Italy 2015

# Overview:

The sights and smells and sounds and tastes of northern Italy’s Umbria, Tuscany, Cinque Terre, Piemonte, and the Lakes filled the 24 day journey of the Teators and Adamses in May 2015.

# Where

(I debated whether to include this but 24 days gathered so many places that a daily listing not only paints a quick picture but also gives a structure to our trip.)

## Umbria

Apr 29 – arrive at Todi, a six hour drive from Milan via Bologna, Florence, & Perugia

Apr 30 – tour Todi, pm drive to Deruta

May 1 – a day at Assisi, back road driving on return

May 2 – most of the day at Spoleto, back roads on return

May 3 – a full day at Norcia, and then on to Castellucio, back roads on return

May 4 – a full day at Orvieto, and then Civita de Bagnoreggio

## Tuscany

May 5 – moving day: 90 minutes to Siena and explore in the evening

May 6 – tour Siena

May 7 – bus trip to Florence

May 8 – most of the day at Cortona

May 9 – driving most of day in the Chianti Hills north of Siena: Brolio, Radda, more

May 10 – a day at Montepulciano and Montalcino; back roads on return

May 11 – a full day at Volterra and San Gimignano

## Cinque Terre

May 12 – moving day: stop at Lucca, three hours to Monterosso al Mare, explore town

May 13 – take train to four other towns (Riomaggiore, Manarolo, Corniglia, Vernazza)

May 14 – hike one leg of trail, and explore close to home rest of day

## Piemonte

May 15 – moving day: three hours to Treiso (near Alba), visit Alba in p.m.

May 16 – look for Alba Rally, two wine-tastings, lots of back roads

May 17 – visit Barbaresco, Trieve, Barolo, more back roads

## Lakes

May 18 – moving day: two hours to Stresa; tour three islands or tour Lago Orta

May 19 – tour three islands or tour town

May 20 – all day train/boat tour to Domodossolo, Locarno, and Stresa

# Influence of living quarters

The nature of the residence and the town certainly influences perspectives

**Todi**: six nights in a two bedroom apartment in a modern house, only a five minute walk from the gate of Todi; kitchen, birds singing in morning, view of valley spreading for miles

**Siena**: a one and two halves bedroom apartment, balcony overlooking the Piazza del Campo; kitchen, city atmosphere, noisy at night, semi-touristy near us, a comfortable city to walk through, limited traffic access

**Monterosso**: two bedroom apartment a block away from beach; one bathroom; an echo-y space near train tracks; town divided into old and new section

**Treiso**: agriturismo on five hectare vineyard; sleeping quarters, no kitchen; breakfast provided; family atmosphere with grandmother Olga and daughters Serene and Alicia; two other guest rooms in house; spectacular views from ridge top

**Stresa**: older hotel/B&B on edge of one time Grand Tour hotels; congenial owner Guiseppe who so graciously served us breakfast on our departure day; a few gritty parts of city

# Geography, topography, and views

Italy, as most countries are, is a diverse land geographically. The Apennines raise their spine the center length of the country, with an adjoining wide plain north of them, and a mix of foothills, beaches, and mountains sprinkled around, with mountains forming the political boundary in the north.

 We discovered the flat plain of farmland mixed with industrial as we drove from Malpensa Airport (Milan) to Bologna. Then a quick veer to Florence found us in the foothills and the mountains, as we drove through a dozen tunnels that facilitated driving conditions. Most of our time was spent in these foothills.

 And even within these foothills is a variety. Tuscany is the world’s star, with its broader but still rounded hills that are covered in vineyards and olive groves (and more agriculture, of course), punctuated with mini-mountains that served as defensive fortresses over the past thousand years or more. Sometimes, these hilltop posts can be adjoining hills, other times one passes ten likely hills before seeing a town, but it seems like every several kilometers, a walled town appears.

 The size of these towns run the gamut. Sometimes, it is a cluster of old buildings on narrow streets that would accommodate half of Freehold, but then you run into Siena and Orvietto that are small cities, with tens of thousands populating it. Our favorites tended to be in-betweeners—big enough to have services that make life comfortable but small enough to walk through town in an hour or so. Montepulciano and Volterra and Alba and Todi could have been the center of Saratoga or Hudson or Rhinebeck, garbed, of course in different architecture and street plans.

 As a consequence, the views from these towns into the valleys below allowed for more wonderful scenes than can be listed, almost to the point of being ”one more nice view.” And 24 days ran the danger of blending many of them together, even if almost all the town have a lot more in common than they have difference. A picture paints a thousand words so I will save the words for looking at our pictures, if you want to contact us.

 Umbria seemed like a less touristy, more rustic Tuscany—not a disadvantage! The Piedmont we saw was even hillier, but in a different way. Cinque Terre collects five towns that used to be isolated until a train provided access and, today, a horde of tourists. The land route to it was as tough of a drive as any we saw. And Stresa sits on a big lake, with easy access except for the final kilometer plunge to the lake’s edge.

# Food – structure of day

We almost started to rebel against the Italian day schedule but we smartly yielded and went with the flow, a necessity, we think, for tourists to understand Italy.

 That one wrinkle in the daily schedule is the midday break which typically runs from 12:30 to 2:30, give or take a half-hour on either end. Many shops, stores, and tourist sites shut down as if it is normal. One can rail against it but it is a fact of life.

 Having said that, good ole capitalism, especially in touristy spots, means more places are open during these hours. Day’s end closing hours can vary from late afternoon to early evening.

 And almost all places close for some of Sunday or Monday or both. If you have a list of sites to see, check the schedules or run the risk of being disappointed.

 We would often leave our abodes nine-ish, tour until 12:30, enjoy a 90-120 minute lunch, resume our treasure-hunting until late afternoon or until our bodies said to slow down.

 If in an apartment, we cooked in and rarely went out at night, although I enjoyed Siena’s comfortable streets in the evening. The B&B’s meant finding food for dinner, even if a light one, and that resulted in rubbing elbows with places and people we would not have done otherwise.

 And some of us have gotten to the stage of life that one big meal day is all we can comfortably handle. So, even though eating a four course meal twice a day seems desirable at first, the first night’s sleep on an extended stomach dictated a new strategy for the following day. So, a light to moderate breakfast, followed by our main meal of the day, ending with a salad or light meal characterized our eating schedule. We had very few desserts with meals although Judy made sure that opportunities for gelato were within reach by late afternoon, a circumstance that three of us availed themselves to while the other one searched for the pasticceria (bakery).

 The menu listings are similar to what we see in Italian fine dining establishments in the US. An antipasto starts, followed by the primo piatti (predominately pasta), followed by secondo piatti (typically, the entrées). Choosing all three leads to gluttony so picking here and there, or sharing with others, became our usual strategy.

 The food choices were not that different from the US. What was different were the types of pasta, and the different sauces that are hard to replicate. As for pizza, we thought it more common in Italy than the US, which was surprising because we had thought pizza was a US invention and that Italy was reluctant to give in. It’s a nice pizza but there is more variety of types of pizza in the US.

 Umbria and Tuscany saw a lot of meat; the change to Cinque Terre meant the dominance of seafood, back to meat in Piedmont, and back to seafood in Stresa.

 Other specialties saw hazelnuts in Piedmont, panforte in Siena, cecina (garbanzo bean paste on pizza) in Lucca; anchovies in Monterosso; and focaccia at the end of our trip. And I delighted in the cantucci with vin santo – almond biscuits dunked in sweet wine – a couple times.

# Food – part 2, lunch sites

I was tempted to leave this out but food memories are integral. So here’s a day by day, a couple reminders, and some of what each of us tried. The reader can decide about Italian food.

Day 1 – Autogrille, on Autostrade, similar to our Thruway stops

Day 2 – Pane & Vino in Todi: our first meal, and ate way too much at a husband/wife run place—bruschetta, beef stew, garbanzo soup, pork, pasta & asparagus, artichoke salad, lamb shank

Day 3 – I Monaci in Assisi: a pizzeria also, with a humorous waiter, different schedules had us rejecting a side and an entrée; oops, sorry—vegetarian pizza, house salad, saltimbucca, artichoke & mushroom calzone

Day 4 – Al Bacco Felice – Spoleto: on the street outside restaurant below the hilltop fortress, a cluster of Italian ladies testing their English—bruschetta, lentil soup, veal limoni, grilled vegetables, veal funghi (mushrooms), chickpea soup, spaghetti with bacon and cheese, veal funghi

Day 5 – Locando del Teatro – Norcia: under umbrella in piazza, with Brit and Welsh women behind us—fritata truffle, pasta with sausage and truffle, lamb, grilled vegetables, pork carpaccio, pasta with boar, pork with lentils, prosciutto, sausage with pasta and mushroom

Day 6 – Trattoria da Carlo in Orvieto: RS recommendation, mother/son operation—bruschetta with fava and fennel; tortelloni, salt cod with olives and tomatoes; sliced beef, chicken with cacciatore sauce

Day 7 – Ristorante de Desiderio – Siena: Palio theme, birthday present from Adamses—stuffed sea bass, cantucci with vin santo, chicken with sauce, bruschetta, sliced roast beef, vegetable soup

Day 8 – Cice – Siena: recommendation from local shop owner—rabbit, eggplant stew, eggplant, pork with juniper, bruschetta, pasta with boar

Day 9 – Bar San Firenza – Florence: on corner on sidewalk; semi-quick food—tuna salad, vegetarian pizza, fried eggs & bacon, margherita pizza

Day 10 – Osteria del Teatro – Cortona: wedding party—three-appetizer special, three soups appetizer, guinea fowl, asparagus pie, beef carpaccio, lamb with cheese, risotto with mushroom

Day 11 – La Perla del Palazzo – Radda: nice window view—focaccia, sliced beef, boar stew with polenta, cantucci with vin santo, three cheeses with honey, pasta with ragu and eggplant, liver pate

Day 12 – Ai Quatro Venti – Montepulciano: long climb to high piazza, RS rec—table antipasto (excellent), pork liver, bean soup (stew?), tagliatore with asparagus and sauce, asparagus flan with cheese fondue, pici with asparagus and bacon bits and cream sauce, duck breast

Day 13 – Ristorante Don Beta – Voltera: rough bench, undercover, upstairs bathroom—peppery beef stew, gnocchi with tomato and basil, salad, pork loins, tomato bread soup, Tuscan stew

Day 14 – Pizzeria ai Felice – Lucca: bicycles—cecina, pizza

 (dinner) Bazara’ SLR – Monterosso: view of ocean, under cover—gold bass, grilled shrimp, mixed salad

Day 15 – Bar Ristorante di Aristade – Manarola:—to four towns by train—salad, panini

Day 16 – La Cantina di Miki – Monterosso: basement level, open well—mixed salad, branzino, carrot & ginger soup, miso mare frito, Greek salad, filet mignon, antipasto

Day 17 – Osteria dell’Unione – Treiso: local, 3 men tasting wine, no credit card—antipasto, carpaccio, rabbit, nut cake, gnocchi gorgonzola, chicken cacciatore, pasta and chicken cacciatore

Day 18 – Café Murra – La Morra: Deb and I separate, light—salad, panini

 (dinner) Il Bricco – Treiso: at agriturismo—noodle with relish, sliced beef marinated in Barbaresco, mixed salad, moscato, nut cake, flan with caramel sauce

Day 19 – Osteria Barolando – Barolo: warm day under cover before wine museum—tajarin with duck confit, risotto with asparagus, green salad, vegetable flan, risotto and asparagus, veal with stew, tajarin ragu

Day 20 – La Rosa dei Venti (dinner) – Stresa: rec. from Guiseppe, view of Isola Madre—pizza, salad, grilled salmon, fresh fruit

Day 21 – Ristorante La Pescheria – Stresa: on Isola Superiore: under wisteria arbor—white fish Mediterranean style, minestrone soup, chicken cutlet, beef, trout

Day 22 – Bar Piazza on Piazza Grande – Locarno Suisse: ripoff prices—pork and risotto, pork and salad, liver (by mistake), veal cordon bleu

# History – churches

One of our travel themes is history, and to place it in a context we are already familiar with or to adjust what we thought we knew.

 In France three years ago, the chateaus of the Loire Valley were the superstars, with the omnipresent churches playing second fiddle.

 In Italy, there is no question. The duomos, the cathedrals, the associated buildings are front and center, and one needs to understand their history and their place in Italian society today. However, the sheer volume of these buildings leads to the risk of “see one church, you have seen most of them,” an attitude I am guilty of unless I have a guidebook to particular churches.

 Tim sorta made up for us by visiting several churches every day, to keep his father happy, he claimed.

 I will not go into detail about the churches but if you look at our list of places visited, you can research the major churches we probably visited. Even the small towns could have several churches.

 The history of the area, otherwise, is gleaned from the museums of art and history that Italy is famous for. Time constraints led us to not emphasize this aspect, favoring instead the feel of the town and people. However, a trip to Florence led all four to the Uffizzi, and then Tim and Judy scrambled to visit a few more that day. We did visit the Wine Museum in Barolo but were remiss in visiting any other major museum along our travels.

# Decisions, decisions

Some of you have already asked how we decided to do what we chose to do. (What?! Go to Italy for almost four weeks and not see Rome!? OMG!)

 After the four of us toured parts of France three years ago, and with the intervening two years and wherever that has taken us (the Adamses a bunch more than the Teators), the Italy idea had percolated even just after France. And after deciding on a Viking Ocean Cruise in 2016 that includes Venice, we started narrowing our choices.

 I think I would have voted for two weeks. But, Tim astutely noted that the cost of getting there is the same, and why not see more in a slightly longer trip.

 So, we started brainstorming where and when. The short answer as to why not Rome? We probably needed four months to run the length of Italy, and we finally decided that my two weeks would be 24 days, trying to get back before Memorial Day and Deb’s work at house managing and at photo jobs.

 Tuscany was the one must see and we gave that a week. I wanted some place in Umbria, we all agreed on Cinque Terre, I wanted Piedmont, and Tim wanted the Lakes. We discarded the Emiliano-Romagna segment, saved Venice for next year’s cruise, and wrote off Rome and south for another trip, should we be fortunate to do so.

 So, we would use Todi in Umbria as our base for six nights, Siena in Tuscany for seven nights, Monterosso in Cinque Terre for three nights, Treiso in Piedmont for three nights, and Stresa in the Lakes for three nights. And we would venture forth, driving like spokes of a wheel to our chosen destination.

 Air fares led us to Milan, both for arrival and departure, even though we had initially considered starting in Milan and flying out of Rome. Several C-notes kept us in Milan.

 And then in what order? Given May’s spring temperatures, we first drove our car south and ran a zigzag course northwestward before northeastward before running the 45 minute ride to the airport and home. Simple enough it but disguises the hours of preparation.

 Tim is the vitals guy – flights, car rental, places to stay. I am the what-to-see once we get there guy. Between the two of us, we spent hundreds of hours investigating, most of them satisfying and pleasurable. Of course, getting a “please forgive us but your place is not available” email without much time to spare allowed for a few minutes of hand-wringing.

# Car and driver

Yes, Tim the superstar.

 It is a good thing Tim likes to drive, prefers to drive instead of sitting as a passenger.

 Just as in France, Tim drove every kilometer, almost 3,000 this trip, and especially the six hour drive the first day from airport to Todi, and after an eight hour flight and almost no sleep.

 City driving, narrow street reconnoitering, hundreds of hairpin turns, varying degrees of light, varying degrees of moods from day to day, and through it all, Tim got us everywhere safely and, for the back seat, with minimal bruising! Ha

 The rental car was supposed to be a Ford Super C-Max, or its equivalent, and Opel was the equivalent. It rode smoothly for the entire trip although the sensor light telling us “to change the oil immediately” two days into our trip was disconcerting at first before we decided it was telling us that the oil change mileage was surpassed. We chose to ignore it.

 Another option Tim decided early on was a Mi-Fi, a portable hot spot that served us well even in the apartments. In the car, in conjunction with Google Maps on the iPad, and with help from the GPS device, navigator Don helped Tim through the tricky spots on a daily basis, with Judy filling in with the GPS in the back seat. Although we took a wrong turn or two, they were minor and we usually found our way quickly and efficiently (if that was desired that day).

 And the drop-off at Hertz, Malpensa went as painlessly as possible. GPS and Google Maps got us close, and the Hertz directions, with a couple close calls, took us directly to the original office. A quick check and a sign-off, and we were waltzing to Terminal 4 to start the trip back.

# Weather:

Ah, the weather gods treated us royally.

 We had researched the typical weather and climate for northern Italy and hoped the average precipitation would, for a couple weeks, diminish in our favor.

 It would prove to be about five degrees warmer than usual, with temps of 70s for highs, with an occasional close-to-80, and lows of mid-upper 50s, with a cool last day or two at the Lakes.

 Whoever did the sun dance, thank you, because almost all our time was spent in sunshine or semi-cloudy. It rained the first day after we had settled into the house; again on our travel day to Piedmont but it stopped after we cleared the tunnels and turned northward to Alessandria; the next to last day in the late afternoon as the Adamses were walking home; and finally on the last day as we sailed the last half of Lake Maggiore.

 We do not claim such nice weather was a just reward, only a much appreciated kindness.

# Wine

Although a daily accompaniment, wine did not play a major role in our schedule.

 Tim and I often looked for a half-bottle, or half-liter, of an area wine for lunch, and were often successful.

 Then we would haunt the local enoteca or supermarket for our nightly bottle, again looking for local choices.

 The one effort we made happened in Piedmont. Our agriturismo was too small to produce their own wine so they partnered with a neighbor, Montaribaldi, to make Il Bricco wines. Il Bricco carried their own wines for sale but they also provided a free winery visit and tasting to Montaribaldi, an offer we partook in, listening to Roberto as he showed us the wine cellar and explaining the wine making process before heading upstairs for a tasting of several, or more, wines.

 Ninety minutes later, and having already made a reservation at the Alba tourist office (TI), we drove several kilometers to arrive at Moccagatta, a small, family-run (as many are in that area) operation. We took the cellar tour, and then participated in a generous (and free) wine tasting of quality wines.

 The following day, in Barolo, after the Wine Museum tour, we went to the basement for the Barolo tasting, a line-up of twenty Barolos, of different sub-areas, soil types, and ages, and partook in a dispenser tasting, where one inserts the card, pushes the right buttons, puts the glass in position to have the dispenser squirt .9 ounces of wine. Taste as many wines as you want, with prices indicated (2-3 euros each), finish, and pay the bill. It is expensive per ounce but a good way of trying a variety of wines.

 I do have a list of the wines Tim and I tasted during our trip but at 45 wines, it is too long to print here. Contact me for a list if want to see the list.

# Sense of people

For us, attempting to understand the people of a country is one of our primary goals. And a trip like this leads travelers to do just that, more so than if on a cruise.

 Umbria proved to be mostly un-touristy, as were parts of Piedmont, and to a lesser degree parts of Tuscany.

 Expecting no major revelations, especially after our personal experiences on other trips, and the Adamses’ longer repertoire, we found everyday people living very similarly to us. We watched people walking to work early in the morning, the after work clustering and socializing, kids going to school, workers fixing the streets and cleaning up the squares, and the whole host of activity that makes up Italian life.

 I was struck by the feeling that, changing a few signs in Italian, and a few pieces of architecture, I could easily have been in a New York town or small city. Many Italians are used to seeing tourists, and can spot Americans, no matter how we tried to fit in. And they were friendly, accommodating, and pleasant. “Parla inglese?” allowed many to admit they knew a little English, and we confessed that their little bit of English was better than our best Italian. And still there were many places that we talked with no language in common other than gestures, facial expressions, and that unspoken communication, especially if commerce is involved.

 Yep, Italians gesture with their hands and arms, inflect with their voices but the language is a melodic one, with one syllable rolling into the next. Close to French in its musical style, not to be confused with a German or American sound.

 One day on the Vernazza to Monterosso hiking trail, we counted eight nationalities, with many of us greeting each other in English, Italian, Spanish, French or German. The proximity of the different nations forces many to learn a little of each, in sharp contrast to the US where its size and lack of need allows for one language to be used.

 Myths busted: Italian men of any age do not wear shorts. They do not wear hats.

# Back roads – views

One of the pleasures of visiting a country, of course, is seeing the advertised points of interest. But, we find as interesting the back roads, the slices of life not visible from the autostrada, the views from a random corner or high spot. And Italy provided many of these.

 Barbaresco and Barolo territory in Piedmont was an unknown, and proved to be outstandingly interesting. We stayed on top of a ridge, with a mile between neighboring ridges, with valley depths a few hundred feet below, most of the hillsides covered in vineyard. A block pattern of vine rows, outlined in bulldozed dirt tracks, punctuated with small groves of trees, either planted or filling an untillable patch, and dotted with the red-brown tile roofs and cream-yellow of most houses. It was a sight we did not tire of. And the back side of the neighboring ridges led to more, only to end in the plain below or to reach higher in a hilltop town or even higher to a mountain that had not been settled.

 And the roads that tied these places together laced up and around, switchbacking and needling its way across the countryside. (note: Tim’s driving). In the low angle of the setting sun, these patterns became enhanced. If only a camera could catch what we saw.

 And the back roads of Umbria and Tuscany, especially on our ways back from the day’s destination, had us wondering if the residents appreciated their scenery as much as we did. The rolling hills with clashing angles of vineyard rows, complemented with fields of tilled land, of the local hay, pale green of olive groves, pastel stuccoed houses of red tile roofs, backgrounded with clear skies of blue, and on it went.

 And then there was the twisting ups and downs to get to Monterosso and the other towns of Cinque Terre.

 Even Stresa, with its plunge to Lake Maggiore revealed distant peaks of snow caps, although we could see them without leaving the Hotel.

# Favorite towns

After almost four weeks and a few thousand kilometers, the list of attractive and interesting towns is a long one. For the sake of the topic, I asked all of us to pick our favorite three towns or places.

**Judy**

1) My number one was in Orvietto and is the frescoes of Luca Signorelli in the Duomo I had never seen them before, and as you know, I was most impressed. Anybody who can be an influence on Michelangelo is pretty astounding!

2) My second favorite image is of the twisting, narrow, and ancient streets of Italy which we eventually got "hardened" to seeing. I remember the ones particularly in Assisi. They are so often filled with worn stone steps twisting sharply upward or downward, exhibiting someone's laundry out to dry and beautiful colorful flowers on doorsteps or and window boxes or on a windowsill. I could not stop taking pictures, but eventually forced myself to many hilltowns later.

3) Third are the undulating hills around El Bricco,  covered in row upon row upon row of vineyards crisscrossing the hillsides horizontally, vertically, and diagonally. And so many different shades of green!

4) And I am going to cheat… A FOURTH image is from the Borgello art museum in Florence. Again, it was the first time that we had been there and their collection was most impressive. Standouts were Donatello's "David", all of the emotionally vibrant Michelangelos, and of course, Ghiberti's original doors. It was also a very interesting fortress-like Medici style building.

**Tim**

1) Todi: Our first place, great house and view, and typical hill town.

2) Norcia and nearby Castelluccio: neat town, but also because mostly all Italians and great ambiance. Spectacular almost eerie views

3) Il Bricco and the Piedmont area in general: Our hosts and view and the marvelous roads, towns, and vineyards

**Deb**

(declined the invitation)

**Don**

1) The site of our agriturismo Il Bricco on the top of a ridge, looking east and west to neighboring ridges, most of patterned with horizontal and vertical stripes of vineyard rows, outlined in smaller blocks by the dusty line of the bulldozer tracks

2) Radda – a classic small hilltop town a third of the way from Siena to Florence, about three parallel streets wide, big enough to have business to utilize if I lived there, small enough to know the town, with wonderful views

3) Montepulciano – a medium size hill town in southern Tuscany, surprising me with its live-ablilty, range of business and residence, low impact of touristy stuff, its Vino Nobile wine, ambiance

# On to Level Two Topics

The big brush strokes have been swiped. Now, here are some of the others that influenced our trip and/or memories.

# The Rick Steves Effect

One of the major European travel guides, Rick Steves is known to many a traveler and PBS watcher. We used the 2015 Italy book both as a starting point, and as a resource to read while we were touring, often listening to one of us reading aloud his guide to a city or even a building, especially the Duomos (cathedrals). Without that information, the buildings are just nice buildings. This was even more relevant with the use of the 2014 Florence/Tuscany book, with its even more in depth depictions of that area.

 The second effect is the tourist crush at some places. Deb noted to a fellow tourist how interesting Cinque Terre was, and that we had found out through Rick Steves. The fellow tourist gave a grimace and said, “We were here before Rick Steves and it was nice then.” And we heard the same about Civita, although that person said Rick Steves had saved that town from oblivion.

 Other guides are influential – Fodor, Michelin, Frommer, and more, but the most commonly seen books out there were Rick Steves’ books.

 And then to trump all of this, just as we had split up to run different errands, Deb walks a street close to our Siena apartment, and she sees the back of a man that she thought looked remarkably like Rick Steves. Turns out, it was! And she introduced herself, mentioned we had been using his books during the trip, he asked if there was anything in his books that we found that needed fixing, she could not remember where we had been or were going (she claims she still could remember her name!), and she came back to the apartment with one of her personal highlights of the trip!

# Navigation aids

We wondered how we ever did it in the past—the finding your destination without going mad, or swearing. Although the gps unit we had did a serviceable job, it was the Google Maps app on an iPad, powered by a Mi-Fi that made this so much easier. Type in an address and, presto almost, and accurate directions were produced and spoken. And with all the roundabouts that Italy seems to favor, it was even more important to know which exit to take. The only fault we could find was the use of compass directions to steer you, and the use of names when those names did not appear on the streets. “Head west on Via Guiseppe Garibaldi.” First, which way is west? And second, where is the road sign? Fortunately, the ability to widen or narrow the map’s scope gave the navigator a good idea where and when to turn.

# Deb on her own

In Stresa, our schedules diverged. Deb wanted some beach time; the rest of us more hiking. So, in Full Day 1, Deb took the train to Vernazza, scouted around, and started the hike back to Monterosso, the same hike the three of us would undertake the next day.

 She befriended a couple of Americans on semester break, glad to be speaking English after a semester of speaking only Italian. At trail’s end, Deb rented an umbrella on the beach and camped out for the day, enjoying the Mediterranean, even the rogue wave that came in over her head in what had been thigh deep water.

 Full Day 2, when the three went to hike the Vernazza-Monterosso trail, Deb stayed behind, exploring the beach of what turned out to be a cloudy day and, thus, no swimming.

# The Adams/Teator History:

Yep, we go back a ways, to about 1980, on day trips and some longer stays. France 2012 was the Teators’ first European trip and we were mighty glad to have knowledgeable travel mates, as well as good friends, to share the experience. And the same was true again. Another chapter in a long book! Grazie mille, Tim and Judy.

# Keeping in touch:

Although the purpose of the trip is to get away, it is still nice to stay in touch with back home. News-wise, we were out of touch longer than ever before. UK was threatening to leave EU and a Philly train crash was about all of any import we heard.

 Deb and I had no phone service; Tim and Judy had limited time but a call from Noel & Mari & grandkids on Mother’s Day was a plus.

 And with the Mi-Fi, plus the wireless all our places had, we were able to check email. I sent out a travel update every three or four days. Otherwise, experiencing Italy was our existence.

# Cats back home:

Deb always frets about leaving the cats alone, and three weeks is quite an absence. Sister Lori came from Florida for several days mid-vacation, stayed at our house, sent pictures of Monet and Jackson, and cheered up Deb.

 Otherwise, reliable neighbor Linda checked in twice a day, emailed occasionally, and also kept Deb’s mind at peace.

# Italian drivers and roads:

Italian drivers have a reputation and perhaps they deserve it in Rome. But we saw consistently good driving and behavior wherever we went, probably better than American driving. The one thing that would be a no-no in US is the coming up to the bumper when a faster car wanted to pass. Once understood, the slow car cleared out and maintained the flow.

 Roads were generally in good shape, perhaps as good as the US. There were some exceptions. The big roads keep big trucks to the right side; thus the right side is worn and rough compared to the left side. So, driving on the left was preferred as long as Tim kept an eye out for traffic coming up behind him. And shoulders on the roads are minimal, if they exist. And, third, we passed a dozen or more sites, usually on twisting hills where a lane had partially washed out. The Italian answer: put up a cautionary barricade and drive around gaps that would not be allowed here.

 It should be noted that the vehicles are consistently compact or medium sized cars. No pick-up trucks, few RVS and no large ones; the work trucks are more like vans. And motorcycles have the same freedom as in France – ride in between cars, and at speeds unsafe for Americans.

# Bathrooms:

Do not fear. Italian bathrooms are as good as ours. Except…

 The public restrooms saw all levels of comfort. Most were fine. Others (at least a dozen and a half) were the bowl-less kind, with footprints to stand on, and a hole to pee or poo into. The next step up was the seat-less bowl—no problem for men standing but otherwise something we Americans think is beneath us.

# Pasticceria, and other shops:

Italy has a reasonable supermarket and market setup.

 Otherwise, I am interested in something sweet and the French patisserie morphed into the Italian pasticceria. It does not surpass the French but the Italian specialties was more than good enough to satisfy my tastes.

 Another type of store is the Tabacchi – a newsstand, convenience store, a ticket seller, and more combined.

 The Bar is almost as omnipresent but should not be confused with the US idea of a bar. Instead, it is a bar but more importantly a quick food place.

# Food shopping:

Shopping for food while we had a kitchen was a necessity as well as sharing in the culture. Most of it is the same as here with only minor differences. It helps to read a little Italian but the Google translator can help out.

 Everything is metric and many products are sold in ette, or units of 100 grams. As long as you wrap your mind around that, and paying in Euros, it is fine. The fruit and vegetables seemed consistently to be fresher. I found no peanut butter; Nutella seems to be the replacement. Tim finally found tissues.

 And another thing about fruits and vegetables. In the US, we are used to the checkout weighing the goods. In Italy, you pick what you want, you weigh it yourself on a machine on which you need to identify the product, and then it spits out a checkout price sticker. Anyone who has been to the bulk section in a food co-op or for some products in some stores, this is old hat, but it certainly slows one’s progress in the store.

# Evocative sounds

The hourly tolling of the tower clock at Piazza del Campo

The chittering swallows at sunrise and sunset at the Campo

The melody of morning birds at our Todi house

Clanking of the bulldozers tending to the vineyards in Treiso

The braying donkey across the valley in Treiso

The nearly riotous contrade parade into the Campo

The whooshing of the train a few times an hour in Monterosso

The motor hum, street abrasion of the street cleaners in Siena

# Colds:

It seemed no one could stay healthy for all three-plus weeks. A few days of sniffles, or tight chest, or a coughing fit plagued all of us but not so much to kill a day.

# Research resources for trip:

Rick Steves 2015 Italy

Rick Steves 2014 Florence/Tuscany

DK Florence/Tuscany

DK Umbria

Wine Trails of Italy

Back Road of Northern and Central Italy

Italybeyondtheobvious website

Summerinitaly website

Slowtravel-Italy website

Combination of travel, food, wine websites for Italy

# Money and credit cards:

Our atm issues last trip were settled by now.

 And credit cards are taken many places. The advice about chip cards is to be heeded but almost all places that took credit cards also took the magnetic strip. When they did not, it was an annoyance but it happened seldom.

 Prices were on a par with the US, with the exception of Switzerland which is still on the Swiss franc. Our lunch there on our last full day was outrageously expensive. One can spend gobs of money but economical choices abound.

# Pickpockets, Security, and Such

All the guide books warn about pickpockets. Fortunately, we ran into none of it although most of our trip was not in high-volume tourist areas.

 Every place felt safe, even Siena in the evening.

Although I have a money belt, I seldom wore it although we were careful about leaving things in obvious sight. Italy felt as safe as the US, at least in the places we frequented.

Early in our trip, a Finnish couple recounted their horror story of two of their three rental cars were broken into in Rome as they were spending a day on their way to northern Italy, and everything of importance stolen, including passports and important papers. So, when we stopped in Lucca, our car full of luggage, we decided to split our time—ninety minutes in the car, ninety in Lucca, and the reverse for the other couple. Better safe than sorry, we thought, even if it meant not spending time where we wanted.

# Airports and flights:

Knock on wood, but flying to Europe has been almost painless, considering it takes eight hours. Both our Delta flights were smooth and routine.

 Security at JFK seemed a lot less intense than at Malpensa. Still, I question if there is not a better way of making sure the country stays safe while also making flying as convenient as possible.

 We had upscaled our economy seats to Super Economy, with its six more inches of leg room, and with some planning, we were up against a bulkhead, so we could stretch our legs and touch the wall, even standing if we wanted.

 Still, the process is enough work that the getting there and enjoying it has to outweigh the inconvenience.

 Food on Delta was not nearly as good as the Air Berlin trip from last summer.

# Jet Lag:

Departing at 6 pm and arriving at 8 am seems to work. We kept busy, were somewhat tired, but hit the beds at 9 and not too much the worse for wear the following day.

 I thought I had completed the trip back in the best shape ever although Nights 3 and 4 back had me in bed early.

# Cruise vs. Self-guided

These are two different animals, each with its own strong suits and minor minuses.

 The cruise, if well selected, takes you places you want to go, with guides to show you around, with good food and drink, for a bit of an uptick in price.

 The self-guided tour gives maximum freedom, a chance to see stuff you might not be able to on a cruise of paid tour. The trade-off is a lot of work researching, and even more work to find a guide, if desired.

 We have done both, like both, respect both, but could not initiate consecutive years of self-guided tours, considering the work we put into it.

# Cost

Our major costs were places to stay, food and meals, airline tickets. Deb and I had points for the airline but paid for the upgrade to Super Economy. Still, with most the bills in, it seems about $7,000 covered most of it. This will be a few thousand dollars less than our ten-day-long cruise next year.

# Photo albums

The trip is over, a few days to rest, and Deb starts the photo albums. Over a thousand pictures, a foot high stack of brochures and receipts and she will produce a lifelong momento in a few days.

# Memories of Places: not mentioned already, or not

**Todi**: 18% grade hill, Casa di Pero – our home away home – great view, close to town; chestnut and locust trees in full bloom, a month ahead of home; the funicular; the Roman cisterns; two churches; scenic overlooks; wonderful rules and resource book by Guido

**Deruta**: town known for colorful ceramics; personable owner giving us a tour

**Assisi**: following Rick Steves trail through town; old Roman market; main street Via San Francesco; Basilica San Francesco – as grand as described

**Spoleto**: three motorized walkways, one an eight-part escalator to Rocco; Roman arch/aqueduct across river; Roman forum; pleasant lunch in walkway outside restaurant; waitress – Brit raised in Italy

**Norcia**: preponderance of boar and cured meats; an Italian town – few American tourists; Sunday service letting out

**Castelluccio**: long uphill drive from Norcia; rundown town; Tim drove to dead end in town; spectacular plains planted with flowers; snow on the mountains; scenic ride home

**Orvieto**: finding a parking spot above the funicular; excellent belvedere; a large hilltop; used RS guide for Duomo; lunch at a mother/son operation; more Americans – talked to Flagstaff man

**Civita** **di** **Bagnoreggio**: wow; long walkway; an empty Hobbit-looking town filled by shop owners for tourists; the RS effect; more Americans and Orientals

**Siena**: finding our apartment; balcony overlooking Campo; 15 minute walk to parking lot; swallows swooping among and nesting in towers around Piazza; big Wednesday market by Fortezza; Duomo, with RS help; Siena soil is a tan/white/gray; a very livable city; Palio theme drives the town; contrade tradition centuries old

**Florence**: took bus to save stress of parking; Uffizi and poor atmospheric protection; dome of Duomo; Renaissance Walk via RS, Ponte Vecchio

**Cortona**: spectacular approach as it sweeps down the mountain side; main street the flat wrinkle; toughest climbing in any hilltown; lunch at RS recommendation

**Chianti** **Hills**: a Peter O’Hara idea; missed our first target with Mi-Fi down; interesting Brolio castle and wine tasting of one wine; lunch at Radda, a pretty town; disappointed with too modernish Greve; Castellina in Chianti – a scenic hilltop town whose parallel main street was a nice mix of businesses

**Monteriggioni:** distinctive but too touristy; intact wall and towers

**Montepulciano**: a nice balance of native and tourist; easy bottom, tougher climb to main square; long walk to basement for Vino Nobile wine;

**Montalcino**: not enough time to savor the Brunello – shucks; a local event with band, live chickens for sale, lawn mowers and chain saws

**Volterra**: Etruscan history, and old arch; Tim and I climbed bell tower; alabaster center; another hilltown with a good balance

**San** **Gimignano**: a pretty town with its towers, highly touristy

**Lucca**: rode a bicycle around the ramparts with Deb; tried cecina for lunch

**Cinque** **Terra**: Monterosso more touristy than I expected; wonderfully wild roads twisting and turning from heights of Autostrade; Giro d’Italia had just passed through; dinner with a view of the sea; learning the train schedule; visiting the other four towns; the long climb up to Corniglia; Train track just a 100 meters away from our place – not as noisy as expected; helpful people in Tabacchi shop for food shopping; the waves of people getting off the train

**Treiso**: squeal of delight as we approached Il Bricco; wonderful views from the agriturismo; Alba seven k. away – nice town in valley; back road driving through more hilltop towns and challenging roads to drive; two worthy wine tastings at vineyards; La Morra! – for Vic, and wonderful belvedere; surprise at smallness of towns of Barbaresco and Barolo; Neive a pleasant surprise with spiral hilltop town and Sunday church letting out; Wine Museum in Barolo

**Stresa**: not an inexpensive town for activities; walk back in the lights at night; congeniality of Guiseppe at Hotel La Fontana; BBC TV in lobby, for the first; all day trip – spectacular views north to Domodossolo, even more spectacular east on narrow gauge to Locarno, and then a half-soggy boat ride back home

# Details

At times, the minor details fill in the major points, all of them enjoyable.

Deb bought cat food to feed cats, and fed all she saw

Food shopping at EMI in Todi

We giggle in anticipation at seeing Todi from the distance sitting high on the hill

May 1 is Italy’s Labor Day. We spent it in Assisi

Back from Assisi through Montefalco and Bastardo

Every bathroom has a bidet, but how to use it?

Evenings spent writing notes or Judy writing her account

Judy’s Fitbit buzzing when she has walked 10,000 steps. Every day.

The scent of locust trees hanging in the air

Gelaterias everywhere, had to try most

Relief at getting first ATM money

The Signorellis at the Siena Duomo

Settling shared finances each evening with Tim

Morning walks by myself in early morning hours in Siena

Shopping at two Siena markets

Silenzio! Intoned in most the big churches

Praise the Lord for Google Maps

Tuscan soil a different color from Umbrian

Deb with a tough week at Siena with chest cold

Emails took 60-90 minutes each

Deb and I hunted for olive wood boards

North and west of Siena on way to Cinque was flat and industrialized

Views of marble mountains, marble businesses along roadway

Tim hit by fish dropped by gull. Really!

Worthy hike from Vernazza to Monterosso

Tim coping with details of RV sale

Deb the only one to stick foot in Mediterranean; oops, add Judy to list

More back road riding on last day in Treiso

Rice paddies on way to Stresa

No place has toaster or microwave; electricity seems limited everywhere

Bait and switch? Checking in to Stresa hotel had us with one person in a room

Deb bought pocketbook in Stresa

We scared ourselves on the train, thinking we had missed our first destination

Pinching ourselves, telling ourselves we were really there