

Day 15 – The Dolomites – September 27th

At 9:30 AM we depart the Venice airport. After some problems with understanding Italian road signs we locate the A4 motorway and drive west for two hours driving past Verona and arriving near our first destination of the day, the largest lake in Italy, Lake Garda. It is another great weather day; sunny with temperatures climbing towards 80 degrees. At 11:45 AM we arrive at our destination, having driven 4 miles up a very narrow peninsula located on the southern shore of the lake to Sirmione. We park our car and walk less than a mile to the old town of Sirmione. The town is built around an old fort, *Rocca Scaligera*, which was started in the late 1200s and finished by the Venetians in the late 1400s. We walk the walls and climb the towers before having lunch at a patio restaurant on the town square. Next we walk past the shops in the old town to the very tip of the peninsula to briefly view the ruins of the 4th century *Roman Villa of Desenzano*.



At 2 PM we return to our car. Kal will be doing all of the driving in the rental car so that we don't have to pay extra for a second driver. We are a little distressed to discover that we can't put the standard transmission on the Peugeot into reverse; Marcia and I push the car out of the parking space! Due to time constraints we scrap our plan of driving around one shore of Lake Garda and we decide to head north into the Dolomite Mountains. Kal pulls over a couple of times to try to see if he can find reverse gear with no success. The rest of us try to decipher the owner's manual which is written in Italian. Finally, after about an hour, Marie figures out that there is a small ring on the shifter that needs to be pulled up to engage reverse gear. We're back in business!

We drive north on the A22 motorway which runs all the way through northern Italy passing into Austria at the famous Brenner Pass. We drive along a river valley flanked on both sides by mountains rising to 6000 feet. The scenery is great with vineyards, old towns, and the river. We see many old castles on the sides or tops of the mountains.

We leave the motorway and drive east on a narrow and winding road into the Dolomite Mountains arriving at 5:00 PM in the small mountain town of Santa Christina Val Gardena. We note that the temperature has dropped from 80 degrees in the valley to about 50 degrees here. The town is at an altitude of 4500 feet. Kal had previously researched Bed and Breakfast accommodations in the Dolomites and we had decided on the *Garni Ariston* for our five night stay. We are welcomed by the owner Frau Nogler. She quickly shows us to our comfortable rooms. We have a large shared balcony looking out over the town and up to one of the towers of the Dolomites. In the picture, below, our rooms are on the second story, on the left, with the big wood balcony with the smaller flower arrangement hanging from it. Frau Nogler apologizes for her English, although we understand her quite well. From previous e-mail correspondence she knows that Marie and Kal are from Ohio and she is wearing an Ohio State tee shirt (Kal's Alma Mater). Her daughter spent last year on an exchange program at a high school in Columbus, Ohio. She will be here this weekend and is looking forward to meeting us. The views from our balcony of the town and the mountains (see below) are spectacular.



At 7 PM the four of us walk through part of the town. We find a restaurant and have an excellent dinner.

Day 16 – Adriatic Vacation – September 28th

We wake up this morning, our first of five at the Garni Ariston Bed and Breakfast in Santa Cristina Val Gardena, Italy; 4500 feet above sea level in the Dolomite Mountains of northeast Italy. We meet at 8 AM in the breakfast room where the owner, Frau Nogler, has prepared our breakfasts. We meet two other couples that are staying at the B&B, an older couple from Tasmania, Australia (they are our age) on a 6 week vacation in Europe and a young couple from Alberta, Canada that are spending two weeks in Europe on their Honeymoon. We enjoy the views of the town and the view of the limestone mountain, Mt. Sassolungo, towering over Santa Cristina at sunrise.



Now, we have been checking the weather forecast for the Dolomite part of our trip for three or so weeks and the forecast has been uniformly dismal; temperatures 10 degrees below normal and cloudy and rainy every day. However, the forecast for today has changed. It should be sunny with highs in the low 50s. We quickly decide that today should be the day that we drive *The Great Dolomites Road* so that we can best enjoy the unique scenery this road is said to offer. The highlight of any visit to the Dolomites is said to be The Great Dolomites Road. The main part of the route, covering 150 miles, dates back to the Renaissance. The present day road was an Austro-Hungarian project that begun in 1891 and finished at Cortina in 1909. Climbing up the sides of mountain to heights above 6000 feet, the road is said to be one of the world's great drives. During breakfast we inform Frau Nogler of our plans. I unfold my detailed road map of the region and she shows us the best route to take.

At 9 AM we depart Santa Cristina in our Peugeot; Kal is driving and I study the map and attempt to give him timely navigation advice. The road is narrow and there are no tunnels on this route (except avalanche tunnels)! The road winds up and down the sides of mountains through series of sharp "switchbacks". You drive into these somewhat blind and hope that any oncoming traffic is also being careful. It's really exciting when a large tour bus or truck meets you at one of these hairpin turns! I normally let out a scream to make sure Kal is seeing what I am seeing.



Mid-morning we spot what appears to be an ancient castle sitting on top of a rock across a narrow valley. We take a paved road that leads towards the castle and then take a short hike to the castle when the paved road ends. We view the ruins of *Castle d'Andrac*, built around the year 1250.



We make many stops at scenic points to enjoy the views and take photos. At one stop about 30 Ferraris (the \$250,000+ exotic Italian sports car) pass us. Stickers on the cars identify this group to be the *Italian Ferraris' Owners Club*. Back on the road we come to a restaurant with a large parking lot and see all 30 Ferraris parked and lined up. Kal stops and allows me to take some pictures of these great cars.



We continue towards Cortina (home of a Winter Olympics many years ago) seeing glaciers, many hikers, hiking trails, and ski lifts some of which are in operation for sightseeing or transporting hikers to higher levels. The Dolomites are a major winter skiing destination but it is hard for us to imagine how folks negotiate these roads in winter snow and ice.



Just before Cortina we turn around and repeat some of the route we have taken, in reverse, before we turn off and take a different scenic route back to Santa Cristina. We stop for a quick (and a poor) lunch at the Falzarego Pass which sits at 7000 feet. After lunch we take about an hour hike along a trail up higher into the mountains. The Dolomite Mountains with their treeless limestone spires and peaks are beautiful and quite unique.

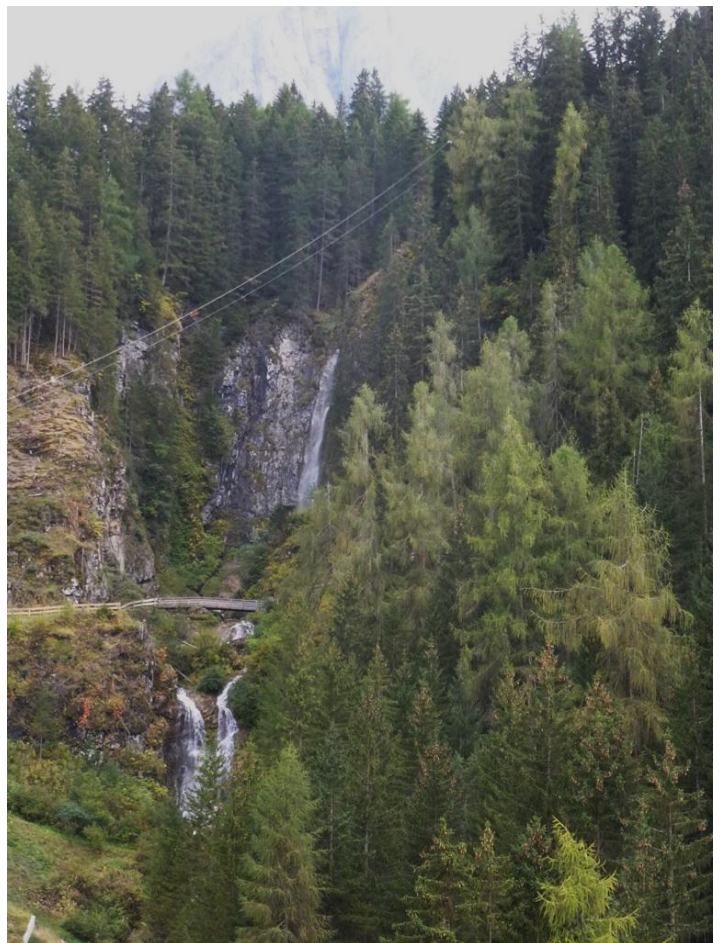


We continue on the new route towards home making frequent stops. At one stop is a museum about the war activity in the Dolomites during WWI. It is housed in an old Austrian-Hungarian Fort built in 1895. We have learned that the Dolomites had been part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire for centuries prior to WWI (hence the prevalence of German speakers still living in the region and road signs being posted in Italian and German). When Italy joined the allied side in WWI they attacked Austria-Hungary through the Dolomites. The Austrians fell back to the central Dolomites (where we are now) and the battle lines solidified. For the next three years both sides attempted to gain control of the highest ground for their artillery...this was called the "Mountain War". Both sides tunneled through mountains and set explosive

charges under enemy troops. They rolled hand grenades down slopes at the opposition. They wintered in caves. Most famously, they built iron cableways, *via ferrata*, to enable troops to climb the steep mountains and cliffs. These cables are still in use today by experienced climbers! After the Allied victory in WWI, Italy was awarded the Dolomites, Trieste, Istria, and most of the Dalmatian Coast. Italy lost these areas, with the exception of the Dolomites, following defeat in WWII.



We arrive back in Santa Cristina at about 4PM. We had a great drive on a beautiful sunny day. A masterful job of negotiating the winding roads by Kal! We now hike up to the waterfall that we can see from our balconies, eventually finding our way back to our B&B by the "long route". We enjoy an excellent dinner at a local restaurant.



Day 17 – Adriatic Vacation – September 29th

We wake up after the second night at our Bed and Breakfast in the Dolomite Mountains of northeast Italy. Today it looks like we are getting our first really bad weather on this vacation. It's cold, foggy, cloudy and rainy. Views of the town and the 10,000 foot high Sassolungo Mountain (invisible!) are not encouraging.



We meet in the breakfast room at 8 AM and chat with the amiable B&B owner, Frau Nogler. We learn that she and her ancestors have lived in this area for many generations. Her native language is Ladin (spoken in this area; a derivative of Latin and related to the Swiss Romesch dialect) and she speaks Italian and German perfectly as well as good English. She had requested, via e-mail, that we pay her for our five day stay in cash (Euros) and I hand her an envelope with the payment for Marcia and myself. She counts the money and says it is exactly the correct amount. Kal then hands her the same amount of money for Marie and he. Frau Nogler says “no, no, no...Jim has given me the correct amount for all four of you; this is the off season”. We had not clearly understood her e-mail to us explaining room rates! We are all now “flush” with Euros as Kal divides up his “room payment” with me.

A little before 10 AM Marie, Kal and myself set out on a hike from our B&B. It is raining lightly, on and off, and there are fog, haze and clouds obstructing views of the mountains and the valleys. The trail starts at a local church where we walk past its graveyard. We see a plaque commemorating earlier hikers who took this route up to the Church of St. Jude and hope we don't look like them when we are done.



We hike up to near the top of the mountain behind the town of Santa Christina Val Gardena on a very well maintained hiking trail, seeing some good sights thru the haze and also some domesticated goats. We arrive at the Church of St. Jude and then hike back down to our B&B, arriving back at 12:15 PM.



Marcia now joins us and we all go out for lunch at a local restaurant. Believing that the weather is clearing we make plans, while we lunch, to take a cable car to the top of a mountain for the views and probably some hiking this

afternoon. However, when we exit the restaurant we see that it is raining heavily, so plans for outdoor activities are cancelled. It rains all afternoon and we spend this time in our rooms reading and checking news on the internet.

At 6:30PM we meet and walk a short distance to a local restaurant for another fine dinner.



Day 18 – Adriatic Vacation – September 30th

We wake up this morning after our third night of five at the Garni Ariston Bed and Breakfast in Santa Cristina Val Gardena, Italy. We enjoy Frau Nogler's breakfast spread. She allows me to take her picture with Kal, Marie and Marcia.



She tells us that after her current guests leave she will spend two weeks totally cleaning the premises before shutting down for two months. It is hard to believe that it would take two weeks (although she *has* seen our room) as this is the

most totally clean place I have ever seen...everything is immaculate. After the cleaning, she and her husband will take a two week vacation in England and come back to re-open on December 1st for the busy skiing season. We chat with the couple from Tasmania and he comes over to show us his photos, on his I-pad, of the area we are going to today. Frau Nogler later comes over with a laptop and shows us a photo show of her daughter's 8 month exchange program with a family in Columbus Ohio where she attended a Columbus area high school. I met her daughter, Marina, yesterday when I needed to buy some more internet time. Her English is excellent and spoken with an American accent.

Now, yesterday's weather was dismal but today's should be an improvement. Shortly before 9 AM we drive to the base of the Col Raiser cable car and ride up to the top of the lift. We rise 1800 feet to an altitude of 6600 feet. It is raining when we exit the cable car so we decide to wait before starting our hike. At 10 AM it is still raining but we don our rain gear and set out on a hike further up the mountain.



Halfway on our hike up the sun comes out.





At 11:45 AM we stop at a Refugio (a restaurant on the trail) for some refreshments. As we rest we see fog and clouds rolling in and then some light rain.



We decide to descend back to the top of the cable car lift.

We are back down at 12:30 PM and stop at the “Odles” restaurant for lunch, outside under an awning as it is still drizzling. Three of us have bratwurst. Marcia has a totally scary dish.



After lunch we see it has stopped raining and some sun occasionally breaks through so we decide to hike down the mountain rather than take the cable car. The hike down is rather pleasant with temperatures in the 50s.



Less than two hours later we are back at our car. We drive back to our B&B, arriving before 4 PM and just before more rain. The weather today has not been the best but we are happy that we have been able to explore the Col Raiser area, see some great views and get in two good hikes between the worst of the rain.

We meet at 6:30 PM for dinner and decide to try a restaurant we have not visited before; one that we walked past when we started our local hike yesterday. We enter the restaurant and are surprised to see it nearly full...all with what appear to be happy locals enjoying a Sunday dinner out. We are quickly seated at a corner booth and enjoy another excellent meal. Tomorrow will be our last full day in the Dolomite Mountains and we are hoping for a break in the weather.

Day 19 – Adriatic Vacation – October 1st

When we wake up this morning it is raining quite hard. This is disappointing as this will be our last full day in the Dolomites and our last day to explore up in the mountains. The poor weather makes hiking less enjoyable but the worst part is the fog and clouds that obstruct the views. At breakfast we agree that the rain seems to be subsiding and that the

sky is getting brighter. Also, the weather forecast we have pulled off the internet indicates that the best weather of the day will be between 10 AM and Noon. So we all agree to Kal's recommendation that we immediately head out on a hike.

At 9 AM we pile into our Peugeot station wagon (we still have not figured out how to release the "automatic", electronic parking brake; three or four "surges" in 1st or reverse seems to work) and head out for the neighboring town of Ortisei. There we board the *Aipe di Siusi* cable car for a ride to the top of Mont Seuc. The cable car ascends 2500 feet to a final altitude of 6200 feet.

The geography here is different from yesterdays, which was more mountainous. Here, we are on a large plateau with rolling hills and farms framed in towering mountains.





We spend 2-1/2 hours hiking over the rolling hills before boarding a chair lift and returning to the cable car station and descending back down to the town of Ortisei. We had many great views on this hike, a little bit of sun, and the rain held off until we got back down into Ortisei.

We now drive to another quaint town that Kal has identified, Castel Rotto. We find a good restaurant and have a fine lunch and then spend another hour or so walking around the "old town" area.





As we've experienced during our time in the Dolomites, there aren't many (any?) other Americans around and this is really true in Castel Rotto. There is a German music festival (think accordions and "Om Pah" bands) getting ready to start in a large tent complex just outside of town. German tourists were enjoying the town today and twenty or so tour buses are parked. Folks (old folks, like us) are walking miles on the roads towards the festival and the road we came into town on is now closed to traffic. We have fun finding a way out of town and back to our B&B in Santa Cristina.

We meet at 6:45 PM and enjoy a final dinner in the Dolomites, choosing our nearest favorite Santa Cristina restaurant as it's raining quite heavily. Tomorrow we will leave the Dolomites and drive to Venice in preparation for our flights home on the following day.

Day 20 – Adriatic Vacation – October 2nd

This morning we will leave the Garni Ariston Bread and Breakfast in Santa Cristina Val Gardena after five nights. The Garni Ariston accommodations have been most comfortable, the premises immaculate, and the staff friendly and knowledgeable. The location is great with several good restaurants within walking distance. Santa Cristina is well located as a central base for exploring the Dolomite Mountains. Thanks to Kal for all the research and then picking this town and B&B. The weather has been about 10 degrees cooler than normal and we've had our share of rain but we really enjoyed our time here. Although we are in northern Italy the whole area looks more Swiss or German to us and, in fact, German is the predominant language.

We load up the Peugeot 5008 station wagon with our luggage and leave Santa Cristina a little before 9 AM. Our destination is a hotel near the Venice, Italy airport. Although this drive to Venice can take as little as 3 hours we plan to take the "scenic" route and perhaps stop for some exploration. We have had some rain this morning and the clouds and fog are around but we hope for some clearing as we travel south.



For the first three hours of our trip we stay on the narrow, winding roads with many switchbacks as we go up and down the mountains. The views are great and we make several stops for photos. We drive through a half dozen small towns, all located near ski lifts and having nice looking restaurants and accommodations but appearing to be completely shut down. Shutters are closed on all windows. We determine that these are ski resort towns and are only open in the winter months. At noontime we start looking for a place for a rest stop and for lunch. We finally find a small country inn and go in for lunch. The dining room is busy serving locals and we quickly determine that we are the only English speakers around, including the waitresses, and there are no menus. All four of us decide to order the same dish...an Italian word we know... lasagna, and enjoy an excellent homemade dish.



Back on the road Kal expertly drives on to the city of Bassano del Grappa in the foothills of the Dolomites. We park and walk through the historic old town area. The most unique structure we find is an old covered bridge that spans the river running through the city, the Ponte Vecchio. We read that a bridge has stood on this site since the year 1209. The current design was built in 1569. The bridge was rebuilt in 1947 and 1948 by the Italian army *Alpini Corp* so was assume that it was destroyed or badly damaged during WWII.



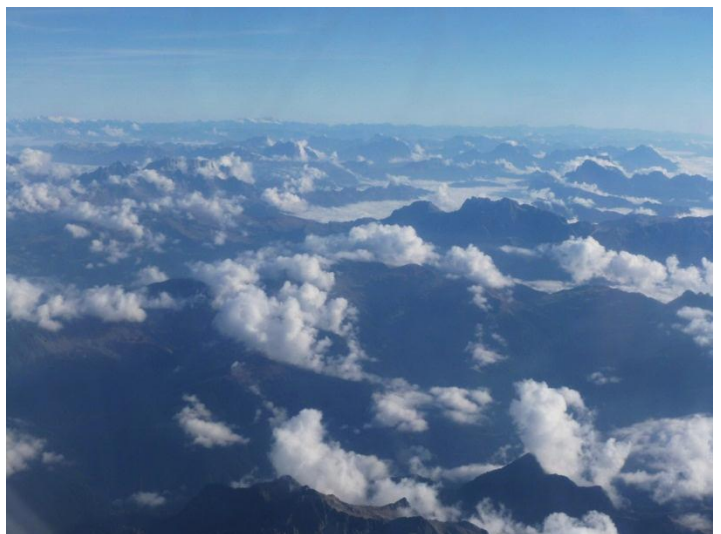
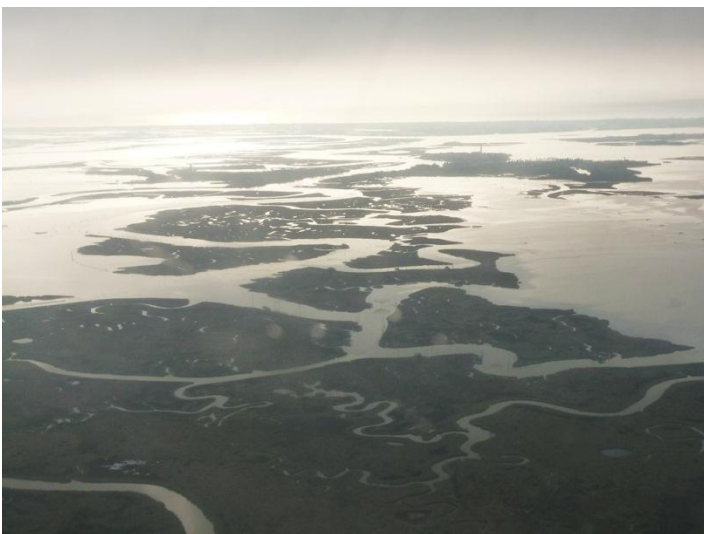
By now it is past 2:30 PM so we decide to drive straight on to Venice. There are no divided highways nearby so we drive on scenic two lane roads past vineyards, farms, medieval structures, old towns and quaint villages. We arrive at our airport hotel, the Titian, at 4:30 PM. As we are at sea level and further south temperatures are in the 70s. The sky is clear. Kal and I drive to the airport and turn in our rental car and then walk back to the hotel. Later we walk to a local pizzeria for our final dinner on Europe. Tomorrow we fly back home.



Day 21 – Adriatic Vacation – October 3rd

Today our vacation ends and we fly back home. We wake up early (5 AM) at our hotel near the Venice, Italy airport and take our hotel's 6:30 AM shuttle to the airport.

Our first flight, on an Air Dolomiti turboprop, takes off from Venice at 8:45 AM. We have some good views of the Venice Lagoon, the Dolomites, Alps and German farmland before landing in Munich at 10 AM.





Our 9 hour flight, on a comfortable United Airlines 777, lands in Washington at 2:30 PM. We've picked up 6 hours. Kal and Marie depart Washington one half hour late and arrive home in Dayton by 7:30 PM. Jim and Marcia's United flight is delayed due to aircraft problems and we take off an hour and a half late at 7 PM. We arrive home a little before 9 PM, just in time for the first Presidential debate...then off to bed...24 hours after we woke in Italy.

This was another great vacation with our favorite traveling companions, Kal and Marie. The Odysseys Unlimited Tour was excellent as was our Tour Director, Sandra. The five days of independent travel in the Dolomite Mountains of northern Italy was an excellent and restful way to finish up our time in Europe.

Best, Jim and Marcia