



## Return to Europe

Umbria, Tuscany, and beyond.

### 28 August 1999

Today's journey would take us from Florence to Assisi, where we would spend most of a week in a time-share condo. On our way out of town, we stopped at the Piazzale Michelangelo, a plaza on the south side of the Arno River from which one gains a panoramic view of the city.



A leisurely drive on both secondary and autostrade routes took us through Tuscan and then Umbrian countryside to the town of [Assisi](#). The province of Umbria bills itself as the "Green Heart of Italy" for good reason – lots of hills and valleys covered with crops and orchards.

We approached Assisi from the west, and our condo lies to the east of town. After climbing the hill to town and navigating around then through this Medieval city, we found ourselves on a winding road leading east. After many turns, not all of them correct, we found ourselves at our condo, Carpediem Assisi Living Club (RCI resort #3573). Whilst signing in, Kelly and Andy walked in. We hardly recognized our daughter! Five months of cycling had a very positive effect on her physique and she had a beautiful tan as well.

We spent the rest of the day sharing memories of our trips and planning our next several days. There were a few places Kelly and Andy wanted to show us, and a few new places we all wanted to explore.

*To see more pictures of the second week of the trip, overlaid on a map, click: [Umbria and Tuscany 1999](#)*

## 29 August 1999

After ten days on the road, we had a slight problem that needed attention: two suitcases full of dirty clothes and very few clean items. Kelly and Andy, who were sharing our condo, also had some laundry to do. Our first activity today was to visit the laundry room. The washer worked fine, but the dryer was not up to the task. We took our wet clothes and arrayed them on the drying rack that came with our condo.

With our clothes basking in the Italian sun, we headed to Assisi. We found a place to park near the northern gate to the city and walked to the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi. We were not able to gain entrance so we walked into town. Kelly and Andy were looking for “bubble wrap” to use in packing their bicycles and that became our shopping objective for the day. We found some in a pottery store and did not realize at the time how soon it would be useful.



It was a hot, muggy, day in Assisi and some of us soon became quite thirsty. A sidewalk cafe provided refreshment. Like many such establishments, it had large umbrellas that would have sheltered us from the sun had it been shining at that time. The umbrellas did come in handy – our explorations were interrupted by a rain shower.

Once the rain stopped, we pressed on. Walking through Assisi was a good preparation for the towns we would spend the rest of the week exploring. Cobblestone streets, barely wide enough for a car, are intersected by walkways that lead up or down the hillside to private homes and courtyards. Many of these walkways are neat and orderly, with lots of flowers in bloom.

We reached the center of town and found a small cafe. The menu had lots of appetizing items, complete with pictures. Little did we realize that they were all pre-made, microwave meals. Tasty enough, but not exactly the epitome of Italian cuisine.

After lunch, another rain shower chased us into the cafe for cover. Once the rain broke, we headed back to the car. Another shower caught us en route, and Meredith and Kelly used the bubble wrap as an impromptu umbrella. Once we made it to the car, we decided to take a ride through the local countryside of Umbria.



We wandered around the landscape, and I can't tell you exactly what route we took. At one point, we came upon the hilltop village [Bettona](#). Farther along, we entered the district seat of [Perugia](#).

Finally, we decided to end our wanderings and return to our condo. Our sun-baked laundry? Not! Our clothes were as soggy as when they came out of the washer. We moved the rack under cover and wrung out a few essentials that we brought inside to dry. A quiet meal in the condo completed our day.

### 30 August 1999

Today, we would visit some of the Medieval towns in Toscana (Tuscany) that Kelly and Andy had seen on their trip from Florence to Assisi. Of course, by car our journey was somewhat more rapid than theirs.



Our first stop was at a small mountain top town named [Monteriggioni](#), which they had spied from afar in their journey. We arrived just before noon and were treated to the noon bells from the local chapel. The whole town has fewer than 100 houses, all enclosed by a wall.

Our stay in Monteriggioni was brief because we wanted to press on to our next destination, [San Gimignano](#). This is a fortified city that was on the pilgrimage route to Rome and sought by many for its strategic location. San Gimignano once had 72 towers, 14 of them remain. It is a United Nations Heritage city and well worth a visit. The town square is ringed by several sidewalk cafes where one can find lunch and refreshment on a hot day.

Our whirlwind tour of Tuscany continued as we drove to [Siena](#). This is a university town (WWU had some affiliation with one of the schools there) that hosts a famous



horse race each summer called [Il Palio](#). Each of the districts (contrada) of the city sponsors a horse in the race, which is run in the town square (Il Campo). We arrived two weeks after the race, but many of the districts were still decorated for the event, which has a civic importance much like Bellingham's Ski-to-Sea festival (although, the Prime Minister of Britain has been known to attend Il Palio). Quite by chance, we entered the city via

the Contrada of Chiocciola (the Snail) which had won the most recent race, August 16, 1999. Red and yellow banners hung everywhere, and many of the kids of the area (and not a few of their parents) were wearing scarves with the district colors. Quite a sight.

The Duomo of Siena is one of the most ornate (after Florence) that we would encounter on our trip. Although one part of the exterior was covered for restoration, the parts that were visible were very interesting. Meredith and I decided to look inside and found ourselves intermingled with a tour group. I think the tour guide paid our admission, because we did not. Inside, they were restoring an intricate marble floor. Above, the chapel is ringed by busts of Popes starting with St. Peter.



Our explorations of Siena also took us to Piazza del Campo – the center of town and site of Il Palio. Here, we once again found refreshment as we rested in anticipation of our journey back to Assisi. A long drive back found us arriving after dark – but we had a great day partaking in the historic splendor of our host nation.

### 31 August 1999

Today our itinerary would take us through some of the historic sites of Umbria. Artifacts can be found from the Etruscans, the Romans, and many centuries of Christian civilization.

South of Assisi is the ancient city of [Spoleto](#). Two of the dominant structures are the castle (Rocca) and the Roman aqueduct (Ponte Delle Torri). We parked on the south side, took a stroll through town, and had lunch in a park. Then we drove to the east end of the aqueduct and took a short walk in the holy forest of Monteluco.

Traveling on, we came to [Todi](#). One of the subplots of our adventures with Kelly and Andy was the need to find shipping boxes for their bikes. We had found one in a bike shop near Assisi, but we needed another. Driving into Todi, we spotted a bike shop. It was closed, but the owner was due back soon. When he returned, Andy asked about a box and the owner said “sure, follow me” (or words to that effect, none of us spoke Italian). He went racing off on a Vespa and we followed as best we could in the Audi. A short distance south of town, he turned in to a small, modern, suburban area and pulled up to house with attached garage. Two minutes later, we were folding a bike box into the trunk of the Audi and he was zipping back to work.

We had the impression that we had solved a disposal problem for him, just as he has solved a packing problem for us.

With our box safely stowed, we returned to the town. It's no accident that fortified towns are

- Interesting
- On top of hills
- Difficult (or impossible) to drive through
- And therefore parking is at a much lower elevation than the town itself.



Once again, we parked and hiked UP into town. We felt we must be getting some good exercise; we climbed the hill into town with little effort. Todi is full of interesting buildings and side streets. On the way back to the car, we decided to take a shortcut on a path that appeared on our map of the town. Well, the shortcut appeared on the map but not on the ground. The four of us went traipsing through a backyard, then down a pathless hillside (picture on the left). With only a few scratches, we returned to our car, dumped the rocks out of our shoes, and continued on our journey.

Our last stop of the day was [Orvieto](#). Another city on a hill, but this one had public parking at the top! The hour was getting somewhat late by now, so we parked and took a quick look at the Duomo and central plaza.

As evening settled in, we headed back to Assisi. We plotted a nice route that would take us along the shores of Lago (Lake) Trasimeno. One thing about road maps of Italy – they show all roads with prominent numbers much like US maps. On the ground, however, one seldom sees those numbers posted on the road signs. Instead, there is a sign pointing to “Paciano” or “Panicale,” usually at the point of the intersection and not before. The prudent driver would stop and study the sign and map before deciding which fork to take, but that is not done in Italy. So, our drive home was a bit like our walk out of Todi – circuitous but ultimately successful. Tomorrow would bring another adventure.

## 1 September 1999

When I was growing up, I collected stamps. Some of the most colorful stamps were those from a place called San Marino. Even as a youngster, I wanted to visit the country that produced such interesting stamps. Today, more than 40 years later, I would see that wish come true.



The road from Assisi to San Marino passes through some rugged hill country in the Marche area of Italy. Once we reached the Adriatic coast we found a scenic road (through someone's vineyard) between Pesaro and Cattolica. Beautiful views and, once we exited the vineyard, we found a village cafe that served an excellent lunch.

The Republic of [San Marino](#) is a very small country completely surrounded by Italy. Originally established on a hill, in recent times (i.e., since 1463) it expanded to include some villages on the slopes as well. From a distance, San Marino looks like something you might see illustrated in a Tolkien novel; towers perched atop a cliff rising steeply from the coastal plain of Italy. This is no fantasy; however, what you see is real. When we first glimpsed it from the south, Meredith said "We're not going there, are we?"



There we went. A sign welcomed us to San Marino and lots of signs pointed to parking. The back (western) slopes of the hill were more accommodating, but still a trek. Once parked, we walked UP (of course) into town. One of the first items we saw was the crossbow stadium. Seems as though the Sammarinese have used that weapon to defend themselves many times in the past and have dedicated some of their precious real estate to an archery field. No one was shooting when we were there.

The main resource of San Marino is the commercial creativity of its inhabitants. In addition to stamps and coins, there were lots of things for sale, including, of course, chilled beverages. One interesting item for sale are postcards already stamped with RSM stamps. We bought several to send to relatives "back home." Lots of other interesting shops and stunning views.

At 6 PM, there is an interesting spectacle in the main square. Actors on stilts reenact one of the battles from the past. Lots of banging of drums, some amazing feats of motion by persons more than 10 feet in the air, and some gunpowder to add to the effect.



We left San Marino after the “battle” and found our way back to Assisi on a modern highway that took a more circuitous route through Rimini, Cesena, and Perugia to Assisi.

## 2 September 1999

Today was to be our last full day in Assisi. Kelly and Andy were to start their air journey home tomorrow as well. Andy elected to stay at the condo and pack the bicycles while Kelly, Meredith, and I went back into Assisi to explore the town some more. Meredith had been looking for a set of bowls in which she could properly serve spaghetti, so that became a subplot of today’s expedition.

We parked in the large public lot on the south side of Assisi and walked into the center of town – the Piazza del Comune – for lunch. After lunch we found exactly what Meredith was seeking – a matched set of bowls, plates, and serving utensils. The kind lady carefully wrapped the whole set in bubble wrap and we put it in my backpack.



Continuing on our journey through town, we walked to the Basilica of St. Francis. This time we were able to enter easily and had a good look at the place, including the crypt and reliquary.

Once we’d satisfied our curiosity, we walked the length of the town back to our car. I got my exercise for the day carrying the bowls around.

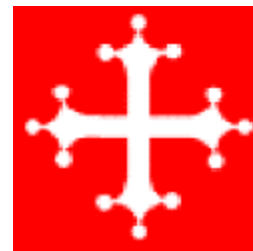
For our last meal with Kelly and Andy, we went to a local Ristorante, Moro di Ronca. I had the special, the “fisherman’s platter.” About the only thing I recognized on the plate was an octopus about 2" in diameter. Really tasty stuff.

## 3 September 1999

Today’s goal was to cover about half the distance between Assisi and Leysin, Switzerland, where our third week would be spent in another condo. There is a lot to see between the two, since the trip covers the northwestern portion of Italy. We

decided to visit Pisa, see the Leaning Tower, and then look at a bit of the Ligurian Coast.

We said good bye to Kelly and Andy and got a reasonably early start. To save time, we drove the autostrade as much as possible, a route which took us right by Florence. The trip was easy and well-marked and we soon found ourselves at the outskirts of [Pisa](#). After two weeks of driving and touring in Europe, we made two assumptions: that the tower would be in the center of town and that the route would be marked. Not exactly.



Pisa is bisected by the Arno River, running east to west, and the “center” of town is the river. The major streets are all one-way. There were a few signs to the “Torre Pendente” but they were sporadic. So, we entered the southwest corner of the city, traveled east, then north, then west along the south bank of the Arno, then across the Arno and north again. Turns out that the tower is in the northwest corner of the old walled city. Had we been armed with a map, we would have saved about 30 minutes driving (but seen less of the city)! The good news, once we found it, parking was easy (an enterprising neighbor has turned his garage into a parking facility) and it was a short walk to the Torre and Duomo.

The tower was designed as the bell tower for the cathedral. Much like Florence, but more spacious, the cathedral area has a large baptistry, the cathedral itself, and the tower. Adjacent to this is a cemetery, integrated with the wall of the city. These were all constructed in the 11<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries. As you can see in our pictures, these are all surrounded by some very lush grass. I think this is the only place in a European city where we saw so much grass – usually such buildings are surrounded by cobblestones or some other type of pavement.



After the usual photo opportunities, we had lunch at a cafe across the street from the tower. On the way back to the car, we bought the kind of tacky souvenir that everyone needs. Then we departed Pisa in search of the coast.

It is a very short drive northwest from Pisa to the major port city of [La Spezia](#).

This is a large NATO naval base that occupies a beautiful harbor. Nearby are the Cinqueterre, a series of five villages perched on the coast of the Gulf of Genoa. Our time did not permit a trip to the Cinqueterre, but we did drive along the shore

to Portovenere, a small resort town on one side of the harbor entrance. We saw some beautiful sights on the beach and in the harbor, including a boat that looked much like *Serendipity*! As usual on a hot day, we found a restaurant with shade and appropriate beverage.

Once relaxed, we set off again on the autostrade. We drove through Genoa but did not stop to visit any of Christopher Columbus's relatives. Just beyond Genoa, we turned north, leaving sea level and starting our climb toward Switzerland. We found a very nice hotel



in [Alessandria](#), a short walk from a nice restaurant and the city center. Dinner, a stroll, and we retired for the evening expecting more adventures tomorrow. (We would not be disappointed.)



#### 4 September 1999

This was our last day in Italy. The country is very interesting and picturesque, but I'd had my fill of driving here. It seems as though bicycles and scooters are immune to all traffic laws, and automobile drivers have their own set of rules that is different from what those of us who drive in North America are used to. For instance, when approaching a stop light or sign, we will stop *behind* the line. In Italy, motorists invariably stop *astride* the line, front wheels ahead and rear wheels behind the line. Until you are used to it, it seems as though they are going to run the light and your right foot scrambles for the brake. As one of my elders once remarked, "It's all in what you're used to ..." and I was finally getting used to their customs.

We left Alessandria after our continental breakfast in the hotel and headed toward Aosta using the autostrade. The region of Valle d'Aosta was once under the control of the French, and in this (NW) corner of Italy we saw many signs in French. The valley has many small towns, most with castles.

Our intent was to cross into Switzerland using the San Bernard Pass, perhaps catching a view of the namesake canines. We left Aosta following the signs for Col

du Pt. St. Bernard. As we drove, we also saw that we were on the route for the Mont Blanc tunnel, which was closed however because of a tanker truck accident a few weeks before. Something about the route did not seem right, so we stopped and took a closer look at the map. Aha! Seems as though there is a Col du Pt. St. Bernard and a Col du Gd. St. Bernard. Pt. is the abbreviation for “Petite” and Gd. for “Grande.” Guess which one we were supposed to be going to?



After a 20 KM backtrack, we were on the route to Col du Gd. St. Bernard.



Beautiful scenery. As one climbs the hill, you see signs for a tunnel that goes through the mountain. During the winter, that is the only open route. But this was the middle of summer and we don't want to go through no stinkin' tunnel and miss the dogs.

So, climb we did. Meredith wasn't saying much but I could hear her gnashing her teeth. The road was wide enough for the Audi, and to meet another car that size coming the other way, but that's about it. Unlike US and Canadian roads, there were no guard rails in most places – just some rocks set at the edge of the road. The road was not too bad, however and we reached the summit in due course. You can see in our pictures how the road snaked up the mountainside. You can also see the sign that is at the TOP of the mountain (but not at the bottom). Loosely translated it says: “No guardrails, drive with caution.”



You might also notice some white stuff in our pictures. Some of that white stuff is gray rock, but some of it is snow. Yesterday we were looking at gals in bikinis – today we are walking on snow.



The summit of the pass is the border between Italy and Switzerland. The Swiss have been neutral for a long time, and they continue to work hard at staying that way. At the border, we had to present our passports and state our business. Although not much more trouble than driving into Canada (and much faster than our bloated Blaine/White Rock crossing), it was the first time since landing in Munich that our transit had been interrupted for customs.

Later today, and almost every day we were in Switzerland, we would see Swiss Army troops in training maneuvers. Neutral does not mean wimpy. I have heard that all the passes, tunnels, and bridges into the country have dynamite in place so they may be closed quickly.

The St. Bernard Monastery is on the Swiss side of the border. We stopped and visited the museum and kennels. Leaving the summit, we traveled through the St. Bernard Region of Valais, one of the Cantons of Switzerland. We found a bank machine that dispensed Swiss Francs. This is the most colorful, and modernistic, of the currencies of Europe (this trip was prior to the printing of the Euro). Swiss Francs were about on a par with Canadian dollars, so our currency thinking became a bit easier. We drove on, into the Canton of Vaud, and took a winding road up to our next condo, in Leysin.



As we checked in, about 4 PM Saturday, the hostess told us that the only grocery store closed at 5 PM (even if there were customers in line) and would not open again until Monday. So, we hurried over and got provisions for the next few days. By this time, we were quite pooped and worked real hard at relaxing for the rest of the day.