

Saturday morning, we caught the Eurostar train to Milano. Guided by the train god in Car 3 (the accent on the announcement was so pronounced that “train guard” sounded distinctly like “train god,” a concept we found delightfully amusing,) we had a calming trip to Milano. The car was nearly empty, making the train an even more charming way to travel, and we watched the Italian countryside roll by as we headed north. As we approached Roma, I saw the ruins of the Roman aqueducts, standing here and there in the countryside. Past Firenze (Florence) and into the hills of Bologna, the ground was suddenly snow-covered,



and we began to worry that we hadn't brought sufficiently warm clothing for this leg of our journey. Though we'd all brought various items of winter attire, we'd all also chosen to leave them in Napoli, in order to conserve space in our overstuffed backpacks. Farther north, but out of the mountains, the snow turned to rain, and we arrived in Milano to a cold, damp drizzle. Our train had been an hour and a half late arriving in Napoli, so it was dark by the time we stumbled out into the monumental space of Milano Centrale. We reserved seats for our trip to Venezia (Venice) without incident, and found the

subway line that would take us to our hotel. Once off the train, armed with a barely legible map printed from the hotel's web site, we wandered in circles a bit before finally orienting ourselves on the proper path. We were delighted when we found the Hotel Trentina (<http://www.htrentina.it/default.htm>), however, for it was

as charming as we could have imagined. We entered the carpeted foyer, and were greeted by a lively man who spoke copiously in English. We checked in, left our belongings in our attic room (scarcely bigger than the four twin beds and a few bed stands that it held, but more than adequate for our needs.) The friendly guy at the desk, who was the next day described to us by his sister as, “My crazy brother Luca,” happily obliged our requests for restaurant recommendations. After raving about a particular pizzeria, however, he then told us that we would not be able to get in that night without reservations, so he would make reservations for us for Sunday night.



He then told us of two other places, one Sardinian and one Tuscan. We opted for the Sardinian, Nuovo Convento, (which translates to “new convent.” Our trip to Milano was apparently to be full of nuns, but more on that later.) The moment we walked in the door, we were greeted by an enthusiastic waiter who bore more than a passing resemblance to Roberto Benigni, in both appearance and manner. They seemed delighted to have us there, (the hotel sends many guests in their direction, no doubt,) and when Katy tried to order us a simple plate of cheeses as an appetizer, they brought out, in addition to the cheese, soft polenta with a porcini mushroom sauce and crispy Sardinian flatbread, a salad of something unrecognizable (but clearly vegetable) in olive oil with anchovies, and sliced artichokes in olive oil. I continued my Tour of Gnocchi with another plate of gnocchi al pomodoro, and they were the lightest, fluffiest gnocchi that had ever graced my palette, and they tasted quite as heavenly as they felt. The salads were flavorful in ways one can only dream a salad to be, and the tiramisù unearthly as well. We had been served by a young woman with only a limited vocabulary in English, and it was she who had taken our orders for caffè and dolce. The plates were already cleared when the cheery-Roberto Benigni-look-alike came back to offer us dessert. When we told him that we had already had dessert, he was quite disappointed, and returned with two bottles of liquor for us to sample, one a limoncello, and the other mirto (the traditional and uniquely Sardinian digestif, made from mirto berries.) Everyone but I tried the mirto, and found it quite to their liking. When we returned that night, it was after midnight. We fell into bed exhausted, and slept for many hours.

We got to breakfast Sunday morning just before it closed, and it was a good thing, because it was wonderful. The croissants were flaky and moist, the rolls just perfectly crunchy, the prosciutto and salami packed with flavor in their delicate slices, and the cappuccino very creamy and frothy. I did not sample the latter, but Leah describes it as, “Some of the best cappuccino I've every had.” Luca was at the stadium to watch the football match (AC Milano won the Champions League last year,) but his sister spoke very good English as well, and was incredibly nice. The crazy schedule over the previous few nights had taken its toll on me, however, for I came down with a cold Saturday, and by Sunday morning I was officially sick. She helped us with how to find a pharmacy, told us what to ask for, and gave us an idea of where to go to see some sights. We headed towards the Duomo, on the look for a pharmacy along the way. We eventually found the pharmacy, and I obtained some Italian cough syrup. What exactly it was I may never know, and I don't know that it helped me much anyway, but it was the best that we could do under the circumstances.

We stopped at a supermarket for water, tissues and other sundries, and then decided to head back to the hotel to change for the opera before heading to the Duomo. It was then that I realized that I had left my dress pants in Napoli, and would have to go to the opera dressed in khakis, despite the effort I had made when packing for the trip to be sure that I would be at least a little dressed up. Such is the nature of travel. Once everyone was dressed, we took the metropolitana to il Duomo.

Stepping out of the underground into Piazza del Duomo in a clammy drizzle, we entered the throng of tourists (or so it seemed at the time, before we encountered Venezia and Firenze,) and looked up, gazing upon the magnificent spired façade of the Duomo to reveal its monumental ... scaffolding. The entire front of



what might just be the most majestic church in Italy was covered in scaffolding for restoration. We took a couple photos, and later bought postcards to show us the view that we missed. Suitably unimpressed by the view outside, we went inside, skirting the African guys trying to get us to buy their braided bracelets. (“Free!” one shouted ... Yeah, and I’ll bet he had a bridge too.) Inside the cathedral was another matter entirely. It was Sunday, and a Lenten mass was in session, the priests clothed in their purple robes. As a result, we were even more limited as tourists, but the experience was phenomenal. The grand arched ceilings frame a dark and heavy space, but light filters through the heavy, damp air, diffused into an ethereal glow.



I watched the tourists and worshippers alike (and of course, some nuns, who probably fell into both categories,) making offerings to light candles. Something inside me urged me to partake in this tradition of a faith I no longer practice, nor even accept. It had been years since I lit a candle at church, but I gathered the requisite €0.80 for the offering from the others, and lit a long, thin candle, silently dedicating it to my three nonni who have died, and all the others who have gone with them. Though the Catholic faith is something I have long since given up, remembering the dead is universal. When I was through, there were tears in my eyes. Much was from the fact that I was exhausted and ill, but some small part of those tears lay in the symbolism of the simple act of lighting a candle.



We were running low on time, so we had to leave the inside of the cathedral not long after we had arrived, so that we would have time to take the lift to the top. I would much have like to explore the inside further, but we decided to use our limited time to survey the much-touted view. It cost us each €5, but that seemed far preferable to the €3.50 it cost to climb the stairs. Once at the top, we walked the turrets, marveling at the architecture and the view of Milano stretched below us. We saw the gilded Madonnina



perched high above the cathedral, and the gothic and often amusing gargoyles and reliefs which cover seemingly every square inch of the building. (A particular favorite of mine was the woman with the sagging boobs standing watch over an archway under which we passed.) Even in the rain, the view was indeed worth the fee. The detail in these buildings leaves one incredulous that anyone would have put forth the effort to create a masterpiece on such a massive scale. Each spire, each archway – indeed, almost every square inch of the marbled structure – held some unique surprise, extracted from the rock.

Alas, even on the roof we were short on time, and had to return to the piazza in order to catch the shuttle for the theatre. The grand Teatro alla Scala is another Milanese landmark – particularly to the opera lover, several of whom could be counted in our merry party. Alas, it succumbed to fire several years ago, and is still closed for renovation, so the company was performing at the Teatro degli Arcimboldi, a newly built theatre created specifically to house the company while restoration was underway. Unfortunately, the new theatre is not quite so convenient to the historic center as the original, and required vehicular transportation. The wonderful woman at the hotel had called the theatre to ask about the shuttle schedule for us, and armed with that information, we had planned our sightseeing. The Piazza del Duomo in Milano is a big space, however, and we couldn’t find the shuttle stop as the minutes ticked by. Finally, we headed for

the giant Tourist Information building, where we finally learned where to catch the shuttle, and were given a subway map and directions, just in case. We hurried over to the shuttle stop, only to discover that our information had gotten a bit muddled, and the last shuttle had already left. We rushed back to the metro, following the map and directions provided to us at the tourist information center. Exiting at the appropriate stop, we scrambled to figure out which direction we needed to go next, hopping on the tram that arrived minutes after we had and hoping for the best. We weren't even sure if our tickets were valid, and I doubted that they were, but we had no time to delve into that particular matter. No one came around checking tickets, thankfully, and we had managed to find the correct tram. This was confirmed by a helpful English-speaking Italian couple, who translated the response of the bus driver after I asked if it was going to the theatre. I was able to ask my question, but the response flew right over my head. It was their first journey to the new theatre as well, so they weren't entirely sure of the way themselves. When the tram deposited us at our destination, we followed them until we saw the building before us.

Slightly harried, we nevertheless arrived with time to spare, and took our seats for the performance. We were seeing Poulanc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*, a French opera about a group of nuns who get guillotined rather than give up their faith after the French Revolution. So, there we were in Italy, watching an opera in French, about a bunch of dying nuns. Luckily, the individual electronic libretto had an English translation in addition to the Italian and French. Thus, we were able to understand why the nuns all died. A bit dark, perhaps, it was still an enjoyable show, and both Leah and Katy were thrilled to be seeing a La Scala production. During the curtain calls, after seeing numerous flashbulbs futilely shooting off throughout the



theatre ("Why darling, what a lovely shot you got of the back of that man's head!") and not seeing any postings banning photography, I decided to sneak a few shots with our new digital camera (sans flash, of course.) I knew that I was probably not supposed to be doing it, but I figured, "What the hell." Ironically, it was only after the performance had ended and I was taking an innocuous snapshot of Leah, Katy and Sue, that the usher came over to yell at me, though the guy sitting next to me had earlier muttered something about "Americano" to his companion. Thus, our huge selection of photos from Italy includes a few snuck at a performance of the famed La Scala.

After the production, we were able to catch the shuttle bus back to Piazza del Duomo, avoiding the confusion of the tram. When we arrived, we headed off for the original Teatro alla Scala, and took a few more pictures of landmarks covered in scaffolding. Leah and Katy, partially fulfilling their life-long dreams of singing at La Scala, sang *in front of* La Scala, while Italians stared and I snapped some very bad photos. Stopping for postcards at a stand near the grand Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, we finished off our mini tour of Milano and hopped back on the metro to spare dress-shoe shod feet the walk back to the hotel. Once changed into more comfortable clothing, we headed off to Luca's special pizza place, where the hotel staff had made reservations for us. The pizzeria was called La Piccola Ischia, so named for an island in the Bay of Napoli. As such, it served an excellent - and quite Neapolitan, according to our resident expert Katy - pizza. Napoli is known as the birthplace of pizza, and the Neapolitan pizza is the standard by which all others are judged. The little place was packed, in a manner which would clearly violate any American fire code, but once we tasted the pizza, it was easy to understand why. Packed into a little space, we scarcely had room to breathe, but we had room to eat, and that was what mattered. After savoring our second wonderful dinner in Milano, we walked back to the hotel and fell into bed, quite exhausted.



We rose earlier the next morning, for we had a train to catch after our far too brief stay in Milano. It was Monday, March 8th, and in Italy it was Festa della Donna - International Women's Day (<http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/women/womday97.htm> or, for a slightly different perspective: <http://www.festadelladonna.it/>) The delightful woman at the desk (whose name may have been Paola, but I'm not quite positive,) told us about the day and the tradition of giving mimosas (the flowers, not the drinks, <http://www.mmdtkw.org/VMimosa.html>) to women. She went on to describe it as a day when women get together and "talk about women, women's things, and no men involved!"

At the pharmacy in Milano Centrale, I tried to find some cough drops, holding up a Ricola to explain what I wanted. The English-speaking pharmacist told me that they did not have Ricola, and did I want something similar? Something similar turned out to be a €6 package of essentially useless cough drops. (We later found the Ricola at nearly every cash register candy display we saw.) Venezia was next on the agenda, and the trip sufficiently short so that we decided to forgo the Eurostar upgrade and take the regular InterCity train; thus, there was no train god, but the trip was uneventful and our exhausted selves arrived in Venezia in one piece (or at least the same number of pieces in which we left.) Rolling over the causway from Mestre (the newer, mainland portion of Venezia,) and arriving at Stazione Santa Lucia was only the beginning, however, for we were staying on the large island of Lido di Venezia. Lido is off the beaten tourist path (particularly in March,) but significantly cheaper than any accommodations in the heart of Venezia. Getting to our hotel involved a trip on a vaporetto (the vaporetti are the Venetian water busses) to the main dock at Lido, followed by a bus ride down the main drag to our hotel. Thankfully, our reservations included good directions. Our first stop was the tourist information desk, where we purchased 3-day ACTV passes (so we wouldn't have to worry about bus tickets for the rest of our stay,) and a map. Hauling our backpacks onto the boat, we got lucky and found seats for the 40-minute ride to Lido. The land bus was a bit more interesting, since it was quite crowded and we really didn't have the foggiest idea which stop was which. We counted stops, and when we got off the bus, the newly purchased map was the key to getting up to our hotel, the picture postcard Villa Albertina (<http://www.villalbertina.com/>) The staff was not quite as effusive as at our previous hotel, but it wasn't a bad place. After checking in and dumping our bags, we walked back towards the vaporetto stop, having decided that the land bus just wasn't worth it – particularly since we needed to find lunch along the way.



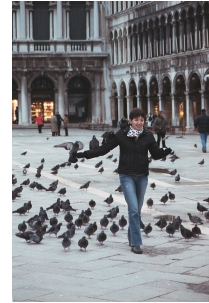
Unfortunately, we were looking for lunch right in the middle of riposa (siesta, Italian style,) and almost nothing was open. When we finally stumbled upon a little caffè bar and gelateria which was open, we staggered inside to see what they had to offer. The selection looked good enough, so we ordered a few different things and had a seat. The woman behind the counter was a joy, and though her English was no better than my Italian, we all had a lovely little conversation with her. As we hungrily consumed what turned out to be a truly delicious selection of lunch bites, she came over to our tables with four small bouquets of mimosas, one for each of us. We had all rushed by the vendors selling them in the train stations, never intending to have any for ourselves, so the gift was a delightful surprise. She told us the story behind the mimosas, much of which I was able to decipher on my own, with Katy filling in the blanks. Her story of a fire at an Italian factory was similar to the following description:

Italy commemorates its own tragedy early in this century. The image of mimosa trees blazing around an Italian factory recalls the many women who worked and died there. The trees are tall, full of clusters of hanging yellow flowers when in bloom, somehow sunny tears. (from <http://www.intac.com/~iwd/page0002.html>)



After our enchanting lunch, we took the Line 1 vaporetto to Piazza San Marco. Katy had to leave Venezia early to return to work, so we had decided to give her the chance to see some of the sights before she left. In order to see the view and the sights as we cruised to Venezia, we sat outside, cameras at the ready. All of the Italians stayed well inside the heated cabin, and undoubtedly wondered about the bizarre Americans who would sit outside on such a frigid day. By the time we got to the Grand Canal, some of our group had retreated inside as well, but I stuck it out, shooting film the whole time. Immediately upon stepping off the boat, we knew that we were smack in the middle of tourist territory, for the first thing we saw was a row of vendors carts' selling every imaginable trinket, including the expected Carnivale masks and jester's hats with bells on them. Milano had been chilly, but in Venezia we were freezing. I'd packed a hat on the trip, but had left it in Napoli, not considering how much colder it would be in the north. Leah had done the same with

her gloves. We all helped the vendor soak some American tourists as we bought hats, gloves, and in Sue's case, a warm and snuggly fleece that had been shamed into life as a souvenir with an embroidered image of a gondola and the words, "Venezia, Le Gondole." Tourists or not, we were much warmer. What I had thought would be a whirlwind tour of San Marco and Palazzo Ducale instead became a window shopping journey through the shops of San Marco. Since Katy wanted to shop, and she had to leave the next day, shopping it was. I took photos, practically got attacked by the pigeons in the piazza, and – as Leah unpleasantly discovered a bit later – got pooped on by one of said pigeons. Being the lovely partner she is, she cleaned it up for me with an official Trenitalia "refreshing towel." When the chill in the air got to be too much, we found a caffè bar for a break and some warm beverages. Though I didn't go for the caffè, even I partook, opting for the cioccolata caldo, topped with whipped cream, of course. The true chocolate lovers among you would certainly enjoy this drink, which is essentially liquid chocolate, a far cry from the hot chocolate we drink at home.



We returned to Lido for dinner, opting for the bus ride from the station to the hotel, but we were packed onto that bus like sardines, such that we were barely able to get off when our stop approached. We resolved henceforth to position ourselves closer to the doors, even if it meant less comfortable seats. After a stop at the hotel, we went looking for the restaurant suggested by the staff at the Villa Albertina. Said restaurant was at the far end of the island, and we decided to walk based upon the directions given to us by the woman at the hotel. The walk was much longer than expected, however, and there was no restaurant at the location she had drawn on the map. The road ended, and we had no clue where to turn next. Everyone was hungry, tired, and getting cranky, so no one seemed to want to bother finding the place. I decided to take matters into my own bad Italian and approached a man out to walk his dogs. "Scusi, dove Ristorante Murazzi?" He gave us directions, in English, but even that didn't seem to help. We all heard differently which was the best way to find the place, and first headed down a trail along the sea. In the dark, this overgrown trail proved to be a creepy and bad idea, so we headed back to the road at the first opportunity. We wandered around the residential area in circles for a while, and finally gave up altogether. Its location virtually guaranteed that it was not a tourist trap, and these particular tourists never did manage to locate it. We headed for a bus stop, only to discover that the line was no longer running for the night. We trudged back (I think we finally caught a different bus,) and headed into the main part of town near the dock. The few restaurants we found were expensive and unimpressive, but we needed to eat, so we picked one of the less expensive (by Venezia standards, at least,) and went in. We'd found our tourist trap after all. The food was unimpressive, and the service both lousy and rude. A random customer – in cahoots with the staff, we think – actually told Katy that she was eating her fish improperly. Two women at a table near us apparently thought as much of the place as we did, for on their way out they asked Leah and I if our pizzas were burnt as theirs had been.

One swindle at the train station, and one lousy tourist trap of a restaurant in Venezia – we were right on schedule for the standard Italian vacation.

We'd slept far too little since we arrived in Italy, and my cold had left me exhausted. Trains from Venezia to Napoli were limited, so Katy had been forced to take one leaving Santa Lucia at 6:30 a.m. on Wednesday morning. Between the bus on Lido and the long vaporetto ride to the train station, this meant she essentially had to be up in the middle of the night, and our difficulties finding dinner the previous night had put us all to bed rather late. We woke when Katy did, but then went back to sleep, rising only to go down to breakfast while it was still being served. It wasn't as impressive as the sumptuous spread at the Hotel Trentina - Leah and Sue quickly learned not to order the cappuccino, for which they even had to pay extra, - but we had our fill. We also thoroughly confused the management by suddenly being only three people instead of four; despite our explanation that Katy had to leave early, I don't think they ever quite got over it. I felt wretched, alas, and decided that the best thing for me was to rest so that I could stand a better chance of enjoying the rest of the trip. So, while Leah and Sue headed off to visit the famous glass-making island of Murano, I went back to bed. I slept for several hours, interrupted only by a call from the front desk, informing me that we were the only guests at the hotel and requiring that we tell them when we would be at breakfast the next morning so that he could arrange the staff, and a very brief visit by a very surprised chambermaid, who must have come to remove the extra bed that we no longer required. I finally rose around one, and was in the shower when Leah and Sue returned, leaving them stuck in the hallway wondering where

the heck I'd gone. They told me brief tales of their trip to Murano and showed me their purchases while I rushed to get ready, since they were quite hungry.

It was a beautiful, sunny day, the first of our trip, and a most welcome one. We walked towards the dock, hoping to stop again at the wonderful little place at which we had had lunch the previous day. To our great disappointment, however, on this day it too was closed for *riposa*. We continued walking, finding



nothing open for us to have our lunch until we reached the "downtown" area near the bus stops. It was with considerable trepidation that we entered the "Snack Bar," already frightened by the English name at what we might find. To our considerable relief, we found a staff who did not speak to us in condescending English, and food that was quite palatable. Thus sated, we took the next *vaporetto*, and this time stayed on board (inside the cabin, however) for a tour of the Canal Grande. From here we saw the magnificent buildings, the quaint residences and hotels, and the Japanese tourists paying a small fortune to be maneuvered amongst the motorboats by surly gondoliers. We stayed on the boat not until the end, but until we reached the famed Rialto bridge. Having gotten a good taste of Venezia from the Canal Grande, we were ready to wander the streets. It has been said that the true way to experience Venezia is to lose oneself in the maze of streets away from San Marco or the other

tourist hot spots, and we did just that, wandering from one shop to another (in Leah's case) and one photograph to another (in my own.)

Having started near the Rialto, we took the obligatory photographs there, but not before stopping for gelato. While I wouldn't go quite so far as to say that it is never too cold for gelato, it wouldn't be untrue to say that it's *almost* never too cold for gelato. With the spring sun warming the streets, we were doing quite well. Armed with the map



I'd purchased when we first arrived in Venezia, we wandered from campo to campo, stopping at shops along the way. When Leah and Sue's legs needed a break (for they had walked all morning while I was in bed,) they sat on a bench and watched the people go by, I wandered around Campo Santa Margherita shooting photos, watching the young boys engaged in one of the ubiquitous pick-up games of calcio, and locating the restaurants which had been recommended to us for dinner. Away from the throngs,



Venezia revealed its quiet charm, from the tiny streets and alleys to the placid canals, where people went about their daily business, coming home from a day at the office, hanging the laundry out to dry, or returning from the daily shopping with food for dinner.

It was still relatively early when we decided to call it a day and head back to Lido, and though I was a bit disappointed that we never had made it back to San Marco and the Doge's Palace, our tour of Venezia was ultimately satisfying. We returned in much the manner we had arrived, albeit slightly more directly, wandering from campo to campo, map in hand, trying to locate our position among the maze as we wove our way to the nearest *vaporetto* stop. Until I scanned and calibrated the map and downloaded the GPS tracks, I was not exactly sure where we wandered that afternoon. After I mapped the tracks, I still wasn't sure, since I got lousy GPS reception in the narrow Venetian streets. (This is known as an "urban canyon" in GPS lingo, and I hadn't used the external antenna which greatly improves the signal.) It was much fun anyway. Though I had managed to locate several of the recommended restaurants in the city, neither would open for several hours, so we decided it best to use that time to get back to



Lido, and eat there, allowing us to get to bed early and get a bit of sleep before catching our train to Firenze the next morning. We decided to stop at one of the several restaurants on the walk back to the hotel, discovering on the way that there was actually only one. Thankfully, it was quite good. The Tour of Gnocchi continued with gnocchi Bolognese - what inspired me to go for the meatiest of meat sauces, I'm not entirely sure; I left the meat and ate the pasta - as did Leah's Tour of Tiramisu, with a light and fluffy

concoction quite unlike any other we'd had on the trip.

Eating breakfast as early as possible the next morning still left us running to catch the boat we needed, and I was still quite sick and unable to do much running, particularly with a giant backpack on my back. By the time we got to the dock, I was gasping for breath and coughing up a storm, but the cough drops and my inhaler eventually got me back to (relative) normal. The morning rush hour crowd packed the empty boat as we first boarded, so we stood outside with our packs for the long trip back to the train station. When we boarded we'd been ordered to remove our backpacks, so we had to cram them into the space as well as our bodies. With each successive stop, a few people disembarked, but multitudes more boarded. It didn't seem possible to pack that many people onto a boat, but at every stop, they shoved a few more into the non-



woman arguing with the ticket guy. It seems that they had not purchased the required tickets for their extra bags (or perhaps had no tickets at all, it was hard to tell,) and were fined €30 each! After that incident, we had our tickets checked for the first time since we'd arrived in Italy, as they went through the boat verifying that everyone had tickets.