

# Italia

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stories below the city streets specializes in tagliata, grilled rare steak. Across the way is the huge, open Piazza di Campo, where the world-renowned Palio is run every July. This colorful pageant culminating in bareback horse races around the piazza draws hundreds of thousands of spectators. Hotels book up months in advance, and tickets (\$100 minimum) are available only from businesses around the piazza, with a steep commission on top. Siena's narrow, winding streets are lined with trendy shops and that wonderful Italian combination pizzeria/gelateria/bakery/bar/espresso stop. Not to miss in Siena: the archeology museum across from the Duomo. Roman and Etruscan ruins beneath Siena have yielded buried treasure.

We left Tuscany and moved eastward to green Umbria, traveling on a slow train with on-board entertainment by a roving gypsy accordionist. We stayed in Assisi at Hotel Da Angelo, another friendly, family-run place. It is just outside the walled city and has its own olive oil business and two friendly dogs named Jimmy and Lulu. The huge outdoor swimming pool was closed for the season, but we hired the owner's wife Margherita to give us a half-day historical tour of



Duomo, Siena



Palazzo Pubblico, Piazza di Campo, Siena

neighboring medieval enclaves Spello and Bevagna (for you historians, this is on the old Roman road, Via Flaminia).

The rest of the day we spent exploring Assisi's churches and museums of antiquity. We met Francesco, a friendly Italian-American olive oil and balsamic vinegar salesman who splits his time between Assisi and Chicago. He recommended eating at Otello and Trattoria Al Camino Vecchio, both of which we tried and were not sorry. I mean, you eat a meal like that and say afterward, "That was the best lasagne and sausages I've ever had."

Our final destination in Umbria was Gubbio, perhaps the most perfectly preserved medieval hilltop town in Italy. Each spring its austere stone face undergoes a transformation as thousands of costumed revelers throng the streets with colorful banners, teaming up to carry heavy wooden pallets

representing various saints up a steep, winding road to the top of the mountain. (Descendants of Gubbio residents who emigrated to the United States generations ago re-enact the festival every year in Jessup, Pennsylvania.)

The day we spent in Gubbio, a

cold wind blew as traces of early snow showed on top of the mountain. We rode up there on the funivia, metal baskets hauled by cable ski-lift style; checked out the view and the basilica; then walked all the way down, our feet and shins feeling the pain. We met a group of women jogging uphill and talking without pausing for breath. They came back and passed us going down. Then, before we got all the way down, we met them again on their way back up a second time. Mediterranean diet, my foot! Try good, hard exercise.

Dinner in Gubbio was at Taverna del Lupo (Tavern of the Wolf), where even the breadsticks are special.

After a side trip to Trieste to see the magnificent coastside castle, Miramare, and accidentally discovering top-rated Zampolli gelato, we caught a fast train to Venice for our last two days in Italy. Venice's familiar sights, sounds, and smells made us feel at home, as if we were visiting an old friend: riding the vaporetto on the Grand Canal; enjoying a sparkling chamber music performance in a grand old palazzo, featuring the music of the Venetian master, Antonio Vivaldi; wandering through ancient alleys and squares; hearing gondoliers serenade their passengers; joking around with the friendly Tunisian headwaiter at Osteria Alle Botteghe; catching a whiff of cigar smoke or roasting coffee on the air; crunching on a biscotti; sipping a rich, red Amaranone.

Italy is an adventure in intensity, best experienced with all the senses fully engaged.

**John Maybury writes the "Wandering and Wondering" column for the Pacifica Tribune. His traveling companion Leslie Davidson took the pictures with her new digital camera.**

