

Italy in the Spring

Austrian Italy Trieste, April 3rd 2010

There is a major shift in the landscape halfway between Venice to Trieste. Around Venice the land is rich and fertile. Every square metre is cultivated, with vineyards and farmhouses covering the landscape. Then around the border between Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia everything changes. The vines and houses disappear and the plains turn into hills covered with low broken shrubs. The limestone bedrock drains away the water, creating dry parched soils so very different from those around Venice.



Trieste is a very old Roman town, but has been stamped much harder with the Austrian imprint. Founded in 178 BCE, Trieste lost much of its wealth in the chaos following the fall of the Roman Empire. In 1382 Trieste voluntarily joined the Austrian Empire, where it stayed for more than 500 years. The grand buildings around Piazza Sant'Antonio and Piazza Dell 'Unita D'Italia are pure 18th century Austro-Hungarian architecture and the city looks far more like Vienna than Rome. The fresh days of spring are perfect for wandering around the city, with the sun bathing us in its warm glow and every miniature dog owner taking their pampered pooch out for a spring walk.

The Caves of Slovenia Postojna, April 4th 2010

A sleek black Mercedes pulled up outside our hotel and a man with a shaved head and a long black trench coat open the door and asked us if we were going to Slovenia. We said yes and he nodded his head towards his car - I guess this was not a normal mini-bus tour we were booked on. Soon we were on the open highway, driving at 170km/hour over the border to Postojna. Our driver didn't say a word on the trip, just a simple "two hours" when we arrived.

Postojna was beautiful, with rolling arid hills, deep blue water from glacier melt and charming rustic Slavic towns. We walked around for half an hour or so then entered the Postojna Caves, a 21.5km series of caves in a region with over 500 caves. In all of Slovenia there are over 9000 caves, some as deep as 1005 metres deep. The entrance to Postojna Caves has been known for at least 50,000 years, with the first 400 metres occupied during paleolithic times. However it was not until 1818, when a construction worker was building lights for a visit by the Austrian Emperor, that people broke into the passage into the main cave network.

Speed was the theme of the day, and at the cave entrance they filed us onto a tourist train, which hurtled at surprising speed deep into the cave network. We passed chamber after chamber with just the flash of beautiful formations, plunging depths and staggering heights - made in quick glimpses as we kept an eye on the erratic roof level and ducked the occasional stalactite. After fifteen minutes on the train we reached the Great Mountain chamber, the highest in the caves, at 20 metres above entry level and only

20 metres from the surface. We climbed the Great Mountain, with amazing views of organic stones dripping out of the ceiling or sprouting from the earth. From the Great Mountain we crossed the Russian Bridge (so named as it was built by Russian prisoners of war during the Great War) to the Beautiful Caves, a 500 metre network of three chambers discovered in 1891. The first chamber was the Spaghetti Chamber, with thin pipe stalactites covering the roof. The second chamber was the White



Chamber, where all formations were made from pure calcite and glowed a pure pale white. The third chamber was the Red Chamber, named after the iron oxide impurities that left a red tinge to the rock. Finally, after the Beautiful Caves we ended in the Concert Hall, a large chamber 40 metres high and 30,000 square metres in size, where they still occasionally play concerts.

Within the Concert Hall they had a small vivarium where we could see the most famous of the 400 different cavernicolous species living in Postojna Caves, the Proteus. The Proteus was the first animal discovered to live in the deep caves and is endemic to the region. Once thought to be hatchling dragons, the Proteus is a luminescent white amphibian, related to salamanders and newts. It is the biggest of the cavernicolous species, growing up to 30cm long (most species in the caves are microscopic, only 20 are longer than 1cm). The Proteus is completely blind, with its degenerated eyes covered by a layer of skin. This is obviously no handicap in the cave environment, where the Proteus can live for over 100 years (going without food for up to five years at a time). In yet another damning indictment of creationism, in 1986 the “Black Proteus” was discovered, a closely related species more recently arrived in the caves, which has not yet lost its black pigment and still expends energy in developing (useless) eyes.

Really? Venice?

Venice, 5th April 2010

Some cities are so famous that, after you’ve seen photo upon photo, you think you know exactly what you are going to encounter. For some, London for me, the image fits so neatly with reality that it feels familiar on your first visit. For others, say, New York, my preconceptions did not do the city justice, and the reality stood out in a way my imagination didn’t. Venice, sadly, had the opposite effect on me, my image of a vibrant city livings its heritage now forever drowned out by a hollowed out caricature of the city.

Venice was the king of the second age of cities. After cities across Europe were abandoned following the fall of the Roman Empire, 500 years went by where Europe was a continent of peasant villages. In the 6th century CE, the constant invasions of Germanic tribes pushed the peasants in north-east Italy to move into the lagoon. For 1000 years before-hand the sea had been the primary threat, with maritime powers striking at every coastal city, so that the great cities were all on inland rivers, with access to the sea but the ability to control entrance. The Goths, Huns and Vandals changed all that, making the inland

routes the source of danger, so the Venetians found security by living on the very edge of the sea, with seven deep lagoons separating them from marauders. The city grew rapidly (the first of the second age of civilisation), and in 726 CE the city elected its first Doge, starting a 1000 year period of stability and prosperity. The position of Venice on the shores of the Adriatic gave it a maritime orientation, but the true trading success of Venice lied in two factors. Firstly, the Venetians pooled their shipbuilding expertise into a single public shipyard, the Arsenal, capable of building three ships a day to ensure maritime supremacy. Secondly, the Venetians developed elaborate financial tools for risk-spreading, which drove cooperation rather than competition between the merchant princes, and gave staggering capacity to empire-building schemes. As an aside, the saying "sailing the seven seas" originally referred to those captains with mastery over the tricky depths of the seven lagoons of Venice, not some global ocean-going experience. After leaving a Venetian imprint on coastal cities around the eastern Mediterranean for hundreds of years, the independence of the Venetians crashed in 1797, with Napoleon finishing off the city state, and in 1866 Venice joined Italy.

Today Venice is a tourist Mecca, attracting 20 million tourists a year. Even though most only day-trip, staying 5-6 hours, tourists still vastly outnumber the 60,000 residents. 60 years ago the city had 150,000 residents, but the population has been dropping by 1000 every year. The area around San Marco square is obviously tourism central - unfortunately it seems that the Venetian Hotel in Los Vegas is now a surprisingly accurate depiction of central Venice - but no part of Venice is untouched by the constant bombardment of tourism. During the day the push and the artificial caricature of the city made me feel dirty to be a part of a violation no less than that imposed by Venice on Constantinople. In the evening, as the crowds thinned and we wandered over to the area around Santa Maria dei Miracoli I could take pleasure in the beauty and richness of the city, but the pleasure was bitter-sweet.

The city of Venice **Venice, 6th April 2010**

Venice is a city of water-ways. This simple fact of transportation dictates every aspect of Venice. The 117 islands and 400 bridges, the roads that end in a canal, the doors that open out onto water. Venice by foot is a confusing and hodge-podge city, because Venice was never designed for pedestrians. Perhaps this is common to all of the great confusions in cities - cities become unfathomable when the dominant mode of transportation grows to be different from the one the city was designed around. London by car is horrible, because London was built as a pedestrian city. In Los Angeles we encountered mystifying concrete barriers and dead-ends when trying to walk, because the city was built for cars.



Building a city within a lagoon requires some innovation in building. In Venice this took the form of countless wooden pilons, rammed down into the mud until they reached solid earth. All the heavy marbles palaces, no matter how immobile they look, are balanced upon these same wooden frames - 100,000 for the Rialto Bridge alone. The risk this poses to structures is obviously throughout Venice - leaning buildings, uneven plazas, columns sunk deep into the floor. But surprisingly enough the main risk isn't too much water, it is too little water. It is when the water drops and the damp wood gets exposed to the air that the rot can set in, and a solid building be undermined from below.

San Marco Piazza

The most famous buildings in Venice are those within San Marco Piazza, the Basilica di San Marco and the Palazzo Ducale. Together they reflect best the Byzantine influence over the city of Venice, with Arabic arches, curves and domes, an emphasis on geometric patterns and bringing out the natural colour of the raw materials. They strongly reminded me of the Topaki Palace and Aye Sofia in Istanbul.

Inside the Basilica the expertise of the Venetians over the art of the mosaic was on show, with the walls and domes covered in beautiful golden mosaics, with each gold leaf tile made at a different angle to ensure the reflection of light from any viewpoint. Various treasures are hidden around the Basilica, including important artifacts stolen during the pillage of Constantinople (the Pala d'Oro alterpiece, inlaid with 2000 precious stones and enamelled gold leaf, and the bronze horses on the Loggia dei Cavalli, more than 2000 years old, being the two most important) and a whole host of 'relics' (such as the bones of 'Saint George' and 'Saint Mark', the latter bones being the purpose of the Basilica, having been stolen from Alexandria by two merchants in 828 CE, then lost, then conveniently 'refound' by prayer when the Church was ready).

The Doge's Palace, for centuries the centre of power in Europe, was unique in being built largely for ascetics rather than defense - the lack of a formidable defense signified that the Doge was not a feudal lord like others in Europe, ruling by consent of the city rather than divine right. Nevertheless, the Doge was not purely kept in his position by the gratitude of the masses, and had in place a despotic system of secret accusations and trials. The most visual sign of this is the Ponte dei Sospiri, the Bridge of Sighs, leading from the Doge's Palace to the Prigione Nove (New Prison). The most famous resident of this prison was Cassanova, the self-proclaimed



Greatest Lover (tails of his exploits in love come largely from his autobiography). According to Cassanova, after he was imprisoned here in 1756 he managed to dig his way out of his cell, make it to the Palace, convince a guard to open the palace doors, then had a coffee on San Marco Piazza before fleeing the city on a stolen gondola.

The other feature I found interesting in San Marco Piazza was the clock overhanging the arcades. This large clock is notable for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was the world's first digital clock, with a digital read-out of time oddly mixing up Roman numerals for hours and modern numerals for minutes (giving us the time of X 25) and only clicking over every five minutes. The clock also has an analog face, but with 24 points rather than 12, and 24 being at out "3 o'clock" position. It stood out as incredibly strange, but the clock was built at the threshold between church time (the rhythm of the city set by the bells) and economic time (time as a measurable and immutable quantity) and the modern conventions were yet to be set. At least this clock went around clockwise, other early clocks in the Doge's Palace move around anti-clockwise.

The rich and the poor

The wealth of Venice was not driven from San Marco Piazza, but rather from the Rialto markets. It was here that the traders sold their jewels, silks and spices (mostly pepper), and it was here that modern finance started, with the 13th century financiers worked under the church porch, inventing the concept of bank cheques to replace coinage and starting the modern banking system. It was this financial clout that allowed Venice to swagger Europe as the greatest of powers for more than 500 years, dominating cities that cooperated with it, destroying those who didn't. The wealth and power of Venice attracted much



envy among the other European powers, and lead to the creation of the League of Cambrai, where Pope Julius II united the Papal States, France, Spain and Germany against the Venetian Empire. Venice faced a dramatic setback at the Battle of Agnadello on the 14th May 1509, but after every side took turns at backstabbing the other, at the end of the bloody wars the borders were much as they were at the beginning and the decay in the Venetian Empire delayed another 100 years. Despite this, the Doge blamed the defeat of Venice in the war on the powerless undesirables, pushing the Jews into the ghetto region (leading to the use of the word 'ghetto' for Jewish quarter) and the prostitutes into the region around Ponte de le Tette.

The Campo dei Frari in San Polo is a Franciscian Cathedral built to preach to these poor outcasts from the Holy Centre. It is an enormous brick Gothic church, towering over the surrounding buildings. Inside it houses two pieces of art that are considered masterpieces of Venice, the Madonna with Child triptych by Bellini and the Madonna of the Ascension by Titian. These are not masterpieces to be considered in isolation - the entire Church has been redesigned around the Madonna of the Ascension. Arches are built and positioned so that on entry to the Church the Madonna is framed by art and architecture, drawing the eye to the centre. Walking up towards the Madonna you are surrounded by the Gothic choir, the voices guided by the designed acoustics to sound ethereal. The Church leaders were truly masters of the integrated multimedia approach, deliberately using every trick in the book to create exactly the right combination of awe and fear in those under their dominion.

We finished our day by catching the ferry over to Isola di Murano, the glass blowing centre of Venice since 13th century. We walked around the Museum of Glass, watched a surly glassblower turn a lump of formless glass into a rearing stallion in about thirty seconds, and caught a ferry the entire way around Venice, in the milky blue-green waters of the lagoon.



Fair Verona

Verona, April 7th 2010

It was a perfect day to walk around Verona, with crystal clear skies and a warm glow from the sun. The Piazza Bra and Roman Arena were a wonderful first taste to the city, full of life and activity, ancient monuments from Rome and stylish cafes. From Piazza Bra we walked up Via Mazzini to Piazza Erbe, wandered the markets, ate fresh fruit in the sun and watched a sausage dog puppy be coaxed across the park. This week in Italy I have developed my “Puppy Index” measure of a city - the higher the number of people walking dogs the better - reflecting a population that has time to live life and a relative dearth of tourists. Verona and Trieste scored very well on the Puppy Index, while Venice really needed to lift its puppy game.

The tourism hub of Verona is very concentrated, to essentially one house which is portrayed as the home of Juliette. Ignoring the fictional nature of Romeo and Juliette, legions of young kids crowded the house, writing love messages on the walls, touching the statue of Juliette on her right breast and taking photos of the balcony where they imagine a very young girl was pressured into making extremely bad decisions by an impetuous boy who confused lust with love.

We skipped the Juliette museum and made for the Church of Saint Anastasia. The church was built from 1290 in Italian Gothic style. The beautiful frescos inside give it a surprisingly light and airy look. I was very interested in the restoration that was taking place of the Centregio Alter, dedicated to Thomas Aquinas, where the thin veil allowed us to see the craftswomen carefully restoring the ancient carvings. We also visited the Duomo and viewed the Roman Theatre from Ponte Pietra, before returning to Piazza Bra for lunch.

I guess at some point some relation of mine lived in Verona, as the café street on Piazza Bra facing the Roman Theatre is called “Via Liston” and one of the cafes was Liston 12. Fortunately the café was a pizzeria / bar, so I was quite happy to endorse my distant relative’s choice. We had excellent pizza and pasta (actually the best we’ve had in Italy so far) accompanied by a mojto, beer and a clown. Next time I’ll have to try the Liston cocktail (Succo d’arancia, ananas, S. Bitter).

Following lunch we visited the Castelvechio and the Basilica of San Zeno. The Basilica was built in 806 to house the remains of Saint Zeno, the African Bishop who converted Verona to Christianity in 362 CE. Luckily Saint Zeno didn’t visit northern Italy today, when an African immigrant preaching their native religion would be vilified and persecuted by the State. Finally we walked back along the old fortifications to the train station, very satisfied with fair Verona.



Strolling through Vicenza

Vicenza, April 7th 2010

We had a wonderful evening strolling around the city of Vicenza, up and down the Corso Andrea Palladio looking at the works of Palladio. One of the things I love most about travel is the unexpected education it brings - before coming to Vicenza I had never heard of Palladio. Andrea Palladio (1508-1580) was a Renaissance architect who is said to be the most influential individual in the history of Western architecture. His reputation was such that in his own lifetime he was renamed from Andrea di Pietro della Gondola to Palladio, the “wise one”. In his works he integrated neo-classical style with civic planning and Renaissance harmony, influencing architects for centuries to come.

Our dinner in Vicenza, at Dai Nodari, is worth a special mention. Lina has stewed Guinea Fowl, Lydia had honey chicken and I had scrambled eggs with Bastardo di Grappa cheese. The meals were simply delicious, the first time in Italy that I've had a meal where every mouthful deserved my undivided attention, although I admit that I cheated a little and ordered a Belgian beer to accompany it.

The Most Serene Republic of San Marino

San Marino, April 8th 2010

The Most Serene Republic of San Marino is one of the smallest countries in the world, only 61.2 km² in area with a population of only 30,000 people. It is the oldest constitutional republic in the world, gaining independence on the 3rd of September 301 after being founded by the stonecutter Marinus of Rab.

Perhaps the most remarkable facet of the history of San Marino is that it has managed to keep its



independence for so long, despite being almost powerless. Partly this is because of the lack of interest - there was little reason for any of the major powers to absorb it. The other, probably not insignificant, factor is the spectacular natural defense San Marino has. Mount Titano (755m high) stands out for miles, rising up from the plains with sheer cliffs. Even from a distance the three towers of San Marino are clearly visible, perched on top of the mountain. Up close the fortifications are even more significant, with the thick stone walls and towers built onto the cliff face, making any attack a nightmarish scenario. If the surprising number of weapon shops in San Marino are anything to go by, the Sammarinese didn't keep the walls as an empty threat.

In 1600 San Marino adopted its constitution, now the oldest constitution still in effect, and it was this which probably saved San Marino during the Napoleonic Wars - Napoleon saw San Marino as a perfect example of a constitutional republic and vowed to do anything he could to maintain its independence. San Marino was also the first country to officially adopt neutrality as its foreign policy (centuries before Switzerland, another country that combines armed force with formal

neutrality), and this saved it from the next threat to its independence - during the Unification of Italy. Due to its neutrality, San Marino served as a refuge for partisans during the Unification Wars, and it was in honour of this role that Giuseppe Garibaldi honoured its wish to remain independent. Another first for little San Marino is that it was the first country in the world to democratically elect a Communist government, first in 1945-1957 and again in 2006-2008, Now San Marino is one of the richest and healthiest countries in the world, and still independent 1709 years on - a record unrivalled by any of the bigger countries which disdain to notice the Most Serene Republic.

While my attraction to San Marino was based on its historical novelty, we were all pleasantly surprised at how charming the city was. The setting is simply spectacular, with knurled pines and bare rock framing the classically designed castle. During the day the city was friendly and bustling, then after 6:30 (the last bus out of San Marino) it became a sleepy village, a place to sit down, eat great food and enjoy both the mountain air and the stunning vista.

Eating in Bologna **Bologna, April 9th 2010**

We did some sightseeing in Bologna, viewing the lactating mermaids of Fontana del Nettuno and the leaning towers of Torre degli Asinelli and Torre Garisenda. But mostly we spent our time in Bologna eating. At Trattoria del Rosso, the oldest trattoria in the city, Lydia had outstanding tagliatelle ragu (it shouldn't really come as a surprise that they don't call meat sauce bolognese in Bologna, but for some reason it did), and across the street in a little gelateria I had the best icecream of my life, with a scoop of black chocolate that tasted like the icing on chocolate mud cake and a scoop of Bolognian Crème that tasted half-way between the custard in a vanilla slice and the filling of a lemon cheesecake. Mmm...



Michelangelo's David **Florence, April 10th 2010**

Michelangelo's David was not created in a vacuum, it was a sculpture of an age and a place. Born any other time or place than 15th century Florence and Michelangelo could not have created David. After a thousand years of medieval art, heavy on symbolism and light on artistic flair, the Renaissance blossomed in the 15th century in the relatively democratic and secular society of Florence, fueled by the wealth and artistic inclination of the Medici family, the bankers of the Pope.

Some scholars date the Renaissance precisely to 1401, when Lorenzo Ghiberti won a commission to sculpt the doors to the baptistery of the Florence Duomo. These doors were the first to try to incorporate realism, through mathematical perspective, rather than simple single-dimension story-telling of medieval art. The gilded eastern doors sculpted in 1425 took this a step further, adding depth to art for the first time since ancient Rome - such that Michelangelo named these the "Gates of Paradise", calling their art perfect. This initiated an explosion of

Florentine art incorporating mathematics and realism - especially the dome of the Duomo by Filippo Brunelleschi and the statues of Donatello.

Donatello's statues were of particular importance in influencing Michelangelo's sculpture. Since the fall of ancient Rome, the art of sculpting the human body had regressed. Unable to sculpt a body, for a thousand years statues were always heavily dressed in elaborate robes, allowing sculptors to concentrate on the fall of fabric and ignore the human image underneath. This first changed in 1417 when Donatello was commissioned to create a sculpture of St George for the Orsanmichele church, a granary converted to a church after the city was devastated by the 14th century black plague pandemic (the old function is still clearly visible, with bricked up arches and grain chutes).. The church was owned by the guilds, with each guild competing for the most beautiful and novel icon sculpture. Donatello's St George broke through by imaging St George in light armour, showing just a little skin on the arms and legs - but in doing so demonstrating a greater understanding of human anatomy than any sculptor since ancient Rome. Inside Orsanmichele the statue of St Mark by Donatello also influenced Michelangelo - initially rejected for its misshapen dimensions, the statue looks perfect when placed up high in a niche, rediscovering the art of modifying a statue's dimensions with consideration of the perspective of the audience. In the painted form, Leonardo da Vinci, also working in Florence, took both perspective and the reality of human form a step further, going so far as to break Church law and dissect human corpses in order to accurately portray the human form.

Raised in Florence, cultivated by the Medici family and inspired by the burgeoning Renaissance art of Ghiberti, Brunelleschi, Donatello and Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo learned to sculpt. Michelangelo was already an accomplished young sculptor by 1501, but craving fame and a challenge he leapt on the chance to carve a statue of David for the Duomo dome. The commission had been lying dormant for forty years, the inferior block of marble, porous and fragile, already hacked into and abandoned by less talented artists. Michelangelo saw this challenge as a way to make his mark, and spent the next three years sculpting David. Unlike other sculptors of the time, Michelangelo worked alone, without a workshop. He was also unique in working without a plaster model, instead preferring to develop his image in the stone, believing that the art was already inside the block and he was only releasing it. Michelangelo characteristically attacked the stone from the front, carving from the angle the statue would be viewed from and working around to the back. These idiosyncrasies are best shown in his unfinished works, with his unfinished pieta in Milan demonstrating creative changes during the sculpting process and his unfinished "prisoners" in Galleria dell' Accademia demonstrating his "front first" approach, with the head and chest unlocked from the rock while the back is locked in solid rock.



Like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo studied anatomy on illicit cadavers, allowing him to sculpt a nude David, with defined muscles, veins and tendons (although perhaps he should have looked at a few Jewish cadavers, as he sculpted David as uncircumcised). Like Brueleschi, Michelangelo incorporated mathematics into the sculpture, balancing the weight of the statue down through the legs, achieving the unusual achievement of balancing a 5.17 metre tall statue weighing 5.6 tonnes through the support of David's legs alone. Like Donatello, Michelangelo built in a distorted perspective, giving David an enlarged head and hands to ensure they looked proportional when placed up high (which is why they look peculiar at eye level).



Built for Duomo dome, when Michelangelo finished "David" in 1504 it was immediately hailed as masterpiece. A committee of artists, including Leonardo da Vinci, decided that rather than sit the sculpture on the Duomo, it should be placed in the prominent position of the entrance to the Palazzo Vecchio, on Piazza della Signoria. While a religious man, in David Michelangelo had created a secular rather than religious masterpiece for Florence's cathedral. The David he sculpted was not a young Jewish boy fighting a giant with faith alone, but rather a towering muscled man, with rock and sling barely evident, reflecting the power of human ability rather than faith. While the move from Duomo to public square did not fit the perspective built into the statue, proud Michelangelo would no doubt have been delighted to have his fame and the message of David's humanity so obviously broadcast.

It is remarkable that David has survived for over 500 years. If David had been sculpted just a few years earlier it would have surely been destroyed by the anti-Renaissance Priest Girolamo Savonarola, who whipped Florentines up into a religious frenzy and used the Palazzo della Signoria to destroy wealth and art in his bonfires of the vanities. Savonarola finally went too far, accusing a corrupt Pope of corruption, and he himself was burnt on the Palazzo in 1498, just metres from the place David would be placed six years later. David stood at Palazzo della Signoria for 350 years, and was struck by lightning and damaged in a riot in 1527, when a bench thrown from a window broke his arm into seven pieces. Finally in 1873 David was moved from the Palazzo into Galleria dell' Accademia, in a room dedicated to the masterpiece, but even here he was not completely safe, being attacked by a man with a hammer who fortunately only succeeded in breaking David's little toe.

In the true sense of the term, David is a Renaissance masterpiece. It was the first large nude sculpted for a thousand years, requiring the rediscovery of anatomy, mathematics and artistic techniques lost since the Roman period. After a thousand years art had finally recaptured the skill and grace of the ancient

Romans, so for the first time in an age human knowledge had to progress by looking forward rather than looking back into antiquity. David is a symbol for the contribution Renaissance Florence made to modern society. The accomplishment of Michelangelo's David, Brueleschi's Dome and other Renaissance masterpieces was in bringing humanity back to the previous heights of civilisation and inspiring people to push further forward, elevating science over literature as the mode for new discovery, driving the scientific revolution and starting the enlightenment.

Before the Romans Fiesole, April 10th 2010

Up in tiny Fiesole, in the hills surrounding Florence, are the best known relics of Etruria, the civilisation that spanned the Italian peninsular before the Roman conquest. The archaeological area of Fiesole is set on a beautiful Tuscan hillside, allowing me and Lina to wander through the ruins of an Etruscan temple in the glorious afternoon sun. The temple is the best preserved in Etruria, and dedicated to Minerva, the Goddess of Health. Remains in the area date back to 2000 BCE, but the main Etruscan structures (the temple and sandstone wall) date back to around the 6th century BCE. The temple was largely destroyed in the first century before the current era, when Fiesole was conquered by Rome and the Roman baths and theatre, which now lie on the hillside next to the ruined temple, were built. Now this once great trading centre is primarily visited for the beautiful views out over Florence.



Cattedrale di Siena Siena, April 11th 2010

On a wet and miserable day we travelled out from Florence to its former rival, Siena. Until the black plague of the 14th century, Florence and Siena competed in every arena, both being enormously wealthy and spending that wealth through the creation of art. Unlike Florence, however, Siena never fully recovered from the plague, locking the city in the mould of Gothic art and architecture. We picked a good day to spend in Siena, as the Duomo of Florence, while beautiful on the outside, is surprisingly drab inside. The inside of the Duomo of Siena (built 1215), by contrast, was a feast for the senses. The floor of the cathedral is a series of 56 intricate marble panels but the most spectacular part for me was the Libreria Piccolomini. This library was built to house the books of Enea Silvio Piccolomini (later Pope Pius II). The large volumes are laid out, each a metre high with perfect gold-embossed calligraphy on each calf-skin page, and the walls and ceiling of the room is covered in the most beautiful frescoes by Bernardino Pinturicchio (painted 1502-1507, probably on designs by Raphael), which look as fresh and vibrant as if they were painted today.

The towers of San Gimignano

San Gimignano, April 11th 2010

The bus to San Gimignano wound through beautiful Tuscan countryside before reaching the small walled town renowned for its towers. The town was founded in the third century BCE by the Etruscans and reached its zenith in the 14th century, when it was hit by the plague and never recovered its former vitality.

Despite its miniscule size, with an old town barely 0.1km², San Gimignano was the ultimate in medieval high density living, with 72 towers up to 10 stories tall crowded together. Other Tuscan towns of the period also had tall towers, such as Florence, but all except San Gimignano have lost them due to war or redevelopment. I climbed up one of the fourteen surviving towers to look down over the city. From that height you can really appreciate just how dense the people were living. San Gimignano is almost a single block of stone with one street running through it, houses are built stone to stone with each other and the thick wall. Looking down I could only imagine the fear that people must have once had of all outsiders, a fear that seems somewhat justified at the time, as the name San Gimignano comes from the bishop Saint Geminianus, who is said to have defended the town from Attila the Hun.



The mysterious tower of Pisa

Pisa, April 12th 2010

The Tower of Pisa is the legacy of Berta di Bernardo, who left a legacy in 1172 to build a bell tower for the Cathedral of Pisa. While it is quite a beautiful Romanesque structure, its fame mostly stems from the dramatic 4 degree lean. When the foundations were laid in 1173 they were poorly designed, only three

metres deep on a thick layer of sand and loose rock. Within five years the original builders had to abandon the project due to the lean which had already developed. Optimistically, new builders restarted the project in 1272, trying to compensate for the lean by building the tower shorter on one side (giving either 296 or 294 stairs depending on which side you climb). The project stopped again in 1284 as the lean grew even more pronounced. Never one to let a bad project die, in 1319 a third set of builders took a stab at the project, finishing off the belltower in 1372, since when it has tipped ever more precariously forward. The most mysterious aspect of the leaning tower of Pisa, however, is the force it exerts on viewers, exhorting them to take amusing photos where they are holding up or pushing down that long-suffering architectural icon.

Pizza

Naples, April 13th 2010

A few days ago I wrote about the contribution Florence made to modern society. Not to be outdone, Naples invented the pizza. The concept of flavoured flatbread has been around for thousands of years and the word pizza itself since at least 997 CE, however the pinnacle of cuisine, the modern pizza, was only invented in the 16th century, after tomatoes were introduced to Naples from America. The original pizza was the simple tomato base pizza, called the marinara as it was prepared by “la marinara”, the fisherman’s wife, for when her husband returned home. It was so popular that it became a tourist attraction for the poor neighbourhoods - King Ferdinand I (1751-1825) had to disguise himself as a commoner and visit the poor neighbourhoods of Naples in order to eat pizza, since the Queen had unreasonably banned pizza from the court. Antica Pizzeria Port’Alba, the world’s first pizzeria, dates from this era, producing pizzas since 1738 and still running in Naples.

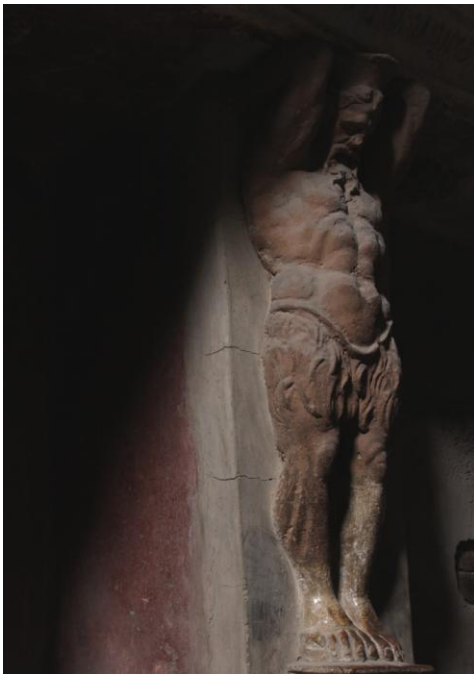


Naples was also the home for the next great innovation in the development of pizza, the addition of cheese. To be precise it was the chef Raffaele Esposito who first added mozzarella to a pizza in 1889. The red, white and green of the pizza (tomato, mozzarella and basil) so pleased the Queen consort of Italy, Margherita of Savoy, that Raffaele Esposito immediately named the Margherita Pizza in her honour. Today purists only recognise the Marinara and Margherita as authentic Neapolitan pizzas, and follow the rules of the Associazione Verace Pizza Napoletana. Pizzerias such as Da Michele will only use Italian wheat flour type 0 or 00, natural Neapolitan yeast, San Marzano tomatoes (added to the pizza in a clockwise direction) and mozzarella made from the milk of semi-wild water buffalo raised in the marshlands of Campaia. The pizza then needs to be kneaded and rolled out by hand to no thicker than 3mm and baked in a 485C oak-wood fired stone oven for only 60-90 seconds.

Politicians and Prostitutes

Pompeii, April 14th 2010

The ruins of old Pompeii give us a snapshot of life in a Roman city in 79 CE. The empty houses and plaster casts of bodies frozen in terror give the impression of a normal city perfectly preserved after an instantaneous apocalypse - bread still in the oven and the dying person holding a cloth over their mouth as they gasp a few last desperate gasps while buried under the ash. The eruption of Mount Vesuvius in



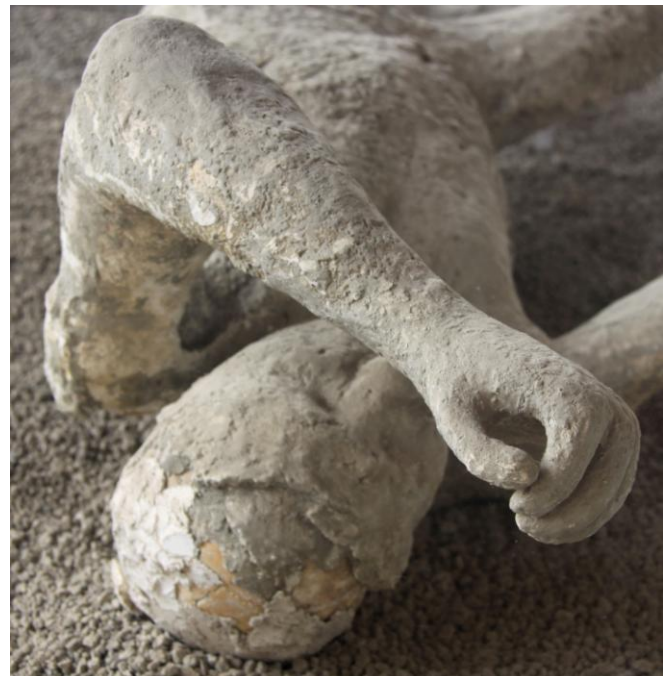
79 CE did not, however, capture a normal Roman city. It caught Pompeii (and how close Pompeii was to a "normal" Roman city is debatable) after 17 years of turmoil and social change, starting with an enormous earthquake in 62 CE and probably a series of minor earthquakes in the leadup to the eruption. Far from being an instantaneous apocalypse, the volcano probably killed only 10% of the population, with 90% leaving the city during the lead-up or fleeing on the first day of the eruption. Some of these probably came back after the eruption to rescue hidden treasures or loot abandoned houses. Seen through this lens the enormous archaeological trove of Pompeii becomes every more complex - interpretations made from particular finds could reflect the normal life of an ancient Roman, or they could be a chance oddity of circumstance.

After walking around the ruins of Pompeii I took enormous pleasure from reading Mary Beard's "Pompeii: The Life of a Roman Town". She makes an excellent case for both the richness of archaeological evidence from Pompeii, and the unstable

edifices of theory which are presented as fact. Graffiti scrawled onto the walls claims that Pompeii women were highly attracted to gladiators. But should this claim be taken at face value? Or should the location of this graffiti (almost exclusively written in the barracks of gladiators) indicate that this was more boastful claim than cultural norm? I especially enjoying learning about the politicians and prostitutes of Pompeii.

Many political posters are preserved in Pompeii, with support listed for one candidate or another on the equivalent of the city council. While this may represent a vibrant political process, the messages are more proclamations of support rather than a political discourse, and so may represent instead the tribal nature of the electoral process. What I found really interesting is the dirtiness of the politics in ancient Pompeii. As well as signs of (presumably) honest support by individual citizens or coalitions, other signs appear to be faked support to make a candidate disreputable, with signs painted on houses claiming support of a candidate by "the pickpockets", "the idlers", "the runaway slaves". We can be fairly sure that these were negative campaigning as in some cases the supporter name was covered over while leaving up the candidate name - indicating that the repainter was happy with the message of support, but not with the group that was purported to be the source of that support. Not a hair of difference between ancient Pompeii and [Australia in 2007](#).

Prostitution is assumed to be big business in ancient Pompeii, with claims to over 35 brothels in a city with only 30,000 free men. The vast majority of these "brothels" are labelled as such



based on graffiti which either pictures a phallus or makes claims about the price of particular young ladies - a criteria which, if used today, would label every bus shelter and bar bathroom as a brothel. While casual prostitution may have been common, there is likely only one brothel in Pompeii, where the combination of graffiti and paintwork are unmistakable. Even here, however, many interpretations can be made - are the explicit pictures pornography to set the mood? Or a menu?

The Villas of Tivoli **Tivoli, April 15th 2010**

Tivoli has been the playground of the rich for more than 2000 years. Powerful Romans built their holiday villas up on the mountain, overlooking the plain. After the fall of the Roman empire Tivoli became an independent rival, but was reconquered and controlled by the Papacy in 1001 CE, and a new generation of rich and powerful built decadent villas. We visited the two villas which have been world heritage listed, the Villa d'Este and Villa Adriana.

Villa d'Este is a beautiful 16th century villa built for Cardinal Ippolito II d'Este. The house itself is stunning, with perfectly preserved mannerist frescoes covering the walls and ceiling. The highlight of the villa is, however, certainly the gardens - the fountains and terraces of Pirro Ligorio and Tommaso Chiruchi.

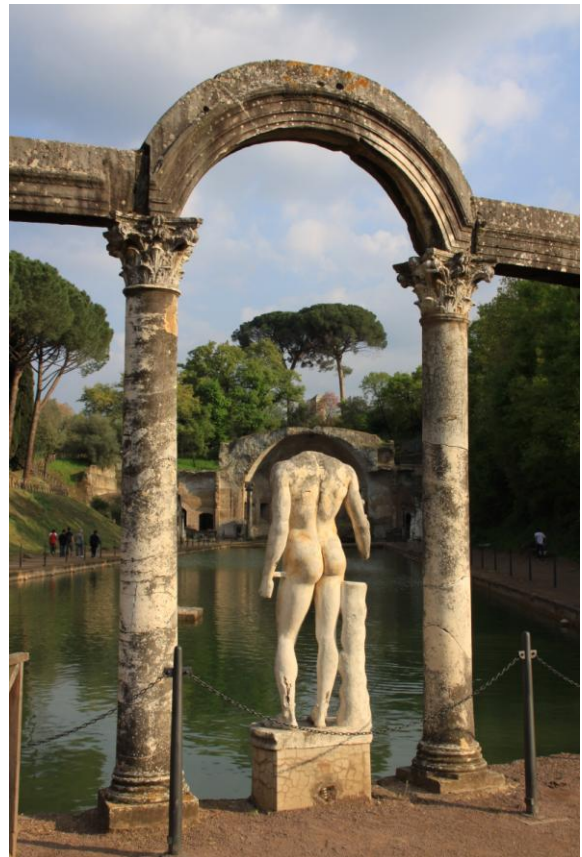
The combination of leading artist (Ligorio was previously painter for the Pope, until he was fired for criticising Michelangelo's work in St Peters) and skilled hydrolic engineer diverted the flow of water from the mountains into five hundred delightful cascades and fountains, falling through three levels of terraces.



Villa Adriana is now barely more than broken columns and walls, but was once the centre of world power. The Roman Emperor Hadrian disliked his palace on Palatine Hill and so commissioned an enormous Villa in Tivoli, a complex covering more than a square kilometre and more than 30 buildings. The most widely travelled of Roman Emperors, Hadrian took an active role in the architecture, pulling in design elements from around his Empire, creating a villa that so pleased him that he moved his court from Rome to Tivoli. While few original buildings are intact, partial reconstructions show that Hadrian, like the latter architects, used the flow of water from the hills to create a garden of waters.

Ancient Rome Ostia Antica, April 16th 2010

Ostia Antica was a pleasant surprise. Having just visited Pompeii, the pinnacle of Roman preservation, I half expected Ostia Antica to be nothing more than broken blocks and mounds of earth. The city, however, is remarkably intact - oh there was no over-baked bread left in the ovens like in Pompeii, but this micro-preservation of Pompeii has largely been removed to the museum in Naples anyway, and the macro-preservation of Ostia Antica was as stunning as Pompeii.



Ostia Antica was probably the first colony of ancient Rome, a natural first step to empire as it was situated at the mouth of the River Tiber, making it the perfect site for Rome's seaport. After thriving for maybe 1000 years, Ostia fell into decay with the end of the Roman Empire, with silting of the Tiber taking away its capacity to act as a port and the death of the Roman trading network. Despite a far slower death than Pompeii, the city is well preserved, especially the magnificent series of mosaics of the Baths of Neptune and around the Square of the Guilds.

Chaos in Rome Rome, April 17th 2010

Like five million other people, we have been stranded due to the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull. Our flight was due to leave Saturday morning, but the airports were in chaos and Belgian airspace closed down. We decided not to risk a repeat performance, so rather than rebook a flight we tried for the train station - more chaos and then some!

Despite record demand and a line taking up the entire hall, Train Italia didn't put on any extra staff, and of course they would not allow internet booking. Despite getting in line at opening, we waited three hours for the five staff members to slowly sell tickets to thousands of patient passengers. There was no sign at all that Train Italia considered the circumstances to be exceptional - they didn't even modify the line divider lay-out to allow an ordered line, having people sprawl out over the entire hall. After an hour of waiting they sent out someone to shout that there were no trains going north for two days. After

another hour the same lady came out with a megaphone saying that Train Italia would put on an extra train to Milan, leaving in a few hours, no need to wait in line - just cram onto the train if you can and buy a ticket on the train. Idiots! I'm surprised there was not a riot on the platform and that no-one died after being pushed in front of a train. What made them decide to get rid of an orderly ticket system and start a free-for-all? We finally got to the front of the line and asked for the next tickets back to Belgium. The guy simply said "there are none". "Ever?" I replied skeptically. "Not today", he said with a shrug, "and not tomorrow". "Well how about the next day, or the day after that? We just want the next available tickets to Brussels". He finally started to click the screen half-heartedly for five minutes, then discussed his lunch choice with a coworker, before finally selling us overpriced train tickets for two days time to Milan, connecting the next day to Zurich and finally arriving just three days late in Brussels.

Obviously Eyjafjallajökull erupting can't be blamed on anyone. I'm glad the governments involved took proactive steps to shut down flights that could have been in danger, far better to have a central decision rather than let every airline decide for itself based on a profit calculation. But the disgrace has been the response of airports, airlines and governments to that decision. RyanAir would not let us rebook our flights online, since we had already checked in, and just sent a text message telling us to go to the airport to book. Rome Airport barely bothered to update its website, with the front page still praising the reductions in waiting times in 2009 and shopping specials. After a dozen clicks there was a message asking people not to come to the airport and a list of which flights were cancelled that didn't match the list produced by the airlines. We were lucky in being stranded in Rome, compared to [200 Bangladeshis](#) who were stuck in Brussels airport as their plane was diverted and they didn't have a Belgian visa to leave the airport. Airlines, airports and governments could all have recognised that their actions would cause chaos and each could have stepped up with small measures that would have made things bearable, instead each acted as if it was business as normal.

