

Italy Vacation Diary, October 2005

Saturday, October 22nd

We arrive in Italy by plane, train, and automobile! We collect our bags and take the Leonardo shuttle to Rome Termini train station. The shuttle drops us off at the north end of the station. We walk a long way to the station's center, where all tracks begin and end. We consult a poster listing train schedules to find our train to Chiusi (kee-you-see). As the departure time approaches, helpful station attendants notify us of a last-minute change of trains; ours will arrive on binario 6 instead of binario 4. One attendant warns us to be wary of pick-pockets, who like to sneak up from behind and plunder backpacks worn by unsuspecting tourists.

We arrive in Chiusi at 12:20, forty minutes ahead of siesta, and pick up our 4-door Ford Fusion at the Hertz rental office located across the street from the station. We drive 30 minutes to San Casciano di Bagni, then a short 2 KM to Celle Sul Rigo. Sharp-eyed Karen spots the last sign for Il Poggio, directing us up a hill. We are rewarded at the summit by a beautiful, expansive, panoramic view of the Tuscan countryside. We are greeted by Arianna and Fabiola, who show us to our room: Girasole #6, named after one of the horses in the family stable. There is a balcony with a view of the valley and San Casciano di Bagni. Fabiola suggests making reservations for the Uffizi Gallery and Accademia in Florence.

We opt for the breakfast, dinner, and daily maid service package at a cost of 40€ per person, per day. After our first evening dinner of ravioli stuffed with cheese and spinach, boar, pork loin, salad greens with olive oil and ice cream with apricot sauce, the package seems a real bargain! We find a local white cabernet for a reasonable 10€ per bottle. It has a very light flavor, which makes it way too easy to kill the whole bottle as if it were mineral water. Every night at Il Poggio, guests can enjoy a complimentary wine tasting and purchase wine, cheese, and meats, all raised and processed on the farm.



Il Poggio

Sunday, October 23rd

We ask Fabiola to reserve Sunday, October 30th for us to visit the Uffizi Gallery and Accademia in Florence. Arianna says the Internet has been down for two days due to the recent storms, so it will take awhile to make the reservations.

We sleep in until 8:30, then grab a table in the glassed-in patio for a breakfast of yogurt, cereal, cappuccino, juice, breads, meats and cheeses. The fruit is a little overripe. About noon, we head toward Bagnoregio and the ancient hill town of Civita. Our drive takes us through the foggy Tuscan countryside as we head south toward Lake Bolsena. The fog soon gives way to sunshine, and we encounter our first medieval hilltop town when we reach Bolsena. It was here that the "[miracle of Corpus Christi](#)" occurred in 1263. Spectacular views of the lake can be had from the town summit (castle) and from turnouts along the road as it meanders lazily up the hillside.

The drive from Bolsena to Bagnoregio takes us past ancient farm houses, vineyards, and groves of olive trees. Entering Bagnoregio, it appears to be a thoroughly modern small town. As we follow the signs for Civita, the roadway suddenly becomes a one-way alley bordered by dwellings and shops on both sides. Side streets branching off from the road offer occasional glimpses of sunshine.

As we come around a bend in the road, we are greeted by a jaw-dropping view of the hilltop town of Civita. After a short, steep hike, we explore the town, its small cathedral, private gardens, and enjoy the panoramic views of the countryside below.



The ancient Tuscan hilltop town of Civita.

After leaving Civita, winding, well-marked country roads bring us down a hillside offering a magnificent view of Orvieto a hill town perched on a 1,000 foot plateau. A castle/winery dominates the countryside below Orvieto. Parking at the train station, we ride the funicular to the top, then hop on the bus going to the Duomo (cathedral). We eat a picnic lunch in the park overlooking the castle/ winery. Paintings by Signorelli in the Duomo chapel leave a lasting impression. We meet Janet and her sisters from Phoenix, taking a picture of them when their camera didn't work. Leaving Orvieto on the funicular, Karen is appalled by the way the old ladies push and jockey for the few available seats for the short ride down to the train station. I laugh and tell her that the Italian translation of the word "queue" is "every man for himself". We take the autostrada to the Fabro exit, then take a wrong turn down a secondary road that meanders for miles. Lesson learned: always follow the blue signs!



The Duomo in the Tuscan hilltop town of Orvieto.

Monday, October 23rd

We awake feeling a bit groggy after a restless night – must be residual jet lag. After breakfast, we leave Il Poggio about 10:30 am and drive north on S2 toward Siena. We don't get very far before being diverted due to a road closure onto a scenic, winding, narrow road through the Tuscan hills. We pass large tractors on three different occasions, all moving slowly down the road. We come to a village, then back down the hillside to reconnect with the S2 highway. The hills are a beautiful autumn gold, red, green and brown. We continue through broad green pastures and meadows and rolling hills, past mansions with long driveways lined with cypress trees. The two-lane road occasionally morphs into a motorway, then becomes ordinary again after a short distance.

We arrive in Siena about 12:30, parking just inside a large portal that stands as a formal entrance to the walled city. We start walking along the street and are soon surrounded by students who have escaped the confines of the nearby Collegio. Light traffic surges past as we continue down the street, lined on either side by tall, multi-storied buildings that house shops on the street level and residences above. Green shutters provide some measure of privacy and noise reduction. Passing

from sunshine to shade within the shadows of the buildings, the temperature seems to drop 5 to 10 degrees. Large, ornate rings embedded in the walls wait patiently for riders to tie off their horses. Bars, shops, restaurants, and small markets line the street and the crowds grow more dense as we approach the Piazza il Campo. Finally, we come to an alley that affords a view toward the piazza, and are rewarded with a view of the 330-foot campanile tower, rising into the sky like a gigantic spire.

The piazza is enormous. People lounge on its red bricks, sunning themselves as if on a white sandy beach. Restaurant bars line the periphery. We find the Tourist Information office and get directions to a bank, which is closed but re-opens at 2:35 pm (?!). We use our SSB ATM card to withdraw 100E; there is no mention of a fee on the receipt (scary). We take lunch at one of the restaurants lining the piazza, lasagna and pizza with a ½ liter of Chianti. We head back to the bank, where I exchange 800 dollars for euros, getting a great rate of 1.21 dollars per euro and only a \$3.00 service fee.

We grab a gelato en route to the Duomo, watching with amusement as a flighty waiter chases unsuspecting tourists from tables “reserved for diners”, even though the gelato store is co-owned by the restaurant which owns the tables. After viewing the Duomo, we return to the piazza, where Karen relaxes at a restaurant table while I make the 22-minute round trip to the car to put more euros in the parking meter. Sipping wine and snacking munchies, we watch a man wearing an overcoat and a red beret pull pranks on unsuspecting passers-by. For example, he’ll squirt water on their heads with a water pistol, and then when they turn around, he’s looking up in the sky as if he’s felt rain drops. He is very entertaining and receives a warm round of applause and generous donations from the onlookers. While Karen reads her book, I climb the 300 steps to the top of the



The central piazza in Siena, with its city hall and clock tower that were built in the Middle Ages.

330-foot tower as the sun hovers low on the horizon. With little traffic this time of day, it is easy to navigate the narrow passageway. I am rewarded at the top by spectacular views of Siena in all directions. It is easy to make out the concentric circles that provide layers of streets and alleyways. We leave at twilight, pausing to purchase Tuscan wine at a wine shop for 9 to 11 E per bottle, then another quick stop at a mini-mart for a few more provisions.

We head south on S2, then follow signs to the A-1. The convoluted twists and turns and aggressive drivers remind me of Disneyland's "autopia". It's a long drive back to the Chiusi exit, then another wrong turn at Sarteano at a thicket of blue signs pointing in all directions takes us back to Chiusi. We decide to stick to the road we know, and arrive safely at 8:20 in time for dinner. The Bartolini family – the owners with their children and grandchildren – are dining at the next table. They have a typical Italian dinner, lots of good food and wine, sprinkled liberally with boisterous conversation.

Tuesday, October 25th

We both sleep soundly through the night, for the first time waking refreshed and vitalized. The day breaks warm and clear. After a light breakfast, we depart at about 10:45 bound for Chiusi. We stop along the way to get gas (\$42 for a little over half a tank!) and to video San Casciano di Bagni and the valley below, which is remarkably free of fog, for a change.

After finding our way to Chiusi Scala, which lies below the hilltop town proper, we find a bank across from the Hertz car rental office. We exchange all \$1,700 in travelers cheques. The rate (1.23) is not as favorable for cheques as for cash; they are listed separately on the exchange board. Plus, there is a 15€ fee vs. 3€ at the bank in Siena for changing \$800. The moral: no more travelers



A Tuscan manor house and vineyard in the Chianti region.

cheques! On the next trip, we will use money belts and ATMs instead.

We follow the signs to the A1, which takes us north of Chiusi. On the A1, the estimated average speed of drivers passing us is 80 to 85 mph. We cruise at 110-120 kph (66-72 mph). Drivers tailgate until you speed up, then they fall back. We miss the turnoff to Siena and exit the A1 at Valdarno, about 35 km south of Florence. The road to Siena (S429) from Montevarchi, just south of Valdarno, enters the low-lying hills to the west. As the road ascends, we realize from the signs and vineyards that we have entered the famous Chianti region. Breathtaking views of rolling hills – colored green, gold, yellow, and red – await us around every bend of the steep, winding road. As the kilometers roll slowly by, we pass through forested areas, vineyards capped by majestic Tuscan farmhouses, and the occasional ruined abbey.

About 2:00 pm, we begin wishing for a picnic spot. Our call is answered by Radda, a quaint hilltop town offering a park and benches overlooking the spectacular valley below. Passing through the modern town of Pongli Bonsi, we make it to San Gimignano by 3:45 pm. It is great fun exploring the medieval town of Romeo and Juliet fame, with its 14 remaining towers built by the nobles of the town. Apparently, the towers were the medieval equivalent of street racing. Like the fastest car, the builder of the tallest tower owned bragging rights. The archaeological museum houses Etruscan pottery dating to the 1st century A.D. as well as a 16th century pharmacy! We explore the modern art gallery upstairs, then head back to the town hall and grand tower, which houses medieval paintings dating from the 1300 to 1500's. All are remarkably well-preserved. Since all descriptions are in Italian, it pays to invest in an audio guide. The tower summit offers gorgeous views of the town and surrounding countryside. At dusk, the tolling bells of several towers take us back in time.



The towers of San Gimignano

The drive home, with no wrong turns or double-backs, takes only 2 hours and 10 minutes. The Ford Fusion gets good mileage; we burn only a half a tank of gas for the whole day. Dinner is prix fixe this time; no choices, but a fine meal of Tuscan canapés, Pici (a local pasta), spaghetti, pork loin, and biscuits with vin santo (tastes like plum wine) for dessert. We are already spoiled rotten by the wonderful multi-course dinners.

Wednesday, October 26th

At the midpoint of our week in Tuscany, we decide to stick close to home today. Fabiola recommends a visit to her village of Radicófani, and Montepulciano, a hilltop town known for its fine vineyards.

We turn left at the stop sign at the bottom of the Il Poggio driveway and take the winding, switchback road down the hill from Celle Sul Rigo, then up the other side past open pastures and wooded areas. We follow the signs toward *S. Pietro in Campo*, an agriturismo, en route to Montepulciano.

We pass the turnoff to Radicófani, which features the huge castle turret we can see across the valley from Il Poggio. We decide that Montepulciano will be our first stop, then Pienza; we will visit Radicófani another day. Along the way we pass Tuscan mansions on hilltops that are featured in scenic Tuscany calendars sold in souvenir shops. At one point, the road turns to hardpan and we cross a bridge in front of an imposing castle wall. It seems the road provides an easement through an ancient property. We pass an old, crumbling farmhouse that appears deserted, except for the



The hilltop town of Montepulciano.

tell-tale antenna on the roof. As we enter the outskirts of Montepulciano, we are greeted by a sign from the Pulcino Fattoria (farm) advertising wine-tasting and produce for sale. It has only been 45 minutes since we left Il Poggio.

We enter the warehouse store, filled with every type of Tuscan wine imaginable, along with bottles of olive oil, cheeses and meats. We sample the famous Nobile wine and local Chianti, and purchase a three-pack containing one each of our favorites. The adjoining restaurant down the road is also a working farm house. The five women there are busy producing bread, meats, and cheeses for sale. The daughter of the proprietor, Gabriella, offers samples of cheese, along with bread smothered in olive oil (delicious!) and generous cups of wine. We buy ¼ kilo of nutty flavored cheese, and drive toward the lovely hilltop town of Montepulciano. The road encircles the town and rises upward. We stay to the right and the road brings us past a park, perfect for a picnic lunch.

While munching bread, cheese, prociutto and salami, we hear a loud “bang!” followed by the sickening crunch of metal. Two cars have collided on the roadway less than 100 feet away. Luckily, no one appears hurt, and within seconds passersby are offering assistance. A large contingent of Midwestern American tourists ambles past. One man smiles when he notices our gourmet spread, and says “great idea!”

After lunch, we head up the hill into the medieval town, past shops and an Internet café, where we learn of the Chargers’ heart-breaking loss to the Philadelphia Eagles. We explore two of the ancient local churches, then head out for Pienza, pausing to video the fading sunlight on the town. In a few minutes we reach the sleepy tourist town of Pienza, whose cafes and shops invite us to linger awhile. I find a book: “Too much Tuscan Sun: Confessions of a Tuscan Tour Guide” that would



Karen and friend on main street of Montepulciano.

make interesting reading. We confound and outsmart the misleading road signs by re-tracing our route from memory, and arrive home 45 minutes later in time for an early dinner – for a change!

Thursday, October 27th

We drag ourselves out of bed at 5:45 am to prepare for our drive to Pisa and Lucca. Karen packs a fine picnic lunch of meats, cheeses, bread, apples, and Chianti. It's still dark at 7:00 am as we leave Il Poggio, and the car is soaked with mist from the "nebbia". We fill up at the friendly roadside gas station outside Chiusi Scala, at a bargain price: 1.22E per liter versus 1.31E elsewhere. The attendant, bundled in a heavy jacket against the fog, remarks in Italian, "you must be cold wearing onlyh that light-blue polo shirt." I shrug, smile, and say "a little". The fog is heavy as we make our way north on the A1. However, it does not deter local drivers from driving at their usual sub-sonic speeds. We encounter some slowing traffic outside Florence, due to a rear-ender between a truck and small car. We consume the generous breakfast from Il Poggio en route to Pisa. As the fog begins to break up, we decide that Pisa will be our first stop.

Two hours and 45 minutes and about 150 miles from home, we arrive at the university parking area just 3 blocks from the Field of Miracles. We arrive at 10:45 am and spend just over 3 hours exploring the Duomo, the Cemetery (with sarcophagi dating to the 3rd century B.C.!), the Baptistry, the Museum of the Sinopeas (drawings that Karen loves even more than the original paintings for which they are designed), and finally, the Leaning Tower itself. The white marble buildings on a splendid field of green do indeed remind us of Minas Tirith, the mythical city of Lord of the Rings



The Duomo and Leaning Tower of Pisa.