

UNDER TUSCAN SUN . . . AND WIND

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It's almost like a page from a fairy tale – the rolling landscape of Tuscany, filled with beautiful old villas, vineyards, and groves of olive trees. This land largely seems caught in a distant, frozen past. Travel across the Italian countryside, and you'll see hill after hill topped with churches and homes, built in medieval times, most 800 or more years old, often surrounded by an ancient city wall.

That's not to say there aren't modern buildings and conveniences.

Modern towns are typically built in the valleys and plains below the old medieval towns. While they maintain a recognizable regional architecture, both, once you are past the doorway, have all the same modern trappings we find in our own homes.

Exploring one of the ancient trade route towns like San Gimignano, it caught me off guard to find a sign in a restaurant advertising WiFi connections, but it was appreciated.

At the beginning of March, eleven of us traveled to this enchanted place through the ABAC Travel Program, joining a larger group from Alabama, New Jersey and California. More trips are planned this summer and fall as ABAC travels to London and Paris, the Black Hills of South Dakota, and Alaska. There's also a cruise on the Mississippi River, a trek to Australia and New Zealand, a Smoky Mountains trip, a cruise on the Danube River in Austria, and in March of 2012, Ireland. For more information, visit <http://www.abac.edu/psbo/travel/>.

Our group met the larger group in Rome at a beautiful welcome dinner of classic cuisine and singing in the grandest Italian tradition.

Before the end of the evening, between the wonderful meal, wine and singing, we were well on our way to making fast friends. Days passed, and I had to sing every Italian song I knew before I could get the joyous sounds of "Funiculi, Funicula!" to stop continuously ringing in my head.

As the tour began in earnest, I was struck by stark differences between what we see at home and what is commonplace throughout Italy. One of the hallmarks in large metropolitan areas is towering skyscrapers defining a modern city. When we landed in Rome, I fully expected to see the treasures of the past. We visited many of the places you would expect – the Coliseum, the Roman Forum, and the huge and imposing monument to King Victor Emmanuel in the center of town.

I threw coins in the Trevi Fountain – one to ensure returning to Rome, another to find true love.

This city, one of the most famous in the world, has no skyscrapers. No building rose more than six stories anywhere I looked. I was surprised to learn that by law, no building in Italy is allowed to be built higher than the main church in any town.

That's true in the smallest village, and in Rome itself. In a modern world where secular so often dominates sacred, what a surprising bow to centuries-old tradition this was.

Italy is known for chaos; traffic is a prime example. The only traffic signals I saw the entire time were in Rome, and our tour manager was very quick to point out that during rush hour, signals, lanes and traffic "laws" were merely guidelines to be ignored if it gave any advantage.

Six lane boulevards suddenly became 12 with tiny Smart Cars vying for every inch of space available, brazenly competing with tour buses. Thousands of scooters zipped between impossibly small gaps.

For most of the country, insanity masked as bravado and a willingness to park or squeeze through spaces with fractions of an inch clearance marked traffic control. New York cabbies are rank amateurs in comparison to the drivers we saw. No wonder so many walk or take a train.

After leaving Rome, the tour centered on the beautiful towns and countryside of Tuscany, with a brief stop at Assisi.

Beautiful sun-drenched hills covered with vineyards, olive groves and beautiful villas.

Days were sunny as predicted, but in an unexpected turn, the temperature dropped about 10-15 degrees below the week before! We had come at the beginning of tourist season, the end of winter and the beginning of spring. That was great for accessing cultural treasures without crowds. It also meant wind whipping through charming old stone medieval streets in Assisi.

Pack a warm jacket and a good pair of gloves if you go in early March.

One of the really enjoyable aspects of this trip was its format, known as a hub-and-spoke tour. After arriving in Tuscany, we made the beautiful spa town, Montecatini Terme, home for the week. We stayed in the four-star Ercolini e Savi Hotel, located in the heart of this modern city, full of great shops everywhere you turned.

Each day after a continental breakfast at the hotel, we would set out by bus for an easy ride of an hour or less to take in the sights, history and, yes, the wonderful food afforded by another Tuscan treasure.

Siena was the first place visited, where once each year, the 17 neighborhoods of this ancient town each offer a courageous horse and rider in a brutal and furious race around the central plaza, the Piazza del Campo. This is no-holds-barred racing, continuous since the Middle Ages and affords the winning horse and the neighborhood it represents bragging rights for a full year.

Some 50,000 screaming fans pack the piazza in an all day celebration for the race, which, start to finish, lasts about one minute.

We spent time in the medieval walled city of San Gimignano, where once the city's wealthy elite showed their might through the construction of high towers, numbering as many as 72 at one time.

Thirteen still stand. This was also one of the great simple moments of the tour, sharing a walking tour around this beautiful old town with others from our group, Martha Parrish from Adel and Lynn Fowler from Sylvester.

We also enjoyed a warm meal with three others of our group, Susan Irwin (Valdosta), Carol Ranew and Lynne Mertins (both from Albany) at a wonderful café on the sunny side of the square.

Even though it was a windy, cool day, one of the true delights of this beautiful hilltop town is the World's Greatest Gelateria, the Gelateria di Piazza, located in the heart of the town square. Master Ice Cream maker Sergio Dondoli and his team have won that coveted title four times since the competition began in 2003, and I can personally attest to the amazing intensity of his wonderful gelati.

The tour also included two days in Florence, capital of the region and birthplace of the Renaissance. This magnificent city was the center of power for the Medici, and boasts some of the finest architectural and artistic masterpieces the world has ever seen. While the group spent some time together exploring one of the world's greatest arts collections in the Pitti Palace or climbing the 463 steps to see the amazing view of the city from the top of the dome of the cathedral, many also took time to explore this great city solo.

It is also a tourist's dream, boasting huge outdoor marketplaces with fine leather goods and clothing at fire sale prices . . . if you haggle.

In addition to the scheduled visits each day, the tour featured options such as a Tuscan cooking school in Montecatini, tours of the Vatican Museums and St. Peter's Cathedral and my personal favorite, a day trip to Lucca and Pisa.

Lucca was incredible, but the real excitement came in our stop at Pisa. Miracle Square contains its beautiful cathedral, baptistery and the ever famous Leaning Tower. Because a fellow traveler, Jason Revels (Tifton), and I wanted to take the opportunity to climb the tower, we chose to follow our instincts and stay, taking the train back by ourselves to Montecatini.

The view was magnificent. It seemed to me you could see forever from the top of the tower, a 15-minute climb. When we came down, we left the walled old city, following our guide's directions to get to the station – almost. We encountered a sign pointing towards the station in the opposite direction from what we'd been told. Thinking that we had simply not listened closely enough, we struck out in the direction the sign indicated.

Fifteen minutes and much pleasant conversation later, we doubted we had gone the right direction – no station. In the next half hour we stopped three different places to check if we were headed the right direction. We were assured each time that we were, and finally arrived at the station.

Back in Montecatini, we met up with many of our travel mates who had decided to stay for the day, taking in the spas for which that town is famous and leisurely shopping and dining.

So what did I learn on my trip through the Tuscan countryside? First, listen to directions from the tour guide; it can save a lot of walking. Driving in Italy is an act of bravado. Early March is a great time to take in the sights without the crush of the crowds – but take a warm jacket so you can be at your most comfortable when taking in the bounty Italy has to offer.

Arrivederci!