

La Bella Italia

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Italy beckoned
we answered the call
and had a *stupendo* vacation
this fall
Four days in Florence
five days in Rome
we felt so Italian
by the time we came home

Our plane touched down at Fiumicino airport as dawn was breaking. A copse of long-legged Roman pines stood off to one side of the runway, their stylish green canopies flecked with gold from the rising sun. The shuttle driver took us into town, pushing the speed limit all the way, talking on his cell phone and gesturing wildly at every other vehicle on the road. He dropped us at the hotel—hearts pounding, adrenalin pumping—and it suddenly hit us: we were in Rome!

Such a grand, spectacular city. And surprisingly easy to get around in, especially since most of what we wanted to see was within walking distance. We walked about twenty-five miles a day, which is the best way to see it all: the magnificent buildings and monuments and fountains, beautiful balconies and rooftops, and narrow alleys winding this way and that through the belly of the Eternal City. We tossed three coins into the Trevi Fountain, which, according to some, guarantees that we will return. Quite frankly, it won't be soon enough! The Colosseum has been remarkably well restored, and evokes a potent sense of history, of being at the very heart of the Roman Empire. As we walked through the gates of the amphitheater, Lillian thought she heard lions roaring, and we shuddered to think of what took place there two thousand years ago. Twenty centuries! And we are so excited because our house is sixty-five years old.

Such is the presence
of religion in Rome
that every few streets
there's a steeple or dome
There are priests by the thousands
and that's no surprise

since they're all tax-exempt
and don't have to wear ties

We did a lot of walking and gawking, but best of all was hanging out at the cafés in the piazzas—like the Piazza Navona and the Campo di Fiori. Some terrific accordionists serenaded us, playing old favorites like “O Sole Mio” and “Amapola”. In spite of making us feel a little self conscious, the serenading was beautiful and we loved it just as much as we love hearing Dean Martin sing “When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore!” On a grey, rainy morning we took the number 64 bus to the Vatican and joined the throngs shuffling through the galleries, ooh-ing and aah-ing at the paintings and tapestries and statues.

The Sistine Chapel gave me such an out-of-body feeling
Perhaps my head just came unhinged
from gazing at the ceiling

Then we took the train north to Florence, which was wonderful in an entirely different way. So much smaller than Rome, for one thing, and even easier to get around in. Full of tourists, certainly, but not like the Costa Brava in summer or Times Square on New Year's Eve.

Let's go back to Florence
in October once again
we can stroll across
the Ponte Vecchio in the rain
trudging to the Duomo
up the narrow, cobbled street
suffering like pilgrims
on our swollen, blistered feet

It was heavenly to walk across the Ponte Vecchio, browsing in the jewelry stores clustered on this medieval bridge that has spanned the river Arno for centuries. We strolled along the embankment to the Uffizi Galleries, where we were entranced by the mimes, faces painted and swathed in costume, holding frozen poses and thanking passing tippers with surreptitious winks. Further

uptown, at the Academia, Michelangelo's David took our breath away, and convinced us that no other sculpture would ever seem quite as perfect. One afternoon we hiked up the hill beyond the river to:

The Gardens of the Boboli
where Earth and heavens meet
with Tuscan skies above my head
and Florence at my feet

Though we were constantly in awe of the timeless art and architecture that one sees everywhere in Italy, I kept reminding myself that Italians are also known for their delightful sense of whimsy:

I'd like to be remembered
with a statue when I'm dead
but I'd hate to stand for centuries
with pigeons on my head

We also enjoyed the food, of course, especially one memorable dinner at the Trattoria Marione on the Via della Spada in Florence. I love soups of almost any kind, and really appreciated the *pasta e fagioli* that was on almost every menu.

Lillian finally got
the spot
of olive oil off my jeans
But we've not
forgot *fagioli*
is Italian for beans

One evening we found a laundromat on a side street in Florence, and decided to use it. After some false starts we managed to figure out the system, and soon had clothes tumbling in sudsy water. There was a *birreria* across the road, where we asked if we might buy some glasses of wine to take back to the laundromat. Of course, said the young lady behind the bar, why not? Her spontaneous response expressed in a nutshell all the charm and hospitality we encountered on this trip. Bella indeed, this Italia. ★