



Adventure in Italy September 4–15, 2007

By Mary Hotson '61, and Arlene Trettin '61

When the Björklunden Italy Seminar was announced, many of us could not resist the prospect of spending 12 days exploring the wonders of Florence and Rome with the guidance of Professor Dan Taylor '63 and his wife, Donna. Our expectations were high, and we were not disappointed. We had everything that makes a great trip spectacular. Gorgeous vistas, superior art, enthusiastic and learned leaders, and willing travelers! In addition, we enjoyed perfect weather. The Björklunden seminar to Florence and Rome was a blend of everything that makes a trip memorable.

We began our trip in the beautiful city of Florence, where we stayed at the Hotel Brunelleschi. The hotel is ideally situated, a short walk from the Duomo and the Baptistery, the Uffizi, the Piazza della Signoria, and the Arno River. As Dan Taylor often said, “location, location, location.” We discovered from a hotel brochure that the ancient tower around which the hotel was constructed is “the oldest standing structure in Florence.” The top of the tower was a perfect spot to enjoy one of the best views of the city, especially in the evening with a glass of wine.

We had excellent guided tours of the Uffizi and Accademia museums, and the Duomo. To help us navigate among the crowds, we were each provided with a radio device to hang around our neck. The guide was equipped with a microphone and when she spoke we could hear her even if she was across the room. These were a great help as the guide described the many beautiful paintings, sculptures, tapestries, mosaics, and frescoes.

At first the generous amount of free time intimidated some of us, but we soon discovered that we could find our way around easily, and were comfortable exploring on our own. The list of places to see and things to do is endless. Shopping was high on most people’s agenda, and purchases included jewelry, leather, fabrics, books, scarves, and souvenirs. Some of us took a city bus to the town of Fiesole, high up in the hills, and had a fine lunch at an outdoor café while enjoying a magnificent view of Florence and the surrounding area. Other popular destinations included the Medici Chapel at San Lorenzo, Santa Croce (containing the tombs of Michelangelo, Dante, Rossini, Galileo, and others), the Ponte Vecchio, with its gold and jewelry shops, Convento di San Marco (wonderful Fra Angelico frescoes, and relics of Savonarola), and the Bargello museum.

No trip to this part of Italy would be complete without some time in the Tuscan countryside. One day was set aside for a bus trip to the cities of Siena and San Gimignano. The views of the endless rolling hills, vineyards, and charming towns were breathtaking. In Siena we saw the vast Campo, filled with people relaxing and a festive bridal party. Inside the magnificent Duomo cathedral, we were in luck because the beautiful mosaic floor was uncovered (only in September and October), and we could see it in all its glory. As we walked out of town, many of us raced into bakeries to buy traditional Panforte cakes before we boarded the bus.

Our next stop was a wonderful lunch and wine tasting—nine wines!—in the garden of a winery. Some of us could

not resist making a few purchases after the meal. The bus was strangely silent as we drove to San Gimignano, but we snapped to as we arrived at this charming medieval town with its thirteen towers and lovely piazza. All in all, it was a great day, and it certainly made us want to spend more time exploring these and other towns in the area.

We would have loved to stay in Florence longer, but we also couldn't wait to see the wonders of Rome. As we arrived, we were struck by how much bigger and busier the city is than Florence. Happily, at our hotel (the Ponte Sisto, also in a great location along the Tiber River), we were met by Lawrence student and Rome resident Chiara Terzuolo '09, who led several of us on a walking tour of the area surrounding our hotel.

We fell in love with Rome, and soon discovered that one trip would not be enough to see everything. But we tried. One busy morning was filled with a tour of the Colosseum, the Roman Forum, and the areas surrounding them. Another day we visited the sprawling Vatican Museum, ending up in the newly restored Sistine Chapel. The enormous St. Peter's Basilica, with its huge dome and its breathtakingly beautiful interior, and the vast St. Peter's Square in front of it, were unforgettable.

Several places were an easy walk from our hotel. Many of us visited the Campo de Fiori. This wonderful piazza was filled by day with vendors selling flowers, vegetables, t-shirts, leather goods, and scarves, but by late afternoon changed into a peaceful spot for dining and people-watching. The Ponte Sisto pedestrian bridge allowed us to cross the Tiber River to the Trastevere area for strolling, eating at wonderful restaurants, and visiting the Santa Maria Church. This beautiful church was the favorite of Chiara, our Lawrence student guide, and it was well worth the visit.

One full day was devoted to a bus trip south to Pompeii, where we could tour the mostly uncovered remains of the city, which was buried by an eruption of nearby Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D., following a disastrous earthquake 17 years earlier. This trip was made more meaningful by Dan Taylor's reading of a letter written by Pliny the Younger. In it he gave a moving account of the death of his uncle, Pliny the Elder, who went to Pompeii in an attempt to bring help to stranded residents. This provided us with a better understanding of the events.

There are so many wonderful memories of the things we saw and did; many were awe inspiring, and many just plain



fun and funny. Some examples: chancing upon a concert in the Pantheon by a brass band from Germany who played, among other things, "Amazing Grace;" finally seeing the inside of a church in Rome after 40 years of trying, as Chris '63 and Mary Ann Vogel did; Diane Deirossi, James Hardy, and Mark Breseman '78 climbing all 463 steps to the top of the Duomo in Florence; Mark jogging along the shores of the Tiber while many of us were collapsed after a day of rugged sightseeing; shopping on the Ponte Vecchio and seeing more gold in the jewelry shops than we could ever imagine; enjoying an outdoor evening

concert in a theater built among Roman ruins, thanks to Greg Fahlund's advance planning; and listening to Fritz Ruf '59 describe climbing "Mount Kilimanjaro" in search of an elusive church.

Wandering along the Arno and Tiber rivers in Florence and Rome, respectively, provided a peaceful respite. By day, crowds of people rushed through the streets, shops, and market places. The evening found them strolling, eating gelato, and taking in the sights and sounds. Our fondest memories are of spending time with our friends, both old and new, while experiencing these two very different historic and beautiful cities.

We owe many thanks to our leaders. Dan and Donna Taylor, and Mark Breseman spent several months planning this trip, and their work certainly paid off. Dan had begun our orientation weeks before we departed, with a series of detailed and enthusiastic e-mails to all of us, covering everything from geography to museums to food to breaking in your walking shoes well in advance. Every day they were there with us, giving us needed direction, advice, help, and information. The Taylors have great love for these cities, and an enthusiasm for sharing their knowledge and experiences. Dan led our group as we walked through the cities, keeping us informed and on track, and making sure we saw the most important sights and many of his favorite things, even redirecting our guide in the Vatican Museum to be sure we saw the statue of the Emperor Augustus. Donna moved among us, providing explanations, advice, and insights. Mark stayed at the back of the pack, keeping track of stragglers, counting heads, and making sure we all got from place to place without incident.

We came home having learned a lot and with a great desire to learn more. Again, thanks to our leaders and fellow travelers for making this a memorable experience!