

Italy

September 3, 2007

My fantasy life is all screwed up and I lay the blame squarely on Nick Baker. Before, if Laurie ran away with a wealthy munitions dealer, I was going to pick up the pieces of my shattered life and move to Monterey where I would live simply and walk on the beach at Asilomar every morning.

Now, there's Italy to dream of. Now I've got a trans-Atlantic flight, learning a new language, paperwork, traveling with Gus, finding a place in a quaint little hill town or perhaps Siena, all new appliances to buy. And Laurie says she's lost interest in the munitions dealer, and is thinking more of a Sienese pastry chef.

We don't know what to dream about anymore. Thanks, Nick.

The Plot

It all started in 2005 when Laurie's sister, Lee, began to dread turning 60. Her husband Nick wanted to do something special to turn this milestone into a celebration. Why not find a villa in Tuscany and secretly bring in Lee's family and friends for a ne'er-to-be-forgotten birthday? I know what most of you are thinking: Why not some flowers and a card?

But a villa in Tuscany?! As one husband observed, "Nick, you're certainly raising the bar." And my thought was, "Yup, now it's so high the rest of us can walk under it."

And so to Italy in 2006. When someone offers you a week in Tuscany, and all you have to do is show up, you don't turn that down. Yes, it meant that I would have to leave the house. And yes, Gus would have to go to dog jail. I accepted that with as much grace as I could muster. (Gus did not.) But I had no idea what a mess the trip would make of my fantasy life.

Snow to Go

We dropped Gus off on the way to the airport in a February blizzard. As I braked to turn into the kennel, the car pulled right towards a ditch, prompting Laurie to call upon the Lord, so I gave up on slowing down and just turned left at speed, drifting sideways until on a line with the drive and then motoring up. In the reception area, Gus yipped at his highest "don't go, don't go" pitch but the smiling high school girl who carried him to his cell was wearing ear plugs.

The snow stopped, the sun came out, the flight to Philadelphia was uneventful, and by the time I was walking to our gate for Flight 2 to Rome, I had pretty much forgotten that I work for a living. Laurie's mother appeared at the gate shortly after we did, arriving from Richmond, Virginia, smiling, waving from the chauffeured cart, a real trooper at 80. Laurie's brother, sister-in-law and nephew -- Jeff, Millie and Erik -- flying in from L.A., appeared next. At the wire, as Flight 2 was almost finished loading, another nephew appeared -- Michael -- in from Chicago and easily beating his luggage to the airplane, a victory he was not celebrating.

Across the Pond

I will tell you this about the flight: In the middle of the night, a couple in the row behind us, having finished their movie, turned on their reading lights to discuss Chex-Mix. I guess when a topic is so emotional, you want to see the other person's face. Three rows back, a man coughed once every minute for three hours; it was one of those rustling-of-dry-leaves coughs; by the end of the flight, plenty of people were glaring at him but he was not making eye contact with anyone.

Fortunately, I had a good book, *Absolute Friends* by John LeCarre, which leapt into my hands at Creekside Books the day before we left. And in reserve, a Skaneateles Library book sale copy of Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands*. Like jury duty and a doctor's office, an airplane is no place to run out of reading matter.

At 7:45 a.m., the pilot told us that if we looked out the starboard windows, we could see Corsica. I was drowsy. I thought of the Corsican Brothers. Corsican pirates. Napoleon. Some villain in a James Bond novel. Was I really flying over Corsica?

As we approached Rome, Laurie's mom began to worry about her wheelchair arrangements. Would she be separated from us? Her grandson reassured her. "Grandma, there are no wheelchairs in Italy." I, too, wanted to help. "You'll be riding a goat," I said. She was warmly appreciative of our support.

Fiumicino to Montisi

As it turned out, they do have wheelchairs in Italy, and we followed Mom and her attendant through Customs. No one inspected us, much less our luggage, which did not include our nephew Michael's bag, off on a travel adventure of its own.

In the terminal, we met the rest of the group before embarking for Tuscany. At a shop with interesting soda bottles, including the new-to-me SLAM brand, I purchased a Swiftian sandwich referred to as the "Guliver" and sat to watch people for a while. We greeted the Rev. Roy and Mary Ellen, in from Connecticut, and our niece Allyson, her husband Eric, and daughter Sophie (not quite one year old) in from Atlanta, and then Ruth and Denny in from Minnesota via the Netherlands.

Nick had arranged for vans to convey us and our luggage to Montisi. I saddled up as the navigator in Denny's car. I am a better navigator than a driver, but I wasn't much good at that either on this particular morning. I was, however, aided immeasurably by Denny's wisdom. Three times he suggested an alternative that proved to be correct. I was having trouble with signs like "tutti directzioni." Did it mean "all directions"? And if so, how?

The landscape was the reverse of what I grew up with. In New York, people live in the valleys and the hilltops are wooded. In Tuscany, the valleys are farmland or wooded, and the people live on the hilltops, where they first built walled cities for protection from uncouth barbarians and nasty neighbors. As one local put it, if someone was attacking you, you wanted them to be out of breath when they got to you. And in the Dark Ages, it was good to get as much sun as you could, and the sun shone longest on the hilltops.

Tuscany was not all pastoral and lovely. In addition to villas and stately ruins, there were collapsed buildings, abandoned farms, gravel pits and tin sheds. We were headed for Montisi, a little hill town in the Comune di S.Giovanni, in the region of Siena. The name Montisi has evolved over the centuries from Monte-Ghisi, Monte-Chisi and then Monte-Isi. Its recorded history dates from 1100 A.D. but like all of these hill towns, it was probably occupied in pre-Roman times.

In 1295, the Lord of Montisi willed his estate to the Hospital of St. Maria della Scala in Siena. The Hospital built a small fortress to be used as a granary -- a "grancia" -- for the storage of local produce. The Grancia was purchased by Jacopo Mannucci Benincasa in 1778 and remains in that family today. However, in June 1944, while retreating before the Allied forces, the German army dynamited the grancia's 600-year-old tower to deny their enemies an observation point for a day. (This was routine for the German military, who dynamited hundreds of ancient Italian architectural treasures to slow the advance of the Allies and cement their reputation as poor losers.)

Our assignment was to get to the villa in Montisi before the Birthday Girl, and we did. If you can find the road to Trequanda leaving Sinalunga, you can find Montisi. But it's one of those roads that only declares itself *after* you've found it, and therein lies the mystery.

My first images of Montisi included a young man wearing a knit wool cap and walking a pit bull, three of the Seven Dwarfs in painted plaster in front of a house, an ancient wall topped by a satellite dish. But mostly, it was magical. Red tile roofs, walls and gateways older than America, a tiny village whose overall beauty and character has for the most part survived the tides of multiple civilizations, war and modernity.

Surprise to Shock

Entering the Villa Maddalena was one of life's "wow" moments: old stone floors, an entrance hall, high ceilings, a large dining room and living room with a fireplace, narrow stairs leading to a maze of corridors and rooms with a view. Lee's neighbors in England -- Ed and Carol -- had gone on ahead to prepare; they left England from a different airport so they wouldn't run into Lee, whose entire family and closest friends had been lying to her for months, spinning one tale after another, acting like the Barrymores, blowing smoke like the White House. But now Nick, the kingpin, the mastermind, the spy master, had finally brought Lee to the door of the villa, and as she stepped inside, he thought, "I've done my job. I can let go, and enjoy this."

Lee was expecting to see her daughter and granddaughter in Rome, but here they were in Montisi. She adjusted. Her sister and brother stepped into the room from the kitchen and her eyes widened, but still not in astonishment. Her mother, who had been in the hospital on Tuesday to have her heart sparked back into synch, now *that* was a surprise, and then her friends, Roy and Mary Ellen, Roger and Judy, Denny and Ruth, Ed and Carol... and Lee was pushed beyond surprise into the realm of shock.

The surprising successful, the champagne decanted, the conversations buzzing, and dinner three hours in the future, I decided to take a nap. After sitting up all night crossing the ocean, dozing for a minute here and there, I was ready to lie down and be still. Oh, so ready. I climbed the stairs, closed the bedroom's old wooden door behind me, stepped down two stone steps, sat on the edge of the bed, took off my shoes and my sweater, set my glasses on the bedside table, rolled under the comforter, slowly lowered my head to the pillow, let out a long sigh and I was asleep. It was blissful, dreamless, soft sleep, the bed like a cloud, the comforter like an embrace. When I awoke two hours later, I truly felt that this had been a nap for the ages. It boded well for Tuscany.

Dinner was a simple but exquisite repast of lasanga, prosciutto, two kinds of cheese, salad, bread, white and red wine, and a fruit tart for dessert. The villa was stocked. If you ever find yourself in Tuscany and someone has to go shopping, be sure to send the right team. Ed, Carol, Roger and Judy (who had also arrived early, to stock the larder) did an extraordinary job. There was a plastic tub of olives on the kitchen counter, and I still dream of it. Plump, green olives, that tasted less like the olives that come out of American jars, and more like butter, more like some mythic ambrosia. Judy also found mayonnaise in a tube. And liters of grapefruit soda, which sustained me since I was avoiding alcohol and caffeine. And she packed a glue stick, which I borrowed often to stick paper items into my notebook. Judy is crafty, in the best sense of the word.

Saturday night I went to bed at 9:30 p.m. and on Sunday morning I awoke at 8:15 a.m. to the sound of Italian birds. Without a resident birder, I was unable to tell what kind of birds they were. I just knew they were birds I hadn't heard in Skaneateles. I swung open the wooden shutters and there was a Tuscan morning, a beautiful valley and far in the distance, another hilltown, with a tower.

M.

The owner of the villa was not in attendance, but she was a reassuring presence all week. Her written directions to the villa, her instructions on how to find and do everything were read and quoted almost hourly. My favorite instruction was, "Do not use the clothes dryer." Apparently, it uses half the electricity in the village, blows fuses, and burns clothes. It must have been part of a set.

Locally, M. is known as "Quella degli otto bagni" -- She of the Eight Bathrooms -- because that's how many she put into the villa. Apparently, eight dining rooms would have been no more surprising, but we all loved having our own bathroom.

Taverna da Roberto

On Sunday, we had dinner at "da Roberto," the domain of Roberto Crocenzi. It was one of the finest meals of my life. My first mission, before dinner, was to convey greetings. Gail Hecko runs Chicktrips, and comes to Montisi every year; I found her on the Web; she was a great help as we planned for Montisi and she asked me to say "Ciao" to Roberto. With Marvin Gaye's "Heard it through the Grapevine" playing in the background, I said "Ciao" to Roberto from Gail, and then took my place for dinner.

Dinner, it's just too small a word. It was three hours of heaven, whatever you'd call that. Savories, salad, two pasta courses, steak, ribs, sausage, white and red wine, and then a dessert wine, a Muscadet. I had a sip from Laurie's glass, and my eyes rolled heavenward.

Laurie pronounced the dessert -- a chocolate mousse cake, chocolate icing and dark chocolate buttons -- the best she'd ever had. From the Dessert Queen, this was extraordinary praise. After the dessert was presented, sliced and served, talk ceased and a rising chorus of mmmm's, oooo's and oh my's began. Anyone listening outside the door would have thought we'd gone from group dining to group sex. Someone observed that it was better if it warmed up a touch, so I had a second piece. The comments were capped by Judy who said, "If I was a dog, I'd roll in it."

Monday

We had been advised by M. and Gail Hecko to get out and about, and we were all quick to visit Il Barrino, the coffee shop where life begins each day in Montisi. I do not speak Italian. To prepare myself, I had learned how to say "please" and "thank you" and especially "excuse me" in anticipation of doing the wrong thing many times. I also have my tattered Spanish, but the people of Il Barrino couldn't have been more helpful. The regulars looked me over and then ignored me. The women behind the counter did lots of pointing, showing me how to lift the cover on the pastries, how much the total was, where the napkins were, as if they were dealing with a really slow child. It was a wise approach. Over the course of the week I managed to exchange Euros for pastries, hot chocolate (oh my goodness), and magazines. I love magazines, and now have my very own copy of *Vanity Fair* in Italian, and *Ville Gardiani*. I also invested in juice in little green bottles (the new-to-me Yoga brand). The pear was a special favorite, but I enjoyed the blood orange and grapefruit as well.

Back to the hot chocolate: Swiss Miss it was not. It was like a melted chocolate bar with cream on top, served with a lovely smile. Others were making similar sounds over the coffee. By 9 a.m., I was pretty much sold on the idea of spending the rest of my life in Italy.

Gail Hecko had recommended a guide named Pino Teresi, and I thought it might be a good idea to have someone show us around the first day. Pino was a sterling choice. He appeared early Monday morning to take us to Montalcino, Pienza and Montepulciano. He grew up across the Mediterranean in Libya when it was an Italian colony. He came to Tuscany as a boy, having learned English and American popular music from a radio station at a nearby U.S. Air Force base. Music was a source of joy to Pino; as an aside, he told us about serving as guide for a woman whose father wrote "Red Roses for a Blue Lady."

Motoring through the countryside, he pointed out the fields of artichokes, olive trees, sheep and vineyards. We paused for a moment to look at a small chapel that appeared in *Under the Tuscan Sun*. A sign cautioning drivers about deer prompted Pino to say there were more signs than deer. We passed a beautiful estate and he observed, "Somebody was born with a shirt, and somebody with a castle."

Our first destination was Montalcino's fortress, completed in 1361, which, on a Monday morning, was closed for a local celebration. A woman in a police uniform gave Pino a hard time about parking. Pino was upset and I was upset for him, wanting everything to proceed swimmingly. Rebuffed like a Ghibelline army of old, we retreated to a restaurant where the camp followers stopped for coffee and pastries, and the warriors pressed forward to an mid-morning wine tasting. I went along for sips of Brunello, and gave the rest of each glass to my nephew, Michael, who graciously agreed to see that the winemaker's work did not go for naught. In leaving, we encountered the traffic director again, and Pino quietly said, "I'm going to get a smile out of her." And after a few words, he did.

Pienza

We motored on to Pienza, a hill town that for a brief time enjoyed the patronage of a native son, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, who became Pope Pius II in 1458. He died in 1464, but in his short reign, he worked with the dispatch and efficiency of a U.S. Congressman building a Navy base in his home district in Kansas.

Originally a hamlet called Corsignano, Pienza was rebuilt as an idealized Renaissance city with the help

of a Florentine architect, Bernardo Rossellino, whose work exceeded both the Pope's expectations and his budget. On the main town square, which includes the family palace, the Palazzo Piccolomini, we saw the Cathedral, built in a small space but with vaulted ceilings to give it a sense of grandeur. It was quiet and starkly beautiful. Laurie lit a candle for Abbie, and we went outside.

Inside, the church had been chilly. Outside, the church was chilling. Bullets had scarred two walls on the side of the church where two lanes met, a corner with clear lines of fire across this small town and up one side of it. Of course, this was also a spot where you could be shot at from two directions as well, with the church walls as a backdrop, and someone had.

"At Pienza there is a German mopping-up, and eight partisans are captured." -- June 10th, 1944, *War in Val D'Orcia: An Italian War Diary* by Iris Origo

"Tiny Pienza, birthplace of Pope Pius II and the very model of a Renaissance city, fell to the French on the morning of June 28. Stubborn enemy rearguards fought desperately to slow the French advance." -- *The War North of Rome* by Thomas Brooks

As I stood before the bullet-pocked walls, built in 1462 and scarred in 1944, I thought about timing. Here I was in February of 2006, free to stand and look out at the valley below. On this same spot, people ran for their lives across these smooth stones: German soldiers, Italian partisans, Frenchmen, hearts pounding, smelling war and tasting fear. Yet there I stood in peace, inhaling nothing but fresh air.

How did such a beautiful place become a battleground? In the 1920's, one political party took control of the leadership, the legislature and the judiciary. The press was either compliant or complicit. The leaders spied on their own citizens, treating them as enemies in rhetoric and in fact. They led the nation into a foreign war, eager to show power and reap the spoils. In her diary, Iris Origo wrote of the loss of confidence as it all began to unravel and the approval ratings sank:

"Among the first were, naturally, all those whom one may call the professional anti-Fascists, the Opposition, and to these must be added the ever increasing numbers of the disillusioned, of all kinds, sincere ex-Fascists, gradually disgusted by graft, mismanagement, and bluff; members of all three Services, suffering from a similar disillusionment; members of the upper classes, whose allegiance to Fascism was really chiefly to the god Success, and whose first anti-Fascist and anti-German wobbings began with the first glimpse of failure, only kept in check by an even greater fear of 'bolshevism'; and finally a number of simply bewildered, frightened, common citizens, afraid that the next bombed city would be their own."

Having sown the wind, they reaped the whirlwind, and the war they exported came home. For two years, the people found themselves bombed, shelled, shot, plundered, violated, imprisoned, betrayed, arrested and tortured by soldiers of all nations, as well as by their own countrymen who were clinging to power or lusting for power in a government to come.

Fortunately for this narrative, Pienza also has cheese. Pino led us to a cheese shop that was closed, to his dismay, but the one across the street was open and we had a tasting of Pecorino cheeses, made from sheeps' milk, which ranged from the delicious to the ambrosial. My favorite was an aged Pecorino wrapped in walnut leaves. Others were wrapped in grape skins, tomato sauce, ashes. I bought a small wheel for the road, rolled in chopped walnuts.

Montepulciano

I remember two things about Montepulciano: the cathedral and the wine cellar. The cathedral was built between 1592 and 1630, and its outside walls were left unfinished. Pino said it was because they had only enough money to finish the inside or the outside, and chose the inside. So instead of the finished stone you'd expect on a cathedral, the face of the church is a mass of ragged brick showing centuries of wear. Inside, things were more of what you'd expect. To the left of the main doorway was the recumbent, marble figure of Bartolomeo Aragazzi, Secretary to Pope Martin V (1417-31), hands crossed, head tilted, eyes closed, face at rest. I, of course, bought a postcard of Bartolomeo, a good thing or otherwise I would have remembered only the outer walls.

The wine cellar, however, I will never forget. The Cantina del Redi is in the Palazzo Ricci, built in 1562. The cellars include tunnels and traces of an earlier medieval structure and an ancient Etruscan well. The brick arches and vaults of the ceiling intertwine with the carved stone of the caves, one ancient world blending into another. The Cantina was supposed to be closed on Monday, but Pino worked some magic and we went inside, and made our way down to the cellars, down into the hill that Montepulciano is built on. The way down included a dark, spiraling equestrian stairway with stone pavers, wide and gradual in its slope for the benefit of horses drawing enormous wine barrels. The wine cellar was like a cathedral in the heart of a mountain with gargantuan wine casks instead of parishioners. Old stone, old brick, old wood, aging wine. Sixty is not so bad when you compare it to 1562.

We returned to Montisi and the news that Michael's bag was now in Pisa, having caught a flight from Rome. Someone said, "Michael, your bag is having a better vacation than you are."

Morning in Montisi

In the garden out back, I was sitting and taking notes, playing a game I used to play with Abbie, counting all the sounds I could hear in the quiet. My nephew Erik joined me, and I said, "What do you hear, Erik?" "Are you writing it down?" he asked, and I nodded, which seemed to make it worthwhile. Together we listened carefully to the breeze, to birds, bees, to a faraway jet plane, to people talking in Italian one or two houses away from ours, then to my nephew Michael practicing his trumpet, playing for an audience of olive trees, accompanied by the soft splashing of the two fountains in the garden, a church bell, a dog barking across the valley, to a car winding up the road from Trequanda. "What do you smell?" I asked. "The wind," he said. "And wood smoke," I added. There was always wood smoke on these cold spring mornings in Tuscany, scenting the fresh air.

I went inside and watched my niece Allyson feed my grandniece Sophie, who seemed very much at ease in Italy.

Tuesday, Siena

On the morning we were to go to Siena, one of our rented vans proclaimed its independence, lurching and stalling repeatedly, and honking its own horn. Laurie said it reminded her of the Clown Car at the circus, and the name stuck. But rather than surrender to despair, cool heads sorted out rides for everyone and the trip to Siena was on.

What I loved about Siena was the buildings, the architecture, the huge double doors with rings or knobs in the center, the high stone walls, the narrow streets that were canyons of history. It was like being in a movie, or a really good dream. I had seen the Palio, the city's central open square, in a film called *A Summer's Lease*, but to stand in its center, to walk its ups and downs, to step into the deep shadow of a lane running off the square and climb up into a few more centuries of history, it was magical.

We had arrived on Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday, and in the Palio performers were entertaining children dressed in traditional costumes, such as Spiderman and Zorro.

The young woman clerking at Il Papiro, a paper shop, was Japanese. We exchanged greetings in Italian ("Buon giorno"), spoke with her about the paper in English, and said "Thank you" ("Arigato") in Japanese as we were leaving. She smiled and said, "Do itashi mashite" which is "You're welcome." I felt oh-so-cosmopolitan.

The Duomo in Siena stands over an earlier church that in turn was built over a temple of the goddess Minerva. Construction of the existing Duomo started in 1200, with the dome built between 1259 and 1264. I was not wild about the Duomo's horizontal stripes of black and white, an allusion to the black and white horses of the city's founders. The stripes made the pillars and walls look like a box of Good & Plenty, or perhaps a 1920's prison suit. But the art, oh my. The stucco busts of early Popes and Emperors that circle a border up near the top of the ceiling. The paintings. The sculptures. Marvelous. I didn't care which were by Michelangelo, Donatello or Caravaggio; I just dealt with each new wonder on its own. Next time, someone can tell me the stories. My favorite statue was not of a saint, or a pope, but a patron, off in a corner, quite grand.

Siena was not without its perils. I was window shopping when a young man passing by in the narrow street made a sudden U-turn and charted a course for my pockets. I was watching his reflection in the store window (too many spy novels) and as he glided up to my side, he looked at the reflection of my face to see if I was absorbed in the window display. Our eyes met in the glass, we reached an understanding in less than a second, and he was gone. I was wearing a money belt (too many Rick Steves episodes) (in fact, it was a Rick Steves money belt) so I wasn't worried. But still, if someone slips a hand into my pocket, that person should be wearing Shalimar.

Sophie's Birthday

Upon our return from Siena, Michael found his suitcase in the front hall. It was a beautiful reunion.

In another celebration, Sophie turned One, and we had a party in her honor. This was painful for Erik, who, like Jackie Coogan being eclipsed by Shirley Temple, was reluctant to pass the torch and give up the adulation that comes with being the youngest. When the presents came out, he moaned, "I want it to be my birthday." I knew how he felt. Every year at Silver Bay, third week in July, we sing "Happy Birthday" to the same people, year in, year out. You'd think in 20 years, it would have been my birthday at least once, but no dice. Sophie ate the cake and frosting with her hands, a practice frowned upon at later birthdays.

Wednesday, Florence

On Wednesday, there were two cats on our window sill when I opened the shutters.

We rode to Florence with Roger and Judy. Roger is an ex-Marine who likes to build things. He has the added virtue of having grown up near Rochester, New York, with a deep, heartfelt appreciation of that city's grill food. At least half of our drive was taken up with a discussion of Don & Bob's, Vic & Irv's, the LDR Char Pit, Schaller's, Abbott's Frozen Custard -- all places I had visited on my many trips to Rochester, guided by such Flower City savants as D.F. McNelly, J.C. Hoffmeier and Lorraine Woerner.

Out the windows I saw vineyards, little homes on hillsides, a ravine behind a home filled with rusted metal tanks. steel drums and trash, a pink villa, a cemetery that was a field of white crosses, and on a wall, a Jethro Tull poster. And then, Florence.

Roger and Judy had reserved tickets for the Uffizi and plunged into the gallery. Laurie, Mom and I went directly to the Ponte Vecchio. I have a thing about bridges, especially those that are old, beautiful, historical, and the Ponte Vecchio is all three.

The bridge was originally made and remade of wood by Etruscans and Romans. It was the easiest place to cross the Arno River, and a great many soldiers marched across, attracting people who sold food, including butchers, and their allied tradesmen, the tanners. Both used the Arno as an open drain. After being destroyed by a flood in 1333, the bridge was rebuilt in stone in 1345, and continued to host merchants. In 1565, to link the Palazzo Vecchio (Florence's town hall) with the Palazzo Pitti on the other side of the river, Cosimo I de Medici had Giorgio Vasari build the "Vasari corridor" above the road level. This allowed Cosimo to travel from palace to palace without having to rub elbows with butchers, or would-be assassins. In 1593, Grand Duke Ferdinando I gave the malodorous butchers the heave-ho, and goldsmiths took their place (at double the rent), to everyone's satisfaction save the butchers.

In 1944 during World War II, the Ponte Vecchio was *not* destroyed by retreating Germans unlike all of the other bridges in Florence. This was allegedly because of an order by Adolf Hitler, who was fond of the bridge, or Field Marshall Kesselring, who was a lover of the arts. Take your pick. Instead, the German army blew up the palaces at both ends of the Ponte Vecchio to block the streets.

But back to the goldsmiths: Today the shops on the bridge are populated almost exclusively by jewelry stores. Laurie, Mom and I did the window shopping circuit. Laurie and I stopped at a shop that had hundreds, perhaps thousands of coral beads, a nice break in the fields of gold. One necklace caught our eyes and simultaneously we went, "Oh." Mom wanted to find a small gold cross as a souvenir of her trip, and so we went across the street to one of the first shops we'd seen, and went inside. In a moment a

velvet easel appeared with perhaps 100 small crosses on it. Mom looked at the first cross. A second easel appeared, followed by a third and a fourth. Mom was still on the first easel, and I decided this might be a good time for a walk.

Outside, I was drawn back to the coral necklace in the windows of U. Gherardi; it was just as beautiful the second time. I went inside to see how fast I could buy it. Buying went fast, but wrapping was a performance that could not be hurried, a ballet of necklace, tissue paper, box, more tissue paper, and sticker. Fortunately, Mom had about 400 crosses to review.

Pigeon or Rabbit?

After the Ponte Vecchio and before anything else, we needed lunch. It was raining lightly, so I left Mom and Laurie at the Uffizi lobby, Laurie with a necklace that was going to take several minutes to unwrap, and went off in search of a nearby restaurant. Just around the corner on the Via Lambertesca, as if on a movie set, I found the Trattoria Antico Fattore. I returned for my charges, took them to the promised land and we were led to a table.

As always, I was watching the people. A woman came into the restaurant, took off her coat and sat down. After ordering, she took out a paperback book for company, which suggested to me that she dined alone often. It was not a guidebook, which suggested that this was not her first trip to Florence. The book was *Blind Man's Bluff*, a good read about American submarine espionage during the Cold War. She was wearing a white sweater like a Hostess Sno Ball, a fuzz of coconut on white marshmallow. She had a pixie-ish haircut, short and dark, and, as she read, she slipped her little finger into her nose up to the second knuckle, which ended my reverie abruptly.

I returned to the menu, and selected deviled rabbit, which Laurie almost never makes for me at home. Mom turned down the pigeon, having seen pigeons in the street on the way to the restaurant. "You could be sure it's fresh," I said, but she was not persuaded. Lunch was delicious. (A culinary sidelight: During World War I, the restaurants in Florence served cat.)

David

From lunch, we went to see Michelangelo's David. The statue was commissioned in 1501 and first displayed, in 1504, in front of the Piazza della Signoria in Florence and was there, at the mercy of the elements, until 1873, when it was moved to the Galleria dell'Accademia. Laurie, Mom and I were among the 1.2 million visitors a year who come to see the statue. The David story can be found in 1 Samuel 17:1-58 and the Web is full of articles about it, so I won't rehash it here. But it was one of the most breathtaking things I've ever seen in my life. And to think it was made from a single block of marble, twice rejected by other sculptors for its imperfections.

Admission to see David is a modest amount, but the city makes up the money in other ways. Images of the statue's penis are for sale everywhere, on boxer shorts, barbecue aprons, and scores of postcards, including one where the manly endowment is wearing sunglasses and enhanced with a few lines to look like the face of a camel who is saying, "Ciao!" What a town.

Drapery

After a few hours in Florence, I could not help thinking of Attorney General John Ashcroft who was embarrassed by photographs of himself in front of the Spirit of Justice, a 1933 statue by Paul Jennewein, and so had the statue draped to cover its exposed breast. I could see Ashcroft in Florence, running with a wobbly stack of sheets, from square to square, gallery to gallery, statue to statue, in a fever of drapery, his eyes blinking and smarting from the smooth breasts that seem about to sway towards him, the gently curving thighs and soft bellies, the lips about to open and whisper, "John, John."

Spare Change?

I saw my first panhandler on the Ponte Vecchio, holding out a white styrofoam cup, an old woman with Marty Feldman eyes. People were practically lining up to give her money. She could have been

supporting a family of ten in fine style, but that didn't stop anyone from chipping in, including me. In front of the Uffizi, a young girl in a dirty white coat thrust out a pudgy, dirty white hand and wept for me, imploring me in a language I did not understand, could not even identify. I began to see a trend. Next a tall man in sunglasses was hitting up every one to pass between the Uffizi and the cathedral of Santa Maria Novella, leaning, swaying, reaching out like he was guarding the lane in the NBA. A moment later, a woman in a booth selling leather goods said to me in English, "Sir, stop! I have something for you. It is like a library book." I did not stop, but I did shiver. Then a very neat, well-dressed, well-fed man sitting outside Santa Maria Novella held out a white cup, perhaps collecting to pay his tailor and restaurant tabs. He smiled warmly, and I rolled my eyes. (I read later that this spot is where drug dealers prey on the elderly, but neither of us fit that scenario.) Next was an albino with pink eyes, short white hair, a black jacket and money problems who rushed across the street to speak to me in hurried Italian. I was flattered, but by then my looks could kill and neither of us was the better for the encounter. On my way back to the Uffizi, I passed a beggar with a tiny body, twisted legs and a huge black leather shoe, sitting in a doorway, but he was on break, in casual conversation with a friend, and it was just as well. It was getting downright creepy.

One More Stop

I had one more stop to make before returning to Montisi, and a ticket to the Palazzo Vecchio, the town hall of Florence, looked like a bargain if I could find a men's room. I stopped to speak with the guard at the entrance; "Il bano?" I said. He said something like "a la puerta sinestra" and I'm thinking puerta... portal... doorway, and sinister... left-handed... to the left and bingo! I was washing my hands and smiling.

Stoking the Coals

Back in Montisi, it was Roger and Judy's turn to cook, and Roger was preparing to grill chicken on the indoor grill, just to the right of the stove with a large hood over it to accept the rising smoke. "I want one of these for my house," Roger said. But how to get the coals fired up? The kitchen was no place for petroleum products (nor had anyone asked for Chevron Chicken). Roger had the coals glowing in one corner, but the heat balked at spreading. I was drawn like a moth to the flame. My Boy Scout training first suggested fanning, but that just sent ash from previous fires in every direction, or blowing on the coals, but that threatened to take off my eyebrows since the air went to the back of the grill and blew back a second later with a shower of sparks.

And then I had an idea; I wasn't sure if it was the angel on one shoulder or the devil on the other who was making the suggestion, but I sprinted upstairs into the bathroom and grabbed a hair dryer. Back down in the kitchen, I found a plug just across from the stove. "Stand back," I said as I hit the button for a low, cool stream of air and began to play it across the grill. Within seconds, the coals were glowing with new fervor, and the bright orange spread like warm marmalade. Of course, the sparks reappeared, bearing a lovely resemblance to fireworks. Erik, watching two grownups play with fire, was entranced. But by pulling back a few inches I managed to create the maximum draft with the least amount of sparks, and within a minute, the heat had spread and every coal was glowing. "Sweet," said Roger. Life was good, and we hadn't burned down the house, or fused the hair dryer which had done the job without even getting warm. The chicken was delicious.

Because I go to bed early -- I love to sleep, in any country -- I missed the late evening entertainment. On Fat Tuesday or Ash Wednesday, I can't remember which, I missed processions with lanterns and men singing. I heard the singing, but didn't connect it to a religious ceremony, because all the men sounded very, very festive. One night I missed cigars, but I saw the photos later, and they looked like fun.

Thursday, Assisi

Laurie shares her birthday with St. Francis, as well as a love of birds, and had long wanted to go to Assisi, and so we went with the birthday girl and her husband, our benefactor. The home and final resting place of St. Francis of Assisi, the town is the site of the Basilica of St. Francis. The basilica holds two churches and a chapel, on three levels, and was begun in 1228, just two years after the saint's death. By the time Laurie got to the frescoes in the upper basilica, tears were streaming down her

cheeks.

In spite of my Baptist upbringing, I loved the basilica. The lower sanctuary with its arched ceilings as deep as twilight, the quiet and intense reverence of the tomb of St. Francis, with a small altar before the remains, candles, rows of short pews for those who wanted to sit and pray.

The collection of relics, including a tunic and a hair shirt, gave us a sense of the reality of St. Francis' time. I also loved the basilica's gift shop, which was large but tasteful, and where, on a lower shelf, I found a glow-in-the-dark St. Francis. Laurie rolled her eyes, but a week later she wanted one, too.

Before leaving Montisi, I had riffled through the pages of Millie's Rick Steves guide to Italy looking for restaurant ideas. I thank Rick, God and St. Francis for the discovery of Locanda del Podesta, a small, lovely restaurant with sublime food. Who knew that sausage, black truffles and cream belonged together on penne pasta? I loved my meal, but Lee ordered the specialty of the house, gnocchi with a gorgonzola sauce, and I could not stay my fork from plunging into it. Of course, this is an Italian tradition; I was acting as the court taster to forestall any possible assassination by poisoning. It was possibly the best thing I tasted in Italy, well worth the risk.

The Two Liz's

Upon our return to Montisi, a young woman saw us passing in the street below and shouted down from her window, "Are you the people I'm having a drink with?" "Probably," I said, "And who might you be?" "I'm Liz," she replied. And I said, "Liz the artist?" "Yes." "I just called you," I said. She looked at her cell phone and said, "So you did." A few minutes later, Liz appeared for a glass of wine and conversation. An artist from London, she learned Italian and pulled up stakes to live in Italy and paint -- mostly landscapes because they don't complain that her work isn't quite the likeness they had in mind. Could the hillsides speak, I am sure they would have nothing but praise for her.

We met the second Liz shortly thereafter -- hot-air ballooning Liz -- also an artist, who also accepted a glass of wine. There was really nothing we could tell either Liz about ourselves -- they'd already heard it all at Il Barrino. And it was difficult for me to choose a conversation, especially because in the kitchen two women from the village were making dinner for us all, rolling out pasta, making spinach and ricotta raviolis by hand, cooking chicken, making salad. I didn't want to miss anything.

Friday, Home

A note about the arts: The most beautiful weaving in all of Italy is done by the drivers on the A1. They must rub olive oil on their bumpers each morning in preparation for their lane changes. What looks like a car length in the U.S. is "a space for my car" in Italy. And the painted center line, that's actually a lane for motorcycles. I didn't know that.

So all too soon we were driving to the airport in Rome, flying home, driving through a blizzard on Route 321. And the next morning, posting bail for Gus, who was doggone glad to see us, and we him.

Links:

Montisi ... www.montisi.com

Elizabeth Cochrane ... www.elizabethcochrane.com

Chicktrips ... www.chicktrips.net

Liz Graham-Yooll ... www.lizgy.com

La Locanda di Montisi... www.lalocandadimontisi.it

Villa Maddalena... <http://www.gamblehadley.com/maddalena/index.html>

La Grancia in Montisi ... www.lagrancia.com

Ballooning in Montisi... www.ballooningintuscany.com

Pino Teresi ... www.fattoriaborgonuovo.it

Trattoria Antico Fattore, Florence ... www.anticofattore.it

Cantina del Redi in Montepulciano ... www.cantinadelredi.com

Recommended Reading:

Because we weren't sure we were going to Italy until the day before we left, I did all my preparatory reading afterwards.

War in Val d'Orcia: An Italian War Diary by Iris Origo

Naples '44 by Norman Lewis

Monte Cassino: The Hardest Fought Battle of World War II by Matthew Parker

The Battle for Rome by Robert Katz

A Spy in Rome by Peter Tompkins

Bella Tuscany by Frances Mayes

The War North of Rome: June 1944 - May 1945 by Thomas Brooks

Neither Fear Nor Hope: The Wartime Memoirs of the German Defender of Cassino by General Frido von Senger und Etterlin

From Caesar to the Mafia: Sketches of Italian Life by Luigi Barzini

The Leopard by Giuseppe di Lampedusa

The City of Florence: Historical Vistas & Personal Sightings by R.W.B. Lewis

Brunelleschi's Dome: How a Renaissance Genius Reinvented Architecture by Ross King

The Broker by John Grisham

The Sixteen Pleasures by Robert Hellenga

And Viewing:

Under the Tuscan Sun

My House in Umbria

Stealing Beauty

Come September

Flowers of St. Francis

Summer's Lease

Faithful Readers

© 2007 by Kihm Winship