

SCOTLAND, SWITZERLAND & ITALY

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ITALY

ART, ARCHITECTURE, And ARCHETYPAL FOOD

Italy was chosen as the last section of our Europe 2024 trip because it wasn't France. France was the first choice but when I looked at the dates and discovered our exit from Switzerland coincided with the middle of the Olympic Games the decision was made. We didn't want to be around any of that hassle. So Italy was made as the alternate choice. Neither of us had been there before. We honed in on a self-guided foodie journey but Andrew ended up being not all that impressed. Forty years ago someone had made the comment to me that Lygon Street in Melbourne has better Italian food than Italy. I think they may have been right. Whilst Lygon Street is no longer dominated by Italian restaurants, and we did try some of the 'local specialities,' we found that not everything was to our taste, or indeed, any better than what we can get at home.

Of course it didn't help that we were travelling in August when not only are the days extremely hot (and you don't feel like eating) but half the recommended restaurants were closed for the holidays. August is traditionally the month that 'everyone' goes on holiday! This may have explained why lots of businesses that looked closed down, may have only been shut whilst their owners were taking annual leave.

Italy is renown for architecture and art and renaissance thinking (although the christian cult put paid to a lot of that and probably stifled a lot of innovation). Some buildings are magnificent, some are overly gaudy, and some have the most delicate artworks inside. We made our way into several 'churches' some on official tours, and some we just walked in off the street - the artwork was beautiful, even if we didn't agree with the subject. Not that churches were the only places to see art - you could find it on the outside of buildings and on the ceilings of public porticos.

From a culinary perspective we tried 'famous dishes' that weren't so delicious, local specialities, some of which can be found in international supermarkets, and drank local wine - some of which has a very specific locality distribution, and some of which wasn't all that great (not to our palate, anyway).

We started our Italy experience by training it into Milan. We ended it by flying out of Florence. We did not visit the typical tourist locations of Rome, Naples, Mount Vesuvius or Pompey. Maybe next time.

To Italy

St Moritz, Switzerland to Milan, Italy

4th August 2024. Andrew's knees weren't wonderful after yesterday's fall so he decided to nurture them this morning: That is, he wasn't going for a walk. I wandered aimlessly after breakfast for a while. Had I thought about it earlier, I could have taken the cable car up to the closest peak and had a look about for an hour or so: it was the only one of the three mountain choices offered to us on arrival that we hadn't investigated.

Instead I visited St Moritz's version of a leaning tower (the remnants of a church whose walls have been mostly demolished) and noted one of the headstones placed inside the outer remnants of the original structure was for a lass from Melbourne Australia (she died in 1887 (she must have been important, it was a large headstone)).

I popped out briefly for a second time when the pharmacy opened to get some more ibuprofen. Andrew's muscles were demanding it and we had run out of the heavy-duty stuff I had bought in Fort William.

Check out at this hotel is a generous 1200. At checkout we got a lift down the hill via the hotel 'taxi.' (A very fancy limousine van). We still had over an hour to wait until we caught our train, so we bought some food at the cafe and waited, watching over Lake St Moritz.

The Bernina Express came in around 1230 and I asked how long it would be until we could board. I was told around 15 to 20 minutes. I got back to Andrew and suggested that we move up to platform to be ready to get on. When I turned around again the train was gone! What! There was however no need to panic; the train was only splitting and rearranging its carriages, so it was soon back.

For a while we were the only people on our carriage. And then, just before the train left a young American family got on: two children under 6 (at a guess). And they sat opposite us! Great. They were louder than preferred, and with spluttering noses, they shouldn't have been on the train. The situation was not conducive to a completely relaxing trip. As there was no one else on the carriage they could have moved anywhere...and they did move seats...eventually..with only 12 miles to go!

When we got to Tirano, Italy, according to the itinerary we had been given, we had two and a half hours to wait for our ongoing transport (the bus had replaced a train to Colico), so we stopped for a bite to eat and a drink. We were now in Italy. Euros were needed here - not Swiss Francs.

After a late lunch (or a really early dinner), we made our way under the road and emerged at the bus stop just as one bus to Colico was about to leave. The driver said it didn't matter that our itinerary suggested a bus two hours later, we could get on this one.

When we got to Colico there was general confusion as to which platform we were required to be on. Eventually we followed the crowds onto platform 2 & 3. It didn't help that a train came into the half platform in between platform 2 and platform 3. The expected Milan Central train was late so when the

first train to arrive had 'Milan' listed (even if the adjunct information didn't make sense), most of those standing on the platform got on. We got on too (Milan is Milan we figured) but then turned around and suddenly there was a train on the other platform. This time Milan Cle was on the info board. This was the expected train. There was an exodus on mass from one train into the other. We managed to find room for our luggage, as well as a seat, which was fortunate as the train got closer to Milan it took on more people. It was Sunday and people were travelling back from their weekend or day excursions.

I had a window seat on the east side of the train and the vista showed near and far mountainous terrain and villages. On the west side of the train for a while was Lake Como but we didn't get a view. At each station the train picked up more and more people coming back from their weekends away. It was like a packed peak hour train in the end. From the bus (and train) the outer hamlets had many abandoned and falling down buildings. From the train Milano's outer suburbs looked like slums. Again with obviously abandoned and graffitied dwellings. It was such a sad sight and not a conducive introduction to a new city.

Given it had been a long day, and there was a lot of people around I didn't stop to take a photo but Milan Central is a massive station. The commercial part of the building is huge, somewhat elaborate, and ostentatious...then again when railroads were first being built around the world, train stations often were elaborate and ostentatious; showing the wealth of a brave new era.

Fortunately the hotel we had been booked into was across the carpark from the station and we signed into the hotel reception at 2030. Despite getting on a substituted bus two hours before scheduled, we only got to the hotel one hour before expected. Timetables aren't as efficient as they have been; we ain't in Switzerland now Dorothy!

The room was small. The bed looked comfortable. But the first priority was a cuppa. The kettle took ages to boil!

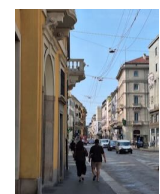
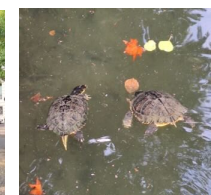
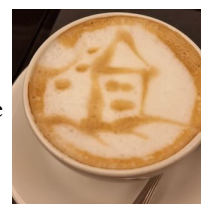
Milano

Ticking off the boxes

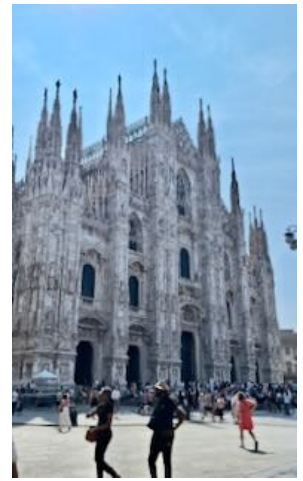
5th August 2024. I had proposed a walk, with stops, given Andrew's healing legs, to include the Duomo, Sforza Palace and Sempione Park...probably the major tourist ticking spots in Milan. Given the proposed expected temperature (and because it was Monday and most museums are usually closed) Andrew suggested the hop-on hop-off bus may be an option instead. In the end, after a confused discussion, we reverted to Plan A, and walked. After the aborted visit to the Visitors Centre at Milan Central we headed to Giardini Indro Montanelli (park), where, after noting the location of the Planetarium and the Natural History Museum, and a rest in the shade, we watched at the lake birds, tortoises and fish. We then wandered down through town, past historic buildings with interps boards (and unusually a museum that was actually open...but which was closed on Tuesdays), and quite a few famous buildings which were scaffolded and sheeted off for maintenance (including the Scala Theatre). We headed through the Emmanuell shopping plaza into Duomo Piazza to 'admire' the Duomo - from a distance. The building is quite impressive but the architecture was a bit much for Andrew, even from the other end of the piazza. Our lunch was had at a cafe with a partial view to the Duomo (sort of...for Andrew it was through not only a road and cars but a fan as well), before we wandered streets lined with interesting buildings to the Sfoza (walking through the courtyards and into Sempione Park), enjoyed a gelato in the park grounds, and wandering past the aquarium (the only building of its style left after the 1906 World Exposition). The final touristy activity was to have a cool drink in the Bohemian Quarter of Brera, before getting back to our hotel a bit after 1500 - to find we had been given an upgraded room.

The room we had been given yesterday evening upon arrival was quite small, and had no view (well, a view to the escape ladder). It did however have a comfortable bed...of course we were using our own pillows but the actual bed I think is the most comfortable I have had on this entire trip. This morning Andrew had pulled a cord in the bathroom thinking it might turn the fan on. It didn't. What it actually was however was the cord to call for help in an emergency. When we went out we told reception not to worry about it...we were fine. But they did worry about it.. as by pulling a cord they were supposed to see a light come up on their computer screen at reception. It didn't come up so when we got

Cappuccino
made for me at
breakfast. Where
are the chocolate
sprinkles?



back, as I was preparing for a cold shower, we got a phone call informing us that as the system wasn't working in our room, they would be happier swapping us to another room. So we had to pack up again, and we were moved from the first floor to the eighth floor. The room is bigger, and at least has a view, albeit across to other buildings...but we can at least see trees!



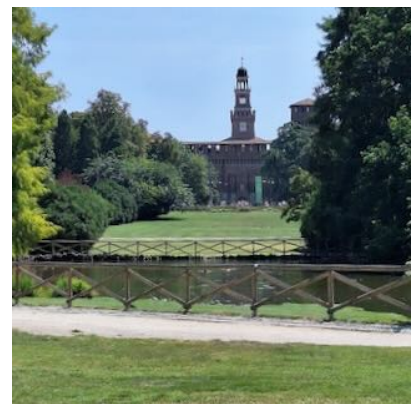
Animals....four dachshunds, one grey squirrel (in the grounds of the aquarium), accompanied dogs

Birds. Ducks, moorhen, coot, rock pigeons, blackbird, parrots (not identified but possibly the invasive African parakeets, or escaped pets), small unidentified birds near the lake in first park, hooded crows.

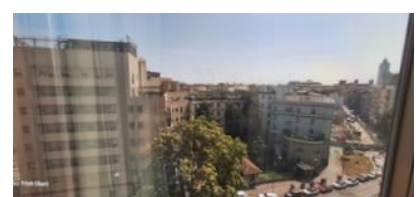
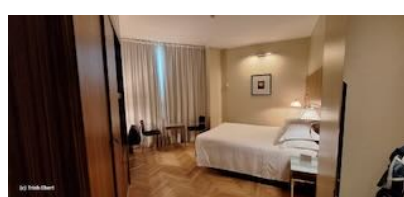




Sforza



The Aquarium

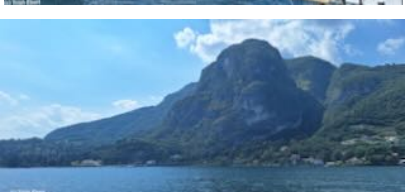
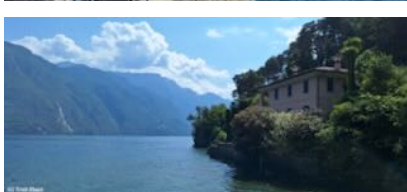
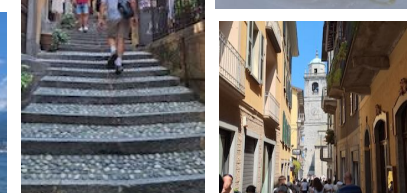
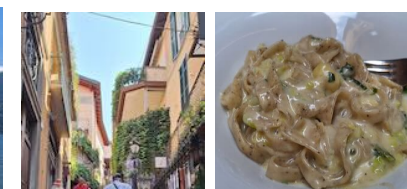


Lake Como

6th August 2024. Today's excursion involved a long bus ride. The destination was Lake Como. The tour given in both English and Spanish became difficult to understand and in the end we gave up trying to listen to the guide. I mean, who cares which house George Clooney owns, or which mansion was used in a recent television series (or was it a movie)? Or which establishment Barak Obama stayed at in whatever year it was. It was almost a full bus of 37 and ages were mixed. Most people preferred English. The Spanish was required for two people only and became a drag. We suspected the tour guide wasn't Italian, but Spanish. Which meant English was her second, possibly third language, and throughout the day the English got less understandable as time went on.

In the end all we needed to know was the meeting time after being dispersed at Bellagio -where the idea was that after lunch one would walk around the quaint hillside town with its long staircases and thin alleys. Unfortunately the temperature of the day was in the mid thirties and apart from walking to the point we didn't have the energy to walk up and down stairs in the heat.

By the time we got to Como, Andrew had had enough. There are few public toilets, if any, at the small Italian cities



and the idea is you spread your money around and instead of paying for a toilet stop, you patronise a bar or restaurant instead, and then you can use the facilities on premises.

In Como Andrew diverted from the group to head to a cafe for a toilet stop and a drink. I followed the group to the corner between the Lake and the local duomo. Instead of looking at the church I headed back to Andrew thinking we could have a drink and then have a look at the shore. That didn't happen. I got back to Andrew and his drink order hadn't been taken. I went to the toilet and when I got back still the drink order hadn't been taken. After 10 minutes of no service, even after I caught the eye of one waiter, we moved on. We found a bar around the corner, the waiters not doing much, and when they asked, I said we are looking for somewhere to have a drink. Can you help us. Of course they could. Their service was much better. We never did get to the waters edge before having to return to the bus, but the cool refreshing drink at 1730 at 33 degrees was well appreciated - and overlooked by a statue of Alessandro Volte.

We had left our hotel room at 0710. We were back in our hotel room at 1910.

Birds. Sparrow, swallow, martin, cormorant, rock pigeon, hooded crow, duck (sp?)



National History Museum

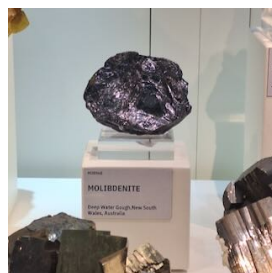
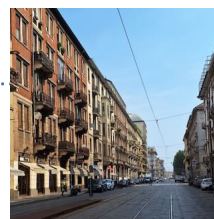
7th August 2024. It was due to be another very hot day so the consensus was to spend it inside. After a sleep in and a late breakfast we left the hotel at 1045. We walked to the Natural History Museum via the backstreets - which consisted of 'mostly consistent, pleasant, architecture' where bottom units had largely been converted to shops but sadly most of these had metal roller doors down for protection. Two cars looked like they had been left for some time and were covered in graffiti.

The website for the museum suggests booking tickets on line with a statement that if you don't you won't be guaranteed to get in on Saturdays Sundays and public holidays..which I suspect are the busiest days of patronage. I wasn't expecting lines quite like those we had had at the British Museum, but we found no line at all. There was only one Spanish family of three in front of us at the ticket booth.

The first gallery (geology and mineralogy) had some of the nicest crystals I have seen (and included a sample of Molybdenite from NSW). It was very old school in its presentation but delightfully simple with great graphics. I mucked through the first paragraph with Andrew but he wasn't in the mind to wait for my very slow Italian interpretation so went ahead. I translated much of what I could but not every panel...had I done so I would have been there all day. I do admit to taking photographs of some interp panels to translate later.

The galleries in the museum were of different ages and styles, and none of it was ultra modern...but it didn't need to be. This is a museum, not a thesis, and basic information was covered clearly. I even learnt of a coral atoll in the Indian Ocean that I didn't know existed... and it has gigantic tortoises!

There was no way we were going to be able to concentrate on each display in this building (particularly given the possibility of an afternoon activity) so I glossed over the



shells, insects and a lot of the anthropology stuff...although the bits I did look at regarding the latter were fascinating

Two hours in this museum 'had finished' Andrew 'off' (his words) so the idea of visiting the Leonardo Da Vinci Science and Technology Museum was scrapped. So the next plan, after a rest in the shade (which we took before walking around the pond behind the Museum Of Modern Art), and then a walk past the pond in the public park we had investigated two days ago, was to head back to room via the Central Railway Station. There were two reasons for this: firstly to change the remaining Swiss Francs cash to Euros. And secondly get to a supermarket which we thought was there, and get some food for lunch. The first activity was easy, although we only saw one exchange shop. I found it funny that to exchange the cash I had to present my passport and sign disclaimers (government rules apparently...I guess for money laundering purposes) but to travel into Italy from Switzerland the other day there was no such presentation needed (although when the agent booked the tickets they may have presented the info (but you can do the Bernina Express line as a return day trip so who knows what the rules are).

The second reason we headed to the Milano Centrale didn't work. We were looking to find supermarkets to pick up items for lunch. We were directed to two different supermarket outlets, in two different directions, by two different people. And couldn't find either of them (internally the station has at least three levels). By this time it was after 1500 and Andrew in particular was getting hungry (and bordering on grumpy). So instead



of persisting in our search we grabbed the first non American Cafe we could see that had tables. We each went separately to the counter. And both of us had issues although I should have picked up on the language of one poor girl immediately...she was using words I had learned months ago (and she clearly didn't know, or was not willing to try English). Eventually I was sorted, and Andrew then tried his luck. He came back to table with food that wasn't his first preference but got himself a beer to compensate.

Using the cafe wifi I tried looking for the mythical supermarkets and found they were just that...mythical. I did however find an Aldi not too far away if we wanted to get something for dinner later.

We got back to the room at 1550, turned the air conditioner up (temperature outside if anywhere near predicted was low 30's), organised some more instant coffee, and got ready to read notes for the next part of our trip. A thunderstorm rolled over Milan around 2100.

Birds..not including the 100 species stuffed ones in the museum (included Australian Species). Ducks, coots, moorhens, pigeons, sparrows.



Milan Central Station



Milano to Parma

8th August 2024. The alarm went off at 0630 and the first thing I did was confirm check-in of our train tickets for today's travel. Like the trip from Tirano two days ago, the booking details had changed. Where two days ago I suspect it was due to rail damage and maintenance, this time I suspect we were put on a cheaper train than originally stated. The itinerary had us on an 1105 train for an 1152 arrival. The tickets were for an 1120 train with a 1258 arrival! That had implications for lunch at the other end as recommended restaurants had closing times and we had to get there.

We got to the station early, of course, and it took ages for the platform to come up for our service. As we got to the closest gate to the platforms I couldn't see the platform numbers. The Gate stated Gate E. Does this get us through to where we want to be? I asked an attendant in Italian if she spoke English. When she replied 'no' I had nowhere to go! The 6 foot high gates looked industrial and were opaque. There was no obvious way to hand the phone back to Andrew here once I was through (I had downloaded the checked in tickets onto my phone). So I got Andrew to take a screenshot of his ticket hoping the quality would work. Fortunately a different attendant let us through anyway. He was letting people through with large luggage and trolleys and I said I had a screen shot. He waved me through. I indicated Andrew was same. I have no idea whether he understood what I said.

Once we were settled we heard a '10 minute' alarm with the announcement (in English) of 'persons not wanting to leave, please get off now.'

There was of course also the announcement of 'If you have purchased a regional ticket please check in before your journey.' This announcement of course was superfluous - the train was already on its way.

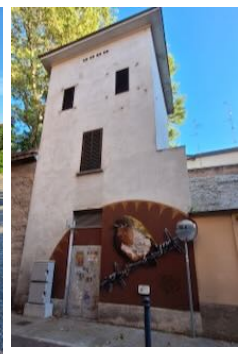




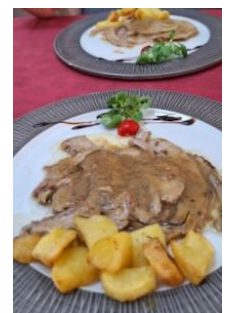
The train was due to leave at 1120. It left the station at 1124. It made up time and we got to Parma on time. We had lunch at a local (recommended) restaurant at 1320. After this we checked in (to an upgraded room considered even a 'tad pink' by the receptionist), rested for a few hours and then went exploring just before 1800; the bell at the local church went off as we were walking away from it.

We had considered drinks and then paninis for dinner but after checking out the stagnant river (although there were ducks and herons that were willing to occupy it) we ended up at a local restaurant (one on the recommended list) just around the corner from our accommodation. We were back in the room just before 2100.

Two dachshunds spotted. Plenty of other dogs. And plenty of people on bikes. The streets were not too busy but the piazzas were busy gathering areas.



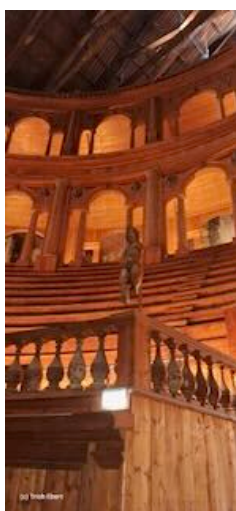
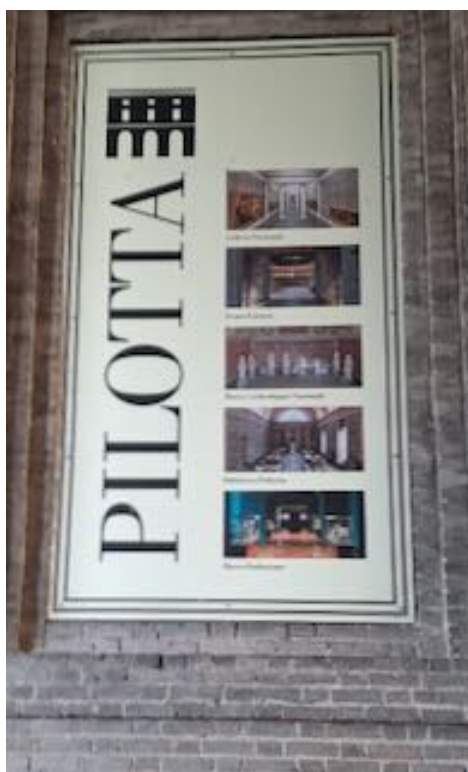
Dinner: Salads or vegetables seem to be an added extra!



Cheese and Ham tour

9th August 2024. We had been booked today on a cheese and ham tour- a tour designed to highlight two of the prized food exports from the local Region. The voucher indicated we would be picked up at 0830. The driver was only a few minutes late. Then we found ourselves outside a hotel near the station. Waiting. And waiting. The next thing we know was that our driver addressed us apologetically, stating that when they got their bookings they didn't realise two groups were together and could we please move to the other vehicle. We weren't quite sure how to take this but we moved over to the other vehicle in the tour and we were placed in the front - next to the driver. In the back were a north American family - with a crying child. Great! In the end the parents of said child (poor little tyke but she was uncomfortably noisy) were great value. And the driver/guide we ended up with was fantastic. Because of the number of people taking the tour (the majority of whom came in from Bologna via train and had been required to catch a train service at 0700) the big group (over three vehicles) ended up at different locations for each of the demonstrations. Our group had two of the vehicles and the other vehicle included an Aussie from Melbourne. He was fun to chat to. Our driver, L, whilst having Italian heritage and now living locally, actually grew up in Switzerland. This, I think, helped shape his attitude to quite a few things we bantered about in the front seat. He was terrific, and whilst we were a bit grumpy about the disorganisation of the tour and having to move vehicles, we definitely ended up in the right place!





In the afternoon we headed across to the Pilotta, an extravagant building designed for one of Parma's original bourgeois and the home of the Farnese Theatre. The Theatre is actually raised off the ground; the walkway that joins the two main wings of the building. After its construction apparently it was rarely used. One wing of the large building was dedicated to an archaeological museum. The layout was old school with regard to items and numbers and little interps was provided, but some glass cabinets had information typed in black letters on clear tape and stuck to the outside of them. There is a good idea in there somewhere - certainly you can change the information quickly as you just have to peel the old Info off. And it is easy to make a couple of copies of the info in different languages and put them on different sides of the cases. But..... most of the stickers were placed at the top of the cabinets and for some, required a crook neck to see (if indeed you were tall enough - I wasn't), that is if you didn't first get the light from the ceiling shining through the top of the display case into your eyes.



Parma to Modena

10th August 2024. I was still having trouble with my phone so I used Andrew's phone to check-in to our train. Surprisingly (or am I being too harsh) the train left on time. Other scheduled services from Parma had delays of 5, 10 and 50 minutes!

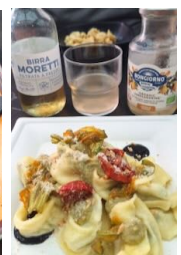
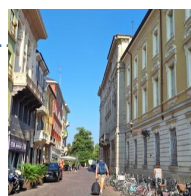
Of course it didn't arrive at Modena on time, the arrival time being a moving feast according to the electronic screen by the door. It did however arrive within 5 minutes of its original schedule.

Perhaps we could have got a seat with a window view on the train, as unlike several trains which had gone through Parma, there seemed to be minimal passengers on this service. However we took the seats just inside the door that faced the opposite side of the train. As we sat opposite each other we both had an oblique (different) view out the window of the adjacent group of four seats.

The train left at 1027. It arrived at Modena at 1100. The description of the route to our hotel by foot was a bit confusing at first but we got there, diverting through the park on the map rather than travelling the streets. We got some shade in the park but we also got an arm workout because we had to pull our struggling suitcase wheels through a Lilydale-topping-like surface.

We arrived at the hotel at around 1130. Of course our room wasn't ready so we left our bags in the foyer and headed off to the market. Apparently some of the delis here offer tastings of cheese and balsamic vinegar here, but Andrew wanted something more substantial. After not being able to find a recommended pasta place we ended back in the market at cucina of basalmic. They offer tasting plates but we both had pasta dishes with balsamic as a highlight instead. Andrew got a bottle brought to the table for his preferred use. My dish had a thick sticky derivative in the corner of the plate. A buttery vanillery ice-cream with a couple of drops of 25 year old balsamic didn't do much for Andrew but I thought the highlights delicious...just not enough of it!

From lunch we wandered via the Info Centre to the Modena Ferrari Museum. The fact we could prove we came by train got us a 50 pc discount. The current exhibition (not sure if it is permanent) in the new exhibition space is full of one-off cars...although in theory, all Ferraris are one-offs. Each car is on a platform with a note not to touch...the platforms are alarmed! At what I assume is a regular interval (we only saw it once) the





lights are dimmed in the exhibition space and there is a simple audio visual presentation on Enzo Ferrari's life projected onto a huge screen above the exhibited cars.

The heat was oppressive when we emerged back outside. After going through the second exhibition space...a refurbished building where Enzo grew up, we headed back to the hotel.

We found ourselves in the delightfully cold air-conditioning of the hotel room at 1515. I had to open the shutters to get a view from our room but I shut them again. The back street view wasn't all that interesting and was certainly not appealing with the sun still at an angle to shine in the windows. A light in the room would have to do for some time.

We saw a couple of pigeons today but no other birdlife seemed to be prepared to frolic in the heat. The insects however provided a monotonic constant background noise...just as they do in the hot Aussie bush.

For dinner we ended up at a local food (not much atmosphere) restaurant consuming a dish of short fat spaghetti with mince and peas (Turkey mince maybe... it had an unusual taste). For desert Andrew stuck with Tiramisu. I went for the restaurant version of trifle...entitled Zuppa Inglese (English Soup).

Two dachshunds...one very overweight individual in Parma. And a normal sized pooch in Modena.

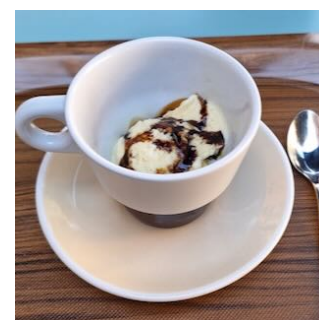
Modena. City Walk

11th August 2024. Andrew had suggested breakfast between 0700 and 0730 but he didn't get out of bed until after 0800, and he got out slightly grumpy.

Breakfast was in the garden area out the back and Andrew discovered he didn't have the waiting skills balancing his black coffee between the food area inside and the table outside (he fills it up to maximum, there was no slosh room). The black coffee was self serve. My 'decaf cap' had to be made by staff - and was delivered, so I suffered no such frustration. I tempted fate and tried the tart and the black cake on the table near the bread and croissants. This region is apparently known for its sour cherry tart and its black cake. Andrew managed a more traditional European (but not Italian) breakfast of bread and sliced meat and cheese. I did follow the cake up with yoghurt and kiwi fruit so there was some semblance of healthy stuff in there.

We rested for a short while in the air-conditioning before heading out into the heat. The predicted top temp was 36 deg C today according to meteoblue.com (windy.com had it a lot less but I suspect it was wrong).

After walking the streets, learning a bit of history (but not going into the Duomo because it is Sunday and there was a session in progress), and enjoying an ice-cream (I tried with balsamic vinegar again...this establishment was more generous with the balsamic than yesterday but I suspect the



quality of the vinegar wasn't as good), we made it back to base around 1130.

Trying to follow the restaurant suggestions on our travel information in August doesn't necessarily work...it is so hot you don't really want to go out for dinner, half the restaurants are closed because most people take holidays in August, and to add to tonight's issues, some that aren't on holidays aren't normally open on Sundays! We couldn't access any recommended restaurants today so we had to go looking. I settled on two options: both had regional dishes (according to their websites) and both had

English menus on-line. The first and closest option was closed for their holidays...a situation not noted on their website. The second option was an unassuming little restaurant in a narrow lane with white linen service, a gracious host and hostess (the host's English was excellent), and the menu items were interesting. We were back in our room at 2115.

One dachshund spotted - whilst we were doing what the locals do and having a refreshing afternoon drink.

Rock doves. Heard craven esk



I asked a bar maid to surprise me. I have no idea what was in this!

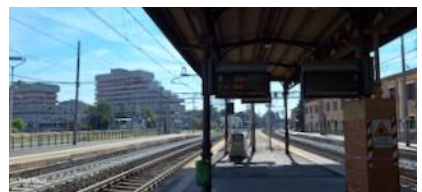


Moderna to Bologna.

12th August 2024. Surprisingly (or am I being too harsh again) our train left on time. It got to the next station late and then reached Bologna Central 5 minutes early!. There were a large amount of taxis at the rank. As we clearly wanted a taxi (I walked up to the back of the car at the front of the row to discover it had occupants) we were game for one and all. Taxis were three layers thick. We had hails from layer two and three. Mr three had pipped two to the post by half a second, and was more colourful (had a purpley/pinkish top). The usual 'buongiorno's' were exchanged. And then, in my basic language I stated....'Il mio italiano non è bene, ma vorriamo andare a hotel Porta San Momolo.' I have no idea if the sentence made sense to the driver (or indeed if it was correct) but he confirmed the name of the hotel and we were off. 'Ahh air-conditioning,' I had said getting into the taxi. 'It's obligatory,' he had replied in English. He proceeded to conduct the rest of the conversation during the journey to the hotel in English. Which was very useful; we briefly got our own tour guide with a bit of local history. As the driver is usually on holidays in the mountains in August, even he found it hot.

After checking into our room (where the hotel thought there was only going to be one occupant so had a rush to give us extra towels)...we were surprised it was ready, we had a short break before heading off for lunch.

Using the notes I chose to patronise a small shop with tigelle sandwiches (from one of many shops supplying these in the old section of town), an

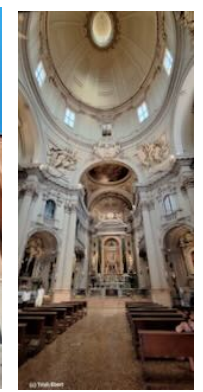
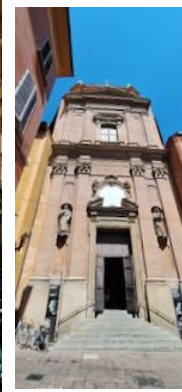


establishment not unlike the little enterprises in the back lanes of Melbourne. They have a menu of options where you get four of a type for a certain price. You can buy them individually too, and in hindsight I should have gone this way as four were too many. I also managed to order these in Italian so was feeling pretty good with myself although the lass taking the orders had perfect English.

After lunch we went for a short stroll around the Quadrilatero (literally, missing a lot of the internal streets), admired the internals of a local church, dropped into the Coop (they are here too) to pick up some cold drinks (cheaper than the minibar options) and headed back to base. We were back in the hotel room before 1400.

Three dachshunds and lots of rock pigeons

For dinner we headed across the road to a restaurant on 'the list.' Sadly the wine was tastier than the tagliatelli. And the mortadella balls supposedly had ginger in the ingredients.. I got one small taste of ginger the final mouthfuls. The poppyseeds listed were sesame seeds.



Book spotted at second hand book shop.

Vier from restaurant back to our hotel



The Town Walk

13th August 2024. Another hot day. Another requirement for completing our activity early. We headed out with the notes for the town walk at 0800. We were back at 1100. We spent rest of day in our room. This wasn't ideal as the only place to sit with a 'back rest' is on the bed. However because it was too hot outside, sitting in the courtyard wasn't an option.

We wandered back into the touristy Quadrilaterl for an 'aperitivo' but the service was terrible where we ended up, and we had no faith that the rest of the establishments around the area would be any better - a captured tourist audience will put up with a lot of things but tardy service is something we will avoid if we can.

Dinner was eventually had at an Osteria in an adjacent street to our hotel - but not the one I was initially hoping for - the other restaurant on the recommended list that was within our block was closed for the holidays. Instead we ended up with a more local affair . Apparently we could use the qr code to get the menu in English (a common practice here). But it didn't work. We went for an easy option and ordered the ragu. Yes, it had more oil and salt than last night's offering - but it was also a lot tastier.





A morning walk

14th August 2024. Another hot day trying to work out what to do. I would have liked to head up to San Luca. But walking uphill in 30 plus Degrees even if undercover was probably a bit stupid. The option considered was to take the 'train' up, or the bus, and walk down. The 'train' however doesn't start until 1000. By the time I stopped at the top for a look and came back down it would be the middle of the day and very hot Overall, not a smart idea.

Andrew wasn't interested in that option anyway but I managed to pull him out of the air-conditioned room at 0800 and walked to a local park. This is claimed to be the biggest park east of the city, It seemed reasonably popular with walkers, dog walkers, sunbathers and some runners but it was also clearly neglected. It was occupied by rough sleepers and there was also a lucky homeless person in a tent. I wasn't however all that impressed by the man who was urinating on the hedge at the back of a statue. The pond was stagnant, full of rubbish and covered in slime. There was no birdlife at the pond, and a lone turtle was on a rock in the middle of it.

Whist there was no birdlife on the pond there were birds frolicking around the grounds; among them hooded crows, blackbirds, starlings, and pigeons.



We took a long way back via the Quadrilatero. Andrew was looking for a morning cuppa but couldn't find a location he was happy with. Instead I grabbed a 'torte di riso' at a deli and we headed back to our room.

I got the job of heading back out into the heat at lunch time to find something to eat. Fortunately there were a couple of cafes not too far away and I grabbed some paninis for lunch. We were going to buy some tigelles this morning but the shop where we had got lunch a few days ago was not yet open.

Afternoon tea was the torta and a bottle of local prosecco.

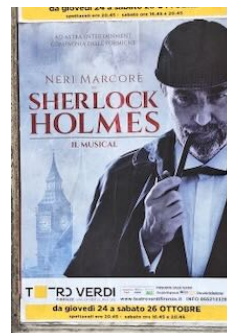
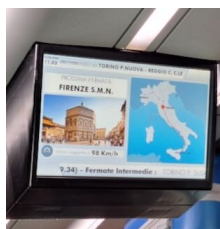
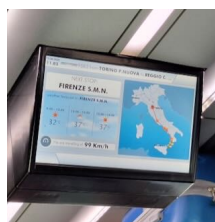
We had dinner back at the Quadrilatero with J, the Melbourne participant in the Cheese and Ham Tour we did at Parma.

We were back in our room around 2200.



Firenze

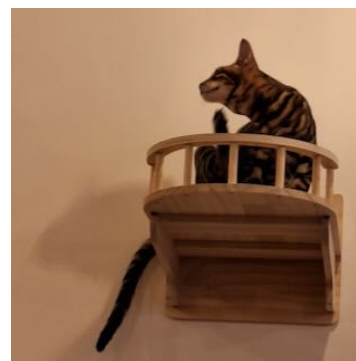
15th August 2024. The alarm was on for 0630. The taxi was booked at 0920... when we got to reception: apparently you don't pre-book taxis here. The trip to the station cost 50 percent more than the trip from the station, and we didn't even get the lovely chat that we had had from the local on the way in. Inside the foyer of the train station we found our service was already listed on the board. Platform 19. I didn't think the station looked that big when we arrived. It's not. Not above ground anyway. We took a lift to a level below to access all stations. Then another lift down again. And then escalators down yet another level again. I was expecting a fast train. I wasn't expecting the underground. And that's where we stayed, for almost the entire trip. Our seats were occupied which made us worry we were on the wrong train. But there were other seats available. I was expecting to come out of the tunnel..maybe after we left Bologna city limits. The above ground exposure was brief, less than a couple of seconds! There was several of these very brief 'coming up for air' until we got to the outer suburbs of Firenze. We can say we've been on a fast train...but we can't say we've seen the countryside!



The taxi in Firenze got us to our accommodation and the hostess was on duty to meet us. After a brief rest we headed out for lunch (at the closest restaurant), checked-out where we need to be tomorrow morning, checked-out a short section of the river, had gelato at Piazza di Santa Croce, found the Firenze Cat Cafe and had a brief cat mush, and then, after hearing thunder, retreated back into air-conditioned comfort at 1500 for the rest of the afternoon.

Birds, heron, duck, moorhen pigeon, heard a blackbird singing this morning

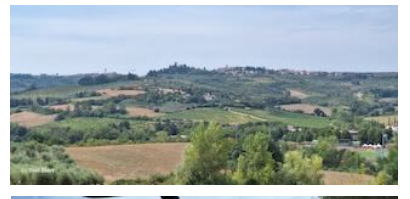
Dinner was at a restaurant - the second listed recommended-option given to us by our host (the first we had discovered on our afternoon stroll was closed for holidays until the 20th). A short stroll after dinner led to Piazza Della Signora. Where we saw another waterfall with water shooting out of potentially suggestive places (although not as blatant as Nettune in Bologna), admired the, mostly barbaric, statues at the end of the Uffizi, and returned to the room around 2100.





Buzzing around...

16th August 2024.... on a vespa. Tuscany apparently has one automotive industry - it makes Vespas. This casual tour was the first activity I had booked in Florence. It was also the one I was a bit hesitant about. Because of the size of the engines, you don't need a motorcycle licence to ride one - but that didn't mean you or you automatically got to enjoy one by yourself on the tour. The guides make sure you can control one before they let you loose; the alternative options being put behind whomever you came with as a passenger, being put behind a guide as a passenger, or I guess not going at all (there is no discount or refund for any of these). Technically I had my licence. But I got it a long time ago and I had had little practice. The guides started me off on a slightly smaller black machine. The owner, who was at the vespa pick up point, was clearly confident enough in me to offer me a white machine after a few laps of a test circuit. I couldn't put my feet flat on the ground with the white ones (which concerned me a little) but they seemed more controllable at higher speeds. I took the white one and had a ball.



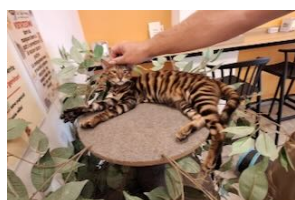
I hate to think what the small rural villages think of the noise reverberation from the vespa engines as the sound waves bounce off high building walls that abut up to narrow streets - but tourism does bring in lots of money and I suspect it is a large part of the economy - as well as wine of course. Lunch was served (risotto - which suited me) at a winery/farm after we 'had put the toys away.'



Instead of being dropped off back where we started our tour - a few minutes walk from the tour office, Andrew and I requested that we be dropped off near Michelangelo's Square (an option that had been offered by our guide on the drive out of town). This place is a wide open space (with a bronze copy of Michelangelo's David) on a hill overlooking the city. As it turned out, the other four people in our van decided walking down from there was a good idea as well. The view across town is impressive, and apparently even more impressive at sunset. However we missed the opportunity for sunset, once up here was enough - we were not going to walk up the steep hill if we didn't have to.

On the way back to base we bought some more ibuprofen and had another pat at the Firenze Cat Cafe.

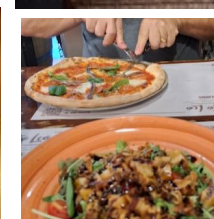
Dinner was at the third of the three restaurants recommended by the host and we were lucky to get a table. When we turned up we were asked if we had a reservation. Nope. They pulled us in anyway and gave us a table. The waiter was rude and officious but I think he was just rushed. By the time we left there was a significant queue outside the door waiting to get in. This was an expensive restaurant - it clearly has a significant reputation. It was a fair walk from our accommodation and passing through various piazzas enabled us to enjoy a range of night time buskers, from popular singers to string quartets to opera hopefuls. Who needs to pay big bucks for a concert - just walk around the streets of Florence at night.... If you are inclined you can throw something in the hat.



A walking tour around Florence

17th August 2024. Which really means a walking tour around the most famous artistic attractions. And we couldn't have got a better guide than an art historian. The main attractions were of course the Academia and the Uffizi. This was a long day on our feet, with a brief respite when we were sent off to lunch. The history was fascinating - the artwork impressive. And we even found cats in some of the paintings on the second floor of the Uffizi! (We had stumped the guide with the question regarding cats in the paintings - I am sure most want to see the religious or historical figures).

Early dinner was at a restaurant close to our accommodation. We were back in our room at 1800.

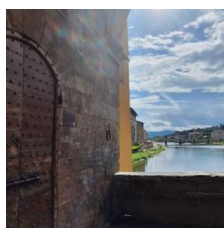


Wine tasting tour of Chianti- Bus Tour

Chianti countryside in sporadic rain

18th August 2024. We left our accommodation at around 1000. Our first touristy activity was to walk across the Ponte Vecchio - just to say we'd done it. Then, after walking around a couple of streets on that side of the river, we recrossed on the next bridge and headed to the station to work out where the meeting points were for both this afternoon's activity and tomorrow's bus trip. That sorted, we had lunch at a cafe under the station, I paid 1 E to go to the toilet (at least they give you a ticket here), checked out the shopping options under the station, wandered around a few more streets and then sat in the bus stop (in the shade) until we had to head to our 1400 afternoon activity.

We were off to the hills of Tuscany for some wine tasting. Although the trip didn't quite turn out as Andrew had expected. It was a tour conducted in English, Spanish and Italian which mean the guide had to repeat everything and although his English was better than the last guide we had with an English/Spanish tour, it did tend to start to get sloppy by the end - I almost felt he was bored.



None the less we did pick up a little about the area and its history.

Of course it started to rain, at moments quite heavily, just as we left the city.

The tasting at the first (and as it turns out, only) winery was outside, albeit under cover so we didn't get too wet. The second tasting was in a wine-merchant's cellar in the town of Rhadda. This was a bit comical as the presenter was great but definitely not what any of us expected. The town itself is quaint and we were given a total of 35 minutes to explore. It - but not in one go. When we arrived we had 20 minutes to have a look around or have a cuppa. Twenty minutes is not long enough to explore anywhere, particularly if you don't know where you are going, and with Italian service it is not enough time for a cuppa. We did try going to the cafe near the meeting point but the waiters had disappeared. After the 'tasting' the tour leader gave us another 15 minutes to explore - you cant do anything with that - they would have been better to consolidate the times. The town looked quaint, had steep and narrow cobbled streets and it would have been a bit of fun to walk around, I did a run around but didn't appreciate it.

When we got back to town we had dinner in a



restaurant in the tourist strip near the Santa Maria Novella. I ordered the wild boar ragu (I may as well try it as a comparison as I'd already tried pork and beef and a mixture of both). It wasn't what I expected - it had some lumps as well as mince. It was quite tasty.

We didn't take note of too many birds today; a couple of egrets on the river, hooded crow, pigeons. Two cats were seen on the trip, and three dachshunds were spotted when we got back for the day.



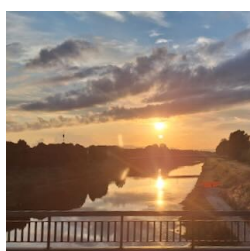
At the winery



Rhadda



Back in town

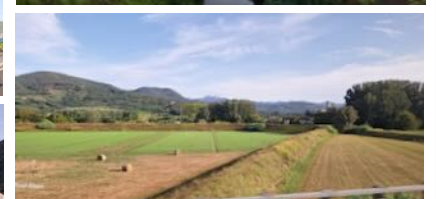


Pisa, Siena and San Gimignano - Bus tour

19th August 2024. I don't think Andrew was particularly fussed with today's activity but I enjoyed it. It was a touristy whirlwind bus trip with a double decker bus and 67 people that the tour 'leader' (not 'guide') had to manage. He did give us a bit of a blurb at certain places whilst we were on board but essentially left us to ourselves at each stop; at Pisa, San Gimignano and Siena.

I had read that there wasn't really much apart from the tower at Pisa (it is only a tower adjunct to the church after all). Locals would argue that it is just one of three buildings that should be appreciated; the tower, the church and the baptistry. Not to mention there is also a very large art gallery. We didn't have time to see anything else as we were only allocated around an hour to walk around. Estimates for climbing the tower amount to 40 or so minutes but I wasn't going to try. Seeing it was enough. Given that tourism is probably the biggest earner here the buildings have been kept beautifully clean. We spent the time sitting in a cafe with a cuppa watching the crowds increase as the time progressed. Whilst we didn't really do much here except take photos, I am glad I saw it.

San Gimignano is purported to be the only medieval town relatively intact in Italy, although I did read that some of it has been rebuilt. What a fascinating place this would be if I had a few hours to explore. We didn't have a few hours. Those of us who hadn't opted for the lunch option got two



hours. We had opted for the lunch option and eventually got one hour to explore. Andrew's leg was playing up a bit so he chose to sit for while whilst I went exploring - but I only did a small loop - up to a rampart lookout - before returning. We filled in the rest of the time with an ice-cream (but not the award winning one - that had a queue extending out into the piazza. The product of its competitor was however eminently satisfying).

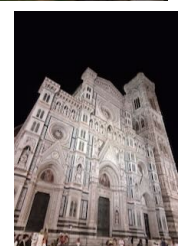
Siena was similarly amazing. And extremely touristy. But the architecture and layout was a sight to see. The Palio di Siena (the biannual horse race) which we had been told had been cancelled (by people who were on our walking tour who were in Siena the day before when the race was scheduled) was apparently run the next day, and the locals were still celebrating - a group of inebriated loud lads passed our group by as they made their way down the street. Here, we had taken the guided tour option. The guide was a bit over the top but a local, and her English was good. We wandered through the piazza where the horse race is conducted - its pavement still covered in a layer of sand for the race. We finished the tour at the church. What an amazing piece of artwork this is. Marbled inlaid floors, statues, frescoed ceilings. From the outside it is bi-coloured - inside it is quite



something else. The guide claimed that inside the Siena church is more spectacular than the duomo in Florence. We can't comment - we didn't go inside the duomo in Florence. From the church we had 45 minutes to get back to the meeting point. We grabbed a coffee and then headed in the direction we thought we should be going.... But it clearly wasn't right. The church dominates the landscape so it should have been easy. I wandered into a butcher and tried my Italian but as time was running out I was a bit rushed, my words morphed into English. The butcher's English was not good and he couldn't help us. It was only when we got ourselves on the right track that I realised the words in Italian that I should have used.

I had managed to snaffle one of the top front seats for us on this trip. We got a great view but unfortunately the leg room wasn't perfect for Andrew - which may have contributed to his 'ho-humness' for the day. There was one Aussie on this group (from Perth) and we chatted to a couple of Canadians.

It was a long trip. Check-in time at the bus pick up point was 0715 for a 0730 start. We were dropped back at 1930. For dinner we just popped into one of the restaurants on the run back to our accommodation.



Winding Down

20th August 2024. My priorities today. Bookshop for history book. Map shop for map. And Galileo Museum... The Galileo Museum was previously the Science Museum and is full of scientific instruments created over the past few hundred years. Andrew was reluctant to go but I think he was convinced when the Canadian Italian host of our accomodation said she loved that museum, it was her favourite. The museum has an App that gives you interps in English. There is a suggested route with selected items for the interps. But there is also information on all the pieces (I assume - labelled 'Full.'). We took the 'Selection.' It still took 1.5 hours to get through.

We didn't get a last cat mush in, but I did end up getting cold meats, cheeses olives, fruit and bread to go with wine to enjoy on the terrace above our accommodation for our last Italian dinner. We were the only ones up there and waited until sun went down. We made sure however we were back down the narrow stairwell before it got dark.

Packing up was the evening activity.

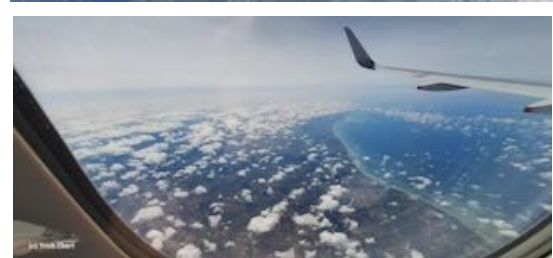
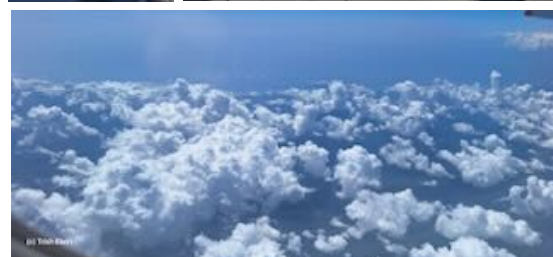
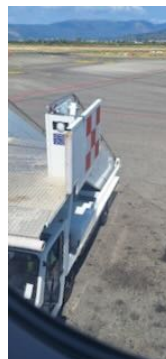


Firenze to Sydney

21st August 2024. The alarm was put on for 0700, although we had plenty of time. We finished breakfast before the hostess arrived, although I did spend some time later chatting to her. We had planned to walk to the Duomo to pick up a taxi but the hostess called for one instead. It was due in an estimated three minutes...just enough time to carry our gear downstairs. At least I think we got the right taxi..I didn't ask to confirm his taxi number. At the airport we were a little earlier than we thought we should be for check-in but the British Airways booth had just opened. After clearing security we headed to the very busy, and basic, lounge. Initially we plonked ourselves on two single seats but eventually moved to a couch facing the departure board. All the better to get an idea when to move to the gate. Except we missed it. I looked up and saw the word 'Boarding'. I checked my watch. 1201. According to the information I had boarding was closing at 1220. But first we had to find the gate. It was a longer than expected walk (but not far, as this airport is probably, building-wise, twice the size of Hobart) and then we had to go downstairs. All well and good but then we had to queue. What!

It seems we had to go through border protection. Two lines. One for citizens. Swiss and EU members. And one for others. Andrew managed to pick up the final boarding call for our flight. 'How did we get ourselves in this mess,' he asked. Checks with officials were taking time and I was getting concerned. In the end an airline lass came around the corner and asked if anyone was in the line for Heathrow. There were at least ten hands and hails. What worries me, I said to Andrew looking out the window, is that there are busses outside.

In the end the local queue was interrupted for those for the London flight, and we were all loaded into busses and deposited next to the plane. And then we all had to wait anyway (the plane was loaded on time but because of traffic, the expected wait time was 20 minutes).



The delayed take-off meant a delayed arrival but not by much. Crowded skies had us circling with an estimated delay of 15 minutes for touchdown-but I didn't check. The set of stairs to the back of the plane looked promising (we were in row 28 out of 30) but it was only for maintenance. Despite paying for business seats (where we were initially listed as getting 2 seats each) we were the last passengers off a very crowded plane and we were squeezed into one seat each (to be perfectly honest I am not sure what I would have done with two seats, anyway). The next stop was a Terminal transfer from Terminal 5 (home of British Airways) to Terminal 3. We chose to travel by bus (I think you can go by train as well). When we got there we had to go back through security and then negotiate the intelligence of various airport workers to find the Qantas Lounge. Initially we ended up at BA One World Lounge but were informed of a dedicated Qantas Longe. Where there had been a queue at BA we walked straight in to Qantas. 'Snacks and bar upstairs. Dinner from 5pm downstairs, and we will call you to board at 8 o'clock,' the receptionist said. What a great service. The lounge was fairly empty - the bar lads wanting to be of service; red wine then a hot chocolate for me, and we had a late lunch (beef curry and rice went down extremely well although I couldn't guarantee that there was no paprika in it). The snack on the flight from Florence had been roasted corn which was no good for me. Anything else you had to pay for.



We had gone down to enjoy the table service for dinner at 1700 knowing that dinner on the plane may be at midnight (it was last time). The lad at the entrance to the Lounge upon checking reiterated that he would call the flight at 2000. He didn't. I am not sure if that was because the flight wasn't officially boarding yet or not, but we left the lounge at 2005 and after the 5 minute walk to Gate 1 found that we were just in time to start boarding. I nearly walked past my seat - 23F and got settled in with a still water and sorting out breakfast options.

From London

Whilst the Captain's accent for the flight from Florence to London had been English, the captains accent from London to Singapore was a delightfully familiar Australian (although most of the crew turned out to be English). In fact a lot of the accents in the lounge had been Australian...this produced mixed feelings for me...the sign that we are going home and leaving this trip.

There was a delay reported of 15 minutes but soon after that, at 2046 (we were supposed to leave at 2045) the captain announced that three people hadn't turned up. So, 'in these security conscious times,' as per the Captan's words, there would be a further delay as they had to unload their bags!

At Singapore we didn't bother with the Qantas Lounge - we had got caught last time; we just walked off the plane and made our way immediately back through security into the waiting departure lounge.

From Singapore

22nd August 2024. UK crew out. Aussie crew in. And now I am a bit more awake thanks to 5.5 hours sleep (I would have been more awake if I had not finished off the House of Dragon HBO series). Aussie accents all around at this stage and as we haven't been exposed to them for a couple of months they sound familiar,



yet foreign at the same time.

Surprisingly we didn't get the same seats on this leg; we were in the row in front and we had swapped sides. What was that all about?



From Sydney International Airport

23rd August 2024. The plane landed at Sydney International Airport around 0510 as it was scheduled to do. Baggage took a little longer than usual to retrieve - half the plane is probably Business Class, and it is a big plane. A customs officer was wandering around checking if people had stuff to declare before they got in the line. Yes, I said. After checking with her regarding our boots and a small wooden statue, she stamped our arrival cards. This made getting through the throng of a line a very smooth affair; as we got to the front of the line, the stamp was checked and we could go straight out. That was easy. And quick.

The next task was to find the train station. We caught the 0647 train from the International Terminal to Sydney Central, and then from Sydney Central to Newcastle (although we had to wait half an hour as we didn't quite make the distance to the needed platform in the three minutes we had between scheduled trains; we missed the 'next' Newcastle train by a matter of meters). From Newcastle (well, actually Harrington. - the station before Newcastle Exchange) we took the 131 Fingal Bay bus, and then swapped to the 134 Soldiers Point bus just before the round-about at Salamander Bay. We were back on board at around 1230. It had taken us over seven hours between getting off the plane and getting back on boat.

Mind you, seven hours wasn't noticed too much. The service from Sydney Central Station to Newcastle is three hours and after you get out of the city the scenery consists of forests, inlets, paddocks and scrub. My thoughts going through the Ku Ring Gai Chase area were: 'gee I can't wait to get back to walking in there' (although it will be a while - we will be heading north, not south), and the scrub, this less than perfectly green bush, brought a smile to my face; I thought of bush birds and strangely a Pacific Baza, (although we have found that species of bird in a different type of scrub than the one I was looking at (and we haven't seen many)). I think the upshot of my thoughts were - the scrubby landscape may be flat (well, flat compared to Switzerland), and scrappy, but it's Australia, and its home. I did however look forward to walking through some of it soon.

The train service to Newcastle Exchange was only four carriages long, and the first and last carriages listed as 'Quiet Carriages'; a fact you are reminded of by the driver (I assume it was the driver - it may have been the conductor in the last carriage) just after each stop. After a while (I assume when the service came into more reasonable commuting hours) this announcement is not made, and the announcements revert to prerecorded announcements of station stops. Commuters were noticeably louder as the morning wore on. As more people got on board there was an increase in coughing and sneezing individuals. 'Great,' I thought. 'We've come home to a petri-dish!'

A swamp wallaby was noticed along the train track past Dora Creek. Bird life noticed from the train included pelicans, pied currawong, a dove (assume pest) and egrets (the train was going too fast to determine species).