

Three Weeeks in Italy

I observed my 58th birthday in Puglia in the south of Italy, on the tip of the heel of the Italian boot. Few foreign tourists go to this part of Italy, and as a consequence very little English is spoken there—we were pretty much on our own. We missed a lot, to be sure, but we also had a wonderful time, as well as a few adventures. For example, while I was collecting a sample of water from the Adriatic to add to next September's "joining of the waters" ceremony at Unity Church, my camera— *kerplunk!*—plopped in the water. I now have a new camera.

After the week in Puglia, we made our way up the Adriatic coast over the next three days, stopping at hotels along the way. After reaching the north, we stopped at Assisi, and it happened to be October 4, the Feast Day of St. Francis. The guidebooks told us that Assisi would be packed, but in fact it wasn't—we spent a very pleasant afternoon in this beautiful Umbrian town. Assisi was badly damaged by an earthquake a couple of years ago. Many of the frescoed ceilings had fallen, and there was scaffolding around a lot of the buildings.

We went on to Tuscany, where we had rented a place for a week, on a mountain-top olive farm south of Siena. It was lovely, as is all of Tuscany. There were several tourist apartments at the farm, and though it was not full we had companions, all of them delightful. In the place next to us was a Swedish couple who now live in Switzerland and her aunt, from Denmark. There were two young couples, each with a young 2½-year-old son, one from London, the other a Dutch couple now living in Brussels. The only other Americans were a couple a little older than us from Colorado—turns out that his roommate in college was George Lattimer, former mayor of St. Paul. A couple from New Zealand and their wheelchair-bound 15-year-old son (who has cerebral palsy) filled out the guest list. Each day we'd head off in different directions, but we began to gather on the lawn in front of our apartment about 5 in the afternoon for conversation and reports about the day's activities. Entirely delightful!

One morning, our friend Ray (who was traveling with us), Ellen, the woman from New Zealand, and I attended a short cooking class at a restaurant in a nearby village. The chef took us into his kitchen and prepared a meal, which we consumed course by course. This was very interesting and also delicious. I am proud to announce that I have now mastered risotto.

We came home through Rome, and we had a day and a half of sightseeing. On Sunday, we hired a driver-guide, who took us to all the major sites in Rome. We happened to arrive at the Vatican in time to see the pope, who was making a rare and unexpected appearance.