

Viva Italia! Part 1: Adventures by Disney

by Dotti Saroufim, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Day One: Benvenuto!

Could I possibly be more excited? My last overseas trip was to Lebanon in 1993, and this trip promised to be much more fun with a lot less bombing. Even after over seven hours of sitting with my knees pushed up to my chin (I'm taller than most), I left the comfort (ha!) of Alitalia with an abundance of caffeine-induced enthusiasm and energy.

Flying in from Logan Airport in Boston made Rome's Leonardo da Vinci - Fiumicino Airport seems sane and organized. The signs were plentiful and clear, and we made our way to the baggage claim without any confusion. There we were met by an Adventures by Disney representative, carrying what would soon become a very familiar sign. After claiming our bags, we were led out to the customs area, where we met our first Adventure Guide, Tina Hyatt.

Tina's job on this day was to run around the airport looking for arrivals, tag their bags, hand out information sheets, and get them and their luggage settled into some kind of transportation and on their way to the hotel. No easy task with guests arriving at all different times, and to multiple baggage claim areas. As effortless and stress-free as she made it appear, it was just the beginning of nine days of careful planning and meticulous attention to detail that made this trip so seamless for those of us traveling.

There were eight of us on the Boston to Rome flight, Tony and I, and a wonderful family of six who we came to know and love. Rather than have us wait for them to clear customs, a private car was ordered up for us and we had our first "thrill ride" in Italy -- Mr. Giuseppe's Wild Ride to the Westin Excelsior. "Hey, is that the Coliseum?" Whoosh! "Wow, was that the Vatican?" Whoosh! "Wait, isn't that…?" Whoosh! In Rome, you pretty much have to do as the Romans do, and we settled back and relaxed -- all Romans drive like this!

We soon (very soon -- whoosh!) arrived at the Westin, our luggage was taken at the door, and we entered the ornately decorated front door to find ourselves in a magnificent chandeliered lobby -- what a lovely hotel! I don't honestly know how or where we found Cinzia Orlando, our other Adventures by Disney guide, but like magic she was by our side. After excusing herself to take care of the guests who arrived shortly

before us, she came over to where we had found a comfortable place to sit and wait, and told us that our room was actually ready at this early hour. It must be Disney magic! She gave us a little tour of the hotel, including a glimpse at the wonderful spa and indoor pool, and showed us where we'd be meeting for the evening events. Our "Daily Viva" noted an "Adventure Welcome" at 5:30 p.m. and a dinner at 6:30 p.m.

Our "Adventure Welcome" was the first time we'd officially meet all of our traveling companions -- 36 of us in all! "Getting to Know You" games were played, champagne flowed freely, and delicious appetizers were served. By the time we entered the private dining area for our meal, we were all fast friends. One tie that bound many of us was our love for Disney, so there was no lack of topics for conversation!

Day Two: All Roads Lead to Rome

Our day began with an amazing array of food at the breakfast buffet in the hotel's restaurant -- and with the best coffee I may ever have tasted! I'd go back to Rome just for that. We then met up with our Adventure Guides, and also with our local guide, Fabrizio, for our walking tour of Rome. Fabrizio would be a familiar sight (and voice) for the next few days, and we became very accustomed to his, "Andiamo, my friend, andiamo," ("Let's go!") as we moved from place to place. We were all given individual headsets and lanyards, so that we could hear Fabrizio from a distance -- so much better than the olden days of guides shouting to large groups of tourists, and those like me, who lagged behind to take photos, missing most of what was said. We were also handed cold water bottles and snacks to pack up and take with us -- a thoughtful touch!

Our walking tour began in the Villa Borghese gardens, a short stroll from our hotel. The villa was built in 1616 by a nephew of Scipio Borghese (Pope Paul V) and in 1901 the gardens became a state-owned public park. The views of these gardens, and from the gardens, were magnificent! From there, our tour took us to the Spanish Steps, the Trevi Fountain (where we all tossed coins to guarantee that we'd one day return), the Pantheon, and the nearby Piazza Navona with its beautiful statues and fountains. By now the sky had cleared considerably and was dotted with white puffy clouds -- a perfect day for walking!

After lunch, we were off to the Coliseum by motor coach. This was our first meeting with Reno, our wonderful driver, who would be with us all the way until our departure for Venice later in the week. Along with being an expert driver (those roads in Tuscany are tough!); he was a kind and patient soul, as we were a loud bunch once we got to know

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each other. The Coliseum was as remarkable as I expected, but even more startling to me (even though I've seen the photos for all of my life) is how it sits there in the middle of this bustling modern city, a huge reminder of the past and how far we've come, but how little we've progressed. (Ignore me. I was sleep-deprived.)

Back at the hotel, we showered and rested and met up soon to depart for our Roman Feast. Being somewhat jet-lagged at this point, I honestly don't remember the name of the restaurant nor where it was located, but the food and the company was truly memorable. During our many-coursed meal, we were entertained by dancers and gladiators, depicting what life would have been like at a Roman feast of old. Tony got to participate in a sword fight (helping to make room for the next course) and we were all made honorary Roman citizens. It was a fun evening!

Back at the hotel, I was asleep in minutes, but I hear that a few of our traveling companions (and you know who you are!) went out in search of some tasty Limoncello -- an Italian liquor made from lemon rinds, sugar, and … lots of alcohol. Judging by the pained looks on their faces the next morning, they found some. "Limoncello!" became somewhat of a battle cry for the whole group as the trip progressed -- somehow these "Adventures" take on a whole new meaning without children along!

Day Three: Let's Be Civilized

This was our day to visit the Vatican, and leaving any later would almost insure that we wouldn't get in -- or we'd at least have to wait for many hours to do so.

After a long but enjoyable (hey, I had 35 people to talk to!) wait in line, we were allowed in. It was also a time for another one of Adventures by Disney's little thoughtful surprises, something that kept us occupied while we waited. One of the wonderful things about being on this type of tour is that the tickets are all purchased by one of the guides while you wait; when it's time to enter, you just go through the turnstiles. This was our third day in Rome and I hadn't yet reached into my wallet for anything -- even the coins for the Trevi Fountain were supplied by our guides!

Once inside the Vatican, even I was so overwhelmed it kept me quiet. There are truly no words to describe it -- the Gallery of Maps, the Gallery of Tapestries, the Etruscan Museum -- ultimately leading into the Sistine Chapel where just the ceiling would take a month of study and admiration. It is so jaw-dropping, overwhelmingly beautiful. And to

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leave the Sistine Chapel thinking that nothing could awe me in quite that way again, and then to walk into St. Peter's Basilica where each and every section and alter and piece of marble was a work of art -- a better writer might be able to describe the emotions that this place evoked, but I'm surely not that writer. For those who know me, just saying I was speechless should be enough.

We had a little time afterwards to explore the Basilica and the Square on our own, and to do a little shopping. We were then brought by motor coach to a lovely little restaurant near the Coliseum called Le Lanterne, where we had pre-ordered our lunches the day before. We started with a generous antipasto buffet, followed by a choice of vegetarian pasta, grilled chicken breast or Veal Saltimbocca (my choice!). Dessert was fruit salad and ice cream - yum! We then had the choice of exploring the area and wandering back to the hotel on foot, or going back via motor coach, and as stuffed as we were (and tired!), we chose the latter.

Dinner tonight was on our own, and our Adventure Guides were in the lobby for any questions or recommendations. Tony had a name of a local place, only a few blocks away, that was recommended by a friend. We were to go to the Taverna Flavia and ask for "Rocco." After meeting up with some of our traveling companions, six of us headed there for dinner and had a wonderful meal -- albeit by questionable means. When Tony asked for Rocco (who was there, by the way), the owner came out to welcome us "back." He brought us champagne to start the meal, an enormous selection of antipasto, only charged us for some of the wine we consumed, and also brought complimentary Limoncello after our meal! From then on, we decided that "Rocco" was a code word, and that we were likely mistaken for visiting Mafia!

Day Four: Etruscan Roots

This morning, we had to leave our luggage outside the door by 7:30 a.m. for our trip to Orvieto and Tuscany. At least the motor coach wouldn't be leaving until 8:45 a.m. -- a much more civilized time! After one last wonderful breakfast and at least a pot of heavenly coffee at the Excelsior, we boarded the bus and within minutes were outside of the city and enjoying the scenery of rural Italy. Tony ended up loving Tuscany the most, as it reminded him of his country, Lebanon, with its rolling hills, farmlands, mountains, and vineyards. It was a lovely and peaceful drive, when two buses weren't fighting for right of way on high winding roads.

Our first stop on the way to Tuscany (after a quick "pit stop" for the bathroom -- see "pot of coffee" above -- and "necessity shopping") was

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to its neighboring region, Umbria, and the lovely village of Orvieto. Orvieto is perched on a 984-foot plateau, overlooks smaller towns and vineyards, and is reached by a "funicular," a cable-car system once run by water. Tourists are drawn to this village for the Duomo, one of Italy's greatest cathedrals, which began construction in 1290 and took over 300 years to build. With its winding cobblestone streets, beautiful views, and interesting history, this is a special village to visit.

After exploring the little side streets with its shops and restaurants, we had a lovely lunch with two of our new friends in a little out-of-the-way cafe that Tony found by asking one of the locals where she liked to eat. I had ravioli with a black truffle sauce that was just heavenly. Did I mention that the food was good in Italy?

When we arrived at our hotel, it was a bit misty and foggy, and the outlines of the buildings and the streetlights appeared almost mystical. Once a working hamlet, we soon discovered that each of the rooms at the Borgo de Fontebussi was uniquely different -- from simple rooms with small baths to multi-level townhouses with kitchens and sitting areas. After unpacking, Tony (since dubbed "the Mayor" by most of our group) took me on a tour, showing me where each of our group was staying. "Rick and Jan are across from us, Marc and Robbin are in that building over there, Maura and Erin are in this one to the left…" Our room was in the "main villa" where there were also a few sitting rooms if guests chose to congregate outside of their rooms.

On the motor coach earlier in the day, we had chosen our dining time and our dining companions, and eight of us were scheduled to eat in the hotel's restaurant at 7:45 p.m. Again, we were given our choices in advance and this time I went for the fried Pecorino (incredibly tasty fried cheese) for a starter, the pasta with wild boar sauce for my first course, and the pork loin with a side of potatoes for my second course. Dessert was a choice of ricotta cake, chocolate mousse or Panna Cotta. Ahhhhh.

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

About The Author: Dotti Saroufim is a CruisingCo.com/MouseEarVacations.com travel agent. She recently returned from Epcot's Food and Wine Festival and is looking forward to meeting some of you on land or at sea in December for MouseFest 2006.

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