

Serendipity Travels

Return to Europe

Venice and Florence.

24 August 1999

Today's ultimate destination was Venice, but we decided to take the "scenic route" to get there. We were close to one of the big inland lakes of Italy – [Lago di Garda](#). Driving south from Calliano, we drove through Roverto, then west through Torbole and on to Riva del Garda. We followed the western and then the southern shore of the lake on a decent, but narrow road.

A 4-kilometer peninsula juts out from the south shore of the lake. The north end of the peninsula contains a small town, the entrance to which is guarded by [Sirmione](#) castle. This castle was profiled in our guide book as a "complete" castle. It has a moat, two drawbridges, and even a fortified marina! We walked around the grounds and climbed the ramparts, took a few pictures, and then descended to town for lunch and more sightseeing.



After lunch we struck out for Venice. We hopped on the A4/E70 Autostrade and zipped by Verona, Vicenza, and Padova. We were not exactly sure of what we were doing, but found a very helpful person in a kiosk at a rest stop. She told us how to get on the causeway to Venezia, where to park, and how to get to our hotel.



Although [Venice](#) is a series of islands intersected by canals, it is possible to drive onto one of the islands. Once there, you have your choice of two parking garages (parcheggi), then you are on foot. Public transportation in Venice consists of water taxis

To see more pictures of the second four days of the trip, overlaid on a map, click: [Venice and Florence 1999](#)

(privately run, fairly expensive) and steam ferries which are like floating city busses. We walked from the garage to the landing stage, purchased our ticket, and had a leisurely ride to San Marco Square, where we debarked and walked to our lodging: Hotel La Fenice et Des Artistes. Navigating the narrow walkways of Venice is an experience like no other. Most “streets” are about 2 meters wide and are seldom more than 100 meters long. The first essential is a very detailed map, then a good set of eyes to spot the occasional sign and a sense of direction when the signs are absent.

Our hotel was adjacent to the Teatro La Fenice and was decorated with autographed pictures of “artists.” We walked to a nearby plaza and dined al fresco, then retired for the night. Tomorrow would be a busy day.

25 August 1999

After a tasty breakfast at Hotel La Fenice, we set out to explore Venice. As we approached St. Mark’s Square, we were accosted (very politely) by one of several gentlemen offering a free ride to the Island of Murano, which Meredith wanted to visit. Seems as though this is the site of some very skilled glass blowing artisans. We took him up on his offer of a ride on a water taxi.



Our taxi took us through a few canals then across the lagoon to [Murano](#). The glass blowers were exiled to this place for fear their furnaces would start a fire and burn the city proper. We were given a guided tour of one of the factories, including a very interesting exhibition of glass blowing, and then, of course, the show room. We succumbed to the temptation to purchase a very nice flower vase and accompanying candy dish, which the company shipped to us. The salesman gave Meredith a horse statue in appreciation of our order.



We left the factory and walked around the island. We found a water bus stand and boarded the next boat. A slight mistake – this one visited the other islands in the Venetian Lagoon and we had to transfer a couple more times before we returned to the city itself. Nice boat ride, however.

Once back in Venice, we had lunch at a sidewalk cafe with a view of the main canal. As we ate, a cruise ship was departing and an accordion player serenaded us and the other patrons. We explored a bit more on foot, including a stop at our room to deposit the morning's shopping treasures. We then walked to the Ponte dell'Accademia and boarded a water bus for a ride through the Canal Grande, the port area, and back to San Marco Square. By this time, we were ready for dinner. A short after dinner stroll returned us to our hotel room.



26 August 1999

Today, we would leave Venice and travel to Florence. After another fine breakfast, we checked out, took our last water bus ride, and retrieved our car. Venice is a fascinating place that we have only begun to explore. We hope to return in the future and spend several more days there.

Firenze is 265 KM from Venezia. We elected to make use of the Autostrade to cover this ground quickly, which we did. We ate lunch at a quick-stop style cafeteria en route. The food was comparable in quality to what you might expect at a similar establishment in North America, i.e., edible. Maybe we should have exited at Bologna to see if they really make it there, but we passed.

We arrived in [Florence](#) in late afternoon and found our lodging, a converted hayloft in a walled residence on the outskirts of town. Our landlords spoke as little English as we did Italian, so communications were sparse. They told us that the autobus is a handy way to get to downtown and where to board the autobus. What they did not tell us, or we did not understand, was where to buy the *biglietto* (ticket). One does not get on a bus and drop coins in the meter – you need a ticket that is validated when you step on the bus. Bus drivers do not sell tickets; they are purchased in tobacco shops. We walked about a kilometer in the very warm Florentine weather before we finally found a place to buy the tickets. We purchased enough for all the rides we were going to take today and tomorrow.

Tickets in hand, we soon were aboard a bus headed downtown. On the way, we spotted an internet business (the only one we saw on our entire trip) which we were to make use of the following day. We got off near the center of town and had dinner and a beer in the shadow of the Duomo (cathedral). After a bit more exploring, we

boarded the bus and returned to our hayloft. Our room was rather hot that night, but we managed to survive. After all, tomorrow we were to explore one of the most fascinating cities of Italy.

27 August 1999



Having purchased our tickets yesterday, riding the bus today was a snap. After the usual continental breakfast in our lodging, we headed to the historical center of Florence. Our first stop was the Duomo – the very ornate central cathedral.

We arrived shortly before the 9:00 AM opening and found a short line awaiting entry. The couple behind us were speaking English, so we introduced ourselves. He is a professional runner who was showing his wife some of the sights he sees in passing on his circuit. The doors soon opened, and we went on our separate ways.

One thing that surprised us was the lack of restrictions on photography in many places. Although our pictures do not begin to do justice to the beauty of the interior, you can get an idea of the grandeur we found here and in many other religious edifices in Italy.

After a suitable time, we left the Duomo with the intention of visiting the Accademia Belle Arti, home of the famous statue of David. We walked along the street expecting to be able to spot the entrance by a long line. In fact, we walked right past the entrance – there was no line at 10:00 AM. We were able to find the entrance and immediately found ourselves surrounded by paintings and statuary. *David* is on a high pedestal and we had no problem getting a clear picture of him.

Michelangelo's *Pieta* is surrounded by glass but at floor level. A copy of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* is the centerpiece of another room (the original is in Piazza Signoria which we were to visit later in the day). There are many more rooms in the Accademia, filled with various altar pieces and sculptures. Definitely a place to visit if you are interested in a quick, but intense, exposure to the art of Italy.



Leaving the Accademia, we peeked in the courtyard of the Palazzo Medici Riccardi and continued on to the Piazza della Repubblica – home to many vendor's stalls in a covered open air market – and then stopped for lunch at a sidewalk cafe in Piazza

Signoria. This piazza is dominated by the Palazzo Vecchio, one of the strongholds of the Medici family in Florence. After lunch, we found the internet business and spent a bit of time checking our e-mail and the stock market.

One of the more fascinating places in Florence is the Ponte Vecchio – a bridge over the Arno River. Once the bridge was the home to many trades, including butchers who used the river as a convenient disposal. Even several centuries ago, however, environmental concerns won out and the butchers were relocated. Today, only jewelers occupy the bridge. Quite a site, it took Meredith a long time to cross.



South of the bridge, we found the Palazzo Pitti – another Medici stronghold – and the Giardino Boboli (Boboli Gardens). We walked the gardens, dodging raindrops at times, and found the statue of Bacchus – apparently riding home on a turtle after an evening of mirth. By this time, we were about ready for a turtle to ride, so we returned across the bridge, had dinner, and took the bus home. Tomorrow would find us in Assisi, meeting up with Kelly and her friend Andy.