

Viva Italia! Part 2: Adventures by Disney

by Dotti Saroufim, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Day Five: Tuscan Holiday

Our Daily Viva for today says that breakfast will be served at 7:30 a.m., that we'd be leaving for our pasta making class and lunch at Castello Vicchiomaggio at 8:45 a.m., and our word of the day is "pasta." I'm Italian -- that's my word of the day every day. That may be why I look like I do...

Castello Vicchiomaggio is located not far from Florence, and has been producing wine for centuries. It's situated on top of a hill overlooking the Greve Valley, affording beautiful views of the surrounding countryside. The castle itself houses wine cellars, which extend under the castle, and also guest rooms, dining areas and meeting rooms. Our pasta making class was set up in one of the private dining rooms, and our teacher, a feisty little woman of Italian and Scottish descent with lots of energy and a wonderful sense of humor, easily got us all in the pasta-making mood. In our aprons and hairnets, covered in flour and eggs, we truly were a sight to behold. I do have to admit, however, that we were much more interested in lunch once we found out that we really didn't have to eat what we created in the class!

Lunch consisted of three types of pasta and a salad, followed by very tasty biscotti and a wonderful dessert wine. We were then treated to a guided tour of the wine cellars and were free to explore the grounds for a bit before boarding the bus for our trip to Siena.

Upon arrival in Siena, we were met by our local guide, Nicoletta, who was prompted to tell us about the rivalry between Siena and Florence, and why we should never mention the name Florence in her presence. Nicoletta was a very informative, humorous, and passionate guide, and to have someone lead this tour that actually lives, works in, and loves her hometown, made it immensely enjoyable.

In Siena, we toured the Piazza del Campo, where the famous Palio, a bareback horse race first recorded in 1283, is held twice each summer. Jockeys from each of Siena's contrade (neighborhoods) compete for this highest honor, with festivals that last for weeks afterwards. A visit to one of the contrade museums, and a video of the actual race, made this event much more imaginable. Our visit to Siena also included a wine tasting at the Grand Hotel Continental, which included a nice assortment of appetizers -- likely provided so that we could navigate

back to the bus later in the day. Dinner was on our own that night, and Tony and I opted for a pizza at one of the cafes lining the piazza. Heading back on the motor coach, we watched "Roman Holiday," an old favorite of mine with Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn, and were able to relive some of our own Roman holiday!

Day Six: Romance and Renaissance

Another early start, today to board the motor coach to Florence. On the way, we made a surprise stop at what Walt Disney World would call a "Kodak Picture Spot," but what Adventures by Disney has given over to Hewlett Packard, based on the "HP Photo Tips" on the back of the Daily Viva. The view from this area of Ponte Vecchio, the Arno, and Florence in the distance was just magnificent!

We arrived in Florence and made the long (but scenic!) trek from the motor coach parking area to the actual city. Elena was our local guide, and again with headphones and lanyards attached, we covered a lot of space in a little bit of time. One highlight was the Piazza della Signoria, where Michelangelo's David stood until 1873, and where a copy now resides. Another highlight, of course, was seeing the real thing in the Galleria dell' Accademia! The Duomo, Europe's fourth largest church and one of Florence's oldest buildings (and the tallest), was even more magnificent than how I imagined it to be.

After a nice lunch of pizza and lasagna with two of our, by now, quite good friends, we explored the city's shopping areas -- the leather is quite beautiful, and the silk scarves are stunning -- but my most exciting find was the Disney Store, where I bought a Firenze sweatshirt and T-shirt! And with this group of travelers, you know that this purchase was a big hit on the way back! At the straw market, we kept running into others from our group at every turn ("Hey! I know you!") and many of us brought multiple shopping bags back with us.

We boarded the motor coach for our last night at the Borgo, and watched the remainder of "Roman Holiday" on the way back. Our dinner on this final night was a "Tuscan BBQ" and we all agreed to bring our collective bottles of wine and Limoncello to share -- and share we did! It's probably a good thing that we took up most of the rooms at this beautiful hotel because sitting on the outside patio of the restaurant, we weren't the quietest of guests...

(Read the final installment of Dotti and Tony's adventures in Italy in the next issue of PassPorter News!)

About The Author: Dotti Saroufim is a

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