



MindStormPhoto  
Italy 2017

Burt and Evelyn Johnson

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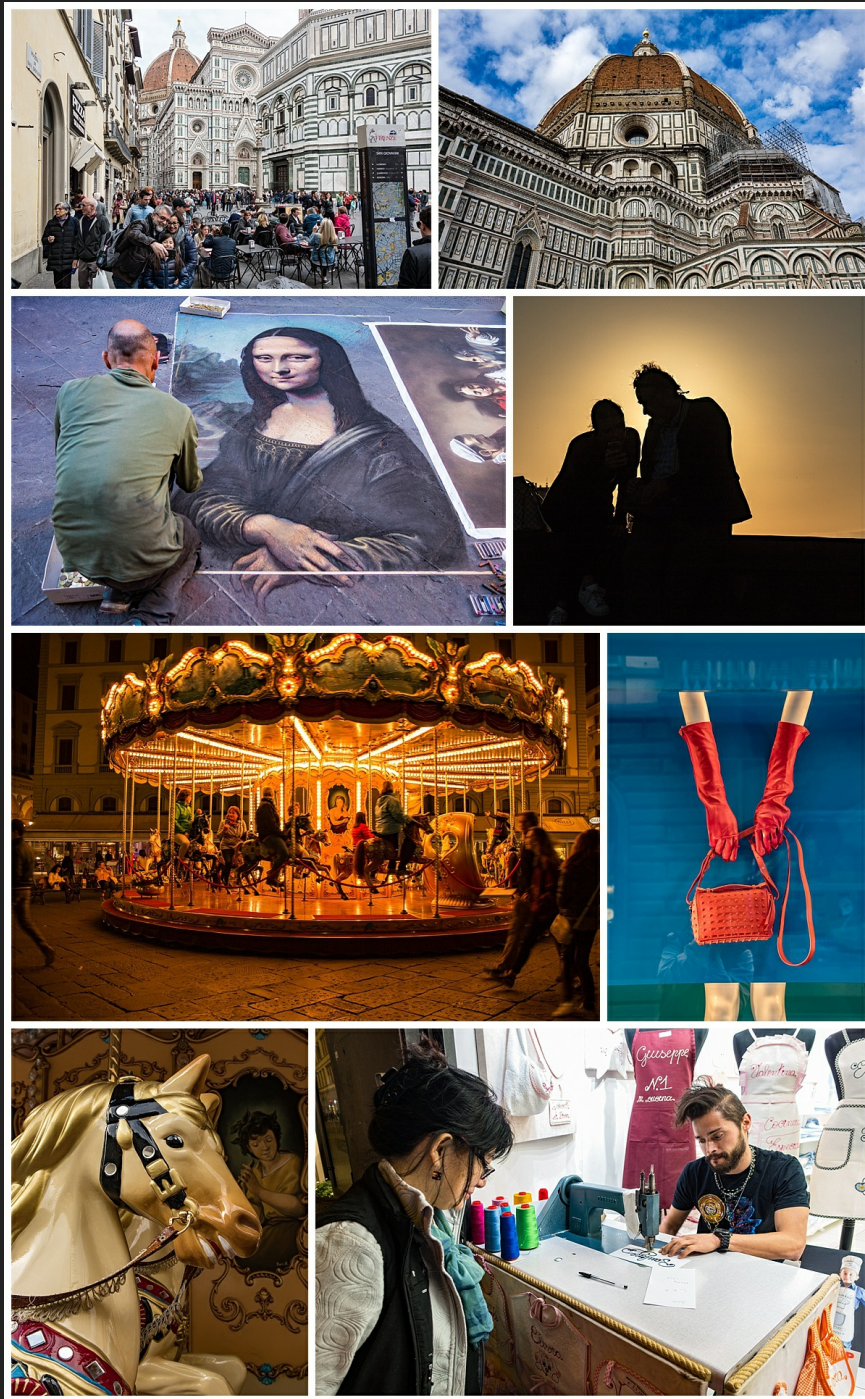
# Italy 1 – Toto, I Don't Think We Are in Ecuador Any More!



*Sunset at Ponte Vecchio bridge in Florence*

We began our travels by staying overnight in Madrid for a layover between Ecuador and Italy. After studying Spanish for 3 years in Cuenca, I figured I would be able to communicate in Madrid. Well... yes and no... Every time I said anything in Spanish, they looked at me completely blankly. I then repeated it in English, and every single person understood me fine, and responded back in English! I also noticed listening to the locals talking among themselves that I did not understand a word they said. I finally asked a waiter about it, and he said (in perfect English), "you have a strange accent that we cannot understand." Oh well, so much for learning all that Spanish in Ecuador...English is pretty universal so far.

And then, there are the prices! At home in Ecuador, we have gotten accustomed to having a decent lunch for \$3, maybe \$6 if we splurge. Our first lunch here was \$45 for the two of us. Yikes! Since then, we have discovered that \$20 to \$35 per person for lunch is the norm. I turned to Evelyn and said "Toto, we are not in Ecuador any more..."



Next, we arrived in Florence, where we stayed for 3 nights. The first thing we could not help notice was the huge number of tourists, and it is only April! The area around the Duomo was absolutely packed (upper left). The Duomo itself is a fascinating architectural delight, but the crowds in front meant the only shot really available was looking up (upper right).

Walking around town, we came across some very talented street chalk artists (2nd row left) and very upscale shopping (3rd row right). As the sun began to lower, lovers on the bridge created interesting silhouettes (2nd row right), and a later visit to the merry go round (lower left 2 images) was mandatory. Evelyn's sister (Pauline in lower right) joined us a couple days later, when we came across a fascinating tailor that made custom business cards by embroidering the customer's name in a matter of seconds.



Our first night in Florence, we walked to the *Ponte Vecchio* bridge to photograph sunset. Almost no clouds resulted in a bland sky, but amplified the blue hour after the sun went down. We were rather happy with our first sunset shots in Italy.



The next morning we got up early for a "food tour" of Florence, which included touring San Lorenzo market. We made six stops between the first cappuccino (Italian coffee has the consistency and strength of espresso) to the final gelato (a gelato per day is almost an Italian law!). Very enjoyable way to start our Italian experience.



There are two popular places to photograph the sunset in Florence, where we had to compete to get space for our tripods. Having gone the first night to the bridge, we explored the Michelangelo Plaza at a higher elevation on the second night. Again, we were astounded by the crowds (upper left). A few more clouds gave the sky more interest tonight. My tripod got bumped on one shot (lower left), and I think the resulting blur was actually one of the more intriguing images from that night...

After sunset, we went to a steak restaurant that had been recommended by the food tour guide this morning. We had a monster T-Bone steak (3 pounds, about 3 inches thick!). They showed us a photograph of the type of cow the steak comes from, and I thought they were pulling my leg -- it dwarfed the man standing next to, and was easily 8 feet tall. I was assured by multiple people that was an honest photo though, and the size of the cow is why the T-Bones are so huge.

Florentine steaks are only cooked one way. That is, essentially not cooked at all... That 3" thick steak gets 5 minutes per side, and then put on the platter. No spices to speak of, and the steak is essentially raw. To ask for an actual cooked steak is considered an affront to the chef, and our waiter insisted he would refuse such a request -- I never was quite sure if he was joking or not. We have been told repeatedly that was one of the best steaks in town, however not for us.





Our third day in Florence was an endurance test. "See all of Florence in one glorious day" touted the advertisement. 3 tours (morning, afternoon, and evening) did let us cover the important museums (the Uffizi and Accademia) and architectural highlights, but it also left our feet worn out after 17,800 steps. The last tour was to see David, the famous sculpture by Michelangelo. It is certainly possible to just walk up and see the art on your own, but having an art historian along provided memorable stories and details, helping the chunk of stone come to life.

We learned why there are seven unfinished statues in the hall leading to David (middle, left two) -- they were commissioned by a pope for his mausoleum, but he died before they were done and the next pope said the prior guy did not deserve such grandeur in death, so stopped the work. Many critics observed that David's proportions seemed a bit off, as his hands and feet appeared too large. However, he was originally designed to rest near the top of the Duomo, and the perspective would have been correct. However, the city leaders decided the quality of the statue was too good to be seen from so far away, so moved David to a location as a sentry at ground level for a number of years, until moved to the museum, where it has remained for the past 4 centuries. We also learned why parts are so worn (middle right) -- because of centuries of people reaching up and touching the only part they could reach (the toes). We had an hard time understanding our guide at first, who kept saying "my client" was so great that he even designed the fold in the sling shot holder located on the back of David, even though it was intended to be placed where none of that could be seen. "My client" was actually "Michelangelo", once we understood our guide's accent.

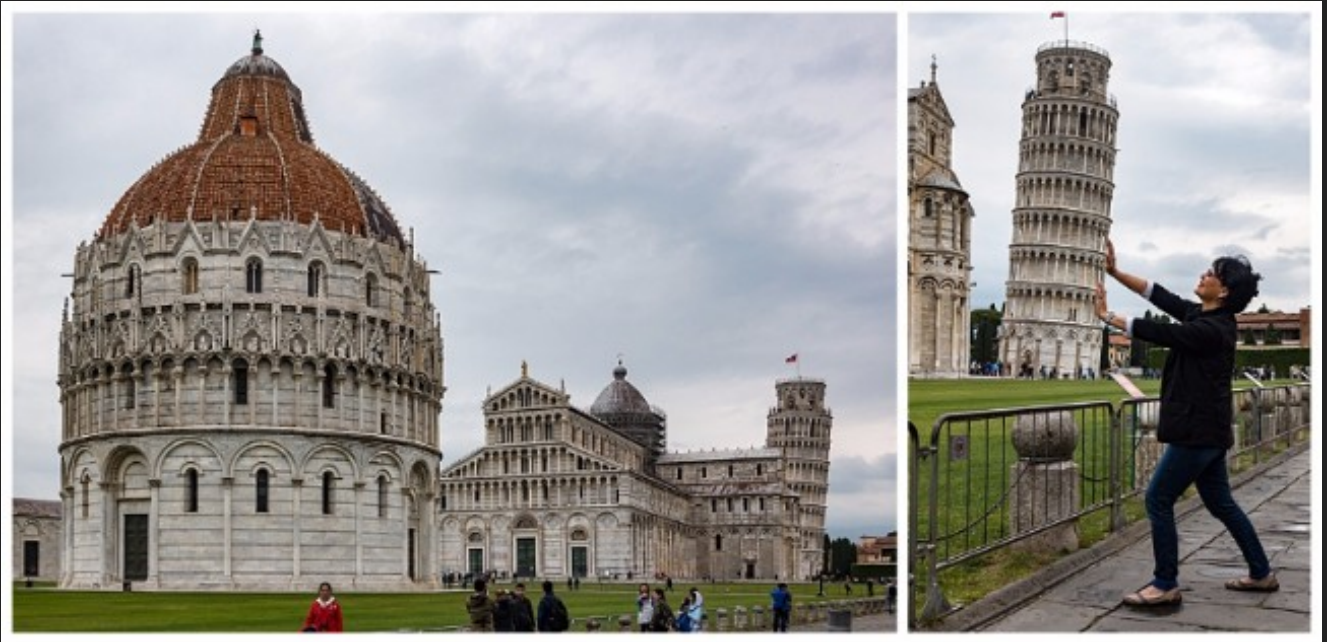


Michelangelo learned his craft from a stone cutting master. Stone statues abound in the city, at almost every turn.



Art is prevalent everywhere in Florence. When you look at the details of the homes as you walk around town, you discover art even in the form of door knockers and address markers.

# Italy 2 – Pisa



We visited Pisa today, and of course made a beeline to the Tower of Pisa, which is known as one of the Seven Wonders of Medieval Times in Italy and one of the most recognizable structures on earth. As we entered the walled complex, the Leaning Tower of Pisa became quite prominent. The architecture is similar to the stunning designs in Florence, and Pauline immediately jumped in to help straighten the poor leaning building... along with at least 100 others doing the same for their photographs...



Now that we have stabilized that poor leaning tower, we were obligated to climb the 296 steps or the 186 feet to the top. It was a surprisingly easy climb compared to 77 steps of the La Escalinata staircase in Cuenca (which is at 8400 ft elevation, as opposed to sea level for Pisa).

Looking up inside the tower (upper left) is surprisingly mundane, and reminded me of looking up an empty grain silo. Once we were at the top, we roped in a friendly stranger from Sacramento to document our ascent (upper right), and we looked down on the neighboring church before returning to earth. And, yes, the horizon is tilted about 4 degrees, due to the Leaning Tower we photographed from.



We next visited the Duomo di Pisa next door, which is a Roman Catholic cathedral noted for its Romanesque architecture.

Next stop, Cinque Terre!

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, April 26, 2017

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# Italy 3 – Cinque Terre



*Sunset in Vernazza is when the village becomes most colorful*

We continued our Italian trip to Cinque Terre for the past few days. This is actually a designated (UNESCO world heritage site) national marine park consisting of five seaside villages connected by hiking trails and trains, hugging the rugged Italian Riviera. They are extremely picturesque and hilly, with no village having more than a few yards of flat plaza surrounded by steep climbs in all directions. Expect to walk a lot, as there are no taxis nor cars allowed in the villages.





The villages are connected by a train costing 4 Euro that runs in each direction every half hour, making it very easy to hop on and off wherever you choose to explore. Our highlight in Italy thus far is the food and house wine, which are outstanding wherever we go. Our favorite breakfast stop was *il Pirata delle Cinque Terre*, where we had their panzerotto, a delicious pastry filled with ricotta cheese, cinnamon and vanilla. They were proud they served no bacon and eggs. And, we found the most tender pulpo (octopus) and fresh seafood.

Once the weather cleared, the restaurants brought out the sun umbrellas for outdoor seafront dining, and business was back to usual again. The only real downside of the area is the crowds (lower left) during the day when the cruise ships are in town and the horde overwhelm the towns. However, by evening, the day trippers are gone and the town is tranquil once again.



Our first day in the area was accompanied by a Spring storm with 30 foot waves. From our hotel room, we had a chance to watch boaters jumping in to rescue and tie together boats to prevent them from washing out to sea. While forcing us to bundle up when going outside, it kept the cruise ship mob away, and enhanced the colors of town in the evening.



When the storm abated, we explored the other villages of Cinque Terre a bit more. We also hiked portions of the famed trail connecting the 5 towns (that is Evelyn and her sister, Pauline, in center image). One portion of the trail between Monterosa and Vernazza ("Little Venice") we had planned to hike was washed out. Given the very steep climbing of the portions we did walk though, perhaps that was a good thing... Some people are able to trek the entire length of the picturesque trails to all 5 towns in 4-5 hours, though it was obvious that we would have taken somewhat longer.



Our home base in Cinque Terre was Vernazza, which has the only natural harbor in the area, and we have included a few more images of that village here. We'll close with a one minute video clip of the storm waves hitting Vernazza the morning after the rain stopped.

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, May 1, 2017

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# Italy 4 – Venice, Part 1



On our first night in Venice, we visited a cicchetti bar (small finger foods, which would be called "tapas" in Spain). On their wall was my new motto in life, as seen in the upper right image.

What first comes to mind when you think of Venice? James Bond destroying buildings on the canal? No, it's gondolas! And yes, they were everywhere, many times in traffic jams on the narrow canals. It was raining on one of the days, which added an interesting twist to the classic gondola photographs. Even in the rain, the singers with operetta voices were still performing beneath our hotel room (large photo in center). And, we rode a couple of gondolas that transported us from one side of the Grand Canal to the opposite side, saving a few kilometers of walking.



Venice's streets are water ways. The canals are the transportation network of the city. While the gondolas and water taxis dominate the smaller side canals, the grand canal is filled with larger and faster boats -- cargo boats, cruise ships and public ferries (vaporettas) transporting people. The classic views of the Grand Canal are from the bridges at the Accademia and Rialto.



Venice is actually composed of 118 separate islands, many of which were originally independently ruled regions. Each of those regions had a main cathedral that was the center of village life during the middle ages.



There are numerous art galleries throughout the city, many with restored paintings and sculptures from various cathedrals that have fallen into disrepair themselves.





While paintings are primarily found in cathedrals and art galleries, statues are found throughout the city, many dating back 6 or more centuries.

St. Mark's Square, a landmark in Venice, is the lowest point in Venice and floods regularly, so Venetians all own hip waders and the city has a portable platform system where people have an opportunity to "walk on water". Though it had flooded three days before our arrival, we were lucky enough not to experience the floods ourselves, and thus have no photos of it.

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, May 4, 2017

## Italy 5 – Venice, Part 2



Venice has a world renowned Carnival every year, where masks and elaborate costumes abound. The practice comes from the Middle Ages, when only persons of Noble birth were allowed to wear masks. In an attempt to quell civil discontent, it was declared that peasants could wear masks and engage in debauchery one week of each year, immediately preceding lent.



A 15 minute boat ride across a wide, shallow lagoon to the island of Murano brings you to a collection of more than 40 glassmaking foundries. Some provide a demonstration of the art, as seen above.



Touring the foundries provides a glimpse into the art of glassmaking, as practiced in Murano. There is always a salesman on hand, telling you that they can take any design and make it whatever color or size you prefer. And, of course, they promise to ship anywhere in the world. Our next stop was the island of Burano (known for their lace), which was lined with trees and extremely colorful buildings along its canals.



One of the highlights in Venice was the local fish market located on the Grand Canal, where restaurants and housewives buy the freshest of fish for meals that day. The market is set up every day at 6AM, and shuts down at noon, whereupon the cleanup crew comes through and power washes the entire area, so there are no fish odors.



We love looking at the large variety of fresh fish at markets such as this, and this one was special with live music playing in the background. Even more though, we love watching the vendors and customers interact, with lots of hand motions describing the size and cuts.



People are always what make a trip interesting. We went on two different tours in Venice, first a "free" walking tour of the city ([La Bussola Free Walking Tours](#) led by Elizabetta upper left), and then a progressive dinner tour ([Venice Bites Food Tour](#) led by Adam and Maya, upper middle and right). We discovered that there are techniques for bar hopping in Italy, gentle yet aggressive to get space at the counter. Both tours were excellent and highly recommended.

We learned that there is a real cultural difference from America when dining out. In Italy, once you make a reservation, you have the table for the entire night, while in the US, restaurants want to turn the table as fast as possible, for more customers per meal. In Italy, the waiter will not hover and ask if you want something, such as the check. Instead, you flag him down as desired. Also, while it is acceptable to stay at the table long after a check has been brought in America, once you ask for the check, you are expected to pay and leave quickly in Italy.

We are actually in Italy because of Keith's birthday. Middle-right shows Keith being congratulated for having another birthday by his wife, Pauline, who is also Evelyn's sister. Lower right shows Keith, Pauline and Evelyn on a bridge, overlooking one of the many smaller canals.



As sunset passes, we have completed the Venice portion of our vacation. Next stop, Tuscany.

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, May 5, 2017

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# Italy 6 – Tuscany



We have just spent several days touring the Tuscany region of Italy, with the medieval town of Siena as our base. "Sienna" is the color many artists are familiar with. Without a doubt, the highlight of this portion of the trip was the cooking school at *La Scuola di Cucina* in Siena. We learned to cook 4 different courses (pici, cinta senese fillet with porcini mushrooms, cantucinni biscuits, and pappa con pomodoro soup, each of which was more delicious than the last. The instructor, Lella, only spoke Italian, but her instructions were interpreted for us into English. We ended with several dishes I will try to reproduce when we return home. Gotta admit though, the the homemade pici (aka fat spaghetti noodles) was delicious, it was a lot of work...



The major landmark in Siena is the monumental Gothic-style Cathedral complex, which includes the Duomo, the Baptistry and the crypt. Statues of she-wolves, a mythical creature, flank the cathedral. What is significant is that this cathedral was built and financed by the people, not the pope. I was amazed at what they could construct with no hydraulic or motorized tools available.



While we toured the Cathedral, Keith and Pauline went truffle hunting. They found 6 gorgeous black truffles... well, 5 after their lead dog ran off and ate one...We were told that truffle hunters used to hunt with pigs, however stopped this practice as the pigs loved to eat the goodies.



While Keith and Pauline searched for delicious treats, Evelyn and I climbed the tower that was part of the Museo dell'Opera. The path leads through a crypt with dozens of statues entombed. We then climbed a narrow winding stairway (one-way only!) to get a 360 degree panoramic view of the city.



Driving around the various hill towns, we came across a granary making pasta (left), and a wine-tasting store with a sophisticated tasting system where you had an opportunity to taste more than 100 different types of wine, charged a few euro for a small pour, before committing to buy an entire bottle. As with most of Italy, there was not a bad wine in the lot.



While driving around, we visited more tiny village hill towns. We saw a Roman bath that was no longer in use, and some interesting wire sculptures around the bath and town (center and upper left). Then, picked a local deli for some yummy treats and "house" wine.



Walking around the various hill towns in the area, all with narrow streets, historic buildings, was a treat, and the persistent rain gave a photographic gleam to the streets. We came across one wall statute that reminded us of Harry Potter's Voldemort (upper left), and another store selling swords and fantasy items, including the mounted head of a dragon (lower right). Even in the rain, tourists were everywhere.

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, May 7, 2017

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# Italy 7 – Pompeii & Herculaneum



We started today with a guided tour of Pompeii, which is a 45-acre unearthed city. Though the general [story of Pompeii is well known](#), the details are not so much. The guide provided us with those details of daily life in Pompeii, how the city was one of the leading trading centers, showed us details of the construction, and how various spaces like the spas were used – none of which we would have understood without a guide.



Frescoes and statues survived in surprisingly good condition. We learned of one pair of slave brothers that were allowed to do small tasks for a wealthy family. Soon they had saved enough to buy their freedom. They then went on to become one of the wealthiest brothers in Pompeii, and the home they built had the most massive collections of frescoes in the city, including some pornography like the lower right image (the statue right column, third row was in their home's entrance). The guide told us to be sure to also see the "Secret Room" in Naples, which had more such pieces of art.





One portion of the city was kept behind bars, so that it cannot be damaged by tourists. That is where the hundreds of recovered wine urns are stored, along with a few of the body casts. The volcanic pyroclastic blast burned their organic material to dust, as the ash solidified around their form. When archaeologists reached a human form in their digging, they would pump in plaster to fill the void, then chip away at the pumice. What was left was a cast of the original person (or animal) in their final pose. Some were praying (center bottom), while others appear have been caught while sleeping (lower left).

Bottom right, of course, is the obligatory shot of the four of us in the main Pompeii plaza with Mt. Vesuvius in the background. From left to right is Burt, Evelyn Pauline and Keith (the "birthday boy" that was the trigger for our all traveling to Italy).



We toured the 5-acre ruins in Herculaneum on our own. The two cities were only 18 km apart, so there were many similarities, and indeed Herculaneum was destroyed in the same blast in 79AD. This city had an estimated population of 4,000, compared to the larger Pompeii of 13,000. Many of the roofs and structures were better preserved than at Pompeii.

When Pompeii was destroyed, there were an estimated 75 legal brothels, and 40 bars, all serving those 13,000 people -- clearly a city that liked to party! Lower left image above shows one of the bars in Herculaneum that was uncovered, showing terra cotta bowls that would contain soup or wine in one of the bars.



Statues, tiled floors and frescoes also survived in surprisingly good condition, after being covered by volcanic ash and pumice for two millennia prior to excavation. Many of the originals were shipped to the Archaeological Museum in Naples. Sometimes replicas were put in their place for display here, while other times gaps in frescoes or floors existed, where the original had been removed.



Although the population of Herculaneum was 4,000 at the time of eruption, only approximately 200 people died in this city. It appears that most managed to get onto boats and escape to the sea, even though lava was upon the city within 8 minutes. When archaeologists first uncovered the city, it was believed that everyone had survived, since no bodies were found. However, later excavations found 200 skeletons, all crowded in boat sheds at the water's edge. These are believed to be people that arrived too late to catch the last boats, or perhaps were poorer people not allowed to board. They all died pretty much instantly as the the pyroclastic blast covered them.

On a last note, we found that Herculaneum to be less inundated with large tour groups, so we felt less rushed. As such, this was a more pleasant ruin to visit.

# Italy 8 – Amalfi Coast



We recently concluded 4 days on the Amalfi Coast, using Sorrento as our home base. This sunset image was taken about a 5 min walk from our small hotel, which is just below those monster hotels you see further up on the hillside.



We took a ferry over to Capri Island, one of the most picturesque islands in Italy, then took a boat similar to the one in upper left to tour the island. The "Blue Grotto" is often a popular side trip, but it was high tide -- you could snorkel into it, but no boat could make it.

In Capri, a student class tour came through (below center left), along with hordes of tour groups from the cruise ships, so we were thrilled to return "home" every night, away from the maddening crowds.



Wandering around Marina Grande (our neighborhood in Sorrento) was a treat. Our "home" ([Hotel del Mare](#)) was located on a small beach, away from the main ferry dock, so there were very few tour groups inundating the area. We could walk out our front door, and find at least a dozen great restaurants, and the sound of the waves put us to sleep each night. There were several boat builders and boat repair shops (lower left) across the street from where we stayed, and we had a chance to peek into several. Going "home" from the main ferry dock was only a 15-minute walk across switch backs with picturesque views of the sea, and included an elevator ride up to the town.



We took the funicular to the highest peak on Capri (upper left shows Pauline getting off the lift), explored art galleries and boutiques, wandered around a small church, had lunch before returning below, and then took a ferry back to Sorrento.





We spent one day driving along the Amalfi coastline, seeing the small towns and sights along the way. We came across a small village at one place -- and by small, I mean the largest building was 12 inches tall... (middle left). We stopped for some fruit at one location, and the vendor immediately took a liking to Pauline, going across the road to pick a flower for her hair, and then posing for a photograph with her (lower right).



Several nights (above block), we just watched the sun set at the end of the day, then enjoyed scrumptious dinners at some outstanding restaurants on "our" beach.

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, May 11, 2017

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# Italy 9 – Naples



On the 45-minute ferry ride from Sorrento to Naples, we encountered two cruise ships in Sorrento plus six cruise ships in Naples, and expected to fight crowds. We took a cab to the Underground City, and our "mad man" drove like a New York taxi driver, barreling across town, honking most of the way. When we stopped, he surprised us by recommending that we see *Cattedrale di San Gennaro*, honoring the city's patron saint, and that we try the pizza at *Pizzeria Dal Presidente*. He was right on---Naples Cathedral is one of the most beautiful churches we've ever seen, and the Naples pizza is the best we've eaten worldwide.



After pizza, we took the [Naples Underground Tour](#). You travel back in time 2400 years, from the time of the Greek-Roman aqueduct, to WWII when the underground became air raid shelters as Naples was the most bombed city in Italy, on to current times when they are experimenting with growing crops that require no water to grow (due to high humidity). The second part of the tour included walking into an obscure apartment at street level, sliding a hatch under a bed, then accessing an ancient Roman theater at the basement level. This is not a tour recommended for claustrophobic people, as there were dark and tight spaces to maneuver. However, we loved it.



A bonus was seeing the visually dramatic works of [Alessandro Kokocinski](#), an internationally-renowned painter, sculptor and set designer, in his current solo exhibition at the Archaeological Museum. A critic said that Alessandro observes the world through the eyes of the heart.



The primary goal to visit Naples was to see the Archaeological Museum, which only 1% of the visitors to Pompeii go to. Many of the original sculptures, frescoes and mosaic floors from Pompeii and Herculaneum (see prior blog post [here](#)) were moved to this museum to preserve the best antiquities from the ruins that were excavated in the late 1700s. This is a world class museum, and surprisingly was not crowded.



Our Pompeii guide told us to be sure to the "Secret Room". There's a sizable collection of erotic frescoes, bawdy statues, and well hung pottery that once adorned bedrooms, brothels and some of the grandest homes in Pompeii and Herculanean.

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, May 13, 2017

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# Italy 10 – Rome



We have finally reached the end of our Italian trip, with a visit to Rome. More than anything, this is a city filled with larger-than-life statues. Most of these huge statues were created during the peak of Roman power in the centuries just before and after Christ. It was clearly an attempt to demonstrate the power of the Roman empire, both to visitors and to its own people.





No trip to Rome is complete without a visit to the Vatican. We had no idea just how many elaborate paintings and sculptures existed in this place. The famed Michelangelo painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is actually only a tiny fraction of the artwork (center image), and much of the Vatican is not accessible to the public. Just looking at that ceiling for a few minutes hurt our necks, and we wondered how Michelangelo spent 4 years painting it on a scaffold. Again, many of the paintings were humongous, with the upper row third image showing people standing in front of a painting that fills a wall in a two story tall room.

Unfortunately, everyone coming to Rome wants to visit the Vatican, and it was so massively overrun with hordes of tourists and tour groups, that it was hard to enjoy the experience, as we felt rushed along.



The highlight of Rome was the [Capitoline museum](#). It was about the only place in the city not completely overrun by hordes of tourists, and had some of the best art we've seen in any museum in the world.



Museums were not open on Monday, so we decided to visit the zoo. We were hoping to avoid some of the crowds, and were successful in that effort. There were several (well behaved!) young school groups, but otherwise very few tourists around. Unfortunately, the zoo was not very good – the selection of animals was limited, and their cages were almost all behind filthy glass. This is a new zoo, and roughly 1/3 of it is still under construction, but the facilities did not reflect well on a modern zoo.



We enjoyed walking around Rome and had a chance to see landmarks such as the Trevi fountain, the Spanish steps, many elaborate churches, and lots of narrow alleys. Center top was our enthusiastic guide Lucca, an architect from Argentina, who led an enjoyable walking tour of the main downtown area showing us various piazzas and a castle. Center right is one of the Swiss Guards at the Vatican.

Most of all, we will remember how great the food and wine was everywhere in Italy.

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, May 15, 2017