

Rome and Tuscany

May 2011 – trip led by Norman Peterken



Report by Liz Lodge

"No other city in the world can be compared with Rome for the vivid sense of the infinite, the universal, the majestic and the grandiose experienced by the visitor". So says the guide book, and they are so right! Everywhere you go, time is measured in centuries centuries of history, civilisation and art - gazing open-mouthed at the Colosseum one minute, and awed at the beauty of the paintings of Michelangelo, Botticelli, Donatello, Titian and other such well-known artists, the next. We ran out of time in Rome, and would certainly love to go back there again. There are several patron saints of Italy's capital city - Lawrence, Martina, Paul the Apostle, Peter the Apostle and Philip Neri.

Saturday 7 May

Leaving a grey Calpe we set off for the coach's pick-up point in Moraira and continued to Javea to pick up the remainder of our passengers, and then continue our drive (now in the rain) to Valencia airport and our Vueling flight to Rome. No delays, thankfully, and we landed on time; our coach arrived and we were driven to our hotel, the Parco Tirreno



Parco Tirreno Hotel entrance

Glad to be done with travelling, we dumped our suitcases and went for a short walk to get our bearings.

Several people travelled into the centre of Rome.



Fontana del Tritone



San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane



Dioscuri



Later, we went in to dinner
(which we found
disappointing) in the hotel.

Sunday 8 May

For our first of three free days in Rome we had booked the "Monumental Rome Tour". After breakfast our coach arrived, to take us in to the centre. Our first stop was the sumptuous St Peter's Basilica - in one guide book called "Catholicism's most sacred shrine."



From his window in the Papal study – the second from the right on the top floor - the Pope blesses the faithful gathered in the piazza below.

After waiting in an amazingly long queue we were able to enter the awesome basilica, which holds hundreds of precious works of art



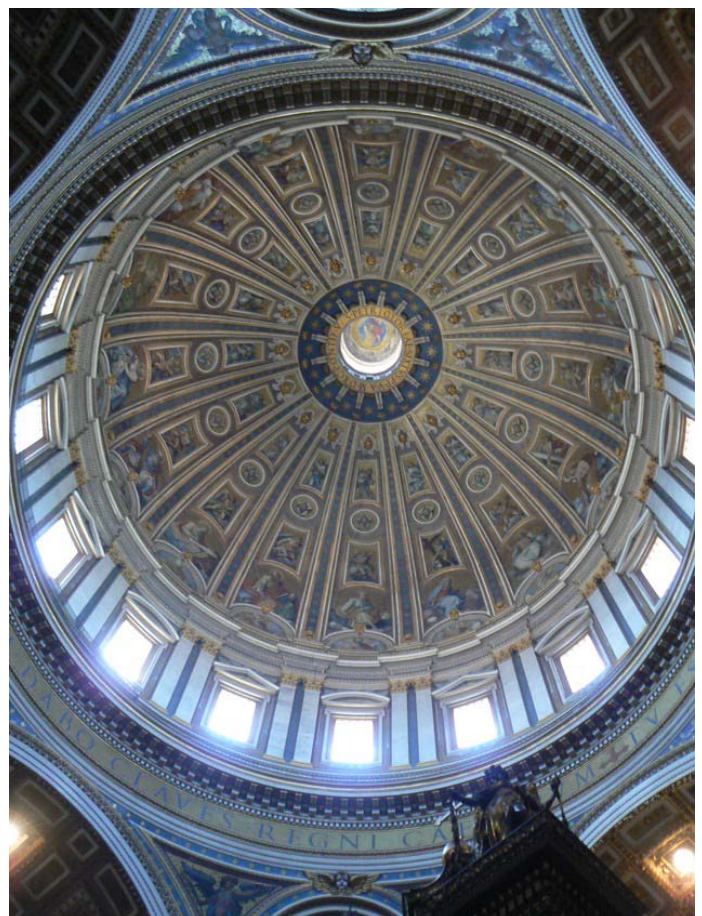
chapel ceiling



procession at the beginning of a service



The famous Swiss Guards looked very striking in their colourful uniforms



the dome



On our way back to the coach we had to wait while a very impressive procession of Ferrari cars drove past - just a little "plus" on our journey



The coach dropped us off near to the Piazza Navona, the social centre of the city, lined with palaces and pavement cafés and restaurants. The piazza boasts three flamboyant Baroque fountains



Fountain of the Four Rivers

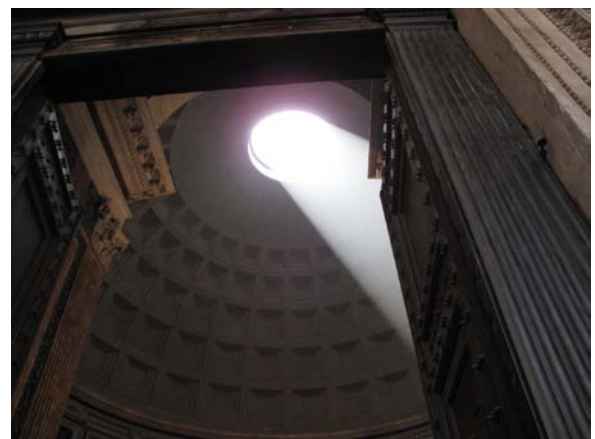
Fountain of Neptune



Fountain of the Four Rivers

Fontana del Moro

We carried on through the maze of narrow streets to the Pantheon, situated in the financial and political district. This "temple to all the gods" is Rome's best-preserved ancient building, with an exceptional dome made from a single pouring of concrete over a wooden frame, and whose skylight is the only source of light



Buried in this building are the kings of Italy and the painter Raphael and for the latter reason was featured in the film "The Da Vinci Code"



Continuing our tour, we stopped for a quick look at the Temple of Hadrian. The columns now form part of the Stock Exchange.

Our next sightseeing stop was also featured in a film - Rome's largest and most famous fountain, the Trevi, which depicts Neptune flanked by two Tritons. We battled our way through the crowds and, just like in the film "Roman Holiday", threw some coins in the fountain to ensure that one day we will return to Rome!



The walking tour finished, we decided to stay in the city and make our own way back to the hotel later. After a quick look at the busy Piazza di Spagna and the Spanish Steps (made memorable by the film "Roman Holiday" with Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck), and the Fontana Barcaccia which is sunk into paving at the bottom of the steps, we searched (with difficulty) for somewhere to eat and eventually found a restaurant down a side street which wasn't too expensive and had just one table vacant.

After our late lunch and a bit more of a wander around we made our way back to the Piazza Navona, which had shrugged off its daytime mantle and was now coming to life with much theatricality around the three fountains - a magician, various "statues", artists painting with spray paints and other unusual mediums, and musicians. It was an absolutely wonderful atmosphere and reluctantly we left the square to walk the long way back to the metro for our train 'home'.

A small group followed part of the Sunday Walking Tour.

Their tour began at the Porta del Popolo, constructed by Bernini in 1655 at what was the entrance to Ancient Rome from the North



The Piazza del Popolo was laid out in 1538 and is a popular meeting place for Romans. Behind the obelisk are the twin churches that flank Via del Corso, Rome's principal shopping street.

The Ara Pacis, "Altar of Peace", was built to celebrate some military victories of Augustus and was one of the most important monuments in Ancient Rome. It has now been restored and sits in its own museum beside the River Tiber.



Ara Pacis – front view



Wendy and John at the other side

Piazza Colonna gained its name because it is the location of the Column of Marcus Aurelius, constructed in the 2nd century AD to celebrate the military victories of Marcus Aurelius. His statue on the top of the column has been replaced by one of St. Paul.



Nearby is the Piazza Montecitorio. Behind the Egyptian obelisk, dating from circa 600BC, is the Palazzo di Montecitorio, the home of the Italian Parliament.



Bernini's elephant statue

After visiting the Pantheon, the group went round the corner to see Bernini's elephant statue. It is located in front of the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, built on the ruins of a temple to Minerva.



Santa Maria Sopra Minerva

Monday 9 May

The group that opted for the Ancient Rome Tour began their tour at the Campidoglio, the elegant square on the Capitoline Hill.



There was a great view looking across the Forum towards the Colosseum.

The tour continued to the Arch of Constantine and.....



...the Colosseum



This amazing amphitheatre, the most famous monument surviving from Ancient Rome, was built by emperor Vespasian on the site of Nero's Domus Aurea to immortalise the name of the Flavian clan and inaugurated by the emperor Titus in the year 80 AD.

The amphitheatre held 70,000 spectators. The passageways below were covered with a wooden floor with trap doors inserted at various intervals. The floor was covered with canvas to make it waterproof and then several centimetres of sand to absorb blood.



The tour ended with a visit to the church of St. Paul's-outside-the-Walls.



Interior of St. Paul's-outside-the-Walls



Exterior view of the church

We made our way to the Castel Sant'Angelo, the massive fortress which takes its name from the vision of the Archangel Michael by Pope Gregory the Great and which was built as a mausoleum for Emperor Hadrian.



Castel Sant'Angelo behind Ponte V. Emanuele

We briefly crossed and returned over the "Bridge of Angels", once known as the Bridge of Hadrian, which was completed in 134 AD by Roman Emperor Hadrian to span the Tiber, linking his mausoleum to the city centre



Ponte Sant'Angelo leads to Castel Sant'Angelo

The entrance ticket to the Colosseum is combined with entry to the Forum and Palatine Hill. One group decided to visit the Forum first so that they could bypass the queue for tickets when they arrived at the Colosseum.



On the right is the Arch of Septimius Severus. The columns on the left formed the entrance to the Temple of Saturn.

The Via Sacra with the column of Phocas on the left. The three columns on the left were part of the Temple of Castor and Pollux.



The Arch of Titus was constructed in 82 AD by the Emperor Domitian following the death of his older brother, Titus.

The Stadium of Domitian is located on the Palatine Hill.





Returning along Via dei Fori Imperiali, the group passed Trajan's Market and Trajan's Column.



The group also made brief visits to some of the famous churches located within 100 metres or so of Piazza Navona.



The church of Sant'Andrea della Valle is the setting of the first act of Tosca.



The church of Sant'Agostino is most famous for the painting of 'Madonna and Pilgrims' by Caravaggio.





The church of San Luigi dei Francesi contains Caravaggio's triptych of St. Matthew



Tuesday 10 May

Today, our last free day, we again took the metro and got off at Termini so that we could catch the "Roma Cristiana" bus and stayed on for the complete journey and listened to the commentary - an excellent way to see the sights and hear all about them. We had good views of:

the semi-circular Piazza della Repubblica



the church of Santa Maria Maggiore

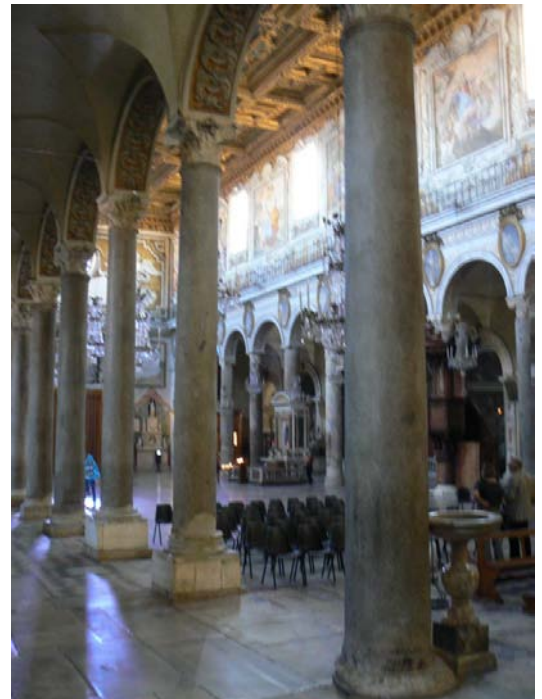
and the Circus Maximus, used principally for chariot races



We got off at Il Vittoriano (The Victor Emmanuel Monument, built in honour of the first king of unified Italy.



We climbed the marble staircase leading to the austere Santa Maria in Aracoeli.



From the Piazza del Campidoglio we took some more steps up to the next level. We were surprised and delighted to find a very chic cafe and, even more surprising, the drinks were incredibly cheap (for a change!). Suitably refreshed we followed the terrace around the building to take advantage of the panoramic views for "photo opportunities" and then climbed back down the steps to the front of the stupendous building where we were lucky enough to see:



the Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

Feeling a little weary we trudged back to the Termini metro station and caught the train back to Cornelia, then back to the hotel.

Dinner (better than our first night) was included on our last night here.

Although there were huge queues for entry to the Vatican Museums at 9am every morning, many of the tour group were able to enjoy a visit, either by booking in advance online or by arriving close to midday by which time the queues had largely disappeared. The museums are simply incredible. The rooms of the museum are extremely opulent and are packed full of an amazing collection of antiquities:



the Laocöon, a 1st century BC statue



Nero's Porphyry Bathtub



Apollo Belvedere



Statue of River Nile



Tapestry of the Resurrection of Christ



The Gallery of Maps



Battle of the Milvian Bridge by pupils of Raphael



Deliverance of St. Peter by Raphael



School of Athens by Raphael



The Sistine Chapel

Several people independently visited Isola Tiberina, the island in the River Tiber. Ponte Fabricio was built in 62 BC.



The 10th century church of San Bartolomeo is located on the island.



They were able to wander round various survivors from Ancient Rome that are located in the small area between the bridge and the Capitoline Hill.



The Teatro di Marcello was completed in 13 BC. The open-air theatre held 11,000 spectators. The Portico di Ottavia is adjacent to Teatro di Marcello.

The Temple of Portunus is undergoing renovation...



...as is the Temple of Hercules Victor. The Arch of Janus is located in the same square....



.... as is the church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin. In its portico is the Bocca della Verita, 'the Mouth of Truth'.



David and Lorna took the train to visit the large archaeological site of Ostia Antica, the port of Ancient Rome.



The theatre in Ostia Antica was built in 12 BC. It is one of the earliest buildings constructed completely from bricks.

There are many mosaics in the Baths of the Cisiarii.



Norman went for a stroll over the Janiculum Hill, from which there are panoramic views across the centre of Rome and was able to view:



Rome's lighthouse



The Tempietto by Bramante

TUSCANY, 11-17 MAY

Wednesday 11 May

After a very noisy breakfast amongst the crowds of school kids staying in the hotel, we had a 40-minute wait for our coach to take us to Siena, once a capital to rival Florence, in the heart of central Tuscany.



We arrived belatedly at the restaurant outside Siena, at which our pasta lunch had been booked, and had a pleasant break.



Our guides joined us and we drove into Siena where we split into two groups for a very interesting walking tour. With our guide Donatella we walked to the main street with its shops and banks - it was the banking section that many years ago had made Siena incredibly rich. It was amazing to think that we were standing in the middle of the pilgrim route running from Scotland, through Rome, and on to Jerusalem. We had a look inside the Basilica of Cateriniana di San Domenico, who was patron saint of Italy and Europe - it was she who convinced the pope to return to Rome from France because she desperately wanted peace



The centre has been pedestrianised and vehicles need a special permit to drive there, and we enjoyed looking around the vehicle-free Campo Square, one of Europe's greatest medieval squares and classed as the third most beautiful square in the world.

Twice a year, the square hosts the world-famous Palio, a horse race contested out by the local parishes.



We were then offered the choice of free time or a walk up to view the cathedral, and we opted for the latter. It was a shame that time didn't allow us to have a look inside, but the view outside was worth the "climb".



On our way back to the square, as an owner of Vespa scooters for more years than I care to remember, I was delighted to walk across a side street and be greeted by a "Vespa procession"



Meeting back at the square it was discovered that some of our group was missing and, after waiting a while, we made the long walk back to the coach and then Norman and Donatella went back to the square and found our fellow passengers so all was well. We then drove on to Montecatini Terme, the largest spa town in Italy, centrally situated to the places of interest we would be visiting during our six days at the Hotel La Pia. Dinner was included on our first night.



Thursday 12 May

After breakfast we left at 9.30 am for our walking tour of Montecatini Terme. When we arrived we split into two groups, and we were with Laura. She told us that the history of the baths goes back to the 16th century, when ancient peoples are known to have taken advantage of the geothermally heated waters, though the current spas date to nearly 300 years later when a steady water supply was first delivered to the town.



We commenced our tour at the Town Hall, where Laura told us a bit about the history of the area and then we went inside. The ceilings were quite incredible, especially for a town hall.

As we walked Laura pointed out the church and other land marks...



...and then we carried on walking through a park, past a carousel (which looked most inviting!) until we arrived at the most wonderful Tettuccio spa where, to our great delight, we could hear music and there we saw a pianist, violinist and a singer who, most appropriately, had almost finished singing one of Puccini's most famous (and our favourite) operatic arias, "Nissun Dorma".



After a look around the fantastic book shop and surroundings, we were invited in to the huge bar for free champagne and nibbles, very welcome!

After this we had free time and chose to stay and look around the spa for a bit longer and then walk back to our hotel.



After a short rest we walked into town, and were lucky enough to just make the next carriage of the funicular railway which took us to Montecatini Alto.



Had a walk around the village, taking in the beautiful panoramic views, and after taking a peep at the nativity scene in one church and a photographic exhibition in the church at the opposite end of the village, we caught (yet again just in time) the funicular back down to the town.

We had decided to sample the local restaurants and did not have dinner in the hotel until our last night, so later went out into the town where we found a pizzeria that was very local and typically Italian.

Friday 13 May

Unlucky for some (but not for us as we'd booked for the "Walking Tour of Florence"!).

After an early breakfast we left at 7.45 with today's guide, Simona, to walk to the station for our 08.30 am train to Florence. We rode through miles of a flat plain which boasted 1,500 nurseries that supply 60% of the trees for the whole of Italy. Finally we arrived at our destination at the end of the line, Firenze Santa Maria Novella Station.

A vast and beautiful monument to the Renaissance, Florence is one of the world's greatest artistic capitals and, although much of the city was rebuilt at that time, the eastern part with its maze of tiny alleys retains a distinctly medieval feel. The patron saint of Florence is St John the Baptist.

We began our tour with the Dominican Church of Santa Maria Novella with its striking marble façade....



...and continued past the Medici Chapels and the San Lorenzo Church, which was the parish church of the Medici family and Florence's first cathedral, rebuilt in 1419 by Brunelleschi; almost a century later Michelangelo submitted some plans for the facade and began work on the family tombs and a library. The Medici Chapels contain some of Michelangelo's most famous sculptures but photographs were not allowed.



I had to make do with a postcard of the majestic cathedral, the Santa Maria del Fiore, as I couldn't get the whole building in my camera lens. One of Florence's most famous symbols, the richly-decorated Duomo is Europe's fourth largest church and, with its bell tower by Giotto and its orange-tiled dome rising above the heart of the city, it is Florence's tallest building.



We crossed the Piazza della Repubblica and reached the Ponte Vecchio, one of the city's most famous landmarks. The oldest surviving bridge in the city, and the first to be built across the Arno, its picturesque shops were originally the domain of blacksmiths, butchers and tanners but were reviled by the nobility for their noise and stench and eventually replaced in 1593 by the jewellers and goldsmiths that exist today.



We walked back to the Piazza della Signoria, a popular promenade for visitors and Florentines - with its ancient buildings, and dominated by the majestic Palazzo Vecchio, the piazza has been at the heart of the city's political and social life for centuries, and the great bell used to summon citizens to public meetings here.



In the Loggia della Signoria, the piazza's statues (some are copies) dominating the square commemorate the city's major historical events, with the most famous statue (a copy, the original being housed in the Gallery of the Accademia) being that of "David" by Michelangelo, which symbolises triumph over tyranny.



The bronze statue by Cellini of "Perseus" beheading Medusa was intended to warn Cosimo I's enemies of their probable fate, and the writhing figures in Giambologna's famous statue "The Rape of the Sabine Women" were carved from a single block of flawed marble.

We then had just over an hour of free time during which we snatched a panini and cappuccino, very enjoyable. At 1.30 pm those who had booked for the Uffizi Gallery tour joined Simona for an extensive tour of Italy's greatest art gallery, whose collections were accumulated over the centuries by the Medici. Built in 1560-80, originally to house offices, this imposing building holds the world's greatest collection of Italian Renaissance paintings as well as masterpieces from other European countries. Some of the group found it all a bit too "intensive" and gave up half way round, but I had wanted to go to Florence and the Uffizi since I was 18 and was determined to finish the tour - I was just awestruck to see such famous paintings as Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" and "Springtime" and Titian's "The Venus of Urbino".



After a well-needed hour's pm free time (with a welcome drink) we all met up again outside the cathedral in the Piazza del Duomo for our walk back to the station and our 6 pm train journey back to Montecatini Terme.

Saturday 14 May

Our coach today left at 7.45 am for San Gimignano, with Simona again, and our journey took us into the Tuscan countryside and the village of San Gimignano.



We set off through the "gate" (arch) and up into the heart of the magnificent village with its medieval Piazza della Cisterna, named after the well at its centre.



Having first been given some free time we climbed some steps at the end of the square and found ourselves in a sheltered area of grass and trees which opened out to offer the most amazing panoramic Tuscan view. Walking further through the glade we came upon a lady playing guitar and singing Tuscan folk songs, and back at the entrance a man was playing a harp. It was idyllic!

At 11.15 am we all met up and divided into two groups for our walking tour of the town, and we were in Sylvia's group.



When that was finished we shared an ice cream from the Gelateria di "Piazza" - boasting its "World Famous Ice Cream" - on our way back to the coach.

Leaving San Gimignano we had a fine view of the town, with its thirteen towers dominating the sky line.



We then drove on to Volterra, a medieval walled town with Roman and Etruscan ruins. Like many Etruscan cities, this 3,000-year-old town is also situated on a high plateau, offering fine views over the surrounding hills.



On our arrival we had some free time and after a bite to eat we took ourselves off to check out the Piazza del Priori, ringed by many medieval mansions, which houses the Palazzo del Priori - the oldest town hall in Tuscany - believed to have been a model for Florence's Palazzo Vecchio.



We then met up with Sylvia for a walking tour of the village, commencing with a look inside the Cathedral and the Baptistry opposite...



...and then we had an interesting visit to the Rossi Alabaster Works where we enjoyed a demonstration of the making of a small urn (which Tom bought as a souvenir for his birthday).

It was a surprise to come across the ruins of the Roman amphitheatre and baths, a very interesting find.



After the tour we had some final free time so we made our way to the Medici Fortress, Rocca Nuova - which today is a prison with a gourmet restaurant! We had a pleasant walk beside the castle walls, enjoying the surprising sight of beds of buttercups, and then wandered back through the Ecological Park to the coach for our return to our hotel. On the drive back we passed Yves Montand's birth place, the house where singer Andrea Bocelli was born, and the Vespa factory.

Sunday 15 May

Free day.

We had intended going to Florence today, but it was raining. Instead, we decided on having a look at Prato and Pistoia so went down to the nearest station, only to find that the ticket office was closed and we couldn't understand the ticket machine. We continued to the next station, only to find that ticket office also closed and yet again we tried unsuccessfully to get tickets from the machine. However, luckily for us we spied a railway man who was just leaving work so we asked if there was anywhere we could buy tickets and to our amazement he said from the Tabac well, why not?!



Our train journey took us past the textile factories on the outskirts of Prato, a modern city known as the "Manchester of Tuscany" because of its textile industry. We got off and had a walk around in the rain, visiting the cathedral of Santo Stefano that has a pulpit by Donatello on the exterior.



We had a look around the courtyard of an old castle (which wasn't very interesting). For a break we had a hot drink in a wonderful patisserie (and bought a couple of mini cakes for later). We found that the centre had several important churches and museums, which were closed, and other than that there wasn't much to look at apart from a market and the river so we caught the next train on to Pistoia.



It was also very quiet there, in fact the town was "dead" and everything was closed. We walked for a long time before we found a bar where we could get a snack and drink and afterwards walked back through the park and past the old Fortress of Santa Barbara, built for Cosimo I de' Medici as a military building then decommissioned in 1774 and later used as a barracks, as a prison, and as a recruitment centre but is now just preserved as a historical monument. After we'd made our way to the town's historical area we found the Piazza della Sala quite quaint, it is the hub of the commercial district (but not today!).



After having a good look around the Piazza del Duomo and the Baptistry, which is elegantly banded in green and white marble, we made our way to the Hospital, which we'd been recommended to see, and we had intended to go around the underground tunnels next door but just didn't have enough time. The rain came on more heavily and it became quite chilly so we decided to head back to the train station - where there **was** somebody in the ticket office - for our return to Montecatini Terme.



Others did decide to brave the rain in Florence. Excellent views could still be seen from the Campanile of the Duomo, including this one of the Baptistry.



Geoff and Toni had a look around the church of Santa Croce.

They also visited the Pitti Palace. Photos could not be taken inside the various museums.



Originally built for Luca Pitti, the palace was acquired for the Medici family in 1550 by Eleanor of Toledo, wife of the Grand Duke Cosimo I. Many changes to the building have taken place since then and in 1919 Victor Emmanuel II presented the palace to the State and today it contains the Museo degli Argenti, the Treasure Museum and also the Palatine Gallery.

Photos are allowed in the extensive gardens attached to the palace.



The Boboli Gardens are one of the earliest examples of Italian-style landscaping.





From Piazzale
Michelangelo....

...there are panoramic views
over the city.



Monday 16 May



Today the coach picked us up at 9 am for Lucca, one of the largest provinces of Tuscany, and much of whose wealth was accounted for from the production of silk. Thank goodness the weather had cleared up, and it was now sunny and warm. Driving through Northern Tuscany, and the heavily-populated plain between Florence and Lucca, we could see how the area is dominated by industry, with intensely cultivated land between the cities and the wild mountainous areas.

When we arrived at Lucca....

...the coach dropped us off at the magnificent tree-lined promenade surrounding the city walls and we split into two groups for a walking tour.



Looking down from the ramparts
Laura pointed out the garden of
the elegant Palazzo Pfanner,
one of the most beautiful formal
gardens in the town.



The house, which is still owned by
the Pfanner family, originally
belonged to the Moriconi family, a
merchant family of Lucca who traded
in silk, but came down in the world a
little when it passed into the
ownership of an Austrian brewer and
became a brewery, which was
operative until 1929.



Once in the town, we
stopped off for a look at
the Frediano Church,
with its splendid font in
pride of place,...



...and then continued to the
amazing, picturesque Piazza
Anfiteatro, where medieval buildings
mark the outline of Lucca's old
Roman amphitheatre, which held
about 6,000 people.



Laura told us that Lucca's regular grid of streets still follows the pattern of the former Roman colony founded in 180 BC. The cathedral was rather a disappointment in comparison to...



...the fine Pisan-Romanesque church of San Michele in Foro, which stands on the site of the Roman forum.



At the end of the tour we had free time till 11.35 am, when the walking tour resumed until 1 pm, ending up at the Piazza San Michele (where we sat and ate our lunch). Looked around for a while – the Palazzo Guinigi is famous for the trees growing from its tower - then made our way back to Piazza Napoleone and on to the exit of Santa Anna and met the group at 5 pm for our coach drive back to Montecatini Terme.

Tuesday 17 May

Another free day, and it was sunny.
Caught the 8.57 am train to Florence,
and this time the journey was very slow
and we arrived late.
Firstly we walked to the Fortress (Firenze
Fiera) but weren't allowed to go in
because they were preparing for a
forthcoming fiesta, so carried on through
the old, narrow streets to the city centre



A short way from the cathedral in the
heart of the historical centre, the
restricted space of the Piazza San
Lorenzo is dominated by the massive
Church of San Lorenzo. It is surrounded
by the stalls of the market place, where
we bought some souvenirs and David
bought me a beautiful purple leather
handbag for my forthcoming birthday. We
should've formed a club, so many ladies
on the trip bought leather bags!



We returned to the Piazza della Signoria for a
longer look at the Loggia and all the statues
and continued to the Baptistry, one of the city's
oldest buildings. Today the area was less
crowded and we were able to get a good shot
of the magnificent Porta del Paradiso, Lorenzo
Ghiberti's celebrated bronze doors (christened
the "Porta del Paradiso" by Michelangelo
because he was so impressed by their beauty),
which were commissioned in 1401 to mark the
city's deliverance from the plague.



Unfortunately it began to cloud over and, worried that we might be in for some rain, we did a circular walk back to the station and just made the 4.38 pm train which was packed and we had to stand for part of the way.

As it was the last night of our trip, and we knew
that there would be presentations to Norman
and Maria, we decided to have dinner in the
hotel. Norman was presented with a painting of
Hotel La Pia that had been painted by Mike
Frost.





Maria, who had been exceptionally helpful to Norman and us members, was presented with a beautiful flower arrangement of orchids and also gift vouchers for books and flowers.

After our main course we were dismayed when the lights went out and presumed it was a power cut but then Maria appeared, wheeling a trolley containing a huge "baked Alaska" type dessert that was alight with flames, it was absolutely spectacular!



Wednesday 18 May



Before we left, Simona took a group photo and then at 8.40 am we were on our way to Pisa.

Norman had expected that we would be dropped off at the Leaning Tower but apparently buses are no longer allowed there so we had to drive to the bus station and had a long wait for a shuttle bus to take us in. But it was well worth it, the sight was fabulous! The group of magnificent monuments - the Romanesque cathedral of medieval Pisa, the white marbled Baptistry, and the cathedral's bell tower, the Leaning Tower, all stand on the Piazza dei Miracoli.



Of Oriental inspiration, the cupola of the Cathedral is covered with lead sheeting and crowns the magnificent building at the point where its four arms meet.

The Baptistry's cupola, however, is only half covered in the lead and the Pisans justify this apparent oddity by explaining that their ancestors were forced to use the lead from the cupola as war material during their final heroic struggle for liberty against the Florentines.





Begun in 1173 on sandy silt subsoil, the Leaning Tower started to tilt even before the third storey was finished in 1274. Despite the shallow foundations, construction continued and the structure was completed in 1350. Today the tower has been restored and underpinned and does not move any more.

Half an hour's free time gave us ample opportunity to take our photographs and then we drove on to Pisa airport. Our Ryanair flight back to Valencia was on time and uneventful, and on our arrival we had a short wait for our coach and were driven back home and dropped off at our pick-up places without further ado.

I would like to take this opportunity of thanking Norman for all his hard work and efforts in making this a truly wonderful and memorable trip the organisation was superb and the information issued to us was without reproach. Thank you, Norman!

Liz and David Lodge, Calpe