

IMPRESSIONS BELLA ITALIA TOUR

September 5-18, 2011

INTRODUCTION

Others are better skilled at capturing the sounds and sights of this exceptional Tour. Ours will be a modest effort to highlight the underlying themes which were interwoven to make this such an unforgettable experience. Not intended in any way to be definitive, these are the themes which had the greatest relevance to us and which should be expanded upon by others.

THE GROUP

This was a manageable number of people from diverse backgrounds who independently chose this Tour. Comprised largely of new acquaintances, the group easily transformed itself into a smoothly functioning team that reliably met all required time tables of an aggressive itinerary. In the process a strong group dynamic emerged and many new friendships were forged that are likely to transcend the limits of the Tour itself. It was relaxed, fun and not one ounce of anyone's unique individualism was lost.

THE COUNTRY

Italy, a modern country with ancient roots and cultures, sits at the heart of Western Civilization. Today, it is the world's 7th largest economy. Its population of 56 million lives within the cities, villages, fields and mountains of a peninsula that measures only 800 miles in length by 150 miles in width. Like many developed nations it is challenged by excess leverage, sluggish GDP growth and dysfunctional governance. Physically it remains one of the most beautiful places on earth, blessed by verdant soils, abundant water, and almost perpetual sunshine.

There are some who choose to label Italy in the past tense – a museum, a theme park, a financial and political trainwreck, home to a dying great religion. However challenged, this was not the picture which emerged from our Tour.

Against the backdrop of sunny hot yet dry weather, Italy presented a picture of overall prosperity. Gone were the remaining scars from the destruction of World War II, replaced by newly urbanized areas, rebuilt cities, well-maintained transit infrastructure and rich vibrant fields carefully planted and cultivated to a variety of crops. The Italians remain friendly, energetic, positive, happy, and proud people. A surprisingly large percentage are fluent in English while still welcoming and encouraging to those Americans confident enough to try to communicate in their native tongue.

Their comprehensive historical work product in music, paintings, sculpture, education, architecture, highways, bridges, water systems, buildings which, despite an abundance of inexpensive labor, could only have come forward from an advanced grounding in math and physics. Its quality, quantity and longevity are almost overwhelming to comprehend. Yet it all

seems to anchor and coexist with what passes today as contemporary. Remembering that Italy as a unified government only dates back to 1861, it still seems to draw its many strengths from its 20 provinces and thousands of smaller communities, many still communicating in their unique local dialect. Today's Italians still remain anchored to their land, culture and Catholic faith.

Italy's history is one of diversity, turmoil, foment and adaptation. It has generated its collective energies from finding ways to manage and overcome challenge and to adapt its core culture. Italy's challenges today will in all likelihood be encountered, managed and ultimately turned to advantage. At the same time its religion, Catholicism, has had its ebbs and flows but it has remained a constant in people's lives and their core beliefs. Having traveled in Italy since the mid 1960's, this Tour brilliantly highlighted that despite formidable current challenges, the Italian heartbeat, spirit and willingness to forge a spirit to confront and overcome adversity lives on.

WORK

Italy celebrates and honors work. If it is worth doing, it is worth doing well – in fact all work should aspire to excellence. What's built must last. The Tour exposed us to this basic yet vital message at every stop. It resonates strongly for Americans who have over the past 50 years grown increasingly willing to settle for the virtual and synthetic, the short-cuts, arbitrage, and a growing list of disposable products.

Think about Venice, wasted swampland engineered and built to last around 118 islands linked by 360 bridges. Think about how it handled its waste and its water needs, how it built an influential city state out of a swamp populated by an original group of social miscasts. It created a strong sense of community by building its neighborhoods to include wealthy and poor living in close proximity to each other. It is Venetians who still create Murano glass using all natural materials and the same ancient glass blowing techniques.

Modena's Pedroni family showed us how they still make the highest grade balsamic vinegar using natural processes and materials including grapes which they grow themselves and then process onsite into "tradizionale", the highest grade balsamic vinegar in the world. High quality, excellence not high volume with dilutive vinegar blends or short-cut processing. The Family also demonstrated their talents in providing us with what was arguably the best meal of the Tour.

Cinque Terre and the Amalfi Coast hillside villages built below olive groves and grape vineyards into sheer cliffs which were originally only accessible via the sea. Where did the know-how and sweat come from to create these villages in the first place and enable them to function up until today?

Visits with local artisans in Tuscany and Sorrento reinforced the use of age old natural processes in producing outstanding current day products. In so doing they honor work – well done.

An example was the visit in Tuscany to the 12th century Castel del Trebbio, originally built by the Pazzi family, rivals to Florence's Medici. Today's resident owners proudly manage their own groves and vineyards to produce in traditional natural processes some of the world's leading olive oil and Chianti.

Another example on more modest scale was the Sorrento family that used four acres and a small number of farm animals and natural centuries old processes to produce outstanding mozzarella and the best homemade Napolitano pizza which they served us in their outdoor arbor. Work, hard work, is still producing outstanding results.

As our coach moved from place to place you could only wonder looking out the windows what the circumstances were that led to the design and construction of such long-lasting buildings and structures.

Nothing seemed to equal the achievement of the young, 26 year old Michelangelo who created The David, followed then by a lifelong portfolio including his Unfinished Sculptures and then, as his grand finale at age 84, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. I think we devoted almost three hours to our visit to the Gallerie dell'Accademia, home of The David and his Unfinished works. Our entire group was locked onto each word of our guide, a trained art historian who specializes in the work of Michelangelo.

Crowds may still line up to see the “mistake” with the leaning clock tower of Pisa, but this is small potatoes when set against the entire body of work on display and in most cases still functional today throughout Italy. Work! Good work is still celebrated here!

THE FOOD

One of Italy's greatest heritages is the food. The food is consistently outstanding. It is at its best when it is simple and made from the freshest ingredients and presented in the most unassuming yet inviting settings. The food is always best enhanced by the appropriate vinegar, olive oil, wine and water – flat or frizzante. The food has to be good, because the meals at which it is served remain central to everyday Italian life. The meal with family, friends or best a combination of both is an enduring cultural value. You take time, you savor and appreciate and most of all you talk. If it is a happy occasion you add singing and dancing. It runs the full spectrum from festival to a relaxed intermezzo for café, campari or a glass of wine. It is wonderful to experience.

WALKING

The Italians walk always – sometimes slow and leisurely, sometimes fast and aggressively. They celebrate walking like no other culture we've seen.

Our best examples were the Via d'Amore (Lover's Lane) between Manarola and Riomaggiore when we visited Cinque Terre in the hillside above La Spezia. This was equaled only by the after dinner walks along the street which stretched in front of our Grand Hotel Tettuccio in Montecatini Terme in Tuscany. This particular street transitioned from the retail streets, was lined by hotels on one side, a carousel, opera house and public park on the opposite side. Here, after dinner older couples in particular would casually promenade the street following dinner and before bedtime as they have for centuries. The women, stylishly yet appropriately dressed, walk in pairs followed by their husbands who are masters at walking with their hands folded behind their backs. It is a beautiful sight! The Via d'Amore walk was for a purpose. Montecatini Terme's walks were simply for the sake of enjoying the experience. In either case – very satisfying.

SPONTANEITY

As mentioned earlier the itinerary was full yet time was found for many “unscheduled” events. Included in this category was the Miss Italia 2011 inspired fashion show at our Montecatini Terme hotel , the wedding anniversary celebration on track 2 at the Stazione in Riomaggiore, another birthday/wedding anniversary at Tanagra Caffè-Concierto, the cruise along the Amalfi Coast, the mid-morning treat of freshly baked Sfogliatelle, and the locations of the two Masses celebrated by Father John.

SAINTS

Italy celebrates many saints and many who someday may become saints. No place was this better brought to life than our visit to Assisi. This almost idyllic mountain town in Umbria is home to not one but two saints – St. Francis and St. Clare. Childhood friends of independently well-to-do parents, they played together growing up and through the better part of their teenage years until St. Francis had his calling to aid the downtrodden. He started by restoring monasteries in the region which had been previously abandoned. He then used proceeds from the goods produced in the monasteries to assist the poor. Clare (Chiara) broke with all tradition to leave home and join Francis in a monastery. Twice family attempts failed to kidnap Clare and return her to her home. In time she founded her own order of nuns which occupied the Convent at San Damiano and devoted their lives to helping the poor. Today St. Clare is known as the patron saint of Television with technology bringing the Mass to the physically homebound.

Having attended grades 1-8 at St. Francis of Assisi School in Torrington, Connecticut and with three grandsons now attending St. Clare of Assisi Elementary School near Vail, Colorado, touring Assisi and learning about St. Clare in particular meant a lot to Dick.

While St. Francis may be better known, it is Clare that made the bigger impression on us. To leave a well-established family when she did must have commanded great courage and a strong calling as a female. It is an inspiring story and must be one of the early cornerstones in women’s liberation.

THE SOUL

This Tour was alternately described as a pilgrimage. In a sense no tour of Italy is complete without a Catholic perspective. As Marisa explained “If you are an Italian, you are a Catholic (with only rare exception). It is integral to our culture.” That said and the fact the Tour was sponsored by the Archdiocese of Hartford, organized and led by Father John and the itinerary included visits to many churches, a visit to the Vatican, St. Peter’s Square and an audience with Pope Benedict XVI might argue that it was more holy pilgrimage than tour. Except it was not. It was primarily a tour with a high quality educational component which wove in the historic role of Catholicism, and the many roles it has played and continues to play in Italian life. It was not organized, per se, as a trip to a sacred or holy place. Instead it was an intensive journey whose purpose was to experience and understand Italy and its culture. It is because Catholicism was/is so central to Italian culture that we gained an even better understanding of Catholicism and its unique role in Italy.

As a surprise Father John brought us on the 10th anniversary of 9/11 to a quiet valley near Florence that housed a little jewel of a U.S. military cemetery memorializing 4,000 buried soldiers plus another 1,000 missing in action in air sorties during World War II. In a beautiful non-denominational chapel with natural light streaming indirectly in, he celebrated Mass using his I-Pad. The liturgy and his sermon addressed the need to grant forgiveness. Wow! None of us will ever forget that special moment in this quiet place far removed from the U.S. God was asking for us to forgive in a place that honorably attempts to pay homage to what war destroys.

Father John surprised us again a week later by celebrating Mass in a chapel at St. John's Basilica in Rome. He had been a seminarian in Rome and celebrated his first Mass following his ordination at St. Paul's over 35 years ago. A man who has ably dedicated his life to God and to serving his fellow man. This time the liturgy and sermon addressed the topic "The First Shall Be Last and the Last Shall Be First." Another moment which will be long remembered.

Father Gatzak used the Tour to touch our souls.

AUTHENTIC

This was obviously an unforgettable experience. We will always be thankful to Father John for being so inclusive and allowing us to participate.

Our minds are a blur of information and sorting the different elements of the Tour is a challenge. If one was hard-pressed to sum it all up in one word, what would that word be? For us, it would be AUTHENTIC. For fourteen days we were exposed to what is real, actual, genuine and what being authentic has meant to the generations of Italians. Whether the olive oil, the Murano glass, the handmade wooden rosary from Assisi, the pizza made on the Sorrento farm, The David, the hillside villages, the Duomo in Florence or St. Peter's in Rome these were all products of great vision, quality workmanship and faith.

Back in the U.S. we have a current fascination with the synthetic, the virtual, holograms, derivatives. There is confusion between that which is real and unreal. Goods and services are designed to be disposed after limited use. Work, especially work done at a high level of excellence is no longer strongly valued. We are diminished by that.

Perhaps it is this sharp contrast between our current circumstance at home and the authenticity that is Italy that made these two weeks so utterly educational, enjoyable, provocative and inspiring. We are grateful for the material and spiritual enrichment.

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