

Bella Italia 2008

By Jeanne Jordan Bent

From the moment the plane touched down at Fiumicino Airport in Rome, I knew I was in for the adventure of a lifetime. Professor Maria Mansella was there waiting to whisk us off to our hotel in a lovely residential section of Rome called Prati. After settling in at Casa Valdese, we were ready for our first class! Later in the evening, we set off on foot, *a piedi*, to a cozy *trattoria* where we filled our plates at a delectable antipasto buffet. Then the waiters served us homemade *lasagna* and *fettuccine*. ***Che delizia!*** Afterwards, as we took our evening *passaggiata*, we could see we were not far from the Vatican, tomorrow's destination. We strolled back to the hotel, being coached about metro stations and bus stops, the importance of validating tickets at the moment of departure and subway safety in general. We stopped off at the local *gelateria* where it didn't matter what size *gelato* you bought, you could have three flavors, topped with *panna* (whipped cream!) I had to try *nocciola* (hazelnut), *fico* (fig) and *fior di latte con arancia* (vanilla with candied orange). ***Che bel sapore!*** Delicious!

We couldn't escape the heat of the Roman sun, but our spirits were not wilted as we explored the Vatican Museum with the magnificent Sistine Chapel, the famous impressive St. Peter's Basilica, the ancient Colosseum and the Roman Forum. For two days, we were met by an entertaining and knowledgeable guide named Fulvio who filled our heads with facts and fables of ancient Rome. So we had a wonderful taste of Rome before departing for our "home away from home" in Orvieto.

On our way to Orvieto, we stopped in the tiny medieval town of Sermoneta, "*la città d'arte*". Even a small town like this had an imposing fort and lovely church enclosed by a stone wall. ***Bellissima!*** Our next stop was Nettuno, the site of the Sicilian-American Cemetery and Memorial commemorating the 7,861 soldiers who lost their lives in World War II. It was a stately, somber place which moved us all. We had a chance to walk the manicured grounds leading us to a simple statue of two soldiers. They are standing each with one arm around the other, exemplifying their friendship and solidarity. Later in the afternoon we arrived at the Grand Hotel Italia and were warmly welcomed by the hotel staff. After all the excitement of the past few days, I felt that I was home at last.

The next morning, bright and early, we met for class where we began in earnest our study of the Italian language. With our varying levels of knowledge, we would meet for instruction all morning, and then we would break for lunch around 1 pm. Sometimes we'd pick up a quick *panino* at Caffè Montanucci right around the corner from the hotel or perhaps have lunch down the street at a *tavola calda*. Those of us enrolled in Chef Lorenzo's cooking class would wait to eat at the restaurant because the chef would always want us to sample a few things he had just whipped up! Then our Italian class would reconvene for conversation practice around 5 pm for a couple of hours before dinner.

We found many ways to enjoy ourselves while in Orvieto. Those of us in cooking class took great pride in the meals we prepared. We all had a hand in making *gnocchi*, fresh pasta of different shapes, and pizzas and breads. We helped Chef Lorenzo make *porchetta* (pork roast) and *coniglio disossato ripieno* (stuffed boneless rabbit). Simona, the waitress, showed her appreciation of our work by bringing us freshly made *cappuccino*. We looked forward to see how the staff of the restaurant Zeppelin would make our creations look even better that evening at dinner.

The most unique occurrence in Orvieto was our opportunity to attend a wedding blessing in the city's oldest church, *San Giovanale*, which dates back to 1004 BCE. As is happened, one of the couples in our group had gotten married earlier in the year. They had wanted to be photographed in a horse drawn

carriage in Rome, so they brought their wedding outfits with them. Instead, Professor Mansella, along with the help of signora Luisa who lives in Orvieto, was able to quickly arrange a beautiful ceremony at the little church of San Giovenale. Luisa and Mario offered their house as “wedding central”. We all attended the ceremony along with some of the parishioners of San Giovenale. Many of the townspeople waved and cheered Congratulations! Best wishes! **Viva gli sposi! Auguri!** as our lovely couple made their way through the streets in their wedding outfits up to the grand Duomo in the center of town. Afterwards we all headed back to San Giovenale, at Luisa and Mario’s house, where a celebratory buffet was set out for everyone **fuori all’aperto**, out in the open area. This all occurred on the Fourth of July so there was everything from the **antipasto, bruschette, lasagna alle melanzane**, (eggplant lasagna), **cinghiale** (wild boar stew), **verdure alla griglia** (grilled vegetables) to **torta zuppa inglese**, a cake decorated in the all American colors of red, white and blue. Soon neighbors brought their specialties they had prepared to add to the table. They brought chairs. They even brought another table! We had just made a block party! Later that night, as the golden sun was slowly fading away behind the rolling hills, we sang the American national anthem. The neighbors sang the Italian national anthem, gazing down and out over the valley of Orvieto which looks like the setting of a fairy tale. I had to pinch myself to make sure this was really happening!

Market day on Thursday and Saturday mornings in Piazza del Popolo, was something to look forward to. People from every walk of life were there looking for a bargain, **un vero affare**, on shoes, table linens, flowers, fruit, cheese, honey, and much more! Even the nuns were there, picking over the merchandise, looking for the best price. One market day, I had an Italian vocabulary lesson with Professor Mansella as we walked from stall to stall. I named everything I knew in Italian and learned several new words from Professoressa. The markets were also a good opportunity to try out one's Italian speaking skills- not only one's grammar and vocabulary but also the fine art of making a deal!

One market day we all accompanied Patrizia of **Gelateria Pasqualetti** to the open air market. She showed us how she chose the freshest fruit for gelato by sampling it. The **fruttivendolo** (fruit vendor) cut many slices of fruit for all of us to try. If the fruit did not pass the taste test, Patrizia would not be making that flavor that day. We met her at the **gelateria** where we all made a delicious gelato. By the end of her demonstration, we were too full of gelato to collect our free samples. We had to go back the next day to enjoy the various flavors!

Our most memorable excursion in Orvieto was the underground, **Orvieto sotterranea!** Orvieto which is built on a volcanic cliff of **tufo** rock has miles and miles of caves and tunnels underground, some of which were used by the Etruscans more than 2,500 years ago. We wound our way through the chilly tunnels, peering into water cisterns and store rooms and openings large enough to have had olive presses operating. The cool temperature made the tunnels an ideal place to store wine. Despite the location's antiquity, the restaurant's food was nothing but the freshest! Every course was artfully presented.

Other days, we climbed on the minibus and headed out to explore the ancient city states that one can find throughout the region of Umbria. We conjugated verbs, reviewed vocabulary and boned up on the history of the town as we rolled along the highways. One of our first excursions was to **Civita Bagnoreggio, “la città che muore”**, the city which is dying. The cliffs upon which it stands are slowly eroding but it is still a place of beauty, rich in history. To reach the town, we had to walk over a narrow bridge which connects it to the outlying nearby town. Supplies are brought in every day via golf carts! Professor Carol Martin Watts, an architectural historian, and her husband Don, an engineer, had so much to tell us about the culture and the ways of old. We saw the outdoor community laundry and the communal ovens built centuries ago. Although they are rarely used anymore, the townspeople

preserve these pieces of history. We got to visit Carol and Don's unique home. The kitchen, dining room and three bedrooms are on one side of the street. One must cross the street to be in the living room! The living room looks out onto a lovely garden on the side of the cliff overlooking the valley. Our visit ended at the residence of signor Felice, with homemade *bruschetta*, *frittata*, and *salsiccia*, (grilled sausage), all prepared in a wood brick oven. So simple and yet so delicious!

A day in Florence flies by in a flash because there is so much to take in. Again accompanied by a knowledgeable guide, we toured the church of *Santa Croce*, *Piazza della Signoria* and the *Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore* which is the Duomo of Florence. The highlight of that day was climbing to the top of the magnificent *Brunelleschi* cupola of the famous Florentine Duomo. I will never forget the panorama of beautiful reddish orange tiled roofs with the River Arno off in the distance. An added bonus was a up close view of the stunning painting of "The Last Judgment" on the ceiling of the Duomo. Later in the day, we shopped along *Ponte Vecchio*, gasping at the prices of gold jewelry. The exchange rate in Europe was so high this summer that many American tourists bought much less than usual. The only benefit of this crushing exchange rate was that tourism was down overall. There were no crowds anywhere we went! So instead of buying gold, we settled for a thirst quenching lemon *granatina* at a little shop at the end of the Ponte Vecchio. On our way home, we stopped at Piazzale Michelangelo across the River Arno for a spectacular view of Florence at sunset.

Other excursions included Gubbio, Perugia and Assisi; each with its own distinct flavor. Gubbio captured my fancy, with its *funivia* up to the top of the hillside where the Basilica of Saint Ubaldo stands. It was thrilling to look down from the little metal cage of the ski lift onto the ruins of an old Roman amphitheater in the distance. After a few screams and a few false steps getting off the funivia, we had a chance to see the church which houses the enormous wooden *ceri* (candles) used in the annual reenactment of a medieval race down the hillside in lower Gubbio. Saint Ubaldo's blessing is upon the city for the rest of the year. We also earned our own license "to be crazy". In order to earn this privilege, one must walk around the city fountain, *Fontana dei Pazzi*, three times with one's hand submerged in the water. If one can accomplish this, one has earned his license.

While in Gubbio, we were also fortunate to visit with Father Mario at Saint Augustine's. He gave us a splendid tour around his lovely, centuries-old church, as well as the living quarters of the priests, the library, the recreational center and the courtyard. He even gave us a mini concert on the *cedra*, an instrument he has been studying for only two years. A cedra looks like a cross between a harpsichord and a dulcimer. Another highlight of that lovely day was ordering our lunch at a little local *salumeria* which is somewhat akin to our deli. Here the shopkeeper hand carved each slice of *prosciutto* with expert precision after which his wife carefully constructed the sandwich of cheese and meat on a fresh slab of bread and then artfully wrapped it. I must say it was one of the best sandwiches I have ever eaten!

Assisi with its rose colored stone is storybook beautiful. Our first stop was at the Church of *Santa Maria degli Angeli* which houses the little chapel, *Porziuncola*, where Saint Francis was originally buried. Then we made our way to the magnificent Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi. On the upper level, we admired the frescoes by Giotto and Cimabue which are awe inspiring. The lower level houses the relics of Saint Francis. Although the Basilica was damaged by an earthquake in 1997, much restoration has been done. In addition, we were able to visit the churches of *Santa Chiara* and *Santa Maria Maggiore*. Interestingly, in the midst of all these Christian religious sites, there still stands an original Roman temple dedicated to the goddess Minerva.

Perugia, with its two universities, is a bustling city, full of young people. We learned about its history and visited many of the public buildings built in ancient times. The commanding *Palazzo dei Priori* houses the city's government. Its public fountain, *Fontana Maggiore*, adjacent to the Palazzo dei Priori, was particularly impressive. After our guided tour with Chiara, we were able to explore a bit on our own. We noticed statues of Garibaldi, the unifier of Italy and Victor Emmanuel, the first King of Italy, and the main avenue named Corso Vannucci. The names of Garibaldi, Mazzini and Cavour appeared in every city we visited. Before we left Perugia, we made sure that we sampled some of the world famous Baci Perugina chocolate.

The last day of our magical adventure arrived way too soon. I had experienced so many aspects of the Italian culture: art, history, culinary traditions, folklore, and geography. I made new friends, had eaten delicious foods, and had learned so many new Italian words and idioms walking through the narrow streets and piazzas listening and observing the local people. One of my proudest moments occurred in a little pottery shop on Orvieto's Corso Cavour. As I made my purchase, I was determined that I would communicate strictly in Italian, explaining to the *negoziante*, shopkeeper, I was an Italian student. When we were finished, she said “*Lei pronuncia bene*” (Your pronunciation is good!) Ah, music to my ears!

I can hardly wait to return to *Italia*, a most beautiful country where they speak a most beautiful language. I am already ready for yet another adventure there!



2008 Program Participants (from left to right):

Prof. Chiara Coletti, Ian Sunborn, Maria Moskos, Judith Labutti, Chandra Rodrigues, Frank Capasso, Concetta Nicolosi, Jeanne Bent, Eileen Garvin, Geraldine Moretti, Prof. Maria C. Mansella, and Charles Mansolillo

For further information
Call (401) 825-2011 or e-mail mmansella@ccri.edu