Central Italy adventures. This first week would also include Florence, Todi and Orvieto – more about them later.

The cities of Assisi and Spello are strikingly beautiful perched on hilltops overlooking the green valleys below. As you read through my accounts of our visit there are links to websites that will give you much more of the facts and figures. Visit them later if your interest is piqued. Let me try to weave the texture of my impressions of these places and our visits with a few words and pictures.

We entered the walled portion of Assisi and immediately were greeted by a phenomenon we would experience in many of these cities over the next two weeks - crowds. I now know why the word, 'scusi,' was added to the Italian language. It was so other English-speaking people could pretend to be Italian and brush by you without creating an offense. I say 'scusi' and you say 'prego.' Nice-a-nice and no one is offended. Out came my scusis, and I was off to the races. Assisi is one of those must visit places if you are interested in the Catholic religion or fine art from the Renaissance.



[Basilica of St. Francis and Interiors](#)

The Cathedral of St. Francis sits on a promontory in Assisi and is astounding because of all of the loving detail that went into

its creation and renovations through the ages. We had the great good fortune to have spotted an article before we came over in the daily blog from Italy called [ItalianNotebook.com](#) about the guided tours of the restoration that required a reservation to see. Isabella and her boss, Cristiana had taken care of all of the details for us. After only a short wait, we were given our hardhats and proceeded to climb several floors of scaffolding to see the detailed work under way on the nearly 800 year-old work damaged in the 1997 earthquake. We saw some of the most important frescoes in the building and the modern artists that are currently bringing them back to near-original life under very strict guidelines and prescribed techniques.

After this important 20 minutes we left that part of the Basilica and continued our journey with Isabella. Just before entering the Basilica we had rented a group of headsets and a microphone for Isabella so she could, in a respectful, hushed voice describe what we were seeing inside of the upper Basilica, but not in

the next area. For this quiet period of personal inspection, she sent us downstairs below the main altar and there we stood before the tomb of St. Francis of Assisi and the tombs of his first few followers. This area is considered too sacred to have even a professional guide speak aloud. If you have any soul, you have to be stopped in your tracks at a moment like this standing before this tomb. Nothing to say and nothing else to do but drop to your knees for a prayer.

Ouch! The hardness of the worn marble lower step at the tomb was an eye opener.

Okay, maybe a short prayer. OOF! Getting off of those knees with no handrail – not easy. We went back up the stairs and



through the rest of the Basilica. If you breathe, you must see this before you die. After the grandeur of being in this shrine to Francis and active church, what could we do? We continued through Assisi.

What we needed next was a pizzeria. Isabella knew just the right one. I wondered to myself as I looked at the selection, "This flat, square stuff reminds me of Elio's Pizza, fresh from the freezer." I was eating with my eyes, not my mouth. Don't cheat yourself when you come here. You must have complete faith that

you will not get a bad meal in Italy. Eat whatever they hand you or whatever your eyes fall upon. It's all good, or it wouldn't be for sale very long in this very food conscious society. The square, odd pizza was great, and they had the dandiest little white cardboard sleeve to serve it in that made it extra easy to hold and eat. So cool – so delish! Once again, when you get out of Rome everything seems like a bargain. The food and beverages for Diane, Isabella and me were super reasonable even in a town jammed with tourists. By the way, we were told the crowd was lighter than usual.

We ate the pizza in a piazza on the steps of the [Chiesa di Santa Clara](#). Clare was Francis' good friend and the founder of the Order of the Poor Clares. Inside the church I noticed some odd



balls in the distance near the altar. Now in New York these would be weird people just hanging out, but the odd balls turned out to be odd balls of flowers. Each one was white, a little bit bigger than a basketball and created from a different variety of flowers – gorgeous.

Isabella told us there must have been a wedding there over the weekend. We came to find out that weddings happen all the time in this season throughout Umbria. People drive in and fly in from all over Italy and the world to get married in these hills – in these churches. We would see some aspect of five weddings while we were in our little corner of Umbria.

The view from the piazza in front of Clare's house was divine. The lower town of Assisi stretched before us with its focal point, the massive dome of the



[Cathedral of Santa Maria degli Angeli](#). This is the cathedral that houses the small chapel (Porziuncola) that St. Francis helped construct with his original band of followers and the infirmary (Transito) where he died. We would have to get there on one of our days off, but that is another story. Also before us from Clare's Piazza we could see Perugia, Montebello and Torgiano on other mountain tops. Each with stories that would unfold in the weeks to come. Now it was time for the quick trip to Spello.

Spello



What a different place Spello was from Assisi. If you just looked at the construction and architecture, there were similarities to Assisi, just minutes away, but the number of people visiting this town was a tiny fraction of Assisi's visitors. What a breath of fresh air.

We wandered up and down thousand year-old



streets that were ours alone. The views were just as spectacular as Assisi and in some ways, more so. Spello is a tiny bit further south on the eastern ring of mountains. It has delightful views of Assisi, Perugia, Montefalco, Bevagna and other small towns.

One of the outstanding features of all of these towns is that as you walk among buildings made of rock along roads and tiny alleyways made of rock, there are sudden sprays of potted flowers with brilliant colors welcoming you in doorways, out of windows and off of small balconies. They are gifts from God and the residents of these tiny towns. Spello was rich in this gift from its inhabitants.



As we strolled we asked Isabella about the residents of these hilltop towns – mostly professionals and some shop owners whose families had owned the properties and shops for generations. The factory workers and store clerks of Italy did not live in these town homes – not unlike America. ‘Where do they shop for food?’ No supermarkets were evident in the several hilltop towns and cities we had already visited. Surprisingly, there were food shops, but hidden behind unmarked doorways. The residents knew where they were, but they were not evident to visitors, thereby not disturbing the fairy tale quality of these places. Kind of cool. Store owners were just happy to be the next generation to serve in the same location. They would pass it on to their children. Certainly one would want to keep up the family

tradition. Getting rich is not a consideration for these few. They are already rich just by living here.

Spello had its churches. None of these towns has only one church. We would find out that even the smallest hamlet sitting in a valley and not majestically on a hilltop has immense pride in their local church. They, too, being hundreds of years old and well-cared for.

This church, [Santa Maria Maggiore](#), in the middle of Spello was unusual because it was sandwiched in between other buildings, but it had the distinction of a bronze sculpture of St. Francis mounted and dressed

in full battle array returning dejectedly from battling at the side of Walter III of Brienne in 1205. This was when he discovered he did not have it in his heart to be a soldier. It



is believed this is where he prayed, and it was in Spello that he had one of his visions to pursue a life of peace and poverty.



As the tour of Spello came to a close, Isabella asked if we would like to taste some olive oil and see how it is produced. We said, "Sure we would." We drove from the Parcheggio just outside of Spello into the valley

around Montefalco. In just a few minutes we arrived at a modern brick factory owned by the surrounding olive growers. More importantly, there we would meet Emo Ricci, but Emo and his friends are stories unto themselves.



Chapter 11

Emo Ricci and the Olive Oil Factory



The Reality... We met Emo Ricci at the end of our first day of touring with Isabella Bellucci in Assisi and Spello. This was a spontaneous event, completely unplanned. What we learned was by saying yes to the unexpected you can add immeasurably to your experience of traveling through Italy.

What I didn't know at the time was Spello and the surrounding region including Bevagna, Montefalco, Trevi, Todi and Foligno are noted worldwide for the smoothness and full-bodied flavor of their extra virgin olive oils. Naturally, Isabella asked if we would like to taste some oil to close out our day. We were mere minutes from an olive oil production facility so off we went for some good tasting olive oil. She knew that we were about 2 months ahead of the annual late-October and November harvest and told us that we would have to be contented with tasting last year's production. We were game and did want to taste the oil, so off we went.

The factory of the "Societa Agricola Frantoio accd" was a non-descript brick building in a dusty parking lot. Of course everything was dusty in the entire region due to the lack of rain in the past month or so. Isabella led us to a parking spot under a set of tall trees which was perfect since Dave decided to sit this one out to listen to one of his books on tape. He rested in the shaded car while everyone else piled out of the van and crossed the hard-packed dirt parking lot to the front door.

When we passed through the front door - it was like going through the looking glass for Alice in



Wonderland. Just like everywhere else in Umbria, the outside of the building looked plain and old, but this was one of those places that was built new to look old. We immediately found ourselves in the showroom which was modern and well-decorated in a sleek Italian style like it was in the heart of Rome. Best of all, it was well air conditioned. One side of the room was decorated with richly colored olive-wood shelves that contained samples of the olive oil product in bottles and the classic square cans. There were also books on the history of olive oil and other decorative art.



In this section was a tasting table that was bare. We hoped upon all get-out that it wouldn't be bare for very long.



We wandered to the other side of the room and found what looked like a retail store with more olive oil products and a cash register at a checkout counter. On this side of the room there were creams, lotions and soaps among other products. Toward the back corner there was a small 20-seat theater and a doorway to the administrative offices. Through that doorway came the president of the olive oil commune, Emo Ricci. Our lives would never be the same.

Emo looked like a man of about 55 years with a stocky, powerful build and in keeping with a long-standing Italian tradition he had achieved about 5'7" in height. His broad smile clearly communicated his inner good humor and hospitable mannerism. Isabella began translating immediately. Speaking with Emo in her wonderful sing-song Italian, she indicated we were visitors who were traveling with her as a guide and that she could not think of a better place to take us to learn about and taste some of the

best extra virgin olive oil in Italy. Emo responded to her in Italian with an even broader smile, so much so I thought we were all going to fall into his Cheshire cat grin. She translated that he was thrilled we were there and would be happy to show us everything. I thought it was time for direct contact, so I shook hands and tried to introduce everyone in Italian, “Mi chiamo Giovanni, questo è il Diana, Judy, Liz e Donna.” Dave had stayed in the parked car to rest. Emo smiled and shook everyone’s hands voraciously. When he got to Donna, she held onto his hand with both of her hands and laughingly corrected the name saying, “Madonna.” Emo immediately took a shine to Donna and they both laughed enthusiastically holding hands for a long time.

He immediately called over a young man, barked something in Italian and sent him on his way to a local bakery to pick up some fresh bread. Isabella told us what was going on and our hearts leaped for joy knowing that the bare tasting table was about to undergo a transformation. The young man ran off and Emo took us over to the little theater, where we



all sat down for an English version of a Disney-style presentation about the olive oil production in the factory. Isabella told us in English what we were about to see. We all watched in rapt attention enjoying the air conditioned surroundings. When the movie was over he asked, in Italian, if

we wanted something to drink. Naturally we were all dry because we hadn't consumed a bottle of water in over 30 minutes, so everyone shouted an enthusiastic yes. He called another gentleman from the offices. He would fetch us water; "Gas or no gas?" Here we go again! "Er, ah, no gas," was the general answer, but Donna asked, "Could we have one with gas?" You think by now we would have learned the Italian for the word "both" (entrambi). Off he went and quickly

returned with several large, cold bottles of gas and no gas with plenty of cups. Emo made sure Donna had her own bottle with gas.



We were all downing the cool refreshment when Emo said – IN PERFECT ENGLISH – “Would any of you like to tour the factory? Wait a minute! Could he speak English all along? Did he learn in the few minutes while kibitzing with us in Italian? Yes - yes, he could speak fluent English all along.

Diane, Donna and I went off with him into the processing plant. I was now in my element. For 40 years I had designed and built factories, some with very similar processing equipment as this small factory. I proceeded to ask him dozens of questions about the material flow, handling, cleaning, separating, collection methods and scads of other stuff. At that moment he realized I could speak English, too. Meanwhile Donna kept kidding around



with Emo, and he opened up. We found out that he was divorced, 67 years old and was the owner of one of the larger olive groves and farms in the region. Wait! Wait! This robust 55-year old guy was really 67? Instantly I was hoping that the bottled water in my hand was filled from a local source. There must be a fountain of youth somewhere in this part of Italy. In the Italian way of communicating we were all touching and hugging by the end of the factory tour. Donna told him that she was a widow and he really lit up.

When we rejoined the others to taste the fresh bread dipped in the olive oil of this commune of producers, we looked like family emerging from a family reunion volleyball game, laughing and patting each other on the back. It was at this moment I first kidded about Donna leaving everything in America to come here and live on Emo's 2,000 acre farm. Emo heard me,

too and winked. The bread had arrived and Emo got out the big knife.

Italians do not cut bread with anything but a big knife. It is also in their DNA to hold the round bread in the crook of their arm while slicing toward their chests. While this is not in the OSHA Guide of safe



techniques, it gets the job done. We eagerly dipped the slices of bread in the olive oil. It had a very perfumy quality that fit well with the richness of the oil. By now it was pushing 5:30 p.m. and we were all starved. We

drank the water, gas and no gas, ate the bread, bought some oil, and we thought our time with Emo Ricci had come to a close.

As we were checking out at the register with our oil, oil soap and oil crème wipes and bidding everyone farewell, some new men came into the showroom.

These were others from the olive oil commune just knocking around town since it was still 2 months to the harvest. Emo introduced us to them in Italian and when he got to Donna, he held her arm and his introduction



lasted extra long. All of the Italians gave off a low-toned, guttural snicker the meaning of which was clear in any language. Emo was interested in Donna. He asked us what we were doing the next day. I told him it was a day off for us and we had scheduled a visit to the famous Arnaldo Caprai Winery to taste the Sagrantino red wine. Emo hit his head. Caprai was his neighbor. Not only was Caprai his neighbor, but he knew at least four other Sagrantino wineries that were better places to visit than Caprai – no love lost there. He exhorted us to forget about Caprai and join him tomorrow for a tour of wine and some of the other edible specialties of the Montefalco area. I had a dilemma. I had a reservation at Caprai.

Our day had been very full and a new adventure awaited us tomorrow. Rather than ending, the Emo Ricci saga had just begun....

Chapter 12

Our Special Dinner Fizzles



Hosteria della Matto, Spoleto



The Reality... From the olive oil factory we drove into Spoleto, but this time we knew about the Parcheggio in the lower part of town and the big escalator that went up to the Rocca. So we parked there, bought our tickets to go up and rode that baby to the top of the mountain saving ourselves a lot of huffing and puffing to get to our special dinner at Osteria della Matto. I had read on the internet about the spectacular pre-fixe meal this restaurant served and did not want to miss it! It was 7 p.m.



What? Closed? Look how dark the door was. We approached we banged on the door – nothing. What would we do?

Hosteria della Matto Photograph ©2010 D Walters

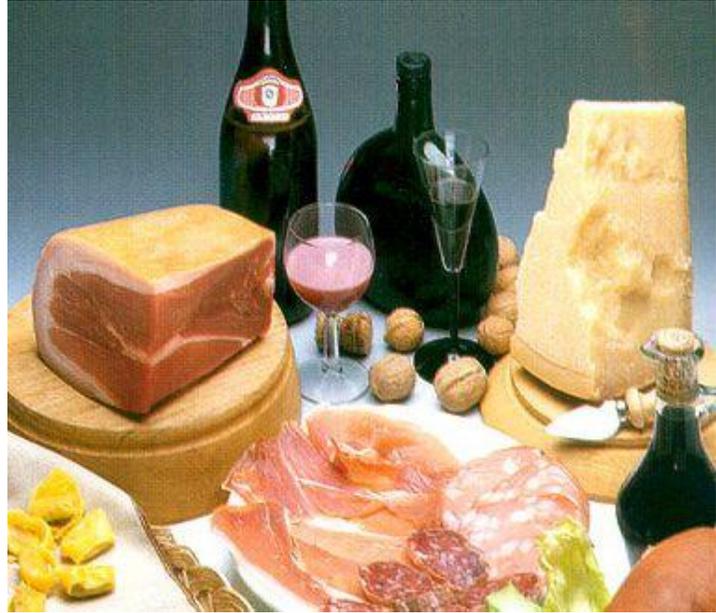


What we did was walk next door, get a gelato and sit down to reassess. It's great when you are a grown-up and can make any rules you want. Who says you can't have dessert before eating dinner? Not us. With the

cool, sweetness dancing in our mouths our thinking became quite clear. We would simply walk down the street to our familiar lunch spot, *Il Mio Vinaio* from our first day in Umbria.

We seated ourselves on the outside front patio again, and then waited wondering what the **H** was going on. The restaurant was completely open, but there wasn't a soul in sight outside or inside. I walked to the back of the place - no one. The lights were on; the doors of the *Enoteca* were wide open with all of the wine, pasta products and olive oil products there on display and unguarded. I guess they have very few sneak thieves in the small hill towns of Italy. I ran down the steps to the basement kitchen - no one. After about 10 minutes, I went across the narrow street to the delicatessen run by the same family as the restaurant. There was a clerk inside waiting on a man and a woman.

While I waited I sampled several different kinds of cheese and meat, some truffle spreads and crusty bread with oil that was strategically placed around the store. Delicious! I was doing okay; the clerk didn't have to rush on my account. He finally finished, and I said to him the same thing I said to every native Italian upon first meeting, "Bongiorno, eh, any ENGLISH?" To which most times the



answer was a shrug, a small smile and a shake of the head - no. This time was different. He shrugged, smiled and using sign language held up his thumb and forefinger as if to say, "a little." That was fluent enough for me. I pointed across the street and said, "eh, Il Mio Vinaio? Opena?" He used his best English at this moment because it involved money – revenue for the restaurant – and replied, "Sure, sure." At which point he now abandoned the delicatessen and the one new customer who had just walked in to run across the street to give menus to our seated party. We didn't care what we had; there were quite a few choices. What we really wanted was water – "Gas or no gas? Uh, no gas please, oh and one with gas, too." He disappeared for a long moment but those requests

were rapidly filled, even a glass of *vino di casa* and then he told us, “*Momma, she’s acoming.*” Evidently he had gone to the back of the wide open restaurant and made a phone call to *Momma*. When she got the call she probably thought, “*Who eats this early?*”

The waiter – er...store clerk – er, uh...son scooted back across the narrow street into the deli to serve the customer who had been left behind and was still waiting in the store. He popped back to us when the deli customer was gone. He took our order, brought it to the back of the restaurant and gave it to NO ONE, ran back across the street, and 5 minutes later *Momma* showed up. She was dressed nicely and ready to cook up all of our special requests. I noticed that she was breathing deeply which made me believe she lived down that block I had climbed up Saturday that almost put me into tachycardia. Of course, she was only slightly out of breath. She greeted us joyfully, remembering us from the weekend, and retreated to the downstairs kitchen.

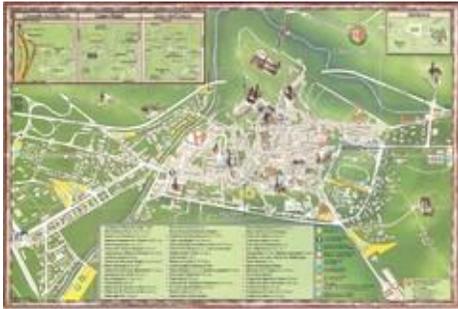
Bada boop, bada beep, food started flowing to us almost immediately. *Sonny* kept running between the deli and the restaurant waiting on our table and serving deli customers big wedges of *pecorino*. The rest of the help strolled in at 8 p.m., and the next thing we knew people started coming in to eat. By 9 p.m. they had a full house. At that hour we were already picking our teeth and contemplating the walk up the hill to the escalator down to our car. “*Who*

eats that late?” Apparently everyone else in Italy except us - crazy Americans!

Now it was time to head back to the comfort of our beds at L'Antico Forziere. We headed up the hill walking toward the top of the escalator. After dinner this was a bit of a chore. Sure, we had ridden the escalator up to the top of the town earlier, no problem, but wait – Gates closed. No access. HA! It seems they are happy to let you park below for free and come up the escalators for a token charge. The problem is the escalator stops running long before any one in Spoleto is finished with their Antipasto or Primi Piato, much less the Secondi, Contorno, Dulci and Digestivo! So newbies like us fill up on dinner, hike back up the hill, and find the gates to the escalators locked.

The faster members of our party turned around to warn the rest of our group who were too full to go fast (me and Donna) that we would have to go back down the hill and find a gravity-aided route down the twisting streets of Spoleto that have an un-Godly number of dead ends to a Parcheggio that now only exists on a map that is too small to read in the dark and may have only been in our imaginations to begin with – did we really have a car when we came to Spoleto this time, or did angels fly us here in a dream? (more about angels flying things around and Loreto later).

It was now completely dark. Here is the map of Spoleto we had. Can you see any connecting streets to the Parcheggio on this map? Can you even find the Parcheggio on this map? It was about the same for us with the withering light from too few street lamps. All of us wore reading glasses to boot, so in broad daylight we would have had trouble reading that map.



We decided we would go down a street we had never been down before, and reasoned that since it started from the main Cathedral of Spoleto it would be perfect, and God and his angels would escort us down to our car. Surprisingly, that is pretty much what happened. At first we went down the perfect street heading right for the Parcheggio that in a few hundred yards turned out to be blocked with an orange plastic warning fence. On the other side of the fence was a giant backhoe that had torn up the road and sidewalks - a dead end. Hey, let's try the next street over. I said, "Wait, let me go and see if this is a dead end, too." Ten minutes later, I returned to announce it went absolutely nowhere except a completely enclosed tiny piazza with 15 cars parked in it - a baby Parcheggio but not ours. I started to assign alleys and doorways for our party of six to sleep in, but they didn't cotton to that idea.

So down another strange street we pressed onward, with Donna behind us by more than a few steps. Finally, we stopped under a street light and studied the map again. In a few minutes Donna caught up bringing with her God and a band of angels coming forth to carry us home.

As she reached us she seemingly, arbitrarily said, "Why don't we go down that (steep, very steep) winding staircase on the right?" To me it seemed to descend into a neighborhood for poor people and the bowels of Hell – not that anyone is too poor in any of these towns, but I was sure that Hell and the Devil Himself could be found down that particular staircase.



With no better ideas we all descended the uneven rock (what else?) steps. For 5 minutes we descended this really long, twisting staircase to the sounds of occasional shouts and echoing babies crying. It was creepy, but we eventually found ourselves on a different street in front of another church (what else?). Down the dark street came the headlights of a fast-moving truck with two workmen. Now these really were the angels of the Lord, because when they saw us looking at a street map in the dim lamplight, they jumped on their brakes, screeched to a halt and started shouting to us in Italian. I thought it was a

stick-up. They jumped out of the truck and with arms waving took the map and oriented it correctly. We had it upside down. I pointed to the green dot that was the Parcheggio where, in a dream, we believed we had left the car. They indicated in their best body language and a very excited manner the Parcheggio was straight down this very road where we were standing in front of the church at the bottom of the twisting, descending rock steps that ran through the poor people's neighborhood and parts of Hell in my imagination.

Donna had saved us! They immediately offered to drive us, but when the other four of our party came down the stairs we all realized that was futile, too many bodies, and Dave and I didn't want to leave the girls behind. So we bid the two truck guys goodbye and with a wave of the hand down the road the angels disappeared. A minute later when the street was quiet again I thought to myself, "Was that a dream, too?" Nope. Not too far down the block we found the bottom end of the escalators locked tight as a drum. Just down the street was our Parcheggio, our van and the way home. BB would guide us from here.

Thank God for BB and Donna!!!!

Chapter 13

Emo Ricci and the Salumificio



The Plan... Tuesday, August 24

7 to 9 a.m. Breakfast (included) at L'Antico Forziere.

10 a.m. At your option you may do anything you want the rest of the day. Relax at the pool. Walk the hills and valleys around L'Antico Forziere. There is a bus stop in Casalina (very near L'Antico Forziere). The buses can take you north to Deruta, Assisi or Perugia and south to Todi and Terni.

You are welcome to join John and Diane in freelance exploring of the Umbrian countryside and nearby towns. We have set up a winery tour, wine tasting and lite-bites for lunch at the Arnaldo Caprai Winery in the commune of Montefalco (15 euros/person). We will stop in Montefalco and Bevagna before returning to L'Antico Forziere.

8 p.m. Dinner (included) at L'Antico Forziere.

The Reality... On the way home from Spoleto and our harrowing lost Parcheggio adventure I found out that three of our party, tired from our long, long day of touring Assisi and Spello with Isabella, were much more interested in resting by the pool at L'Antico Forziere during our first planned Rest and Relaxation Day than in going to the Arnaldo Caprai Winery, so my decision became much easier. When we arrived at our Ancient Treasure Chest, I called Emo back and told him we would be there in the morning. We agreed on 11 a.m. We could sleep-in. Then I went to the front desk asked Samuele to do the dirty work of canceling the Caprai reservations. As usual, he was a prince and only too happy to oblige. Our first day of

touring in Umbria had been very full and a new adventure awaited us tomorrow as guests of Emo Ricci and his friends....

Ah, we finally slept late – well not too late that we would miss Alesandro and his fine country inn breakfast. We broke our fast around 8:30 a.m. in a leisurely manner on fresh croissant, cheese, prosciutto crudo, fruit, juices and Alesandro's wonderful cappuccino. We had plenty of time since we would not be pushing off until 10 for our 11 a.m. time with Emo Ricci. I knew Montefalco and Bevagna were only 18 to 20 miles from Casalina, so an hour would be more than enough time to get there. As we relaxed over a second cup, Diane and I chatted about the previous day in Assisi and about the very entertaining visit to Emo's olive oil factory. We wondered what lay in store today.

Donna, Diane and I gathered in the lobby right at 10 and off to the van we went. We weren't even out of the parking lot and we were receiving signs from on-high that this day would also be challenging. I set up BB, the GPS, as usual on the windshield, programmed in Emo's address, and BB objected. What? This is when I learned that many of the addresses for homes (especially farms) in Italy are not precise. They refer to "localita" which in Italian means locality or "somewhere in the vicinity of." This is great for the postman who lives in the neighborhood and knows everyone and their

grandchildren, but is a near-death experience for people from 4,000 miles away with only an hour to get there! What to do? What to do? Wait, I did have that hand drawn map on the back of a napkin from Emo folded in my pocket. I looked at that. It looked like we would come close to Bevagna along the way, so I set BB for Bevagna. When she asked for a street I just put in “done” and she gave me the name of every street in Bevagna. I picked one, put in the street number “1,” punched in “shortest distance” for the route, and we were off to the races. BB showed that it was only 16 miles and we would be there in 40 minutes. Well that amount of time seemed curious and slow but just fine. We would be there on time.

We went south on the main highway for a short while which made sense, and then BB started us on another adventure, off the main road and into the mountains. We began the, now familiar, switching back and forth as we climbed the first hill. Soon we were rewarded with breath-taking landscapes.





[Sagrantino di Montefalco Wine](#)

[Montefalco](#)

Remember this was only our 4th day in Umbria and we were still taken by the panorama every time we went into the hills. Down the mountain we went, up another, down another, up another and then finally a straight run over to Bevagna which sits in the valley with Montefalco looming on the hills above the valley floor. The last part of our ride was just hilly, not mountainous.

When we got to the entrance of Bevagna I pulled off the road into a dusty parking lot. Donna and Diane jumped out of the van to buy some water in a small deli. I called Emo. It was almost 11 a.m.

“Good morning, Emo, this is John.” “Oh yes, John, how are you?” “Fine, Emo. We have arrived at the entrance to the town of Bevagna.” “Oh, you have gone

too far. You must come back on the same road you rode into Bevagna and look for a fork in the road, stay to the right and you will pass my farm.” “Oh, okay, I will come back.” “Fine. Fine. See you in a few minutes, John.” We disconnected and I immediately felt lost. Come back on the same road? Stay right? We hadn’t come close to Montefalco yet. There it was on that hill still in the distance, and he wanted us to come back the way we came. Gee, when they say “localita,” they really do mean somewhere in the vicinity of, in this case Montefalco. The ladies returned with their bottles of water and said the store owner spoke only Italian and German. So much for getting any more directions from him.

Off we went on the same road we came in on looking for a fork and a chance to stay right. We were only a mile or so out of town when the chance to stay right came up – bingo! We were so happy, but prematurely so. We continued on and another fork came up – well let’s stay right again and off we went. When the third fork came up, going right looked like we would go off into unpaved roads so we stopped. We were right in front of a building with a few parked cars and a name. I got out my cell phone which seemed up to that point to work on every hill top and in every valley of Italy - lucky for me. I could tell Emo where we were. I dialed and got a funny beeping noise. I looked again at the phone and saw that there was no signal where I had parked – unlucky for me. I looked off into the unpaved field and unlike Robert Frost

decided to take the road more traveled – the one with paving – to the left. We continued to drive for a couple of miles and found ourselves going through a very small village in the middle of nowhere. Look, look, there is a woman walking just beyond the huge building – another big church in a tiny town. We pulled up next to her and when I said my customary, “English?” She shook her head emphatically, “NO!” Summoning up all of my linguistic powers I said, “eh, Dove Arnaldo Caprai?” I remembered Emo said Caprai was next door. Her face lit up. She gave us detailed instruction not with words but by pointing in the opposite direction. “Grazie, mille grazie.” Another K-turn, a nice wave to the woman as we passed her again, and we were off with renewed confidence.

A few miles down the road we saw a Caprai Winery sign, and my heartbeat and my speed increased with anticipation. Around another curve and another, suddenly Diane shouted from the back seat, “Hey, stop! I think I just saw him in his car at the end of a driveway.” I pulled onto the very narrow shoulder of the road as two cars passed, and looked down the hill to my right – a pretty steep drop off of the hill. I stayed still and sure enough, there was Emo in his car next to me shouting through his window, “Follow me.” Another K-turn for us while he whipped down the road in his BMW. A Chrysler van chasing a BMW on twisty Italian roads? Ha! A few miles down the road he finally pulled into a parking lot in front of a building. What was this place? Tiburzi? It looked

familiar. Wait! Wait! This was the same building we were in front of a half-hour ago where we couldn't get a cell phone signal. If I could have reached him and told him I was in front of this Tiburzi-place...I jumped out of the car and told him the whole story and when I said the name like "Tiburzey" he said "TIBURTS! TIBURTS!" He was correcting my pronunciation before we met the owner inside.

The ladies got out of the car and Emo saw it was just the three of us, but Donna was there so his sounds of ever-so-slight protest and disappointment quickly faded to a warm, warm welcome for Donna, and a nice handshake and smile for Diane. He escorted us into the Tiburzi Salumificio (Pork Factory) and

immediately we were greeted by Gustavo. As the day wore on it became clear, Gustavo was the head of the Tiburzi family and owned everything, farms, vineyards, pork factory, pork products business, winery, cantina



and wine business. He was a giant of a man for Italians, maybe 5'8" tall - much taller than Emo and me by at least an inch. Gustavo looked about 75 to 80 years old but strong which probably meant that he was 120. He had a day and a half of white whiskers on his face, a full shock of white hair like my grandfather's. He wore work clothes that consisted of

somewhat worn grey pants, a heavy white shirt with both Tiburzi and blood on it, and heavy work shoes. The smell on the inside of the building and the blood on Gustavo's shirt reminded me of being in my father's butcher shop in Brooklyn, only my dad was always well-shaven and neat as a pin with a bloody full apron. Gustavo's most memorable characteristic was a broad smile that never seemed to leave his face over the next 4 hours that we would be together.

Emo introduced us. I said, "Grazie, Signore 'Tibursey' for having us." Emo said loudly, "TIBURTS! TIBURTS!" When Emo introduced Donna, he again had a long pre-amble that caused Gustavo to laugh with the same sound made by the two men the night before at the olive oil factory. Emo was moving in. Donna knew it and she played along. Gustavo started telling us in Italian about his pork factory while we walked from room to room with Emo translating. He told us that since it was past noon everyone was at lunch and would be for the next few hours – just like everywhere else in Italy!





The entire place was spic and span, so his workers really towed the mark when it came to cleaning up before they went on the mid-day break.

Once again, I was on my turf having worked from the age of 8 to 22 in my father's butcher shop. I had developed skills at making sausage and cutting meat, so I had lots of questions. Gustavo was happy that he was talking to a person who had been a butcher. He started us in refrigerated receiving where we saw many pig carcasses hanging from hooks. He bought



already slaughtered, gutted and split pigs from a very large producer in Northern Umbria. He walked us through the cutting and trimming areas and showed us which directions the cut meat went.



We went through his grinding and spicing rooms and finally to the casing stuffing area. This was a big room where the chopped spiced meat was forced into the

sheep's or cow's casing (intestines). By the way, if you eat sausage with natural casing that is what you are eating as the "skin" of the sausage.

I was really impressed by this room since I

had done this same work with a hand-cranked press in my father's store. Gustavo had huge handling and pressing machines to force the sausage into the casing. Cool. From the processing rooms we went on a journey of the aging rooms.





We entered a fresh sausage room and there was about 2 miles of sausage looped over hundreds of hooks. He pulled at the end of one long casing and squeezed some of the raw, spiced sausage meat from

the casing. He placed some of it in our hands to eat raw. RAW?!?!?!? He evidently had no fear of trichinosis. We quaked a bit, but Gustavo popped his into his mouth, chewed and smiled. Emo did the same and smiled. Donna and I followed suit and smiled. Diane palmed hers, chewed nothing and smiled. I only found out recently that Diane never ate her raw sausage, discarding it somewhere along the way on the rest of our tour. Gustavo led on. We visited about 20 fairly large refrigerated rooms on two floors. This was a pretty big place.





Vault after vault of hard and soft salamis, hard and soft sausages, dry capicola, ham capicola, full legs of prosciutto and other cold cuts.

Gustavo was like the father of the bride as he opened each and every large door to display the work of his company. For the son of a butcher, it was a beautiful sight.



For the daughter-in-law of a butcher it was amusing. For the cousin of the daughter-in-law of a butcher, after the first 10 refrigerators, Emo was Donna's main attraction.



We jumped back into the elevator to return to the top floor where we had entered this building clinging to the side of another Italian hill and found ourselves back at the big cutting and trimming room. It

was still empty since the workers had not returned from lunch. There was a young man there maybe 40 give or take a few years who looked all of 25. Gustavo started barking commands in Italian and the young man jumped into action. Large sheets of white butcher paper were unrolled and cut to fit over about 4 tables in the center of the room making a giant dining table. Chairs were rolled out of the office. The

young man ran off to a refrigerator and returned with a prosciutto, two kinds of capicola and another cold cut they called coppa that resembled the headcheese I used to slice in my father's store.



Coppa is all of the odds and ends of a trimmed pig that don't make sense to put into other products. That is all mixed up with spices and cooked in a broth that becomes like Jell-O when it is cooled. The gelatin

holds all of the pieces together. The young man jumped on a slicer and started cutting copious amounts of each cold cut.



Gustavo barked another



command and another young man appeared from nowhere and ran off with instructions to go

buy fresh bread. He soon returned with a giant round loaf that Emo started to cut the same way he cut the loaf the previous afternoon at his olive oil factory, in the crook of his arm with wide pulling strokes of the knife.

Gustavo disappeared into the offices and soon returned with a woman. The two of them were



carrying 4 bottles of wine, a bottle of extra virgin olive oil (Emo's Tiburzi Brand) and a bottle of balsamic vinegar (Modena, of course).

All of these items were placed on the

table. Emo shouted an order, and the woman disappeared and quickly returned with wine glasses and bottles of water, 'no gas' and frizzante (Emo had remembered Donna's favorite frizzante from the night before). Gustavo looked at us, smiled that huge smile and made motions for us to dig in.

We were all hungry since it was closing in on 2:30 p.m. and we literally dove in!



I found the coppa on the freshly sliced bread with a few drops of oil to be unbelievably good. I never ate the headcheese in my



father's store because of texture, but hey, just like the tripe sandwich I would eat in Florence in about 24 hours, tastes change as you age. Gustavo busied himself pouring the Tiburzi white wine. We drank and ate. He poured a Tiburzi rose or blush wine. We drank and ate. He poured a Tiburzi rosso. We drank and ate and ate.

Gustavo made a sudden shout in the midst of all of this revelry, and the first young man appeared from nowhere. Gustavo gave a few short commands in Italian while waving his arm at the door, and the young man was off and running again. About 10 minutes later he returned carrying an old graying peach basket that was about 1/3 full of beautifully ripened peaches and fresh figs. These were quickly washed, drained and added to the table among the meats, wines and bread. Donna squealed with delight. We all dove into the fruit which enhanced the flavor of the cut meats and took the experience to a higher level. Wine, fruit, cured meats, fresh bread, oil and vinegar. This may have been the best free lunch I had ever eaten! I “theenk” Emo was right when he said to us the night before that he knew of a better place to go than the Caprai Winery.



We spent the next 30 minutes in serious eating and testing of everything, but we had still not tested the most special local wine from 100% Sagrantino grapes. Donna asked Emo when we would get



to taste it. Emo responded, "That is the gold." He went on to explain that this dry wine was best tasted at 19° Centigrade or about 66° Fahrenheit. So the slightly chilled bottle was sitting in the center of the table coming up in temperature. He then removed the cork from the bottle to let the wine breathe. It would be ready when we finished our meal.

Several pieces of fruit, a half-bottle of blush, a half-bottle of rosso and a lot of cold meats later, we were ready for the Tiburzi Sagrantino. New stemless wine glasses were brought to the table. A large bag of biscotti that were purchased at the bakery along with the bread was broken open and placed within



everyone's reach. Emo then carefully poured from the bottle of Sagrantino. We each took a short drink of water to clear our palates. Finally the long-awaited Sagrantino was tasted. It was a superb, dry red that entered your mouth innocently with a hint of

the grapes that gave it birth. As it sat inside of your mouth it had a slight astringent affect on the tongue and insides of the lips. After the swallow it left an aftertaste that reminded me of the taste from chewing a red grape skin after the sweet center of the grape was gone. The flavor was fantastic and for dry red wine drinkers it was a wonderful experience.

Diane courteously took one or two sips and put it down. It was much too dry for her palate. Emo saw this and saved her for the Sagrantino's sake. He took one of the hard, sweet biscotti from the center of the table and demonstrated dunking it in the wine to soak it and then eating the softened cookie. We all tried it. It was fantastic and the perfect dolci cap to our sumptuous mid-day meal.



I asked Emo if we could see the ‘Tiburzey’ winery. He immediately smiled and said, “TIBURTS! TIBURTS!” He knew I would get it sooner or later and continued to smile. We would soon drive over to the Tiburzi Cantine in Montefalco. Donna asked if she could buy the left over meats that were still on the table. Emo waved at her to be patient. Sure enough, she had made such a fuss over Gustavo on the tour and the very good sliced meats we had just eaten that Gustavo wrapped everything up, packed it in a bag, threw in the bread and the fruit, added a full uncut prosciutto and handed it to her as a gift.

Off to the cantine we drove in our van with Emo and Gustavo leading in their cars. In no time flat we were inside of this plain looking industrial building that belied its contents. Inside was all of the modern vinification equipment needed to press, ferment and age the wine. There were also packaging stations and controlled climate warehouse storage. Of course



there was a beautiful tasting room that showed the entire process



on the walls from vineyard to finished bottle and more Sagrantino to taste. Donna and I had more.

Fully satisfied and ready for home, we bought a half-case of the Sagrantino for about half of what one would pay in the States, packed our car and were ready for home. This is when Emo and Gustavo pulled me aside and

asked if I could represent them in the United States. They handed me their business cards. I was flattered but honest with them. I said that I was retired and distribution was not my field of expertise, but hey, I could give it a try when I got back home. Since my return, I have been trying to learn the ropes and hopefully will be able to help these fine gentlemen get their very good products into the American stream of consciousness and stomachs.

No matter how hard I tried all during that day, I could not get Donna to make the commitment to drop everything in the USA and come here to live with Emo. I am pretty sure Emo was interested. Donna was pretty sure Emo was interested. She got cold feet and gave me a hard stare when I kept “kidding” about it. I stopped. So for now, there is no ‘Donna and Emo.’ She returned to her home, two dogs and life among the non-ethnic people of Lumberton, North Carolina. By the end of her week in Umbria Donna was convinced our day with Emo and Gustavo in the Tiburzi Salumificio was the high-point of her trip to Italy. I have to admit it will remain one of my most memorable experiences along with “Si, si, Becattini, si,” kneeling at St. Francis’ tomb, and gnocchi and porcini mushrooms....

Chapter 14

Florence and the Surprise Dinner



Florence

The Plan... Wednesday, August 25

7 to 7:30 a.m. *Breakfast (included) at L'Antico Forziere.*

8:00 a.m. *Depart for Florence, Tuscany.*

10:30 a.m. *Arrive in Florence. Walk around town as a group. Visit Mercato Centrale.*

Noon *At your option you may join us for lunch in Mercato Centrale or go off on your own and rendezvous with us at an appointed location for our tour of Florence.*

1:00 p.m. *Rendezvous with Beauty in Italy for afternoon tour of Florence and the Academy Museum (included).*

4:30 p.m. *Enter Uffizi Museum (included) for 2-hour visit.*

6:30 p.m. *Depart Uffizi for Enoteca Ponte Vecchio.*

7 p.m. *Wine, cheese and olive oil tasting (included) at Enoteca Ponte Vecchio.*

8 p.m. *Depart Florence.*

9 p.m. *Dinner (freelance) at Becattini in Poggio alla Croce during return to L'Antico Forziere.*

The Reality... *We had been out of the USA for seven days when August 25, 2010 rolled around. On August 25, 1940, Assunta Bianca Yolanda Oculato married Stilianos (Steve) John Perides. Today was the 70th anniversary of my parents wedding. I hoped this would be a special day with our visit to Florence.*



[Dante](#)

[The Cathedral of The Holy Cross](#)

Cristina from Beauty in Italy would meet us right in front of the Dante Alighieri statue next to the Cathedral of Santa Croce (Holy Cross).

We drove into Florence ahead of schedule following every British accented word from BB the now highly respected GPS Queen. Naturally the indoor parking garage we were heading for did not exist. At least not in the place where Google Maps had promised it would be. We did see it later somewhere else in the city. For the moment we needed to try to get parked and head for the Mercato Centrale; this was my pre-

tour target to taste the world famous Lampredotto sandwich made of cow's stomach (tripe). I stayed away from this as a kid and had only given it a second chance at a cousin's 50th wedding anniversary party the summer before our trip. That anniversary party was a real Italian affair in a real Italian catering hall in Queens, New York – Really Italian! The tripe was delicious. I was determined to have this famous sandwich in Mercato Centrale.

After failing to find the parking garage, we were working with maps trying to drive to Mercato Centrale. Of course it was in the restricted district. What's a restricted district? No cars without the special resident's sticker. Beyond the oldness and narrowness of the typical Centro Storico, every once in a while you also run into this restricted situation in an Italian city, residents only. Did our van have a resident's sticker? NOT! Round and round we drove. Finally, we found a garage right in front of a huge fort on the edge of town. I thought nervously, that this would be easy to find at the end of the day with a landmark like that. For once it turned out to be easier than even I thought at that moment. We gave our car and keys to the parking attendant. No one spoke English. I didn't even ask by this time. I just waved my money around and they gestured that I could pay when I got back. By magic - I suppose it was by using Judy Laundry Italian - I asked if they would be open at 7 p.m., and they assured me that they would be there. I felt confident. They gave me a

map. Wow, the garage was denoted by another green dot; just like the Parcheggio in Spoleto. I became even more confident. Some truck-driving angels would get us back to the dot if we needed help, just like in Spoleto. They did...uh, she did.

We referred to our much better 5-euro purchased maps of Florence and decided to split into two groups. That was a heady moment. Those interested in shopping for trinkets would go one way and those interested in vegetables, fruit, fish, pastries, meat and the all-important Lampredotto 'Sangavich' would go another way! We would meet at 1 p.m. at the Dante Alighieri Statue in front of The Church of the Holy Cross. We split.

Donna went with me and the other four went for trinkets. We found the Mercato Centrale in no time flat. What a place this turned out to be! If you are a fan of fresh foods, meats, produce and fish this is the spot.





[Mercato Centrale](#)

We were in the marketplace for only 1 minute and Donna had an espresso and a pastry in her hands. So I just had to have a sip and a bite. Yup – like everything else in this country, delicious.





We surged over to the food market stalls finding saffron threads, mixed bags of spice, and free tastes of olive oil, bread, pecorino cheese, salami and balsamic

vinegar. I was going home with a few bags of spice blends that I knew would make my mouth sing every time I used them.

The English was pretty good inside of the marketplace, since this is a major tourist destination. I asked about the [Lampredotto sandwich](#) stand inside the market that I had seen Todd English eat at in his travel and food show, and the response was it wasn't open today. Of course, this was the middle of the week in the busiest tourist season; why would I be so confident that they would be open? Clearly this is not The Mall of America. This situation might seem troubling for a person who was traveling 8,000 miles round trip to eat this sandwich, but thanks to YouTube this boy was



informed. I knew from [watching YouTube](#) that there was a cart outside the market building that sold the same sandwich. I asked about it and got my answer. 'Si, si,' it was open. I got my sandwich. Donna refused to taste it knowing what it was made from. She went pocketbook shopping instead and made a killing in leather! I took my first bite and was in heaven. The spices and juicy sauce made it all I had hoped it would be.

As I chomped away, Donna closed the deal on her pocketbook for 45 euros. I kept shouting from the sidewalk into the store, "Offer her 40." As we headed for Dante, we passed another leather bag cart, and the guy told Donna she paid too much without even knowing what she had paid. He guessed 80 euros. We said nothing and just smiled. Just think I could have skunked the deal trying to get her to offer 40.

We got to the statue about 10 minutes early and I went in to buy the tickets to enter the church. Santa Croce is like a city and national monument as well as an operating church. It has tombs dedicated to some of the most famous men in Italian History, such as Machiavelli, Michelangelo, Galileo, Dante, and some guy named A. Capone. Turns out he was a Bishop of Florence hundreds of years ago (in his first incarnation, anyway). Our guide from [Beauty in Italy](#) arrived right on time. She saw I had the tickets and we went right in. For the rest of the day she was a fountain of knowledge about the city's history, art, the artists, their training, their inclinations, and the

politics of the period from 1000 through 1700. She was all any student of art history could have asked for, and I thought highly of her, but the problem was Florence was nearly 100 degrees that day. The streets were busy



with tourists and big city business activity. The old cobblestones were worn unevenly, and I twisted my ankle this day. It nagged me for the next week

and a half. The sheer number of art pieces, frescoes, statues, paintings and other amazing things were far too many for a half day tour, but Cristina tried valiantly to gift us with her knowledge. We hung for nearly an hour in the [Accademia Gallery](#), much of it in close study of the [David](#) from numerous angles. Fortunately it was air conditioned in there and provided relief from the heat, but we lost our ability to concentrate outside in the heat after 3 hours. Everyone was exhausted.





I think you could go to Florence in mid-September or October, get our very same Cristina from Beauty in Italy, spread the same tour over 2 days and have a fantastic time. This is a city that deserves slower, longer contemplation. It is not a tiny hill town that can be consumed in a few hours. A few days in Florence in cooler temperatures would be a revelation. By the time we were done, it was the least favored visit of entire vacation. Even I had a completely different view of the city than I did 5 years



earlier when we came here on a half-day tour off a cruise ship. We were exposed to far less by our guide that day. I hope someday, I get to spend more time with Cristina at one of the sidewalk cafes of Florence - maybe across from the Pitti Palace.



We were exhausted so we skipped our wine, cheese and olive oil tasting at Enoteca Ponte Vecchio – well truth be told, the wine tasting skipped us. After several email reassurances from the owner the doors were closed and it was dark inside when we approached. We were a half hour early and the owner had told me he had a young child at home. He liked to eat dinner with the child, so we came in second. When I looked in the eyes of my companions, I knew it was time to call it a day in Florence.

We asked a barista in an Espresso BAR across from the enoteca if he would call us a cab big enough to hold all six of us and the driver. He called and then told us we would have to wait about 4 minutes. No problem. That deserved a tip. The cab came. It was tiny looking but cars in Italy are shaped differently from American cars. The driver jumped out, reached in back, flipped a few levers and the four-seater suddenly held seven. Whoosh! She took about two

dozen turns to get across the city. I would have gone the wrong way on at least 5 one-way streets and through several restricted zones if I did it myself. In a matter of minutes and only a few euros later, we were at the Green Dot Garage. She was our angel.

We popped into the van and left the city, heading to our planned dinner stop about halfway home on the long ride to Casalina and our Ancient Treasure Chest. We drove directly into the heart of Chianti Country. We were aiming for the small town of Poggio alla Croce in the heart of the Frazione of Greve-in-Chianti. We got off the main road and almost instantly started driving uphill on switchback roads. I noticed immediately that these roads were better paved and a bit wider than our 'lost in space' day after laundry a few days earlier.



Up, up and up. BB was a doll she brought us right there. We saw a sign for the town, made the final turn exactly where she told us and drove almost vertically up someone's driveway. It seemed like just another tiny paved road, but we found ourselves in the middle of a tiny piazza parking lot of five or six homes clinging to the edge of this mountain. Almost instantly a very old gentleman approached the passenger side of the car and smiled in the car window. I opened the window and said probably louder than he needed, "eh, Becattini? Dove

Becattini?” Becattini was the name of the restaurant we were looking for. He smiled broadly and said, “Si, si, Becattini, si” as he pointed at the house just up the hill from us, but he was pointing through it and above it. It was still higher on the hill. Was there a higher? With wide circular motions he indicated we should go out the perpendicular descending driveway and circle around to the right to find the road and restaurant above, higher yet on the hill. What happened next is storybook for this region.

We managed to drop out of heaven back down onto the main (HA! I use the word 'main' loosely) road and around to the right. We slowly ascended into a higher part of heaven and the town...



...a much higher – much, much higher part of town.



This tiny, little town is perched on the absolute top of a mountain. I could see the valley far below on both sides of the street each time I passed between houses. Sure

enough there was [Becattini](#) on our right just as my Google Map had predicted. It was dark, really dark, no lights on at all! Out the front of the dark place came a young man and what looked like his slightly older brother who had a few strands of grey hair – maybe more responsibility than the younger guy. The young man spoke English (angels at work here) and told us that the restaurant was closed (devil at work here). His grandparents had just gotten home from their annual summer vacation and they were not opening the restaurant until tomorrow. By the way $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Italian population is missing from August 1 to August 15. The other $\frac{1}{4}$ is on vacation longer than that! Evidently his grandparents had worked hard their entire lives and they deserved as much time off as they wanted. Anyway, who comes to Poggio alla Croce on August 25th? Just neighborhood people... and they all knew his grandparents would be away until August 26th.

Oh no! What now? Here's the storybook ending. The young man goes on to say that he and his father could open the restaurant just for us, but we would have to be satisfied with three or four varieties of pasta, grilled sausages, cutlets of veal and rabbit, a few varieties of insalata misti, sliced trays of salume and pecorino, fresh bread, gelato, cappuccino, espresso, limoncello or another digestivo, and maybe some other fresh grilled vegetables. Holy Crap! We would have to be satisfied???

Yes, yes, yes, we would just have to make ourselves be satisfied – HA!

He said, “Oh our pizza oven is not lit, so, scusi, no pizza.” Ha! He said no pizza. Ha! No pizza! We eagerly shook our heads, yes, went in, sat down and he came back with menus, reminding us no pizza and nothing from the rotisserie spit. Looked like we would have to skip the full roasted pig! Shortly afterward he came back with a large tray of salume, pecorino and bread and indicated this was on the house because of our disappointment – disappointment? What disappointment? Were we disappointed? Let me at it. The house Chianti was served in a liter carafe. I mean this is house Chianti in the middle of Chianti Classico Country!! Oh, good!

In another minute I noticed the old guy from the driveway 80 feet below was knocking around our table straightening other table settings. AHA! This was the grandfather who owned the place. In the time it took us to drive down his driveway and take the road around to the right, he had climbed maybe 80 or 100 back steps and told his grandson and his older brother that they were opening up ahead of schedule. We thanked our lucky stars. This may have been one of our best meals of the vacation. There we were perched on top of this mountain in Chianti with our own restaurant serving everything we could have dreamed of, and it was closed, but we were eating! Later on, during the main part of the meal, the grandson came out and brought a huge



platter of batter dipped zucchini blossoms. Only my Aunt Tessie ever made these. My mother couldn't be bothered with the delicate, expensive blossoms. Give her a veal cutlet to fry any day of the week. The young man said that these were a gift from his father, too. Father? Father?

Where was this father? The older brother was in the kitchen doorway waving. He spoke no English.



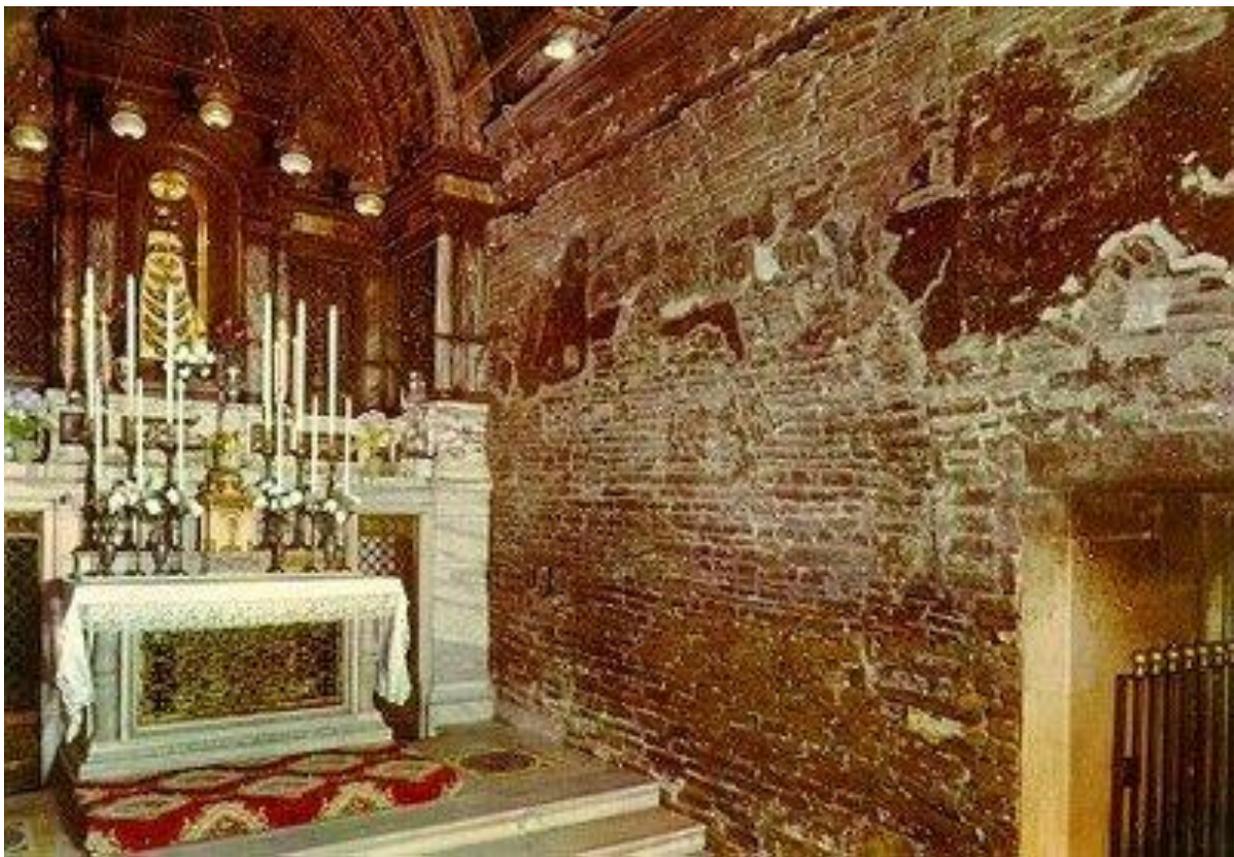
Later after settling the bill, I asked for a receipt and the young man said, "Oh, you will have to talk to my father and mother about that." He took me into another room of the restaurant where his brother was with what looked like his sister. Oh, oh, oh, I get it. This is his father and his mother. Evidently living on a mountain in the heart of Chianti country is also the fountain of youth. Well what then? Was the oldest guy really 150 years old? Maybe.

BB took us home from this faraway place in the mountains of Chianti Country in Tuscany from another experience that seemed as if it were a dream. After a tough day in hot Florence we were surprised and rewarded with balance. This country is all about balance. Dave drove to the Treasure Chest that night like an ace. I had had a party with

the 'vino di casa.' I knew some of us would be up really early the next day – one of our days of rest with an optional tour to the Adriatic Sea and the mysterious Santa Casa of Loreto. More about that later....

Chapter 15

In Search of Angels and Ancient Mariners



[Santa Casa, Loreto](#)

The Plan... Thursday, August 26

7 to 9 a.m. Breakfast (included) at L'Antico Forziere.

9 a.m. At your option you may do anything you want the rest of the day. Relax at the pool. Walk the hills and valleys around L'Antico Forziere. There is a bus stop in Casalina (very near L'Antico Forziere). The buses can take you north to Deruta, Assisi or Perugia and south to Todi and Terni.

You are welcome to join John and Diane in freelance exploring of the Umbrian and Marches countryside. We are planning a day-long journey to Loreto and the beaches of the crystal blue Adriatic Sea to visit the Santa Casa, home of the Holy Family relocated from Nazareth to Loreto in mysterious circumstances. Loreto is just 2 miles from the Adriatic beaches. On the way home we will drive south along the coast and then drive inland to the Piano Grande, Castelluccio, Norcia and home to L'Antico Forziere.

8 p.m. Dinner (included) at L'Antico Forziere.

The Reality... After the early start on Wednesday and a long, long, long day in Florence, we were exhausted from the heat and all of the walking. The Rest and Relaxation Day planned for Thursday was much needed, but Dave and Donna would be the only ones who took advantage of it. For Diane, Judy, Liz and yours truly were off in search of angels and ancient mariners.

This was the only logical day on which we could get to the east coast of Italy, the little-known holy site in the town of Loreto, and the Adriatic Sea, acclaimed as the bluest, cleanest sea water in the world – at least as acclaimed by Matt Lauer. We asked Alesandro for an early breakfast again and he obliged. Everyone in the Rodella Family was so accommodating. By 8 a.m. our reduced size troop was back on the road, first speeding north along the busy E45 toward Perugia so we could catch the dark red line on the Rick Steves map of Italy out to Ancona - or was it the Frommer map or maybe the AAA map? Nonetheless, Google Map showed this as the fastest way to the Adriatic and Loreto from Casalina, and BB agreed with all of them. Since the dark red line meant we would be on all expressways out to Ancona, Diane consented to drive this leg of our journey. Finally her International Driving Permit would be put to use. This was planned to be a day consisting of about 8 hours of driving and sightseeing on the road and an additional 4 hours of stops along the way.

We zipped up to Perugia and caught the road to Ancona, a dark red line (or was it a blue line?) on the map. Only a few miles outside of Perugia the reality of the dark red started to fade – not on the map but in the real world and what dark red should have meant. The road went from 2 lanes each way with a divider to one lane each way with a divider. Soon the divider ended. The road surface was still good but the road went from straight to zigzagging up and down hills. This made Diane nervous. This is not what she had signed on for. Suddenly around one of the curves there was a guy in a tight stretch one-piece outfit standing in the middle of the road trying to wave us – wave anyone - down. Diane immediately pulled to the right, onto the shoulder of the road in response to his frantic waves. Just one minor problem – as was true with every other zigzag switchback road in the mountains of Italy, there was virtually no shoulder – there was no guard rail. There were barely two lanes. We were only partially on the shoulder and dangling close to the edge. The other not-so-nice motorists were blasting right by squeezing between the guy and us. I yelled, “Don’t pull over. Get back on the road.” In a few more feet of bumps we came to a driveway of a home perched



precariously in the rocks and over the precipice. She turned into the driveway. It immediately dropped several feet down into the house yard

The frantic stretch suited guy ran over to our car, and we discovered with little surprise that we could only talk to each other in the pidgin-ItalioAnglo dialect. Somewhere in the middle of the two languages we were able to make out that he had been on his motorcycle and was run off the road by a motorist who fled the scene. He must have been in shock. We offered our phone to call the carabinieri, but he had already done that with his own phone.

I am not sure what he was hoping anyone could do for him before the police arrived. He soon departed and walked back across the road to his motorcycle. Diane was now faced with the awesome task of backing up onto the fast curvy road that had a blind spot just a few yards up the road. We agreed that my rest was over and Diane and I switched places. Instead of backing up I moved forward continued down the curving pathway around to the back of the house hoping there would be enough space back there to make a u or k-turn. Nope. Now I had to back up around the curve of the house back to the road. Off to our right there were two stalls that looked like they once held the manger where Christ was born. I asked Diane to hop out and yell to me if I was about to crush a manger or anything else as I backed in for another reverse k-turn – our favorite thing in Italy!

God knew the journey we were on that day and He glided the Chrysler perfectly into the little stall making it possible for me to get going forward again. We bounced up the driveway and as the stretch suited man faded in the rear view mirror we were back on our way enjoying the pleasure of the open switchback road again. The road continued to change between curving switchbacks, straight single lane roads and divided super highways all the way over to Ancona. A few of the super highways went directly through super holes that had been bored right through the base of mountains. Other times the super highway would abruptly end at a mountain were they were just beginning to bore the huge hole with gigantic machines – no small-time effort was being expended by the Italians to fulfill Rick Steves (or someone else's) red line dream for the map.



What I thought would be a 2-hour run over to Ancona wound up taking more like 3 hours. As we approached the city and the coast, one of the ubiquitous Autogrills appeared on our right. I needed gas; everyone could do with a snack; we stopped. The Autogrill did not disappoint us. There was plenty of gas;



panini were stacked high just waiting for hungry travelers; and the WCs were clean as a whistle. We pointed our way through their packed lunch counter showcases – no English - and all four of us wound up with excellent heated sandwiches, beverages, candy and ice cream – yes ice cream in the middle of the day; we were on vacation! So I treated Diane and myself to what I had by now come to believe was the Italian version of a Dove Bar, the Magnum! It wasn't my first Magnum on the trip. Later I found out it was made by the British/Dutch Unilever Company. Fooled again!!



[Ancona](#)

Refreshed and back on the road we found ourselves cruising into Ancona in a few more minutes. The fast, gently curving road dropped out of the hills into the city revealing a spectacular view of the crystal, blue waters of the Adriatic Sea. The old city, elevated on cliffs overlooking the sea sat there like a jewel against the picturesque backdrop.

We eagerly drove into the city following BB's voice on our GPS which we had set for the Piazza del Duomo, the main church of Ancona. We wanted this spot because the Duomo was on a bluff overlooking the sea and we knew it would be the best view of the sea in town. Quickly BB took us onto a ring road that went up and down as well as around the coastline – great views. Soon we were climbing a narrow road along a fortress wall with a solid line of parked cars making the roadway even narrower. Up, up and around a curve and we pulled right into the parking lot of a Best Western. Wait, where was the Duomo? We got out of the car and looked around. We had a spectacular view of the harbor with industrial buildings and shipping docks but not the pristine Adriatic we had expected. There was a huge cruise



ship belching out the darkest black smoke as it pulled out of the harbor, but where was the Duomo? “Over there, look over there,” Liz said.

We turned and saw in the distance on the next hilltop the Duomo. See it way back there on the green hill? Beautiful, but it was going to be back down this hill, through more of the

old city and up another hill. We contented ourselves for the moment with shooting pictures of the harbor and the belching black smoke from right there in the parking lot, being careful to edit out the Best Western hotel



entrance and trying to limit the smoke. I bet not as many people come to visit the Duomo now that the belching smoke machines are in the harbor. We piled back into the van to find our way over to Piazza del Duomo.

You guessed it – going through that city was just as difficult as every other small Italian city although Ancona did have curbs and sidewalks so it felt spacious. Lots of one-ways and in this case barely any signs, and of course BB had her ideas on which way to turn that didn't always work out. Suddenly, heading around a corner following some off-beat one-way street there was a Banco Popolare with an ATM. I was still in the mood for collecting cash so I made the turn and stopped a bit sloppily near the corner, maybe 2 or 3 feet from the curb, but there was not another soul on this back street and we would only be a minute. Judy and Liz wanted a few Euros too, so we popped out of the van, crossed the narrow street and started to work our magic with the ATM

making Euros appear out of concrete and steel. I swear; we were there less than 2 minutes trying to make our withdrawals and there was honking. Out of nowhere about 6 cars were blocked by the van and a woman about our age or a bit older was waving her fist out the driver's side window at us to move the van. No translation was needed. Using everything I had been taught on the streets of New York about international driving etiquette I ran to the curb and in a very animated way motioned with my arms while yelling "GO AROUND - GO AROUND!" There was room to get by; she just wanted us to move. No deal, lady! "GO AROUND - GO AROUND!" ...and she went around. None of the other cars had any trouble pulling around the van. We had just scored another triumph in Italio-American diplomatic relations.

Filled with Euros we happily made our way through the city and found the Duomo. It was here that I began my search for ancient mariners. We were at a high point both in land and in heart, but there was one problem. Ancient shrubs had grown up all around the 4-foot high perimeter stone wall surrounding the Duomo gardens and it was nearly impossible to see the Adriatic.

I looked all around and could not find a clear place to shoot some photos to prove I had been there – oh, nuts! Then an idea came to mind that would have been better



executed when I was 30 years younger. I would scale the wall and stand on it holding onto the wrought iron fence on top of the wall. I found a water fountain that was built against the side of the wall about 50 feet from the corner facing the Adriatic. That provided a toehold and I actually was able to right myself on the top of the wall and get into a standing position. I had not imagined during all of those hours at the gym leading up to the trip that the strength conditioning would pay off in this way, but it did help. I inched along the wall holding onto the fence and made it to the corner.

The view was spectacular. I could see white sails and the wakes of cruisers frolicking off the coast on the bluest water I can ever remember seeing.

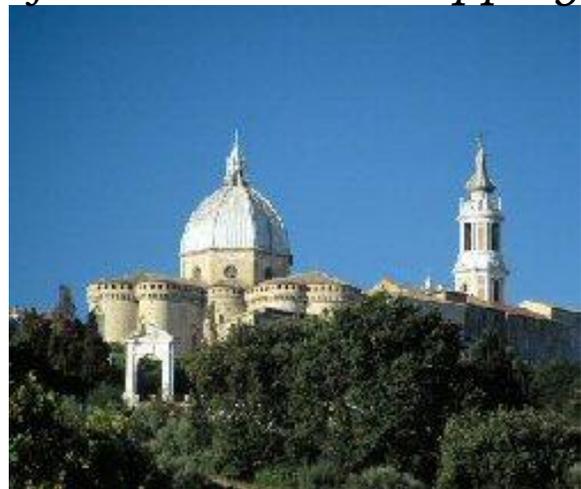




On the next hill down the coast was a view of an ancient building on a bluff and a home on a small hill in between. I held my camera high over my head and poof – magic happened.

Now all I had left to do was dismount the wall. At 62 years of age I find one lands a bit harder than the last time you may have jumped off a 4-foot wall. I guess it was because during the last 10 or so years I had the mature good sense to not jump off of walls. I made it down with only a slight shock to my Keds and the sore ankle from Florence. We were ready for our ride to Loreto and down the Adriatic coast.

After visiting the Duomo, getting out of Ancona to the expressway south was much, much easier than getting in. In no time flat we found ourselves zipping along at 100 kilometers an hour, and in just 15 minutes we were off the highway and following a big tourist bus up the hill toward Loreto. We could see the basilica looming over our heads.



The big bus graciously turned off toward the bus parking lot and we found ourselves in the heart of Loreto right at the gate to the Centro Storico. No Cars Allowed! What else? We had to find a parking space on the street. Oy! This was a formidable task everywhere we went - except in Loreto. Fifty feet from the main gate we turned a corner and there was a magic space open for our enjoyment. I pulled in sure that there would be a catch. No signs – no meters - no catch. No catch? Nope, no catch even when we returned and departed. How unusual. I attributed it to the power and presence of the spirit of the Holy Family. Why? Let me tell you about why we were in Loreto...

Before we left for our vacation I had stumbled upon this little known fact. The house where Mary and Jesus both grew up was now located in this little town of Loreto on Italy's east coast. How did it get there? Why was it that every deeply religious person I spoke to had no knowledge of this place? This included our local priests. Here is the dogma.

Around 1291 the advancing Muslim Turks were closing in on the territories that included Nazareth. For 12 centuries Christians had revered as a shrine a simple 3-sided home that had been built up against a cave. It was reputed to be Mary's home and the location of The Annunciation and the place where the young Jesus would reside for decades and mature into the man who preached the Gospel. In 336 Empress Helena visited the shrine and ordered that a

basilica be built around it. For the next 900 years Christians worshiped at the basilica. As the Muslims closed in Christians were running wild to get away, abandoning house and home. The basilica and its contents faced certain ruin. That's when as the legend goes, a "Band of Angels" appeared in Nazareth, lifted the house off of its foundation, and flew it across the Mediterranean Sea to Tsat, a suburb of Rijeka, Croatia. Later, the Virgin Mary appeared at this site and there were claims of miraculous cures that were confirmed by a Papal Investigation Team.

In 1294, the "Angel Moving Team" showed up again for reasons undocumented and moved the house across the Adriatic Sea to the hills of Recanati for a brief stay. Under uncertain circumstances the house was relocated 2 miles to the hills of Loreto in 1295. Certainly angels must have been involved with all of these moves. There was no Croatian Mayflower Movers franchise at the time. For the next 700+ years to the present day, this tiny structure in Loreto has been visited by millions of pilgrims from around the world where many prayers of the faithful have been lifted to heaven and answered.

Papal bulls were issued by both Popes Paul V and Julius II around 1500 in favor of the shrine. In the late 1500s Pope Sixtus V ordered the construction of a church façade for the basilica that had been constructed sometime earlier to enclose the Site of the Holy Family's House (La Santa Casa).



The issue of the Band of Angels transporting the house three times to its current site in Loreto has never been identified by any of the popes as a matter of faith for Christians to believe in. That belief is just a spontaneous expression and tradition that has enthralled the pilgrims coming to the site. Official literature available inside the basilica during our visit indicates two telling points. First, modern scientific evidence shows the stone at the base of the Santa Casa in Loreto to be identical to the stone in the foundation located in Nazareth where the house is believed to have originated. Second, there is archaeological evidence that indicates the house was disassembled and reassembled which leads to a conclusion

that there was human intervention in the movements. So the Angels may have been Croatian soldiers who were on the crusade in 1291.

...After parking successfully we passed through the gate into the Centro Storico and were once again in an old town with streets of chiseled stone and homes of smooth stone and mortar. This was a bit more current than the towns of Spoleto, Todi and Assisi. Many of the buildings just inside the gate were commercial places such as restaurants, gelato shops, bars for coffee, tabacchi (I guess we could have purchased bus tickets there but none were needed today), and trinket shops. A brief stop in a coffee bar for bottled water (no gas, please) and the use of the WCs and we were off to the shrine. The basilica was in a large piazza that was fairly crowded with pilgrims on a Thursday afternoon - lots of people in wheelchairs and with various assistive devices for walking. I felt a bit humbled by comparison to the faith of these good folks, since for my back pain all I had to do was take a Celebrex capsule that morning. These folks were here to pray for the healing of much more serious conditions – what faith!

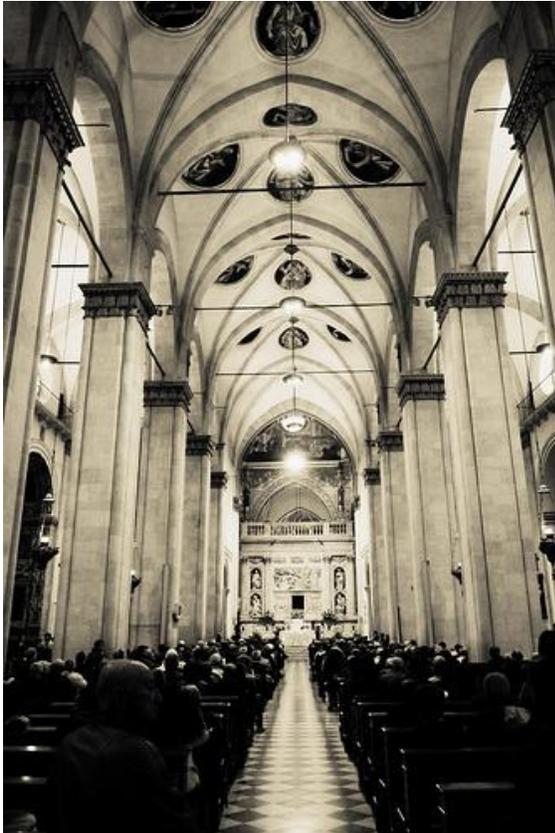
We went right into the basilica, paid the modest entry fee, collected our literature and began to wander. The four of us wandered off in different directions occasionally passing by each other with silent looks of amazement. As with so many other big basilicas that we had entered, the interior and the artwork was



spectacular. What struck me in particular was the absolute immaculate condition of all parts of the interior. Being so close to the salty sea, I guess I

expected to see much more wear and tear from the passing years. It looked like it was constructed last week – miraculous.





The nave of the church which was very white extended all the way to the Holy Family's House located right in the center aisle under the dome. It was a small stone room enclosed in an ornate marble screen on all four sides with entry and exit doors on the left and right sides. The marble enclosure had been built centuries before to protect the stone walls. I did not

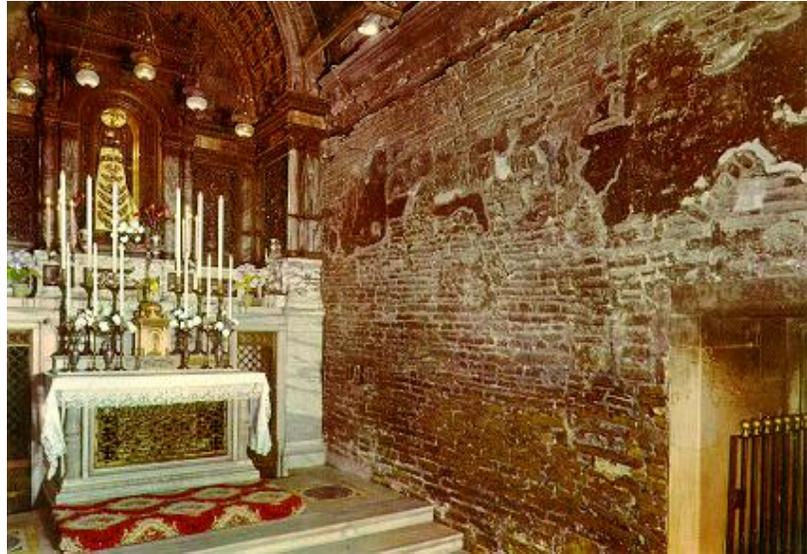
know this fact as I approached the house from the right side. I was confused by this very ornate looking building. Then I stepped inside. Immediately it became clear what



I had been looking at on the outside. The inside revealed three ancient walls that did look like they could have been the simple structure made by a mason 2,000 years ago to enclose the front of a cave. The open end had long ago been closed with a wall,

and an altar had been placed in the interior along that new wall.

I found about 20 people shoulder to shoulder all staring in the same direction at the altar with a



bejeweled Black Madonna and Child. I was in a state of awe at this point thinking this may have been the very structure where Mary and Jesus lived. It then occurred to me that everyone was looking at the wrong thing. They were transfixed in prayer staring at the Black Madonna and Child and ignoring the walls. I turned from the altar and began reaching out and touching one wall after another, thinking these walls most likely were touched by Jesus. I moved gently through the crowd to the original walls and laid the palm of my open right hand on each wall.

After a few minutes of prayer, I stepped out and repeated the action on the outside of the tiny building. Judy caught sight of me and asked what I was doing. I told her. A few minutes later, I found Diane and excitedly told her what I had just done. She was happy for me. She always is.

I then turned toward the back of the church behind the Santa Casa and the interior was dazzling. The ceilings and dome were indescribable. Take a look.



They seemed to be made out of gold. I guess gold leaf is more accurate. I bumped into both Judy and Diane back there and we all sat transfixed by the beauty of that spot. Liz was lost somewhere else in the church. Slowly we gathered our senses and started the walk back to the front of the church where we had come in. We found Liz by one of the side altars staring dreamily into one of the many pieces of art along the side walls and altars. We had to tap her to bring her back out of the transcendental state that she had entered. I guess you can tell we were all quite taken by this visit, and if you ask most church people don't even know this place exists.

Here is one more view of the church from the rear with a view of the dome built over the Santa Casa. This place was splendid from every angle.



On the way out of the Centro Storico we visited one of the many trinket shops to buy some holy items. Diane got her normal ration of holy cards. I was particularly impressed by Liz's search for just the right masculine cross to bring home to a friend. She obviously was touched by our stop at La Santa Casa. We returned to the van. It was right where we left it.

There was no ticket. We were off to the coastal beaches and our search for Ancient Mariners.

Surprisingly, the ride south on the SS16 coastal highway reminded me a great deal of the A1A along Florida's Gold Coast especially in Fort Lauderdale.

There were lots of condos, shops, restaurants and precious few views of the beach. For many miles it looked like there were no public access ways from the road to the beach. We could see it occasionally



through a fenced-in, undeveloped lot but that was it. Once again good old 'suddenly' came into play, because suddenly running

along a strip of commercial stores and restaurants there was a small one-block park on the beach side. Out of the corner of my eye I could see a walkway down to the beach.





I pulled into a curbside parking space so fast Diane, Liz and Judy were startled. I explained I had to get down to the beach to stick my feet in the water. This might be my only chance. Judy said that she was going to nap in the car. No nap was necessary for the rest of us. Liz, Diane and I lit out for the little park. We found the walkway to the beach that went down into a tunnel under a small beachside road and were soon standing on a strip of Lido.

There were Italian Tiki Bars, beach chair, umbrella rentals and plenty of beautiful people having so much



fun that they appeared to not realize that they were at the beach.

We worked our way further down toward the water's edge through another

maze of people sunning themselves on rented beach chairs, but I had one thought in my head and it wasn't an umbrella drink or a



good tan. Off came my sandals and straight to the water's edge I went. Ow! Oh! Ow! Ow! All of the beaches along the Mediterranean and the other seas of the

area have volcanic rock instead of sand. Lots of stones – some sharp. We are really spoiled in the USA with beautiful white sand beaches all the way into the water that are easy on your tootsies. I made it over the hot, daggers and into the water. Perfect..... The water was warm, salty and oh, so comforting.



Diane knew, but I explained to Liz while we stood up to our knees in the crystal clear water – I had to touch the waters of my ancestors. I had done it in the Mediterranean at the Greek Island of Santorini, now I was in the Adriatic. I only have the Aegean Sea left

to touch and I will be in full communion with those ancestral Greek souls who gave me life. Maybe in a few years.

With this part of our journey complete I checked my watch and we were only 2 hours behind schedule. I checked my brain and quickly edited out my intention of swinging further south toward the southern reaches of the Piano Grande, Castelluccio and Norcia. That would get us back on schedule to be back at our Ancient Treasure Chest, L'Antico Forziere, between 7 and 8 p.m. for dinner. We would cut due-west when we reached Civitanova Marche on the coast and go directly toward Foligno along the dark red line on the Rick Steves (or AAA) map. We had it made!

Arriving at Civitanova was easy, but this was one busy town during the last week in August. Traffic jams on every street. Lots of one-way streets. Lots of pedestrians to watch out for. It took a while but we found the expressway, and guess what? The SS77 really was an expressway. At least for the first 50 kilometers toward Foligno.

At that point, as we had come to expect, the super duper highway abruptly ended at one mountain or another where there was a giant mountain boring machine and



we found ourselves on a small town road in San Giusto. Apparently they have every intention of completing this expressway, only it will be long after we are dead. The red line on our maps and in our heads faded once again.



You have heard it all before and this was no different. We ran roads that skirted mountains, through river gorges, some that weaved up and down switching back and forth, through an occasional baby tunnel and along some steep drop-offs. At some point you gotta just sit back and enjoy the ride.

Oddly enough along the way of the last 50 kilometers to Foligno there were a few patches of new super highway. It was like something I saw in China 12 years ago where in-between some of the cities there was a super highway and in other places nothing. It all depended on the political clout local leaders had.

In Italy I am not sure of the reason for these spotty 5 mile runs, but someone had some kind of idea that wasn't readily discernable. At one point we were on these small roads and above our heads we could see an elevated highway. We found it on the map and

wanted it dearly, but we couldn't seem to find an entrance. BB was trying but she, too was frustrated by the fit and starts approach to Italian highway system. At one point it looked like she was finally guiding us to an entrance ramp of the highway. I moved slowly because we were in a really small town. We made the turn that BB suggested and drove past a side yard with a group of old women sitting in folding chairs with small children dancing happily around them. We waved courteously. They just gave us the oddest stare.



We soon found out why. BB was taking us up a dead end entrance ramp that wanted to go onto the overhead highway but for some curious reason had been stopped. There were now plenty of weeds growing in the cracks in the concrete and there was a chain link fence between us and the desired road. Oh, it was so, so close. We made our customary k-turn to go back the way we had come. I drove slowly anticipating the dancing children to pop out along the way, and as we drove by the old women seated in



the folding chairs for the second time now going about 10 miles per hour, they stared once again with an even stranger look. I lowered my window,

leaned out, and pointing to my head said, “Sono matto,” I’m a bit nuts. One of the younger women laughed, but the older ones just kept their blank, strange stares.

We finally made it to Foligno by around 5 p.m. Flushed with confidence from our ride through the Sibilini Mountains I decided to take the short route from Foligno to Casalina rather than the much longer, albeit faster moving, ring road around the Valley of Spoleto. We headed through Foligno and caught a small road directly west out of the town that BB seemed to think was the shortest route. Okay! With trust in our hearts and dinner on our minds we traveled on toward our Ancient Treasure Chest. The road ran through rolling farm fields and through some more tiny towns before it began to rise. We had been in the mountains just east of Casalina two other times earlier in the week so this was no surprise. Up, up, back and forth with one great view after another but no time or place to stop.



After 20 minutes we pulled into another town that was at the absolute peak of one of the higher hills. Another tiny town, Cantalupo with one road in on one side and another out on the

other side. Can't get lost here – right? Wrong! The main road through the town twisted and turned around building after building. It obviously had been paved long after the community had been built with small paths between the houses. Fortunately this was no Spoleto. There was a respectable amount of space between the stone homes, more than a foot on each side of the van. Finally, we came to a small fork in the road, and I turned in the direction of the larger road – right? Wrong! That was a side road in the heart of the town that went to the town's church. It quickly narrowed and there was no place to turn around. That was another long back out that required having Diane hop out of the car to guide as I backed into the fork.

Off we went on the smaller fork and quickly out of the town toward an unexpected treat. The

down slope of the hill was straight, gentle, and because we were still at a high point it unfolded a panorama of rolling farm



fields that was like an Andrew Wyeth landscape.

There was even a farmer on a piece of farm equipment in the distance harvesting a crop. He was far enough off that we could not hear the sound of his machine and he looked the size of a large bread crumb with the fields set against an impressive backdrop of high, rising mountains. Perfect. I was so taken I had to stop the van and jump out to take a few pictures. There wasn't another car in sight.



Liz and Judy liked it too and got out with their cameras in hand. Of course what the human eye beholds cannot be duplicated by a photograph. The depth of field and peripheries are lost in these pictures, but this was without a doubt the most



scenic, bucolic spot of the entire vacation, and the ‘Green Heart of Italy.’

Less than an hour later we had wended our way through the last set of hills, found ourselves just north of Deruta our neighboring town and worked our way a bit south on the E45 to Casalina. We were home at last and filled with memories of the paths we had trod of Angels and Ancient Mariners. We found a well-rested Donna and a well-rested Dave who had contented themselves all day with the great views from the Ancient Treasure Chest, the pool, lounge chairs, the laptop computer, salume (Donna) from Emo Ricci and Snickers (Dave) from his own stash. It was nice to see a smile on everyone’s faces over dinner at the end of our "Rest and Relaxation Day".....

Chapter 16

Todi and Orvieto

Todi



Orvieto



The Plan... *Friday, August 27*

- 7 to 8 a.m. *Breakfast (included) at L'Antico Forziere.*
- 8:15 a.m. *Depart for Todi.*
- 8:30 a.m. *Rendezvous with Love Umbria private tour guide for morning tour of Todi (included).*
- Noon *At your option you may join us for lunch in Todi (maybe le Scalette) or go off on your own.*
- 1:00 p.m. *Rendezvous with us at an appointed location in Todi. Depart for Orvieto.*
- 2:00 p.m. *Rendezvous with Love Umbria tour guide for afternoon tour of Orvieto (included).*
- 5 p.m. *Depart Orvieto for Tenuta di Lavalette Vineyards.*
- 5:30 p.m. *Tour and tasting at Tenuta di Lavalette.*
- 7 p.m. *Depart Tenuta di Lavalette for Viterbo and Hostaria del Ponte Ristorante.*
- 7:30 p.m. *Dinner (freelance) at Hostaria del Ponte overlooking Civita del Bagnoregio.*
- 10 p.m. *Depart Hostaria del Ponte for return to L'Antico Forziere.*

The Reality... *we were up and ready to go somewhat early this day since we were meeting Isabella, our favorite guide, in Todi at 8:30 a.m. We did not know what to expect, but Todi has been described in some*

respected journals as one of the most livable cities in the world. When we arrived in Todi we kept our streak alive by parking in the wrong spot for about the seventh consecutive day, but we found each other using a cell phone tower that I could not see. Our cell phones seemed to be back to working everywhere again except that one time on the Emo Ricci day when we really could have used it.

Anyway, I was on the phone and told Isabella we were at the Duomo on the top of Todi. Where was she?



She was at the Chiesa di San Fortunata at the bottom of the hill near the Parcheggio.

I said that I had an illegal parking place at a meter with a broken coin receptacle halfway up the opposite side of the mountain. We were all out of breath from walking up that side of town, and I asked her to come to us and adjust her order for the tour of Todi using

gravity most of the way. She is great. She readily agreed and said to give her 15 minutes to walk up to the main piazza and the Duomo. The women split the scene immediately and went shopping.



While Dave and I were waiting for Isabella, I flagged down a Carabinieri car that was driving by on the piazza and asked if either of them spoke English. One said no and the other had fluent use of about seven words. From this conversation and various body motions I learned that I shouldn't worry about the parking meter or being towed away. It seemed it was already mid-morning and parking would be free at lunchtime, which as I explained to you earlier takes most of the afternoon. Since we were only a few hours from lunch starting he thought nothing would happen. All this from just seven words of English and a lot of arm waving from both of us. By the end of the first week in Umbria, I was really getting into this form of communication. I would have a different opinion by the end of the second week when I was really tired and ready for my living room chair in New Jersey.

True to her word, fifteen minutes later Isabella appeared across the piazza from us. She took us inside the Duomo first and then worked the town using gravity as she had agreed on the phone. We

spent a lot of time on the two hills of Todi. Yes unfortunately this town is built on two hills, so there was some descending that gave way to walking uphill again. Worth it. Worth it all.

On the side streets of Todi we understood what the world journals had meant about livability. Fresh air, great views, brilliantly restored homes, colorful gardens and peace. This was my favorite home in Todi. A balcony on the back of the house overlooked a drop of hundreds of feet into the valley below. We paused a long time to take pictures at the low wall next to the house looking way down into the Tiber River Valley. On the opposite hills there were farms and farm houses spread comfortably apart, there was another former Benedictine monastery and green as far as the eye could see.



For once, my target restaurant for lunch was open! Hooray! [Le Scalette](#) (The Descending Staircase) from YouTube looked as good as it did on the internet. Donna and I shared something they called Antipasto Big in Italian. The English translation of the dish was Antipasto Big. Big must be one of those words with Latin origin.



The view from the restaurant was outstanding. Great views of the town of Todi and great views of the valleys and mountains outside of Todi. Good wine, good food, nice company. This is what this tour was about.



Right after lunch there was time for one more picture in the small park next door to Le Scalette. It gave me a chance to illustrate how petite Isabella is.

We left Todi right after lunch to get over to Orvieto. Leaving was fun. We rode down a cable car with Isabella. I jumped into her car and showed her the way to my car. The carabinieri were right. No ticket! Ah, life is good. In a few moments we were in the legal Parcheggio and picked up the gang. We followed her to Orvieto since our tour plans were to part company at the end of that tour.





Orvieto is built on a large chunk of tuffa stone that was pushed up out of the ground 350,000 years ago by seismic activity. It is sort of flat on the top; well, a lot flatter than the other hill towns. Following Isabella we managed to park legally in a Parcheggio in the upper part of the town. There is another Parcheggio on the valley floor that has a free funicular ride to the upper part of the town.

I have to say at this point in my defense, if you come to Orvieto or any of these hill towns in the future, and look for these Parcheggios, 9 out of 10 of them do not look like parking lots. If you are used to stadium parking in the USA, forget it. None of them look like that. They are usually small lots that are full. Around them there might be scattered pockets of paid

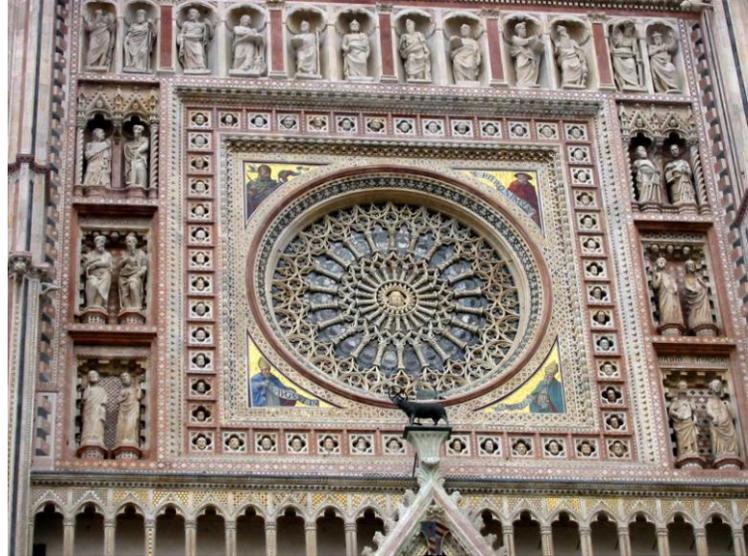
or free parking, but they look like city streets or small dirt lots that are about to be condemned for confiscation. We parked legally for free and paid the 1 euro per person fee for the little bus ride to the main piazza up on the big rock. About public buses in Italy, they kind of work on the honor system. You buy a ticket that is unmarked. You get on the bus and insert the ticket at the back of the bus into a machine that stamps a time on it. The ticket is then good for 70 minutes of hop on hop off. After that you need a new ticket. None of us knew that and Isabella being a guide did not need a ticket to board the bus. So we all got on the bus and sat down – seemed natural, I mean there were plenty of seats. Later in the afternoon, hours later, we found that all of our tickets were still good for the ride down since they had not been punched in the validator machine on the ride up. Score one for our team! We saved a euro apiece.

When we arrived at the Piazza del Duomo, Donna said that she wanted to just hang around the piazza, sit in an outdoor café, drink espresso and drink in the local color. While we were away she managed to make friends with a number of people who spoke no English and she had a great time. I mean, look at



these guys. They are the real thing, not actors.





We went hiking and studying with Isabella. The main [Duomo](#) in Orvieto is one of the primary attractions. It is huge. The front has one of the most highly decorated

Renaissance façades and is known all over Italy. The inside is large and well decorated with frescoes, but the real story of this Duomo is the large side chapel where Luca Signorelli took the Renaissance fresco business to a whole new startling level from the original masters such as Giotto.





I've seen this chapel a bunch of times on the internet and in [Rick Steves Travel Shows](#). Standing inside of it is a whole different ballgame. This is

the chapel that Michelangelo came to study when he was given the commission by Pope Julius II to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. When Michelangelo

got the commission he didn't want to do it, but the pope insisted and paid him royally for the work. Michel was a fast study and with Signorelli under his belt he went on to do a



knockout job on the Pope's favorite haunt. So we saw the Chapel in Orvieto.

The next item on my bucket list was 34 Via del Duomo. This is the house where Marlena Di Blasi

lives with her husband Fernando. Marlena is an accomplished author and great cook. I have five of her books. I read the 3 books about her 3 years in Venice, 1 year in Tuscany and getting settled finally in Umbria. The one about Umbria was primarily about finding this perfect spot to live in Umbria and renovating 34 Via del Duomo. After living through these books I had to see this place. HA! All of the ground floor of the palazzo has been converted to small shops catering to the tourist trade. She lives upstairs. All of the renovation work was overseen by the family in Umbria and Rome that owns the palazzo. Marlena and Fernando paid for everything but did not have the right to specify the details of the renovation and they only have the rights to live in the space until they both die. Then their heirs own nothing. The family in Umbria and Rome who owned the palazzo originally retakes possession. I was amused by the trinket shops underneath what I suspect is a magnificently renovated palazzo, at least the main ballroom that was converted into the De Blasi apartment.



We walked the streets of Orvieto; hit the ATM which had become a religion for me in all of these towns. I now was able to pay in cash each of the guides who wanted to be paid that way. I wonder why?

We worked our way out to the edge of town and the precipice of a cliff that is the stone the town sits on.



On top of that there is also a defensive wall. As much as you might read about it; it really hits home when you are standing right there looking at these vertical cliffs with walls built on top, how much these towns attacked each other from 1000 BC right up to Garibaldi in the 19th Century.



We had great photo ops on the wall, and then we were back in the middle of town. We had managed to stop off and buy an ashtray which will become part of my daughter's dowry. We rejoined Donna and then waited for the 'free' bus ride down to the Parcheggio.

When we made it back to the Parcheggio we had our final goodbyes with Isabella. She had come to like our diverse group a lot and the feelings were mutual. We hugged. We kissed the two cheeks, Italian style. There were many words, a few tears and a great tip! I picked up a few of her cards to give to the other guides we would be with in Tuscany and Umbria. These guides are constantly networking to find tour groups. Today I work for you tomorrow you work for me.

Suddenly, Isabella was gone. We had finished the third major guided tour of the first week promised in my website tour information. I looked at everyone in the van. They looked bushed. I asked, “What would you like to do?” For the evening I had planned a wine tasting at a famous vineyard and a trip further south to a little restaurant which would have a spectacular view of the sun setting over Civita de Bagnoregio.



All opted to go directly back to our Ancient Treasure Chest and crash. That was okay by me. BB took us home.....

Go to Part 3