

2015 Southern Italy Tour – Day 1 – Friday September 18th

Depart USA



Today Marie and Kal and Marcia and Jim (that's me) Elving depart on a seventeen day trip to Rome and Southern Italy. Marie and Marcia are sisters and this will be the eighteenth overseas trip the four of us have made together over the last thirteen years. We really enjoy traveling together!

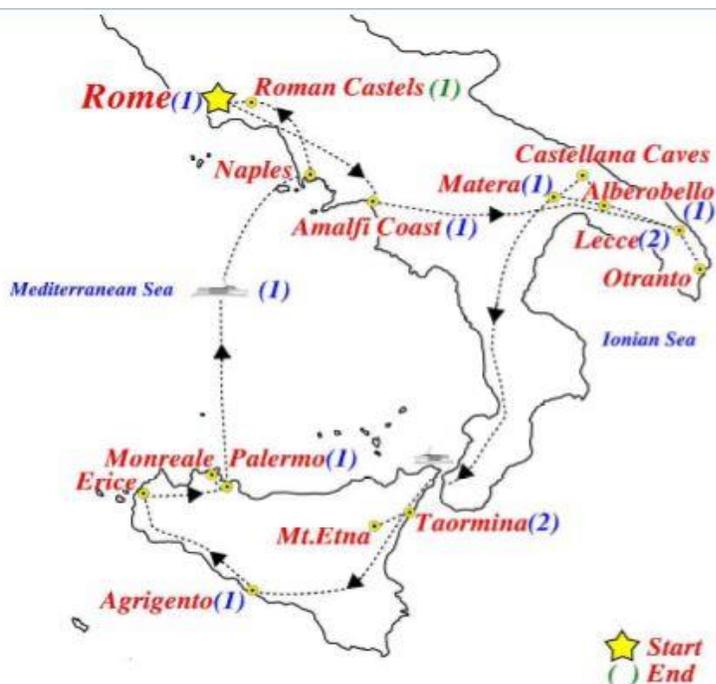


Italy is a major, important, and historic European country of 61 million folks. Italy is in Southern Europe and is surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea on the west, south and east and the mountainous Alps to the north.

On the map at the left Italy is shown in dark green. The lighter green indicates the other members of the European Union (EU) of which Italy is a founding member. Most of the countries of the EU, including Italy, use a shared currency called the Euro. They also share “mostly” open borders. You may have been hearing in the news about the current crisis concerning hundreds of thousands of unfortunate refugees/immigrants from Africa and the Middle East fleeing their homelands and attempting to enter the EU to find safer homes and/or better economic prospects.

We wanted to again visit Italy as it is known to have been a real key to the development of our Western Culture (and cuisine!). We are looking forward to great scenery, viewing ancient Greek and Roman ruins, and seeing famous sites like the Vatican.

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The four of us have previously traveled in Northern Italy (Milan, Florence, Cinque Terra, the Lake Region, Venice and the Dolomite Mountains) but not a lot in Southern Italy. We struggled finding an organized tour of Southern Italy that did not spend too much time in areas that some of us had already seen. Marie and Kal finally found what we think will be a good tour. It's from a rather obscure Italian based company called “Great Tours of Italy” and we have signed up for their “Great Southern Italy” tour which starts and finishes in Rome but spends time mostly in Italy's “Southern Boot” and in their island state of Sicily, as shown to the left.

Now, the Marie and Kal have spent quite a bit of time in Rome but Marcia and I have never been to Rome. So, we all are flying into Rome a few days before the start of our organized tour. We will have three full days to explore Rome, on our

own, with the Kal and Marie as our Tour Guides! We have reserved hotel rooms in Rome (for three nights) at what we

believe will be a nice “boutique” hotel in central Rome. Then, we will be joining our tour group for the organized tour of Southern Italy.

Kal has contacted our Tour Director and we believe there will only be a total of eight folks on our tour...the four of us and four people from Canada.

Italian time will be six hours ahead of the time on the East Coast of the USA. Sunrise at 7 AM and sunset at 7 PM. Weather-wise, we think we have picked an ideal time to visit Southern Italy. High temperatures should be in the low 80s or 70s each day with lows in the 60s.

We will be writing a daily Trip Journal, adding a few pictures and posting a link for you to access when we have an internet connection.

Here is a calendar of where we will be and what we will be doing.



2015 Southern Italy Tour

Time is 6 hours ahead of USA Eastern Time Zone
 Average Hi Temp: 75- 80 Average Lo Temp 55-70
 Sunrise: 7 AM Sunset: 7 PM



Fri. 9/18

Depart USA

-Leave Home mid-afternoon
 -Depart Charlotte NC for Rome at 6:25 PM on US Airways Flight 720
 Meals: D & B
 Htl: Airplane

Sat. 9/19

Rome

-Arrive in Rome at 9:45 AM
 -Travel to Hotel
 -Visit Catacombs, Diocletian Baths & Ntl. Museum
 -Dolce Vita Stroll
 Htl: Bailey's

<p>Sun. 9/20 Rome -Visit Colosseum, Roman Forum, Constantine Arch, Pantheon, Palatine Hill, and Victor Emmanuel Monument Htl: Bailey's</p>	<p>Mon. 9/21 Rome -Vatican City, Vatican Museum, St. Pete's Basilica -Capitaline Museum -Heart of Rome Walk Htl: Bailey's</p>	<p>Tues. 9/22 Rome -Ostia Antica -Borghese Villa and Gallery -Travel to new hotel & meet up w/tour group Meals: D Htl: NH Midas</p>	<p>Wed. 9/23 Amalfi Coast -Travel The Sun Highway to the Amalfi Coast -See Cassino, Sorrento and Positano Meals: B & D Htl: HG Tritone</p>	<p>Thurs. 9/24 Lecce -Castellana Caves -Scenic Drive to Lecce -Tour of Lecce; Basilica & Piazza Del Duomo Meals: B & D Htl: GH di Lecce</p>	<p>Fri. 9/25 Lecce -Visit ancient town of Otranto & 1000 year old walled city and Norman Cathedral -Free time in Lecce Meals: B, L Htl: GH di Lecce</p>	<p>Sat. 9/26 Alberobello -Travel to Alberobello see conical Trulli Buildings -Free time to stroll and shop Meals: B & D Htl: GH Olimpo</p>
<p>Sun. 9/27 Matera -Visit Sassi of Matera troglodyte cave dwellings Meals: B & D Htl: San Domnico</p>	<p>Mon. 9/28 Taormina -Drive thru Calabria Region -Ferry to Sicily -Visit ancient Greek Amphitheater Meals: B & D Htl: Caesar Palace</p>	<p>Tues. 9/29 Taormina -Excursion up Mt. Etna with lunch and wine tasting -Free time in Taormina Meals: B & L Htl: Caesar Pal.</p>	<p>Wed. 9/30 Agrigento -Drive to Agrigento and tour the Valley of Temples; five ancient Greek Temples Meals: B & D Htl: Baia di Ulisse</p>	<p>Thurs. 10/1 Palermo -Tour medieval town of Erice and see Elimi, Phoenician and Gothic Catalan architecture Meals: B & D Htl: Palzo Sitano</p>	<p>Fri. 10/2 Palermo -Tour Palermo -Tour Monreale & Cathedrals -Overnight Ferry to Naples on mainland Meals: B & (L or D?) Htl: Overnight Ferry</p>	<p>Sat. 10/3 Naples/Rome -Tour Naples Meals: B & D Htl: Castel Vecchio Sun. 10/4 -11:20 AM Depart Rome USAIR 721 -7:30 PM land in Home City</p>

2015 Southern Italy Tour – Day 2 – Saturday September 19th – Arrive In Rome



Our second day of vacation begins with us flying over the Atlantic Ocean between the USA and Italy. Yesterday Kal, Marie, Jim, and Marcia departed Dayton and Pittsburgh and met at the Charlotte NC airport. We boarded a full 300 passenger US Airways/American Airlines Airbus A330 for an on-time 6:30 PM departure. Our flight lasts nine hours as we cover almost 5000 miles. It is a clear sunny day and we get a good view of Rome's International Airport prior to our landing. As we gain six hours flying east it is 10 AM Rome time when we deplane.

Rome, of course, is an ancient center of civilization and the seat of the mighty Roman Empire for many centuries. Today it is the Capital of Italy. Its population of 4.4 million represents about 8% of Italy's total. Marcia and I have never been to Rome. Marie and Kal spent time in Rome fifteen years ago and are looking forward to showing us around.

We clear passport control, claim our luggage and find our driver for the hour drive to the city. It is noon when we arrive at The Bailey's Hotel. It is a small 29 room centrally located boutique hotel that we think will work well for our three night stay. We are warmly greeted by Gerald the Assistant Manager. He gives us maps and tells us the best ways to get to the sites. Our rooms are nice and look out on a quiet Rome city street.





We are able to get into our rooms right away and clean up a bit and unpack. This is great as we are all a little tired from the long plane trip and our inability to get any real sleep.

We all meet at 1:15 PM to plan the rest of this day. We have heard that Italians usually have their main meal mid-day. Dinners normally don't commence before 8 PM. With the time zone change and our lack of sleep we don't believe any of us will make it to dinner time so we decide to start our activities with a good lunch. "When in Rome do as the Romans do". We find a nice restaurant and enjoy our first Italian pizza.

It is hot, in the upper 80's, and quite humid. We walk a couple of miles to the Spanish Steps area and then take a walk through Borghese Park,

admiring the views and the unique flat-topped "Umbrella Pines" that we see throughout Rome.



We stroll along the crowded Via del Corso, a pedestrian street lined with high end shops, and enjoy looking at the beautiful people. This is the route of the La Dolce Vita Stroll. We walk by the famous Trevoli Fountains and see that after a few years of renovation they are still not operational and covered in scaffolding. We manage to get lost and walk several more miles before finding our hotel, exhausted, a little before 6 PM.



2015 Southern Italy Tour – Day 3 – Sunday September 20th - Rome

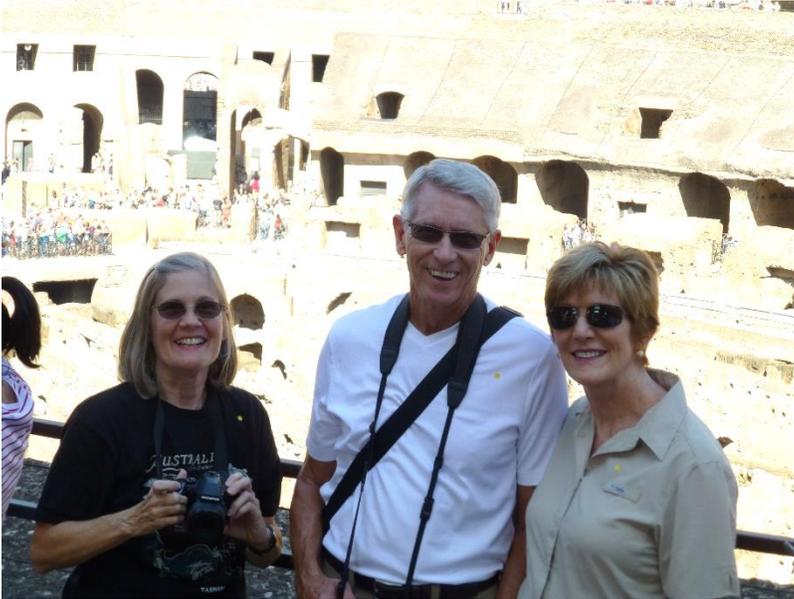
We wake up this morning after our first night of sleep in Europe. It is amazing how some sleep can rejuvenate you!

After a nice included breakfast we decide to have the front desk at the Hotel Bailey's call a taxi to take us to the Roman Colosseum. Some of our feet are worn out from yesterday's stroll (or Forced March as Marcia calls these things)!

We arrive at the Colosseum area a little before 10 AM and find it, as usual this time of year, crowded with many tourists. It is another clear and warm day but not as hot as yesterday. There is a long line to buy tickets, said to be an hour-and-a-half wait, so we decide to pay a few extra Euros for a private guide that will allow us to skip the long line.

Our guide is Stefano and he does a good job for the next hour taking us around the Colosseum. He tells us that only about half of the original structure remains. All of the marble that used to cover the surfaces has been stripped away for other construction (much of it for buildings in the Vatican) and parts of the structure have been destroyed by earthquakes. Construction of the Colosseum started in 72 AD and it was built in only eight years, primarily by slaves.





The structure held 50,000 spectators and was in use from 80 AD until 440 AD.

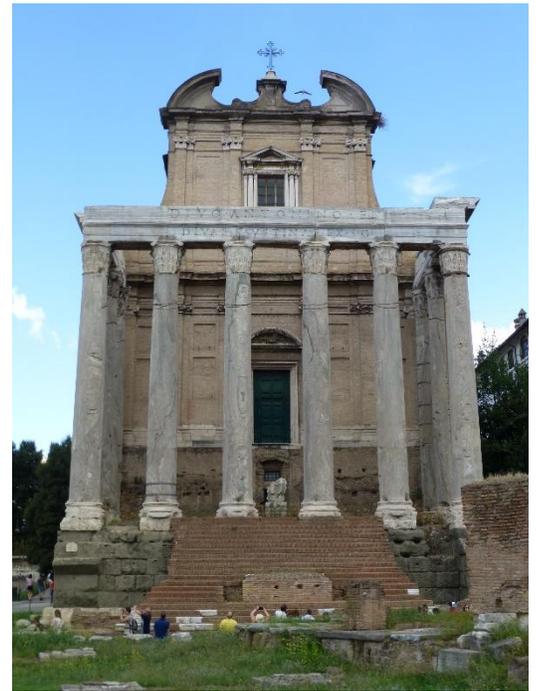
Exotic animal shows were held in the mornings featuring Elephants, Tigers and Lions from Rome's possessions in Africa and Asia. Gladiator shows were held in the afternoons.

As shown in the picture above there were extensive rooms and tunnels below the main floor of the Colosseum. From there the animals or the Gladiators would emerge through trap doors to the cheers of the crowds.

After an hour our guide gives us one hour of free time to tour the structure on our own. It is most huge and impressive. The crowds of tourists are also huge. Many are smokers!

At noon, as instructed, we exit the Colosseum and join a larger guided tour group of about forty folks for a walk to Palatine Hill and a tour of the ruins of the Roman Forum. Greg, our guide, explains that Palatine Hill is one of the seven hills that Rome was built on. Legend has it that Rome was founded right here by Romulus (after he killed his brother Remus) in 753 BC. The area that we initially visit contains the ruins of Domitian's Palace. It was a massive five story high structure containing 1000 rooms built between 82 and 92 AD. We spend some time at these ruins and then get good views of the ruins of the Roman Forum (the main market area and meeting place). We then descend into what remains of the Roman Forum and enjoy the sights.





We next walk/climb to the “Vittoriano”, the monument to the first King of Italy, Victor Emmanuel who helped unify and establish the country of Italy in the 1870s. The building was started on 1880 and completed in 1911. Italy’s Tomb of the Unknowns was added in 1921. The main reason that we visit is to take the elevator to the top of the monument for great views of Rome, the nearby ruins, the Vatican, and even the distant mountains that surround Rome.



We take a taxi back to our hotel. We meet at 6:15 AM and walk to a nearby restaurant for a good dinner of Italian specialities.

This has been a great day.

2015 Southern Italy Tour – Day 4 – Monday September 21st - Rome

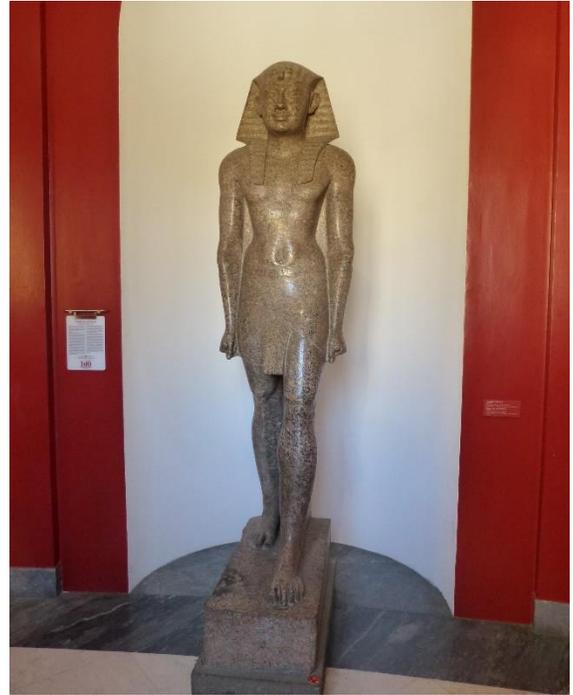
This morning Marcia and I will visit Vatican City. Marie and Kal spent a lot of time at the Vatican on their 2000 trip so they have made plans to visit other historical sites today. Vatican City is a very small independent state within the boundaries of Rome and Italy. It is, of course, the home of Pope Francis and I was expecting he would want to meet with me on our visit so that I could give him some advice. It turns out he's in Cuba and the USA while we are here!

At 9:30 AM Marcia and I take a taxi from our hotel to the Vatican Museum. These taxi rides are great as we get to see a lot more beautiful buildings in different areas of Rome and the local residents out on the streets.

The area around the museum entrance is packed with people...long lines to buy tickets and numerous tour groups congregating. Fortunately we had read on the Trip Advisor Forums about pre-buying a ticket direct from the Vatican, which we did on-line several weeks ago. Thus, our admittance to the museum today is quick and easy.

Our objective is to view the Sistine Chapel and its famous murals but first we need to go through the Vatican Museums. This turns out to be most enjoyable as the Vatican Museums are among the best we've ever experienced. The rooms are massive and well laid out with many decorations and beautiful frescos.

The first rooms contain artifacts (looted?) from Egypt including mummies.



Next are rooms containing thousands of antiquities from ancient Rome and Greece including a statue of Apollo.



Then rooms of tapestries, murals, old maps and other artifacts.



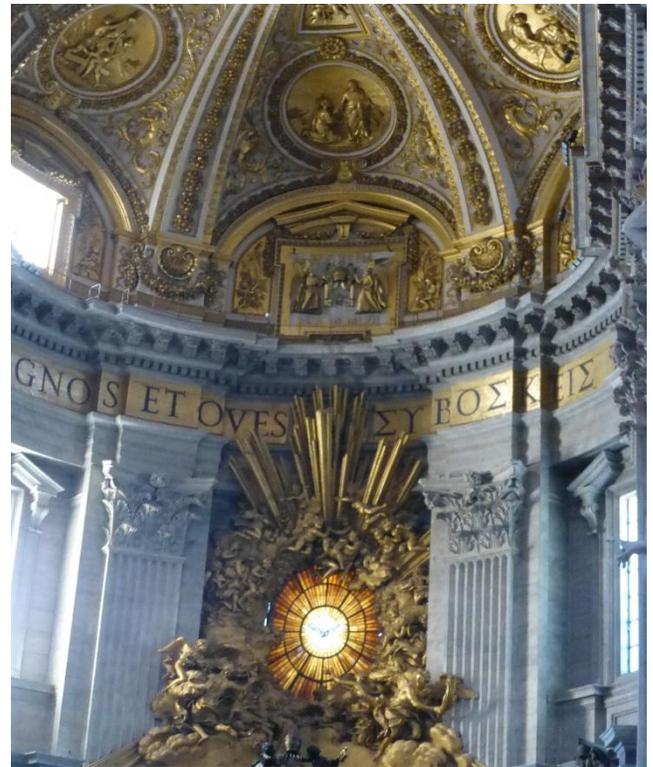
We finally arrive at the small but beautiful Sistine Chapel. No pictures of the beautiful frescos inside the Sistine Chapel are allowed (except for the video Marcia secretly takes before she is challenged by the numerous staff of photo police). Instead, the photo at left was taken by me from a poster for sale in the Vatican gift shop.



We exit the Chapel a little before noon and walk around the Walls of the Vatican for over a mile to reach the entrance to St. Peter's Square. We are amazed to see the line, six folks wide, nearly a mile long and not moving, waiting to buy tickets to get into the museums and the Sistine Chapel...good luck. On the way we stop at a restaurant (mainly to sit down) but I enjoy a beer and Marcia an order of tiramisu while we converse with our charming waiter who knows very minimal English.

We now walk over to St. Peter's Square and join a short and fast moving line to get checked by the security folks. Next we walk to St. Peter's Cathedral, said to be the largest church in the world. There is no charge to enter the church. It is huge and beautiful. We see Michelangelo's Pieta in

one of the alcoves. We go underground and see the Tombs of the Popes. We next stroll around St. Peter's Square and enjoy another sunny and warm day.



Taxi rides in Rome are a great way to get around. I think they are moderately priced. But, it is certainly an adventure with the crazy taxi and car drivers, motorcycles and mopeds, and bicyclists. Also, the thousands of pedestrians trying to cross busy streets. We have a problem on the ride back from the Vatican to our hotel. Our taxi ride this morning from the hotel to Vatican City, a pretty long drive, was just under 20 Euros (a Euro is slightly stronger than the dollar; 1 Euro = 1.11 US\$). When we now get a taxi at the Vatican Taxi Stand the driver says it will be 28 Euros to return to our hotel. When I question him he said it's more because he has to drive all the way around the Vatican to get headed to Rome and there's more traffic now. I have a twenty Euro note in my pocket when we approached the taxi stand. As we approach our hotel I hand it to Marcia, who is in the back seat with me, and pull out a ten Euro note from my pocket. At our hotel there is no room to park so the driver pulls into an alley. I hand him (having gotten the 20 back from Marcia) 30 Euros for the 28 Euro fare. He hands it back and said "sir, you only gave me 15". He has exchanged the blue 20 note for a red 5 note....the oldest trick in the book! Rather than endanger any of us, I take back the 5 and gave him another 20. I am still upset that I did not confront him, but maybe that was the best decision.

At 5 PM we meet up with the Marie and Kal at our hotel. They have had an enjoyable time seeing some new sights. We then leave with them, via taxi, for a site they say we just have to see. We arrive at the Roman Parthenon. It was built in 373 BC and reconstructed by Emperor Hadrian in 120 AD. It contains the largest domed roof made until the 1400s. The dome has a round hole in the top to let in light and 22 small holes in the floor to drain rainwater. It is spectacular.





We start walking back towards our hotel but stop for a light dinner on the way back. We sit on an outdoor patio of a restaurant on a large public square and have a great time watching the folks walk by.

Another great day.

2015 Southern Italy Tour – Day 5 – Tuesday September 22nd - Rome

Today is our last day of independent travel in Rome. Tomorrow we join a guided tour group. Marie and Kal have researched and figured out a way for us to visit the ancient ruins of Ostia Antica this morning.



We exit our hotel early at 7:30 AM and walk about a mile and a half to Rome's main transportation hub for buses, trains and the subway, the Rome Termini. At the Termini we buy a ticket for only 1-1/2 Euros (less than \$2) for each of us that will allow us to first ride the subway and then a local train for a total of about forty miles to arrive at our destination. We first board a crowded subway train (it is rush hour) for a twenty minute ride to a train station. There, we board a local train, as shown at left, for a thirty minute ride to the Ostia Antica stop. We leave the train and walk half a mile to the ruins of Ostia.

We have learned that Ostia was first established in 400 BC by the then city-state of Rome as a military outpost at the location where the Tiber River empties into the Mediterranean Sea. Designed to protect Rome from invasion by sea, it was Rome's first colony. Later, as the empire expanded to cover all of southern Europe Ostia became a commercial and trading center. Around 600 AD the river changed course and left Ostia a swampy backwater and the town was abandoned.

We spend the next two-and-a-half hours exploring the neat ruins and viewing the statues and artifacts in the museum. There are few people at this historic site and we enjoy not being jostled by huge crowds like we experienced in Rome.



About noontime we re-board the train and start our return trip to Rome. We exit the train and now get on the subway for the last leg of the trip. The subway train is quite crowded, especially at the door Marie and Kal enter through, so I enter through another door and miss all the excitement that now transpires! As Kal pushes into the crowded subway car, a teenage Gypsy girl (with one or possibly two other Gypsies helping by causing a diversion) deftly unzips the side pocket of Kal's pants and grabs all of his paper money! In the crush of entering the car Kal notices nothing amiss but a nearby couple see what is happening and knock the money from the girl's hand. Kal's Euros fall to the floor. Kal, now aware of what is happening pushes the Gypsy out of the subway car door and back onto the platform while the folks around Kal retrieve the money and return all to him. Kal spends the rest of the subway trip being lectured to by the folks around him as to how to guard his valuables in crowd situations in Rome!



We walk back towards our hotel from the Termini and stop for a quick light lunch. Today has been another perfect weather day.

We check out of the Bailey's Hotel and they call for a large taxi to take all of us and our luggage to another Rome hotel where we will join our tour group for the thirteen day Great Southern Italy tour. We enjoyed our three night stay at the Bailey's. Good location, nice rooms, and a very helpful and friendly staff. Marcia and I really appreciate the great job Marie and Kal did planning and implementing our three days in Rome.

At 2 PM we arrive at the NH Midas hotel for a one night stay. The rooms are great! Yet another good weather day.



At 4 PM the four of us meet with our Tour Director/Driver Simone Martini and the other four members of our group for the first time. Simone gives us some more information about our tour and himself. He is an Italian national in his early 30s and after the touring season he will return to the USA to be with his wife (also an Italian national with a Civil Engineering degree from Princeton working for a large engineering firm) and their young son. We know that he is a highly regarded tour guide and his attitude, humor and demeanor immediately tells us we have a good guide.

We are warmly greeted by the other four members of our group, all from near Ottawa Canada. Gail and Geoff are retired folks and Sue is their daughter. Kevin is Sue's husband. We quickly sense that they will be great traveling companions. We will try to be the same. Wow...we have never been on a guided tour with only eight people and if our guide and traveling companions are good this could be really special.

We depart the hotel in Simone's eight passenger Mercedes-Benz mini-bus and drive further into Rome. We thought we had seen most everything in Rome but Simone drives us to special places we had missed like the Gianicolo Overlook, the Roman Baths and the side of the Colosseum that we had not viewed. Below are Kevin, Sue, Geoff and Gail.





We next go to a local restaurant and have a great meal with fun folks. The Italian dishes and wine just keep coming. The local guitar player and singer is super. He knows every song you could ask for.

After dinner Simone takes us on a night tour of some of the iconic structures in Rome like St. Patrick's Cathedral. Then back to the hotel at about 9:30 PM. We are starting to get the feeling that this could be an outstanding tour.

2015 Southern Italy Tour – Day 6 – Wednesday Sept. 23rd - Amalfi Coast

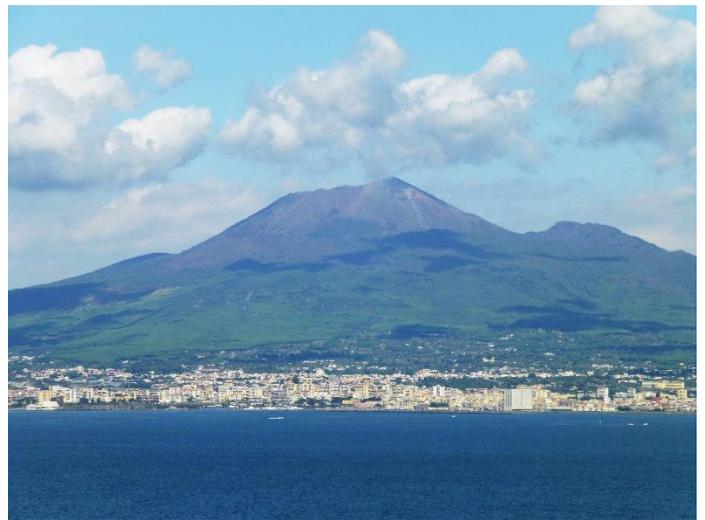
We all enjoy a good night's sleep and breakfast on our one night stay at the NH Midas Hotel in suburban Rome. Today we will leave Rome for Southern Italy. We really enjoyed Rome but we are looking forward to seeing some less hectic and crowded areas of Italy.

At 8 AM we board our mini-bus and drive south out of Rome. Driver/Tour Guide Simone does a great job of driving while giving us good commentary on the country and the region we are in. Interestingly he tells us that there are twenty-two major dialects in Italy and many sub-dialects. In some dialects different words are used to describe the same thing. Most Italians can tell right away what region a fellow Italian is from by their speech.

We are very happy and somewhat surprised at how nice our Mercedes-Benz mini-bus is. The eight passenger seats are roomy and comfortable. The bus suspension gives a very smooth ride and the air conditioning works well. We have fast Wi-Fi onboard! Simone has put together some nice mixes of Italian music, standards, and classic rock that he sometimes plays on the audio system. He tells us that this small bus will allow him to stop more often for photo opportunities and take us to more interesting places than he can go to in a larger vehicle with more tour group members.



We stay on freeways until 11 AM bypassing the large city of Naples where we will spend time on the last full day of the tour. We now drive towards the coast on local roads and start getting some great views of the Mediterranean Sea and the shoreline. We see the Isle of Capri in the distance and then part of the city of Naples with Mt. Vesuvius, an active volcano, rising behind.



Lunch is on our own today and Simone asks us if we all want to have lunch today. We say yes and he says he has a friend with a small restaurant. His friend makes all of his food from his own produce and that of his neighbors and serves excellent homemade wine. It is up in the mountains. Simone calls him. Off we go. What a great place! We all sit at a large table on a covered deck with amazing views (see below....scenic pictures from the deck we are on). We are the only customers.



The owner's wife and son are the cooks and his son's wife helps wait on our table. In the picture at left we are seated at our table with tour guide Simone seated at the end. The owner, who speaks good English, is standing next to Simone as they explain the food offerings for today.

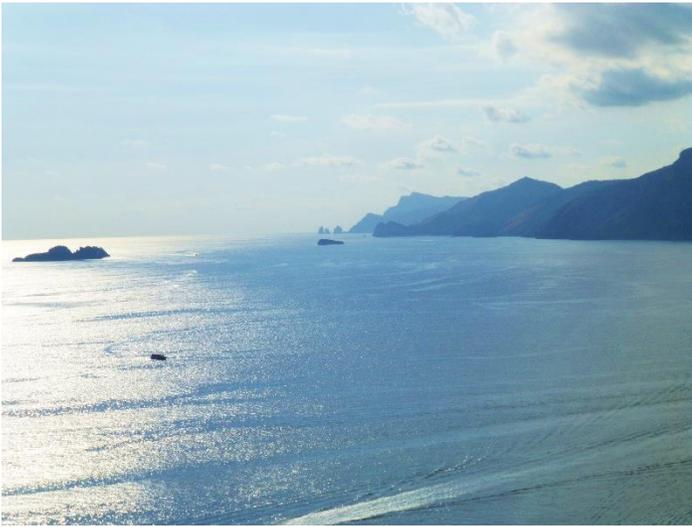
Marcia, Marie, and Kal enjoy Capri Salads while Marcia and I split a portion of the pasta of the day. We enjoy freshly made desert cake. The food is excellent.

After lunch we resume our ride on the Amalfi Coast headed south, always along the shore but rising up and down the sides of mountains. The road is narrow with many turns. The mountains and occasional road elevations are much greater than we imagined they would be. As there are little or no real parking spots available in this

popular tourist area cars are parked all along the road making travel even more difficult. Simone does a masterful job of driving and makes frequent stops for us to take pictures. He says the larger motor coaches can only traverse certain sections of the coastal road. We will drive the complete road today and tomorrow!



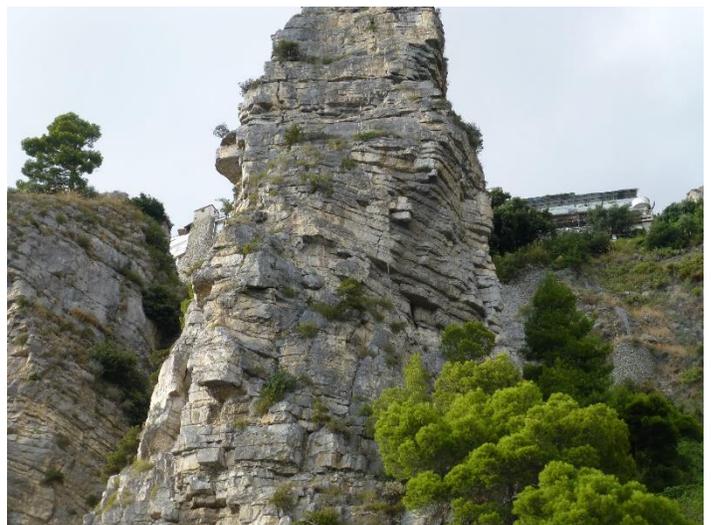
At 4 PM we arrive in Positano and check into our hotel for the night, the Tritone. What a unique hotel! It is built on the top and top sides of a cliff with elevators that take you up or down to room level and then another set of two elevators to take you down eleven stories to the sea shore. Below left is the view from the hotel looking north. Below right is the view looking down from their restaurant veranda showing the smaller of their two pools and a beach to the left.



Here is a photo of our room at the Tritone and the view from our window.



Marcia and I take the two elevators down to sea level. Here are views from the beach looking north and up at the hotel,



We all meet at 6 PM in the lobby to go out to dinner. I am in the last group, with Geoff, Gail, Sue and Kevin, to take the elevator up from the hotel lobby to our mini-bus in the parking area. Now it says the elevator capacity is six people, but the five of us are not small people. As we get in Kevin comments he was talking to two men from San Francisco today that were stuck in one of the elevators for an hour. Our elevator starts to go up but then stops moving and we hear an

ominous sound something like a belt slipping on a pulley; we are no longer ascending. We hit the “Stop” button, then try again to ascend. We hear the noises but no movement up. As we ponder being stuck inside of the mountain Kevin suggest that we try to descend one floor. We hit the “down” button for the next floor and it works! We take the stairs to street level.

We board our mini-bus and Simone drives us further south for half an hour to the town of Amalfi. What a pretty town.



Simone gives us 45 minutes for shopping and walking around the town.

He then leads us to a local restaurant where we have another great Italian dinner. We eat on their outdoor deck. Dozens of appetizers, pasta, main course, desert and good wine.

We are back to our hotel at 10 PM. Another great day.

2015 Southern Italy Tour – Thursday September 24th - Day 7 - Lecce

Before going to bed late last night I look out the window of our room at the Tritone Hotel on the Amalfi Coast and can see the forecasted storm front approaching from the west. Every five or ten seconds a lightning strike flies down from the approaching clouds and in to the ocean. At about 3:30 AM this morning the front reaches us with more lightning, thunder and heavy rain. When we get up at 6 AM the front has passed and the skies are clearing.

Today will be a long travel day as we will be going from the Amalfi Coast on the west side of Italy to Lecce on the very southeastern part of Italy; the “heel” of its “boot”.

We depart our hotel at 8:30 AM and drive for an hour on the final stretch of the Amalfi Coast road. More great views.



It is something to watch vehicles pass each other on this narrow road. The large motor coaches, on the sections they are allowed to travel, sometimes have to move back and forth several times to make it around sharp corners and other vehicles.

At Salarno the road ends and we turn inland driving through the mountains into a central valley of rolling hills and farms growing wheat and corn. As we near the eastern coast of Italy the land flattens out and a wider variety of crops are being grown including olives and grapes. There are cattle being raised. The divided highways that we travel on are of high quality and we appreciate the absence of billboards.

At 12:30 PM we stop at a service plaza for a light lunch and at 1 PM we reach the eastern coast and see the Adriatic Sea. At 2:45 PM we arrive in the city of Lecce and check into our rooms in the old and elegant central city hotel the Grand Hotel di Lecce where we will stay for two nights. Our rooms are fancy and huge.



At 4:30 PM we meet our local guide Angela for a two hour tour of Lecce. She explains that the town was first founded by the Greeks and later controlled by the Romans, Normans, Byzantines, Turks, Spanish and French. So, it has many architectural styles but the predominant surviving style is called “Lecce Baroque”. We walk to the Piazza Duomo and first visit the Parrocchia Cathedral. It was built in the 15th century but most of the decorations were added in the 16th and 17th century under the Spanish.



We next visit what we assume to be a Roman amphitheater. Our guide tells us it is a Roman colosseum built in the 3rd Century AD (completely round) but the other side is under the road and they don't want to tear the road up!. It had an "upper deck" and facade but those have been destroyed.

We next go to another church, the Basilic di Croce which was built and added to between the 15th and 17th centuries.



At 7:30 PM we leave for an included dinner. All of our meals have been great but this one is our favorite so far. Twenty or so appetizer plates to be passed around; all are great. Wonderful pasta and main courses. Of course desert and wine.

2015 Southern Italy Tour – Day 8 – Friday September 25th - Lecce

We wake up rested at the Grand Hotel Lecce after our first night's stay and board our mini-bus at 9:30 AM for a forty minute drive to Otranto. It appears that we will have a perfect weather day. We meet again local guide Angela who explains that this seaside town at the most south eastern part of Italy has been controlled over the years by Greeks, Romans, Normans, Byzantines, Turks and Spanish.

We first view the 12th Century Norman castle that was upgraded by the Spanish in the 15th Century for protection against the Turks. It was surrounded by a moat that could be filled with seawater.



We next walk to the shore and view the extremely clear waters of the Adriatic Sea. Angela takes a picture of the group.



We are continuing to really enjoy traveling with the four Canadians. Gail and Geoff are very well traveled; they have been to most of the places we have visited and more. Their daughter Sue and husband Kevin, on the other hand, have never been in Europe and so far they think Italy is great.



As in most of the towns we visit there are shops lining what appear to be pedestrian streets in the shopping district. However, these are actually the active streets so you need to be careful to dodge the occasional bike, motor scooter, motorcycle, car, and even van or truck. In the case at the left, the shop owners have to draw back their awnings so that the van can pass.

Angela next leads us to a baroque cathedral whose construction started in the 11th Century. It is famous for its mosaic floors made from millions of small tiles. The scene shown below at the right depicts “Hell”.



Most gruesome, the church displays the relics of 800 folks beheaded by invading Turks in 1480.





At 1 PM Simone drives us out in to the country to a farm that is also an Agri/Tourism restaurant. To get that license you need to use homegrown and homemade ingredients for 80% of the food you serve, sourcing only 20%. We sit at a table on the veranda and enjoy many different offerings of Italian food specialties. Desert is delicious, Panacotte.

Simone sits with us and talks about his family; wife and eleven month old son, Gary, back in the USA. He shows us a video on his Smart Phone, sent by his wife yesterday, of his son taking his first steps. He has been leading tours in Italy since May. He is going home to the USA for five days when our tour in finished and we can tell that this thirty-three year old is looking forward to visiting home. He will then fly back to Italy to lead two more tours before the end of the touring season.

Marie and Kal buy a two liter container of fresh-pressed olive oil to bring home. We walk around the grounds on a perfect day; sunny and not too hot.



We return to Lecce and our hotel in the late afternoon. As the tour supplied our two meals today as breakfast and lunch, dinner is on our own. Later, we ask the front desk for a recommendation for a good pizzeria and they direct us to a restaurant where we have an excellent pizza dinner.

2015 Southern Italy Tour – Day 9 – Saturday Sept. 26th – Alberobello

We board our mini-bus at 8:30 AM and leave the city of Lecce. We enjoyed our two night stay at the Grand Hotel Lecce. We also really enjoyed the city, sometimes called the “Florence of the South”; historic buildings all over the place but not a lot of traffic or crowds.

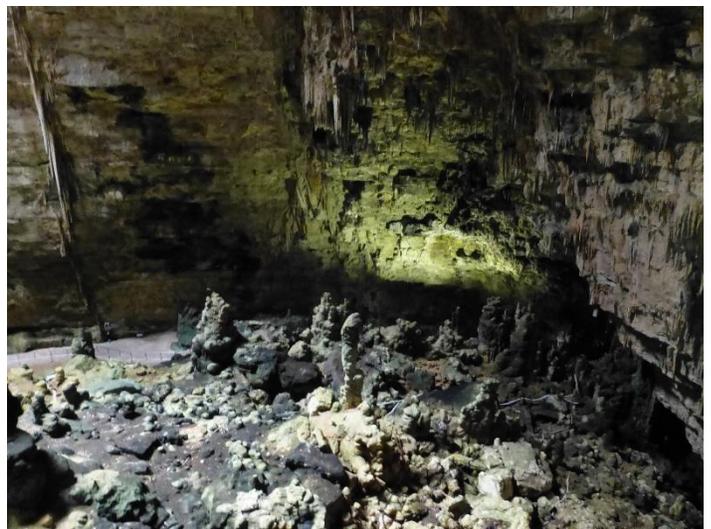


We drive north through flat land on another good weather day. At 10 AM we arrive at the Grotte di Castellana caves with some time for shopping before our English language tour begins at 11 AM.

Our guide Nico leads us down the stairs of the man-made cave entrance. Once down into the first chamber of the cave Nico explains that the caves were first discovered in 1938 when Franco Anelli and Vito Matarrese rappelled down a rope from a large hole in the ground. The hole had been known about for many centuries and had been used as a garbage dumping place. The explorers had to clear away mounds of trash to be certain of what they had discovered.

With the exception of the first chamber of the caves, photography, even non-flash, is not allowed. We think this is

probably because if everyone was stopping to take pictures of the many unique formations the tours would never finish!



Above on the left is a picture of the centuries old hole in the ceiling of the first chamber. It is perhaps fifty feet in diameter. To the right is another picture taken in the first chamber which is huge (perhaps eighty yards long, sixty yards wide and fifty yards high) but not very spectacular. For the next hour we walk about a mile through many chambers and see varied and beautiful formations of stalactites and stalagmites. The last chamber, the White Cave, is said to be unique among all of the caves in the world. Rock formations above the ceiling of the cave have enabled dripping water to create limestone formations that are all pure white. We are surprised at the size and extent of this cave system.



We walk another mile and return to the cave entrance, coming above ground at 1:15 PM.

We find a nearby pizzeria and enjoy a light lunch.

At 2:45 PM we arrive in the city of Alberobello and check into the Grand Hotel Olimpo.



At 3 PM we meet our local guide Alexandra for a tour of the Trulli stone houses, unique white circular structures with conical roofs. Alexandra tells us that they were built in the second half of the 16th century. There are 1400 Trulla here.



Trulla walls are made with large limestone blocks and the roofs with thinner pieces of limestone set on top of each other to form a tapered cone. The roof must weigh many tons.

We are able to go inside of a Trulla. It is no longer occupied but the friendly owners are happy to show it off to tourists.

These houses typically have only one small window. The thick stone walls and roof keep heat in during winter and out during summer.

It is said to be good luck to have your picture taken sitting on the bed in a Trulla. One of the owners take our pictures.



We next visit the Saint Antonio Church built in the same style as the Tullia in 1927.

We shop for a while in the town and then return to our hotel, watching the sun set over the olive and walnut trees right off of our patio.

At 7:15 PM we meet and walk back into town where we have another great included dinner at a local restaurant.

There is a large festival going on in the town this weekend. After dinner Marie and Kal find an area where artists are performing and enjoy some Italian music.



2015 Southern Italy Tour – Day10 – Sunday September 27th – Matera



At 10 AM we board our mini-bus and leave Alberobello, We drive on back roads for an hour-and-a-half past farmland with very rocky soil and many stone fences. This is a dairy farming region. This should be a somewhat relaxing day for us. Not too many activities are planned.

At 11:30 AM we reach the city of Matera and check into the Hotel San Domnico. Below is a picture of the street that our room looks out on. We are only two minutes from city center. The weather is sunny and a bit cool; probably about 68 degrees.

The four of us meet at 1 PM and walk into town. We pass through three town squares before we find a restaurant that looks perfect. It is fun to watch all the

citizens of Matera strolling around town on a Sunday afternoon..

We each have pizza or calzone. We chat with a couple at the next table from Monterrey California. They are here to bike 50 miles a day all the way to Lecce, where we were a couple of days ago. I think we are glad we are on a tour seeing the sights!



We have noticed that in the southern part of Italy few people speak any English. The hotel desk people do but not the restaurant staff.

At 3 PM we meet our local guide for a tour of the town. The main attraction of this town is the Sassi area. The first populations lived here in caves in Neolithic times. In the 15th Century the caves were enlarged and turned into dwellings, many of which are still in use today. Below is a picture of some of the original caves and of the inhabited parts of the Sassi.



Our guide leads us down into the Sassi area. She tells us we are walking on roads built on top of the houses. She shows us pictures from Mel Gibson's "Passion of the Christ" showing him carrying the crucifixion cross down the same road we

just walked down, with the backdrop of Sassi representing Jerusalem. Part of the remake of Ben Hur (with Morgan Freeman) has recently been filmed here.



Most of the old dwelling are occupied as homes or shops and have been extensively modified internally. Our guide takes us to a house that was last occupied in 1956 and has been restored to its original configuration. The folks lived in this house with their donkey and chickens. No toilet or running water. As we go through, an audio tape gives us a narration about their daily life.



We see the ruins of the original church in Sassi and the current one.



At 7:30 PM we meet for another great included dinner in a “cave restaurant” in Sassi.



After dinner we walk around town and watch the many local families chatting in the town squares.



2015 Southern Italy Tour – Day 11 – Monday September 28th - Taormina

We board our mini-bus at 8 AM and leave Matera, bound for the Italian island state of Sicily. This will be our longest travel day. We will be on the bus for about six hours.



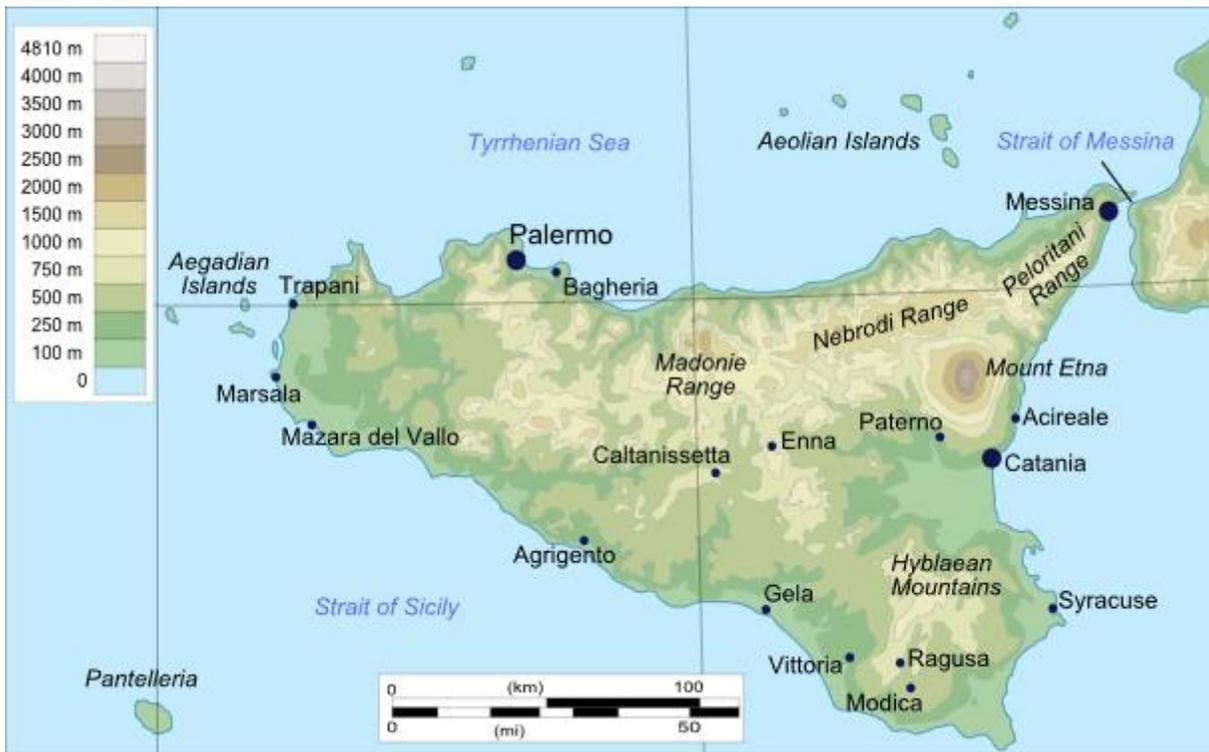
We drive through the Calabria region passing through rolling hills and later cross the Apennine Mountains, going through perhaps seventy tunnels. We reach the coast and see the Mediterranean Sea. We follow the coast south until we reach the Straits of Messina. Here we will take a ferry across to Sicily. We are surprised at how close to Italy the island of Sicily is.



We watch our ferry return from Sicily and at 1:15 PM Simone drives our Mercedes onboard. We go up on the viewing deck to watch the crossing. The water in the strait is very calm and it only takes about half an hour for us to cross.

Sicily is a large island, almost 10,000 square miles in size, and has a population of over five million people. It is perhaps the poorest region in Italy. A high percentage of the Italians that immigrated to America in the late 1800s and early 1900s came from Sicily. It is also the home of the world-wide crime syndicate known as The Mafia.

We will be spending four and a half days in Sicily and are looking forward to enjoying the scenery and historic buildings and ruins.



We stop for a light lunch and it starts to rain. We reach our hotel at 4 PM, Caesar Palace, which has a resort feel to it. Our rooms are nice and we have large patios off of our rooms looking down on the swimming pool.



It continues to rain. This is the first real rain that we have experienced on our vacation.

Tonight's plan calls for us to drive twenty minutes into town and walk to a local restaurant for an included dinner. Due to the heavy rain Simone decides to have us dine in our hotel at their extensive dinner buffet. The food and the atmosphere are just OK. (However, their Pina Colodas are excellent.....Marcia!)

2015 Southern Italy Tour – Day 12 – Tuesday September 29th - Taormina



It rained all night and is still raining when we wake up this morning in our hotel in Taormina Sicily. After an included breakfast we are joined by our local guide at 9 AM and Simone drives us all for about twenty minutes to Taormina for the start of our city tour.

When we reach Taormina we are happy to see that the rain has stopped. We enter the old city through an archway. I ask our guide if she has lived in Sicily all of her life and she says mostly yes and repeats something that Simone had told us. Italians tend to stay in the area that they were born in for all of their life. Partly this is to remain near family. The nomadic moves of Americans is not something that most Italians would consider. This may be a drag on the Southern Italy economy as the better jobs are in Northern Italy.

We learn that Taormina was first settled by Greeks in 750 BC. Greece was then becoming heavily populated and this area, with good volcanic soil rich in nutrients and good rainfall (no kidding!) was ideal. I asked our guide when Mount Etna, which rises behind Taormina, last erupted and she said May!

She leads us to an ancient Amphitheater first constructed by the Greeks in the 1st Century BC and later expanded by the Romans. It is used, today, every evening during the summer for a wide variety of performances. It is quite an impressive structure looking down on the sea. It now starts raining again and we break out the nice umbrellas Simone has supplied us with.



As we leave the Amphitheater the skies open up....it's really raining now.

We stand under some arches for a while as our guide gives us some more good information about the history of the area.

Next we seek "sanctuary" in some old churches.

We also note the narrow steps between buildings leading up from the main street. We find the very narrowest one in Taormina.



Our guide points out Mount Etna, the 11,000 foot high volcanic mountain towering over Taormina. Below on the left is what we see. To the right, courtesy of the internet, is what we would see on a good weather day!



Simone picks us up in the mini-bus and we say goodbye to our local guide who did a great job for us today. It is now noon and we leave for Mount Etna. We drive over very flooded roads.

At 1:45 PM we arrive at the Barone di Villagrande Winery, 2200 feet up on the slopes of Mount Etna. We are taken on a tour of the winery and learn that the volcanic soil and the unique geography that promotes lots of rain (no kidding!) are great for growing grapes. The winery was first started in 1724 and is still owned by the same family.



Now, with few exceptions, the included lunches and dinners that we have had on this tour have been among the best we have ever had. We now enjoy the very best! We have a lunch paired with seven different wines to taste. We start with a grouping of appetizers that are delicious; olives, special cheeses, meats, sun dried tomatoes, then a great pasta dish, a pork entre and a penneccota desert. All eight of us are amazed as every bite is unique and tasty.

We leave the winery a little after 3 PM. Simone wants to drive us up the mountain even though it is raining and the mountain is shrouded in clouds. Hello...what is this!! Water is leaking from the inside roof of our mini-bus. I guess they don't make Mercedes-Benzs like they used to. Marie and Kal, in the third row, cover themselves with their waterproof jackets. Geoff in the second row raises his umbrella. Marcia and I stay dry in the back row.



We drive to the end of the road where a ski resort is located. At the end of the road we are perhaps still a thousand feet from the summit and the volcanic cone. We are amazed at the extent of the lava fields.





Simone drives us back to our hotel. We arrive a little before 5 PM. As we had the great included lunch today dinner is on our own. Simone offers to drive us into town for dinner but we are still full from lunch so decline.

At 6:30 PM we go down to the bar area for Happy Hour. Marcia enjoys meeting a new nine month old friend from Belgium. Marie and Kal join us and we end up dining on munchies from the Happy Hour spread for dinner. Simone joins us and we chat about the travel business that he is the owner of...the one that offers this great tour we are on.

2015 Southern Italy Tour - Day 13 – Wednesday September 30th – Agrigento

We wake up this morning after the second night at our hotel near Taormina Sicily. It appears that it has rained even more



overnight and it is now quite cloudy outside. Now, what a surprise. After my shower I look out towards our patio. It has cleared quite a bit. Wait....what is that I see between a large palm tree and one of our hotel's buildings? Yes, it is Mount Etna with snow on its left peak and steam coming out of its volcanic cone on the right! Marie and Kal cannot see Etna from their room two doors down from ours. They come to our room to get the good view. It clouds up again and the summit of Mount Etna disappears.

We board our mini-bus at 8:30 AM as Simone does his always masterful job of loading our luggage in the

back compartment of our bus. . We will be traveling from the Northeast coast of Sicily to the Southwest coast, crossing through the mountainous middle part of the island.

It starts to rain quite heavily. After an hour-and-a-half the landscape starts to turn browner and we see cattle ranches. We also see our old friend the sun!

As we near the Southwest coast of Sicily we start to again see vineyards.





We reach the Valley of the Temples near Agrigento at noon. The weather is perfect; sunny and about seventy degrees. We have a quick, light lunch and meet our local guide Salvatore and start our two hour tour at 12:30 PM. Salvatore tells us that this site was founded by the Greeks in 581 BC and was then known as Akaragas and grew to be a city of 100,000 by the 5th Century BC.

They chose the site due to the presence of good soil, salt, sulfur and defensive positions offered by the sea, two rivers, and the mountains and cliffs.

After the Greeks established the city they were attacked by their mortal foes from Carthage. The Greeks defeated the Carthaginians, took 25,000 of them as slaves, and used the slaves to build the temples.

The Greek's "Golden Age" was short. Only seventy-four years later a 250,000 man army from Carthage captured, sacked and took over Akaragas. Two hundred years later the Romans conquered all of Sicily and started restoring the temples. In the 4th Century AD the area was abandoned and in the 5th Century AD the Vandals from Northern Europe plundered the area.

We start at the Temple of Juno. It was built in 450 BC from the local sandstone. Marble was not available in Sicily so these temples were always painted with a white stucco paint to give the appearance of marble. The remains of the temple are spectacular. Salvatore explains to us how these temples were constructed.



We now walk about half a mile to see the Temple of Concordia. It was built in 470 BC and is the second best preserved Greek temple in the world. It is 80% complete. We are really enjoying this visit. Salvatore is a most excellent local guide, the weather is perfect and the crowds are small.



We next walk to the remains of the Temple of Hercules. It was bigger than the Concordia Temple and just slightly smaller than the Pantheon in Athens. It was destroyed by an earthquake in the 6th Century AD.





The last area we visit is the remains of the Temple of Zeus. It was built in 480 BC and was the third largest structure ever built by the Greeks. It was 130 feet long, 65 feet wide, and 100 feet tall. It was destroyed by the Carthaginians.

At left Marcia stands by a reconstruction of one the “Titans” that stood above the columns “supporting” the roof.

This has been a great tour and Salvatore a truly excellent guide.



At 3:30 PM we arrive at our hotel for tonight the Baia di Ulisse. It is another beautiful four star property and it is right near the beach. We can see the sea from our patio.



We check out the pool and spend some time walking the beach.



We have an included dinner tonight in the hotel restaurant.

2015 Southern Italy Tour - Day 14 – Thursday Oct. 1 – Erice & Palermo

We board our mini-bus and leave our nice hotel near Agrigento at 9 AM. It has started to rain lightly. Today we will drive from the Southwest coast of Sicily to the Northwest coast ending up in the large city of Palermo. We will stop at the historical site of Erice. Most of our driving will be along the coast.



It now begins to rain quite heavily. Also the ceiling of the mini-van starts to leak again!

We drive through some towns that appear to be almost deserted. Simone reminds us that “there are no jobs in Sicily” and many people have left. The agriculture industry appears to be doing well. We pass vineyards, olive farms, fields growing artichokes and all types of vegetables. It stops raining at 10:30 AM and we drive into sunshine.

At noon we spot a huge rock rising out of the land near the sea and Simone tells us that it is Erice, a medieval city originally founded by the Phoenicians.



Simone drives us up a narrow winding road to the top of the mountain. We have incredible views on the way up. At the top we are at an elevation of 2,887 feet. It is now 12:30 PM. It is very windy. We enjoy more great views.



We also see some medieval buildings... the castle and the 14th century Gothic church. We also have time to stop in the shops on the narrow streets.



At 1:30 PM we meet at a restaurant in town and have a great included lunch. Marcia shows off the small table covering that she bought for our house. There's more time for shopping after lunch.



At lunch I ask Simone a question about Erice, the town we are in. He tells me he cannot answer me now...maybe in the bus. He says that Italian law allows only licensed local guides to talk about attractions; he could lose his licence if someone in the restaurant reported him for talking about any historical aspect of Erice (without the required tag hanging around his neck).

As he lives in the USA for half the year he tells us another difference in the cultures. In Italy, if the person is polite, they would never ask a personal question of another person (age, number of children, marital status, etc). Italians are taught this from birth. He's known Americans that came back from meeting distant relatives in Italy and were amazed they were never asked what their profession was.



We leave Erice at 3:30 PM and drive two hours to the large city of Palermo. Traffic is very congested! We check into a very nice hotel near the harbor in the center of the city, the Palzo Sitano. The view out of our room's window (see left) is not great.

Dinner is on our own tonight and the four of us meet at 7 PM and walk around the corner and enjoy a nice pizza dinner on a restaurant patio on a quiet street. The four Canadians enjoy a seafood dinner at a harborside restaurant recommended by Simone.

2015 Southern Italy Tour - Day 15 – Friday October 2nd – Palermo



We enjoy a good night's sleep in our hotel in Palermo Sicily. At 9 AM we meet our local guide Francesca for a 2-3/4 hour walking tour of the central city.

She tells us that the area was first inhabited by the Phoenicians in the 8th century BC. Then by the Romans, Vandals, Normans, Byzantines, Turks and the Spanish.

The population of Palermo is 800,000 with another 200,000 migrants from Africa. Unemployment is between 60 and 65 percent.

We first walk to the Plaza Bellini and see three churches built by the Spaniards during the time they controlled the area from 1450 through 1713.

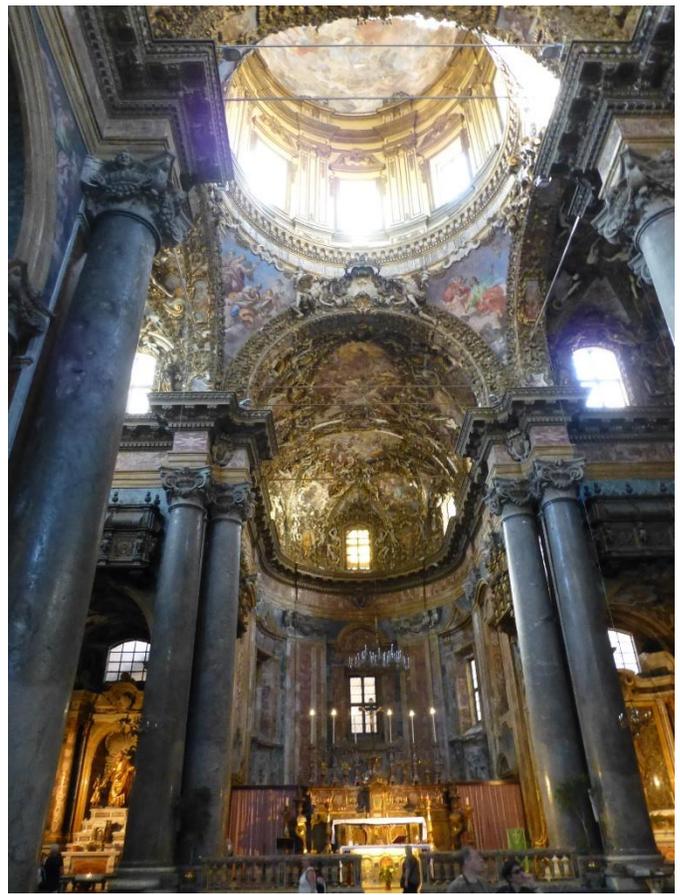
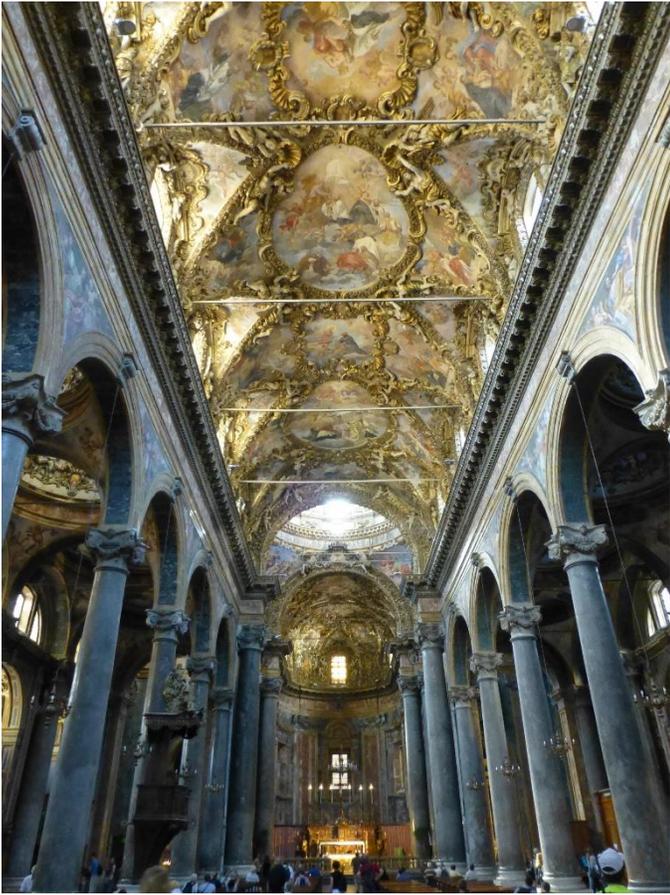
We walk to the Plaza Pretoria and see and visit the magnificent City Offices. The building was built in the early 17th Century. The offices and council chambers are impressive as is the fountain in front of the hall.



The city is crowded and the traffic chaotic. We go to the four corners square and see the statues built into the buildings at each of the corners.



Next we view and visit the Teatini Church built by the Spanish in the early 17th century in the “Sicilian Baroque” style.



Then we walk past Teatro Massimo. It is a 7000 seat opera house built in the Art Nouveau style in the late 18th century. The exterior is seen in the photo on the left.

We now walk to the open air market and our guide takes us though it while explaining all of the interesting foods for sale and how they are used by Sicilians.

Next we go to the truly amazing Cathedral of Palermo. The first construction began in the 8th century. It was first a Catholic church, then turned in to a Mosque when the Turks conquered Sicily, and then again into a Catholic church. It's an interesting blend of Arab and Norman architecture.



In an alcove there is a tomb and a memorial for a Priest killed by the Mafia in the 1990s. He had been opposing the stranglehold that the crime syndicate holds over Sicily and paid the ultimate price. Yesterday, on the four lane highway leading into Palermo we saw a very large memorial. Simone explained that it honored a judge, his wife, and a dozen policemen in his protective unit that were killed when the Mafia exploded a huge bomb planted under the highway as his car passed. Obviously, he too had been opposing the mob. The current mayor of Palermo was elected to the office after his predecessor was murdered by the Mafia.



At 11:45 AM we exit the inner city walls through an arch. In the picture at the left the beautiful pink flowering tree is a Kapoc tree. It is a great weather day; 70 degrees and sunny.

Simone picks us up in the mini-bus and we drive for about thirty minutes to Monreale (Royal Mountain). We are now about 900 feet above sea level.

We visit the amazing Cathedral di Monreale. Construction was started by the Normans in 1172 and finished forty years later. It is huge. All of the interior decoration is done in mosaic tiles which are still in great shape.





We enjoy some nice views from the heights.

At 12:45 PM we have a light lunch.

We have noticed that, outside of the guides and hotel personnel, very few folks understand any English.

At 1:45 PM we reboard the mini-bus and Simone drives us to Mount Pellegrino.

We first visit Santuario Santa Rosalig a church built to honor the Patron Saint of Palermo. It was built utilizing a cave in 1735. The ceiling of the church is the roof of a cave that rises a couple of hundred feet.



Simone now drives us to the top of Mount Pellegrino. We are at 2000 feet and get some nice views of Palermo.



We have some time to kill before we board the overnight ferry to Naples. Simone drives us to a nice location on the harbor and we enjoy refreshments. Marcia is happy when the Fifty Euro note that she thought she had lost falls out of the bottom of her pants on to the floor of the bar. The group has fun exchanging stories with each other and Simone.



At 6 PM we leave the bar to board the overnight ferry from Parlema Sicily to Naples Italy. We see our ferry at the dock. Simone drives aboard and we go to our staterooms. We have small interior rooms.



We depart Palermo harbor at 8 PM for an overnight cruise to Naples on the Italian mainland. They say our ship is lightly loaded tonight; not a lot of cars, trucks or people so we will make good time and should dock at Naples in only about ten hours at 6 AM.

At 8:15 PM we meet in the cafeteria for a (very average) dinner included with our ferry ticket. Simone has brought along a few bottles of wine for us which helped make dinner a bit better. Tomorrow will be our last full day in Italy.

2015 Southern Italy Tour - Day 16 – Sat. Oct. 3 - Naples & Roman Castels



Today will be the last full day of our Italy vacation.

Our overnight ferry from Palermo Sicily to Naples, on the mainland of Italy, docks in Naples at 6:15 AM after a ten hour voyage. Getting good sleep in the tiny cabins was an iffy thing. The sea was very calm. Disembarking is caotic.

Simone drives us off the ferry directly to a nice resturant where we enjoy breakfast in their enclosed patio.

Local guide Laura joins us at 7:30 AM and we depart for a drive around the city. It is early on a Saturday morning so traffic is light. Laura tells us that Naples is the third largest city in Italy with a population of over three million. The city is nearly 3000 years old. We drive to an overlook and get good views of the city and expensive villas. Unfortunately,

as we have seen in most places in Southern Italy and Sicily, graffitti seems to cover nearly every surface, litter and broken bottles are everywhere, and folks don't pick up after their dogs!



We drive downtown and Laura takes us on a two hour walking tour of The Old Town. We first visit a building that was built in 1470 as a palace for a Spanish nobleman. It later was converted into a church for a convent. The interior of this baroque style church is beautifully decorated, mostly all with inlaid marble.



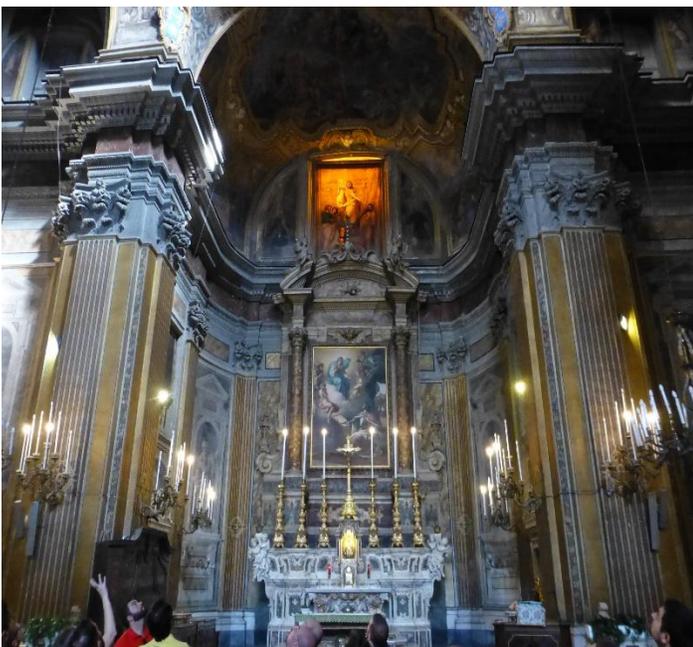
We walk down many narrow streets lined with small shops. Laura gives us some time for shopping and she explains the unique food offerings for sale. We walk through several squares with more old buildings and statues.

At 11:00 AM Simone picks us up and we drive to the Central Plaza for more shopping and sightseeing.

Construction of the central plaza, or Palazeo Reale, was started in 1599. The centerpiece of the plaza is the massive Bourbon church, the Basilica S. Francesco di Paola, that was built between 1816 and 1860. It is amazing.



I also view the ornate interior of the Chiesa di San Ferdinando church built in 1622 and the exterior of a nearby fort.





Simone picks us up at noon and we drive for the next three-and-a-half hours to the Roman Castels region in the hilly countryside near Rome. This is where Simone was born and raised and he is looking forward to seeing his mother and his friends tonight.

After we leave the four lane highway we travel for quite a while over scenic country roads. We stop at an overlook and view the town that we will be staying in. The town overlooks a lake formed in the crater of an extinct volcano.

In the picture to the left our hotel is on the extreme left, the town is in the middle and at the right is the Pope's summer retreat. Pope Francis has yet to use it.

We check into the Castle Vecchio, a hotel converted from an estate. Our rooms are nice and the view from our rooms of the lake is great.



We walk into town and enjoy a little shopping and more views of the lake. What a restful way to end our vacation rather than staying in busy Rome or at a hotel near the airport. Today is another perfect weather day.



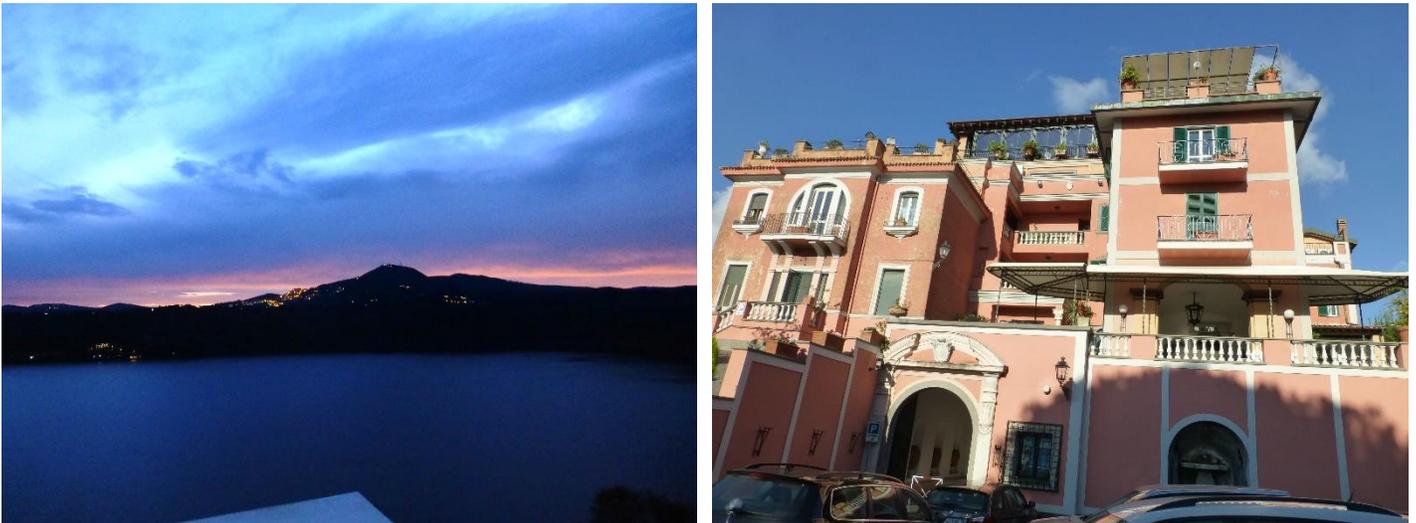
It seems like this is the season for weddings. We run into three today. First at the castle in Naples, then in the small town where we are staying and then at our hotel where a lively reception was underway right below our window.



We enjoy an excellent farewell dinner in our hotel restaurant with our fun traveling companions from the Ottawa area, Gail, Geoff, Sue and Kevin. Tomorrow the four of us travel home to the USA while the Canadians will stay in Italy for one more day.

2015 Southern Italy Tour - Day 17 – Sunday October 4 - Return to USA

Today Marie, Kal, Marcia and I travel back to the USA. We enjoy watching the sunrise over the mountains and our lake in the Roman Castels region of Italy.



We say goodbye to our great Canadian traveling companions and the Castle Vecchio hotel. After breakfast Simone picks us up at 8 AM for a forty five minute drive to the Rome airport. Traffic is light on this Sunday morning. He tells us that we rode for 2700 miles with him on this vacation. We say our goodbyes to Simone and sincerely thank him for a great vacation. We wish him the best of luck in the future with his family (they are expecting a second child in March) and with his travel company. We promise to recommend Great Tours of Italy to our friends.

Security screening for our flight to the USA is very thorough. We board a full (300 passenger) US Airways (soon to be called American Airlines) Airbus A330 and depart on time at 11:20 AM for a 9-3/4 hour flight to Charlotte NC. We lose six hours in route to the USA so it is 3:55 PM, today, when we land. The trip back home (during the day) seemed a lot easier than the overnight trip going to Europe.

Both Marie and Kal and the Marcia and I catch 6:05 PM flights to Dayton and Pittsburgh. Arriving home at 8:30 PM. We enjoy the sunset as we land in Pittsburgh. Pepper is happy to see Marcia again.



A Brief Rating/Recap of our Trip:

Pluses:

Southern Italy and Sicily – A great area to visit with superb scenery, towns, churches, historic sites and ruins, and friendly people. All exceeded our expectations.

Rome – What a city and thanks to Marie and Kal for putting together and implementing a great itinerary for us.

Great Tours of Italy's "Great Southern Italy Tour":

---We are now spoiled. Traveling in a group of only eight people is so convenient vs. the larger groups we've toured with.

---Excellent itinerary. No early morning starts (before 8 AM) and no long travel days. Good mix of activities and free time

---Great four star accommodations (except for the overnight ferry from Palermo to Naples). Also, we recommend the Bailey's Hotel that we booked for our three pre-tour nights in Rome.

---Included food. With the exception of two of the hotel meals in the early part of the trip all meals were excellent.

---Mercedes-Benz mini-bus. First class and very comfortable seats, suspension, Wi-Fi, air conditioning and Simone's tunes.

---Local Guides. The first two that we had were OK, after that they all were very good or excellent.

---Weather. We think we picked a good time to visit Southern Italy. We really only had one rainy day.

---Traveling companions. Gail, Geoff, Sue and Kevin were a blast to travel with. Of course Kal and Marie are just the best.

---Simone Martini our Guide and Driver. A most pleasant, knowledgeable, interesting, helpful, and funny individual. Also an excellent driver. Helped to make this a special trip.

---The roads and infrastructure of Southern Italy are in better shape than I expected. They are really quite good.

---Meals and beverages that we bought on our own seemed reasonably priced. The stronger dollar helped.

Minuses:

---Unfortunate that it appears to be in the behavior practices of some in the region that graffiti on all surfaces, throwing trash and glass bottles all around and not picking up after your dog is OK.

---Traffic and the local driving styles can be a bit harrowing for an American.

---Overnight ferry ride to Naples

---Sites were crowded with folks in Rome; probably normal. Less so as we moved south.

---African migrants walking around hawking things like “selfie sticks” were a little annoying.

Best, Jim