

May 1, 2006

We had an amazing winter in Italy exploring Rome and taking side trips to southern Italy in early February and northern Italy in early March. We also took a tour to the Holy Land with our church group in late March. In just those two months we ended up "playing tourist" a total of 31 days.

Rome, one of the most pre-eminent cities in the world, was wonderful to explore. This city was the heart of the ancient Roman Empire and is now Italy's political capital. Within its boundaries is Vatican City, the headquarters of the Catholic Church. Rome is host to some of the greatest works of art in the world, and the magnificent ruins of the Roman Empire and the impressive architecture and sculptures of Rome's grandiose Baroque period can still be seen.

During our stay in Italy we lived onboard our boat at the marina, Porto Turistico di Roma, in Ostia, a large working class suburb of Rome. The marina was almost three-quarters of a mile long and consisted of 810 berths with lots of shops and restaurants along its esplanade. On weekends, especially on Sundays, families would come down to stroll along the esplanade and patronize the many shops, especially after the midday family meal. In winter there could be as many as 1000 people strolling. Just before we left in late April there were at least 3000 people strolling along the esplanade. It was an amazing sight to see. Many women were stylishly dressed; fashionable high heel boots with very pointed toes were the in-thing this winter.



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Most boats in this marina were Italian boats. Our three Italian friends, Luigi, Alfonso, and Simon, made us feel so welcomed and were always there for us whenever we needed help. We will certainly miss them. There were also about thirty live-aboard cruising boats this winter from six different countries: Britain, Sweden, United States, France, Netherlands, and Australia. As members of the Roma Yacht Club, we were all allowed unlimited use of the premises for social gatherings plus access to the club's computers. Many a fun time was had by all.



Our Dock at Marina



Kuhela in a Med-Moor



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The marina was conveniently located for easy access into Rome. Just outside the marina we could catch the bus to the metro station, and from there the train into Rome, all without long waits. In a little over an hour we'd be in the heart of Rome sightseeing, and the fare per person each way was just one euro (about \$1.20). Sometimes we'd be entertained by musicians along the route.



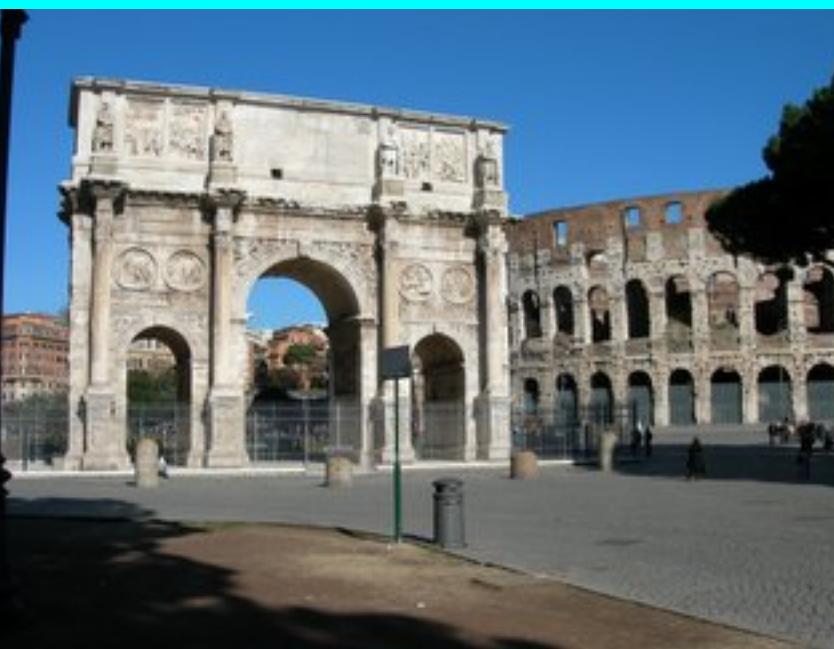
During our stay in Rome, we toured many of the ancient Roman sights. We were amazed at the engineering ability of the Romans 2000 years ago and marveled at the sheer size and complexity of their structures. We will never forget our first outing in Rome in February after our return from Florida. When we saw the Colosseum we were overwhelmed by its size. In close proximity to the Colosseum stood the Arch of Constantine, Palatine Hill (the mythical birthplace of Rome), the ruins of the Roman Forum (the political and civil center during the Roman Empire, especially during the Republican era), and the ruins of the Imperial Forums of Augustus and Trajan. While traversing the Roman Forum it was exciting to think that we were walking on the same stones trod so long ago by Roman senators and ordinary citizens. We also stepped down into the ancient Roman Mamertine Prison, a cistern-like prison where apostles Peter and Paul had been imprisoned.

The Colosseum



Passages below the floor of the Colosseum

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Arch of Constantine

Commemorates victory over rival establishing Christianity



Arch of Titus

Commemorates Roman victory over Judea 70 AD

Roman Forum



Roman Forum with Palatine Hill in background



Roman Forum



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One of the most incredible ancient buildings we saw was the Pantheon, the only architecturally intact building still standing from ancient Rome. Once a Roman temple, it now was a church. The interior of the Pantheon was a perfect cylinder, and its extraordinary dome was one of the most important achievements of ancient Roman architecture. Not until the Renaissance were architects even able to duplicate it. Interestingly, an opening in the dome let in light while small holes in the floor allowed for water drainage.



The Pantheon



Interior of Pantheon

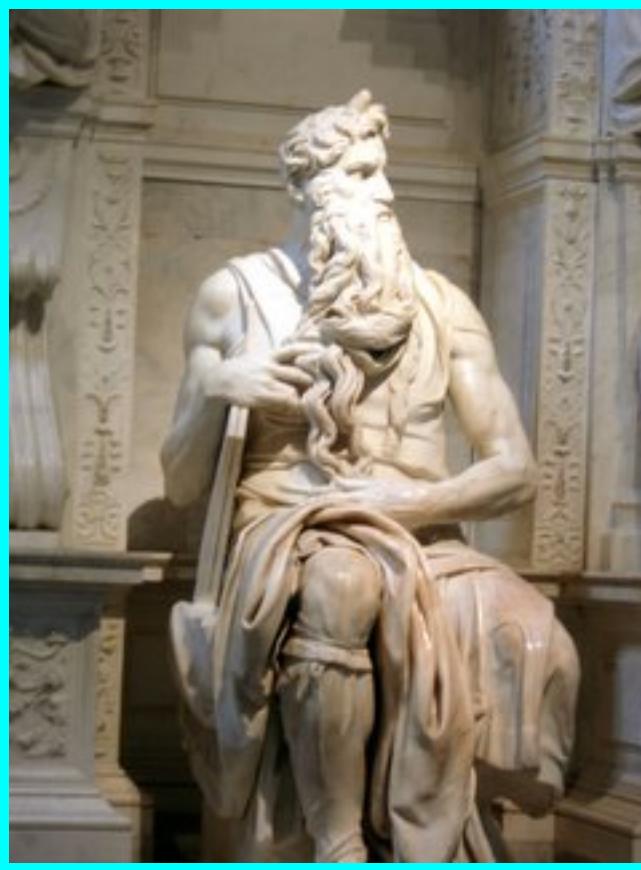
With the roots of the Catholic Church in Rome, the city contained a multitude of churches. Everywhere we looked there was a beautiful church. St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City was the largest and richest church in Christendom, containing Michelangelo's first *Piata*. We climbed to the top of its mighty dome designed by Michelangelo and had great views of Vatican City and Rome. Some of the other churches we visited were St. Peter-in-Chains (San Pietro in Vincoli) Church containing Michelangelo's *Moses* and the urn housing the chains used by Herod to imprison Peter; St. Paul's Outside the Walls Basilica (Basilica San Paolo Fuori le Mura); and the Church of St. Mary of the Angels (Santa Maria degli Angeli) with a sun calendar laying across the floor of its transept used to regulate Rome's clocks in the 1700's.



St. Peters Basilica



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Michelangelo's Moses



St. Peter's Chains



St. Paul's Basilica

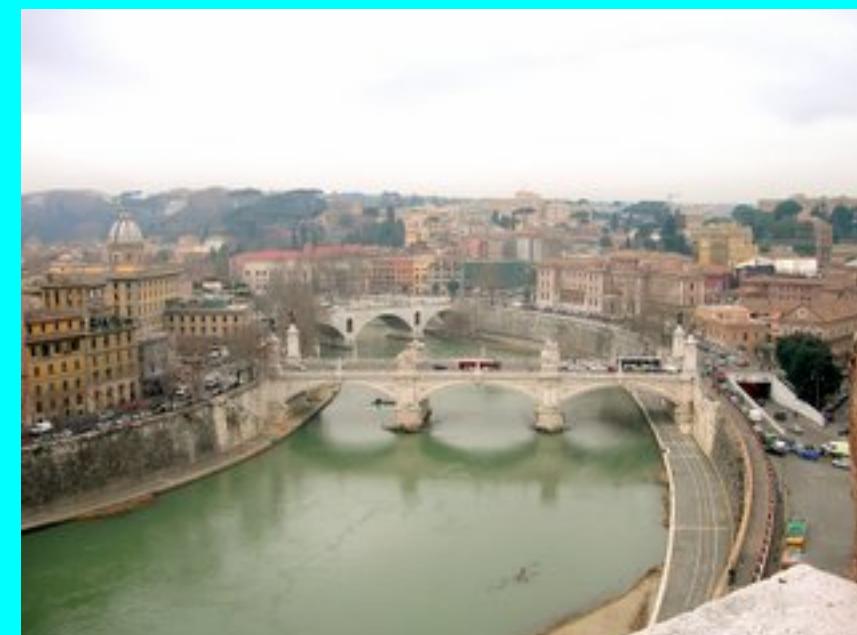
Just outside Vatican City we visited the fortress Castel Sant' Angelo, originally Hadrian's mausoleum and later a castle and place of last refuge for threatened popes. From the top of Castel Sant' Angelo we were able to see Vatican City and observe the elevated corridor which connected Castel Sant' Angelo to the Vatican. The foot bridge, Ponte Sant' Angelo, in front of Castel Sant' Angelo was built by Hadrian, and in medieval times it was the only bridge connecting the Vatican with downtown Rome.



Castel Sant' Angelo and Tiber River



*St. Peter's Basilica and Vatican City.
Elevated corridor on right.*



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Rome was endowed with an abundance of museums due to the large collections of art treasures collected over the centuries by popes and individual families plus Roman artifacts discovered by archeologists. We visited the National Museum of Rome in Palazzo Massimo housing a great collection of Roman sculptures, frescoes, mosaics, and sarcophagi; the Capitol Hill Museum (Musei Capitolini) containing great statues of antiquity and art plus ruins of the Roman Tabularium; the Borghese Gallery, one of the richest and most elegant art museums in Europe, exhibiting Bernini's sculpture *Apollo and Daphne* (one of our favorite sculptures); and the Vatican Museum containing some of the greatest art in the world culminating with the world-renown frescos of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. (Only in the National Museum of Rome and the Capital Hill Museum were we allowed to take pictures.)



Remains of Colossal Statue of Constantine (4C AD)



*Etruscan Bronze Statue of She-Wolf (500 BC)
(Represents Mythical Beginning of Rome)*



"Medusa" by Bernini



*Original Gilded Bronze Equestrian Statue of
Marcus Aurelius*



Capitoline Venus (1C BC)

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One cannot be in Rome without noticing the countless fountains and squares (piazzas). Two of the most famous fountains we enjoyed were Bernini's **Fountain of the Four Rivers** in Piazza Novana and Salvi's **Trevi Fountain**. During our stay we also visited Capital Square designed by Michelangelo, the huge Victor Emmanuel II Monument to Italy's first king commemorating the unification of Italy in 1870 (from on top we had beautiful views of the city), and the Catacombs of San Callisto along the ancient Appian Way (Via Appia Antica). At San Callisto the catacombs (underground Christian cemeteries) consisted of four levels of tunnels. We went down two levels and saw many single and family tombs which had been carved out of the soft volcanic rock during the 2nd to the 9th centuries. Inscriptions and symbols could still be seen on some.



Trevi Fountain



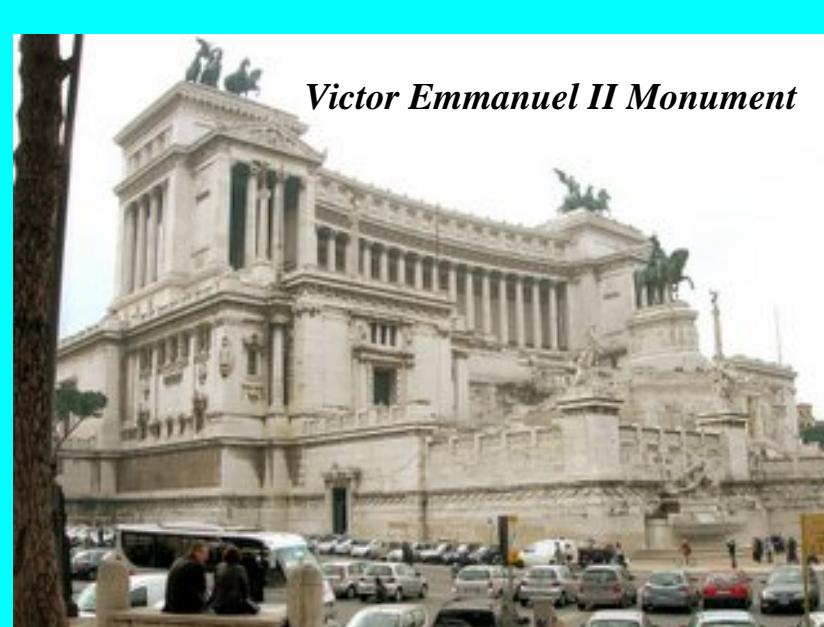
Fountain of Four Rivers.. Figures represent 4 River Gods, symbolizing the 4 quarters of the earth



Capital Square



Michaelangelo's Grand Staircase to Capital Square



Victor Emmanuel II Monument

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The second weekend in February our German cruising friends, Uli and Imke, came to visit us in their camper. The weather forecast was calling for five straight sunny days, plus it was Mary's birthday. With such beautiful weather, the four of us decided to drive to southern Italy and explore the Amalfi Coast and Pompeii and then return via Sabaudia to visit our cruising friends John and Sharon. All six of us had wintered in Lagos, Portugal, the winter before.

The drive along the Amalfi Coast, just south of Naples, was breathtaking. Small villages had been built right along the edge of the cliffs. We spent Saturday night in Positano, one such village. This village had been squeezed into a ravine, and steps were the only way to maneuver up and down this small village. When we arrived, most hotels were closed for the winter. Only two were open and they were full. Fortunately the hotel recommended by our friends John and Sharon, although closed, opened up one of its rooms for us as it was Mary's birthday.



View from Hotel Room



Positano and Amalfi Coast

With the weather being so beautiful, we lingered along the Amalfi Coast on Sunday enjoying the towns of Amalfi and Sorrento. Amalfi was a powerful maritime republic in the 10th and 11th centuries, rivaling Genoa, Pisa, and Venice. Near Sorrento we enjoyed a beautiful view of Naples and Mount Vesuvius, the volcano that erupted in 79 AD burying Pompeii under 30 feet of hot mud and volcanic ash, preserving the city forever. We spent Sunday night in Sorrento.



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Amalfi



Amalfi



Amalfi Cathedral



View of Naples and Mt. Vesuvius

Monday we visited the archeological site of Pompeii, a city which had once been home to 20,000 inhabitants. Walking the streets of these well-preserved ruins gave us a feeling for Roman daily life 2000 years ago. Everywhere we could see the existence of a well-developed society with organized streets, water and sewage systems, impressive gymnasium and public baths with rooms for cold, warm, and hot baths, fast-food restaurants, bakery, laundry, market, trade shops, theaters, amphitheater, and much more. We were quite impressed. The splendor that was the Roman Empire was visibility present in the ruins of Pompeii.



Basilica - Heart of Financial Activities and Law Courts



Entrance to Forum



Temple of Jupiter



Plaster Cast of Person Unable to Escape

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*Device to Measure Quantities of Commodities
(Located in Market)*



Temple of Apollo



Streets of Pompeii



Note Grooves caused by Chariot Wheels. Raised Stones were used to cross streets when rain caused flooding. Streets were used as storm drainage



Roman Fast Food Restaurant ... Food was heated in the Crocks from under the counter.



Courtyard and Gym Area



Amphitheater



Inside Amphitheater



Smaller of Two Theaters at Pompeii

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After visiting Pompeii we drove to the top of Mt. Vesuvius, hiking the last mile up to the rim of the crater. The weather on top, although sunny, was bitter cold. As the sun was setting we left the area and drove north to the coastal town of Sabaudia, located approximately halfway between Rome and Naples, where our cruising friends John and Sharon were living. One of John's international business associates had offered them his summer apartment for the winter.



View from the Top



Crater at Top of Mt. Vesuvius

We spent Monday and Tuesday night in Sabaudia with John and Sharon. While in Sabaudia we saw up close the buffalo which produced the delicious "mozzarella di bufala" cheese, a specialty of this region. We also sampled some wines at the local Sant' Andrea winery store and watched as the locals came in get their jugs refilled. Italians certainly enjoy their wine! What started out to be a three day excursion ended up being five days. We arrived back in Ostia Wednesday afternoon, but oh what a fun time we had!



Mary, Uli, Imke, Sharon & John in front of Camper



The Same to You



In Search of the Perfect Grape

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The pre-lent carnival atmosphere lasts much longer in Italy than it does in Portugal. Every weekend between Epiphany on January 6th and Ash Wednesday on March 1st children strolled through the marina wearing their costumes, and many were quite elaborate. Some carried confetti to throw at other children. The last two Sundays prior to Ash Wednesday Ostia held its Grand Finale di Carnevale at Ostia's town pier. At this time, children in costumes could be seen everywhere having loads of fun throwing their confetti at each other and spraying "Silly String." Plus, there were carnival rides and games for the children to enjoy.



Stands Selling Confetti and Silly String

On Sunday, March 5, we traveled to northern Italy via train. We had originally planned to leave on Monday, but due to the possibility of an Italian transit strike occurring on Monday we departed on Sunday. Of all the countries in Europe, Italy has the most strikes. These one day strikes are an inconvenience, but interestingly, they are advertised in advance so that one can plan around them.

Our first stop was Venice. On our arrival late Sunday afternoon we were greeted with frigid, windy, drizzly weather. Except to get a quick bite to eat, we didn't venture out of our hotel that evening. We stayed three nights in Venice; luckily during the rest of our stay we had beautiful, blue sky weather. For 400 years from the 11th to the 15th centuries, Venice was one of the wealthiest cities in the world. As an important maritime and trading power, it accumulated considerable wealth from its advantageous position along the major trading route between Europe and the Orient, from booty acquired by returning sea captains, and from treasures plundered during the crusades.

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Nowhere could this wealth be seen more than in St. Mark's Basilica. The Byzantine Eastern-style architecture of this basilica was beautiful, and when we saw it for the first time we felt that we had arrived at the edge of the Western-Eastern worlds. The interior of the church was covered with 43,000 square feet of lavish gold Byzantine mosaics along its entire ceilings and upper sides with beautiful colored marble along its lower sides. It was a dazzling sight to behold. While in St. Mark's Square we also took the elevator to the top of the Campanile bell tower for spectacular views of Venice and its lagoon, and we visited the Doge's Palace which had been the seat of the Venetian government and home to its elected ruler, the Doge. Adjoining the palace via a bridge was a dungeon where prisoners had been jailed and tortured, *some secretly*.



St. Mark's Square and Basilica; Campanile Tower on right



St. Mark's Basilica



St. Mark's Basilica

Doge's Palace



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Since we love boats and we love water, Venice was one of our favorite places on this trip. As Venice consisted of 117 small islands connected by 409 bridges, travel within the city could only be done by boat or on foot. We bought a three day pass for unlimited travel throughout Venice and its lagoon and we made much use of our pass during our stay. Transportation was by motorized passenger boats called "vaporetti." In our vaporetto we enjoyed traveling along Venice's main street, the Grand Canal, where many of Venice's lavish palaces, more than 100, had been located during its heyday. The Grand Canal meandered like an "S" through the middle of Venice. We also had much fun "getting lost" along Venice's narrow, winding backstreets, traversing many of the countless small bridges connecting the



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On Tuesday we took the vaporetto out into the Venice Lagoon to the small islands of Murano and Burano. These islands were famous for their Murano glass and Burano lace. We fell in love with these smaller island villages with their laid-back atmosphere, especially the pretty little village of Burano. Upon our return to Venice in the late afternoon we took a romantic gondola ride through the back narrow canals of Venice, and at one point passed by what would have been Marco Polo's old home. As we approached obstructed corners along our canal journey, our gondolier would shout "ahoy," finishing with a whistle just before turning. Traveling these narrow winding canals in a gondola was definitely the highlight of our stay in Venice.



Wednesday morning we visited the Correr Museum exhibiting Venetian history and art before catching the early afternoon train to Florence. Three hours later we were in Florence, the city considered the cradle of the Renaissance and home to Michelangelo and the Medici.

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We spent two full intense days sightseeing in Florence, absorbing as much as we could of all its cultural art treasures. Thursday we visited the Church of Santa Maria Novella containing Masaccio's ***The Holy Trinity***, the first artist incorporating Brunelleschi's mathematical perspective; the Basilica of San Lorenzo designed by Brunelleschi and considered one of the most harmonious examples of Renaissance architecture; the Academy (Accademia) containing Michelangelo's ***David*** and his four unfinished ***Prisoners***; the Medici Chapels with their lush Chapel of the Princes and New Sacristy containing Michelangelo's Medici tomb sculptures; and the Duomo Museum (Museo dell' Opera del Duomo) exhibiting original art treasures removed from the Cathedral and Baptistry, such as the restored panels of Ghiberti's bronze Baptistry East Door, plus



Santa Maria Novella



Duomo ... Facade covered with pink, green & white Tuscan Marble



Baptistery



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Baptistery Door Panel Telling the Story of Joshua by Ghiberti

Friday we visited the Bargello Museum containing sculpture treasures by Michelangelo and other Italian artists, plus a special exhibition by Giambologna; the Uffizi Gallery containing the greatest collection of Italian paintings in the world; and the Duomo (Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore), Florence's main cathedral with its magnificent dome designed by Brunelleschi, the first dome to be built since ancient Roman times incorporating ideas from the Pantheon in Rome. Afterwards, we climbed to the top of the Duomo's dome (actually a dome within a dome) providing spectacular views of Florence. We also enjoyed Piazza della Signoria, the political hub of Florence for centuries, and Ponte Vecchio, the famous old foot bridge across the Arno River.



View of Florence



Giotto's Bell Tower



Renaissance Painting "Last Judgment" inside Duomo Dome



Looking toward Piazza della Signoria from Uffizi



Piazza della Signoria



Fountain of Neptune



Michelangelo's "David" (Copy)



Ponte Vecchio and Arno River



Arno River

Saturday morning, March 11, we departed Florence with our cruising friends Geoff and June. On Friday they had taken the train up from Ostia to join us for this last part of our trip. The four of us rented a car and spent three days enjoying the medieval hill towns of Tuscany. Before leaving Florence we drove up to Piazza Michelangelo, a hilltop square overlooking Florence, offering stunning views of the city and the Duomo.



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Meals became an important part of our travels around Tuscany as we savored and relished the local Tuscan wines and cuisine. Eating in these hill towns became a most memorable experience: Castellina in Chianti for its excellent pasta dishes and Chianti Classico wine, Siena for its local Sienese cuisine, Pienza for its special Pecorino di Pienza cheese, Montepulciano for its robust Vino Nobile, and San Gimignano for its classic cuisine and Vernaccia wine.



In Search of the Perfect Grape



We spent Saturday night in Siena. This medieval city was enchanting with its narrow streets, its beautiful Gothic cathedral richly decorated with inlaid marble floors and beautiful Siena artwork, and its huge main square “Il Campo.” Every year the festival “Il Palio” (dating back to the Middle Ages) takes place on this square. At this time the outer ring of Il Campo becomes a racetrack with the spectators standing in the middle.



Il Campo

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Our drive through Tuscany consisted of scenic countryside with rolling hills and lots of vineyards and olive trees, but since it was still winter the landscape was quite barren. We spent Sunday night in Montepulciano, built on top a ridge overlooking the surrounding countryside. We didn't walk around much that evening as it was cold and windy, with even a few snowflakes falling.



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Views from Montepulciano

Before returning to Florence Monday afternoon, March 13, we visited the medieval hill town of San Gimignano, known for its many soaring watch towers. Originally there were 72; now only 14 remained. Upon leaving San Gimignano, we drove to Florence, dropped the car off and caught the 5 p.m. train back to Rome. It had been an exhilarating nine day trip!



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Mary's brother Everett passed away April 12. He will be greatly missed but will always be fondly remembered whenever we think back of our travels in Italy. During February and March Everett called quite often while we were sightseeing, always interested to know what we were seeing. Now fond memories of Everett will be forever linked with our Italian memories.

An extra amount of time was spent in April getting our boat ready for the cruising season. This year the boat was unusually dirty due to the winter storms, especially those storms which brought the red sand from the Sahara. Everything on the boat was thickly coated with this caked dirt and had to be cleaned.

Before departing Rome the end of April, we visited the archeological site of Ostia Antica, just three miles inland from where our marina was located on the Mediterranean Sea. 2000 years ago this Roman port town of Ostia Antica was at the edge of the Mediterranean Sea and the Tiber River, but over time the river shifted course burying much of the city in silt, helping to preserve it. Unlike Pompeii which was a more up-scale city, Ostia Antica was a working class port town full of apartment buildings, shops, warehouses, and baths. At its peak it was quite densely populated with about 60,000 inhabitants. Here, just like in Pompeii, the plumbing was one of the Roman marvels. In fact, the Roman civil engineering was so sophisticated that many of the water and sewage systems put in place by the ancient Romans are still in use today in central Rome.



Mosaics uncovered in Baths



Restored Open Air Theater



Masks originally on Stage of Theater



Warehouses



Apartment Buildings

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Communal Restroom



Mill Stones at Bakery



Necropolis



Rome was an amazing city; there was so much to see. We easily could have lingered longer, but it was time to move on. We have many more ports and countries to explore. On Friday, April 28, we departed Rome for Sardinia. Our plans this cruising season are to visit Sardinia, Sicily, Greece and the Greek Islands before arriving in Turkey the latter part of October. We plan to keep our boat in Marmaris, Turkey, this coming winter.

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