

“Viva Roma”

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On December 15, 2003, Ellen and I flew Delta from Atlanta directly to Rome, a smooth, fast and wonderful flight – a great way to go!

Hotel White near the Fontana di Trevi proved to be a disappointment: too crowded an area and too far from the Spanish Steps. We were grateful, however, to stay there overnight in time to receive a great surprise call. “Mrs. Morris, you can pick up your tickets for the Papal Audience tomorrow morning at the U.S. Embassy to the Vatican.” Wow! The tickets were obtained through “Crisis” magazine and my son-in-law, Cortes DeRussy.

On Wednesday morning we did two things – switched over to the Hotel Mozart near the Spanish Steps and sped to the Vatican for Pope John Paul’s special audience. Our tickets admitted us to the VIP section; we sat on the third row of this vast auditorium. Directly behind us were about 300 young, strong, healthy and handsome Italian soldiers shouting along with everyone else in the packed auditorium, “Viva, Papa! Viva Papa!” It made me sad, however, to hear them, see them, and know that soon they might be in Iraq involved in a war without the dimension of just war.

The Pope appeared to be more chipper than usual as he waved to the huge assemblage, a very special up-down wave with his left arm. A huge screen on one side of the auditorium tracked the whole event for all to have an optimal view. After the ceremony and a most nostalgic whirlwind tour of the Vatican ... everywhere I turned I saw Clif’s smiling face ... we went down the steps to find the “Tomb of St. Peter” once again ... and I imagined I heard well-wishers calling out, “Auguri, Dottore Morris, Auguri!”

We found a favorite trattoria in Vatican City, Il Pozzetto, where we had our first Spaghetti Bolognese.

Hotel Mozart proved to be a stroke of luck! Our room was large and spacious and ideally located on Via dei Greci between the Via del Corso and Via Babuino.

We found the Carriage Hotel where Clif and I stayed so often and where Ellen and I stayed just before her high school graduation from the Overseas

School of Rome. The Piazza di Spagna has a magical allure all its own and a simple walk looking in shop windows and at the beautiful Italian women with their Italian glamour must be what it's like on a movie set. At a bus stop near the American Express office we took the #17 to the Basilica of St. John Lateran. Its description deserves a tome of its own.

On Friday, December 19th, we awakened at 4:00 a.m. We went to Florence for a long day but not nearly long enough. The train ride was pleasant and brief. We attended Mass at the Duomo and revisited the Uffizi Gallery. It was, however, like seeing it for the first time!

Lunch in Florence was, also, delightful – Spaghetti Bolognese, again! The Ristorante il Cavallino is in the Piazza Signoria. Ellen visited the Palazzo Vecchio while I sat and studied Italian passersby! The day was freezing cold and the square was rather empty. We took a 4:00 train back to Rome and then a metro to Piazza di Spagna and back to the Mozart where we slept until 11:30 the next morning!

After colazione we visited the Church of Sts. Ambrose and Charles on Via del Corso. We then experienced a most fortuitous event: we met an adorable young woman at American Express. Brankica Lukac from Croatia became our friend and helped us more than once. She gave us valuable advice and offered one of the American Express “golf carts” (with driver) for a spin all the way from Piazza di Spagna along Via Babuino to the Piazza del Popolo! And on to Piazza Venezia as people stared at us sitting on the back of this two-passenger motorized cart! What a way to go! Our lovely driver dropped us off near St. Mark's Basilica.

Then our search “among the ruins” truly began! On Via di Teatro Marcello near the Monument to Victor Emmanuel II we circled on foot up and down, round and round, looking for the Sala Baldini on Piazza Campitelli where a renowned pianist, Enrico Camerini, was giving a concert of Beethoven sonatas. Around the ruins and narrow, cobblestone streets we searched for the salon where the concert was held. Finally, we found it and arrived exactly in time for the very beginning of the concert. The concert hall was attached to the Church of Santa Maria in Portico. Camerini gave a truly virtuosic performance. Never before had I seen the treble hand play the bass and the bass hand play the treble! Formidable!

After the concert we had dinner at an elegant place nearby, the Ristorante Vecchia Roma. We declined an offer by the owner to get us a cab, never dreaming that Rome was witnessing a cab/bus/metro strike that very night! It was impossible to get a taxi. We walked at least a mile back to the Hotel Mozart. The walk was easy for Ellen but difficult for me. But I must admit that seeing and hearing Camerini's brilliant rendition of Beethoven countered any negativity of my tired feet!

The railway station in Rome is mammoth and quite efficient. Reserved seats insure good ones, and early on the morning of December 26th we left Rome for Assisi. We took a cab from the station in Assisi to the pinnacle of the town and soon registered at the Hotel San Francesco, a stone's throw from the Basilica of St. Francis. We were in the nick of time to make the evening Mass in the grotto – surrounded by Cimabues.

The walk down the hill for supper at the Palota Ristorante near Piazza Comune was easy, but the walk back up the hill after supper was a true labor of Sisyphus. Next morning Friar John (we'd met him the night before) unturned every stone for Ellen as he gave her a tour of the entire Basilica of St. Francis, upper and lower churches. The Franciscan priest was from Zambia.

Next on our agenda was Siena! We waited for our bus in a slight but cold rain. At first we were the only two passengers going to Siena and sat right up front next to our communicative driver. We rode along the lovely, scenic highway for about two hours. We reached Siena. When the driver stopped, he opened the bus door, pointed to an "escalator station" across the road and said good-bye. It seemed we were nowhere. Neither of us had ever entered Siena this way!

The spirit of Siena's Saint Catherine urged us on – up one escalator after another (perhaps five or six!) until we reached the summit which turned out to be quite close to the main square, Piazza del Campo. On this cold, rainy, wintry night luck was with us. Hotel da Toscana, a well-located, elegant, small hotel, was truly a haven for weary travelers. An added bonus was the small, family-owned ristorante (Taverna di Cecco) right across the street. The young owner, Carlo Pace, and the virtuoso in the kitchen (his grandmother) came out to meet us. Our visit to Siena was short but all-encompassing. We made fast tracks. Mass at San Domenico (where lies a relic of St. Catherine), a Duccio exhibit, visits to the Duomo and Baptistery.

A special memory, and indelible, is our visit to the home of St. Catherine. There it was our privilege to meet a lovely Hermit Sister from Pretoria, South Africa, who gave us illuminating information on the life of St. Catherine. She was the essence of sweetness and gentleness. Both of us realized that meeting this special person was indeed God's gift to us.

Sunday, December 21, 2003 was a memorable day. We attended a 10:30 Mass at St. Peter's, Vaticano. It was truly memory-evoking to be in St. Peter's once again. I looked back in time to 1972 when my beloved Clif and I were married. Ellen "stood" for him ... and there we were again after 31 years. Joy and tears -- tears and joy -- dominated my thoughts, and yet I knew Clif would prefer joy!

It seems that in Rome the art of painting dominates the senses! We were enchanted with Caravaggio this trip, with his boldness and with his strength. We saw "St. Matthew and the Angel," "The Calling of St. Matthew," and "The Martyrdom of St. Matthew" at San Luigi dei Francesi. Boldly stunning, or stunningly bold! And we saw others at Santa Maria del Popolo and among the works at the Galleria Doria-Pamphili and the Galleria Borghese (reservations necessary).

Piazza Navona was, as usual, bustling. It was Christmas time and the huge piazza had a carnival air. The four Bernini statues in the "Fountain of the Rivers" are awesome, representing the Danube, Ganges, Nile and Plate. Near the Church of St. Agnese in Agone we chanced upon a museum (formerly cloisters), the Chiostro del Bramante, which proved to be a treasure trove. A fine art exhibit featured the Catalan artist, Antoni Gaudi. The collection included his famous drawing rendition of the "Sagrada Famillia," the still unfinished Cathedral in Seville. Years ago I saw it there. Seeing his authentic plan on paper -- the plan which was never completed -- and remembering the magnificent unfinished structure was a poignant juncture.

Culinary experiences in Rome are always impressive, but Christmas Eve lunch at the Hassler-Medici Rooftop Room and Christmas Day lunch at L'eau Vive seemed to enter the realm of the spiritual. Memories of Clif enjoying these two wonderful places decades ago intersected with the reality of our Christmas 2003. In every turn, in every view I saw Clif and felt his presence.

Our dinner party the night before our wedding day in 1972 was unique. The restaurant known as L'eau Vive (Living Waters) is owned and operated by a group of women who are committed to feeding the hungry of the world. Officially they are called "Missionary Workers of Mary Immaculate of L'eau Vive." With restaurants in Europe, Asia, Africa and South America, the Sisters not only cook and serve, but also visit and pray with their guests. On this Christmas Eve in Rome various Sisters dressed in their native garb danced among the diners as they performed the Nativity scene. Ellen and I were grateful to be back at L'eau Vive once again to share yet another truly precious occasion.

Our last evening in Rome we collected souvenirs in the Vatican area. Then we walked in the cold, wet night to see St. Peter's Basilica gorgeously illuminated and to pay a visit to the magnificent crèche in the middle of Piazza San Pietro. The figures were life-size and commanding; indeed, the whole scene was transporting. We felt a transcendental oneness with the shepherds and Magi, everyone standing in adoration of the Baby Jesus.

The next morning a strange thing happened on the way to the airport. The refrain "Arriverderci, Roma" played in my head and never stopped.