

**5/6/2005 Friday Mill Valley**

Left for SFO at 4:00 am. Connection is through Chicago and on to Rome before connecting to Athens. The plane was on time

**5/7/2005 Saturday Chicago-Rome-Athens**

Tried to sleep as much as we can on the flight from Chicago. We had Melatonin, sleep mask and ear plugs. It worked somewhat until the body discomfort from sitting too long gave way to restless tossing and turning. The flight arrived in Rome on time at about 8:00 am Saturday morning. The Aegean Air was late about 2 hours. We had to wait in a short line to get our tickets but the line was sooo sloooow. The lady had to take our information, find our names on one screen copy down the info on a piece of paper, bring up another screen, reenter the information before printing out the ticket. It took about 15 minutes to complete the whole affair. Good thing we had extra time. Then we went to another line to use the ticket to check our bags and get the flight coupon. Very strange indeed. It turns out that there was a strike of the air traffic controllers in Athens so no flights were able to take off. After the strike was over we still couldn't take off because of all the other flights stacked up in front of us. We waited at the assigned waiting area until about 15 minutes before flight time when the flight info disappeared from the marquee. A quick check at the counter told us that the gate had changed to one in another area of the terminal. The whole gallery had to trudge down to another gate to get on a bus to be taken to the plane. We tried to call Christy to let her know that we would be late. We bought a phone card but couldn't figure out how to work the phone and card. We asked several people. In the end we figured the two phones we were trying were not working and by looking at the instructions at another companies phone, we figured out how to call long distance – put zero-zero in front of the country code of 30 for Greece.

We met Christy as we exited the terminal 4 hours later than planned. It was good to see her. We took the metro from the airport to the city center. Pretty efficient and clean. Christy walked us up to our hotel (all uphill with turns right and left – how can anyone retrace those directions).

We saw Christy's suite, went to dinner at a nice local taverna and met some of Christy's friends before turning in for the evening. It had been a long two days of travel compressed into one.

**5/8/05 Sunday - Athens**

Met Christy at around 10:30 and walked all over the city from the hotel St. George Lycabettus which is in the Kolonaki, district to Syntagma Square and the Parliament building in the Plaka

district. At the Parliament building we watched the changing of the guard at the tomb of the unknown. Then through the Plaka district to the flea market in Monastiraki. We walked through the Agora ruins up to the Acropolis, Odeum of Herodes and Theatre of Dionysos. Then down to Hadrian's Arch and Temple of Olympian Zeus, to the Royal palace and national gardens and back to the Parliament building across from Syntagma Square. Finally back up the hill to the St. George where my feet hurt and my muscles refused to work. We tried a number of dinner choices but discovered that a lot of places were closed on Sunday evenings. Had dinner with Christy down near the Plaka and Peter came just as we were finishing. Peter was on a school field trip up North.

### **5/9/2005 Monday - Athens**

Woke up and walked up the Lycabettus hill to the top. Then we walked down to Syntagma square and the metro station under it. We took the metro out to the Olympic stadium complex. Nothing at all was happening there. It was all fenced off so we could only get to see the track and from the road we could see several outdoor swimming pools. No tour or anything. In the place where one would expect to see the Olympic village, apartment buildings were being completed, hundreds of them. If they are just now finishing them, what was there during the Olympics? Took the metro back, but at the transfer location, we took the metro the wrong direction for one stop before reversing ourselves. Nice metro system. I believe Bechtel managed the building of it. We went to the Benaki Museum. I'm not a big museum fan. It was OK. Lots of history of the area and surrounding areas from Egypt to Rome. Played cards with Christy and Peter. We had an excellent dinner of Lamb at a local restaurant.

### **5/10/2005 Tuesday - Athens - Santorini**

Met Christy for Breakfast at the St. George. Little did we realize that they would charge us 30 Euro just to have her join us for breakfast. It certainly was not worth that much. Went shopping again in Monastiraki area. Christy needed another bag to carry all her shoes home in. We stopped at every shoe store along the way. Peter and I just waited outside with our worry beads. We had Gyro's for lunch at a local place near Christy's – yummy.

We took the metro back to the airport. Very fast and convenient. It lets you off right near the terminal. The plane was on time and we reached Santorini without incident. We took a taxi with another couple to our hotel, the Atlantis. They charge both couples the same price whether you have two or four people in the cab. The Atlantis is a large hotel visible from most everywhere in Fira. It's at the top of the rim with a commanding view of the Caldara. A very nice choice. We

had dinner at a place recommended by the hotel but it wasn't very good. They had only one waiter who had to run (literally) up and down the stairs with food and drinks. Our appetizer came after the main course. We walked around, bought some wine and cheese. It was pretty good wine.

### **5/11/2005 Wednesday - Santorini**

We got up early to get the Pegasus boat ride around the islands. We took a bus ride to the new port (Athinios Port) which was South of Fira. Once you reached the rim of the crater above the new port, the road down was one switchback after another down a very steep hill. I was amazed that the large bus would actually make the turns. Don't look down, that's for sure. We got on a boat with all French tourists. The guide would give 10 minutes of commentary in French then walk over to us and give us 30 seconds on the same subject. We went from the new port to old port back at Fira to pick up more passengers. It turns out that today was a strike day for all of Greece and the gondola was not working. The strike was because they didn't get May 1<sup>st</sup> off as a holiday since it was Easter and already a holiday. So they felt like they deserved another day off. Thus the strike. At least they gave everyone notice. I'm glad we were not flying today.

Anyway we went to the center island of Ner Kameni where the active volcano vent is located. There was a small steam vent, but nothing too exciting. Santorini is an ancient but still active volcano crater. The sides of the crater Caldara are open to the sea. There are theories that when Santorini erupted several thousand years ago, the massive tidal wave wiped out the Minoan empire including ancient Atlantis. The ring of islands are the edge of the ancient caldera. One very small island had 50 feet of pumice ash on it showing what it must have been like thousands of years ago. We stopped at Thirassira, the island furthest away from Fira for lunch. From there we went to the port at OIA (eye-a), then back to old port then concluded at new port again and a bus ride back to Fira. Fira is where old port is located, but to get there without the gondola or donkey's you have to walk down and back up. The hotel had told us about the strike and suggested the bus ride to the new port instead of walking down to old port. Good recommendation.

Long day. We sat by the pool to relax, walked around the city center, had dinner at Caesars – very good. Lamb Kilataki? and Greek Salad plus stuffed Tomato and Pepper. Bed early 10:30.

### **5/12/2005 Thursday - Santorini**

Breakfast then laundry opens at 10:00. You put the laundry in the machine, give your name to the attendant then come back 4 hours later to find it dried and folded all for 6 Euro. We visited the museum of prehistoric Thira which was near the hotel. Saw some of the thousands of years old

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artifacts from the island – 17-20 Century BC. Read books by the pool – relaxing. After the clothes were done we took the bus over to OIA. More shops and it's supposed to be the best place to see the sunset. The clouds came in and there was a cold wind so it was not a great sunset. I did get some pictures before the clouds came in. We went to dinner and had Mussaka and Pet?? Something. It was like Mussaka but with noodles. We were too late for the last bus back to Fira so we took a taxi back to the hotel. When we got to the hotel we found out we didn't have a room for Friday night. The reservation said in 10/5/05 and out 14/5/05, three nights. Well, the day's were right but whoops, that's four nights, not three. So we found an internet café to send an email to Anna, the travel agent in Athens and also to Christy. We AIM talked to John which was fun.

### **5/13/2005 Friday - Santorini**

We called Anna who had the email and was working on it. She called back later to say all was OK. We were a little lazy today so we decided to stay near the hotel. We read more books, walked around a little. Had lunch of wine, cheese, tomatoes, and tzatsaki we purchased at the grocery store plus apple and crackers we already had. Read some more and had gyro's at a local taverna for dinner. We walked to the furthest North edge of Fira and took pictures of the sunset and back at the city. We packed and got ready for a 5:30 am wakeup call and taxi.

### **5/14/2005 Saturday - Santorini – Athens – Rome**

5:30 is too #\$\$^ early on vacation. They did have a little breakfast ready for us, which was very nice then taxi to the airport. I have to recommend the Atlantis. They were very good to us and it was a comfortable place to stay. However, we had a great deal price wise. We were being charged 55 euro per night for a room that normally went for 165 per night. I don't know how the travel agent arranged it, but it was a great deal.

BTW, taxi's don't stop at stop signs. Apparently they are just suggestions. The flight to Athens was on time and we met Christy and Peter at the airport. The flight to Rome was also on time. One strange thing. We saw a baggage handling cart with bags on it being pulled by a truck. One of the wheels of the cart was frozen and didn't turn. We could hear it coming as it made it's screeching sound while being drug down the tarmat. I prayed that was not an indication of the shape of our airplane maintenance. Not to worry. All went as planned.

We rented a FIAT mini-van. Real nice car. Probably a 4 cylinder and was diesel. It drove easily and smoothly. We drove the coast route towards PISA on Via Aurelia. We made one side trip off the highway into Grosseto. We stopped at a deli and had to communicate in hand signals. Then we ventured further off the highway – paralleling it, to see some of the country and find our way

back to the highway, we had not figured out the street signs by that time yet. We got sort of lost. City streets are all meandering. After finding the highway again, we figured out that the sign to Aurelia must have been to the highway. Later we were to learn that the green signs took you to the pay autostrata and the blue to regular street/highways.

We got to Pisa on time after getting a little more turned around on the city streets trying the tower. I did that a lot this trip, I just didn't want it to be dull and unexciting for my passengers. BTW again, nobody else would touch the steering wheel so I had to do all the driving.

Anyway, we found the leaning tower and got there just a few minutes after Katie and Hugh had arrived. So the biggest fear I had of not making contact was not realized. A great trip so far.

I took lots of photos, but the #\$\$%& camera was acting up as it had on Santorini and Athens.

Photos would come out such that the three primary colors did not overlap correctly so the picture appeared out of focus and the colors were way off. I got about one out of 10 to come out OK.

### **Katie's bad day**

This deserves a whole section unto itself. When we met Katie and Hugh at the tower they had a long and sad story to tell.

They had taken the overnight train from Germany the night before and arrived in Florence this morning. After getting on the train and settling into their stateroom the attendant wanted their passports and railpass. Hugh was not willing to part with the passport but after much discussion they were told that was the way it had to be. The next morning, bright and early Hugh went to get the passports and railpass. He was given the passports but told that he had not given the rail pass to them, they didn't have it. After much heated discussion, the attendant went into her room and came out with somebody else's rail pass and gave it to them. That didn't work. When they arrived in Florence they argued some more and brought in the Italian train people. Nothing the Italians could do for them they were told. It was the Germans. All the while this was going on they had all their bags and a box of stuff they had purchased that they were carrying around with them. The box was to be mail home to themselves. They were told a post was right around the corner so they hurried over there only to find that it closed minutes before. They could see the people inside, but they would not let them in. They hurried back to the train depot to try one more time but to no avail to get a rail pass. Again they were told of another post a little further away. They rushed over there only to realize that they had left a bag with the camera, file research and walkie-talkie's behind at the rail station. Rushing back to the depot it was too late, it was gone. No rail pass, no camera and they still had the box to mail. Finally the Italians took pity and gave them a pass to get to Pisa. That evening after settling into the Villa we went shopping for a few

things for dinner. I parked the car while Katie, Hugh and Cathie went into a grocery store. With all that was going on Katie was not feeling well as she was coming down with a cold. She's sure that and the stress contributed together to loosing the bag. Anyway, Cathie and Hugh went off to a bread store and Katie and I went into a meat shop where she bought some Yogurt. She had forgotten she didn't have any cash so she found me to get some. We figured later that is when she left her credit cards behind on the counter. She didn't realize until later that evening that her wallet was missing. We figured they must be at either the grocery store or the meat shop. All while this was going on, Katie was fighting off the start of a cold. What a bad day.

### **5/15/2006 Sunday - Lucca, Tuscany**

The next day being Sunday, the meat shop was not open to see if the credit cards were there. So they called and cancelled them all. Fortunately Hugh had different cards and they had insurance for the rail pass. There was nothing they could do for the lost photo's unfortunately.

This morning we got up to discover that the espresso machine at the villa did not work as expected. We drove around looking for a real grocery store to buy stuff and coffee. By dumb luck and asking a passerby, we did locate one that was quite a ways away from the villa. There were several closer we were to learn as the week progressed. They didn't sell fresh coffee so after that we went looking for coffee. We found a kiosk and Hugh ordered five espresso's while I sat double parked in the car. People parked everywhere in Italy. No parking signs and parking spaces were just suggestions as was speed limits, stop signs and right of way. The larger vehicle got the right of way – always. Anyway, back to the coffee. After the guy did his thing, he presented Hugh with five small mugs, not paper cups of espresso. Since Hugh wanted take-out, that didn't work so he left them behind and we drove back without coffee.

We all packed into the van and drove back to Lucca. Turns out the coffee place was right at the entrance nearest our Villa so we parked almost right next to it. Hugh and Katie used the phone to cancel the cards and we went into the walled city. The Espresso guy was closed, but would open for us. Unfortunately, the espresso machine was cleaned and put away so no coffee. Anyway, we had a set of walkie-talkie's so we could try and find each other later.

While Katie and Hugh did the phone thing, we went inside the walls and rented bicycles. We rode around the top of the wall and then down into town. We were able to see glimpses of things we wanted to come back and see. There was a flea market going on so after returning the bikes, that's where we headed. The walkie-talkie worked OK if you weren't too far apart. We met up with Katie and Hugh at the Piazza Anfiteatro a circular courtyard surrounded by buildings. We walked up to the top of one of the towers for a commanding view of the city. Cool city.

After spending the day there we ended up at the largest, most crowded flea market I have ever seen down near the Piazza Antelminelli. This is the flea market that Hugh and Katie wanted to see but they had it identified as next Saturday, not this Sunday.

I don't get claustrophobia much, but it was way too crowded for me. I headed back to the Piazza Santa Maria gate where we came in to meet up with Cathie, Christy and Peter. After Katie and Hugh showed up we found our way to a real grocery store where the ladies did some shopping for food.

### **5/16/2005 Monday - Lucca, Christy's 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday**

We went to the meat store and they had Katie's credit cards. Cool, but they had been cancelled anyway. We drove to San Gimignano (Jimmy-yawno). This was another ancient walled city on top of a hill. It used to have 72 towers but only 14 remain. The towers were used to dry cloth, which was their staple economy. We had lunch then drove on to Siena.

Siena was an interesting town. The Duomo was magnificent. It's hard to describe. The church was magnificent both outside and inside. It was to be the largest church ever built, trying to outdo their rivals in Florence. However, they ran out of money and the plague took too many lives such that what was finished was about 1/3 the size and is still massive. There are huge stone columns outside the church which marks the size that the church was suppose to be. The columns were built but that part of the church was never finished. Standing at the entrance of the columns one can visualize the vast size that was imagined. Siena is built on the sides of two hills with a deep fissure running down the center. The easiest way, the way everyone goes is to follow the contours of the hill such that you don't walk up or down, just around a large arc to get from where we parked, near the stadium to the Duomo and then to the center Piazza del Campo.

We had a cocktail at the Piazza before going out to dinner at a restaurant recommended by Rick Steves. I must say, it was OK, but nothing special for the exorbitant price. We made it back to the villa via the autostrada and Florence by about 11:30. There was Birthday cake and Ice cream, Yum.

### **5/17/2005, Tuesday - Lucca**

We hit the supermarket again for coffee. Then to Lucca to mail Katie and Hugh's package and use the internet at the Fed Express. Another zoo. Fed Ex was way too expensive and the Post said it was not packaged right. A very nice American Lady named Jo (actually Mary-Jo) behind us at the post helped translate for the Post employee. In the end, after going around in circles, Hugh mailed it without insurance. We used the computer to email H&H travel agent. They called

Florence train and found the person they needed to talk too was not in until Wednesday. That saved us a trip there and we decided to see Florence on Wednesday. We got a reservation to see the David but the other museum was booked until June.

We found a map to a winery and B&B with a restaurant. We drove there but it was closed on Tuesday. We bought some wine anyway. We hit the Café for lunch then to the supermarket for dinner food. It rained hard this afternoon. We played a lot of cards and read some books. A nice relaxing day was needed anyway.

### **5/18/2005, Wednesday - Lucca – Florence**

We hit the Internet at Fed Express and learned that K&H were to purchase a new rail ticket to finish the trip.

We drove to Florence where K&H went to the rail station. They stood in line for 1 hour only to learn that they needed both passports. Katie didn't carry hers. We went to see the David. It was cool. No photos allowed, but I took one anyway. It came out nice. K&H met us there and told us the story of the tickets. Katie had a copy of her passport and it was decided to try again, but with the copy. Yeah, that worked and they didn't have to wait in line for it.

We did the shopping routine in Florence. Cathie bought a new leather coat. Oh, driving in Florence was a nightmare. Very small streets, no parking, confusing signs, etc, etc. We did find a parking garage and decided to pay their price for parking. OK, I did get lost again. I did that a lot, but that was part of the fun of seeing if the navigators could recover from my bonehead driving. We went back to Lucca to a restaurant inside the walls for dinner. One of the best meals, excluding the ones we cooked ourselves.

### **5/19/2005, Thursday - Lucca – Cinque Terra**

I really love the Italian motorway. The signs are all clear and precise – not. Once again I challenged the navigators to find where I had gone wrong. Actually, we went miles beyond our turn off before we realized it. The map shows multiple places where the autostrada crosses state roads. However, we learned that there is one and only one exit to any one area. All the other points of intersection are not true intersections. If you see a sign to a city you want, you had better take it. Chances are there won't be another one.

Anyway, we found our way back to La Spezia. Good thing I had Christy, Peter and Hugh to navigate otherwise we might still be out there somewhere looking for the train station and a parking place. As luck would have it, we found a spot almost across the street from the depot.

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Good thing those cars have a tight turning radius so I can get into those extra small parking places with that van.

We purchased a ticket on the train before realizing that we wanted a different ticket, one that included the boat. We turned in the ticket for a refund and went to the info booth for the other ticket only to find that the boat wasn't running today. It was a beautiful day, but apparently the boat still was not going today. So we repurchased the train ticket. The train traversed through miles of tunnel with no lights – Black – to emerge at the first Cinque Terra town of Riomaggiore. The towns were easy to walk and we decided to try the trail to the next town of Manarola. Then we walked to the next town of Corniglia. Corniglia was up on a crest away from the sea and the train depot. There was a bus to the town, but Rick Steves said there's not much there when you're there. Peter and Christy decided to take the steps up to the town and would meet us at the next town. The trail to Vernazza was harder so we took the easy way on the train. Vernazza was probably the cutest town. Kind of in a valley leading down to a small harbor. We sat by the sea and had a wine and chatted with other Americans. It was real nice. Christy and Peter showed up an hour later and we took the train to the last Cinque Terra town of Monerosso. This was another nice town. It had an old town and a new town section separated by a walking tunnel through the mountain or an easy trail around it. We had dinner there. A weird waiter. We ordered water and wine but only got one set of glasses. So Cathie asked for water glasses and got one glass. You have to be so precise when asking for things. The food was real good. We took the train back and drove to the villa. 2 hours to get there, but one hour to get back. It makes a difference if you don't get lost.

### **5/20/2005 – Friday - Lucca and surrounding area**

This was a kick back day. We drove around to look at local Villas. We drove to the top of the hill near our villa and saw an old ruin of a Villa with lots of cats. We went to several historical Villas and took one tour Villa Grabau, San Pancrazio, Lucca.

After that we hit Lucca again so the ladies could do some more shopping – what else. Peter and I hit the Internet and then I took a tour of the Palazzo Mansi, an aristocratic dwelling from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. I sat inside it's garden and read my book until it was time to go. Dinner was takeout Pizza, cheese, bread and wine. You should see the impressive lineup of 13 wine and champagne bottles we had. All was good wine. The best might have been an ordinary table wine we bought at the store for .80 euro. It was very smooth and went down easy. No telling what grapes were in it. Probably a combination of whatever they had in the fields.

## **5/21/2005 – Saturday - Lucca - Como - Bob's bad day**

I'm taking to calling this Bob's bad day. It started out just great. Katie and Hugh were going to Lugano, which was only 30 km or less from the city of Como that we were going to. Why not drive together. We could stop see Genoa and Milan on the way, although both cities didn't have a lot to offer the tourist. So on the road again. The closer we got to Genoa, the more we felt like we were on the road and lets just get to Como so we bypassed Genoa now having learned something about the road signs, we had no problem there. As we approached Milan, however, the signs became less clear as to which way we had to go to get take the correct turnoff or exit. We ended up at the end of the autostrada where it dumped us onto city streets of Milan. We needed gas anyway so we pulled off the road and turned around in a gas station that was unmanned. Oh well, we got instructions from some locals in broken English but felt confidence growing that we were on our way again. A few miles down the autostrada was a gas station and might as well fill up now then risk it later. So we pulled off and looked at the signs: 1.02,9 for Diesel on the white sign. I started filling from the white pump handle and after a while I looked around at the pump and realized with a heart thump that the nozzle next to the one I was using was diesel. This one was not. At the same time the attendant realized what I had done also and I didn't need to understand Italian to realize what he was saying. Petrol in a diesel would not work. So we pushed it over to the garage where they pumped and drained out the wrong gas so we could pump in diesel instead. We were very lucky to be at a manned garage and not at an unmanned gas station like we first pulled off at. Anyway, an hour and a half later we were on our way just a little lighter in the wallet and feeling very foolish.

We made it to Como and found Hotel Como with a little luck and our improved ability to read street signs. After checking out the flea market and boat excursions, we took off for Lugano where we planned to drop off Hugh and Katie and have dinner together. We were counseled by the front desk to not take the autostrada as once you get into Switzerland they charge you for a yearly pass to use the toll roads. Follow the blue road signs, not the green ones.

So off we went. Getting there was OK. It took us an hour to go the 28km. With a little help, we found the hotel. Their room was great, they upgraded to a room high on the hill overlooking the city and lake. We walked around and discovered that Laguno is apparently the Rodeo drive of the Swiss lake region. All the big name stores were there with all their high prices and all the restaurant had prices commensurate with the Rodeo drive analogy.

Well after walking around we settled on one near where a band was setting up. The waiter apparently didn't put in Katie's order so when we finally waited much to long for it, he made like we hadn't ordered anything for her but then ran off and I'm sure put in the order. By the time we

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had finished dinner, Katie's meal came out. The Waiter just about ignored us from then on and his tip reflected the service.

Lugano was a clean city with none of the parking anywhere, forget the signs, of Italy. Parking and rules appeared to be strictly enforced.

It was late and so we took off towards Como and our hotel. On the outskirts of Laguno, before the bridge over the lake, we were stopped by a road closure. We didn't speak the language and couldn't find a common one but we understood the cop was saying turn around and go some other way. We found ourselves trying to find an alternate road on the map and kept climbing up and up on progressively narrower and narrower roads until finally we came to a small town on the top of the steep hill way above the lake where the car barely fit through a set of arches that were narrow enough to look like we were going through a church door. Anyway, we were assured by the locals that we should keep going and we would eventually come out on the other side. Sure enough after many more, narrow, steep, switchback roads later we did come around to the lake bridge from the other direction. The rest of the ride home was anticlimactic. Looking back it was OK, but at the time, it was quite nerve wracking. I think we only lost a half hour in all that. A hard day of 6-1/2 hours worth of driving.

### **5/22/2005, Sunday - Lake Como**

Katie and Hugh thought they might want to come back on the train and take the tour of Lake Como that we were going to take. We really didn't expect to see them and indeed they were smarter in the end and went on their way. We left the car parked where it was in the underground parking garage and got on the ferry ride to Bellagio. Wow talk about picturesque cities. It was a little foggy – hazy but still you could see the old country estates that dotted the lake side. Some were spectacular. Towns like Cernobbio, Argegno, Colonno, Tremezzo and finally Bellagio. Lunch late at bellagio and lots of shopping – what else. We found a park where the locals were playing a concert. We purchased some pottery for the kitchen. We took the slow boat out and the fast boat back so 1.5 hours to get there and 45 minutes to return to Como.

After a long day we weren't hungry for a large dinner so we got pizza and proccutto & melon to go, ate and played cards.

### **5/232005, Monday - Como - Verona - Venice**

Today was going to be a rainy day. We took off and apparently out ran the rain – thunder and lightening – before we reached Verona. We stopped there to see this quant little walled city. It's suppose to be the location of Romeo and Juliet but Rick Steves says the purported Juliet balcony

is not the real one. We had the Italian version of a Turkish Gyro. It was pretty good and a welcome change from all the pasta. By the time we walked to the city, ate, looked around (translation – shopped) and walked back to the train depot where we had parked, the rain had started to catch up with us. We timed it just right to get back on the road. We drove to Venice and were pretty good with the signs by now. We made it to the car park and got on the Vaporetto to the Rialto Bridge stop. The hotel was down a narrow passageway near the fish and fruit market areas. 4 people in a pretty small room was real cozy. We went to dinner just as the thunder, lightening and rain again caught up with us again.

### **5/24/2005, Tuesday - Venice**

We walked all around Venice. We visited the St. Marks Square & Basilica and took the tour of the Doges palace including the bridge of sighs to the jail. We then walked over to the academia bridge and made our way back to the Rialto bridge on the West side of the grand canal. It was lots of walking, picture taking and shopping and it was hot today. We didn't go into the Academia museum. When we got back to the hotel, we discovered that I had made the reservation for the Galleria Borghese on Saturday the 28<sup>th</sup> instead of Friday the 27<sup>th</sup>. So we went to an internet café only to find that it was closed. We'll do it tomorrow before we leave.

### **5/25/2005, Wednesday - Venice - Rome**

We went to the Internet café early and changed the reservation to the Borghese. We checked out and were at the car park at Noon and on the road. The road to Rome was pretty straightforward. All roads lead to Rome anyway – right? There seemed to be lots of construction along the way. By following the signs and a little consternation we made it to the Rome FCO airport by 6:00. Good thing we emailed the Hotel that we would not be checking in by 6:00. Upon presenting the car and getting the receipt we discovered that the cost was double what we expected. First the car rental price was not what we were told it would be. They said that National gave us a wrong price, the price for the 5 passenger car, not the 7 passenger van. Plus collision waiver is not optional, you have to take the Italian collision, plus they don't recognize National's unlimited mileage for Bechtel best rate accounts. It's 100km per day final answer. Plus there is airport charges and road tax and value added tax all adding up to another 700 euro for a total of 1415.89 euros instead of 714. What a sticker shock. We tried arguing with them for 45 minutes but the only answer we got was, that's what we charge and that's what the computer says. Well, we'll try to do something with National when we get home.

While still steaming, we found the Train to the Rome Central station then the metro from there to our stop at Piazza Del Popolo. Five blocks down Via Del Corso brought us to our hotel. The desk man chuckled when we came in and he said, I read your emails on driving from Venice. Wow, should have taken the train. Given the cost, I would have definitely reevaluated towards that alternative.

The room wasn't really a suite, but a large room and a small room connected by a wide hallway. The door opened into the smaller room and the bathroom was off that room so you had to walk through the small room to get to the bath. Not ideal, but nothing to do about it now. The location was really great, right in the heart of the shopping district. They closed Via Del Corso at night so people walked down the center of the road and made it a lot more pleasant. Long day of driving but all in all the driving wasn't that hard as long as you kept your concentration up.

That evening we walked over to the Trevi Fountain then to an internet café near the Barberini metro station. On the way back we walked down the Spanish steps which was on the way to our hotel.

### **5/26/2005 Thursday – Rome**

We decided to see the Vatican. Everything seemed to be within walking distance. Some a little further than others, but not too bad. We walked down Via del Corso to see the sights along there. We stopped at the Pantheon then the Piazza Navona before reaching the Palazzo Di Giustizia over the Tevere river. After backtracking a little we had lunch at an outdoor café. Then across the Ponte S. Angelo bridge to the Castel S. Angelo. This is the Pope's castle or castle of the angles. There is an armored walkway that goes from the Vatican to the Castel S. Angelo that the popes built so that if the Vatican were ever under siege they could make their way safely to their castle and relative safety. The castle was originally built as a crypt for the ruling family of (I forget). Later the crypt was sacked and the castle built in its place. Angles were added to the bridge leading to the castle.

Anyway, we made our way to the Vatican as we were told in Rick Steves that at 1:15 there was a tour in English. We didn't find any such tour but did rent the headphones and went inside. Huge church and wow all the priceless artifacts and sculptures in there. The church will never go broke, that's for sure. In the end we bought our souvenirs and walked past the tomb of John-Paul II or Gionni-Paules II. At this time we made our way around the Vatican wall to where the Vatican museum is only to find out that it was closed today for an unexplained reason. No wonder there was no line.

We considered our options and figured we would come back tomorrow at 10:30 to visit the museum then make our way to the Borghese at 12:30 for that tour. For now, we hopped on the metro and made our way to the far side of town where the Ancient Coliseum and Arch of Constantine was located. We paid to go inside the Coliseum but it was pretty disappointing inside. Anyway, we spent too much time there such that when we exited, the ancient ruins next to the Coliseum was closed. Hot and thirsty we decided to walk back to the hotel from there. At the foot of Via del Corso, where it meets the ruins is the piazza San Marco and the capital building. It was pretty impressive. I took lots of pictures of it.

### **5/27/2005, Friday - Rome**

After breakfast at the hotel, we decided to take the metro to the Vatican rather than walk. We got off at the station nearest the museum and found there was a line down the street from the entrance. The line stretched all the way down Viale Vaticano to the corner of Via De Bastioni Di Michelangelo and turned the corner. We followed it and turned the corner just to see that the line stretch out of sight following the Vatican wall back around another corner to the Piazza Risorgimento where it turned yet another corner onto Via Porta Angelica and headed almost all the way down to Saint Peter's square. I figure that's about 10 US city blocks. Now some of the Rome blocks are short, but still it was a long - long line. We got in line and discovered it moved pretty fast. It only took us 1-1/2 hours to make it to the entrance. After being in line for about an hour some friendly people came up and started a conversation with the group behind. Where are you from. Oh, I've been there. Do you like it. I'm from bla, bla, bla. It was not until a little while later that the lady behind us told Christy that there was a hole in her purse. Someone had taken a razorblade to it and cut it open. Fortunately nothing was missing and she didn't have any small items in there, but it was a brand new purse that she really loved and now it was ruined. Little things like that make you glad when you finally get back home again.

Anyway, by the time we reached the front of the line it was noon or slightly after and we knew we were not going to be able to make the Borghese. Oh well, something for next time. Inside was fantastic. More evidence that the Catholic church will never go broke as long as they have all that priceless art by the masters inside. Each piece must be worth 100 of thousands or millions of dollars and there were rooms and rooms of stuff.

Finally we made our way to the Sistine Chapel. If you've read this far you've probably learned that Italians don't follow directions well. There was one guard at the front of the chapel constantly yelling, No talking, No photo's. As he would say this, hundreds of flashes and photos would be taken followed by No talking, no photo's followed by hundreds of more photo's being

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taken. It was a bit of a comedy. No photo's flash, flash, snap, snap, No photo's flash, snap, flash snap, repeat until blue in the face. Hey, when in Rome... So I took some photos of the Chapel ceiling.

It was two and a half hours to get through all that and it was close to 3:00 in the afternoon. We'd spent all day there and seemed exhausted. We walked back to the hotel and cooled off for a bit.

That evening we went to our final dinner in Rome so we went back to what looked like a fancy restaurant with outdoor seating. It was a fine night and we were in the mood to eat well.

Right from the beginning the waiter seemed to ignore us. Now this seems to be a common theme for us. Do we look that common? After dotting on a large table he finally brought over the menus just to excuse himself in a hurry to go back to the other table, taking the menus with him.

When he came back he was pushing us to order the appetizer plate but we resisted and he went away for another long time. Finally we ordered house wine and our food and the food came. But he basically ignored us after that until finally we got his attention and asked for the bill. Boy did we get unwanted attention then. He brought the bill and whispered to me that the service charge was not included, then he stepped back only a few steps and watched us look over the bill. The top line was 4X2euro for the cover charge. We'd seen that before. We didn't understand the next line so I called him over and was told it was the tax. The rest was understandable. Cathie presented her card, he went away and was back in a flash but this time he didn't bother to back away, he stood right over us and watched as Cathie signed the bill. We were confused about the tip as there was no line on the bill to add it so we dropped a 10 spot and he scooped it right up.

When we got back to the hotel we asked about the unknown word and was told that was the service charge. That creep. I wish we were not leaving so we could go back the next night order a large meal and then stiff him on the service charge, Dine and Dash fashion.

Peter and I went to the internet café and Christy and Cathie went shopping. We walked back along the route to the Spanish steps and low and behold we ran into them along the del Corso. We set up the following morning travel with the front desk. It would be 50 euro for Peter and Christy to take a taxi from there- the metro and train did not run early enough to get them to the airport on time. Their flight was at 6:30. Ours was at 10:20. We decided to share the cab with them but that required the van and 80 euro. Well OK, so set it up for a 4:30 wakeup call in the morning and 5:00 checkout.

### **5/27/2005, Saturday - Rome to Home**

Damn 4:30 is even earlier than 5:30, way too early. We checked out but my credit card was declined. How can this be? I presented another card and it was declined too. I present a third card

which they don't take. Cathie came in from the taxi to see what was taking so long and presented a third card different than any of mine which was also declined. Each one is with a different bank. By this time we suspected it was the del Corso's machine or bank at fault. However, we were starting to panic as to how to pay for the stay without credit cards. Finally we gave our primary card to the clerk and instructed him to make a collect call to our bank card company per the instructions on the back of the card. He made the call direct instead. Our card holder confirmed that no transactions had been presented to them and they had not declined any. Three more tries and no dice. The guy at the other end confirmed that nothing was reaching them. Finally one went through and we were presented with the bill. Oh, the clerk says, I added 5 euro for the phone call. I protested, it was the Del Corso's fault, not mine. Well, he says it would come out of his pocket if we didn't pay for it. So, I continued to protest, it comes out of my pocket if I pay for it. By this time the taxi driver was tapping his toe. I didn't want to try another stab at the credit card machine so I absorbed the small cost. But it was one more message to the brain that it was going to be good to get back home.

Long wait at the airport. Long flight to NY Kennedy and I started to not feel so good and Long flight to SFO at which time I had a headache and stomach ache and I don't envy the lady that went into the bathroom after me. Bus to Mill Valley and John picked us up. Phew home at last. I unpacked and fell into bed without eating much.

### **5/28/2005, Sunday and Monday (Memorial Day) - Home**

I didn't get out of bed except to go to the bathroom. I had a fever of 104 and the runs to match it. I tried to make the day go by fast by just sleeping the time away.

Tuesday I felt better and stayed home from work and felt just fine by day's end. I had visions of the week long flu that was going around. Anyway, I think I lost all the weight I gained on vacation in the three days while sick. I don't recommend that dieting method however.

I hope you enjoyed my travel log.

Bob