Judy’s Journal – Italy: May 2015

## April 28, 2015

Left Woodbridge at 8:00 & drove on the HOV to Noel’s house. Left our car & got a taxi to National ($20 includes tip & bags) arriving at 9:15. Breakfast at airport

Caught a flight to JFK at 11:30. Got there at 1:00. Emailed & texted. Tim called Annella. Deb & Don arrive around 2:00 via shuttle bus from Catskill. So nice to see them again. Lunch was expensive but good at Palm Café in the airport (turkey burgers for us, salads for D & D).

Board at 5:45. We are Sky Priority for $75 more each way/person. Much more leg room. Tim & I are in a bulkhead & Don & Deb behind us.

8 ½ hr. flight. Crummy chicken dinner. Next to us is a young family with 2 young boys & 1 baby girl. Very well behaved children.

Watched part of a movie & tried to sleep w/no luck. Restless legs.

Awaken (!) for breakfast

## April 29, 2015

Day 2 of Day Trips

 We are all exhausted because of lack of sleep & we have a long day ahead!

We land in Milan at 8:35 am., 2:35 am. our time. No wonder we are so tired!

We go thru customs, get our bags & go pick up the rental car. It is an Opal Zafira CDTI. It is a station wagon, model Tourer, with an extra seat in back, which we have flattened down, so all our luggage fits. We get the GPS going (coordinate set up won’t work & neither will toll free telephone help line.) We drive mostly on the Autostrata on A1. Three lanes of traffic, w/real speed demons flying by in the left lane, including 4 speeding Porsches. Speed checks via camera every once in a while & the GPS bings & warns us. Speed limit is mostly 110 kmh. It take us from 10:00 to shortly before 5:00. We stop for lunch along the Autostrata – You order, pay at the cash register & then give your receipt to the guy who serves up what you want. Sandwich for Tim, Margarita pizza slice & cut up fruit for me. I have a really horrible time staying awake & as Deb says, I often end up with my “face in my lap.”

We call Guido, our landlord, to let him know when we’ll arrive, & he is at our house waiting when we get there. As we approach Todi, our destination, we see a gorgeous old town on top of a hill & comment on its beauty & realize w/surprise & pleasure, it is our destination. We drive up a steep hill, approach an antique Etruscan gate, take a sharp left, drove alongside an ancient stone wall & take another turn sharply to the right & finally approach the driveway to our rental house, “Casa de Peri.” It is a steep downhill paved w/ textured concrete, & we must also navigate several sharp turns as we go downward.

Guido is tall, handsome & gregarious. Also very organized & efficient. Lovely 2 floored stone house built in 2013 to look old. Fabulous view of the Eastern valley. We are surrounded by flowers & olive trees. Also a patio w/a large umbrella & another apartment in our 2 floored building. Also, there’s another small house on the property, where people will come in on May 1.

We settle into our comfortable place. 1st floor – small kitchen, din. Room & living room w/French doors opening onto the herb gardens. Second floor has 2 bedrooms & 2 full bathrooms. Lovely tile & all new & very clean.

On to the grocery store in the town at the bottom of our hill – Ponterio. The grocery is a pretty good supermarket – EMI super store. We buy stuff for tonite’s dinner (fresh pasta & sauce & salad). Also very delicious Prosecco – Valdobbiadene Winery, La Gioiosa et Amorosa Prosecco Superiore DOCG. Small bubbles but many and a delicious flavor.

We eat & about collapse in our food w/exhaustion. Off to bed for all at 9:15. I sleep like a rock till 7:30 am., when I am awakened by people talking below.

## April 30, 2015

Day 3

 Slow moving. Up & out at 10:00. Off to Todi. We circumambulate the town in the car.

 Park at funiculare parking lot. Lift is free to top of hill, but parking costs. Tim & I walk up & meet Don & Deb at top. It is sunny & in the 60’s today. Slight breeze, so it’s not warm. We visit two churches – Tempio di San Fortunato (Romanesque rebuilt in Gothic style), & the Cattedrale where St. Jacopone is buried. Also Piazza del Popolo. There are many elementary & HS students (Italian) touring also. All kids the world over are the same, or so it seems! We also overlook a wonderful view of the valley.

 Tim & I go back down to the car via the funicular & get Guido’s list of restaurant suggestions. We choose 2, check them out & decide on Pane & Vino. We eat like pigs & order too many courses. We are there from about 12:30 to 3:30. Wine (white local for me, & red Montefalco red, also local for Don & Tim). Tim: pasta w/asparagus, Deb – tomato soup w/ chickpeas, mushrooms, J: artichoke salad. Secondi: Don & T: a special of beef stew; J: roasted lamb shank; Deb: smoked pork chop w/ mushroom garnish. No dessert!

 On to the car & a trip to the church shaped like a Greek cross, the Tempio di S. Maria della Consolazione. Very high dome and another great view outside.

 Home to gather ourselves & out to Deruta, known for its locally made & decorated Majolica pottery. We journey to what looks like a large factory, Grandi Maioliche Ficola. We talk to the granddaughter of the man who started the business. They have now expanded into making decorated tabletops out of volcanic rock. She takes us into the work area where we see a woman painting a tabletop w/ undercoats. She has been doing this for 50 years! We also see the kilns they fire in & she explains the whole process. Glaze on table top, fire, undercoat, glaze fire, add gold glaze if desired & fire again. Deb buys a plate & we buy a candlestick.

 On to town to another Majolica store. The painting here is neater & more detailed. We buy a spoon holder & Deb 2 tiles. The woman has to quote prices to us because nothing is labeled. Tim is convinced she’s ripping us off!

 Back to the grocery store for wine, salad, yogurt, etc. Home to salad for dinner. Deb drawing & feeding a stray cat milk, me catching up on this & all planning for tomorrow, which is a national Holiday in Italy – Labor Day.

 P.S. April 25 was just celebrated in Italy as the 70th anniversary for the country’s liberation from Nazi Fascism.

 Off to bed at 10:00.

 Car flashed a notice today – It needs an oil chg. ASAP!

## May 1, 2015

Day 4

 Up at 6:30 via alarm. I had a poor nite w/ many awake times, & Tim slept like a rock. Breakfast, showers, get the rented Mi-Fi working, do some hand washing of clothes.

 Drive north to Assisi, which is about a 40 minute ride & past Perugia. We park at the top of the hill, as recommended by Rick Steves, in Piazza Marteotti. We follow Rick Steves’ guidebook & do the “Assisi Walk.” We can’t find the Roman Amphitheater, but walk on to the Umbrian View; the Cathedral of San Rufino, w/ its Roman foundations & cistern & where St. Augustine & St. Claire were baptized; the basilica of St. Claire w/ its buttresses added on later; the Temple of Minerva; the old market w/ its Roman ceiling frescoes; the Church of Santo Stefano & on to the Basilica of St. Frances. Before that we eat lunch at a pizzeria at I Monaci. Very good & a warm haven. (It is a cool & breezy day w/ many wearing boots, scarves & puffy coats.). I have a mushroom & artichoke calzone & salad; Don & Deb each have a veggie pizza & a salad. Tim has bruschetta & veal Saltimbocca. It is all very good, but they don’t bring the French fries to Tim & soup for Deb until after all our food is done. We turn them away & the waiter isn’t too happy, but we are not charged. The waiter who took our order, by the way, was adorable & funny. We nicknamed him Tony/Paolo!

 We go to the basilica after lunch & start on the lower level. Since it is Italian Labor Day & a Natl. holiday, it is very crowded mostly w/ Italians. We see the wonderful murals by Giotto & Cimabue & go to see the relics of St. Frances (hair shirt, communion chalice) & his reliquary where his bones are. Then up the many steps to the upper church with its many fabulous Giotto murals depicting St. Augustine’s life. Giotto was quite amazing & changed art so much. We think of Edna & Norman & their love of St. Frances & Assisi. Afterwards we stop for gelato & walk up, up, up back to the car. It is still crowded & windy.

 We are very impressed with the beauty of Assisi’s streets. Small, narrow, winding, steep, filled w/ flowers & occasional panoramic views over the countryside. Also interesting small shops w/ local fabrics, handmade Italian leather shoes & bags, pizzerias, & pastry shops. We see Italian shoes for 1/3 the price they are in the US (Mephisto). \*Bought two small water colors in Assisi for €45. Directly from local artist. One for us and one for Noel and Mari.

 We leave Assisi on its tall hill & head down for a trip on the back roads back to Todi. We head toward Foligno, Bevagna & eventually end up in Montefalco & its delicious wines. Deb stays in the car. (My Fit-Bit says we have already walked 6.2 miles & she is tired.) We again see many Italians & families enjoying their national holiday. We do a short wine tasting, buy 2 Montefalco reds & one white & then also a bubbly from the Romagna area. On to a walk uphill to the center of town w/ a flower market. More beautiful views, narrow streets & panoramic landscape views!

 After we leave, we drive on & go thru Bastardo, a town Don thought we just had to go to for its name. We drive on past lovely old homes, farm fields & grapes & vineyards. We drive to Todi, stop at the grocery store & arrive home around 7:30. Drinks, dinner of pick up & baths for the Teators. Write in the book & write an email to all & send photos. Phone having trouble sending.

 To bed around 10:30.

## May 2, 2015

Day 5

 Up at 7:00 via alarm. Don received my email, so hopefully everyone else did too. My phone is not working correctly regarding receiving message or erasing message. Frustrating.

 Leave around 9:30 to head to Spoleto. On main highway for 14 miles & then on winding country road for 14 miles. It is cloudy & a little windy & a bit cool. It develops into a lovely, sunny day in the low 70’s. A beautiful, gorgeous day with clear, panoramic views.

 Arrive in Spoleto after 45 minutes, park in a garage, go to town via the moving walkway, & walk thru the downtown. They are having a chocolate fair, & give away free tastes along the way. Yum! We walk thru winding, narrow streets, very charming stucco front stone buildings sometimes painted in colors, compared to Todi & Assisi’s unpainted stone buildings. We attempt to find the ruins of the Roman forum/amphitheater, but it is closed for repairs. It is from the 1st c. BC, & we do see the outside walls. We get to the Western side of town & go up the 8-leveled escalator to the upper town. We get off at level 6 & walk up to the Duomo, built in the 12th century. An annual very famous music festival is held in the front of the cathedral, with the stage the arched entry area to the Duomo, & the seating area the rising step area adjoining the Duomo plaza. The front of the cathedral is decorated w/ a 12 c. mosaic in gold. We enter the Duomo which is Romanesque & filled w/ art. We see the frescoes painted in the apse by Filippo Lippi, a hand written letter by St. Augustine to Father Leone, and a baroque chapel.

 We get back on the uprising escalators & go to the top of the hill & town, to the Fortress which overlooks Spoleto & was built by the Popes. It is called Rocco Albornoziana from the 14th c. It also overlooks the valley surrounding Spoleto & the Roman bridge /aqueduct called Ponte delle Tori. The aqueduct was from the Romans & the bridge was added on to it in the 13 c. Many people are walking over it on this perfect day. We decide not to, because it is 1:00 pm & we are starving.

 We journey down the hillside & into the town. We (& esp Deb) speak to a group of older Italian women, who point out a good place for lunch. We sit outdoors in the shade on a narrow street w/ no wind. It is called Al Bacco Felice on Via Aurelio Saffi, an osteria & ristorante. It is a wonderful, slow-paced meal. We get the Menu Touristica. It is 20€ each for bruschetta & prosciutto; veggie soup for Deb, chick pea soup for me, & lentil soup for Don; veal saltimbocca limone for Don & Tim; Deb & I veal saltimbocca w/ mushrooms; side orders of roasted veggies for Don & roasted potatoes for the rest. We turn down the included espresso & get the bill. It totals €90, including 3 glasses of wine! And we don’t leave until 3:30, a little over 2 hours! We walk on towards the car, stopping for gelato & for Don to buy chocolate from one of the street booths. The streets today are busy, just like in Assisi, filled w/ Italian tourists & families since it is still their Labor Day holiday weekend. We only see about 2 or 3 American couples. The streets are also quaint, winding, narrow & picturesque. Shortly before we get to the car, we see the Roman theater, which is impressive. We are walking in the feet of the Romans! Then thru a park & back to the parking lot.

 We pay for parking & head towards Bastardo. We meander thru the Italian countryside, alongside vineyard fields, wild poppies, long distance panoramic views with many shades of green & plowed fields, stone mansions & ancient farmhouses & barns. A most interesting and picturesque drive.

 We stop at the grocery store again for supplies & then arrive home at about 6:15. We unpack & settle in to the outdoor table to enjoy the out of doors, the sunshine & the gorgeous view. Deb goes for a walk & sketches. Don, Tim & I have wine & good conversation & planning talk. A dinner of salad made by Don. We try to facetime Mari & the family on her bday, but are not successful. Plans are discussed over dinner for possibilities for tomorrow.

 The last discussion of the evening is on how to use a bidet! We discuss it a great length, & since we are just guessing, we decide to Google it in the am. (which we do!)

 We go to bed to read about 9:30. We are upstairs reading, hear a strange noise, realize it is the IPad with a facetime call! I get to it just as the music stops & realize pat tried to reach us. I’m too tired to call back & will do so tomorrow instead.

## May 3, 2015

Day 6

 I set the alarm but it doesn’t go off (7:15 pm. Not am!)! We sleep until 7:45, Deb until 8:00! And Don till 7:00.

 We do our usual morning routine, but I also do our first load of wash in the washing machine. It works fine, but it takes Deb and I a while to even figure out how to get the lid up! There is no dryer, so we hang the wet clothes outside on drying racks. We have seen this all over Italy, even in hill towns & cities. Wash is hung outside upper story windows on clothes lines or over railings.

 Also, Guido, our house manager, said Italian electrical companies only dole out so much electricity at a time, so if you use too many appliances at once, the electricity will go off & you have to reset your meter! Guido is surprised & wonders why they don’t want to sell unlimited amounts & make more $.

 We look up how to use a bidet & find several videos. They are a riot! But, now we all know how to do it, & we all promise to try! Deb is the first & declares it satisfactory.

 We finally leave around 9:45 & head southeast on the same route we used yesterday to get to Spoleto. It is a lot like driving up 23A to Haines Falls. We see a cluster of people & politzie at the bottom of the hill. We think maybe there is a bike race coming up or going down. We never see it, so who knows….

 We arrive in Norcia after about 1 ½ hr drive. It is a busy small hilltown w/ many Italian weekend holiday visitors. We walk thru an old Roman gate (there are 8 in all) & walk into the Piazza San Benedeto. Norcia is a town known for selling high quality meat, sausages & salami. There are many boar heads hanging on the front of shops.It is also known as the birthplace/home of St. Benedeto & Ste Scholastica (they were twins).

 We visit the church & crypt, and walk more thru the town looking for a restaurant for lunch. We even see a small church w/ parishioners leaving a service. We also see the Castelina on the plaza, a fortress built by Pope Julius III in 1554. It is now a museum.

 We decide to eat lunch at an outdoor café w/ a covered roof called Produti Tipici, Brancaleone da Norcia; Locanda del Teatro. We each have fixed price meals – Tim & Deb for 20€ each including 3 courses, wine & water; Judy & Don - 30€ for 3 courses, wine & water. T & Deb: Menu del Giorno: carpaccio salad w/ arugula & mushrooms & olive oil’ pasta w/red sauce & boar for Tim & w/ mushrooms for Deb; filets of pork w/ capers for Tim & sausages roasted for Deb; both w/ roasted veggies w/ bread crumbs. J & Don: Menu degustatione di Stagione: frittata w/ tartuffo (truffles); pasta w/ cheese, sausage & truffle shavings; main course of lamb chops grilled. We are full but not uncomfortable. The service is good. We meet the people behind us from Wales – two sisters w/ red hair & British accents. One lives in Rome, married to an Italian; the other lives in Windsor.

 We walk a bit more after lunch. The town has a largely emptied out & some of the stores are closed for siesta. Deb buys a decorated towel w/ pictures of Umbria, to make a quilt with.

 BTW, it is a beautiful sunny day w/ clear skies, a small breeze & eventually about 78°.

 We leave Norcia & head up a very winding road to Castelucio. It is in the mountainous Mount Sibillini National park. Before we arrive at the town, we come up to the top of the peak/road. We continue to drive up (5000 ft) & suddenly in front of us, we are greeted w/ a high plain vista which is totally incredible. Fanning out in front of us & surrounding the foot of the isolated village of Castellucio are 3 high plains. They are in a bowl, surrounded by precipitous, snow covered mountains on all sides. The plains will be an even more astonishing site in June when they are filled with wildflowers in full bloom. We gape for a while & then drive down through the plains & up into the small village which is pretty “third world”. It is filled with many motorcyclists & is known for its lentils, so Deb & I buy some.

 Back to the car & down the mountain & back to Todi, about 1 hr. 45 minutes later. We travel a different route the first half, north thru Castelsantangelo. Today is the most southern & the most eastern we will be on this trip to Italy.

 We arrive home around 6:15 and find an email from Pat. We eventually facetime w/ Chloe & Sienna, see Mari briefly, & have a very quick talk w/ Noel.

 We eat Don salads for dinner outside on our patio. Tim has a sandwich instead. Wine is also imbibed on our patio overlooking our view. We notice for the first time that we can see the snow capped Apennines from our table & chairs.

 Around 8:30 we decide to walk to town. There is a full moon, so we head off but bring flashlites too. We head up our “Platte Clove” driveway, turn right past the garden of artichokes & then left past the stone wall surrounding the town & then thru the Roman Gate. Then its up into town. We see very few people & the town is very quiet at the end of this holiday weekend. On the upper stories of buildings, we hear people talking & families interacting as we stroll by. There can be few secrets in this town. On we go, being passed by cars, mostly going down hill & heading out of town & speeding past us. We arrive in Piazza del Popolo and its cathedral. There are a few restaurants open, & we find a gelato shop. Don & Deb enjoy some Italian delight. Then downward in the dark past quiet lit & unlit alleys, back to Casa del Peri at 9:30! Tjis was a different view of an Italian hill town in the dark of the evening.

 Other photos in my mind from today – Many speeding motorcycles buzzing between lanes of traffic or zooming past us on the other side of the road. Supposedly this is all legal in Italy.

 When Italians go to bed or leave their homes or apartments, they close their shutters (wood or slide-down metal). That must certainly cut down on break-ins!

 Tim has developed much sneezing, wheezing & congestion. We think it is allergies from the locust or chestnut trees.

## May 4, 2015

Day 7

 Up at 7:00 via alarm. (I actually set it correctly last nite!). We follow our usual routine, and then head off to the hilltown of Orvieto, about 45 minutes away. It is perched on a high tufo cliff, 1000 ft. above the valley floor. It was even an important city before the time of Christ.

 We have a bit of trouble figuring out the parking meters but do eventually – cash only. We park the car at the top of the city near the upper end of the funicular. First we belly up to the view of the valley (as Rick Steves says). Then an uphill walk to the Duomo, which is a stunner. We approach from the rear & see the black & white striped building from a distance. The walkways surrounding the Cathedral also have the pink stone famous in Assisi. The front of the Cathedral is highly decorated w/ mosaics, twisted columns & arches, mosaics of color & gold, & 4 highly decorated bas reliefs, each depicting different scenes from the Bible, such as from the book of Genesis, the life of Christ, the Last Judgment, etc. We enter, pay 3€ each for admission, & are quite wowed! It was “de-Baroqued” & an empty nave up until the altar, & also has the black & white stripes inside. The architect/designer/builder made it wider at the front & more narrow towards the altar, so one gets a great feeling of depth. Then one turns around by the altar & looks to the front entrance & the opposite effect occurs! We tour through the chapels & interiors & Don reads to us from the Rick Steves’ book. The lower half of the stained glass windows are alabaster. We visit the Chapel of the Corporal, with its “bloody cloth” relic & the stone Pieta by Scalza, inspired by Michelangelo. The most impressive area is the Chapel of San Brizo with the detailed frescoes by Fran Angelico, but mostly Luca Signorelli, painted between 1499-1504. Michelangelo was greatly influenced by this work & studied it extensively. I am quite surprised Signorelli has not known and famous!

 We then follow Rick Steves’ “Orvieto Walk.” We travel down the narrow roads & passageways & see a variety of shops. Orvieto is known for its ceramics, painted in a different, more detailed manner than Deruta. One shop advertises “free shipping to the US.” When we inquire, the owner says, “I am not Santa Claus! You have to buy at least 300€ to get free shipping!”

 We run into two American couples, one from DC & another from the Poconos. Nice people. The DC couple live on Capitol Hill & his name is Noel (pronounced No-el). We have fun talking to them & actually run into them again later in the day.

 We keep walking thru the city, & find a place to eat lunch, a recommended by Rick Steves. It is called Trattoria da Carlo. Very good food, sitting outside under a canopy on a beautiful day.

 The weather is super again. High in the low 80s & full sun with a slight breeze.

 To lunch. I have the local white wine which Don shares w/ me too. We also share our meal – bruschetta w/ fava beans & fennel, salt cod w/ tomato sauce, olives & onions, & tortelloni (lg.) filled w/ mild cheese, resting on arugula & sprinkled w/ parmesan & balsamic. Deliscioso! And we are comfortably full & not stuffed since we shared! Tim has bruschetta w/ tomatoes which I think is the best he has had yet. The tomatoes are kind of mashed down & flavorful. He also has thin slices of beef sprinkled w/ oil & lemon with an olive oil drenched baked potato, which is fabulous. Deb has roasted chicken cacciatore, which she loves.

 Afterwards, we walk back thru the city to our car. Many shops are now closed for siesta (great handmade leather handbags!).

 We get our car & travel south 24k to Civita di Bagnoregio. We park in Bagnoregio & walk to Civita, a hill town only reachable by a narrow walkway. It is a traffic-free village which is beyond picturesque. It is warm, but there is a breeze, so we hike into the town. We meet a couple from Boston & speak to them several times during our circumambulation of the town. We take pictures of them & them of us. The town has been spruced up with small eateries & a refurbished church. (The replacement ceiling beams were pulled over the narrow walkway via tractor.) It appears several apartments/houses have been fixed up & are lived in. However, a serious earthquake several hundred years ago has caused damage & serious erosion problems. We see many Japanese tourists – loud & photo obsessed. And we meet 2 more American couples, this time from near Lake Tahoe in CA. They state facetiously that Jerry Brown will solve all their drought & water issues.

 After we return from Civita, we stop for gelato, & then drive back to Todi, which only ends up being about a 55 minute ride on very windy roads.

 Also met another American couple in Orvieto who I forgot to mention. Tim noticed his Canyon de Chielly hat. They live in Flagstaff. We had a lot of fun today talking to Americans, but when we’re here, we would prefer to see Italian tourists & not be where there are 10,000 American tourists. (Or maybe I should say I would prefer...) As Don says, it’s also nice to have a shared camaraderie w/ other Americans from home.

 Don makes us a salad again & we eat it on the patio. Tim emails the lady in charge of where we’re going tomorrow & finds out details, so we’re all set & ready to move on to Siena.

 We have fun listening to Don read over his notes from our trip to France 3 years ago. Also, we discuss our ideas/plans for Siena/Tuscany.

## May 5, 2015

Day 8

 Deb’s 59th Birthday!

 Up at 7:00 via alarm. Both of us tired. We do our usual am routine & pack up to leave Todi today. Deb cleans up too! (She runs a B&B & doesn’t want to leave things dirty!) The owner’s Dad shows up outside, an elderly gentleman, & walks around the property. We meet him & we are able to talk because he speaks English.

 Jon Scott shows up around 9:45 & checks the place over. All is well, so he rips up the security check. He is a Scotsman & has lived here for 6 years.

 We are off at 10:00, headed north/northwest to Siena. It takes until noon, because we have to stop for gas.

 BTW, the guys had to go deliver all the recyclings downtown to their appropriate bins in Todi. The Italians are very strict about recycling. Too bad the US isn’t. All the garbage we had at the end of the week fit in a small plastic shopping bag full of food scraps! All else was recycling!

 We arrive in Siena & drive into the middle of the city (pop. 60,000) via narrow, winding, crowded streets. The woman who rented us the apartment has told us to do so, but the streets are closed to traffic at noon & we are now at noon. We find out later our apartment lady, Maura, calls the police & gets us a special extension.

 We drive past where we are supposed to meet Maura, & can’t back up, so I jump out & go to #36. There is no bell, which I was told to ring. I talk to a man, point to a name of the people I need & he points and seems to explain in Italian to walk up 2 stories or go via the elevator around the corner. I go up, find the apartment door, ring the bell, & the door is opened by an older woman in her nitegown, who says, “Scusi, Scusi!” I ask for Maura, who she calls on the phone. In her pidgin English, she says Maura is coming, & she will keep her door open for me if I have problems. I go down & wait. No one shows up. Tim eventually calls me, & says they have been greeted by a man who speaks only Italian. He takes them to the apartment lobby, off Il Campo & they drop off the luggage & food. The apartment is being cleaned, so we can’t get in. We then leave the center of town & drive for about 15 minutes to the parking on the edge of town at St. Catherina. We have to go way back uphill to get back to the center of the city, & there are escalators to take you up many levels. At first, we think they are not working, so we climb the steps. Tim then realizes that if you step on the entry to the escalator, it begins & up we go. We are now all starving, & look for palace to eat a birthday lunch, to celebrate Deb’s day. We eat at Ristorante Desideria. We sit inside, despite it being another sunny, warm day. We have a delicious meal – house red wine, prosecco, Tim – Bruschetta, beef (London broil) & roasted potatoes; Don, sea bass stuffed w/ mash potatoes & small shrimp, accompanied by veggies & small potato pieces; Deb – roasted chicken w/ veggies; Me- vegetable soup w/ fava beans, onions & thickened w/ pieces of bread (a typical Tuscan dish) & the same sea bass as Don. Don orders dessert - cantucca (biscotti) w/ vin santo. One dips the almond flavored bischotti in the sweet wine & enjoys. It is another typical Italian dish & we all enjoy it.

 Afterwards we go to the TI on the Campo for maps & then walk across the Campo to meet the representative to let us in our apartment. She takes us in (the first “ripe” smelling European we’ve run into). She shows us the apartment & says there is only 1 bathroom, despite Debbie having a photo of the other. She calls the office, finds out there is another & the cleaning lady has locked it! She unlocks it! She leaves & we unpack & settle in. The view of the Campo is astonishing, & we can sit on our small patio & soak it in. But, the apartment is not as clean as it should be, & there is no toaster, microwave or coffee mugs. But we will be fine & appreciate how lucky we are to be in an apartment w/ such a view. What a great place to watch the Palio! Tim & I have a lovely, spacious bedroom which also faces onto the Campo. Plus a king sized bed, but a small bathroom. Since we rotate who gets the larger bedroom, Don and Deb have a small fold out and another small bed, which is not a very comfortable situation.

 We decide to head out to the grocery store & buy our staples. It is called Conad & is several blocks off the Campo. We also buy gelato on the way back (My supper! Such dark chocolate!).

 Then Deb stays in our place while Tim, Don & I go to check out a free area to park in. It will work fine, but Tim forgets to bring along the car keys, so we have to return to the apartment to retrieve them before going to the car. This time, Don stays with Deb, & Tim & I head off to move the car! This time he forgets the WiFi, so we don’t have a GPS to navigate the city with!! We find our way after paying €14 for 7 hours stay w/ the car & park near the stadium, where it is free. We should save €80 over 2 days! By the time we get back we have 17,500 steps (according to my fit bit), the most yet in one day.

 We sit on the patio and enjoy the view. The city certainly quiets down & empties out at nite.

 We text Tobi about Buddy, who texts back saying he misses us, but is doing well.

 BTW, the apartment rep did not collect the rest of the $ we owe. I’m sure they will eventually.

 To bed around 9:00. Tim & I are both very tired.

## May 6, 2015

Day 9 – Wednesday

 We wake up at 7:30 am. We had a fitful sleep with one pillow each, the thickness of a saltine! Oh well… We’re on Il Campo in Siena!

 We prepare ourselves & leave the house/apartment around 10:00. Don & Deb have developed sore throats & aren’t feeling 100%. They leave separately from us around 9:30, and head off to the weekly market.

 Tim and I walk the roads around our place. I am shopping for a purse (or two). My goal today is to survey my choices & come back later & purchase. I also try on some shoes with no luck. We also eventually make it to the market, a sprawling group of temporary buildings filled to the gills with shoppers, mostly Italian, but foreign too. From the top of the Piazza, as one looks down the paths between the tents, there is hardly a blank space to fit in another shopper. We see clothing, leather goods, food items & lamp shades. This is a very popular destination on a Wednesday.

 We also find out info & get a schedule for the buses, in order to go to Firenze tomorrow.

 We run into Don & Deb on the street near our place, where we had already made plans to meet up at 12:30. We head off to a restaurant nearby recommended by one of the pocketbook sales ladies. Tim and I had already checked it out and found it very satisfactory. We have another good meal. Tim ordered bruschetta & pasta w/ boar meat sauce, which we all shared. I ordered a cheese spread with ricotta, gorgonzola & truffle shaving w/ toasted bread. We all shared that too. Deb & I have roasted eggplant in a small casserole w/ tomato sauce & cheese. Don had roasted rabbit w/ veggies. Tim’s main meal was the “choice” – pork cut in small pieces & served w/ roasted plums & apple slices. Yum! Prosecco & red wine filled the rest of the bill. Total was €84, including tip.

 Then off to the Duomo. It has gotten hot & sunny. Later it clouds up, & we feel a few sprinkles. Then the sun returns again at 6:00.

 We pay 12€ each for tickets for the Duomo, Museo de Duomo, Baptistry & Crypt. We follow the Rick Steves’ book & Don reads the sections to us as we tour around the Duomo. Very ornate, detailed & filled w/ Renaissance art, including Donatello & Bernini sculptures Pintoricchio frescoes, illuminated hymns, & inlaid floors! After the Library room, Don & Deb leave & return to the apartment, since Deb is feeling worse w/ her cold. Tim & I continue on & go to the Duomo Museum w/ another Donatello sculpture, medieval paintings & the original 1350 rose window from the cathedral. It was removed in 1943 to keep it from being damaged during WWII. Rather than putting it back in later, a replacement copy was made. We decide not to wait 30 minutes to climb up to see the view from the cathedral wall.

 Then on to the Crypt, not discovered until 1999 & filled w/ the oldest frescoes in town. After that, the Baptistry, with beautiful frescoes & metal sculpted panels on the baptismal font, some created by both Ghiberti & Donatello.

 Afterwards we take a break at a sidewalk café behind the Duomo. I have water & Tim has decaf latte. A free toilet helps too, since all we saw today cost .50€ (I used a pay toilet once today.)

 After a rest we head to San Domenica, an old Romanesque church. It is a Dominican Church & has the dried finger and skull with face of St. Catherina. The church is a disappointment w/ modern stained glass & much scaffolding inside since they are repairing the ceiling. We are very tired & return home at 5:30. Deb is napping & Don writing emails.

 At 7:10, the two apartment renters arrive w/ 4 coffee cups. He speaks English & has come as the translator. She will return later w/2 extra pillows. They give us advice about a few other things, such as the safety of where the car is parked & getting to and from Florence, & about a farmers market on Friday. They also collected the rest of the rent.

 We saw many school groups touring today. They were usually approximately MS age & looked semi-bored. They even moved en masse into a room in the museum which we had just gotten in, & so we were forced to move on.

 The guy who came to collect our rent tonight said to go to the Palio, you have to purchase a ticket for about €200-250/person.

 When he collected our $, he said he needed cash (600€), despite us being told we could use a credit card. After a discussion, it was finally decided he would take a check. He also told us we had to pay a city tax of €2.50 for each person, each nite. We said Maura hadn’t told us that, & so they waived it.

 One of our interesting sites from our patio every nite is the circling of the sparrows. They frantically call & circle around the sky & eventually go into the holes to sleep. We read that the holes which cover the exterior of the City Hall building were holes where medieval builders inserted scaffolding.

 At 9:45 our landlady arrives w/ 2 extra pillows. So nice of her to come back again, and we are much more comfortable sleeping because of them.

## May 7, 2015

Day 10 – Thursday

 Up at 6:00 to prepare to go to Florence today. Leave the apartment at 8:20, walk to the bus station & leave at 9:10 for Florence. Arrive in Firenze at 10:25.

 Stop at ticket booth to try to buy art tickets. Small booth recommended by Rick Steves. Also stopped before this a TI by the railroad station for map. We were successful, but the place was a madhouse! We were also successful in buying museum tickets, & go immediately to the Uffizi for an 11:00 entry.

 Uffizi: Large crowds esp. in front of most famous pieces: Botticelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Artemisia Brunelleschi, Caravaggio. Warm in some rooms w/ what appears to be very little humidity control; long corridors w/ black & wt. tile; bldg. in U shape; view of Ponte Vecchio (Arno green) from upstairs hallway windows; Another view on outside patio by cafeteria of Duomo and Brunelleschi’s dome. We are there about 2 hours & leave exhausted & starving. Tim & I did buy water at the café inside.

 We walk awhile looking for a restaurant. We decide on an osteria w/ outside tables. Tim- omelette, roasted tomatoes, potatoes roasted, bacon/proscuitto; Judy- mushroom/artichoke pizza; Deb & Don – share a salad & veggie pizza.

 After lunch, the two couples separate, and go in separate directions. Tim & I head for the Duomo, but the line is too long to get in. We head then to the Bargello, a sculpture museum in an old fortress/gov. bldg./jail (bargello). Many Michelangelos, Donatellos, Cellini, Verrocchio & the Baptistry competition doors of Ghiberti & Brunelleschi. Standouts are Donatello’s David & the 2 door panels. The museum is also filled w/ Della Robbias, the glazed terracotta reliefs in blue, white, yellow & green. Museum is a treat architecturally (Medici fortress style) & w/ few people. Quite a comparison to the Uffizi.

 Off to the Acaddemia at 3:20ish to see Michelangelo’s works. Our tickets are for admission at 4:00. We see many people in line outside the building. There are also many men with thin paper art prints for sale which they spread on the ground. Tim almost steps on one guy’s prints, because the roadway is so crowded & it is hard to move around. The guy yells at Tim & looks like he wants to get in a fist fight! We glare & walk on. We have to ask the guard which line to get in for entry, & we are admitted by 3:40. BTW, each museum has security w/ guards, an x-ray machine for bags & a machine all have to walk thru, like in the US.

 The museum is almost empty, which we are so surprised about. The first room contains paintings (religious) & a large sculpture of twisting figures by Giambolgna (Rape of the Sabine Women). We go into the main room w/ its long hallway leading to David. This is a special bldg. built just for these works in the mid-1800’s. Before that David was outside for 350 yrs. in the Palazzo Vecchio. There is a bit of wear & tear on his shoulders & one foot because of being out of doors. There was also breakage to his arm during a revolt centuries ago when somebody threw something from the Medici townhall & hit it & broke off the arm. We now have a clear view down the long hall of the statue. Naturally lite by the glass dome above. The hallway before is lined w/ his slaves or prisoners called “Prigioni.” We sit & enjoy & read Rick Steves, always interesting & informative.

 After the Accademia, I am exhausted & need water, so we stop at a patio gelateria & have water & decaf latte for Tim & a gelato sundae for me. Yum! Very revitalizing.

 We decide we are close to the Museum of San Marco to see the Fra Angelico’s & we walk there to find it closed at 1:50. Oh well….

 On to the Duomo & we get in line to go inside, find out it is the entry for climbing up to the dome & that the Duomo itself is closed. Oh well again…

 We call Don & Deb (he has Tim’s cell), since we realize we are done for today & can leave Florence earlier than we thought. They agree, and we decide on a meeting point. On the way, Tim & I cross thru the Palazzo Vecchio & see the large bronze sculpture in the center of Lorenzo Medici, “The Magnificent!” Last night I was reading the “Saving Italy” book & saw a photo of the Allies dragging it back into place after WW2. (The Nazis had confiscated it.)

 We meet D&D, go to the train & bus station, flounder around & eventually find where to get the bus. We catch the 6:10 Rapida to Siena which takes a ½ hour longer than the trip in. Very bad rush hour traffic. Then we walk back to our apartment, Deb buys a bit of food so she & Don can eat. Tim & I do not (gelato too late).

 We are all very tired & have walked over 20,000 steps, according to my Fitbit. To bed to read.

## May 8, 2015

Day 11 – Friday

 Tim up at 7:30 & me a bit later. Deb still not feeling well so sleeps to around 8:30. Don out walking when we arise.

 We had agreed last night to have a slow morning & not rush, so we take our time. Don & Tim go grocery shopping & eventually Tim & I go out & I buy two Italian leather pocketbooks (1 white, 1 dark brown) from the purse company, Cuoieria Fiorentina. We get 45€ in VAT tax back on my purses. We have to have the form stamped and signed at the airport or our credit card will be charged w/ a 17% penalty. Deb & Don go to the pharmacy to get her some cold meds. It is another gorgeous & perfect day. Low to mid 70’s & full sun. It has been like this every day. We are so lucky, and this weather is predicted for the rest of the week.

 We then leave shortly after 11:00 & head east in the car towards Cortona, which is a hill town only 1 mile from the Umbria Area. We find free parking up near the top of the very hilly hill town. It blankets a 1700 ft. hill & spills down the hill toward the modern town below. The town was made famous in the book by Frances Mayes titled “Under the Tuscan Sun”. We walk to the center of town & look for a Rick Steves’ recommended restaurant. It is called Osteria del Teatro, & we find it & are ushered to an inside table. It is lovely & eventually a small wedding party is ushered into our room too. Everyone applauds. There are only 15 people in the wedding party, & we find out later they are Swedish & English. The couple came for a visit to Cortona a year ago, fell in love with the town & returned for a destination wedding.

 Our meal is local dishes & delicious. Deb – 3 small bowls of different soups & guinea hen; Don – 3 different special appetizers/eggplant, veggie pie, & a sausage pizza thing; Tim – pasta (homemade) w/ pork ragu, smoked pork pieces accompanied by olive tapenade bean sauce & polenta w/roasted potatoes; Judy – asparagus pie w/ cheese sauce on top, accompanied by thin slices of beef carpaccio on a bed of arugula and 3 lamb chops breaded & top w/ thinly sliced cheese (parm. reggiano?) on a bed of what looks like pea soup. Also a small decorative cut zucchini. I also have white wine – local – Cortona DOC sauvignon blanc. Tim & Don have red. Deb has coke.

 We are stuffed at the end. We also make a trip to the uniquely decorated bathrooms – many dolls in the toilet area antechamber. There are also many flowers on the steps & patio outside. Very pretty. Excellent service, esp. from a man who has only studied English for 2 months.

 We then leave Deb in the Piazza, & Tim & Don & I hike up the Cortona roads which are very steep, & do a good part of the Rick Steves’ walk. The panoramic views from overlooking walls are exceptional. We see a gigantic walled graveyard w/ many individual buildings, terraced gardens & grassy areas, etc. Beautiful! We reach the Santa Marguerita Church, near the top & then head down to the Piazza & Deb. A lovely breeze to cool us.

 We buy water & gelato, use the WC & then go to the car. We drive back to Siena in about 55 minutes & are able to find an empty spot in the free parking lot again. We walk back to the apartment, although Tim has to double back to the car again because he forgot his glasses. We stop along the way to buy green bananas. Some eat, drink wine, read, relax, shower & attempt to recover. We are tired again & Tim has a blister. But the good news is Deb’s meds are working, & she is feeling better.

 BTW, it is a small world! We were walking out of Cortona on the main drag & saw an older couple coming toward us, I noticed her blue shirt says “Ca Mea” & look closer & see it says “Ca Mea Ristorante, Hudson NY.” I say “Ca Mea.”!!! They stop & grin & we say we live near there. They don’t speak English, but obviously understand us & point towards their chests & say “Max. He is our son! (in Italian!) We are quite surprised! The world gets smaller.

 To bed around 9:30 to read. Starting “Lady in Gold.”

## May 9, 2015

Day 12 – Saturday

 Up at 7:30 for our usual am preparations.

 Joe wrote regarding the sale of the motor home. He’s still being jerked around by his bank loan companies, & now needs a photo of the motor home VIN#. Tim sends off emails orchestrating this.

 We decide to spend the day in the Chianti area north of Siena but only about 40 minutes away! We leave our place, walk to the car, exit Siena & drive to Brolio Castle. It has been owned by Ricasoli family since the early 1400’s. It is also the home of Chianti Classico, developed by Bettino Ricasoli in the mid-1800’s. We tour the grounds & admire the panoramic views, even the towers of Siena in the distance. The family still lives in the castle, so access is denied. The exterior shows damage from explosion, bullets & bombs from WW2. We also do a wine tasting at Brolio, included in the 5€ & has 1 pour.

 On to Radda en Chianti, another town perched on a cliff. We walk around the town & find a nice place for lunch called La Perla dei Palazza or Ristorante con Giadino. It is a cute place, & we sit near a window & enjoy the nice weather & view. The waiter speaks English & has a sense of humor. Tim – Focaccia cheese (melted & warm), lettuce, tomatoes, prosciutto; thinly sliced beef from the area w/ delicious sauce & roasted potatoes; Don – boar stew w/ polenta, & cantucca w/ vin santo; Deb – 3 types of goat cheese, w/ honey, pasta w/ ragu & eggplant; Judy – liver pate on bread w/ olive oil (shared w/ Don); boar stew; Tim & I shared a crème brulee for dessert; Also prosecco for me; red wine (chianti classico reserve). Total cost 124€ including tip.

 Then to Greve en Chianti, which we only drove thru. Onto to Castellina en Chianti. We pay 1€ to park to 1 hr. Deb stays near the car & draws in her sketchbook. We walk up to town, which is charming, small & not filled w/ many people. There is a little charming church & little shops. Don stops & buys a replacement hat for the one he lost. (We later fool Deb & say Guido met us on a street & gave us the hat he lost!) We also buy some Chianti Classico after a wine tasting in town.

 The last town we drive to is Monteriggioni, a very charming (the word of the day!), small hill town built in the mid-1100’s & still surrounded by its original stone walls & multiple towers. You can pay to walk around the top of the tower walls, but we decide not to. The town has more visitors, & again many panoramic views. (Here we had to pay 2€ for an hour of car parking.)

 The road the GPS sends us on to exit Monteriggioni is narrow, stony & curvy. We eventually make it back to Siena after only about 30 minutes. We go to the free parking area again & it is full & a madhouse. There is a carnival, soccer match & flower market going on, so many people fill spots & even park illegally. We finally find a spot, thankfully.

 Our views on our ride today were typically Tuscan – rolling hills, old stone buildings perched on a hill top, tall cypress trees, rows of olive groves w/ their blue-gray leaves & field after field of Chianti grapes. We also see a few workers in the grape fields dressed in white to protect them from the sun. We did think the Chianti hills were a bit steeper than the Tuscan hills w/ a few more regular trees.

 After we get back to Siena, we stop at Gelateria Grom, recommended by Rick Steves. Just before getting there, we see a parade of locals w/ a drum, 2 flag wavers & hundreds of people marching & singing & dressed w/ their red, white & black scarves of their Palio teams – men & women. Very unique. BTW, Gelato Grom is good, but I liked the one in Florence better.

 Home to a busy Il Campo. Salad by Don for dinner. Hand washing & emails.

 To bed around 9:30 to read.

## May 10, 2015

Day 13 – Sunday

 Up at 8:00. Didn’t sleep well. Lots of noise on Campo!

 Don & Deb go out early to shop. We do the usual. We all leave the apartment around 9:30. Deb finds her olive wood gifts, & we buy bracelets for the girls.

 We walk to the car. It’s another market day, so very busy. We leave Siena around 10:30 & head southeast towards Montepulciano. We park for free near the Porta al Prata & walk thru the old gate into the lovely, charming (I keep saying that!) town. We follow the Rick Steves walk up to town. It is uphill but not killer. We decide to have lunch at a Rick Steves recommended restaurant in the Piazza Grande. They are known for using organic foods from their farm. It is called Ristorante Ai Quattro Venti. We sit inside because it’s windy. Don – duck livers (they looked like balls!; Deb – vegetable soup w/ bread (very filling) and tagliatelle w/ asparagus, bacon bits & cream sauce; Tim – ordered a starter we all shared w/ cheese & an assortment of local salamis, & duck breast w/ an onion side dish & a vegetable (zucchini) flan; Judy – artichoke flan w/ cheese fondue & sauce & pici (local hand made pasta) w/ the same sauce as Deb’s cream sauce! Egads! Red wine for D & T – Rosa Montepulciano & a local white wine for me.

 After lunch, we continue up the main drag (Corso) & overlook a view which is the best we’ve seen yet. Tim & I just love this charming town! (There’s that word again!) & would love to come back & stay here.

 We stop in the Cantine del Redi for a wine tasting. You go thru an unassuming door off the main square, down ancient old steps/spiral staircase & keep going down till you get to rooms carved out of solid rock – rooms from Etruscan times complete w/ a stone well. Then up to the wine tasting. They even have 1 white for me.

Afterwards, we jump in the car & head towards Peanza, which we see, but head past, deciding to concentrate instead on Montalcino, the home of Brunello wine. We walk the town (2€ for parking) & Deb sits & draws. It is dominated by a fortress at one end. It is a much smaller town than the last, but contains an interesting local market, with everything from a variety of chickens to weapons & knives, lawn equipment & chain saws, etc. & of course, shoes. We also see a group of locals playing in a marching-type band near the fort. They range in age from about 10 to 80.

 Back to where Deb is & another panoramic view. To the car & an hour drive back to Siena. We find a free parking spot again. Still a busy city w/ a flower market & carnival. We arrive back to Il Campo, where it is filled w/ locals from a contrada (neighborhood district), dressed w/ their scarves, singing their songs, accompanied by their band, drums & flag wavers. This is one of the contradas from the Palio & people appear very loyal & dedicated. We can see all very well from our balcony.

 We stopped & got a small bit of food to bring back to eat. Tim & I are both totally exhausted & getting (or have) Deb’s cold. Despite that, I record the day in the book & write an email to all. To bed to read at 9:30. A large noise develops outside (There is a crowd of men singing & waving flags & lighting large sparkler kind of things. This goes on for a quite a while. Eventually, there was an accident, an ambulance arrived & things quieted down.

## May 11, 2015

Day 14 – Monday

 I have a bad cough, but eventually go to sleep.

 Up at 7:30 for the usual routine. We head northwest to Volterra for the day. It is about an hour’s ride. It is perched on a giant tufa hill and is known for alabaster carving, its old Etruscan gate & has a relatively non-touristy ambiance. We do the Rick Steves’ walk & I like the town a lot. I stop & buy pair of alabaster earrings directly from the artist for 15€. We stop for lunch & sit outside at a table under an umbrella along the street. It was recommended by Rick Steves, called Don Beta on Via Matteotti. It is typical Tuscan food: Tim: gnocchi w/ tomato sauce, Tuscany stew, French fries; Don: gnocchi too & peppered beef stew; Deb – tomato & bread soup, pork loin & salad, diet coke; Me – bean soup, Tuscan stew & salad; Chianti Classico for Don & Tim; local white wine w/ a slight bubble for me, very light & good. Nice lunch. Satisfying but not fancy.

 Afterwards, we walk more of the town. I buy a necklace & bracelet w/ alabaster stones & silver. Then down the main drag (via Gramsci). Don & Tim decide to climb the tower in the govt. building/city hall, which is still operating there & has been since the 13th century. It is 70 steps & a panoramic view. Deb & I wait below. I buy an “appropriate” card for Kenny & the stamp, & we write it & send it. – David’s private parts w/ Groucho glasses, etc.

 In the morning before lunch, when walking the town, we walked past the Roman theatre, where they were also working on excavating the old Roman baths. Also, into the Duomo with its black & white striped front. Inside was a painted Crucifix from the mid-1200s. Very active lines & movement. And a pulpit from the mid-1200s w/ beautiful carvings & alabaster inlay. We also stopped at an alabaster workshop which consisted of 3 rooms & the sculptor work. We were amazed that he wore no protective face mask in a very dusty work place.

 The town was filled w/ alabaster workshops, clothing & shoe stores & jewelry & art emporiums with objects made out of alabaster, & restaurants, and other eating places. There were also panoramic Tuscan views again.

 We leave Volterra & head to San Gimignano, about a 30 to 40 minute drive. It used to have 72 towers & it now has 14. It is very picturesque, but a real tourist trap! When Tim, Noel, Edna, Norman & I were here 25 years ago, it was not like this – one kitschy, touristy store after another, busloads of people, crowds of tourist w/ guides all traveling in packs, some even all wearing orange hats. We walk from one end of town to the other, stop & take photos by the well in the center of the main square like we did 25 years ago, & on to the view. We take photos of the view & towers & take turns doing photos for a family from New Hampshire. Back to the car & pay parking & drive back to Siena in about 60 minutes, and traffic is bad. We park in the free lot once again, & D & D go their way to the cash machine. We head to our place & I stop & buy 2 prs. Of shoes. We arrive back at the apartment & see a very excited Deb. She ended up walking back on her own, and believe it or not, runs into the real live Rick Steves. She goes & talks to him, tells him how much we use & enjoy his book, & she takes some photos. However, when he asks her where she has been and where she is going next, she get flustered (as would a lot of people) and can’t remember a thing!! After we hear she has seen him, we all immediately go out to see if we can find him, but of course, no luck. We come home, have salads & do our evening routine.

 Tomorrow we leave this lovely city & beautiful Tuscany. This is our third time here & will we return again?

 Just before bed, we hear the violinist playing in the restaurant below our apartment. We have enjoyed listening to him play every nite, & Tim has often nodded his approval to him, with the violinist acknowledging his nod. We listen on our porch & Don runs down a tip to him. He nods to us, thanking us.

 Off to bed to read at 9:30ish. Very tired again. Because of my cold?

## May 12, 2015

Day 15 – Tuesday

 Up at 6:00 to pack & prepare for our exit. Deb cleans up the apartment. Tim leaves around 8:35 to go get the car. At 9:00 we move the baggage up to the street from the apartment. Tim arrives shortly thereafter. We load the car & exit Siena.

 It take about 1 hr. 45 min, to drive to Lucca, a great walled town in northwest Tuscany. Since Italy has a well founded reputation for car break-ins & thefts (we met a Swedish family in Todi who it happened to, & they lost everything including passports!), so we decide to take turns touring the town, with one couple always in the car. We go first to town, go to the TI, get a map, & walk into town to a pizzeria next to Puccini’s home & statue. We eat & relax & enjoy more perfect weather. (Tim- pasta carbinara; Me – salad & mushroom pizza). We walk briefly thru the town & up to the wide bastions surrounding the city & are back at the car in an hour & a half. We are impressed w/ this everyday, non-touristy Italian city with little shops, a large piazza, a unique white & black duomo & many bikes. Bicycles are for rent everywhere & many do, especially to take the 2 ½ mi. path/grassy area/smooth road on top of the walls which surround the city, which Don and Deb do. A nice place to come back to.

 On to Cinque Terre, which is about an hour & 45 minute ride. First we’re on a big highway (A12) & then 30 minutes on a very curving, winding, down & up road. We drive to Levanto & then end up in our rental in Monterosso al Mare. We arrive about 45 minutes before we are scheduled to meet our “landlord.” We try to call the # we’ve been given & it doesn’t work. We find out later we have been given the wrong #. Tim decided instead to email Amadeo. He emails back & says Isolta is on the way. She meets us at the apartment & shows us around. Tim drives the car up & parks it next to our place. We unpack the car & settle in. After looking at the washing machine (Yuk!), we head off to take our clothes to be cleaned at the laundromat. They are open 9 – 7:00 & charge $13/load. It was dropped off at 6:30 & will be done by 10:00 tomorrow! A good deal.

 Then off to dinner. We settle on a restaurant in old town (Fegina). It is called Le Bazara. We have a table on a patio which overlooks the Mediterranean Sea. The food is very good. Deb has shrimp (large (4) fileted), Don & I have gold bass cooked in lemon which was very fresh & light & very good.

 Home & Deb watches TV & we email & read messages. To bed at 9:30 – 10:00.

## May 13, 2015

Day 16 – Wed

 Up at 7:45 after a good nite’s sleep. We go & eat breakfast at the local boat turned restaurant. American breakfast for 10€ - scrambled eggs, ham, chs., 6 slices of toast, fresh squeezed OJ, tea or coffee, croissant.

 Deb heads out for her short hike after a train ride & then to the beach.

 Don, Tim & I head out for the day. We buy a trekking card for 23€ each – good for 2 days of multiple/unlimited train rides, bus, some WC’s, and a hiking pass.

 We go first to the far south end – Riomaggiore, a 30 minute train ride. We take many photos in each town, because each has unique specialties. We work our way back north – 5 train rides & 20,000 steps later. Riomaggiore, Manarola, Corniglia, Vernazza, & then back to our home base at Monterosso al Mare. Many Americans & many hikers, & many tourists, esp. in Vernazza. Lunch in a small café (sandwiches) in Manarola, really delicious gelato in Corniglia. Don leaves us at Corniglia to head back to Deb. We arrive home around 6:00 – 6:30.

 We stop to pick up the clean laundry. On the way home, believe it or not, Tim is hit in the head/ a fish! Seagulls are circling above us & drop it! We think at first someone has thrown it at us. A young couple near us says, “Wow! I’ve never seen that before but it must mean good luck!”

 We met & talked to many people today – esp. American, some from Oregon, CO, NYC, & many others we didn’t know where they were from. A couple from Canada too.

 Home to shower. Tim & I out for a light dinner, near the water in Fegina. Salad for me, pasta & bread for Tim. Home to write journal & let our feet rest.

 Cinque Terre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

 Saw photo today of the October 2011 flood. Vernazza was particularly hard hit after 22 inches of rain & the town filling with mud. Much help from the outside world.

 BTW, we are over our cold & not feeling exhausted anymore.

 Weather continues to be perfect. Sunny & warm. Cinque Terre weather is interesting – supposedly controlled by winds coming in from sea from Africa, or off land, etc. For us, it is warm & sunny during the day; 71° in shade; often a breeze (cool) between narrow passageways of bldgs. blowing up from the marinas off the sea.

 Town #1 – Riomaggiore: biggest & most workaday. All of these according to Rick Steves. Town #2: Manarola: waterfront village dotted w/ picturesque mix of shops, houses & vineyards. Town #3: Corniglia (pronounced Cornelia). Hilltop village, 375 steps up from train; not on coast; Tradition of wines; We saw the “wine train” here – men in little cars being pulled up mtn. On piping system; Town #4: Vernazza: Region’s gem; crowned by ruined & rebuilt castle. Infested w/ Germans during WWII & bombed by Allies to rid them from the area. (Also a pillbox visible in Fegina). We were there at 4:00. Very overcrowded & filled w/ tourist. Worse than San Gimignano.

 Town #5: Monterosso al Mare (old town) & Fegina (New town where our apartment is). Resorty, flat, & spread out. Modern new town. Region’s best beaches, swimming & nightlife.

 The “Jeffrey” incident – We are climbing the 375 steps from the train station to Corniglia in a string of humanity. (see photo) There is a whining woman who browbeats her husband, Jeffery, as she climbs… the worst thing she’s ever had to do… Think of lunch… I’ll never eat again… Why are we doing this… Guess you didn’t do your homework… I think I’m in hell… This is some cruel joke…

 To bed at 9:30 to read & let our feet recover after over 20,000 steps.

## May 14, 2015

Day 17 – Thurs.

 Up at 7:00 to our first overcast day. Breakfast & then leave at 9:00 to meet the train from Monterosso al Mare to Vernazza. It is a 9 minute train ride, but it takes Don, Tim & I two hours to hike it because of all the people. We are not held up by those in front of us, but by all the stopping we have to do on the narrow trail to have people pass us going the other way. We think that involves from about 250-300 people! Not all have good trail etiquette but many are friendly. Don says “Bon giorno”, Hello to everyone & most reply back. We think over 50% are American. It’s a relatively easy hike – straight up steps at beginning, flat in middle, downhill steps at end.

 Deb is on the beach walking when we get there & we wave. We walk thru the market & then thru the tunnel & decide to stop for lunch. It’s 12:30. We eat inside (we are a bit chilled w/ sweat & no sun) at la Cantina Miky. It is a lovely, classy, architect/interior design created place w/ an attractive, modern, clean BR, w/ a toilet seat. (Today at the train station we peed in a hole in the floor.) Tim – southern Italian liquidy mozz. Chs., prosciutto & a small salad; special fried bread of the area; steak filet w/ potatoes & salad; Deb – carrot & ginger soup (very hot & thick) & asst. of fried local fish (anchovies, shrimp, calamari); Me – special of the day spinach homemade ravioli w/ tomatoes, shrimp & asparagus pieces; Don – branzino w/ roasted potatoes & insalata mista. I also had a salad w/ anchovies, tuna, tomatoes, & cheese. 150€ total. Most expensive meal we’ve had but a `classy place.

 After lunch we go off to the apartment to regroup Deb & Don go to town (the old part) & tour around and take a photo to send home to Titus with his 2015 tour tee shirt.

 Tim & I head off out of Fegina for a hike, & head northwest towards the rock area which sticks out in the ocean called Punta Mesco. First we go on a trail towards the beach & it is a washed out trail. We go back & turn up a different direction. Our trail map says it is a 30 minute hike. One hour and 45 minutes later, after climbing straight up continuously, we reach the decaying castle/chapel at the top. It is an extremely tough trail up w/ large steps & loose dirt! It is also now very hot, & we are in the sun almost continuously. We have also only brought one bottle of water for what we thought was a 30 minute hike. We rest at the top & see many old buildings where people have obviously lived, but not for a while. We’re thinking maybe from WW2. After a rest, we head down the mtn. It only takes about 45 minutes.

 I forgot to mention that on the way up, we stop & talk to an American woman who now lives in Switzerland. She is accompanied by her husband & 2 kids. She was very interesting & friendly, from CA, but has lived all over the world.

 By the end of the hike we are totally exhausted! Our legs are totally shot! We meet Don along the way as we get close to our place. He’s such a good guy & is off to buy stuff for dinner.

 We shower & Tim takes another load of laundry to be done by early tomorrow (13€).

 To bed pretty early to read & recover. 25,000 steps today!

## May 15, 2015

Day 18 – Friday

 Up at 7:00 to prepare to leave Cinque Terre. For the first time it is cloudy & spritzing rain. We pack & Don, Deb & Tim go out for breakfast. We clean up the place & leave around 9:45. We wind our way up out of Cinque Terre & enjoy the views. Even though it is cloudy & cooler (65°), it is humid & feels warm. We eventually make it to the big highway & drive west to Genoa, a big industrial city & port.

 There we head north towards the Piedmont area of Italy, home of wonderful red wines like Barolo & white wine like Moscato d’Asti. It rains hard on the big highway, & we drive in & out of many dark tunnels thru the mtns. We exit & get into the countryside with beautiful rolling hills covered with vines going in every direction. This area is also known for raising hazelnuts & digging white truffles. We reach our new destination, Treiso & our agriturismo lodging, Il Bricco. It is a lovely old stone farm house which was redone in 2005.

 The owner, who is my age, is a former teacher, & speaks no English. Her name is Olga & she is very gregarious & helpful. Despite our language barrier, we communicated the basics. She showed us our respective rooms, Don & Deb’s w/ a small patio & soaking tub & ours with a shower. It is spotlessly clean & has fabulous views from its spot on the top of a hill.

 We are starving & she recommends a couple of places in town. We go to Ostoria dell-Unione. It is well known for doing local foods. It is busy and has very good food. Don and I have the Plat du Jour for 27€ - a variety of salamis & prosciutto w/ spinach & egg omelettes the size of 2 half dollars; beef carpaccio w/ lots of raw ground meat (just for the DP8 crowd!); rabbit casserole w/ onions & cooked peppers & dessert & coffee; Me- chocolate pudding & Don – hazelnut cake; Deb – gnocchi w/ gorgonzola pollo cacchatori; Tim – small flat spaghetti pasta ragu/light meat sauce & chicken cacchatori. Tim & Don have house wine, a Barbera, Deb & I share Moscato d’Asti (fabulous & fruity!)

 Back to our B&B to rest. Tim has diarrhea & is feeling punky, so we rest an hour. Then off to Alba. We park, pay & walk. Rick Steves hasn’t written about the Piedmont area, so we don’t see tourists in the town. We have certainly seen lots of the “Rick Steves” affect everywhere else in Italy! This seems like a small working town, newer bldgs., than previously. We buy gelato & go to the TI which is the best we’ve seen yet. The woman tells us where to go in town to buy a new GPS, since ours broke (broken wire in charger wire). We drive to the “shopping mall,” get lost on the way, & eventually find it. Don & Deb go to the grocery store & we head to “Euronics”, which is like the Italian “Best Buy.” They even wear blue & yellow shirts. People (sales) are very helpful. We are able to talk to a guy who speaks English, & we get a Garmin for €139.50. The rental company will reimburse us (per a phone conversation w/ Tim). Tim is tired out & sits & waits for Don & Deb to be done. I buy a pair of sandals (€15.90). We head off & stop at a Burger King cause Deb needs to eat. Tim gets a chicken sandwich but it has mayo & is fried, so he doesn’t eat it. (Deb later gives it to the house dog!). Back home, we meet Olga’s daughter, who speaks English. She is serving dinner to several people. You must make a reservation in the am to eat. 20€ for 3 courses, coffee, water, not including wine.

 Deb takes a bath & Tim, Don & I sit on the patio, have wine & snacks & enjoy the view. It has cleared off & was sunny today after all. However, there is a possibility of rain tonite & there are clouds obscuring the horizon. We also discuss plans for the next few days here. We will make a final decision at breakfast.

 Off to our room. It is getting cold at 9:15. Close shutters & settle in to our comfortable environment.

 When we got into bed at 9:45 to read, it was still light outside!

## May 16, 2015

Day 19 – Sat.

 Up at 7:30, shower & to breakfast down stairs at Il Bricco at 8:30. Coffee or tea, fruit, yogurt, salami, cheese, breads, etc.

 We leave at 9:30 to head to Alba. We pay to park, and then realize it has a limit of 30 minutes, so move to the inside garage which has no limit.

 Walk to town, which is crowded with people since there is a large outdoor market going on with everything from clothes to sewing machines & notions to vacuum cleaners. Deb & I search the market while Don & Tim go to the TI to make reservations for a wine tasting this afternoon, which is expected here. We leave the city after we go check out the rally cars which are having an event in the area this weekend. They are mostly small cars, striped down inside & filled with safety roll bars,and covered with stickers & advertising outside.

 We head off to La Morra around 12:00, & a half hour later we are there. Again to the TI where we get recommendations for a simple lunch & ask how to get to the famous belvedere (view). We find a restaurant recommended by the TI.

 The whole menu is in Italian, & it is busy & filled w/ locals. Deb wants a sandwich, so she & Don leave & go elsewhere. We have a delicious meal & Tim an enjoyable Barbera. Tim – local pasta w/ ragu (Tajarin); Judy – Risotto w/ asparagus, served w/ a dish w/ 2 hunks of parmegiano reggiano cheese, which your grate yourself. Yum! Yum! Also served w/ a variety of breads & breadsticks. All for 23€.

 Then on to the famous view of the valley, recommended by tour books & Don’s friend, Vic. Beautiful panorama!

 On to Barbaresco and the winery our B&B uses to make their wine. It is called Montaribaldi & we are greeted by young, cute Robert, the vintner, who shows us where their vines are located & gives us a tour of their cellar. They make red & white wine & some sparkling. Then we do a tasting w/ one of the owner’s wives. I have 1 sparkling, 1 local white, 2 chardonnays & a moscato. The others have some whites & then reds. And it’s all free & served w/ local cheese half cow/half goat along w/ a jelly made from local fruits, such as quince & hazelnut. Very good. I would have bought some, but they were sold out.

 Then on to our wine tasting apt, also in Barbaresco & only about 5 minutes away. It is called Moccagatta, & has about 14 hectares of land & 2 employees & 4 family members working, two daughters of brothers & their Dads/or better said – two brothers & their daughters. Our hostess is Martina, one of daughters. She is excellent, explains things so clearly, is very knowledgeable & has very good English. We spend over an hour with her, including the tour & tasting. This is also free, contains many large tastings & afterwards we need to go back to our B&B to rest!

 Back to Il Bricco for a wonderful view on a late Saturday afternoon. 100% sun w/ a slight atmospheric haze. We rest & relax (Tom & I & Don for a short bit.)

 We have decided to eat at our B&B tonite. At 7:30, we sit & are served a lovely meal. 1st course – local flat, large pasta w/veggies & olive oil sauce; main course- beef cooked in Barbaresco wine w/ salad; Dessert – Moscato & hazelnut flan w/ nugget cookie. Red wine – Barbera from Il Bricco grapes. White wine for me from Il Bricco grapes. Meal is 20€ each w/o wine.

 Tired & stuffed. To bed to read at 9:30.

## May 17, 2015

Day 20 – Sunday

 Up at 7:30. Breakfast at 8:30. Off in the car at 10:00 to Barbaresco. Walked thru the town & tried to climb the tower, but it was closed. More beautiful panoramas. A TI in an enoteca, & a small town market.

 Then on to Neive, a picturesque medieval town with roads which circle around to the church. A gate designed by Borghesi, another panorama, a church w/ golden icons & offerings & many Italians coming out of church & hanging out & talking. All dressed up (even a young guy in a red tuxedo coat). Then off to Barolo, a small town w/ many enotecas & a wine museum in a castle. We walk the town & then decide on a place to eat on a small Square – Osteria Barolando. Tim – Tajarin w/ duck ragu & veal stew cooked for 5 hours in wine; Judy – vegetable flan w/ cheese fondue sauce & thin pastry sheet holding the fondue; asparagus risotto; Deb – green salad & asparagus risotto; Don – Tajarin pasta (local) w/ duck ragu, served w/ bread & delicious breadsticks. T& D have Barolo wine.

 Afterwards to the 5 floor castle & wine museum. Artsy & informative. D& T do a wine tasting afterward in the castle of local Barolos. Dispensed w/ automatic machines for 4 tastes (dust, rock, clay, combo). It cost between 8 & 10€.

 We then stop for some gelato in the square. The guy serving spoke excellent English. Then travel by car thru Serralunga, Alba & Sinio.

 BTW, it’s another gorgeous sunny day. About 80° w/ full sun & mist on the hill in the am. However, we still can’t see the Alps from our place since they are clouded in. On the north side of Il Bricco, on a clear day, the Matterhorn is visible.

 I am feeling “punky” today. Maybe Tim’s bug from 2 days ago. Very tired.

 Home to Il Bricco at 5:45. Read email (another from Don) & relax on the deck & enjoy the view & temp.

We did see a few rally cars on our route today, going the other way, w/ a distinctive engine noise & trying to pass those in front of them.

## May 18, 2015

Day 21 - Monday

 Up at 6:30 to pack, eat breakfast at 8:30 & off at 9:00 for our northern most point – Stresa on Lake Maggiore. We are there by 11:30 & check into our hotel, Hotel Fontana. Our room is on the top floor – what they call 3 & we call 4 - & it has a patio w/ a view of the Lake. Don & Deb are on the floor directly below us w/ a smaller room & larger deck. The girl who signs us in says the rate we have been quoted is for a single room (1 person for 93€ nite) & that we have to pay 17€ more / nite for 2 people. Don & Deb meet a couple later who have the same thing happen to them at one of the ritzy grand hotels down the way from us. Is it a rip-off? Bait & switch?

 Anyway, the 2 couples decide to go their separate ways after we settle in. Deb & Don to the Islands w/ gardens & villas before the rain hits tomorrow. We go instead to a nice lunch at a local restaurant, La Rosa dei Venti, recommended by the hotel. Tim – pasta w/ meat ragu & veal filet (huge) & Me - a variety of broiled fish (octopus, prawns, salmon, sea bass, etc.) Very good. Tim a local red wine.

 Afterwards we jump in the car & drive up to the top of the mountain (5000 ft.), Mottarone. It takes about 40 minutes on winding, narrow roads. Used to have a big gondola that would take people up to the top, but it is closed for major renovations. (Lori & Gary went on it last year.) Ski trails & bldgs. & lifts at top. Some people hiking, our first cloudy day, so not a clear view, but still beautiful. Then on to the other side of the mountain to the cute, but run-down town of Lago d’Orta w/ a smaller lake than Stresa. We walk the town, see the sites & get gelato. Home to Stresa on the different route, again about 45 minutes to Stresa.

 Don & Deb have returned & we hook up & sit on their balcony & have some wine. I email Tobi about Buddy & Betsy Ridl Baun, to see if we can hook up as we had emailed we might. Then Don & Deb are hungry, so we take them to where we had lunch (also recommended to Don by a different guy at hotel). Tim has pizza & I have fresh cut up fruit. Deb – salad & pizza; Don – broiled swordfish & veggies.

 Home in the twilight. The grand hotels, which have been here for so many years & were built for those in the 1800s on the Grand Tour, are lit up & beautiful. Lights also sparkle on the lake on this side & the other. It is beautiful, but the town also has several rotting shells of old manor houses or hotels, which are no longer used, with falling apart shutters & vine covered walls and holes in their roofs and windows.

 Another thing I wanted to remember to include in this journal is the state of Italian roads. The govt has no $, so we have seen many mountainous roads which have collapsed edges. Repairs are not done & instead the edge is roped off & the highway becomes one lane!

 Also, water is not free in Italian restaurants. One purchases still or sparkling water in a large bottle for 1 to 3€ / bottle.

 Also, one does not tip in a restaurant in Italy. A service charge is included on each check, usually ranging also from 1 to 3€.

 We were sorry to leave our Il Bricco women this am. What a nice family (Olga, the mom & her two daughters & granddaughters) & a lovely place. As we left, they gave each couple a bag of candied macadamia nuts.

## May 19, 2015

Day 22 – Tuesday

 Up at 8:00ish & to breakfast at our Hotel La Fontana – dry cereals, fruit, juice, jelly filled croissants, cakes! Bread, yogurt, coffee, tea, cheese, ham. A good spread. Something for everyone & waited on for tea & coffee by Guiseppe.

 Tim & I leave Don & Deb (after making plans to meet for lunch) & head to the boat to buy an all day ticket to go to the Islands. The boat ticket is 19€ each & the ticket to the 3 islands & their chateaus is16€. Expensive but Rick Steves says it’s worth it. We get to the dock just below us & the boat is already there, so we don’t have to wait. Our first stop is Isola Bella w/ its gorgeous palace & gardens. It was built on land given to the Borromeo family & was started in the mid 1500’s, along w/ the step pyramid shaped garden. The Palace has several outstanding features – a multi room stone decorated grotto, a multi floor spiral staircase w/ steps imbedded into the wall & an expensive art collection from the 1400’s to the 1700’s. I see one good Ghirlandio but some of the ptgs are copies. The garden is also spectacular (but not as good as Villandry!) & used to contain fruit & veggies & be the place of many large parties. Now it is filled w/ white peacocks, sculpture, water fountains & many flowers. Rain is predicted for later today but this am is sunny w/ intermittent clouds & pleasant temps. We are at Isola Bella for about 2 ½ hrs. & then catch the boat to Isola Superiore (Pescatori). We just miss one & have to wait 30 minutes for the next. We get on & find Don & Deb onboard and w/ another couple they befriended yesterday, Pat & Jack. He reminds us so much of Ross! They are very friendly & jovial. They moved a few years ago from N.J. to Sarasota, FL.

 They stay on board & D&D&T&I get off at Superiore & walk around looking for a restaurant. This island is only shops & restaurants, & we find an ideal spot off the middle path on the island. The restaurant is called La Pescatore & has a beautiful patio w/ a wisteria leaf covered lattice work. Deb & I share Moscato d’Alba w/ Don. He & Tim also share red. Deb – minestrone soup, chicken cutlet; Don – white fish Mediterranean style; Tim – slice beef – like cordon bleu- w/ fries; Judy – minestrone soup & one of their specialties, trout w/ a side of grilled smoked cheese & fries. A fabulous view & lovely atmosphere & a fun talk w/ the British couple next to us about politics in their country & ours & why Britain might leave the EU (forced laws such as immigration).

 We go back to catch the next boat. Don & Deb leave immediately & we have to wait 30 minutes for another just missed boat. I buy a chiffon scarf for 20€. We eventually board the boat & make it to the third island, Isola Madre. We walk thru the gardens & see the ancient Himalayan Cyprus which was blown down in a hurricane a few years ago. It is a very rare old tree, so they righted it & have it surrounded w/ guide wires. This palace & its gardens is also owned by the Borromeo family, & doesn’t seem as well cared for! It also doesn’t have atmospheric controls & few guards. Photos are not allowed, but w/ no guards, I sneak several. This palace has many old dark ptgs., dark furniture & puppets & their marionette stages. Supposedly the family still comes to the island for several weeks each year. Also, the garden on Isola Madre is nonnative plants & trees.

 We again have to wait 30 minutes for a boat, since we once again just missed one. It is much cooler & starting to drip rain.

 We board the boat back to Stresa & run in to Pat & Jack again & talk the whole way back. We exchange #s & emails before we part.

 When we arrive back in Stresa, it is windy & very rainy. We walk quickly into town so I can buy another scarf (purple). We then have a cold, rainy, long walk back to the hotel w/ our small umbrella & no coats!

 We change & join Don & Deb for some wine. No patio sitting w/ the rain! We all decide we’re hungry, so we head back down to town again for a pizza for 3 & pasta for Tim. It is still raining a little, but has mostly stopped by the time we head back to the hotel.

 Then off to bed to read. I had hot chocolate (delicious, but stupid, since I end up not sleeping very well because of the caffeine.)

## May 20, 2015

Day 23 – Wednesday

 Up at 7:00 via alarm. BTW, Tim’s phone rang at midnite – someone from Minnesota. We didn’t answer because it is probably about the motor home.

 BTW, Tim spent time yesterday on the phone & writing emails about the upcoming sale of the motor home to Joe & Brenda Turner. The closing will probably take place about 2 weeks after we get home. And yesterday, Joe agreed to also buy the Ford, our towing car for $11,000! A good deal for him.

 We eat breakfast at our hotel w/ Don & Deb & head out at 9:00 to walk to the railroad stazione to catch the Lago Maggiore Express. We leave Stresa on a train at 9:35 & head north to Domodossola. We have a whole train car to ourselves, so can walk from side to side looking at the various views. Despite the rain last nite, the skies have cleared, & we can finally see the snow capped, granite surfaced Alps. It is a beautiful ride. We do not realize that the train is running late, & at one point, we think we have missed our stop. Deb goes back a car & talks to a woman who says we aren’t there yet! Phew! So we arrive in Domodossola about 15 minutes late. We go to the TI, also find where our next train leaves from & walk the town for an hour.

 We leave on the narrow gauge railroad towards Locarno, Switzerland at 11:25. This time we have a crowded train car (the first one w/ the driver) & all seats are taken, except by Don & Deb’s area, which has some empties and gives them more room. It is a truly spectacular route up into the mountains, along the edge of cliffs, looking down at waterfalls & rivers & up at old stone houses & snow capped peaks. The ride takes until 1:20.

 We exit the train, wind our way thru the streets to the TI, get a recommendation about which attractions to go to and which restaurant & we set off. We find Bar Piazza on a square & fill ourselves. Tim- cordon bleu pork w/ fried potatoes & red wine; Don – pork Milanese w/ risotto (looked like creamed corn but tasted good); Deb – the pork filet special w/ fries & a green salad before; Me – liver of veal! I thought I was ordering a veal filet. Oh well! One bite does it! I have the fried potatoe cake, the size of a pancake, & some of Tim’s cordon bleu. Also insalata mista before, which comes w/ Italian dressing on it. No olive oil for the first time on this trip! The bill is 160 francs (Swiss), including red wine for 30 and 2 liters of water for 10 francs each. We think this very expensive & don’t know the exchange rate w/ Euros. Our waitress say it’s even! Yikes! We’ll check when we get back to the internet.

 It is already 3:30 so we head back towards the boat. It has gotten windier & cloudy. We use the WC, Deb sits & D, T, & I walk & buy gelato (probably our last this trip!). Deb already had some near our lunch place.

 There is a large crowd to board the boat & we all squeeze on for a 4:15 departure. We find a table w/ a view & Don & Tim spend a bit of time outside. It starts to rain & the mountains cloud in. We are quite amazed at all the villages & houses along the route next to Lake Maggiore. It is about a 2 hr., 20 minute ride. We arrive back at 6:35.

 We walk in the pouring rain under our umbrellas, to the town area adjacent to where the boat arrives. We buy some food for a snack this evening. Then back to the hotel, where we have wine & snacks in Don & Deb’s room! Then to our room to get organized & do some packing.

 To bed to read & to sleep around 9:30.

 Our last day in Italy was another fun one. We again lucked out w/ the weather, since our rail trip thru the mountains was clear & bright, our lunch outside under the covered patio was pleasant & walking in the rain was not a big deal.

## May 21, 2015

Day 24 – Thursday

 Up at 5:00 by alarm. Shower & finish packing. Downstairs w/ the bags by 6:15. Load the car & go back inside. We eat a bit since Guiseppe, our host/owner of the hotel, insists that we cannot go until we have something to eat.

 We are back in the car & on the road by 6:45. It is raining again as we leave, but as we reach the Hertz rental car return in Milan Malpenza Airport, it has stopped. The rental car return goes very smoothly & quickly unlike the horror show in Paris. We arrive there w/ no problem at 7:30, return the car, check in, get my purse VAT tax form stamped & put in the mail, & head to the gate. We have a bite to eat & board the plane around 10:10. We are Sky Priority again & sit in the bulkhead again for more room (10 A&B). Don & Deb are in the same position across the aisle (GH). We paid more for more leg room, a good move.

 The flight goes smoothly. We read, watch many movies & TV shows on our individual TVs & Tim naps a bit. To JFK about 15 minutes late. We run off the plane. We are actually the first off the plane! We run to passport control which has new check in machines for US citizens, basically yet another step. We get stamped & approved at another desk, run along & pick up our bags, get in a large line for passport control (no line at global entry! Gotta do it!). We finally make it thru & exit & drop our bags already tagged to go on our connecting flight. At this point, we have less than an hour till we fly to DC, & we are told we can’t go thru security till we get another boarding pass. We go up 3 floors via elevator, & a Delta agent helps us get our passes. On to security which has a huge line! We realize that we’ll never make our flight w/o assistance, so we again take the help of an agent, who tells us to take the elevator again, this time one floor up to the Train over to Terminal 2 from 4, where the security line is short, which it is. However, my carry on bag is flagged for inspection, & we are now only 15 minutes away from our flight leaving. We have to wait in line to be inspected, & then the TSA guy takes everything out of my bag while I have to stand behind a wall & not touch anything. All is out, small papers, bags, pamphlets, gifts, jewelry, pills & meds, shoes, art work, etc. and placed into 3 separate bins as well as the original bag! I eventually find out he is looking for a corkscrew but can’t find it. I’m convinced there isn’t one. Everything is sent thru the X ray machine again. Meanwhile, Tim has found our gate & luckily, they aren’t departing yet. The guy finally can see the corkscrew on the X ray, so starts emptying plastic bags & finds it! I am then left to put the mess back in. We run to the gate, the bathroom & for water, since we had to throw out 3 bottles before going thru security again! We finally start boarding & the plane pushes off on time at 3:30. We then sit on the tarmac for one hour w/ our seatbelts on. There is heavy traffic in the NY-DC corridor, so we have to wait for a path. We make it to DC around 5:30, go to baggage claim & find Tim’s bag has not arrived. It will have to be delivered to Woodbridge tomorrow since it has been held up in passport control in NYC. Who knows why…

 We get a taxi & go to Noel & Mari’s house to pick up our car. We are greeted by two running & screaming & jumping 6 year olds. We are as excited as they are to see us. Big hugs all around. A nice greeting from Mari too. We stay around a bit to catch up on the news & pick up the mail. We leave before Noel gets home, but he calls & we get to catch up with him too. We arrive in Woodbridge around 7:30 - 8:00, stop at the Silver Diner for a bite to eat. Everyone speaks English! We arrive home around 9:00 & Tim has email to write & catch up on regarding the motor home sale. Joe & Brenda want the motor home closing Saturday which means tomorrow we have to empty all of our stuff out of it!!!! We’ll be jetlagged, oh, well! Never a dull moment.

 So, we’re home safe, saw fabulous things with good friends & get to sleep in our own bed. Back to Europe 3 months from today w/ Pat & Jim. Tim leaves in 5 days for an Oregon bday trip w/ Noel Son, who will soon be 40.

Back to normalcy…

Exchange rate for Euro - $1.14 = 1€

Last year $1.40 = 1€

Quite a change!