



Grandtravel tour guides keep things moving

[by Molly Arost Staub]

My grandson Beryn Staub-Waldenberg and I continued on the second leg of our Grandtravel Italy trip on a train to Florence. Here Janet Alsteen, of Long Grove, Ill., told me she takes each of her grandchildren on a Grandtravel trip. The first time, she asked each of her daughters if they wanted to travel with her. One was busy and another was less than enthusiastic, so she turned to her oldest granddaughter, who was then 12. She asked her where in the world she would like to go if she had her choice, and she answered London.

Thus began her tradition of taking each child separately. She has also gone to Australia. And she says it's their trip, so they can do whatever they like. This was her third Grandtravel trip, and she has three to go.

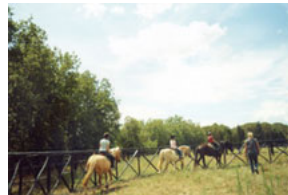
"I can't imagine going any other way," she said.

In Florence, our members were disappointed by the Grand Hotel Minerva, which was located near the railroad station and had small rooms. After our previous palatial accommodations, we decided this was what was available. But others who had traveled with Grandtravel previously said it was not up to their standards.

We visited the Palazzo Vecchio and were greeted by a lively costumed actor emulating the 16th century architect and writer Giorgio Vasari. Pointing to one of the grandmothers wearing slacks, he said, "You must be a man, since you're wearing underpants!" And, "You're from America? You must be savages."

He presented small doses of history and whisked us past some of the famous highlights. In a locked room, he pointed to a fresco and asked a question. Only one student knew the answer: my Beryn! How proud I felt of this kid.

We saw only one set of the stunning Ghiberti bronze doors to the baptistery, which Michelangelo dubbed the Doors of Paradise. And the crowds in front of and inside the Duomo were not nearly as dense as on my previous visits. I'm sure some of the adults wished for more, but in deference to the youngsters the planners kept it short.



Nancy Lasser of New Vernon, N.J., said, "I think their idea is right. They

know how much a child can take. I might have taken too much time if I planned it myself. And you get the time to be with your grandchildren - that's the purpose."

Our guide at the Uffizi Gallery, Italy's most important painting museum, didn't want to overwhelm the youngsters either. He pointed out just a few of the notables, such as Michelangelo's only painting on wood, "Sacra Famiglia" ("The Holy Family") and Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus." Then it was on to the Academia Museum for my favorite, Michelangelo's powerful sculpture of David, the symbol of freedom from oppression.

"The grandchildren seem to be getting a lot out of it," said Anita Rutugliano, of Lake Forest, Ill. "They're happy and involved; these kids help each other. The hope is that through the years, the art, architecture and archaeology will ring a bell."

Later, we drove into the Tuscan hills to a 15th century farm, I Bonsi. The group viewed how wine is made from the farm's grapes and how olives are crushed for oil. Then it was into the kitchen, where all of us donned plastic aprons and sliced and diced, minced and chopped, sauteed and baked. We prepared our meal under the tutelage of Maria Teresa Berdoncini, a professional chef who gives cooking classes.

We motorcoached to Sienna, an entire city on UNESCO's protected list. The 14th century Gothic Duomo of dark green and white marble is certainly impressive. But it's the Church of San Domenico that many flock to: A fresco by Andrea Vanni represents native daughter St. Catherine of Sienna, who has inspired churches throughout the world. Those so inclined may see her head on an altar. Also visitable is the home of St. Catherine.



Sienna apparently had become wealthy since it was on the Crusaders'

route from Scotland to Jerusalem. The city boasts the world's oldest continuously working bank dating from 1472. Someone in the group asked how this was permitted since the church had forbidden Christians from being money lenders, and the guide said it was approved because they were called bankers, not money lenders.

The square is a huge, cobblestoned, shell-shaped, concave central meeting point. And the yellow ochre bricks gave rise to the term "burnt sienna." Though still lovely, today some of the 15th and 16th century buildings' charms are distilled by the multitudinous shops.

The next day brought a surprise visit to another Tuscan villa, Il Borro Estate, owned by the Ferragamo family since 1993. We met



the young Salvatore Ferragamo, grandson of the original shoe magnate. He said his 85-year-old grandmother still goes to the office every day and does a lot of charitable work. We lunched deliciously at its Osteria del Borro.

Afterward we toured the on-property medieval village - dating from 1039 - where artisans displayed their wares including jewelry, woodcarvings and a miniature village created by a priest. The grandchildren rode horses and swam in a pool within sight of the Tuscan hills and fields of sunflowers grown for their oil. The youngsters expressed relief from museum-hopping.

That evening, after visiting the famed Tivoli Gardens, we dined outdoors beneath a brilliant blue sky. Tables sat on a terrace beneath ancient Roman temple ruins at Sibilla Ristorante in Tivoli, dating from 1730 and visited by royalty and celebrities. The term antipasto took on new meaning, as the dishes continued to roll on and on.

IF YOU GO

Traditionally, Grandtravel trips have taken place during the summer, over school vacation. This year two trips will debut in April: one to New Mexico and one to Greece; another goes to New York in December. Itineraries include domestic destinations as well as European, plus African and Australian. Lengths vary from five to 14 days.

Information, brochures and reservations may be obtained from Grandtravel (800) 247-7651, (202) 785-9000, extension 3153 or www.grandtrvl.com.

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