

Perspectives of Italy, 2009 by Elizabeth Van Brocklin

From the moment I stepped off my Alitalia flight, I knew I was in Italy. Almost instantly, my ears filled with the romantic tones of the Italian language, my eyes filled with the beauty of Roma, and even my nose seemed to sense a difference in the smell of the air. It seemed to me that Italy was a place where all of my fantasies of European life came to fruition. Even amidst the confusion caused by being in a foreign place, and the effects of jet lag, I knew that Italy would be all that I had dreamed. What my dream was exactly was soon to be proved true and even enhanced by the culture and beauty of the places in Italy that I visited. My advice to anyone who travels to Italy is simply to collect all that you can. Collect knowledge and experience through all of your senses; from sight, taste, touch, smell and hearing.

From the moment I arrived, I was greeted by the sights, sounds, smells, feelings and tastes of Italy. From the window of my Al'italia flight, I saw gently rolling hills caressing small towns graduating to the clustered buildings of the city of Roma. Arriving at the Rome-Fiumacino Airport, I looked into the excited faces of my mother and sister, and knew their anticipation was reflected in my own expression. As my journey in Italy truly began that afternoon, I drank in the sights of everything around me from the highway and cars driving to and from the city of Roma, to the faces in the group surrounding me. Even the taste of the air was different; somehow strange; more clean and warm than the air of my home. The voices ebbing and flowing in the tones of Italian surrounded me, and I felt exhilarated by the sound. From our base at Hotel Casa Farnese, I took in the city of Roma. From the blue sky to the cobbled streets below, Rome is a beautiful sight. An incredible mix of modern and ancient worlds coexist in the space of the city, the footsteps of the famous and infamous have trod on its streets, and the sound of their voices echo off the walls. As night enveloped me and I had my

first bite of truly Italian cuisine, I could barely contain the fountain of enthusiasm that I felt in my heart. It is an indescribable feeling to be in such a place, and I was overwhelmed by my senses and emotions.

On June 26, I toured the Vatican City, the smallest independent state in the world, and witnessed the indescribable art and architecture of the Vatican Museo, the Sistine Chapel, and St. Peter's Basilica. The Vatican Museo contains innumerable items of precious art from paintings to sculpture showing the evolution and revolution of art from ancient to renaissance. It was as if experiencing the history of the world while walking through the halls of the museum. The statues of Greek and Roman gods glowed with life, youth, vigor, and showed the spectrum of human emotion on their stone faces. The tombs of marble shared space with ancient sconces, baths of granite, and fountains. The floor and walls glowed with mosaics depicting the lives and worlds of those who lived thousands of years before. The paintings of masters on stone and canvas and wall seemed as portals leading into another time and place. Every piece and painting, every sight beckoned me to watch; to look and see into the past and feel it in my soul. Leading from the halls of the Vatican Museo, we entered the Sistine Chapel. To say that one feels honored to be within that relatively small room is an understatement. As guards restrict photography and silence the voices of the hundreds of people passing through, the paintings of Michelangelo rest, glorified upon the walls and ceiling. The vibrancy of his work remains nearly unscathed after hundreds of years, his figures looking down upon masses of humanity, portraying their stories of life and God. From heaven to earth, Michelangelo's labor glows with inspiration from God and man, colors of azure and red and gold depict the stories of the relationship, love and struggle of man and sin and the divine. Leaving behind the chapel, we entered St. Peter's Basilica, the largest Catholic Basilica in the world. Soaring above the

buildings of the Vatican stands this immense structure, St. Peter's is a statement of the immense power and history standing behind Catholic faith. A structure of marble and glass, houses the remains of St. Peter and popes through the ages. Like a flower the structure unfolds to the eye, the light streaming from windows, while the marble sky of the great dome soars above. The impressive building reveals the godly and human, portrayed through the grounding of such man-made beauty visibly reaching toward God.

After visiting the Vatican City, I truly gained an appreciation for the history contained within the bounds of Roma. On June 27 we visited the most ancient parts of the city including the Coliseum, Roman Forum, and Palatine Hill. My eyes were filled with the immensity, beauty, and history within the bounds of this one incredible place. Entering the Coliseum, I was filled with such a powerful feeling of exhilaration that I felt as if I were alone in the crowd of which I was a part. The walls soared up around me, as real to me as they must have been to the millions who have passed through this place throughout history. The power of the Roman Empire seems to be comparable to the strength of the Coliseum. I reached out and touched stone that remains after thousands of years of history, standing in witness to all of man and nature. Time takes its toll, but where the Coliseum crumbles, imagination fills. I could almost see the people filling the seats spiraling toward the sky, felt as if a gladiator should appear below to bellow a challenge. The walls around me, the sky above, and I was so grateful to be able to experience the world and all of its wonders. As I traveled from the Coliseum to the remains of the Roman Forum, I passed by the powerful structure of Constantine's Arch, and saw the ground beneath where those who built these structures must have walked. The immensity of the Roman Empire was revealed in a relief on walls as I walked by. Rome grew from one small state to encompassing nearly all of Europe and huge parts of Africa and Asia. In the Roman Forum I strolled past the remains of

temples and businesses, homes and piazzas. One could almost smell the aromas of baking breads, fresh produce, even horse sweat as you walked through streets now crumbled and overgrown. Columns stand as proud and tall as the day they were completed next to the rubble of a wall, stairs lead to buildings no longer existing, and all of this stands under the shadow of what once was. You have only to blink and you are imagining life at the peak of Roman power, at its decline, and even after. You have only to think to realize that you stand under the same sun and feel the same heat that the people tens, hundreds, thousands of years ago felt and saw and lived under. That night I sat by the Trevi Fountain's roaring waters, staring at the immense statues and beyond to the stars, thankful that I was there. It sent tingles down my spine to see how much and yet how little the world changes.

Despite the incredible beauty, history, and powerful images I experienced in Rome, I was excited to leave the bustle of the city. Leaving early on the morning of June 28, our group left our Roma home and embarked on the two hour journey to Orvieto, located in Umbria, the beautiful "Green Heart of Italy". From my seat on the bus I watched as fields of sunflowers flashed past, quaint towns appeared veiled perched upon peaks in the distance, and vineyards mingled with silver leaved olive groves. Before reaching Orvieto, we detoured to the town of Tivoli, known for the Villa D'Este, and its incredible fountain gardens. This was the highlight of my excursions in Italy. As a lover of Renaissance history, and a special student of Borgia family history, I was enthralled to see the place where a member of Pope Alexander I family made his home. Not only did Alexander I's grandson build the Villa but it had the most beautiful gardens that I had ever seen. Miles of waterways hide and then reveal themselves in channels and waterfalls, fountains and jets of water. Statues and basins covered in mosses, lichens and ferns appear through mists in caverns and in the midst of streams like nymphs frozen in time.

Hundreds upon hundreds of fountains create a symphony of sound in this landscape of water in steps from the villa which itself is a work of art; every room themed with Roman and Greek mythological gods and creatures, or biblical stories brought to life in paint and gilt. Passion for art and architecture is evident in every facet of this incredible home. Yet the most evident passion is of course, for life.

Another stop on our way to Orvieto was at Villa Farnese in Caprarola. Villa Farnese is a Renaissance mansion overlooking the Monte Cimini, a range of densely wooded volcanic hills. Walking through its halls, I was fascinated by its pentagonal design. It seems that there is always a room being warmed by the sun, the light glowing off of the reddish gold stone. The center of the building opens up to nature, the hallways surrounding the blue sky above. Inside, beautiful paintings cover every wall and ceiling, creating a world of incredible beauty inside looking at the natural beauty outside. The *Scale Reggia*, is a grand winding staircase of broad steps leading to the different levels of the home and it feels as if you are ascending to the heavens as you look at the paintings of the heavens on the ceiling above. Outside, the gardens of the Villa are as impressive as the building itself. The building is surrounded by a moat with drawbridge, with two of the buildings facades facing the gardens, each with its parterre beyond the moat. The lower garden is reached from a drawbridge from the terrace of the *piano nobile*. This is a parterre garden of box topiary, and fountains. A grotto-like cave with waterfalls was, to me, the centerpiece of the picturesque garden.

Leaving the grandeur of Italy's Renaissance architecture behind, we drove up winding roads that led us to our home for the remainder of our trip, Orvieto in the province of Umbria. The site of the city is among the most dramatic I have ever witnessed, rising above the almost-vertical faces of tuffa rock cliffs that are completed by defensive walls built of the same stone. The ancient

city has been populated since Etruscan times. Orvieto was annexed by Rome in the third century BC, and Roman influence is seen throughout the city. After the collapse of the Roman Empire its defensible site gained new importance: the city was held by Goths and by Lombards before its self-governing commune was established in the 10th century. Orvieto, sitting on its impregnable rock was an important stop on the road between Florence and Rome. From 1201 Orvieto governed itself lead by the "captain of the people". The territory of Orvieto was under papal control long before it was officially added to the Papal States, and remained a papal possession until 1860, when in was annexed to the newly unified Italy. Entering the city, I was astounded by the sights of ancient architecture married with new, of the cobblestoned narrow streets and towering churches. At first I thought the city was quaint, but then I realized the true magnificence of the city. After settling in at the beautiful Grand Hotel Italia, I walked the streets of the city. It is such a small place that it feels as if you could walk anywhere and not be lost at any time. Stores line the main streets and squares, selling everything from pottery to local wines and cheeses. Throughout my stay in this incredible city, we became more and more familiar with the sights, sounds, and even tastes of my surroundings. From the cobbled streets that surround the city, I was able to walk to the Duomo, the main cathedral in Orvieto. The church is an imposing structure in the center of the city, all striped in white travertine and greenish-black basalt in narrow bands. The façade is striking and includes remarkable sculptures of Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, as well as various figures of saints and angels. Viewing the Duomo in the evening as the sun begins to set, the images glow on the face of the building with all of the gilding and light reflecting off of the beautiful paintings. At night the piazza in front of the building is illuminated with light and gives added depth to the figures portrayed on the surface of the building.

A huge part of the fame of Orvieto is the Etruscan ruins all around the city. Orvieto is home to Etruscan ruins and the remnants of a wall that enclosed the city more than 2000 years ago. At the foot of the mountain that the city rests upon, the Etruscan necropolis of *Crocefisso di Tufo* contains almost a hundred ancient chamber tombs. The underground city is also very important to the identity of Orvieto as an ancient city. The city of Orvieto has long kept the secret of its labyrinth of caves and tunnels that lie beneath the surface. Dug deep into the tuffa rock, a type volcanic rock, these hidden and secret tunnels are only now open to view through guided tours. Their spectacular nature has also yielded many historical and archeological finds. The underground city contains tunnels, galleries, wells, stairs, quarries, cellars, unexpected passageways, cisterns, superimposed rooms with numerous small square niches, detailing its creation over the centuries. I experienced the underground city with my group on July 4, entering it through the *Pasticceria Adriano* and guided by the chef himself as he detailed the experience of discovering the underground city beneath his store. It is fully ten degrees colder than the world above as we entered the tunnels leading to the catacomb of rooms underground. The smell of damp rock in the cool space surrounded me as I walked through the rooms. It seemed to be a completely different world than that of the light above.

To say that Orvieto is a beautiful place is a huge understatement. From July 28 until August 9, I discovered the true beauty within the walls of the city. Not too long, not too narrow, Via del Duomo and Corso Cavour were perfect streets for strolling and shopping. After Italian class ended at around 1, I was able to stroll the town and discover the lovely life that people in Orvieto lead. I enjoyed looking for places to eat, and was fascinated by the amount of variety Orvieto offered. I sampled many different dishes prepared and made up of ingredients I had never experienced before. I even spent time at the local *mercato* in the *Piazza del Popolo* where

I found a world of myriad color, smell, and taste. From the sights to the sounds and tastes of the food Orvieto is truly a magnificent place.

From Orvieto, my group traveled to sites around Italy. On June 30, I found myself in Spoleto, a small city resting at the start of the Appennine Mountain range. Spoleto, like Orvieto, is an ancient city built upon the ruins of an ancient city. It is amazing to see the remains of walls dating back to the 5th century BC. The remnants of the people who have lived on the land that modern Spoleto is built are still evident. We walked along the *Ponte delle Torri*, a Roman bridge built in the 1st century BC and were able to see the city as a whole from this site. From there we could see the *Albornozian Castle*, where it has stood imposingly upon the top of the hill it was built on. Inside the city, we were able to see the Roman theater. It has been largely rebuilt, yet because of this I was able to gain a good perspective of what it may have looked like centuries ago. Walking in the streets of Spoleto, I looked at the incredible buildings that surrounded me. Some were clearly from medieval periods, yet they were nestled closely to the modern buildings at their sides. I felt overwhelmed at first walking amongst the people of Spoleto, not understanding what they said as they passed by, yet smiles are the same everywhere, and the sight of a grin on anyone's face is comforting and every face I saw seemed to have a ready smile for me.

On July 7, I spent the day with my group traveling to Perugia and Assisi. Perugia is one of the most important cities in the Umbria province. Perugia is the capital city of Umbria and is very close to the Tiber River. As the van approached the city, I was fascinated to see it emerging from the fog that clouded the valley below. As buildings revealed themselves, I was confronted by the sheer size of the city. Compared to Orvieto, Perugia seemed huge. Inside the city, the symbol of the griffin dominates buildings and plaques. In the surrounding countryside, ancient

and medieval aqueducts reveal themselves as part of the landscape. On a guided tour of the city, we were able to see the *Palazzo dei Priori*, or Prior's Palace, which is and was the center of the government in Perugia. The group also entered the Cathedral and explored the beautiful art and architecture within. In the center of the city is the Fontana Maggiore. The *Fontana Maggiore* is truly spectacular, depicting the lives of saints in stone, designed by Fra Bevignate and sculpted by Nicola and Giovanni Pisano, father and son. After having a cappuccino at a local café, I was in search of Perugia's famous Baci chocolate. In a small chocolate shop, I found the luscious chocolates in the Piazza Grande and watched students coming and going to the University of Foreigners. I was so blessed to be able to eat at a restaurant overlooking the walls of the city and surrounding countryside. Halfway through the meal, I witnessed a spectacular lightening show in the distance. Leaving Perugia behind, we drove to Assisi. This city has its Roman origins and truly developed during the Middle Ages. This city is perched upon the flank of Monte Subasio, and overlooks the valley between itself and Perugia. Assisi is most famous as the birthplace of St. Francis and St. Clare. Walking the streets of Assisi, I witnessed the surge of religious pilgrims that congregate in the city and its churches. From any angle it seems possible to see the ancient fortress *Rocca Maggiore*. Yet the city remains closely linked in legend with its native son, St. Francis. St. Francis established the Franciscan order and shares honors with St. Catherine of Siena as the patron saint of Italy. At the Basilica of San Francesco d'Assisi, we visited the lower and upper parts of the church, and witnessed the art and architecture that is nearly one thousand years old. The lower church boasts beautiful frescos by renowned late-medieval artists Cimabue and Giotto, the founders of Renaissance perspective and color, as well as the works of Pietro Lorenzetti and Simone Martini. We also visited the earliest church in Assisi, *Santa Maria Maggiore* and the *Basilica of Santa Chiara* which houses the remains of the

saint. Our last stop was at the *Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli*, which surrounds the tiny *Porziuncola* where St. Francis decided to spend his last hours on earth. The church itself is full of the scents of incense and the air itself is heavy with the importance of the place. The town is full of people seeking to learn and experience this city full of history and faith, the air is full of the wonder of God. Assisi is truly a magnificent place.

July 8 was my last day in Orvieto. After a walk through the city, I felt the need to absorb everything I could from Italy. I joined the rest of my group at their cooking class and had a real taste of how Italian cuisine comes to be so unique. In the kitchen, I felt at home and happy surrounded by friends. Leaving the kitchen, my heart was filled with song, and I found myself singing, and people smiling at the sound. I went to dinner and tasted the fruit of my group's labor and looked up at the stars filling the sky above Orvieto. Deep breaths of the air in Italy filled my lungs and as I returned to the hotel, my eyes filled with tears. Italy, a most spectacular place seemed to fill a hole in my heart, and indeed filled it to overflowing. I learned to experience the world with all of my senses. This is why I must end by saying that this was truly a moving experience. I may now tell people how rewarding traveling to Italy is, how it changes the way you look at the world itself. Live each day to the fullest no matter where you are. See all you can, taste everything, touch every texture you can and feel it in your soul, and listen to words, sounds, and take it all in. A picture may say a thousand words, but viewing the world through your own senses is incomparable, experiencing life for yourself is truly priceless.

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