

Pro Ego, Omnen Italia Tenere Tres Partes: Umbria, Toscano, Lazio 2006 Bicycle Exploration through Central Italy

Monday, May 8: New York to Roma

It is wonderful to experience a reality whose joy exceeds all imagination. I know that whatever my mind concocts as a likely visit of my imminent journey though Italy, that the reality will be different – and more felt.

The purpose of life, I believe, is to see beauty – with all the senses – and to create beauty. The journey, even now, is a pause in “ordinary life” to allow the many filters of the mind simply to let more in.

This moment, taking the train to Grand Central Terminal, the same I take each day to work, I appreciate all the greenery, the overcast day, the rubbish along the tracks, the rocking of the train, the sound of the rocking of the train, the scent of cleanliness, and the greatest of all creatures – people.

Though a vagabound with my duffle bag and daypack luggage, I feel spiffy in my lugged shoes, black jeans, blue Brooks Brothers shirt, and freshly trimmed hair. And too – showered. While the days ahead may be a sweaty effort, I hope to start each day as fresh.

Tuesday, May 9: Roma to Firenze

I slept well on the so-called “red eye” and awoke just before landing at 8:00 a.m. With little effort, I found the train to Rome Central (Termina) and from there boarded a train for Firenze. It was pouring rain, but fortunately all my connections were indoors, and the sun was shining by the time I reached Firenze. The directions to pick up the used bicycle I had bought on the Internet were easy to follow, so after getting the bike, I was home-free – or so I thought. The seat was loose and the tires were flat, but the silverlining was that I bought a genuine Giro jersey at the bicycle shop I sought out to do the repairs. The dark cloud – and it was with rain threatening – was that all hotels were booked so I ended up in a hostel dormitory, and the torrential downpour kept me there for the night. Though I felt good about getting the bike and getting some sense of Florence by riding around, I felt it was more a tedious task day than a vacation. The good news was despite a smelly, noisy room, I had an excellent night’s sleep.

Wednesday, May 10: Firenze to Assisi

The good night’s rest had me up at 7:00 a.m. and at the opening of the Duomo cathedral tower at 8:30. It was great having the place to myself. The full circle view of the city was magnificent – and not a high-rise or SUV in sight! Thomas Cole, of the Hudson River School, painted a Florence vista in 1837; nothing has changed. It was also a nice opportunity to compare the topography with my map. Afterwards, I gazed incessantly with a big smile at the breathtaking facade of the Duomo cathedral: a beautiful blend of green, beige and pink marble, with dozens of symmetrical statues.

I was then on the 12:00 train bound for Assisi. Comparing the town names on the map with the train station stops helped orient me. Finally arriving in mid-afternoon, I was struck by the splendor of that stone city on a hill. Though not in size, the hilltop buildings reminded me of Graymoor.

Thursday, May 11: Assisi

The day started with Mass at the Cathedral del San Francesco where I met Father Tom – a diocesan priest from Colorado with Brooklyn roots – who gave me a cathedral tour and afterwards shared a morning OJ at a café together where we talked about New York hiking spots.

In the afternoon, I bicycled to the summit of Mount Subasio – 1300 meters – and stopped at the Eerema dele Corceri – the hillside house of Saint Francis and his monks. It was a quiet, comfortable place to walk which I had entirely to myself since it was after hours; the place beckoned me to stay – much like the peace that comes from sitting alone patiently in church.

Friday, May 12: Assisi

Today was a special day, perhaps because I visited so many holy places. The day began with Mass at the Cathedral of Saint Clare (Chiara). As I approached the church, I was moved by its beautiful pink stone. Upon entering, the rose ceiling captured my gaze. Before Mass started, I visited a side altar where I discovered Saint Francis' cross. I sat there enraptured. And then moved forward to kneel and I recited the "Prayer Before the Cross" three times in earnest. After Mass, I visited the crypt beneath the church before it was open to the public, and in solitude knelt before the body of Saint Clare.

At the Church of Saint Pietro, I lit a candle for my parents – people who loved me with their very lives. And for the church wish, I wished for the welfare of my family, my extended family, and all families.

At the Church of Saint Refino, I lit a candle for the parents of all my family and friends – people who love without effort.

At San Damiano, being behind a tour group, I had the good fortune of being slowed down so that I could gather the spirit of the place.

At Santuario Di Rivotortu, it was interesting to see the church built over the original Franciscan settlement. There I had the pleasure of meeting Christiana, with whom I toured the church, and advised me on what to see in Siena, Firenze, and Pisa – my upcoming destinations. I suppose Christiana was my angel for this trip.

In the town of Rivoltuto, I had my first ever taste of gelato – choosing the unknown flavor basio by its color. Creamy and tasty, it was a delight.

At the Chiesa Nuova is my favorite fresco in Assisi. It is a Garden of Eden scene in which God is accusingly pointing directly at Adam, who is pointing down at Eve – kneeling beside him – in a deflective gesture that says "Me? It's her fault."; Eve beseeching with two open hands towards the serpent is gesturing "He's the one." As the serpent slithers away seemingly getting away with impunity. How cynically true to life! I

like the contrast with my favorite fresco at Il Duomo (Firenza) in which a kneeling woman is supporting a standing man, who is lifting another woman to the heavens so that an angel can grab her arm and pull her into heaven.

At the Church of Saint Mary Major, I prayed for all relatives and friends.

At the top of Assisi, I toured the Rocca Maggiore. It was also a panoramic vantage point to plot my journey to Siena towards the northwest.

From the scripture I read today: "This is how it is from the Father. Accept whatever you can accept."

Saturday, May 13: Assisi to Siena

After morning Mass at Saint Clare's, I headed out for Siena. Who knew 50 miles into the trip I would hit mountains! At midnight, just outside of Ascenio, atop a desolate Il Crete mountaintop, I was out of energy. Unable to peddle or even take another step, I laid beneath the guardrail quivering with overtaxed muscles. Though an hour's sleep gave me the strength to continue. Zooming down mountain passes in the black of night, I hoped no fallen branch obstructed the road or it would be my end. The last 20 miles were arduous and I pulled into Siena at 4:00 a.m.! The hotel clerk did not come on duty until 7:00, so it was 8:00 before I got to sleep! The trip left me too drained to do anymore city-to-city biking. I suppose the lesson is that mountains and luggage (I was carting sixty pounds) do not go together. So with all those travel days converted into touring days, I was able to move things up and stay the final weekend in Rome.

Sunday, May 14, Siena

Though I slept 8:00 to noon, I still had a full day including Mass at Domenico. Getting a 5-place tour ticket, I saw many sites including the Duomo. Interestingly, the Camp—plaza was not much of a draw, though I had witnessed it empty at 5:00 a.m. Going church to church has me very peaceful.

Life is to see beauty.
Life is to create beauty,
Life is to understand beauty.

My hotel room #10 at Il Gaurdino overlooks the city – a wonderful way to wake up.

Monday, May 15, Siena to Firenza

Taking a mid-afternoon bus allowed me to see more of Siena in the morning, including the Basilica of St. Francesco, and had me in Firenza in time to bicycle around the city and have a very nice lasagna dinner in a neighborhood restaurant away from tourists.

My hotel Orcagna is quiet like the others. I am in the loft space – the uppermost room. The terrace overlooks the Duomo.

Tuesday, May 16, Firenze