

# Italy 2023

With the help of some of my closest friends, my wife has once again roped me into traveling abroad. Regular readers may recall that Christopher is no fan of traveling outside of the country. The food is different, the language is often different, the culture is different, and the laws are different. I certainly wouldn't want to find myself in a Brittney Griner situation! Fortunately, I've survived nearly two weeks in Italy and I am back on American soil.

Most of the trip was a private group tour package that began in Rome and was followed by a weeklong stay at a private villa in Tuscany. At the end of that week, we were dropped off in Florence and left to fend for ourselves. My travel agent friend, Tom, played quarterback for many of the details and he worked with Jessica (Italy Vacation Specialists) to put together the private tour portion of the trip. Our "group" included 5 couples. Suzanne and I, Dave/Meg, Craig/Michelle, George/Ellen (who started their adventure early with a stop in Venice), and Mark/Kristina (who extended their trip to include Milan and some other towns that all look the same to me). Here is a recap of our "adventure."

## Chapter 1 - Rome

**June 14-15.** We began with a direct flight to Rome that arrived on Thursday morning. Smooth and without incident, I only wish I had been able to sleep on the flight. We found our arranged driver and set out for our hotel where we checked our bags at the desk because we weren't able to check in until 3 pm. Time for some walking.

Suzanne had planned ahead and one of the stops she wanted to make was the Capuchin Crypt, because checking out the bones of 4,000 friars who died in the 1700s "artfully" arranged in a series of 6 crypts is how she rolls. Actually, I think it was mentioned in a Rick Steves book and it was a short walk from our hotel. The Museum and Crypt of the Capuchin Friars was an

interesting first stop. A pile of skulls here, a stack of femurs there... you get the idea. They say "no pictures" and I obliged (but I'm sure some of the other tourists didn't). You might think the morbid sight of wall-to-wall human remains would burn an image into your brain, so there is no need for pictures. You'd be wrong. Already a fading memory.

After the dead friar thing, we roamed (*Rome'd?*) the streets near our hotel. A bunch of steps, a fountain, and our first gelato of the trip. Over priced, second rate, tourist trap gelato. A mistake we only made once the entire trip.



Spanish Steps



Spanish Steps



Trevi Fountain



random sighting

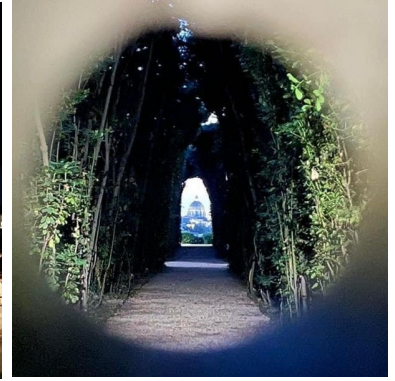
Back to the hotel to check-in, freshen up, and nap before dinner. Jessica made us reservations at a local restaurant and joined us for a drink. After dinner, our driver (Samo) took us on a driving tour of Rome by night. Day one. In the books. 10,793 steps.



The pyramid of Cestius



The Colosseum



View of St. Peter's dome through the Aventine Keyhole

**Friday, June 16.** Morning walk to an outdoor market by way of the Pantheon, then back to the hotel to rest and prepare for our 2 pm pickup. Destination Vatican City. The Pantheon was originally built as a pagan temple in 27 BC. The current structure, built around 120 AD, was later converted to a church in 609 AD by Pope Boniface IV. Its dome is an engineering marvel and was later the inspiration for a domed cathedral in Florence, Michelangelo's dome on St. Peter's Basilica, and the dome on our Capitol Building in Washington DC.

( I read all of that sitting at my desk, right here in the USA. After the trip.)

Note: When we happened upon the Pantheon we walked right in for a look.

Starting 7/2/2023, you now have to pay 5 Euro for a ticket and wait in line to enter.

Future travelers... My advice is to save the 5 Euro and check out Wikipedia.



We met up with our guide for the Vatican tour just outside the entrance. About a billion people want to see the place, so it's a good thing we had a private tour planned in advance. "Private" in the sense that you skip some lines for entering and we navigate the crowds as a small group while listening to our microphoned guide with an earpiece. Come on, Toto. We're not in Italy anymore. Vatican City is its own country, with papal security provided by Swiss Guards since 1506. Museums, the Sistine Chapel, St. Peter's Basilica, a bunch of history, blah... blah... blah...



Old map of Tuscany in museum



Insert map of Florence from map on left



Throng of people headed to Sistine Chapel



Archways between museum sections

Chapels... churches... basilicas... cathedrals... I'm not inclined to research the subtle (or not-so-subtle) differences. I'm just going to call them all "churches." Thing is... they are *everywhere*. Some fancy. Some not-so-fancy. After a handful, they all seem the same and blur together. This is going to be a LONG trip.

Oh! Fun fact. Peter, that guy with a *basilica* named after him... His real name wasn't Peter. It was Simon. According to legend, some guy named Jesus (if that's his real name) couldn't be troubled to remember his real name and just started calling him Peter. That's some full-on diva shit. Kinda makes you start to question the whole "story."



Contraband photo of ceiling inside Sistine Chapel (Chapel is a no-photo shut-the-fuck-up zone)



Left: Inside St. Peter's Basilica

Above: Front of St. Peter's Basilica



After the tour, we were on our own for transportation back to the hotel. Ellen scored us a large van taxi that could fit all 8 of us for a very reasonable price. We got cleaned up then caught up with Kristina and Mark, who arrived earlier in the day. We are now a party of 10 for most of the next 8 days. We took a short walk, passing the rainbow flag waving American Embassy (still pride month), to a restaurant where Kristina had made reservations. We had a nice meal then topped it off with gelato around the corner that was better quality and about half the price compared to the previous day. 14,092 steps for the day.

**Saturday, June 17.** Quick breakfast, checkout, then our group was shuttled to a spot near the Colosseum for a private tour of Ancient Rome. The tour lasted about 3 hours and it was around 90 degrees and sunny for most of it. Our guide rattled off a bunch of history, but most of what I heard reminded me of the teacher from the Peanuts cartoons. Glad there isn't a test. If I ever need a refresher, I'll just ask George. I'm pretty sure he locked in all the details or knew them before the trip. The Colosseum, Arch of Constantine, and other shots of Ancient Rome:





## Chapter 2 - Tuscany

After our tour of Ancient Rome, our drivers (Samo and Michael) swung us by the hotel to pick up our checked luggage then we headed to Tuscany. About 3 hours later, including a quick stop for lunch at a gas station snack counter (I'll pass), we arrived at Villa Privata. A private villa in the middle of nowhere about 2 kilometers down a one-lane dirt road and a 20 minute drive from anything resembling a town. Are we having fun yet?

The villa had 6 rooms for our 5 couples plus 2 smaller rooms for our drivers, who spent the week at the villa with us. The property was picturesque if you like to look at rolling hills of nothing or grazing sheep. Our room was spacious and comfortable for the most part, but a little warm. Two days in we finally got the owner to turn on the air conditioning. Parts of the house stayed fairly cool without it, but a few rooms (including ours) got pretty warm by late afternoon. Air conditioning took the edge off, but we were never able to cool it off to our preferred temperature.

At first glance, the pool looked nice. But the umbrellas didn't tilt, so it was hard to get out of the sun. The chairs weren't that comfortable. The water... freakin' cold. We had some fairly hot days with temps in the 90s, so jumping in a pool to cool off after a long day sounds like a great idea. Until you step in and your foot goes numb. I don't even know how they got it that cold. Were they dumping ice in while we were away for our day-long excursions? I did go in one time during the week for a grand total of two minutes. Which is how long it took me to step in slowly, screeching like a little girl when I started to choke on my testicles. I got to the bottom of the steps with water up to my shoulders then turned around and got out. Cool showers in the room for the rest of the trip when I got overheated. Sometimes you want to bring down your core temperature without experiencing frostbite.

The villa was actually in two halves. Each side with its own kitchen and dining area. The side we were on had a larger kitchen and dining area, so that's where our group mainly congregated. Not exactly sure why, but we kept getting a lot of flies. Every time you'd open a door another would get it. George and Ellen did their best to keep the fly population down, but it was a continuous fight the entire week. I didn't keep track of all the *thwacks*, but I'm guessing they killed 100 flies or more. Leaving some of the carcasses on the walls and lying about as a message to the others.



Flies were not the only insect issue. The mosquitoes could be relentless in the early evening. We had been warned by friends who had been to the “picturesque rolling hills of Tuscany” about the mosquito situation. I forgot, didn’t apply bug spray, and we sat outside for a bit before dinner. I didn’t really notice them or their handywork until the next day when my legs were itchy and I appeared to have the chicken pox. Lesson learned. Bug spray each evening.

Other members of our gang experienced a variety of bug situations, but I’ll share just 3 more personal incidents. The first was a large spider dropping into my freshly poured glass of ice tea. I’m sure he didn’t drink much, but I got a fresh glass just the same. On night 3 at the villa, we got into bed, turned out the lights, then something “large” landed on Suzanne. She screamed, I screamed, lights on, then the investigation. Some kind of flying beetle. Captured, crushed, flushed, and hopeful thoughts that he didn’t have any friends. Lastly, I was sitting in the bathroom taking care of some important business when something large landed on my shoulder. Like a ninja, I reached up and grabbed it, threw it on the floor, then removed a shoe (not that easy when your pants are around your ankles), and whacked the shit out of it. Bitch-ass grasshopper had it commin’.



Ok... enough about our accommodations. After arriving and getting settled, Dave, Craig, and I popped into town for provisions. That evening we enjoyed an authentic Italian meal prepared by a private chef at the villa. It was ok. Definitely better than Olive Garden, but I probably would have been just as happy with a burger and fries. 14,520 steps for the day, most on the tour of Ancient Rome.



**Sunday, June 18.** I guess it wasn't really a surprise that our first stop would be a church. First of all... *Sunday*. Secondly, they are everywhere. We arrived shortly before the bells in the bell tower began to ring. A few members of our group went in for a few minutes, but I chose to wander the grounds for a bit. *How long do we have to be here?*

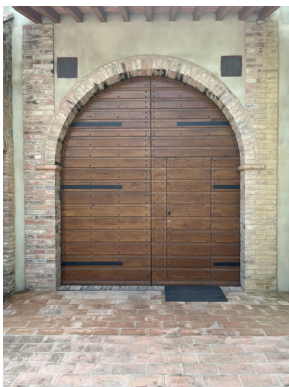


Our next stop was the charming little town of Montepulciano where we wandered on our own for a bit. Old buildings, narrow "streets," wine shops, gelato, various other places to spend money, and (of course) churches. Suz and I had gelato as a late morning snack. No judging.



Included with our tailor-made travel experience was our next stop. A pre-arranged visit to Canneto Wines for a short tour, wine tasting, and lunch. At some point we learned that they had opened just for us and that only one person showed up. She took us to one of their cellars and explained their process. She was very knowledgeable about the grapes, the aging process, and their wines. Then we went back to the tasting room for some additional thoughts before tasting the wines while enjoying a nice lunch. *Would we like to enjoy our tasting/lunch outside at tables overlooking the valley? Sure, that sounds wonderful! And it was.*

Daniella prepared the food (delicious), served the wine and food, bussed the dirty glasses and dishes, then rang up our wine purchases at the end. She was a one woman show. Amazing. This lunch was probably the most enjoyable experience of the trip. Spoiler alert... most of the rest of the trip is a bunch of churches, marginal Italian food, and some marble/stone penises. The pain of international travel mostly dulled by house wine (I don't care what grape it is), pistachio gelato, and the company of good friends. 11,111 steps for the day, but spread out and leisurely.





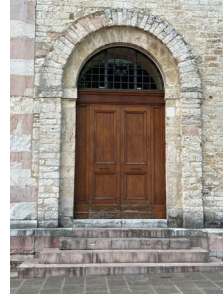
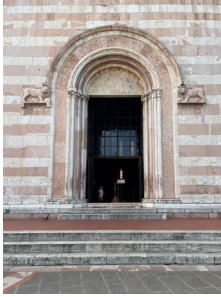


One more stop before heading back to the villa for the day. A stroll through another small town. All the towns kinda look the same, but I'm pretty sure these pictures are from Pienza, where we swapped out one of our drivers. Michael and Paul would be our drivers for the rest of the week.



**Monday, June 19.** Day trip to Assisi to see... wait for it... .. Churches.

First, the Basilica of St. Clare. She was one of the first followers of Francis of Assisi and founder of the Order of Poor Ladies, a Franciscan monastic religious order for chicks. Not sure how she got much done since she was cloistered in a convent for most of her adult life, but somehow she caught the attention of a Pope and eventually got sainted.



A short walk through town brings you to the Papal Basilica of St. Francis. More on this dude later. But first, a few photos from the walk between the two basilicas. Feel free to note that they look a lot like the photos from nearly every other middle ages town in Italy. And yes, that second picture is another church on the short walk from Clare's church to Francis's church.



Apparently, Francis was a big deal for Catholics (especially Italian Catholics) even while he was alive. Which wasn't very long, since he died in 1226 when he was in his mid-40s. Canonized as a saint less than two years after his death by the Pope, he has had many followers (friars and such) for hundreds of years. This includes the Capuchins, an offshoot of the Franciscan Order founded in 1528. (Remember the "artistically displayed" human remains described earlier in Rome? *Those* dudes.) The basilica built in his name is large, one church above another with what seemed like dozens of side chapels, and is decorated with what some might call "magnificent" frescoes. ("Fresco" is a fancy word for a mural painted on plaster.) The ostentatiousness probably has Francis rolling in his crypt to this day. Which, by the way, is *in* the basilica.

I'm not sure why, but no pictures are allowed in this basilica. Totally cool at St. Peter's basilica, but at the St. Francis basilica it's apparently a big no-no. That didn't stop a few members of my group from trying. One got scolded and another surreptitiously snapped a pic of a friar praying in front of Francis's crypt. I *mostly* retired from rogue photography after my shot in the Sistine Chapel.



Not for the first time on the trip, someone mentioned the architecture and engineering precision of some of these very old buildings. Some people are amazed by what they were able to accomplish without computers and the heavy machinery we have today. I found myself to be less awestruck. Besides, they probably had help from the same aliens who helped the Egyptians build the pyramids.

Moving on. After touring St. Francis's basilica we had to skip a third basilica in Assisi and return to the villa because *someone* insisted on scheduling a cooking class for the ladies of our group. "Oh, no... we have to skip the Papal Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels?!" What a shame. Maybe we'll catch it on our next trip to Italy. (*Pffft... There is no "next" trip to Italy. Once is enough for Christopher.*)

The gals paid extra for the privilege of slaving away in the kitchen while the boys stole a few hours to relax. I think I snuck in a nap. Dinner was mostly edible. Certainly better than Applebee's. On a date night. 11,244 steps for the day. Mostly in churches. Basilicas. Whatever.

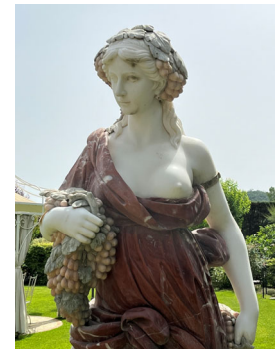
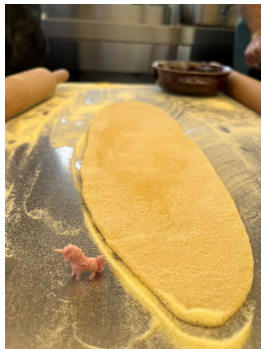
**Tuesday, June 20.** Quick stop in a quaint little town for a light breakfast then on to the Tenuta Torciano Winery near San Gimignano for some truffle hunting and a cooking class (including the dudes), followed by a meal paired with various wines that included a dish using the pasta we made. Just a quick note about the breakfast stop. The town had a church, *obviously*, but it didn't seem like your ordinary church. I didn't go in, but I think it is the church of the bug-eyed naked leapfrog men.



When we arrived at Tenuta Torciano, we started with the truffle hunt. Which was more of a presentation about the different kinds of truffles, the life-cycle of the fungi, and the best way to find them, followed by a short walk in the woods where the actual "hunting" was done by dogs. Our presenter was a retired, cigar-loving, truffle expert with many years of experience training dogs and harvesting truffles. He spoke little English, but had a translator for sharing his wisdom. He snorted in derision when asked about using pigs instead of dogs to seek out truffles that are ready for plucking, then explained why dogs are better for retrieving the treasured nuggets.



Then it was time to make some pasta. I'm still fuzzy on the concept of paying money to prepare my own food, but they were generous with topping off our glasses of rosé. So after a while I didn't really mind as much.



After making pasta, it was time for lunch. With generous servings of wine. I'm sure their diabolical plan was to get us drunk so that we would buy a bunch of wine to ship home, and it worked. Mark and Kristina put together an order and got me to add 3 bottles to the shipment.



After lunch, our drivers got us back to the villa at around 5:25 pm. I know this because I documented the time with a photo of bird poop on the van window as we were arriving. I'm not sure what we did that evening because I was still a bit buzzed. I'm pretty sure I had some more wine and went to bed early. 6,216 steps for the day. Some of them while staggering a bit.

*Let he without sin be the first to judge.*



**Wednesday, June 21.** Our group split up and went in different directions on this day. Paul drove 3 of our couples to experience the hot springs of Bagnovithfuck while Michael took Mark, Kristina, Suzanne and I to Montalcino. We stumbled upon a local restaurant and invited Michael to join us for lunch. He was really impressed by the food and pointed out that you know it's a good place to eat because the diners were mostly locals, not tourists, and there was an elderly woman peeking out from the kitchen periodically. My lunch was pretty good, but I regretted my choice a little after a bite of Mark's wild boar stew.



Many of the streets in these ancient towns that all look the same to me are little more than glorified alleys originally designed for pedestrians and the occasional horse. That doesn't stop locals from navigating their subcompact cars through, often parking in creative ways. Do cars or pedestrians have the right of way? Anybody's guess. Best to keep sharp and quickly dodge out of the way when you hear a short car-horn beep behind you.

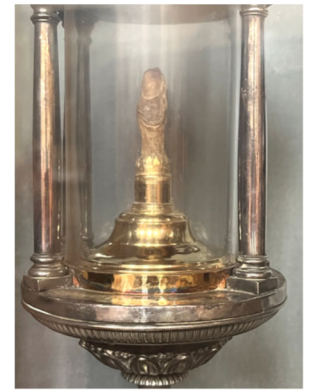
Before heading back to the villa, we decided to storm the castle on the edge of town and taste some of the wine from the region. Brunello di Montalcino is a red wine made with Sangiovese grapes grown in and around Montalcino. Brunello wines were some of the pricier red wines we saw in Tuscany but, to be honest, I wasn't that impressed. I guess I prefer a nice Chianti for washing down a human liver with some fava beans. Except skip the liver. And the fava beans.



Not a horrible first day of summer. No scheduled guided tours, no hours-long rides in a van to see a church, and only 6,233 steps for the day. Might have been nice to sit on my patio with a fire and a nice glass of... Chianti, but *somebody* wanted to go to Italy. Whatchagonnado?

**Thursday, June 22.** Guided walking tour of Siena. Complete with... churches. A town probably best known as the inspiration for the crayon color burnt sienna, except that Crayola added an extra 'n.' Siena is broken up into 17 neighborhoods, or contradas. Each contrade has its own church, a square, a well or fountain, and a mascot. Rivalries between them are most evident during their Hunger Games like events, which take place on horseback in a large square at the center of Siena. The town was gearing up for the next event to be held on July 2. I'm guessing that residents from the various factions... or districts... or whatever, were already talking smack during happy hours. *"Your horse is going down, bruh!"*

Our tour started at St. Catherine's Basilica. They say no pictures, but I couldn't resist a picture of her mummified finger. I don't know which digit it was, but I want to believe that it was a middle finger and that she is flipping off every person who enters. Our guided walking tour made its way to the center of town where we ended with a nice lunch. Table for 13, counting our drivers and guide.



A quick stop in Chianti to pick up some wine, then back to the villa for dinner. Before the trip, a member of our group was continuously worried about where her next meal was going to come from because the villa was so remote. So she arranged to have the private chef from our first night in Tuscany back for an encore. This time for a 10-course meal featuring Florentine steak. It wasn't horrible, but I'm not sure I can say it was better than Olive Garden. We dined outside after applying insect repellent. 7,632 steps for the day.



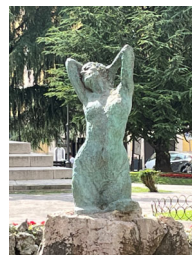
**Friday, June 23.** We spent the morning in the small town of Foiano. Not touristy at all. We chose it as one of our stops because Dave's mom's family was from there. Dave, who enjoys pottery, also wanted to pop by a ceramics studio/shop that a cousin had mentioned.



Our next stop was a small town near a lake for some lunch. After lunch, we went down by the lake for a quick stroll. Some organization had installed a “cat hotel” for all the stray cats in a small park near the water. I didn’t see any Chinese restaurants in the area. Coincidence?



Before heading back to the villa, we stopped in the town of Perugia. We parked on the outskirts of town and took the tram up to the heart of the city. Michael, one of our drivers, was very knowledgeable about the town and its history so he was our guide for the town. We walked around, ate gelato, bought chocolates, then headed back to the villa. 11,430 steps for the day.



**Saturday, June 24.** We packed up and “checked out” of the villa then departed for Florence. On the way, we stopped in that little town with the church of the bug-eyed naked leapfrog men for breakfast. We noticed some gardens with unusual installations among the shrubbery and along the wall on one side of the perimeter. Plus a new item in the square that hadn’t been there a few days earlier. This was a strange little town.





### Chapter 3 - Florence

We arrived in Florence and were able to check in to our rooms early because they were ready. Paul, our driver, had difficulty finding the hotel. It was on a one-way “street” a block away from the Duomo, a huge gothic cathedral. (We skipped the tour/visit, but Ellen/George climbed the 414 steps of the bell tower.) Once we found the hotel, we needed to take a rickety, exposed elevator that held 3 or 4 of us at a time to the 3rd floor. The place only has 20 rooms, mostly on the 3rd and 4th floors, but it was nice and they had a very friendly staff.

After getting situated, four of us went for a walk to grab a snack. It was hot and the streets were crowded, so moving in a larger group was not optimal. A few blocks into our walk, we found a little place with outside seating and the hint of a breeze. We had a light lunch and a beverage then walked through a crowded, street-long outdoor market with several persistent hucksters trying to sell their leather goods. Then we walked through a 2-story market selling various grocery items and prepared foods in a food-court style setting. At some point during our walk, the heat and the crowds got to me. I got tunnel vision, light-headed, and cranky.

Maybe we should have skipped Florence? I was ready to go home almost a week ago!

It was time for a cool shower and a short nap before dinner.

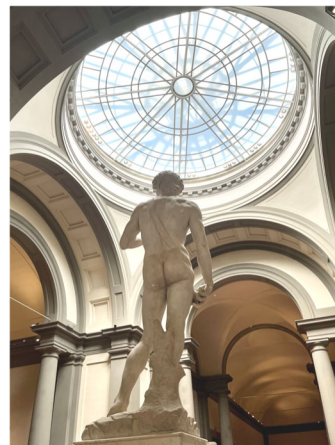
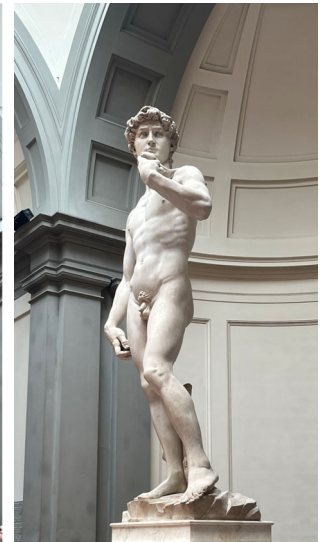
9,405 steps for the day. 9,000 painful and longing-for-home steps. < sigh >

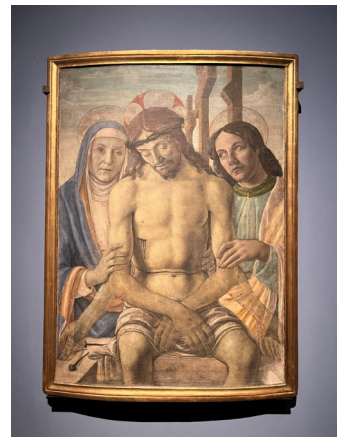
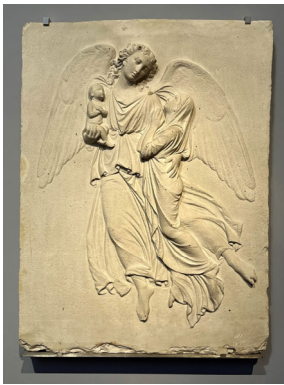
**Sunday, June 25.** First up is the Galleria dell’Accademia. A museum full of old paintings, mostly depicting religious stuff (including a 6-toed baby Jesus), and several statues.

The star of the show and reason for going is Michealangelo’s statue of David.

I focused on taking several pictures to justify the 16 Euro cost per person and the wait in line to enter.

If you are an elementary school teacher in Florida, please don’t share this with your students.

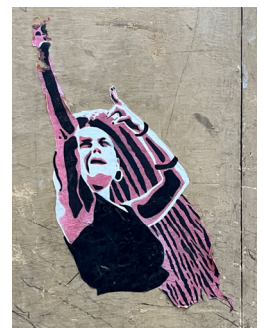
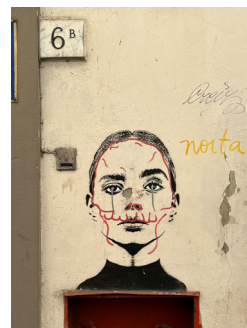
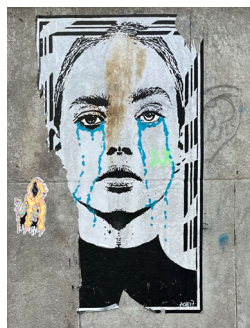
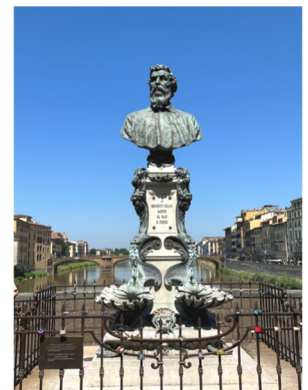
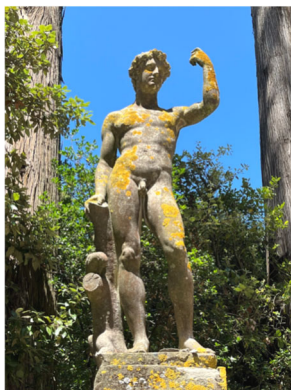


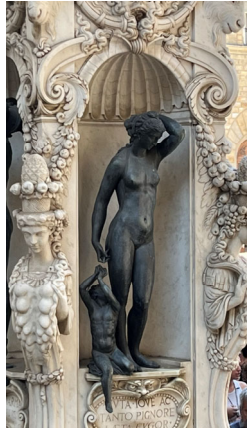


After the museum, Suzanne and I did a lot of walking. A LOT of walking. Here are some pictures of The Duomo near our hotel from various vantage points. Bell tower is on the right.



Florence on foot. Various sightings:





At some point we passed a restaurant near the hotel that we thought might be good for dinner. We made reservations for 8 and let the other couples know in case they wanted to join us. They all did. The restaurant had a wood fired brick oven near the front and it turned out to be the best pizza we had the entire trip.

Already getting fuzzy, but I think we had gelato for lunch. Then we went back to the hotel mid-afternoon for a shower and to lay down for a few minutes. After recharging, we walked to a church that had a school and shop for leather goods. Happy hour near the Duomo then the wood fired pizza. 20,641 steps for the day. A lot of fucking steps.



**Monday, June 26.** We started with a short walk before checking out while it was still cool and less congested. I bought a small leather duffel from one of the hucksters at the outdoor market. (I'm pretty sure it's real leather. It says "Made in Italy," but I'm less sure about that.) After checking out and parking our luggage near the front desk, we did some more walking. Confession time... Some of the pictures on the previous pages were from this day. All of it just blurred together for me, especially since I had no sense of direction and we walked by several of the same spots more than once. At some point it got hot and there were people everywhere. I started to get tunnel vision again and begged Suzanne to stop the madness. *Let's go back to the hotel and sit in the lobby for a bit before our train.* Which way it that again? I had no idea.



We weren't alone. Dave/Meg and Craig/Michelle were waiting in the lobby when we arrived and were ready to head to the train station early. We arranged for some taxis because nobody wanted to navigate the crowded streets for half a mile while dragging 80 pounds of luggage in 90 degree temperatures. We found a place at the train station to grab a drink, then it was off to Rome. The next day we were headed home. But not before experiencing the most egregious planning error of our entire adventure.

We arrived in Rome and set out on foot for our hotel. Four tenths of a mile. How bad could it be? Well... Not great considering that it was hot, the streets and sidewalks weren't exactly smooth, and I had broken the handle on my roller bag at the train station. Dave was navigating and told us that the Google bitch was saying that we had arrived. Actually, we've passed it. *What the fuck?*

After several minutes of standing around in the heat about ready to have a stroke, we found the entrance. It was locked. I somehow had the presence of mind to check the reservation and saw that there was a code to enter on the keypad to the right of the door to gain access. *We're in. Now What?*

Take the exposed death-trap elevator that only holds 2 persons at a time to the fourth floor.

*What is this, a fucking scavenger hunt?*

Dave went up first to figure out how to "check in." When I got up there I found that Dave had reached the proprietor via intercom and he had buzzed us in.

Self check-in. Key cards for our rooms were on a board just inside the door. We got to our rooms (which actually weren't bad) and I needed a cool shower before I was going to do anything else. Craig/Michelle needed a drink, stat, so they took off. Dave opened a bottle of wine purchased a few days earlier that he didn't want to haul home. He offered me some and I scored a paper cup-full to help-a-brother-out. It was delicious.

After freshening up, Dave, Meg, Suzanne, and I ventured out for some dinner. Out the front door on the building and 15 yards to the right. *This'll do.* By the time we were done it had cooled off and I found a second wind. Just enough to go a block or so for some gelato. Then I was done. 15,149 steps for the day. Next time we'll spend our final night in Italy at the Hilton next to the airport. *(Seriously... There won't BE a next time.)*

## **Final Thoughts**

The whole adventure wasn't horrible, but I definitely had more than my fill of churches and old towns that all look the same. Still not a big fan of international travel, but sometimes you have to do shit so the wife is happy. Thank you to Jessica (Italy Vacation Specialists) and our drivers (Samo, Michael, and Paul) for their efforts. They were great. Also, thank you to Tom for coordinating our group of 5 couples and their various requests and itinerary differences. Finally, a very special thank you to all of my traveling companions for putting up with my curmudgeonly shenanigans. Arrivederci and thanks for reading.



Entrance to building for the "hotel." Note lack of appropriate signage.



Only *this* portion of the "door" opens. Just wide enough for an oversized roller bag.