



ITALY TRIP

February 2005

For Family, Friends, and those who express an interest.

Well, I'm not sure where to begin, but in a nutshell, everyone should go to Italy at least once in their lifetime! It was just as I remembered about 6 years ago from my previous trip. Driving is a blast. Of all countries, eating in Italy is an art form. The weather sucked. I actually have Ned Jaquith (Bamboo Garden <http://www.bamboogarden.com>) to thank for this wonderful opportunity. If it hadn't been for Ned forwarding the notice by eMail to his mailing list, I would never have known. The trip did not disappoint!

Air Travel:

Going by Delta worked very well for us this trip because we flew directly from Asheville, NC, to Atlanta, GA, to Rome, Italy. We were able to board in Asheville and have our luggage checked in, and straight through to Rome. Same deal coming back; check in at Rome and luggage ends up in Asheville, NC. None of this go to LA and then go to the international terminal and recheck in with your bags. In all fairness, I think other airlines with direct flights to Rome, also do this.

Arrival:

We arrived in Rome at 9:20 AM on Monday, and had no problems with luggage or passport or customs. We found the car rental agency (Europcar, Rome Fiumicino Airport, 39-6-65010879, booked with Auto Europe). There is an "Auto Europe" window and a "Europcar" window. Go to the Europcar window. Finding the area is no problem, the airport is well signed in English and Italian and while it is spread out, the rental car agencies are all in one little office/ room.

After learning that Rome had passed a new *limit* on the number of cars allowed in the central part of the city, Carol and I discussed the possibility of just changing our car reservation. We decided (her wonderful idea really) to forget about the car until Wednesday and take the Train into Rome and get a taxi to the Hotel, also suggested by the **AAA Spiral Guides ROME** Book. The employees were able to cancel the car reservation and rebook without any trouble. It also saved money. I would strongly advise anyone who was in a similar situation to do the same. It is easy to locate the train terminal and purchase tickets. Also following the Spiral Guide, we purchased round trip tickets, enabling us to just catch the train back at the appropriate time (they are good anytime/ day).

A word about **reference materials**: The AAA Spiral Guides are essential! It was an excellent text, and well worth the money spent. Michelin Maps are also essential if you travel by car. Rick Steve's book is a good supplement if you find yourself other than where you plan or plans change, and has some good tips. I had also picked up a *Pop out* Map of Rome and Florence. These are great when walking around and can be kept in a shirt pocket.

The train ride is quick and lets you see some countryside. No problem getting a taxi. The weather was rainy. More on the weather later.

Hotel:

The **Hotel dei Borgognoni**, Via del Bufalo 126, Roma, 39-06-69941505, <http://www.hotelborgognoni.it/>

(you can select *translate this page* in Google), was excellent. I would return in a minute. It's on a very short street and not too easy to locate, but is VERY centrally located!

After a rest, the first item on the list was the Hard Rock Cafe, which was of course, within walking distance of the hotel. Once again, due to the Spiral Guide and its EXCELLENT MAPS, I knew within a half block of where to go. Since we had to leave Wednesday, it was good that the Metro was also within walking distance of the hotel and we played tourist to see just a few of the important sights as time allowed.

Rome:
You need at least a week. I will try to return someday. This time of year, February 12-25th, it is great for



small crowds, lesser lines and cheaper rates, but the weather can still be cold. It was the same as Oregon, 42-45 during the day, but with wind-chill it is colder. It was also cloudy and rainy, so dress accordingly. No one was eating outside or riding on the top of the sightseeing busses. I can imagine that during the summer it must be tourist hell.

One very interesting sight that I have never seen before anywhere, was PLASTIC BAMBOO. This was at an indoor shopping mall near the Pantheon and was at the Galleria Colonna.



Back to Fiumicino Airport and Europcar on Wednesday. Again, this was the best way to rent a car. We were offered a brand new Alfa GTV 2 liter JTS, with only 10 KM on it, and since I had saved a couple of days rental, I could not refuse. I still can not believe I was able to return it without a dent, or scratches or a light broken! More on that later.



After driving the Alfa for awhile, I must admit, I love my Mini Cooper S better! I own an Alfa, and I never thought I would say this, but my Mini is faster, (the Alfa had the mid-size engine), shorter steering radius, better vision all around, and of course, smaller. Much better suited to Italy! There actually were quite a few Minis in Italy. I was always pointing them out to Carol.

Travel to our Seminar in Tuscany:

Leaving the airport was no problem, signage is great on Autostrada. The Alfa was plush on the inside and we had lots of room for luggage (one of the few advantages of the Alfa over the Mini). Since we would eventually end up at Firenze (Florence), we decided to take the coast route up. Once we were up to speed, 140 km/hr (about 85 mph) it was a real pleasure. Carol wouldn't let me go faster, although we were passed. The drive up was great scenery. The Autostrada doesn't go too far up the coast so we just cruised along. We stopped at a picturesque mountain town somewhere near Sienna and at an out of the way restaurant in the mountains

where no one spoke English but I had a short menu dictionary. I'm sure the meal was only fair by Italian standards, but by American, it was very good. In Italy food is an art!

Toward the end of a nice sunny traveling day, Wednesday, we reached our turn off, Bargino. A few kilometers into the hinterland of Tuscany and our goal, La Ginestra (Tel/Fax 055.8248196 www.laginestra.toscana.it). La Ginestra is a working organic farm with 150 year old restored farm houses



that have been remodeled into apartments with shared bathrooms and a large restaurant, kitchen, meeting room in another restored building. On the positive side, the meals, served family style, are fantastic and nutritious, the views of the countryside spectacular, and for smaller groups, the meeting room adequate. It is only 18 kilometers from Florence, and they have internet access. While they may serve couples and families on vacation, it is primarily designed for small groups and wedding parties. Room accommodations are clean, but I'd travel in a warmer time of year with those high farmhouse ceilings. This is a great place for *hippie types*, if you wish to save money and be within about 20 minutes of Florence, but stay in the *real* countryside.

Oh, I almost forgot. One major reason to go to Italy is the wine ... yes, that is me by a sign that says this is an official area in Italy of Chianti wines. Within walking of La Ginestra.

A typical seminar day started off with a continental buffet breakfast at 8:00AM. Lecture and slides were from 9 AM to 12 noon, then a hot noon large meal. Afternoon workshops and/or lectures were from 2:30PM to 4:30PM, followed by further lectures by Oscar, from 5PM to 7PM. DINNER was at 8:00PM nightly, and awaited anxiously by all!



Meals were typical Italian. They started off with fresh raw vegetables (from the farm), with fresh baked bread and olive oil and salami. This was followed by a pasta dish with tomato and meat sauce, sliced beef and cabbage, boiled potatoes and rosemary, with olive oil and butter. More than once we had major chocolate cake for dessert! To drink there was as much wine as you wish and water with or without, *gas*. Coffee also was served after dinner. And once, we were treated to some after dinner wines and grappa (if you desire). At 9:30 to 11:00 PM nightly, we had optional evening presentations by the attendees. They were excellent and gave an overview on what is being done with bamboo in different parts of Europe (for the most part).

OK, some dialog about the lectures. Here is Oscar Hidalgo pointing out to yours truly, the most common method of joinery of bamboo that has been used for large structures; that of making a "T" using bolts imbedded in concrete within the bamboo joint. The photo at the top of the next page, shows a joint that has been constructed using this method and an example of what the inside looks like hanging next to the vertical bamboo pole.

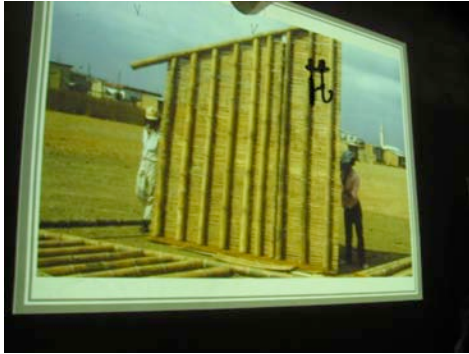
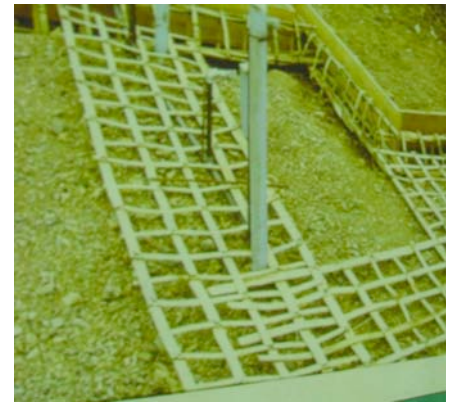
To the right is a slide showing bamboo framing for the foundation of a living





structure. Forgive me for the quality of the photograph presented during the lectures. Not only was I taking a picture of a projected slide on the wall, but my angle was bad. A noticeable “black anomaly” in some photos, is a light fixture on the wall.

Italy is a region that has been subjected to earthquakes over much of the country for several thousand years, so of the 35 attendees, about 14 to 16 were architects. The majority had never used bamboo in construction projects and were eager to learn. The photos above (from left to right) show, framed bamboo wall, two walls up, and finished structure. When completed the houses look



similar to any wood framed house with a stucco covering, so they are acceptable to the local populace. Not shown was construction of interior walls using bamboo strips. When plaster is used on both sides of an interior wall, it does not need as much cross bracing because it is very rigid. Bamboo strips have been used to cover stairs and mats over roads for bridge construction. We were shown a number of interesting slides where bamboo cables were used in bridge construction in China and the use of a “capstan” to tighten the cables.

Our stay was more like Oregon and Seattle this time of year and NOT like Florida. I tried to do some scouting of Florence before we had to leave La Ginestra on Sunday afternoon when the conference was scheduled to end. I had no trouble following the great maps I had into town; following the “centro” signs. However, little did I know I had not picked the best way to go into Firenze. It was an experience best forgotten.

I ended up lost in the middle of town where streets are as wide as cars and traffic and people everywhere. This is the area where only residents are allowed and cameras take pictures of every car that enters. If you don't belong, you get fined big time! Hey, I was a tourist and lost. Hopefully, the rental agency is a good excuse.

I only almost ran over one bicyclist but didn't scratch or dent the car! I drove all over, stopped to try to get bearings a few times, to no avail, and just followed traffic looking for train station signs where public parking is located. I never found the station. When it got dark, I gave up and tried to get out of town which was also not real easy. I did eventually, but on the way back, missed the exit and was halfway to Sienna before I realized I was passing towns too far away. I got off the S-2 and made it back by 8:45 PM. Not a fun time for the last 4.5 hours.

The good part of this adventure was that I did not miss dinner (they usually serve at 8:00 PM), and at La Ginestra the meals were some of the longest and best I have ever had, as mentioned earlier, and I am a picky eater. After wine with dinner, two sweeter wines after dinner, and finishing with Grappa, I had forgotten

about anything that had happened to me in the last 24 hours.

Oh, I have forgotten to mention that the exchange rate for U.S. vrs Euro Dollars is about \$1.30 (US) to 1.00e (Euro). I did not see any Italian Lira used anywhere, though I had brought some from my previous trip. Luckily, I was able to exchange them at the airport. None of the banks would take them either. You have to go to an *Italian State Bank* (read government of Italy sponsored bank).

On Sunday, the cook, registration, secretary lady, all-in-one, at La Ginestra, called up the Hotel I was trying to find (Residenza dei Pucci, via dei Pucci 9, 055-281-886). It turned out that they also own a place on the side of the river I had been lost in, and I committed there. Hey, I had been all over, now had an address and had been in the area (Residenza via Romana #61, 055-220-528). It also had a parking (?) area.

We only had to go around the block and park on the curb a couple of times, to get out on foot and find the doorway. You see in Italy, you can have a number 18 *red* and/or 18 *black*, on the same block! I still can't believe I was able to squeeze the car into their courtyard after 15 minutes, but I did, and everything was within walking distance.

Next time I go to Italy, I am going to rent a Smart Car or Volkswagen or Mini. Anything bigger just won't do. I have learned my lesson. Actually, unless you stay in the country like we did, just go by train between towns.

Firenze:Florence:

Monday was freezing cold, cloudy, scattered rain. Yes, sights are not as crowded this time of year, but it is uncomfortable to be outside when the high is about 36 degrees!

Tuesday; whoa, woke up to it snowing. No, this is not normal according to a local shop keeper. We hit some tourist sights... marvelous, what can you say. It rained off and on during the day and was freezing cold. Between sights, we went into shops to look around and just get warm. Also stopped a lot for coffee. We had great maps. Again, the AAA Spiral Guide for Florence, and a *pop out* map, but you still need to look at them a lot. These Medieval Italian towns don't have streets that go very far, or in the same direction, and they don't keep the same name. London and Paris are similar. At around 6 PM when it was getting dark (remember February) we hit a small local market (an advantage of the west side of the river Arno) bought some food and took it back to the place we were staying. The room we had was actually a garage that had been converted into an apartment with kitchenette. In the summer it rents for up to 250 euros a night, we paid 80e ... so another perk because of the time of year and we had made reservations the same day we needed.



Back to Fiumicino Airport:

While at the seminar, we had met a couple who invited us to visit on the way back to Fiumicino Airport for lunch at their house/ apartment on lake Bracciano. Since we were driving, we said ok. We had planned to go to Biera, also in the hinterland of Italy, but felt it was too far from Rome to get up early and make for the airport. Instead, we canceled that, and I made reservations at the Hilton at the Airport. This cost 200 euros, but let me say, it was well worth the peace of mind and ease to get up Wednesday morning and just walk to check in, having returned the car the night before! If you don't mind springing for the cash, I wouldn't hesitate to do it again.

It's a good thing we left early Wednesday morning. because as we drove out of Florence it was really snowing and there was up to 3 inches on the ground! If we had left a bit later, we wouldn't have been able to get out of town. I'm not going to Italy this early in the season again.

We eventually made it to Bracciano, found our hosts (by accident), and had lunch that they had been holding for about 2 hours. It was a wonderful Medieval Town with a large Castle that the owners still live in, and they had an apartment in the surrounding village that housed the original builders. Built in the 1500's, it has been remodeled to modern standards and they rent it out for those who wish to vacation on the lake. Here is the information: Gloria Galecki:: info@romanholiday.it www.romanholiday.it Fax (+39)06-233-230798 Office (+39)06-478-26367 Yes the office number lists one more digit ?

Off that evening for Fiumicino Airport and the Hilton, then back to the USA.

