

FOLLOWING THE VIA FRANCIGENA, ITALY

18 APRIL - 3 MAY 2023



The garden at La Foce near Chanciano Terme, Tuscany

On 15 April, we flew straight to **Rome** to meet with our group of 14 people at the aptly named Hotel Villa San Pio, comprising three old villas in a beautiful garden on the Aventine Hill. What a great and intrepid group they were! Our European agent Claudia and her husband Michael, who over the last eight years have become our firm friends, hired two large cars to drive us along the ancient pilgrim route the Via Francigena, (originally across Europe to Jerusalem via Italy), but in our case from Rome to Milan, stopping and staying at historic old towns like Bolsena, Pienza, Siena, Florence and Lucca. The idea was to walk part of the route every day. The athletic ones (like Sally) walked up to 20ks a day, while some preferred to travel by car most of the way: it was your choice. It was a perfect group of our friends, including my two daughters Sarah and Ann, enjoying the beautiful landscape, the historic villages and towns.

The highlights were many:

In Rome we went to the opera to see an unusual double-bill of Puccini's *Il Tabarro* and Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle*. The Director's concept was fascinating: to feature two short

operas, though while musically and dramatically completely different, they were linked through a common theme of psychological or physical violence towards women.

Also in Rome we had the dubious experience of a guided tour of the Vatican, lasting about 2 hours in a maelstrom of thousands of visitors jostling each other and endless noise. At the end, we entered the Sistine Chapel and a few of us amongst the huge throng squeezed on to a bench to gaze at the famous Michelangelo ceiling.

Much better for me was an afternoon with my artist daughter Ann at the Rome National Contemporary Art Museum with her expertise enlightening me as we explored the encyclopaedic collection

On our first day out of Rome we visited the **Villa Farnese** on a hill near Caprarola, a magnificent Renaissance pile with a rather wild formal garden. The next day near Chanciano Terme we had a guided tour of a much more beautiful garden at **La Foce** in the midst of beautiful Tuscan hills and valleys, created by an English woman Iris Origo who has written books about its history, notably how her family rescued young children from the region during the worst of WW2.

From La Foce, we arrived at the beautiful hilltop Tuscan town of **Pienza** that Sally and I fell in love with 30 years ago. Wandering its narrow alleys that usually finish with a low stone wall and great panoramas of Tuscan hillsides and vineyards, we found a little cellar restaurant where for the first of several times during the trip I ordered *ribolita*, a kind of delicious bread, veg and meat soup that's a meal in itself. Sally had a gorgeous glutinous mixture of white beans, herbs, Parmesan, and truffles that you need to dig into with the spoon.

The following morning we took most of the group on a reprise of our walk from 30 years earlier down and across the valley and up to the neighbouring hilltop village of Montecchiello. Most made it to the top with grins on their faces but it nearly killed me this time! After Pienza, many of the group took long (10-15 k) or short (4-5 k) walks along or close to the Via Francigena every day guided by the online Komoot walking and cycling maps. Some along spectacular ridges, others in forests or beside lakes and rivers.

While we stayed 2 or 3 nights in most of the bigger cities or towns during our journey, we stopped every day to explore historic places. **Monteriggioni**, visible from a distance with its cluster of narrow towers on top of a hill was typical. Arriving at the top, it seemed to be nothing much more than a piazza surrounded by cafes, trattoria and pretty gardens among the towers. We met an Australian woman there who had come across the village 15 years earlier, left her husband and settled there. Now she said she was bored and planned to return to Australia. Another hill top town, also featuring tall towers, is **San Gimignano**, larger, smarter and crowded with tourists and full of steep labyrinthine lanes and pathways. It had the added advantage of boasting the most famous gelato bar in Italy and several nearby rivals.

Florence was rather a disappointment. It was the time of Italy's leading music Festival, Maggio Musicale but they announced their program so late, long after our own schedule and there was nothing on when we were there. Also the tourist crowds were huge - even in late April you could hardly move in the centre. Every museum or major church or attraction charges c. \$20 for entry and you queue for ever for tickets. **Siena**, another great jewel of Tuscany where we stayed 3 nights is similar. We queued nearly an hour to buy tickets for

its magnificent Duomo. Still how could we not visit and enjoy these great Renaissance cities. However it tells us that these places should be visited nowadays outside of the summer season.

By instinct I had decided it would be better for us to stay outside Florence up in the elegant hill town of **Fiesole** overlooking Florence. It was a great decision. We stayed in the *Pensione Bencista*, a crumbling 100 year old yellow mansion with rambling old rooms amongst forests of trees and flower decked terraces



View of Florence from Pensione Bencista, Fiesole

overlooking stupendous views of Florence. One day I declined to join the others catching the bus into Florence and spent a heavenly day relaxing on a terrace among the flowering shrubs and sipping glasses of superb Tuscan reds. Apart from lacking the white suit, cigarette holder, straw hat and spats, it could have been 1923, not 2023.

Next we drove on to **Lucca**, famous for its ancient walls or ramparts that surround the whole city, tree lined and some 30 metres wide that everyone strolls and where you can see the intricacies of the city within. We all enjoyed walking around the city on the ramparts and exploring the local churches and piazzas. One evening we went to a concert in the opera house that was promoted on billboards everywhere. It was a performance of three short operas composed and performed by students or recent graduates from the local university. They were all off-beat but interesting but the strangest aspect was five old men, a cardinal in regalia, the mayor and three others who each gave a dissertation (in Italian of course) and interviewed one of other of the performers who were all suitably obsequious. This went on for half an hour before the performance was allowed to begin. Can you imagine five such grey hairs being allowed to do this at an Australian university without being howled off the stage?

After Lucca we had an eight hour drive north of Tuscany to **Menaggio**, a town on the shore of glorious **Lake Como** where we spent the last three days of our journey, staying in the Grand Hotel on the shore of the lake, facing the mountains on the opposite shore where snow still snaked along their tops. In the morning of the next day, we drove back along the narrow *corniche* road to **Villa Balbianello**, a magnificent yellow villa on a promontory into the lake surrounded by one of Italy's most famous gardens tumbling down the hill to the shore in a profusion of exotic flowers, shrubs, hedges and trees large and small in every colour of the rainbow. Given last century by the owner to the Italian state, it is now a leading botanic institution as well as a mecca for visitors from everywhere.

To top off a fabulous day, we had been fortunate months earlier to secure seats for a new production of Donizetti's **Lucia di Lammermoor** at Milan's great opera house **La Scala**. Claudia and Michael drove us into Milan for a light dinner before the opera which starred the great tenor Juan Diego Florez as Edgardo and Lisa Oropesa as the ill-fated Lucia. She was splendid but his smooth lyric tenor did not have the dramatic edge the role needs.

On 4 May, our memorable journey was over and we were driven to the airport or Milan all to go our separate ways.

TRIESTE

Sally and I had a week after our Italian journey to suit ourselves. We took a five hour trip to **Trieste** on the far eastern margin of Italy at the top of the Adriatic Sea. But why Trieste? It is a great and historic city with its long Austrian heritage but the main reason was that our Sydney friends, Ingrid and John Mann, have been living there for more than a year. They have made the most of their retirement in recent years by living for long periods in such diverse cities as New York, Amsterdam and now Trieste. Very soon they move again to live in Berlin.

They are living in a spacious apartment in the centre of the old town, one short block from the seafront and also from the huge and magnificent central piazza on the seafront, **Piazza Unità d'Italia** that is flanked on three sides by huge, ornate 19th century building giving the city an unprecedented air of grandeur fitting for the largest cities in the world. The narrow streets and piazzas radiating from its seafront centre are elegant and full of shops, cafes, restaurants, churches and historic precincts and buildings. Tourists abound, many from the huge cruise ships tied up at the waterfront. Yet despite its splendour, it is a small city of about 200,000 residents, attractive and convenient to live in and the Manns have

loved living there and have made many friends.

We had five of the happiest days there, talking, meeting their friends, eating fabulous food, exploring the historic city and taking boat rides to the neighbouring seaside town Muggia.

Villa Balbianello, Lake Como



**Sally and Julia at
Villa Balbianello**

