

Part Two



The pub crawl group - lost in Venice

Friday 6/24

We spent the morning getting lost again while trying to find the Academia. Once we found it, we used “Mona Winks” as our guide. It gave excellent explanations of this Venetian art that none of us would otherwise have understood. We then went to St. Mark’s square, upset a lot of pigeons, then took the ride up to the top of the campanile. It was worth the price for the view.

With “Mona” in hand, we next attacked the Doge’s Palace. This is the best attraction in Venice as far as I’m concerned. What a place! “Mona” made it even better. We saw monstrous masterpieces, Doges, big rooms, strange clocks, the bridge of sighs, and some dungeons.

Lunch was pizza at a pizzeria. Wow, onions and curry can go on pizza! We bought food for our next day’s journey to Rome then took a siesta. For dinner, we did the “pub crawl” that was outlined in Rick Steves’ “2-22 days in Europe” book. The directions went from outstanding to very hazy but we found four of the first five places then skipped #6 because most of the group had a gondola to catch. Place #5 was the best. It was a tappas bar. The owner, Michael, served us Chianti and one unknown but delicious tid-bit after another while singing for us and charming us to death. Rather than charging us for the food and wine, he took an offering. I had my first escargots and tripe there — I had been drinking so much on this excursion that I would have eaten anything — and it all tasted great.

Barbara and I decided not to go on the gondola so six different couples in our group gave us their cameras and asked us to take pictures of them from the bridge level above. It sounded easy, but the gondola went to a place without bridges first. We chased the gondola by listening to the sounds of the singer who was serenading the group. We went over many bridges,

taking a few shots as we could, if we could find our group, if they had not already passed, if we were on the right bridge. It was all so confusing but fun. Venice is quite a labyrinth. We eventually lost them for good so we headed to the Rialto Bridge. We ate gelato while dangling our feet in the canal and watching the gondolas go by.

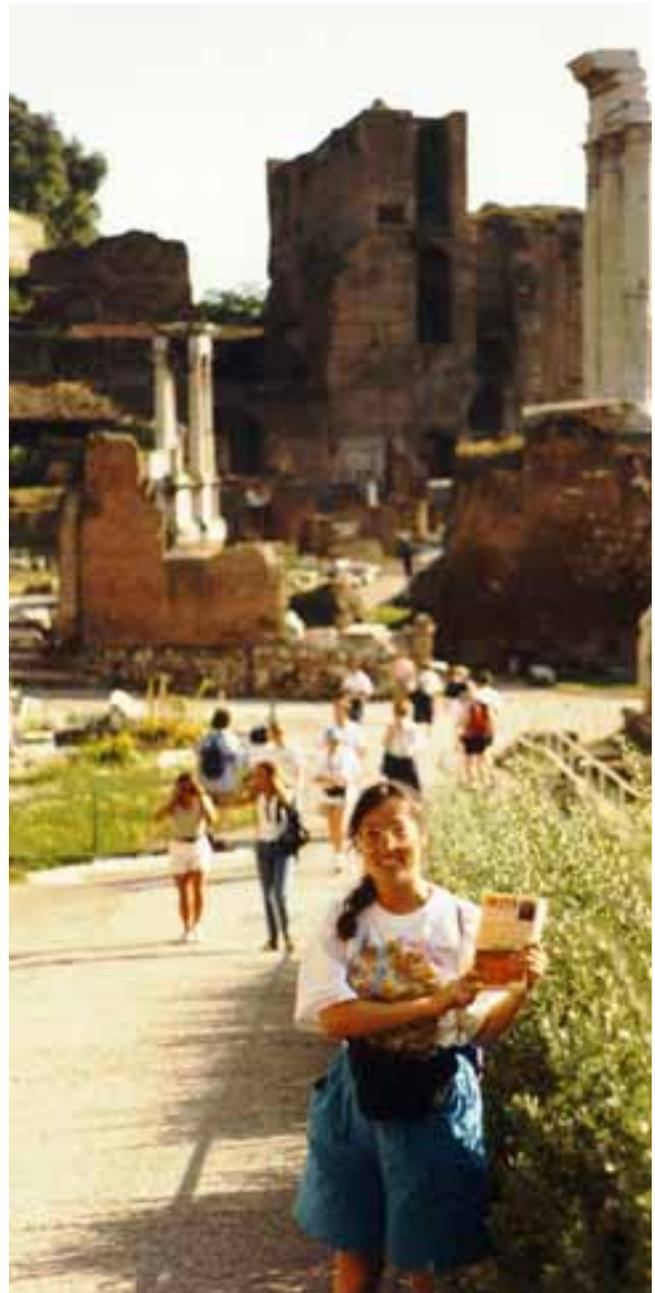
Saturday 6/25

Happy sixth anniversary!

We bought fresh baked goods then took the vaperetto out of Venice. The roads were very uneven, making it very difficult to write in this journal. The roads got better and so did the scenery. It still looked like California. At our first rest stop, we decided to buy sandwiches at the local Italian deli. They had an odd system that confused our group. You paid at one place, got a receipt, then you showed the receipt to the deli guy and he would make your sandwich. That way, no deli hands would be touching dirty money. Bethany in our group threw her receipt away after showing it to the deli guy and when the sandwich was done, he wouldn't give it to her. She was looking up Italian swear words in her book so she could yell at him. It was funny to hear "Stupido!... un momento... (flip, flip, flip)... !@#%#@#...momento, por favore... (flip, flip, flip)..." On the way out, some 20 or so Gypsies lined the door and tried to fleece us and take our sandwiches as we exited. Most of us ran through the gauntlet like line-backers.

Since it was our anniversary, our group pitched in to buy us a bottle of Chianti, cheese and bread which we shared with them and a whole bunch of ants at a rest stop.

Rome was big and dirty looking — even at a distance. We were dropped off at the forum in 104°F temperatures. The "Mona" book, for once, was fairly useless (that, or we were hot and tired). At one point, ten of us, with four copies of "Mona" were pointing in four different directions. The consensus was that we stand in the shade rather than continue. Barbara and I didn't go along with the vote. We hiked up the hill where Caligula lived and found a beautiful garden at the top. There were more ruins to see there too,



Barbara and "Mona" in the Forum of Rome

though none quite so large and impressive as the Basilica Maxentius down below. We never did find the Circus Maximus that we were looking for. We got out of the forum and made it to the Coliseum just before it closed. We didn't get to see much in one minute, so we planned to get back tomorrow. Our group of ten met up again and we spent an hour walking around the exterior of the coliseum, looking at columns, arches, and wedding parties getting their picture taken. The bus found us and took us to our hotel, located right by the entrance to the Vatican Museum. The downstairs was nice and it even had an elevator! Our room was a sub-compact with no amenities. We wouldn't spend much time there. I really liked the garden roof.

Before long, we were back out on the town. We had an excellent and cheap dinner in the square by the Pantheon. We found a gelato place for dessert, then rode bus 64 to St. Peter's without a bus pass. It was a very exciting ride. We saw Castle S. Angelo, which was lit up, and the Tiber river. Our hike to the hotel was long and unlit. We asked some police where we were. Fortunately, we were in the right place and we had no trouble finding our hotel.

Sunday 6/26

Today, we bought an all day pass for the rip-roaring bus 64. We took the bus to the Pantheon. This time, we went inside. The dome is huge! So were the pillars at the entrance. Looking along the side of the exterior, you can see how much Rome grew in the past few centuries — about four feet up. We passed a couple of obelisks and headed into the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minevera. It was a great Gothic church with a redone Baroque interior. We saw the sculpture of Christ bearing the cross by Michelangelo. I didn't know that Christ had such muscle tone! I suppose he was a carpenter. We also saw the body of St. Catherine. We'll see her head in Sienna.

The church of S. Ignazio around the corner was the most interesting church to date. As you enter, you see all the Baroque action on the ceiling, and a central dome in the distance. If you look up and walk forward, you soon realize that the pillars in the ceiling painting, and the central dome are all fakes! The "dome" is painted on a flat surface and the pillars are painted on a barrel vault ceiling. The pillars appear to fall towards you as you exit. All the sculpture around the ceiling is flat too, though it doesn't look it. Cute things like extending fingers into window spaces and toes over the edge of the cornice add to the effect of three dimensionally. A nice young man who spoke English gave us a history lesson about the church, then a cute, short, old Italian man who spoke no English at all showed us how we could



Painted dome on a flat surface at St. Ignazio

have more fun with the pillars in the ceiling. He would drag Hang and Barbara by the arms to different locations and I would then take a picture. It was lots of fun watching the pillars “sway.”

We went back to the coliseum next. it is much more impressive when you can walk around it. We tried to get into a church after that, but it was closed. We passed St. Peter in Chains, which had another Michelangelo statue in it, without realizing it. Bummer! I forgot all about that stop.

We took bus 64 back and stood in St. Peter’s square for a while. It is hard to describe how immense the (oval) square is. At the hotel, we lost Hang and gained Jeff and Bethany. The four of us strolled for a while, picking up gelato and sodas along the way.

We got Hang back and lost Beth then went to St. Peter’s. It was huge! (largest cathedral in the world). After touring the floor and viewing its many statues, like the Pietá, we went to the top of the dome. The climb was exhausting, but worth it for the view. We then went into



Inside St. Peter



Atop St. Peter

the crypt to see Pete and the popes. The whole time we were there, vespers were going on. We went back to our hotel to get ready for dinner. Jeff went back to St. Peter’s later on to see the Pope, who blessed the crowd every fourth Sunday. As a Catholic, this was a huge deal for him. We went to dinner while most of Rome was at the Vatican.

For dinner, Hang and Dan (the tour guide’s husband)

joined us as we went to Piazza Navona, where Barbara's brother, Aaron, had spent three months studying architecture. The sculpture by Bernini was awesome. Tonight's lasagna was made from sun dried tomatoes. Last night's lasagna at the Pantheon was made with real mozzarella and other potent cheeses (did you know that real mozzarella is made from water buffalo milk?). Both were very different but wonderful.

We all walked to the Trevi fountain after that. It was crowded beyond belief. We took a picture, then hiked back to our restaurant because Dan forgot his (wife's new) camera. We then went back to the Trevi fountain so Dan

~~at~~
take his picture. Home was via bus 64.

We watched the American football (soccer) team loose 1 - 0 to some team in yellow on the roof terrace TV set.

*Vatican
Museum*

Monday 6/27

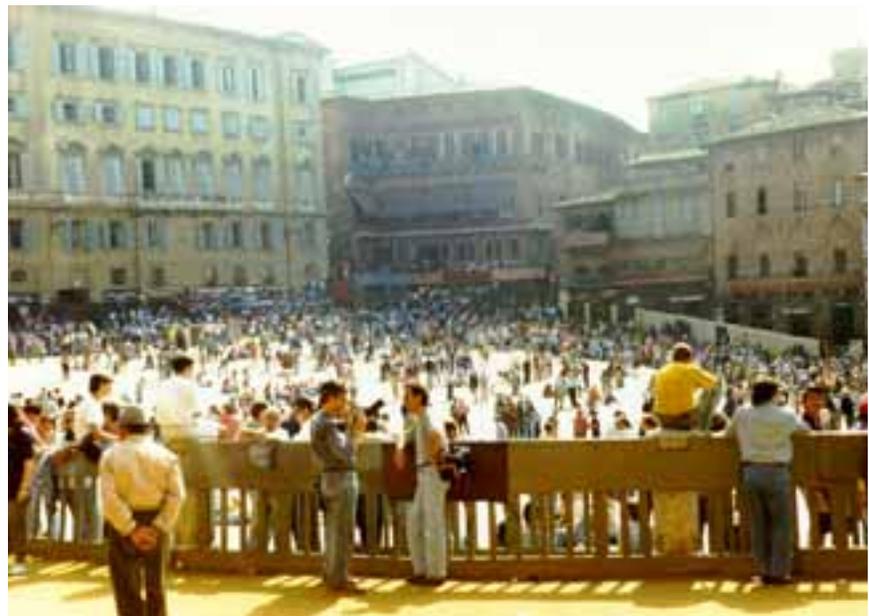
We got in line at the Vatican Museum well before it opened. On the advice of some friends, we ran all the other way to the end of the museum first, where the Sistine Chapel was located. That was terrific advice! Barb and I, plus Hang, Doug and Bethany, were alone in the chapel for half an hour before we saw our next tourist. We used "Mona" to help us navigate the ceiling. I only wish I had remembered my mirror so my neck wouldn't have been so strained. When the first tour group arrived, we went back to the beginning of the museum. We noticed along the way that the Raphael rooms were closed for repairs. Darn. We trudged though the museum with the rest of the crowds after that. My favorite piece was the Laocoön statue. We met Jeff and Nancy just after exiting the chapel for the second time (we should have gone through the "employees only" door in the chapel that exits right into St. Peter's — saves that half an hour walk around the wall. Oh well, live and learn.). We all went back to the hotel, ate cold pizza and had a siesta on the garden roof.

We left Rome at 2:30 and took a 3.5 hour trip to Sienna. The route took us through low rolling hills planted with wheat, corn, garlic and lots of grapes. The houses were now beige with brown trim and low pitch terra cotta roofs. Now this looks like Italy!

Sienna is a medieval hill town that is mostly sienna in color (hence the name). Some parts were burnt sienna in color. It was supposed to be traffic free, but as we soon discovered, that was far from true. Any resident was allowed to drive a moped, vespa or a three wheeled truck with a lawnmower engine — just so long as there weren't four wheels or more. None of these vehicles had a muffler. More on this subject later...

We were given the world's worst map at the hotel. We used this map for twenty meters or so then gave up. Our group of 14 spread out in search of the Campo Square. I found it first (by accident) then rallied the troops back to that location.

The Campo turned out to be a dirt track with a slanted center section. There was a big drain hole at the bottom so we nick-named it "the big sink hole." No one in our group was very impressed. I guess I should mention that our whole group was moist because it was pouring when we got off the bus (remember, no busses in the city, so we had to walk some distance to reach our hotel.).



The Campo, Sienna

We decided to find "authentic Siennese food" so we went to Locanda Garibaldi. The food and local wine (Sienna is where all the authentic Chianti comes from) was outstanding — it equaled Zell, which no place had done up to this point. Even the Flageletto beans were something to write home about. Afterwards, we grabbed some gelati and stood in the square. We found out that every year, there is a world famous horse race held here called the Palio. A horse is chosen by each of the nine districts within Sienna to represent the district team. The first horse, with or without jockey, to do five laps wins. Usually, only three horses will cross the finish line. There is one very sharp turn that downs many horses and there is a tunnel at the other end that many horses go through. The horses are ridden bareback so the jockeys fly off sometimes. It must be great fun to watch.

There was a rock concert setting up by our hotel so we thought we'd check it out. It was scheduled to start at nine o'clock but the opening band was still warming up at 9:30; then a transformer blew.

From the warm-up, we could tell that the opening group was exceedingly talented (progressive jazz). At 10:30, the opening band started. The new amp they were using didn't cut it at all. Everything was bassy and mushy. No individual notes could be heard so I left. Even with the windows shut, we could hear the band quite clearly. I watched some Italian TV. Love those commercials! Just as Barbara and I were going to bed, the main band started. They were twice as loud. They were also a completely untalented heavy metal band. After their second song, they stopped. A torrential rain had started. There is a God!

That turned out to be the only consolation because the thunder was louder than the

rock band, though just about as talented. I have never heard anything this loud in my life! At 4:00, the rain stopped but people were singing, yelling and talking outside. Sienna is a city that never sleeps. From four to eight, street sweepers and mini cars would drive by (remember, no mufflers). I found out too, that our window faced a concave wall that faced the square. No wonder everything was so loud.

Tuesday, 6/28

Didn't sleep well.

Those torrential rains started again just prior to our getting off the bus at Florence. We all stood against the wall, which offered some shelter, while we waited an hour and a half to see David. The three cups of coffee that substituted for sleep weighed heavily on my bladder as I stood in line. Eventually, I snuck in the exit and found the bathroom. The guards were very accommodating.

We saw Michelangelo's David and the "Prisoners" then we saw darkness. There was a city wide power outage. We exited and waltzed outside into the pouring rain. We then ran to the Duomo. It was slippery and dark inside, so we ran to the Baptistry to see the beautiful bronze doors... pretty wet here too. Jeff bought a saran wrap raincoat from a street vendor. We all ran for food. The food was hot, but I thought that Jenò's made a better pizza. We ran to the Uffizi Gallery, or tried to. We got lost in a square and couldn't find it. We found the Medici Palace instead. None of us knew anything about this place so we left (had we only known the treasures we would have found inside, we would have stayed). Oh, the Uffizi was behind all that construction that the map didn't show! The line was an hour long but it was under a roof. Fifteen minutes into our wait, the sun came out. Then it got hot and muggy in a hurry.

Power was restored by the time we got in, however, as the Uffizi itself is considered to be a work of art, nothing modern like air conditioning or elevators could be added. All the art was on the fourth floor and each floor was easily fifteen feet high. The Boticelli's were the best. A couple of the rooms I wanted to see were closed.

Once out, we found "the world's best gelateria" according to Rick and I tried the Riso (rice). Rick was right! This was the best so far and our group had been averaging three gelatos a day since Venice.

We gave the baptistry and the Duomo another look then went shopping until the bus took us back to Sienna. It rained most of the way back. Fortunately, it stopped long enough for us to get a cityscape picture of Florence on the way.

We ate at Locanda's again but this time, we had a three course meal and des-



Barbara and the Florence cityscape

sert with some great coffee. Most of the males in our group watched TV commercials after that (Italy is known for its multi-million dollar commercials, often with nudity, which are far superior to the programming. Imagine actually waiting for the commercials!). I went to bed early, having not slept the previous night.

Wednesday 6/29

The square was jumping from midnight to four with talking and more singing. I think it was singles night. The street sweepers cleaned up after them from four to eight. At eight, there was a color guard and drum corps marching to the square. Today was the beginning of the Palio horse race, and the beginning of a week of fun. So far as I could tell, today was “find your horse” day. Every district had their flags out. Everyone was wearing a bandanna with their district’s colors and mascot. The drum corps’ colors were red and gold. They were the snails. Our hotel was just on the other side of the border. They were a part of the red and blue porcupines. Down



Palio preparations in Sienna

at the Compo Square, the horses had been chosen and there were thousands of people there — each with their district’s colors. All this was happening and the race was still three days away. I got a betting form. Historically, the best team has been the “host family team.” They were the compo district team — much like Washington DC would be in America. We did not want to join the rowdy crowds so we hiked up to Sienna’s Duomo. It was a pretty, Baroque structure with alternating white and black marble inside and out. Too bad they wouldn’t let us take pictures inside. I liked it a lot.

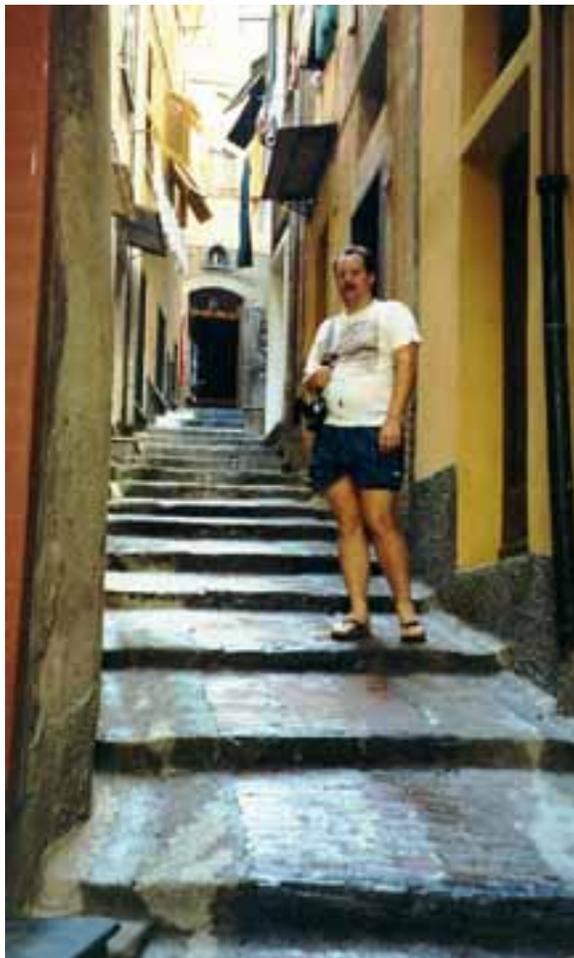
We spent the rest of the morning in the open market, looking at Italian clothing. From what I’ve seen throughout Italy, the women have four styles. The old wear slacks or a skirt and a button down shirt. The urbanites wear v-necks with tight pants or skirts. The “wispy” ones wear a nice one piece, light dress with only skimpy undies beneath. The hourglass types wear mini skirts with a wrap around tops. Each style really accentuates the best of the particular body type. It was clear to me that Italian women understood fashion. They all looked as good as they could manage because of the chosen cut of their outfits. I don’t think that American women understand this concept at all.

Both Barbara and Hang were looking at “wispy” outfits. I was trying to convince Barbara that she was more the hourglass type. Hang was ready to buy an outfit but she noticed that the top was semi see through and that people might see her bra. I was thinking to myself, “no kidding; that’s because the wispy Italians don’t wear one — it would look wrong in this outfit.” She didn’t buy the outfit.

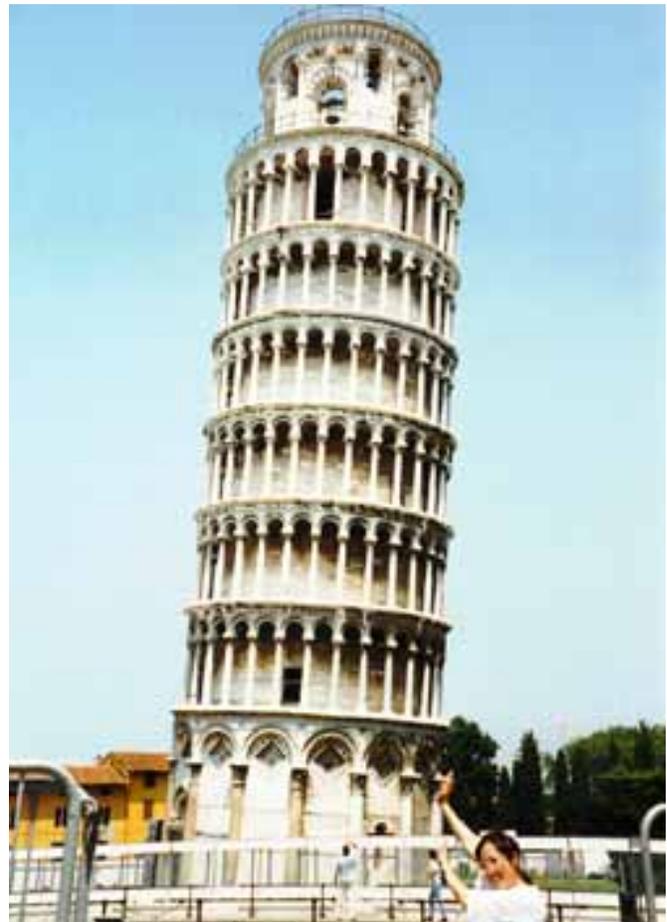
We somehow, as a tour group, lost our bus for fifteen minutes. Once we did find it, we

were off to Pisa. The leaning tower was a lot of fun. I wish that the cathedral and the baptistery were opened, but they were closed for lunch. Barb and I ordered a pizza for lunch with 10 minutes to go before our bus left. They told us they could do it. Nine minutes later, they were still cutting up the mushrooms so we canceled the order and ran back to the bus. Someday, that tower is going to crush that pizza parlor.

The trip from Pisa to La Spezia was fun because there were marble quarries all along the way. We saw white, red and gray marble hillsides. We all took the train from La Spezia to Vernazza, which is town #4 of the Cinqua Terre (five towns). This was a one street town that went straight to the Mediterranean. The water was a beautiful, clear aqua green.



Brian climbs way too many stairs in Vernazza



Barbara saves a pizza parlor

Our hotel, in typical ETBD (Europe Through the Back Door, our tour company) fashion, was up six staircases to the front door. Our room was up the staircase / rope to the fourth floor. It became very apparent that you didn't ever want to forget anything when you went down.

This was the first day of our "vacation from our vacation," which started with a nice swim in very salty water. It was very refreshing, but I cut both my feet on the rocks. Dinner was a bit fun because, as usual, our group (of 10 tonight) wanted to order different things so we could try them out. By this time, we were all eating off each other's plates, off each other's forks, and out of each other's cups. Anyway, this cute waitress, who looked a lot like Michelle Pfeiffer, told us that we couldn't order different things of the cook would kill her. She suggested that we all order the same dish. This didn't go over too well with our group so we ordered whatever was available, which turned out to be five menu items out of a possible

thirty. There was another group under the umbrellas in the next restaurant. We tried each other's house wines and pestos. Their's was better, but more expensive.

Barbara ordered the fresh sea bass, which was one of the cheapest items at 7,000 lira (\$4.67), or so we thought. When we got the bill, we discovered that the fish was 7,000 lira per 100 grams (a quarter pound). The fish was good, but it wasn't worth \$14.00; and, at the end of it all, Barbara was still hungry. We spent the late evening with almost the entire group eating cheese, gelati, Tiramisu, and drinking wine out by the sea.

There was no air conditioning in our room, and after the big climb up, we needed it. There was a slight breeze, but it didn't do much for us. We found out very quickly that this hotel was very loud. We could hear every conversation through three floors as if they were all in the room with us. Every door slammed shut. The church nearby chimed every half hour, 24 hours a day. Still, we did get some sleep. We knew that the lady next door could hear us too, because she was yelling at our group to be quiet and was calling us names like "dirt peasants." Some of the environmentalists in our group were mad at her because earlier that day, we had all witnessed her throwing her garbage off the cliff by her house and into the sea.

Thursday, 6/30

Hang, Barbara and I took the morning boat to Monterosso al Mare for shopping and a sandy beach. There wasn't much more shopping there than there was in Vernazza. Still, we had fun and we did buy stuff. The beach cost money, so we didn't go, but we did eat lunch by the sand. It was packed on the



Vernazza

beach and it wasn't even noon. We took the boat back and shopped in Vernazza as well.

For swimming fun, we bought swimming goggles and headed to the rocks where the locals swam. The rocks were longer and flatter so you could lay on them. The water was deeper and had many fish and sea anemones to look at. About an hour into our swim, Doug fell 10' off a rock and landed in shallow water. He was a little bit shocky, but otherwise OK. One very nice (and formerly topless) local came over and showed us where we could get medical attention. Doug was fine 20 minutes later so no doctor was needed. We headed back because we began to notice that even with waterproof spf 30 sunblock, we were still getting burned. I don't know how that lady who helped us was able to sunbathe for five hours, but she did.

We all went under the umbrellas and joined some of our male friends who were formerly watching a topless skin-diver (an American who had obviously never been topless before. She got really mad at the guys for watching her and left.). We drank lots of water and

bought wine for later that evening. I also bought a bottle of grappa to try out (liquor from grape stems and leaves).

The restaurant we ate at that evening was expensive and awful! The evening group of 20 that formed at the umbrellas last night to drink wine never appeared this evening. Those who did show up had enough wine for 30, so we were left with a whole bunch of wine to carry to our next destination (the Alps!) and up the cliff tonight to our room.

Our bus driver was mad at us and at ETBD for making him sleep in this hotel. He got no sleep last night, and would probably get none tonight. Tomorrow's drive would be up and around the mountains. I hope we live.

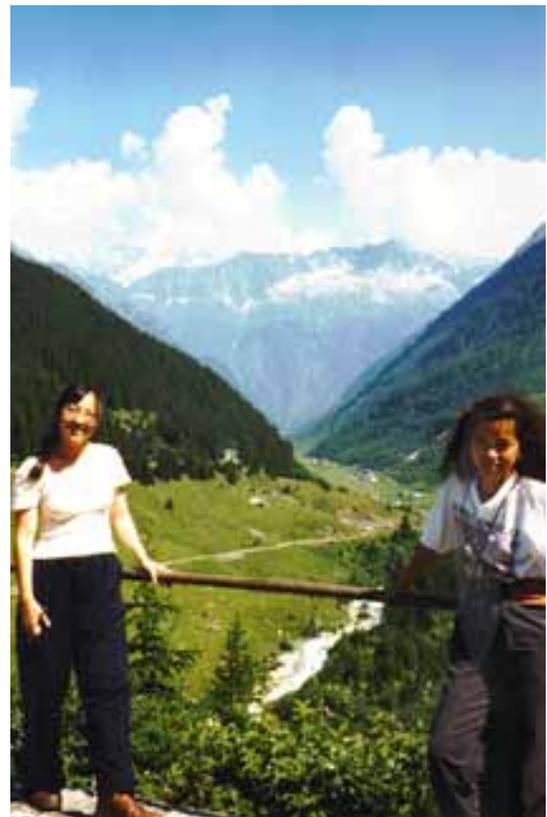
Friday 7/1

Morning came early because the train left at 6:25. Some of our more ambitious members decided to wake up at 4:30, waking everyone else up in the process. The lady next door was still calling us dirt peasants as she was dumping more garbage over the cliff.

This was to be our longest bus trip. I had discovered from earlier days that the bus and I did not agree. Sitting up front and breathing deeply kept me somewhat stable, but still queasy. Doing this journal and reading my "2-22 days in Europe" book made things worse. I did find though that reading my book "Ender's Game" by Orson Scott Card did not make me queasy because it was such a good book. Go figure.

Things started to get interesting about the time we hit the lakes district of northern Italy. It was very beautiful. Just on the other side of the Swiss border, we stopped at a "Mövenpick" rest stop (a somewhat appropriate title as it turned out). Our gang of four had packed a nice picnic lunch, but there was warm food to be had in the cafeteria so we decided to eat there. Barbara had the lasagna and I had the ravioli and a rhubarb pie — all rather unremarkable. I paid 45,000 lira and got the change in Swiss Francs. I was more excited about the register's abilities than I was with the food prices. Later, when people started to complain about the price, I figured out what we had paid — \$30.00! The lasagna alone was \$16.00. Our group was screaming "rape!" as we left the rest stop. We all swore never to do that again.

Ten minutes past the rest stop, we started to find some Alps. The drive got slower and windier. I got queasier. Half an hour later, the bus began to overheat so we stopped at the next available rest stop for 20 minutes while Mark looked at the engine. It was not doing well. We rode on with no air conditioning. That worked for half an hour. We then took another 30 minute unscheduled stop. The next stretch of road had road construction, which actually worked to our advantage because it allowed the bus time to cool down. We finally got to the top of the mountain and played in the snow for 10 minutes.



Barbara and Hang waiting for the bus to cool down

Going down was much easier, but then the brakes started to smoke. We stopped in Interlaken long enough to get Swiss Francs and a Swiss army knife, then it was up a winding road to the gondola. Hang got very sick along the way. Margaret called ahead to Walter at the hotel so he knew that we'd be late (he's very punctual about dinner). When we got up the cliff, a hay cart was waiting to take our luggage up. Good thing too because the hike was 200 meters of almost straight up. The hotel was a creaky Swiss chalet. I loved it. The food was terrific and so were the Heidi Chocolates (hot cocoa with peppermint schnapps). I stayed up very late because we were all getting rid of the Italian wines and Grappa that we brought. Barbara and Hang found energy from somewhere and had run up the hillside and were now dancing. I had had enough of the grappa so I gave the rest to some very appreciative Canadian hikers.

Saturday 7/2

After a pleasant evening in five foot beds with four foot comforters, our entire group was ready to tackle the Schilthorn (a mountain) for breakfast at the spinning restaurant on top. We took three gondolas up 5,200 feet to get to the top. The temperature dropped about 20°F by the time we got to the top. After breakfast, we walked around the top and took pictures. My group of nine took one gondola down to Birg, then hiked down to Mürren.

The hike went something like this... We hiked through snow for two kilos. I used my jacket, with marginal success, as a sled. We found an outhouse in the middle of nowhere on top of a mountain peak, so we used it. The next stretch was a 30° slope over avalanche areas, rivers and big rocks. The views were spectacular. That lasted for one kilometer; then it was 45° or greater down loose shale. A few people fell. After that kilometer, the grade maintained something greater than 45°. This was getting downright dangerous. The steep descent lasted three kilometers or so. The last four kilometers was considered easy by the posted trail sign because it had steps, but it still went from 30° - 50°.



Our group rests on the way to Mürren

We met up with some cows along the trail. I wanted a picture with the cow so I approached it. The cow began to dig in the dirt, then lowered her head and charged me when I got about a meter away. For a second, I thought Barbara was going to get a picture of me being gored by "Bessy." She did have horns. After some quick jogging, I got a tree between us and Bessy backed off.



Brian and Bessie moments before the confrontation

We finally got to Mürren two and a half hours after we

began our hike from Birg. Barbara bought a Swiss army knife, then we went to lunch and realized that we had only enough Swiss Francs for the soup of the day. Our group spent lunch thinking about what Rick Steves might have said about this murderous trail we had just hiked. His descriptions had become famous with our group because he would neglect to mention things like stairs and elevation and he always underestimated the degree of difficulty (though in all fairness, he always did stress in his book that you needed to be in good shape for this trip). We got the impression that he would send triatheletes to scout out the trails while he rode to the end point. Here's what we came up with (the parentheses are our notes):

Birg to Mürren This is one of my favorite hikes. The well marked trail (not!) will take you through some of the prettiest Heidi country. The hike, though difficult, can easily be done in an hour (using rappel gear, or in less time if you simply jump to your death). I usually skip and juggle down the entire trail. Every (knee popping, ear popping) descent will bring you to a new and exciting (cliff hanging) panorama. You'll say (w)ow!

Sometimes, just for fun, I take this trail up. The rapid ascent is truly breathtaking. I usually wear ankle weights and pack a full lunch so I can picnic in the snow. It's a wonderful experience that everyone should try. Every year, I take a group up. Those that make it to the top of this beautiful (avalanche) country have sworn to (or at) me that they'd never forget it. Some have even offered to help me find a quicker way back down.

Most of our group at this point wants to fly up to Edmonds Washington and throttle him (not us, the older, out of shape ones). Still, it is truly the best of Europe. Rick knows his stuff.

We got some more money at an ATM (should have done that before lunch), checked out the local grocery store (quaint) then headed down to Gimmelwald (our homebase). The trail was listed as easy, maybe because it was on pavement, but I felt like I had lost a knee

and two hip joints already so the hard pavement was no fun at all. I actually enjoyed going up the staircase to my third floor room. It was the only “up” I had seen in hours. I told some other members about the “cow incident” and they asked me if I had looked under the cow prior to approaching it, since there is no differentiation between the male and female cows in this Swiss breed. I had not. Pictures would later reveal that “Bessy” was indeed a boy cow.

Dinner was good. We had a polka playing accordion player named Christian join us. Most everyone danced. The afternoon fondue was excellent as well.

We found out that there was an annual dance/fund-raiser for the Gimmelwald ski team. We went, but then we started hearing American country music. Hmmm, no yodeling. We were out of there. I couldn’t see myself dancing the night away to country music even if it did mean mingling with the Swiss locals. I was just too pooped. The party went until 2AM and it was very, very loud. Yeeha!

Sunday 7/3

Today was our 10th dating anniversary.

We were all sad to leave Gimmelwald. Most everyone wanted to ditch France and take up residence here. I love this place. My legs ached, but the air was clean and the view was spectacular.

We bought two more Swiss army knives at the first rest stop. we also used up the rest of our Swiss Francs on chocolate.

It was fairly late when we arrived in Beaune and just a bit

over one hundred degrees outside. Our hotel was very funky and 70’s looking with no air conditioning. We were told that we had just enough time to either see a medieval hospital or go wine tasting. I wanted to do both, but chose the hospital (had I known that the wine tasting was in a cool wine cave, I would have gone there). The Flemish tiled roof of the Hôtel Dieu was interesting. The inside showed how bad the medicine was back in those days. It would be a miracle if the patient didn’t die from the cure. There was an Alterpiece at the end of the tour that was amazing in its detail. There was a huge mobile magnifying glass placed in front so you could view it all.

Dinner was good and the waiter was a comedian. Wow, there is something to this French food. I think most everyone at the table was guessing at what they had ordered. Our foursome knew at least to stay away from the country ham.

The evening was spent putting wet towels on ourselves to keep cool.



Hôtel Dieu, Beaune

Monday 7/4

Fourth of July in Paris? I had a feeling that we would see lots of red white and blue, but that no one would be playing “stars and stripes forever.”

Our entire group pitched in to get Mark, the bus driver, three bottles of Burgundy wine. We had all written on the box and I was assigned to draw the bus on the box because I was a “layout artist.” The group didn’t understand that my job had nothing to do with art. Jeff should have been drawing this. The road was very bumpy but I managed to do an adequate job. We gave it to him at the first (and only) rest stop. He gave a heart wrenching speech about how our group had treated him so much better than most others.

We found out that we were to be dropped off right in the middle of Paris, then Mark would immediately head off for his home in Belgium. He would have one day to shop for his mother before heading back to Haarlem for the next group.

We passed the Arc du Triumph and the Palace of Justice, the Louvre and Ile de Cité on our way to our final destination at Bastille. We were dropped off in the middle of the street. In three minutes, our bus was gone forever. We found our hotel and were given rooms. The previous group was just checking out as we arrived. We were given the fourth (European 3rd) floor as our location for the next five days. Our group of four balked because we were sick of climbing stairs. We had no choice though; every room was booked.

Hang, Barbara and I went to the Latin Quarter for dinner after finding the “Highlander” spot. The prices were very high. After dinner, I got a nutella crêpe from a street vendor. We made it to the Ile de Cité and took a river cruise. We paid 5F extra to see the sites all lit up, but it was barely dark at 10:00 when we went back.

Hang had to find a W.C. The helpful blue signs took us to closed or broken toilets. One set of signs took us in a complete loop. She finally snuck in a bar to go.

We walked two miles back in the very dark streets to our hotel. This whole section of the city (the Jewish Quarter) had closed down by 9:30.



Barbara at the “Highlander” spot near Ile de Cité, Paris

Tuesday 7/5

The comment about closing down... If you go out to eat in France, the restaurant assumes that you will be dining as the evening’s entertainment. The restaurants open at 7:00 and close at 9:00. They assume you will be there the whole time.

Our group of four plus Joan and Milan took the RER to Versailles. Along the way, a classroom full of deaf students entered our car. Barbara was talking to them in an instant. Some of the signs were new because they were using French sign language. I joined in too because it was fun. ASL (American Sign Language) and FSL (?) worked out well because both were based on imagery rather than syntax. It also didn't hurt that American sign language was developed from French sign language. The kids would sign in French and we could understand them! We just couldn't read their lips. One girl, Olivia, became the spokesman for the group. Eventually, we met the teacher. She was not deaf and she spoke excellent English. We traded addresses and phone numbers. She invited us to her house to see how a French family lived. She also told us that this was the last school day in France. Barbara and I wanted to go to Versailles with this group but we couldn't because they had pre-arranged to have a special signing tour guide for the trip.

We paid our ransom then we were free to wander before the English speaking tour began. The place was crowded. We almost didn't make the tour. NO big loss though because the French tour guide spoke English with a thick French accent, and to only one person. We were lucky if we could get one understandable sentence from her in each room. After each room, our group of six would compare notes and try to piece together what she had said. It was fun to do because even after doing that, we didn't know much more. Our conversation would go something like this:

"OK, I don't think that painting is original."

"I heard her say peasants were allowed to watch the king eat in this room."

"Ya, and something in here is made of gold."

"I heard that the peasants weren't allowed in here."

"Did anyone catch what was so important about this room?"

"No, but I think it had something to do with peasants or fake gold."

And on it went for one grueling hour. We were happy to see her go because our heads were about to explode from the high concentration levels that we had to maintain.

After that, we toured the gardens and ate lunch. By that time, we had lost Milan and Joan but gained the "three generation family" of Luanne, Cindy and Emily. We shopped a little then went home.



The Queen's bedroom in Versailles Palace

Dinner was with our group of six from this morning. I had read about a vegetarian restaurant called Aquarius in one of the guidebooks (Joan and Milan are vegetarians). It was very hard to find, but it was worth the effort. On the way, I asked directions in French at a tobacco shop. I asked if he spoke English and he said no. Later though, he said "Stop, your French is hurting my ears!" I will speak English to you so long as you stop speaking French!" His directions were excellent and we were soon there.

The food was excellent too, once we got it. The sixty year old waitress began with "I speak good English" then proceeded to speak nothing but French. We got really confused at one point trying to understand what the waitress was talking about and someone yelled from across the room "It's mint tea!" He was an American who was living in Paris. None of us had a Marling Menu Master, so we resorted to animal sounds and pointing to parts of our body to order food. Rick Steves would have been proud — it actually worked.

Wednesday 7/6

Our group of four plus Nancy went to the Orsay museum. The setup was very nice but they had changed it drastically since Rick had published "Mona." Still, we tried to use it as much as possible. Someone had also taken most of the good art across the river to an Impressionist exhibit in the Palace du Justice. I wondered about the logic of having an Impressionist exhibit in the same city that had the world's greatest Impressionist Museum. I felt I missed some good Monets, Renoirs and Manet's "Olympia" because of that dumb exhibit. Even so, this was the best museum that I had been to. After a very long stay in the museum's bookstore, we went to lunch. We found a cheap bistro with good food near the Sorbonne. We then went to the Notre Dame. It was only OK. San Chappelle was another story. It was magnificent. The stained glass was beautiful... and so much of it! The live Gregorian chants by some monks in the background made it that much better.



The second floor apse of San Chappelle

We got back to the hotel then went to our group's last picnic supper together in the park by the Eiffel Tower that Margaret had prepared. We got to the metro and Jeff discovered that he had lost his wallet. He went back and we continued. The picnic was very good. Everyone, even Jeff who found his wallet, showed up. At the end, many people said good-bye because they would be gone before breakfast.

Later, I was able to get 8.50F profit off a broken toilet that had ripped me off.

Thursday 7/7

More good-byes... We were down to five now and only because we convinced Nancy to stay an extra day so we could all go to Euro Disney.

We got lost on the RER and I had to jump a turnstile to get out, but we made it. Euro Disney is very well built (and still under construction). They had improved on Disneyland and added some new stuff. You could walk through the castle. The new ride was "Indiana Jones et Temple du Peril" (Temple of Doom). The thunder mountain railroad was built on an island. The ride began on shore. We realized later that we went under water to get there and back. Many of the workers were American. One gal spoke English and French seamlessly during a country can-can show.

Friday 7/8

Nancy didn't have a place to sleep so she slept in Jeff's bed. Jeff slept on the floor. She left early for En-



Nancy, Jeff, Hang & Barbara at EuroDisney



Brian at the Louvre

gland. Then there were four. Jeff was depressed.

We went to the Louvre and Jeff showed us the highlights (in about half an hour). He wanted to leave — he had seen the Louvre a few days earlier without us. The girls wanted to shop. I wanted to see the Louvre. I lost. We shopped. I got bored. At least the Louvre food court wasn't too bad.

By now, we were all sick of Paris and each other. Actually, we decided later that we had simply in Europe too long. 21 days is about ideal. After that, it's time to go home. A month (the length of our trip) was too long. It's really too bad that we hit Paris on day 24. I don't feel that Paris got a fair shake. I hope we come back.

Jeff took a nap. We went grocery shopping, then had a picnic dinner in our room. It was really a sad way to end the trip, but we couldn't muster enough excitement to go out. We spent the evening packing.

Saturday 7/9

All the trains were running late and there was a track change at Gare du Nord that was only made in French. Many Americans sat on a train going nowhere for half an hour or so. I kept hearing the announcement and finally decided to go and see what was happening. We made the other train with two minutes to spare. Each of us had 60 pound backpacks on. Since Hang's was on mini wheels, and because she only weighs 85 pounds, Jeff and I had the task of taking her bag up and down the many stairs in the metro and at the station. It was not fun. We should have drunk those four bottles of Zell wines three weeks ago! Since we got to the airport late, we had our choice of the last four seats on the plane. None of us got to sit next to each other on the way home. I landed in a middle seat in the middle of the smoking section of the plane. Europeans sure do smoke a lot. I spent a fair amount of time sitting on a milk crate in the kitchen with the stewards playing cards. One of the movies on the way home was in French and starred Lisa Bouquet (she played the Greek daughter in James Bond "For your eyes only"). It was typically French. Ooh la la! Air France pretty much throws those PG ratings right out the door.

Finally, we landed and I got to see my wife and friends again after twelve hours. It was nice to be back in San Francisco.

Once in a lifetime is not enough. Once a year is barely adequate. As McArthur said, "I shall return" (of course I won't be running from Japanese bullets as I say it, like he did). Europe had changed us. Jeff gained self-assurance. He would go back again. Hang had

questions about the religious art the whole time we were there; she would eventually become Christian and travel to other distant lands. Now that Barbara had done her "big trip," she would turn her attention towards starting a family. I had fallen in love with Europe and now planned to become an art historian so I could teach others about this wonderful place and learn more about what I had seen. More immediately, I had lost seven pounds! I could get used to this kind of diet.



Jeff, Hang, Brian & Barbara



*The End...
FOR NOW*