

Rome, Tuscany and Lake Como

May 2013 – trip report by Toni Rowe - trip led by Norman Peterken

I'm looking down the length of Lake Como from our little balcony, listening to the waves splashing against the wall at the end of our hotel. We are surrounded by snow clad mountains, though the temperature here is very pleasant for walking and it is an ideal spot to finish off our holiday in Italy.



It started a bit hectic as our flight times were changed and we booked into a hotel in Valencia the night before but that gave us time for a quick visit to the centre and a chance to get our legs in gear. It also meant that we arrived in Rome in time for a good half day extra sightseeing. We caught a tube to the "Spanish Steps" and walked around the Borghese Gardens where the local Italians were out cycling, skating and generally enjoying the good weather.

We walked back through the side streets via the "Trevi Fountain" to our hotel near Termini. Luckily we had a Turkish bath type shower and had a good soak to ease our aching legs.



The next day we took the underground and then train out to Ostia Antica which from the 4th century BC to 42 AD was a busy trading post on what was then the mouth of the Tiber River. The ruins cover a huge area and have some beautiful mosaics. We spent most of the day there and at the local 15th century Castello di Giulio II.



We tackled the Vatican Museums and Sistine Chapel which took the whole of one day!! There is a wealth of treasures to be seen as well as the actual buildings themselves. The morning was very busy but got quieter as the tour groups diminished and we headed for the less popular areas. We had booked our tickets on line but there were enormous queues waiting to go in and we still had to queue to get an audio guide.

Our last day in Rome we met up with a few others of our group to go on another train trip to Tivoli, a small hilltop town about 30 Km east of Rome and a summer escape for rich Romans. It is particularly famous for two Unesco World heritage sites, Villa Adriana built for Emperor Hadrian in AD 118 and...



... Villa D'Este once a Convent but converted in 1550 by Lucrezia Borgia's son to a pleasure palace with beautiful terraced gardens and spectacular fountains on all levels.

We left by coach for the spa town of Montecatini Terme in Tuscany stopping off in Arezzo for a local produce lunch, which was excellent,...



... and a tour of this important Etruscan town with its sloping Piazza.

The next day we caught the train to Florence to visit the Uffizi, originally a 16th century U shaped palazzo but modified to house the Medici art collection. Again the ceilings and décor were wonderful but some of the art was bit heavy going. We wandered around the back streets of the centre coming across market stalls, strolling along the Arno and its bridges just taking in the atmosphere.



The next day we returned by coach and visited the Piazza del Duomo with its famous red tiled dome and bell tower all in a pink, white and green marble façade and...

... the Basilica di Santa Croce.



In the afternoon we drove to Fiesole, a village perched in hills 9km north east of Florence from where we had fabulous views over the city.

We drove to Lucca and visited Villa Torrigiani and....



... Villa Reale, both had wonderful gardens and woodland. The whole area is a fascinating mixture of varying shades of green with the valley floors covered in nursery gardens growing all types of fruit and ornamental trees for the whole of Europe.

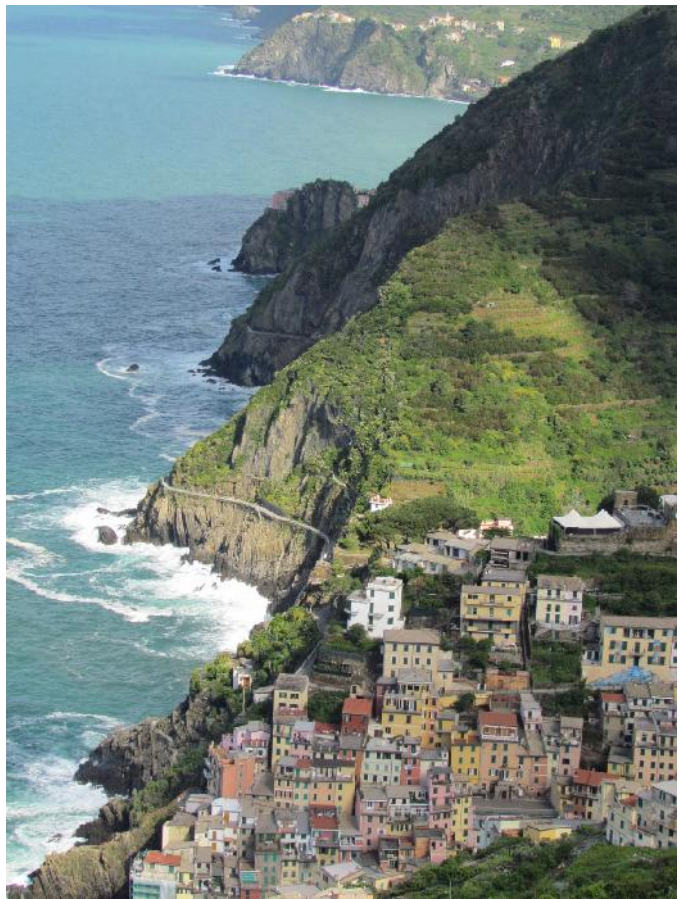


We finished that day in Pisa travelling from the car park to the Piazza dei Miracoli by little train.

The Leaning Tower, the Duomo and the Baptistry are all in this wonderful square, all decorated in striking alternating bands of green and cream marble and even these are leaning a little!!!



Tuscany was definitely full on and the day we left for the coast was a particularly early start. We visited Cinque Terre (five land) which is actually five little fishing villages dating back to the Middle Ages and intersected by sheer cliffs with terraced fields and gardens. A single track railway line links them all together and is having difficulty coping with the massive influx of tourists which invade this pretty area.



Our last tour in Tuscany was to the beautiful city of Siena, famous for Il Palio, the horse race that attracts thousands of people to Il Campo, the sloping piazza, and lasts barely one minute while ten horses race three times around the square. The lanes around the centre are an intricate tangle but we managed to find our way back to the piazza in time to soak in the atmosphere.

We finished at the medieval town of San Gimignano sporting its fourteen towers and the best ice cream shops in Italy.



Our last day at Montecatini found us catching up with the washing in the local launderette and chatting with a group of visiting Australians. We did manage to escape the crowds and catch a train to the local village of Pistoia before having a grand meal at our hotel La Pia and waving a fond farewell to the owner, Maria.



We set off for the long drive to the far north of Lake Como stopping for a lunch break at Piacenza, just short of the region of Lombardy. Unfortunately, unknown to our driver, there had been a tunnel “cave-in” due to a land slide on the motorway along lake Como and we had to drive on the local roads causing a couple of hours delay.

When we reached Gravedona and saw where we would be staying for the last week, the journey was quickly forgotten and we headed off to sample the various restaurants near by.



Our first trip was along the west side of the lake to Tremezzo to visit the beautiful Villa Carlotta with its botanical gardens.



From there we went by boat, passing the villas of George Clooney and Richard Branson, to the town of Como...

... and travelled up the funicular railway for fabulous views over the lake and houses.



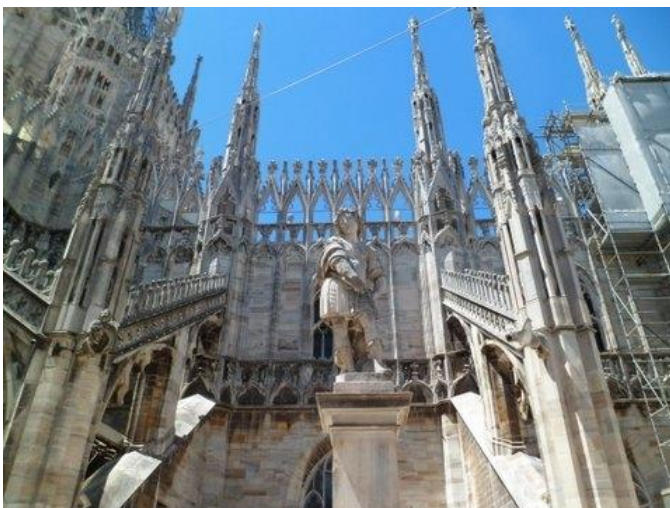
An early start the next day took us to Tirano to board the "Red Train" for a journey through the pass between Italy and Switzerland to St. Moritz. It was a wonderful trip with so many twists and turns over viaducts that you could see the back and the front of the train at the same time.

It started snowing before we were half way there which just added to the fun as we were all dressed up for the cold although the train itself was very warm. We stopped for hot soup and gluwwein...



... before heading back by coach to Gravedona.

After two hectic days we needed a free day to just walk along the lake shore stopping for the frothy capuchinos or beer as necessary.



We spent a day in Milan visiting the impressive Duomo,...

... the fortress now housing a museum and window shopping the expensive stores. La Scala had a performance that afternoon so we were unable to go inside but did visit a bank which had been turned in to an art museum and was an escape from the busy shoppers.



Our last excursion was with our own boat for the day.

We cruised down the west shore visiting Varenna for coffee and walking around a garden...



... and then to Bellagio for lunch and to visit the gardens of the Villa Melzi. The climate around the lakes encourages so many different plants and there are citrus trees, cypress, magnolia, willows and ginkos all growing amongst azaleas, camellias, rhododendrons, hibiscus and oleanders.



The food has been great, there is no way you can avoid the pizzas, pastas and breads...

... and for ice cream lovers, it's a pure delight.



Our last day was another rest day which was good just to enjoy the scenery of the lake and prepare for the early start for our flight, due to the tunnel still not being fixed.