

fame. Returning to our car, we negotiate the madhouse of scooters, pedestrians, cars, and trucks and follow the state route (SS12) out of Pisa, bound for Lucca.

The modern city of Lucca surrounds the old walled city, which is closed to all except commercial traffic. We enter one of the four portals to the old city, looking for a place to park and picnic. We stumble through the maze of streets, then turn towards an uscita (exit). One block from the Santa Maria portal, we find the perfect parking spot near the tourist office, bike rental store, and café. As we picnic on the gravel next to the car, a parking attendant wishes us “bon appetite” as he tickets a violator. After lunch, we rent a pair of bikes across the street, and make our way up the rampway to the ramparts that encircle the old city. We easily complete two circuits of the ramparts within 50 minutes. We pass old people on foot and on bikes, families with strollers, lovers and groups relaxing on the park benches. The 60 foot thick ramparts could have stopped any cannonball, but never had to – proving once again that the best offense is a good defense. We explore old Lucca on foot. The cathedral containing the 800 year old remains of some sainted old woman, the ancient Roman amphitheatre now converted to a piazza surrounded by shops in a perfect circle.

The fog has lifted for our drive home, which requires heightened awareness to avoid being run over by impatient, rude, young Italian male drivers and truckers trying to gain a 100-foot advantage on other trucks. We arrive home in time for another great dinner. A hot shower feels very refreshing after the long drive home.



*Karen pauses to watch passers-by on bicycle path around the old town of Lucca.*



## Friday, October 28<sup>th</sup>

We sleep in until 8:30, which feels good after yesterday's epic trip. We enjoy a leisurely breakfast, clean out email on the communal computer (the Internet connection has been restored), write Donna and Mom. I catch up this diary while sipping Morelli, a decent Italian beer.

In the afternoon, we drive the 12 km to Radicófani and explore the hilltop castle dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It was virtually destroyed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when an ammo dump exploded, and was restored in 1989. On the drive down the hill, we pass Fabiola, who is walking along the roadside. She seems glad to see us, but appears to be preoccupied. She says that she is returning home to get ready for work, but we never see her again.

We arrive home later in the afternoon, where Karen whips up a great lunch from three nights of leftovers.

## Saturday, October 29<sup>th</sup>

We say goodbye to our friends at Il Poggio about 10:20 and drove to Chiusi. The nebbia becomes heavier as we descend the hill, cross over the A1, and head north toward Chiusi Scala. We stop at our service station where our smiling attendant asks, "Illego?" to which I reply "Si, per favore." We drop off the car at Hertz and walk across the street to the train station. The train to Milan arrives 1 hour and 50 minutes late and is packed to the rafters with "refugees". Our train to Florence arrives only 35 minutes late (when delayed, arrival times appear on the train schedule as "minutes delayed")



*The fortress of Radicófani*

under the RIT column. Some old, mental defective gropes himself when Karen says “buon giorno” while sitting in the café. When I show up with the coffee, he behaves himself.

Once on board the train, we find standing room only until a kind lady offers Karen her seat. At the next stop, I snag two free seats. A young couple standing in the corridor has a lover’s spat but are holding hands and smiling once again when we reach the Florence station. We catch a taxi (12E) which crawls the short distance to our hotel through streets clogged with tourists. People amble back and forth, treating the street as an oversized sidewalk.

We find the Hotel Allesandra situated on a side street just a couple of blocks from the main drag leading to the famous Ponte Vecchio. We lug our baggage up to the tiny first floor elevator. Karen squeezes in with a couple bags, while I tramp up the remaining stairs to the Hotel Allesandra on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. Karen has trouble extricating herself and the luggage from the lift. Having worked up a pretty good sweat, we are greeted by the proprietor Andrea who shows us to our large, pleasant room. Enjoying the view from our room, we relax with wine, cheese, leftover bread and meatloaf. After a refreshing shower (down the hall on the left), we decide to venture out into the crowds.

The nearby Ponte Vecchio is a sea of people surging past glittering jewelry shops. Two blocks later, we come to the Pitti Palace, housing art and artifacts once owned by the powerful Medici family. Later that evening, we dine at the Trattoria Nella, a restaurant recommended by Rick Steves. We find it is right around the corner from our hotel. A couple from New York, Scott and his wife, are seated at our table. Scott is fluent in Italian and teaches us some unique Florentine words. He describes Florentines as warm and fun-loving, especially when you make an effort to practice their dialect.



*View from Ponte Vecchio in Florence.*



The waiter's mouth falls open in amazement when Karen says "bisquero!" after prompting by Scott. We learn that bisquero is the Florentine equivalent of "idiot!" and has an interesting origin. It seems that a few centuries ago, the church authorities were searching for a location on which to build their famous Duomo. They found the perfect spot inhabited by local residents. Exercising a form of eminent domain, they offered the residents money to pull up stakes and relocate. Everyone took the offer except the Bisquero family. The authorities decided to increase the amount of the original offer, to which the Bisqueros said "no thanks". After huddling up, the authorities increased the offer again to three times the original amount and implored the Bisqueros to move. However, despite increasing public pressure, the Bisqueros remained steadfast and declined the generous offer again. It seems everyone but the Bisqueros could see that the church would eventually get its way. One night, the Bisquero's hut mysteriously burned down, and the family left the city in disgrace. Some years later, when the family returned to Florence, they did so under an assumed name. There are no Bisqueros in Florence today.

We learn that there are similar, colorful histories behind other uniquely Florentine words. The word "beh", accompanied by a shrug of the shoulders, means "gee, I dunno" or "maybe yes, maybe no." The word "bo" means "I don't know." The phrase "Ho Ha Hola con hornucha" means "I would like a Coke with a straw."

After a fine meal of bruchetta, ravioli with walnuts, lasagna al forno, and tiramisu for dessert, we wander the streets to observe the nightlife. The crowds are still out in force, filling the streets and the large town squares. Street vendors lay out their purses on blankets on the sidewalk. We learn later, from Lucco at the Hotel American Dinesen in Venice, that police fine tourists who purchase.



*The Duomo in Florence.*

**Sunday, October 30<sup>th</sup>**

knock-off goods from street vendors, but do not arrest the street vendors themselves. They would seem to have a nice little racket going. The blankets allow vendors to scoop up their wares and leave in a hurry, when the need arises. The air has grown cold as we head back to the hotel for the night

We spend a comfortable night at the Hotel Allesandra. The bed is good – supportive, but not too firm. The room is spacious, with a view of rooftops and the street below. The lift makes a funny noise – like Martian spacecraft from a 1950's movie – as a reminder to close the accordion-style doors. Andrea, the proprietor, is very polite and helpful. There is a computer workstation in the large lounge area, furnished with overstuffed sofas and a TV set. Internet access is not free, but inexpensive at 5E an hour.

In the adjacent dining room, we enjoy a first-class breakfast consisting of four types of cereal, yogurt, croissant biscuits, cream cheese, sliced ham and cheeses, juices, and American coffee.

They even offer “additives” like Jack Daniels and Cinzano, which curdles the cream in Karen's coffee.

The crowds are out in force early (8:30 am) around the Duomo. We enter the short line to visit the Baptistry, and try to ignore the begging Gypsy woman holding a baby.

Once inside, we rent the audio guide which explains the marvelous, intricate mosaic ceiling portraying Christ on Judgment Day. The images of demons consuming the flesh of the condemned give Karen nightmares later. Again, we find the audio guide to be well worth the small investment.

Arriving at the Accademia at 10:15, fifteen minutes prior to our reservation time, we find two lines: one for those holding reservations, the other for those without. While the former is long, the latter is far longer and neither line is moving much. The night before, the time changed from daylight savings back to standard time and there is a lot of confusion with people arriving at the wrong times. While the door attendants try to sort it all out, they finally admit a large group of school kids ahead of us and the log jam begins to clear. Once inside, we show the cashier our reservation slip and are admitted to the gallery. The ticket suggests that we limit our viewing time to 3 hours, but there is no enforcement.

The first hall is filled with large paintings of the Italian Renaissance. We find our way to the music room, with computer workstations offering interactive descriptions of the instruments on display. We



*The Statue of David at the Accademia, Florence.*



find some of the earliest creations, including the first upright piano, and a working display of a dulcimer that allows the visitor to see how the instrument is designed and how the strings are plucked.

We come to a large hall where Michelangelo's unfinished "Prisoners" sculptures lead the way to the magnificent [Statue of David](#) situated under a cupola at the end of the hall. The statue is on a pedestal, making it appear even larger than its 10-foot height. We are reminded that taking photos is forbidden, as an attendant scolds a female student severely for sneaking a shot. We suspect the prohibition has something to do with increasing the sales of photo books in the souvenir shops.

There is an interactive digital display, allowing the visitor to obtain views of David from all possible angles. It truly set the standard for all sculptures to come, and was one of the first to emphasize the "humanity" of the human form.

We seek out one of [Rick Steves'](#) recommended restaurants, only to find it besieged by long lines of hungry patrons. We pass by the Hot Spot, a cafeteria style restaurant with photos of the fare in plain view on the sidewalk. A tall, friendly kid wearing an apron invites us inside and offers to save us an outdoor table. There is a good variety of food, with eager servers waiting to help. The prices are good, and the customer service is wonderful. Once we are seated, we enjoy a lunch of pasta, veggies, and Chianti, while being entertained by passersby and the efforts of our server to entice patrons inside.

### **Monday, October 31<sup>st</sup>**

I wake up early this morning as usual, consider taking a hot bath then opt for a shower in the communal bathroom down the hall. I log in and send email to Mom, wishing her a happy birthday. It doesn't feel like Halloween; except for the occasional decorations in shop windows, you wouldn't know that October 31<sup>st</sup> is a special day around here. It's a holiday that merchants support, but has yet to gain popularity, according to Arianna at Il Poggio.

While Karen gets ready, I head over to the American Express office to buy seat reservations on the train. I'm first in line, but strangely none of the clerical staff who are busily shuffling papers or typing at keyboards asks "prego?" Finally, I ask a woman behind me who is very busy at her desk if I'm in the right line to buy train reservations. She smiles and says "yes", then goes in search of the ticket agent. Waiting politely doesn't get you anything here. It dawns on me that clerical staff expect their customers to be assertive. Fine. The agent, in a business-like tone, directs me to pay the 48 E for the four seat reservations to the unsmiling robot at the next window. I present the agent with the receipt and leave with the reservations in hand.

I meet Karen back at the hotel and we head for the Duomo to join the growing line to get in. We meet Fritz and Francois, very friendly biologists from France who are familiar with the Salk Institute. The 20-minute wait passes quickly, then we're inside the Duomo, which features one of the longest naves in Europe. The interior is more impressive for its size than its rather plain adornments. We consider the Duomo museum and climbing to the top of the Duomo, then opt for the shorter line at Giotto's bell tower. Karen decides to wait for me at the nearby café, but has trouble getting service. After a 30-minute wait, I climb the 414 steps up a narrow stairwell with uneven steps. I am rewarded at the top by gorgeous, panoramic views of Florence. We stop at the Hot Spot for another great value, self-service lunch. The staff are friendly, smiling, and helpful as usual. Our tall waiter bids us arvevderci as we head for the hotel to pick up our bags for the short taxi ride to the station.

The route is uncrowded with tourist bodies. We find our seats in Eurostar car #1, in 1<sup>st</sup> class. The car is almost deserted. The seats recline, have fold-out tables, with good lighting and plenty of overhead luggage space. The ride is quiet and smooth at over 120 mph. The view of the Florentine countryside is beautiful, but as we approach Bologna, the fog makes viewing difficult. We arrive in Venice and buy 72-hour vaporetto passes at the dock, then within a couple of minutes we catch the

#82 boat to the Accademia bridge. When we reach the bridge less than 20 minutes later, there is no announcement. We grab our bags and scramble off, then ask directions to Hotel American Dinesen from a sidewalk vendor. Two hundred yards later, we arrive at our canal-side hotel, where we are greeted by friendly Lucco. He finds us a corner room #102 with two balconies overlooking the quiet canal. We can also see the boat traffic on the Grand Canal a short distance away.

We find Lucco's recommended restaurant full, so we eat a fine dinner of Ravioli and wine at Cantinone Storico, a tavern next door to our hotel. The staff is casually dressed, polite, and offer great service. The two guys sitting next to us are from northern California. We strike up a conversation, and are soon exchanging travel stories and tips. They have been to Venice several times, and recommend Harry's Bar near P. San Marco. It has been frequented by the rich and famous, including Earnest Hemingway, over the years. They say the drinks are expensive but worth a splurge. Venice's only major grocery store, Billa Supermarket, is a long walk from our hotel, but worth it for the scenery.

We try grappa, an Italian liqueur, and find it to our liking. We escape for 40 E, and then we retire to our room for our first night in Venice.

### **Tuesday, November 1<sup>st</sup>**

Our first full day in Venice. In between sightseeing sojourns, we enjoy taking short breaks in our hotel room. A quick shower, some wine, cheese, and crackers, and/or a brief (15-minute) nap can do wonders to recharge our batteries. CNN World News, while informative, can be monotonous and depressing. We've found the Italian version of the MTV channel is a far better complement to our



*View from our balcony at the Hotel American Dinesen, Venice.*

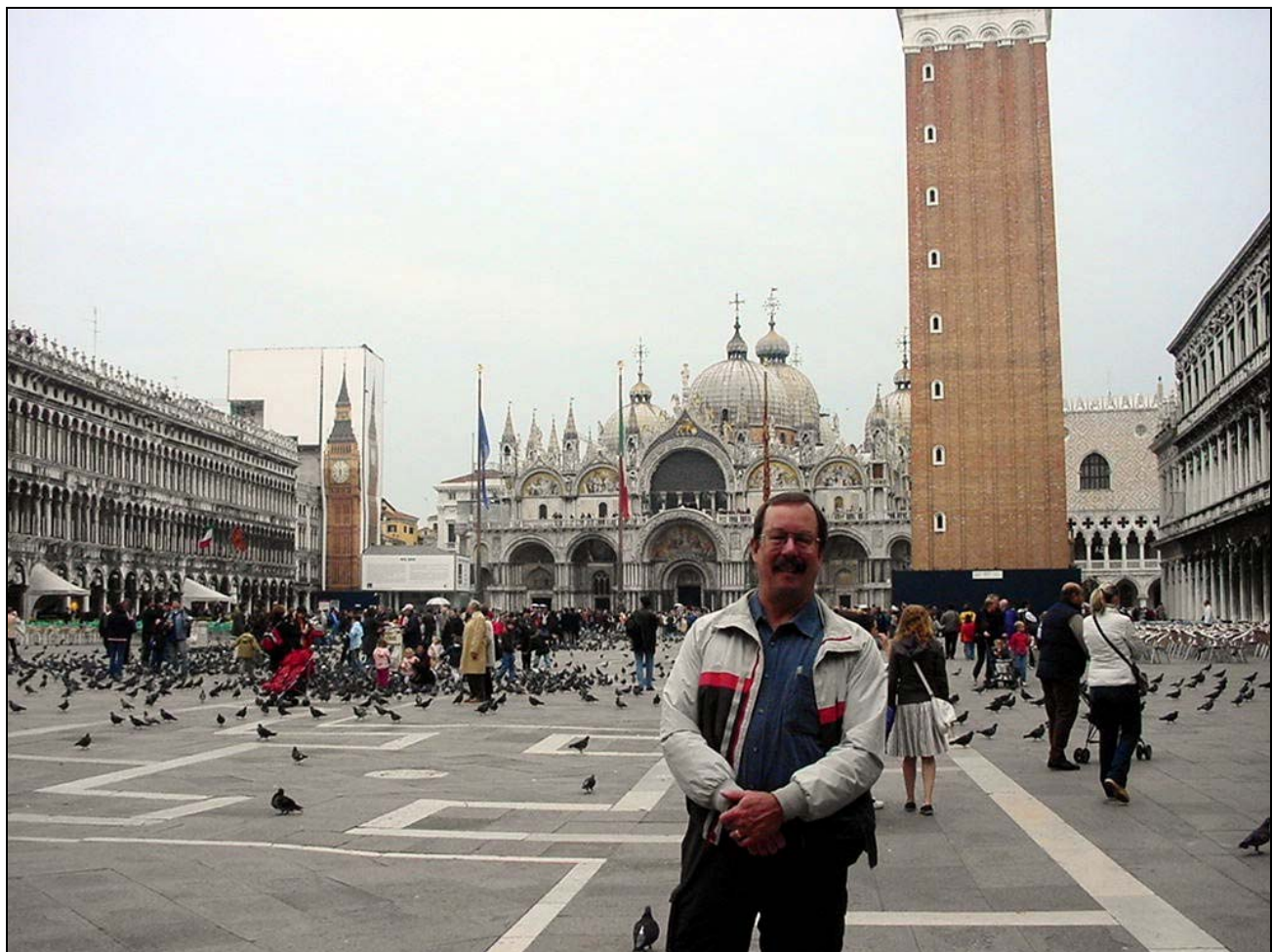


vacation mind-set. Two of the more popular Italian artists are Eros Ramazotti (think Johnny Rivers) and Paola Turci (think Sheryl Crow). Karen also likes Jovanotti (“Mi Fido di Te”). The American and Italian music videos are interspersed. Other artists who get a lot of airplay include Shakira (a cross between Alanis Morissette and Tori Amos – “Don’t Bother”), Piero Pelu (an older rocker in the vein of Peter Gabriel – “Nel Mio Mondo”), and Buastelle (“La Guerra e Finita”).

Hotel American Dinesen offers a wonderful breakfast of cereals, yogurt, breads and croissants, meats and cheeses, and a full pot of strong coffee with a small pitcher of warm milk. We pack some biscuits and cheeses up to our room for an afternoon snack to enjoy with a bottle of Chianti.

We head off toward St. Marks, crossing over the Accademia bridge. Armed with Lucco’s map and excellent directions, we navigate the maze of back streets lined with shops. We pass a church where tickets are being sold to an evening concert. Classical music concerts, some electrified, are common – especially Vivaldi. A music student dressed in 18<sup>th</sup> century costume entices us to a presentation by music students that evening at 9:00. We’re tempted, but reluctant to commit due to our uncertain schedule. We cross several small bridges over canals, pausing to snap pictures of gondoliers. A beggar makes a home in the doorway of a church, which otherwise appears closed.

The crowds are out early, and we stop to allow a gaggle of giggling girls to pass. Suddenly, Piazza San Marco comes into view, with the basilica at the far end. It’s bigger than a football field, and populated with vending stands, tour groups, and countless pigeons. We waste no time buying pigeon feed and offering it to the birds. They are quick to spot the bag of feed and I am instantly transformed into a human perch. The birds are totally fearless, jostling one another to peck at the feed in my hand, and the bag itself. I feel like Rod Taylor in *The Birds* as I hear the constant beating of wings.



*Piazza San Marco and the famous Duomo and clock tower, Venice.*



We start to make a quick tour of the Correr Museum, then slow down as we encounter ever more fascinating exhibits, including armor and weaponry. There is a small bible on display, with a space carved out of the pages to hold a small pistol. There are many other maritime artifacts on display, and paintings of naval battles between Venetians and Turks. We find a huge coin collection dating back to 800 A.D., along with a device used to mint coins.

We queue up to enter the Duomo, only to be told when we get to the entrance that we can only enter the Duomo museum at this time. We climb the stairs to find the original four horses of San Marco dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Outside on the balcony, we are rewarded with great views of the Piazza and Doge's Palace and the lagoon. Inside, we can peer into the immense nave of the Duomo from the second story. The Duomo interior is covered with millions of gold mosaic tiles. Fragments of scenes, including the Slaughter of Innocents, are preserved in the museum. We descend steep stairs to find the basilica now opened to us.

We tour the Treasury containing priceless works of art from around the globe. In medieval times, the church authorities insisted that sea captains contribute to the glory of Venice by bringing back these treasures from their long voyages. We leave the Treasury to catch a glimpse of the Pal d' Oro, then head out into the afternoon drizzle. We grab a quick bite at a snack bar, where Karen is appalled by her sandwich. We explore the Doge's Palace in the afternoon, including the enormous halls, apartments with huge fireplaces, and the Bridge of Sighs and prison.

We have dinner at a taverna recommended by Lucco. The food is mediocre and the service leaves something to be desired. We grab an after-dinner grappa at the Cantonine Storico where our smiling waiter says "it's on the house." We take a nighttime tour of Venice by vaporetto, heading



*The island of Guidecca, Venice.*