

Italy!

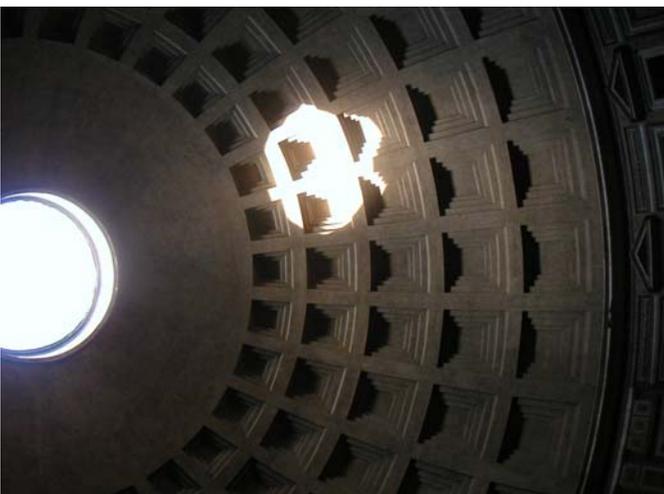
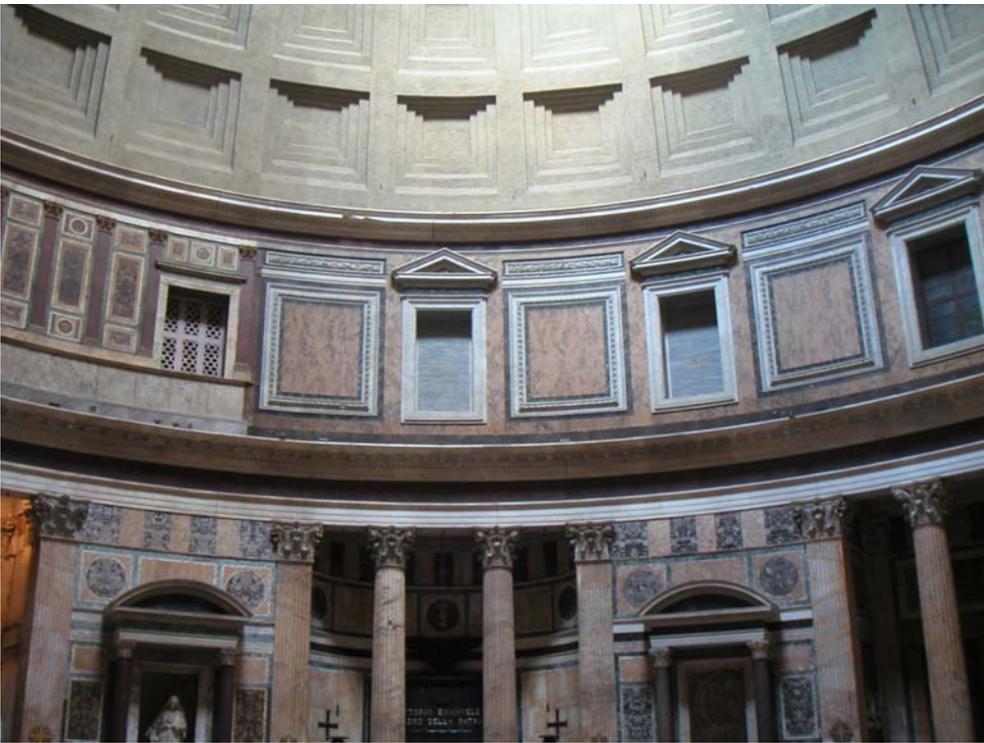
Rome, Florence, Tuscan Hill Towns



Robert & Robin Charlton
September 2005

Rome

Our trip begins with the "Caesar Shuffle" – a visit to ancient Rome's Forum, Coliseum, and Pantheon



Siena

Our favorite Tuscan hill town. We loved Il Campo (the main square) and the evening parade with drums and flags.



Siena

The zebra-striped columns and mosaic floors of the cathedral's interior made it one of our favorites in all of Europe



Monteriggioni

We only stopped for a short while in this walled medieval hill town—but how picturesque, and what great views!



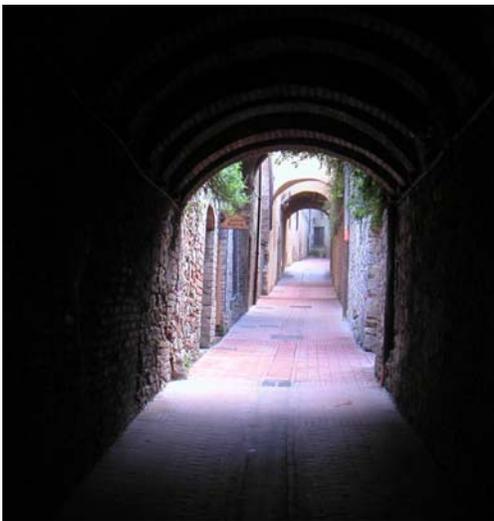
San Gimignano

We shared the local white wine and cheese while enjoying fantastic views of San Gimi's medieval towers at sunset



San Gimignano

Brightly lit shop windows...brooding towers at dusk...flowerboxes on balconies...narrow medieval streets...ahhh!



Florence

Just one day to see Florence? That's crazy talk! We had time for the "must sees" but there's plenty left for next trip.



Florence

We climbed 414 winding steps to the top of Giotto's Tower—then rewarded ourselves with a fine dinner along the Arno



Chianti Countryside

Our trusty Fiat Panda gave us the freedom to explore the back roads of Tuscany and get out into the countryside



Montalcino

Wine tasting is pretty much mandatory (twist our arms) in the hill town of Montalcino, home of robust Brunello wines



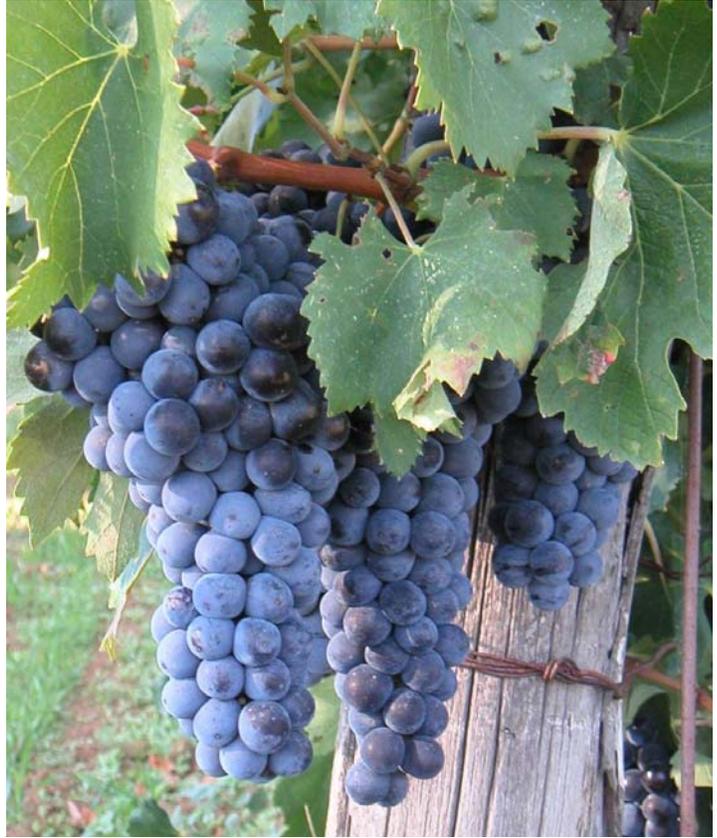
Montepulciano

This turned out to be one of our favorite hill towns, though we only got to explore its steep streets for an hour or so



Orvieto

Orvieto's cathedral façade is the most beautiful we've ever seen. The surrounding countryside is lovely, too.



Civita di Bagnoregio

This tiny hill town is only reachable by pedestrian bridge. Crossing it is like walking back into the Middle Ages.



Civita di Bagnoregio

Civita is so picturesque! We snapped dozens of photos (including the one on the cover of this photo journal).



Italy Trip

September 9-16, 2005

This was a great overview trip of Italy. We got a first taste of Rome and Florence and fell in love with Siena and the Tuscan countryside. The trip left us hungry for more—although preferably at a slower pace than this whirlwind “if it’s Tuesday it must be San Gimignano” experience.

September 9-10 (Fri-Sat) – Fly to Italy

Our trip began, appropriately enough, with me getting shot out of a cannon straight from work on Friday afternoon to an overnight flight to London. The nine-hour flight left Denver an hour late (around 9 pm) and put us into London around 1 pm. The short connection time to our flight to Rome ended up causing us some major headaches later on, as one of our three bags didn’t make the connection and got stranded in London (more on that later). But WE made the flight even if some of our luggage didn’t, and we arrived in Rome’s Fiumicino Airport around 5:30 pm. We got our first taste of an Italian-style work slowdown when we stood in line at Customs for over an hour with the line hardly budging. Suddenly, a managerial type strode into the booth and started stamping passports like crazy—he stamped ours without even looking at us and let us straight through. Next, we waited a long time for that third piece of luggage—the one with all our formal wear in it—but it never showed. So, for the second international trip in a row, we got to stand in the lost luggage line, fill out a form, and hope it would show up the next day (which it didn’t). We got on the airport train to Termini Station and once again got to experience an Italian-style work slowdown, with the train crawling at a pathetically slow pace over the tracks and taking an hour instead of a half hour to make the journey.

So it was that, with all these delays, we arrived at Termini station around 9 pm instead of the expected 5:30 pm. We took the long way around a very large train terminal before finding our way to the Hotel Sileo on Via Magenta 39. It really is only a block from the train station as advertised, but you have to go out the correct exit. We took a very tiny elevator up to the fourth floor of the building to get to our hotel—we both agreed we’d rather avoid the rickety stairs which had nothing supporting them from underneath as far as we could see. The nice older Italian couple running the hotel spoke only a bit of English, but we managed to check in and get our room key without too much difficulty. (Trying to explain that a lost piece of luggage might be arriving at their hotel proved more challenging.) Our room was small but serviceable, pleasant enough with its two twin beds, and with the sounds of a restaurant’s kitchen wafting up the alleyway behind our room. The windows were thrown wide open, something that turned out to be commonplace in Italy as there appear to be very few bugs to worry about.

It was 10 pm when we finally stowed our bags in our room. We were quite tired. Should we still go out on the town, as originally planned, and see the lit-up monuments of the city? We probably shouldn’t have, but we did anyway. We each got a slice of pizza at a pizzeria near the train station to fortify ourselves, then took our first metro ride in Rome to the Coliseo stop. Before we even got out of the metro stop, we could see the famous Coliseum of Rome all lit up before us. What a sight! Finally it felt like we were on vacation. We strolled past the Coliseum and ended up walking up Palatine

Hill for a fantastic view of the Forum ruins all lit up at night. They looked mysterious and brooding, and there was even mood music playing to add to the magic of the moment. The brooding symphonic music seemed to be coming from inside the Forum; we felt like we had stepped into a *Lord of the Rings* scene. It was actually quite moving, and one of our favorite experiences in Rome.

After a steep walk up Palatine Hill, we reached an iron gate and a dead end and retraced our steps. Walking along Fori Imperiali, we saw the same ruins from a different angle. Tiny Italian cars and Vespas zipped by to our right. The pedestrian part of the street was clogged with people. It was a Saturday night, after all, and all Rome seemed to be out partying. Lots of people were wearing running clothes with numbered bibs attached—apparently Adidas was sponsoring some big charity race that was to get underway at midnight. Eventually we made it to the beautifully lit Campidoglio. Michelangelo’s grand flight of steps known as the “Cordonata” led gradually and symmetrically up to the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius. We peered through the iron gate at the Campidoglio (closed at this hour), then continued around the far side of the piazza. We went up some very steep steps in an attempt to look down on the Forum but were thwarted by another iron gate. By now we were footsore and tired so we decided to head home.

It was close to midnight. We tried to go home by a different route and paid the price. For some time we wandered through streets that seemed to get narrower and more deserted with each twist and turn. You’d think it would be easy to see the lit-up Coliseum at night, but we couldn’t see it for anything. Finally, lost and forlorn, we asked for directions. The young woman we asked gave us authoritative directions. It turned out we had wandered quite far from our path. No wonder we couldn’t see the Coliseum. In essence, we made a huge square through Rome in order to get back to our starting point. At last we came within sight of the Coliseo metro stop. An unending stream of midnight runners made it impossible to cross the street to the metro stop for several minutes, so we joined the Romans who were cheering for their friends and family members—another favorite memory of Rome. We reached our hotel at half past midnight, fell into bed, and slept like the dead.

September 11 (Sun) – Rome to Siena

Knowing we had a very busy day ahead of us, we awoke bleary-eyed at 7 am. By 8:30 we were taking a taxi to the Pantheon. Yes, we got ripped off, paying 15 euro for the relatively short journey; but hey, we’re at the PANTHEON in Rome, so who cares? As soon as it opened at 9 am, we headed inside for a look. Wow! We loved it! The interior is a perfect circle in which the diameter and height are exactly the same. The hemispherical dome with its skylight oculus or “eye” at the top are fantastic. Without question it was our favorite building from ancient Roman times. It is in such good repair, and such a marvel of architecture, that it’s hard to believe it was built back around 100 AD, close to the time of Christ. It looks like something from Renaissance times in the 1500s. Part of the reason for its good state of repair is that it was adopted by the early Christians and turned into a church. In fact, the famous painter Raphael has his tomb inside the Pantheon.

We made a quick stop at the Gothic church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva—an unexpected bonus—where we saw Michelangelo’s “Christ Carrying a Cross” and a statue of St. Catherine. Navigating our way back to the Campidoglio, this time we were able to walk up the shallow steps of the “Cordonata” to the top. We got good views of the city and of the ruins of the Forum. Then we headed back down and walked along Fori Imperiali to the Forum itself.

By now it was late morning and starting to get hot. We stood on the Forum, the political and economic center of ancient Rome, and drank in the atmosphere. We saw the Rostra, or speaker’s platform, where Marc Anthony once addressed friends, Romans, and countrymen, and the ruins of temples and basilicas too numerous to mention. Frankly, without a guide and without the time to do it real justice, it was sometimes hard to figure out what was what. We identified the Temple of Saturn, the Arch of Titus, the Arch of Severus, and a few other ruins. We think we saw what was left of the Temple of the Vestal Virgins. But in the noonday heat, and with the growing crowds, it was hard to care too much about the details, so we agreed this was one site we’d come back to on a future trip, preferably in the morning when it was cool and when the crowds were lighter, and with a good guide-book (or guide). I actually preferred the ruins at night, all lit up, when they looked mysterious and romantic, to the same ruins in the garish light of day.

We walked to the Coliseum, then uphill to the Church of San Pietro in Vincoli, where we saw Michelangelo’s famous Statue of Moses—one of our “must-sees.” Then we made the long trek along Via Cavour back to our hotel. It was close to noon—time to get out of dodge. We had a car to pick up by 1 pm. We took the train back to the airport, checked in at Thrifty, and got the keys to our car. We trekked over to Terminal C to look for our bag one more time but it was still missing. I spoke with a representative of British Airways who agreed to have the bag held at the Rome airport until our return in five days.

We had a quick bite to eat at the airport around 2 pm, then began our drive. We liked our little baby-blue Fiat Panda right from the start. But we ran into a few problems at the beginning of our drive. First, an “imbecile” Italian driver nearly backed up into us before we had even left the Thrifty parking lot. I honked the horn loudly and he barely stopped in time. He wanted me to back up so he could back up further, but I couldn’t figure out how to at first. Aha! You had to lift up on a “ring” around the stick shift before you could put the car in reverse. Once that little detail was solved, the driving was straightforward enough. But right out of the airport, we managed to get ourselves completely lost. We didn’t follow the sign for “Roma” and ended up on unsigned back roads for close to an hour. Very frustrating. We kept seeing the expressway but couldn’t find a way onto it! It didn’t help that vandals had messed with some of the signs, spray-painting some and physically moving others to point in the wrong direction! Finally, after again having to ask for directions, we found our way onto the expressway and followed signs for Civitavecchia and Grosseto. From this point forward, all of our driving went smoothly and we had no other real problems getting around in Italy (except for driving on the Duomo in Florence...more on that later.)

It was such a relief to be on the right road headed in the right direction. Our mood immediately improved. We saw the ocean to our left and passed Civitavecchia where we would

be boarding our cruise in a week’s time. At Grosseto, we got onto smaller roads; it felt a bit like driving through small towns on Route 1 in Maine. Italian drivers are fast and aggressive, just as advertised. One thing that surprised me was that the expressway kept “accordianing” from two lanes to one lane and back to two lanes again, so you had to pay attention. We passed through some beautiful countryside as we got closer to Siena. The sun was just setting when we arrived in Siena around 7 pm. We parked outside the Palazzo Ravizza, one of the most expensive hotels of our trip—and no wonder why, when we saw the wonderful view from our window of the Duomo and the red-tiled roofs of Siena. The price also included free parking in a gated parking lot inside the city, which was wonderfully handy.

The city of Siena looked beautiful softly lit up as dusk fell. We shared a half-bottle of red wine in our room, purchased at the bar of the hotel, and enjoyed the view. We planned on taking a nap first, but dusk was so pretty we ended up getting dressed and walking out to Il Campo, the main square in the center of town. On the way there, a parade came down the narrow medieval street we were walking up. The participants were wearing their “contrade” colors—Siena is divided up into 17 contrade, or districts, that are fiercely competitive with one another. They were waving their colorful flags and beating their drums, which echoed through the city. How wonderful! There was even a section of the parade devoted to young mothers pushing their babies in carriages! I think it was at that moment that we both started falling in love with Siena.

We had dinner at Ristorante Spadaforte, at a table right at the corner of Il Campo, to the right of the church. The tables slanted downwards because the fan-shaped Campo itself slopes down towards the center. We shared a plate of antipasti—salami, olives, cheese, and too-crunchy bruschetta. For the entrée, I had a tasty cheese ravioli and Robin had a meaty lasagna. I got to taste my first glass of Brunello wine. The couple next to us struck up a conversation. They were Americans—he was in the Navy and his wife was a nurse in the navy, so she and Robin had a lot to talk about. A cool breeze left me chilled in my short-sleeve shirt by dinner’s end. We warmed up by wandering streets at random through the city, finding many medieval winding streets that were very much to our liking. We walked up one street where an old woman was hanging laundry out of a window and where two young women were sitting in the window next to her looking out as evening fell. It was fun to see people going about their daily lives. Back at Il Campo, we ate a tasty gelato while standing on a balcony and enjoying the view down at the fan-shaped piazza. We imagined ourselves standing there during the annual Palio, or horse race, around the Campo, in which the contrade, or districts, compete against one another. The no-holds-barred race is over in about 75 seconds. Jockeys can whip their rivals and other horses in an attempt to get around the tight corners first, and the horse can win even without a jockey! After fully enjoying our evening, we headed home to our hotel and were in bed by 11 pm.

September 12 (Mon) – Siena to San Gimignano

First off, we slept in, making this the first relaxing morning of the trip. We had breakfast at Palazzo Ravizza on the patio: eggs, tasty bacon, breakfast meats (including prosciutto), juice, coffee, and cappuccino. We packed up quickly and checked out of the hotel around 10 am, taking our stuff to

the car. Then we continued our explorations of Siena. First we visited the Duomo. The interior is magic, with zebra-striped columns and mosaic floors. Of all the interiors of all the cathedrals I've seen in Europe, this is my favorite by far. Despite its large size, it feels intimate because of the wealth of geometric design and detail within.

We had a picnic lunch right on Il Campo—ham and cheese on ultra-crunchy mini baguettes, panforte (a Siena specialty that tastes like a dense, nutty fruitcake), and Coke. We sat in the shade of the bell tower. The square got busier and busier as the day progressed. We explored the back streets of the town for about an hour, which are wonderfully medieval and mostly free of traffic. We made it back to the hotel just as a summer rain squall started to descend. Robin e-mailed family while I relaxed in a comfy chair. It was nice that Palazzo Ravizza let us continue to use their facilities and parking even after we had checked out.

We began a leisurely drive towards San Gimignano, taking a scenic route. Driving through Italy is a breeze once you get the hang of navigating from one town to the next along your route instead of following route numbers. Each roundabout or decision point tends to be well marked with the names of towns and arrows telling you which way to go. What a relief after our bad start near the airport.

We stopped at the medieval walled town of Monteriggioni. The walls, nearly intact, circle the top of the hill and are alternated by 14 towers and two gates. The town within is not much more than a village, with only one main street, but it is definitely worth the stop because it is so photogenic. We loved getting to walk the “parapets” along the walls, which provide tremendous views of the Tuscan countryside. The long drop from the added-on see-through walkway around the parapets made for an extra sense of excitement.

One of the best planning decisions I made on this trip was to arrive in each of the towns where we were staying late in the afternoon, allowing us to enjoy the evening and morning instead of the busy midday when the small towns tend to be overrun with tourists. This was particularly true in San Gimignano. We arrived around 3 pm right in the middle of the tourist crush, and it was gratifying to see the crowds steadily diminishing as the afternoon wore on. We drove right up onto Piazza Cisterna despite all the people milling about, dropped off our luggage at the Hotel Leon Bianco—which overlooks the main piazza—and reparked in Parking Lot 3. Now on foot, we explored a bit of the town. We saw the Church of St. Augustine with a pretty fresco cycle of St. Augustine by Benozzo Gozzoli. During our walk back, we bought some local white wine and some fresh pecorino cheese and had a little snack back in our room. The pecorino cheese was really delicious—Robin thinks she may like it even better than manchego, which is saying a lot! While we ate, we enjoyed the view of the Piazza Cisterna from our open bedroom window two floors above.

Around 6 pm, we took the rest of our wine and cheese up to La Rocca for some fantastic views back at San Gimignano and the surrounding countryside. Sunset took a bit longer to arrive than I thought it would, so we had an hour to enjoy the views before the sun set around 7:15 pm. We were both in high spirits, no doubt helped by our finishing off the rest of the white wine, which we drank out of plastic cups. A few other couples enjoyed the view along with us in comradely silence. San Gimignano is such a picturesque town—I took lots of pictures from La Rocca, and even more as dusk fell

and we walked back through town. By then, the crowds had evaporated.

We took a desperately needed nap back in the room, awoke at 8:15, and went to a late dinner. Very European of us. We ate at a restaurant recommended at our hotel called La Mangiatoia, on a tiny side street near one of the entrance gates to the city. We sat on a patio outside, and this time I brought my jacket to stay warm. It tends to turn quite cool in the evenings in these hill towns—somewhat reminiscent of our own weather in Colorado. Robin had wild boar (cinghiale) in rosemary and garlic and I had a traditional hearty Tuscan soup called ribollita (“reboiled”) which contains spinach and other vegetables, beans, and bread in a minestrone-like thick broth. Very tasty. We also split an appetizer of melon with prosciutto, along with a side dish of tasty spinach with garlic.

We walked through the town at night. The streets were mostly empty, with just enough people to make it feel romantic instead of desolate. Piazza La Cisterna was still busy with people finishing late dinners or eating gelatos. We had a gelato and called it a night around 11 pm, leaving the windows wide open to let in the cool breeze.

September 13 (Tue) – San Gimignano to Florence

I awoke early and took pictures of Piazza Cisterna empty of all people—a small miracle! We ate a simple breakfast in the “cloister” of the Hotel Leon Bianco, up on the roof. On our way to the car, we took some early morning pictures of the town. Then it was off to Florence along A1, the main autostrada in Italy. This was just like driving on any highway in the U.S. As we took our exit near Florence, the roads got more city and busy with cars. It was slow going all the way to Porta Romana. I had suggested parking at a public lot near Porta Romana and walking into the city from there, wanting to avoid the hassle of driving in a major city, but in the end we agreed it would be a very long walk and decided to give it a try and continue into the historic district of the city.

We had almost reached our hotel—the Hotel Maxim on Via dei Calzaiuoli right in the heart of the city—when we got lost. Instead of turning right as we should have, we continued straight. The next thing we knew, we were driving on the pedestrian-only piazza of the Duomo—the main cathedral of Florence. Yikes! Thousands of tourists were milling about; it was like parting a sea of people with my car. “I’m not liking this,” I kept muttering to Robin, who was close to tears after having been so close to getting us to our destination with no trouble. We stayed lost for quite awhile, turning down one crowded one-way street after another and apparently exploring every pedestrian-only zone in central Florence. We drove onto the Piazza della Signoria, with the famous Palazzo Vecchio looming over us. “We’re getting our own car tour of Florence,” I said with a grim laugh. I thought it was amazing we hadn’t gotten a ticket yet. I learned later on that it’s actually okay to drive in these areas if you’re staying at a hotel in the city, but at the time I thought we were in big trouble, since all cars are photo ID’d on their way into the historic district of the city.

Finally we got lucky and found ourselves on Via dei Calzaiuoli, which is itself a major pedestrian mall in the heart of the city. It was packed wall-to-wall with people ambling along, eating their gelatos and window shopping. Imagine driving down Pearl Street at the height of the action on a

lovely summer afternoon, people peering over their shoulders in surprise as your car nudges up behind them. Finally Robin spotted the sign for the Hotel Maxim. What a lovely sight!

Hotel Maxim is located only a block from the Duomo, on the third floor. We arrived around 10 am, stored our luggage, and paid to have our car parked for us at a cost of 21 euro (worth every euro in my opinion by that point). After a simple lunch of pizza at a small cafe, we walked to the Academia and saw the statue of David—our biggest “must-see” in Florence. Even though we had seen it a hundred times before in books and videos, it still impressed us. This was the real thing, carved by Michelangelo out of a single block of marble, and beautifully restored just a year prior.

Next on our list was the Bargello, the sculpture museum in Florence. Unfortunately, by the time we got there, we only had half an hour to explore it before it closed for the day at the surprisingly early hour of 1:45 pm. We raced through the museum and managed to see the key sights. Donatello’s David—the first freestanding bronze nude since Roman times—looked quite jaunty and effeminate compared to Michelangelo’s David. Another famous statue was Giambologna’s “Mercury,” finger pointing upwards and winged feet being supported by the blowing wind. At the last moment, we found Michelangelo’s “Drunken Bacchus,” one of his earliest works. As they were locking up, we made our way through the courtyard and to the exit.

We checked into our room and napped for awhile during the heat of the day. Then we visited the Duomo. The Duomo is spectacular on the outside with its mix of green and pink marble, but much simpler and emptier-feeling on the inside than the cathedral in Siena. Next, we stopped to see Ghiberti’s famous golden Baptistery doors, right next to the Duomo, which Michelangelo said were “worthy of Paradise.” When we discovered, to our surprise, that there was no line to climb up Giotto’s tower, we decided to go for it. We climbed all 414 winding steps up to the top and enjoyed great views of Florence. Of course, Brunelleschi’s wonderful octagonal-ribbed dome was visible directly across from us, a beautiful sight which has become symbolic of Florence and the Renaissance. It was the first notable dome erected in Italy since antiquity. We also managed to find the River Arno hidden amongst the buildings of Florence.

As late afternoon approached, we did the “Renaissance Ramble,” as Rick Steves calls it, an enjoyable tramp through the heart of Florence. We saw Orsanmichele from the outside, then the Piazza della Signoria—this time on foot. We really enjoyed this piazza, with the Palazzo Vecchio looking sternly down on us and a whole host of statues keeping us company. A replica of Michelangelo’s David stood where the original had during Renaissance times. Other statues dotted the square, including a martial equestrian statue of Cosimo I, the lovely Neptune fountain, and a dramatic if somewhat unpleasant statue of Perseus holding Medusa’s cut-off head. An open-air loggia adjoining the piazza was “guarded” by two lions with their paws atop orbs—symbolic of the power of Florence. Inside the loggia were beautifully carved statues including Giambologna’s “Rape of the Sabine Women.”

I drank a delicious Coke and Robin had a local Beer Moretti as we rested on a ledge just outside the loggia. Then it was on to the Pont Vecchio. We admired all the fine goldwork and jewelry as we crossed the famous bridge over the

Oltrarno, or “other side of the Arno,” of Florence. We walked to the Pitti Palace (not much to see from the outside), then backtracked to the River Arno and found a beautifully situated restaurant right along the river called Ristorante De Bardi. There we had a very early dinner by Italian standards as we sat at a window seat overlooking the River Arno and Pont Vecchio as the sun set. Beautiful! The food was great, too. We split an entrée of Bistecca alla Fiorentina (T-bone steak served with lemon), the signature dish of Florence. This was our most expensive meal in Italy, but still only about \$80 since we split the entrée. Half the bill was for our full bottle of Chianti Riserva, but the meal was worth every penny for the view alone. We also split an appetizer of bruschetta mista (bruschetta with four different toppings). It was a delicious and memorable dinner. We walked home, enjoying the lit monuments, and went to bed early after such a busy day. We felt we had made the most of Florence in the short time we had.

September 14 (Wed) – Florence to Montalcino

We made one more stop in Florence in the morning, visiting the Capella Medici after breakfast. This small chapel is beautiful and intimately rich on the inside. We saw Michelangelo’s statues of “Night,” “Day,” “Dawn,” and “Dusk,” among the most famous statues in the world.

We drove out of Florence around 10 am. In hindsight, we made a mistake at this point, taking local roads to reach Greve instead of the autostrada. As a result, we spent most of our time getting to Greve and didn’t leave enough time to complete a hoped-for loop trip through some beautiful Chianti hill country. We only saw Castellina in Chianti (where we bought lunch supplies for a picnic) and Radda in Chianti (where we ate lunch at a scenic overlook) before running out of time.

Castellina was a cute little village—quaint, lots of stone, artist shops, produce stores, and a fortress and church on the main square. We heard the church bells chime at noon. We bought some of the yummiest strawberries we’ve ever eaten at a local produce store, each one small, perfectly red, and sweetly decadent. At various other small shops we picked up a half bottle of wine, fresh pecorino cheese, bread, olives (mixed purple and green), and a peach, plum, tiny pear, and Coke. Before leaving town, we used the strangest, most complicated WC we’ve ever come across. It went through a minute-long automatic wash cycle before it would let us in. We paid the equivalent of 50 cents and entered together, at which point a timer indicated how much time we had left out of the 5 minutes allotted. You couldn’t flush the toilet since there was no handle—you had to hit the exit button, then the sliding door opened to let us out before resealing itself and going into its automatic cleansing routine. Bizarre!

After lunch in Radda, we started driving toward a town called Gaole but realized it was getting late. Missing so many quaint towns I had hoped to see put me in a bad mood. It’s a funny thing that you can be in a bad mood while driving through such beautiful country, but I was. I drove like Mario Andretti around winding curves that were every bit as tight as our mountain roads in Colorado, trying to make up time and also venting my frustration on the road. Amazingly, despite my aggressive driving, I could barely stay ahead of the crazy Italians in their cars and Vespas who hugged my rear bumper and passed at the slightest opportunity.

We headed on a straighter road toward Siena and Montalcino, pausing for one or two pictures as we passed through the Crete Senese, a drier part of Tuscany with unusual landscapes. We made one stop at the Abbey di Sant Antimo. This was a bit of a disappointment—beautiful in a pastoral way, tucked up in the trees on a hillside—but it was a long walk to get to the abbey, and once there, we didn't feel comfortable going inside because the priest was giving a sermon—raging against his flock, judging from the tone of his voice. It put me in mind of the fire-and-brimstone sermons of Savonarola in Florence during the time of Michelangelo.

We drove straight on to Montalcino. I took a much-needed nap upon reaching our hotel, Il Giglio, and awoke feeling refreshed. Late afternoon in Montalcino began with a walk along the castle ramparts at the imposing fortress at the top of town. We snapped photos of the beautiful Brunello wine country from a castle turret and watched a hard-fought local soccer match on a green playing field just below. Then we paid \$25 for three wine tastings each at the fortress's stone-walled enoteca (wine bar)—three different Brunello di Montalcino wines for me, and one Brunello, one Rosso di Montalcino, and one Supertuscan for Robin. We took all six (partially filled) glasses to a wooden table in the enoteca and took our time sipping. The Brunello wines were robust and delicious, as expected, but the one that left us both the most impressed was the Supertuscan. My three Brunellos were Vigna Spuntali 1999 (49 euro per bottle at the enoteca), Vigna del Lago 1999 (58 euro), and the organic Cupano 2000 (95 euro and my favorite of the three even before I knew the price). Robin's three wines were Rosso Podere La Vigna 2000 (16 euro, basically a young Brunello), Riserva Fornacina 1999 (her Brunello), and Supertuscan Nearco 2000 (27 euro, a blend of 50% merlot, 30% syrah, and 20% cab). We both loved this Supertuscan from the Col d'Orcia for its complexity and long finish.

Now that we had done the wine-tasting thing (pretty much mandatory if you're going to stay in Montalcino, the home of Brunello wines), we did some more exploring. Montalcino, like most hill towns, is steep, so it takes effort to get from one part of town to another. We used our Colorado muscles to power our way through most of the town, including the residential sections near the top. It appears that every hill town in Tuscany is picturesque beyond belief, which goes a long way towards explaining the 630 photos I took on this trip.

We shared a late, delicious, and unpretentious dinner at Taverna Il Grappolo Blu, one of two restaurants recommended in our Rick Steves guide. We started off with melone e prosciutto. My entrée was a thick spaghetti with a beefy sauce, and Robin's was a pecorino cheese ravioli. Of course we split a half bottle of Brunello with the meal. Crème caramel and pears in a brown sugar sauce made for tasty desserts. Then it was home to bed.

September 15 (Thu) – Montalcino to Civita di Bagnoregio

We ate a very simple breakfast in our room (yogurt and plums), then got an early start on our day. The desk clerk retrieved our car for us and we were off. It was a misty morning; we passed beautiful vineyards and olive groves, then wound our way up the hill to Pienza, a small town near Siena. When Pope Pius II came to power, he showered his love and money on his tiny hometown, building a glorious piazza and cathedral. The main square, Piazza Pio II, is a

lovely example of Renaissance architecture. Engineers are still trying to figure out how to keep one end of the cathedral from slipping off the hillside. Pienza itself is very quaint feeling, with lots of shops, fruit stands, and artist galleries. We walked along the streets and bought supplies for lunch, including white grapes, bread, and fresh pecorino cheese.

Next we drove to the beautiful hill town of Montepulciano. We loved this town and can see why Dan Bergh's parents consider it their favorite in Italy. It offers a better balance of shops than Montalcino, which is all about wine. We walked up steep streets to the Piazza Grande, near the top of the hill, enjoying fine views. We quickly toured a winery with huge barrels of wine. It was still too early for wine tasting, so we walked through town, mostly downhill, past all sorts of shops. Around 11 am, we stopped at the Salcheto wine shop and tasted a Montepulciano Vino Nobile 2000 and 2001, a rosso, and a premium wine that was way out of our price range. The low-key salesman, from Belgium, ended up selling us a 2000 Vino Nobile for 17 euro. We strolled back uphill through this vertical town, enjoying the small shops and narrow side alleys, until we reached our car. There were great views of the wine country even from the parking lot.

We drove to Orvieto along A1—good move, much faster. We had a picnic in a park with a pleasant overlook, but it was so windy it was hard to enjoy it. We ate sausage bought in Montepulciano, bread, and a half-bottle of Chianti vino. Robin fed bread crumbs to the ants. She got a headache from the cedar-like trees, so we went back to the car and snoozed for a half hour, which seemed to help. Then we walked up to the cathedral in Orvieto. We didn't park close enough, so it was a long walk uphill. It took 15 minutes at least to get there, but it was worth it. The cathedral façade is outstanding, with gold leaf, paintings of the madonna, and sculptures. It may be the most beautiful exterior of a cathedral I've ever seen. We sat on a nearby stoop and ate gelato while enjoying the view of the façade.

By now it was close to 4 pm. We drove toward our destination for the night, Civita di Bagnoregio, and made good time, arriving around 5 pm at Lugarno, the town across the valley. We took a beautiful picture of Civita, standing isolated on its hillside, then drove through Bagnoregio and parked at the base of a pedestrian bridge. Civita is a tiny, medieval, barely inhabited town that Rick Steves has popularized, but still not many people take the time to get to it. The town is perched on top of a hill, and the only way to get to it is across a pedestrian bridge that no car can cross. Its isolated and dramatic setting made it a must-see for me.

In the parking lot at the base of the pedestrian bridge, we repacked so all we had to bring was a daypack. Then we walked up the steep bridge and through the town to the small central piazza. Our Civita B&B—the only place to stay in town, with only four rooms!—was right on the piazza overlooking the church. The young hostess gave us a much-needed bottle of water when we checked in. Dinner, we were told, would be at 8 pm. Our hostess was very nice but didn't speak much English. She placed a cell phone call to Franco, the owner, who welcomed us and assured us we wouldn't get a parking ticket for parking at the base of the hill (a sign there seemed to indicate there was an hourly parking rate and no overnight parking allowed—but hey, this is Italy, where speed limits are suggestions and rules are flexible).

We relaxed a bit, then began walking through the town. It didn't take long to get from one side of town to the other, but every street was a photographer's dream. Civita is the definition of quaint—small stone houses, stone staircases, brightly painted exteriors, lots of flowerboxes, cats in the windowsills. I took more pictures here than nearly anywhere else on our trip, especially as evening fell and the lighting softened. An elderly woman invited us in to tour her small garden; we paid her a euro—apparently it's her only way of making a meager living. After an hour or two, we had explored every nook and cranny of the town—even a prison cell carved out of the rock outside of the town proper. We retired to our room as darkness fell.

Dinner was pre-arranged for 15 euro per person including unlimited wine. We made the most of it! We drank two small pitchers of red wine through the course of the dinner. The food was surprisingly excellent for such a small establishment. There were two types of bruschetta, one tomato-based and the other garlic and olive oil (salty). The "primi piatti" were traditional pasta dishes. Both of us were predictably full by the time the "secundi piatti" arrived, but the crisply breaded cutlets were tasty enough that I managed to polish mine off. By the time the dessert arrived, I felt like I had boarded the cruise ship a day early! We spoke at length to an older gentleman seated at the table next to us from Colorado Springs who travels to Italy often and uses Asisi as a base. All in all, we had a great dinner and were pleasantly tipsy by the end. We climbed upstairs and fell into bed. Shortly after I fell asleep, Robin got up and shut the window because of a noisy screeching bird circling the piazza. I must have been tired, because I never heard a thing.

September 16 (Fri) – Civita to Cruise Ship

We got up around 7:30 and had a very simple croissant-in-a-bag breakfast that was mostly memorable for the

company we kept. We talked at length with a sociable young couple from California, Joe (a musician) and Jane (a corporate film maker), comparing notes about our experiences in Italy. Joe made us laugh with his observation that you could hit a golf ball in St. Peter's and not hit a thing it was so huge.

We walked back down the pedestrian bridge and drove to A1 without mishap, then down A1 to the G.R.E. road encircling Rome, then to the airport, stopping several times for gas to make sure our tank was full before we returned the car. I must say, the car rental was worth every penny at \$230 for the freedom it gave us to explore the Tuscan countryside. We did very well navigating through Italy on our own.

We expected our missing bag—the one with all our formal wear for the cruise—to be waiting for us at the airport in Terminal C and were sorely disappointed when it was not. We learned that for some incomprehensible reason it had been held in London. I spoke with a British Airways representative who said he would try to have the bag flown to Rome that evening and then delivered by car to Naples the next day. What a mess!

We took the train to Rome's Termini station, then bought tickets to Civitavecchia. We missed a waiting train by just a minute. But it worked out okay. We met a couple, David and Natalie, who were also going to Civitavecchia, and it turned out they worked on the Celebrity Galaxy ship we were sailing on, him in the sound booth and her as one of the singers. We ended up sitting with them on the train ride. Once in Civitavecchia, they led us on the ten-minute walk from the train station to the port. A free shuttle bus took us from the port entrance to the cruise ship. Hooray!

We boarded the ship quickly and were on by 4 pm for the start of our 10-day Mediterranean cruise.