

past St. Marks toward the Lido. A strange blue waterfall of light beckons in the distance. We bundle up against the evening chill, but the cool air feels great as we glide toward the Accademia stop and home.

Wednesday, November 2nd

The day dawns clear and cool, in the low 50's. After another great breakfast, we hop aboard vaporetto #82 to Rialto. It's a perfect day for shooting video along the grand canal. The vaporettos move quickly but barely leave a wake – no sloshing waves to jostle boats docked on the shore. Rialto is a busy stop; a lot of shoppers are roaming the streets. We are searching for gifts for mothers and for Donna and Art and Linda. We figure correctly that prices are lower away from the bridge. We buy Murano glass pieces for the moms, an ornament and set of angels for Donna. We then purchase his and her naughty Roman aprons for Art and Linda. Good – we're done with shopping.

After returning the gifts to our room, we head left out of the hotel toward the lagoon. To catch the vaporetto for the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, we head south toward the Guidecca Canal which separates Venice from the island of Guidecca. As we approach the vaporetto stop of Zaitere, we pass Pension La Calcina on the waterfront. It's a great location, as advertised, but we prefer our hotel on the quiet ancillary canal. We take the short boat ride down the Guidecca Canal several stops to the church of San Giorgio Maggiore, situated on a tiny piazza at the edge of the lagoon. The water laps at the steps leading to the piazza, and the portable sidewalks are stacked nearby in preparation for the inevitable November floods.

The church is closed for siesta, so we look for an entrance to the bell tower which offers a fine view of Venice, but to no avail. Access is through the church grounds, which are also closed. We hop the boat to cross the lagoon to the Zaccaria stop near P. San Marco. As we pass a waterfront restaurant, we are enticed by the low prices on the menu (8€ per entrée). The proprietor approaches and rapidly explains the menu in perfect English. He makes it sound good, so we grab a front-row table and enjoy watching the passers by. With a small carafe of wine, mineral water, bread, lasagna, salad, and free restroom, the meal comes to 28€ – more than advertised, but upon reflection, not a bad value. Just remember to insist on an itemized bill.

We stop once again to feed the pigeons on the way to St. Mark's campanile tower. There is an elevator to the top, saving us another long climb up a steep skinny stairwell. We find a panoramic view of Venice and the



Feeding the pigeons in Piazza San Marco.

islands of S. Michele and Guidecca. We decided earlier against visiting the outer islands of Murano, Burano, and Torcello based on the advice of travelers who we met at the taverna the night before. It's a one-hour boat ride, one way, across choppy water.

We return to the hotel to relax for awhile, and then take a 5-minute walk to the Guggenheim Museum. When we first encounter the works of modern art by Picasso, Max Ernst, Pollack, and other famous artists from the early 20th century, we're not sure how much we really like them. We start listening to the audio guide, which explains what each artist was trying to accomplish. The descriptions are accompanied by intimate biographical details with narration by a voice actor playing Peggy Guggenheim, who talks about her relationship to each artist. After awhile, Karen says she finds herself drawn into the works. One large, complex painting by Boccioni in the Gianni Mattioli collection is worthy of a 5-minute description (visit www.guggenheim-venice.it).

We enjoy a casual dinner at a nearby taverna of fish and vegetables. Surprisingly, the place closes up around 8 o'clock. We decide to take another romantic night cruise down the Grand Canal, this time headed toward the train station. We jump off at the Rialto stop with the intention of "getting lost" in the back streets of Venice. We head in the general direction of the Accademia Bridge, and find that we are only a 10-minute walk away. We return to the hotel for another good night's sleep.

Thursday, November 3rd

It's another clear, sunny day in Venice. I'm up early again as usual, and find the Internet workstation available. I send an email to our neighbor Donna with the workstation's Venice wallpaper attached.



View from Accademia Bridge of Grand Canal and a vaporetto (water taxi) pulling to a stop.

Around 7:30, we enjoy another great breakfast, and smuggle some biscuits, meat, and cheese back up to the room for lunch on the train. We pack up and pay the bill in cash for another 5% discount on top of the 10% discount for staying 3 nights.

We say goodbye to the kind staff at the desk of the Hotel American. As we leave, we notice a woodworking shop next door where craftsmen have been making chairs for shops and restaurants.

We catch the #82 vaporetto at Accademia Bridge, on the right-hand dock to go toward the train station. We remember that the #82 makes fewer stops than the #1. We stash the luggage in a corner, and within a minute are approached by an attendant who demands 7 Euro for luggage transport. What can we do? We pay up, then watch as the attendant approaches a middle-aged American tourist with a couple of small bags and delivers the bad news. The tourist protests that he's only going to the train station, to no avail. Wearing a sour expression, he reluctantly digs into his pocket. The attendant returns with a receipt, as if to say that the surcharge is legitimate and not a creative scam.

I move forward to one of the seats in the bow, which provides an unobstructed view of the Grand Canal as we motor through the busy Venice "rush hour" traffic. Fishermen pass by in boats sorely in need of paint. A work crew in a long boat pulls up to a door in a building with no dock in preparation for unloading stacks of chairs, suitable for a restaurant. A police boat cruises in front of us. At Rialto, a mob of people climbs aboard. Karen finds herself pinned in and unable to move despite the attendant's insistence that she do so since she is occupying "luggage space."



View of Rialto Bridge on the Grand Canal, en route to the train station.

Before we know it, we arrive at the train station dock and extricate ourselves from the crowd. We make our way to the station, grab a luggage cart, and park ourselves in the middle of the café. People pay at the cashier then belly up to the coffee bar to have their orders filled. We buy a liter of water for the trip and wait for the platform announcement for our train. The Eurostar Express is right on time. We find our car at the end of the train and climb aboard. This time the car is nearly full, and we find ourselves surrounded by other American tourists, including two couples from New York with whom we swap seats.

It's getting near lunch time as we approach Florence. We break out the biscuits, meat, cheese, and Chianti and enjoy a picnic mini-feast. As we leave the station bound for Rome, the warm sun and Chianti conspire to make us doze off. We wake up to the announcement that we are approaching Rome Termini station.

We are among the last passengers to disembark the train. As we do so, a man wearing a blue and orange shirt helps us off with our bags, then insists on putting them on a cart. He asks if we need a taxi, and I say yes. As we walk to the terminal, I ask in my best pidgin-Italian how much his services cost. He says something unintelligible and walks on. The logo on the back of his shirt looks official, but I begin to have my suspicions. Outside the station, we pull up in front of a taxi. A young man asks in English if we want a taxi, and we say yes, we're staying at Hotel Nardizzi. He says "30 Euro"; I say "That sounds high". He explains that there is a strike in progress, and the bags are already loaded in the car. As we pull away from the station, I notice a long queue of white taxis in line. During the 5-minute ride, the kid drives like a maniac, nearly running down pedestrians at one



The Vittorio Emmanuele II Monument on a rotunda near the Via Nazionale, Rome's busiest street.

point. At our hotel, he quickly removes the bags and demands 5 more Euros for transport, then leaves us in the middle of the street as he speeds off. When we check in, I report the incident to the receptionist, who apologizes and tells us that the typical taxi fare from the station is 10-12 €. Our remorse is matched by a sense of wonder at how we could allow ourselves to be duped so easily. Upon reflection, we surmise that we are “strangers in a strange land” who happened to let our guard down just long enough to be taken advantage of by the unscrupulous.

Our room on the 4th floor is large and comfortable. The traffic noise is bearable with the windows closed. We unpack, wash off the chagrin of our arrival with a hot shower, and seek out the receptionist for guidance on a nighttime walking tour of central Rome. He marks out our route on the map, explaining the sites and best bets for eating. We thank him and head out into the night ready for a new adventure.

We walk down Via Firenze toward Via Nazionale, one of Rome's busiest streets. On the corner, beckoning like a siren, are the familiar golden arches. Our sense of cultural decorum is overcome by our need for French fries, so we enter the restaurant. It's too early for dinner, but just the right time for a snack, so we order small cheeseburgers and split an order of fries. The waiter appears to be in his 60's and is very courteous and efficient. Curiously, they offer beer on the menu but no wine.

As we head down Via Nazionale, we stop at the tourist information center to ask about reservations for Nero's Golden House. We are given a museum directory with a list of phone numbers, and told to call a phone number in the morning. The street is noisy and bustling with cars, buses, people,



St. Peter's Basicila, The Vatican.

and...motor scooters. Swarms of men and women whip by on motor scooters. For some strange reason, the scooters are not required to stop at a red light, which makes life as a pedestrian in Rome that much more challenging.

We pass by shops and theatres, and the street makes a hard right turn in front of a high wall. On the opposite side of the wall is the Roman Forum. I'm looking for a Tobacco Shop or newsstand which sells bus tickets, and decide to cross the street. Karen, observing the constant flow and speed of the traffic, considers it nearly suicidal. We double back to a crosswalk, and do as our guidebook recommends: shadow the locals. Seizing his opportunity, a pedestrian suddenly darts across the street. We follow, pausing at the center line until traffic passes. We learn that drivers don't necessarily stop or even slow down for crosswalks. The best chance for survival is to carefully consider your timing, make eye contact with the driver, and not be too insistent about your rights as a pedestrian.

Suddenly, the [Vittorio Emanuele II](#) monument comes into view. Lit by high-powered lights, it looks spectacular. Cars flow constantly around the traffic circle in front of it. We shadow a group of nuns crossing the broad boulevard, figuring our odds may be slightly better. We stop at an English pub for a quick drink and munchies. The waitress is Swedish and looks vaguely like Elke Sommer. On the map, we look for Campo di Fiori (field of flowers), where a statue of Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), the Howard Stern of his day who ran afoul of the Inquisition, sits prominently in the center.

We walk past a church and more stores, finally finding a tobacco shop that sells bus tickets (I buy 4). Before long we arrive at another busy intersection in front of a bridge. Off to the left we can see the cupola of [St. Peter's Basilica](#). To the right is [St. Angelos Castle](#), gloriously lit up. We realize we have missed the turnoff for Campo di Fiori, and backtrack several blocks. We turn up a side street filled with small restaurants, shops, markets, and gelaterias, who are doing a brisk business. We are impressed by the exotic choices of ice cream, bright colors, and large containers.

We finally find the statue of Bruno in the center of the large square, surrounded by cafes and filled with evening strollers. As irreverent as he was in his day, we think he would have enjoyed a good party.

We cross the street heading toward [Piazza Navona](#). From a distance, we can see golden light shining on buildings facing the square. As we arrive, we are greeted by a fountain.



A busy hallway inside the Vatican Museum.

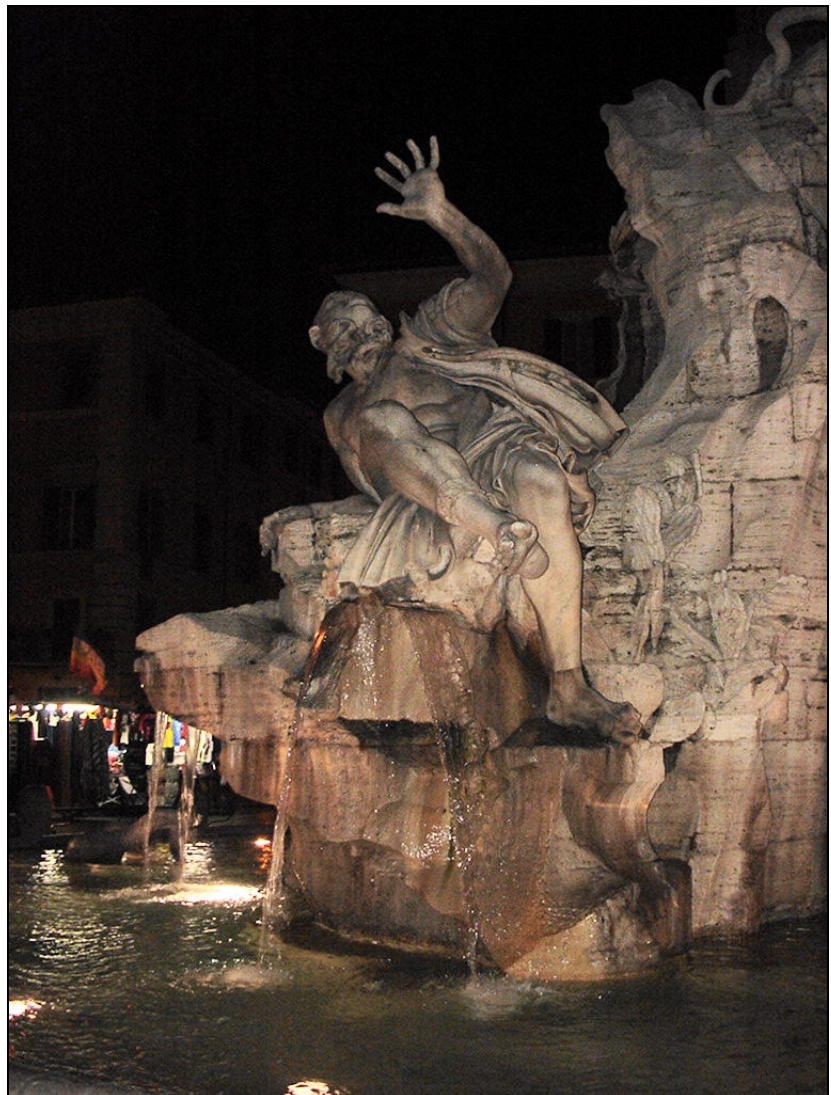
A large white tent sits just beyond, filled with people shopping for tourist knick knacks. Vendors abound, selling everything from sun glasses to glow rings. A disabled man with misshapen limbs wheels himself by on a cart. We make our way across the busy square to find Bar Tre Scalini, where I was treated to a gelato by Uncle Charles so many years ago. We buy small cups of ice cream; Karen prefers the dark chocolate, while I like the vanilla-like “crema” flavor. We find a bench on the square where we can spoil our appetite for dinner, while admiring the huge, complex Four Rivers fountain by Bernini in the center of the square.

Following our guide map and Rick Steves’ directions, we make our way past the vendors and palm readers toward the Pantheon. We pass an ancient obelisk, and encounter a large tour group out for an evening stroll. As we come into the square, a woman driving a truck is trying to squeeze between a concrete pillar and tables of patrons at a sidewalk café. The manager eventually moves a table out of the way, and the truck finally passes. We admire the Pantheon, built by Emperor Hadrian in the 2nd century A.D.

We pass the Tazza d’Oro coffee store and an old church, then come into a large square in front of a massive building housing government offices. A 6th century B.C. Egyptian obelisk over 50 ft high stands in the center, brought to Rome by Augustus. Karen feels the call of nature, and we backtrack to McDonalds near the Pantheon. While finding bathrooms in a timely manner in Rome can be challenging, McDonalds has become our “old reliable”.

We retrace our steps past the government buildings, past the Piazza Colonna (named for the huge 2nd century column honoring Marcus Aurelius), and encounter a tour group out for an evening stroll. We proceed down an alley, and hear the faint sound of falling water in the distance. We turn a corner and suddenly find ourselves staring at the largest fountain and pool ever built – the Trevi Fountain. We learn later that it is fed by an aqueduct. Scores of people line the steps in front of the fountain. Many are posing for pictures, while others toss a coin over their shoulder and into the fountain for good luck. We watch in amusement as the incorrigible street vendors shove flowers at couples. When one approaches us, I say “no” in a way that leaves no doubt in the vendor’s mind.

We leave the Trevi Fountain and meander up a street lined with shops and restaurants. We are getting close to our restaurant, the Hosteria Romana.



Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers (1651), Piazza Navona

Karen stops at a shop to inquire about Absinthe. The salesgirl tells us that it is illegal to import Absinthe into the U.S., so it's a hot commodity in Rome with American tourists. The restaurant looks busy and we don't feel all that hungry after ingesting bar munchies. We continue on to our hotel, and then decide to head down Via Firenze to a local deli. The waiter speaks good English, and serves us heaping plates of pasta, eggplant, mixed veggies, and a bottle of Chianti for a very reasonable 18 €.

Friday, November 4th

The hotel serves a decent breakfast of croissants, coffee, juices, etc. The buffet features a magical coffee machine that can make cappuccino, espresso, or American coffee at the touch of a button. We meet a couple from Washington D.C., Bob Barrett and his wife. They are planning to visit the Borghese gardens and museum, while we are bound for the Vatican.

We head down to Via Nazionale in time to catch the #40 express bus and find it's jammed with riders, mostly standing. As the bus creeps through rush hour traffic, we watch as pedestrians move swiftly along on the sidewalk. Swarms of scooters roar past. Cars block the intersections at a red light, preventing cross traffic from moving. Horns blare incessantly. Ah, Roma!

As we pass the Vittorio Emanuele monument, a Scottish couple opine that animals are transported more humanely back home than here. It's very warm and cramped, but after the bus makes a few stops, a space clears toward the rear. After 40 minutes of hell, we decide to jump off at the bridge near the Vatican and walk in the fresh air rather than riding the rest of the way.



Michelangelo's Pietà, St. Peter's Basilica, The Vatican.

There is a wide boulevard leading up to the Vatican. As we pass through the security checkpoint, something in my pocket sets off the alarm. Oh crap! I forgot to leave my pocketknife at the hotel. The guard suggests I throw it away and get back in line. I calculate the time required to return to the hotel vs. the expense of replacing the knife. I tell Karen I want to return to the hotel, but using the Metro this time. The Metro stop is four blocks away, and I suggest to Karen that she relax at a café while I make the dash. She says she would rather come with me, so off we go. In less than 10 minutes, we are boarding the subway. Nine minutes later, we emerge from the underground station at Piazza Repubblica, a 5-minute walk from our hotel.

An hour later, we are in line for the Vatican Museum, which closes in the early afternoon. Soon we are passing through security and the ticket booth, and head into the museum. Egyptian antiquities is first, followed by Roman artifacts. We find mummies very well preserved, along with statuary. We find a window and balcony with a panoramic view of Rome. Surprise, no high-rises. Rome passed a law many years ago prohibiting any building from being higher than St. Peter's cupola. We pass through an octagonal courtyard, pausing to admire some of the finest Greek statuary on display anywhere.

We proceed down a hall the length of a football field, its walls covered in tapestries. The ceiling is one long series of individual paintings of biblical stories. We peer out a window at the Vatican gardens, and spot the radio tower and living quarters within the city. We continue to follow the signs to the Sistine Chapel, dodging tour groups and racing the clock. Finally, we arrive at Michelangelo's masterpiece. The seats are all taken, so we stand and admire his work. Some elements are familiar from guidebooks and art history courses taken long ago. It's in great condition, having been restored within the past couple of decades. We have about 15 minutes to take it all in before we are



The front of St. Peter's Basilica, The Vatican. The pope delivers Mass from the center balcony.