

## Ahhhhh..... Firenze!

I can't believe I'm in Florence!!!! Ever since Margaret M. and I spent all of a day here a long, long time ago, I have wanted to come back, maybe rent an apartment for a week or so and overdose on museums. Florence is the epicenter of Renaissance art and architecture -- the home of some of the greatest museums in the world. And the land of good gelato!

First, I want to mention my United flight -- fabulous! I used my frequent flyer miles for first class -- what an experience. My pod was the same size as two business class seats and I had 3 1/2 windows all to myself. And the whole bin above my seat was reserved for me, me, me! There were just 12 seats in first -- and two bathrooms just for us! Regrettably it was a night flight, so it was more important to get some sleep and try to ward off jet lag rather than staying awake to enjoy the service and the movies.



Florence's Hotel Cellai, the group hotel for the Road Scholar program is lovely. Built in 1881, it does have its quirky side, but the public rooms are filled with antiques and artwork.

The location is wonderful -- walking distance from everything I would want to see and do here .... the Duomo, the Uffizi Museum,

Michelangelos' David in the Accademia Gallery, San Lorenzo Market (where you bargain to the death), the Central Market (like the "Eataly" concept -- an upscale food court) and much, much more. (<http://>

[www.eataly.com/global/](http://www.eataly.com/global/)) Though I arrived in Florence about 10am last Thursday, my room was ready so I was able to take a quick nap then be all set to go at 3:00 when it was time to meet my walking tour guide.

Want to mention that I love the TV programming here -- the service has CNN, BBC and a channel that just plays classic rock music videos from the '60's thru the '80's 24/7!

## The Florence Greeters

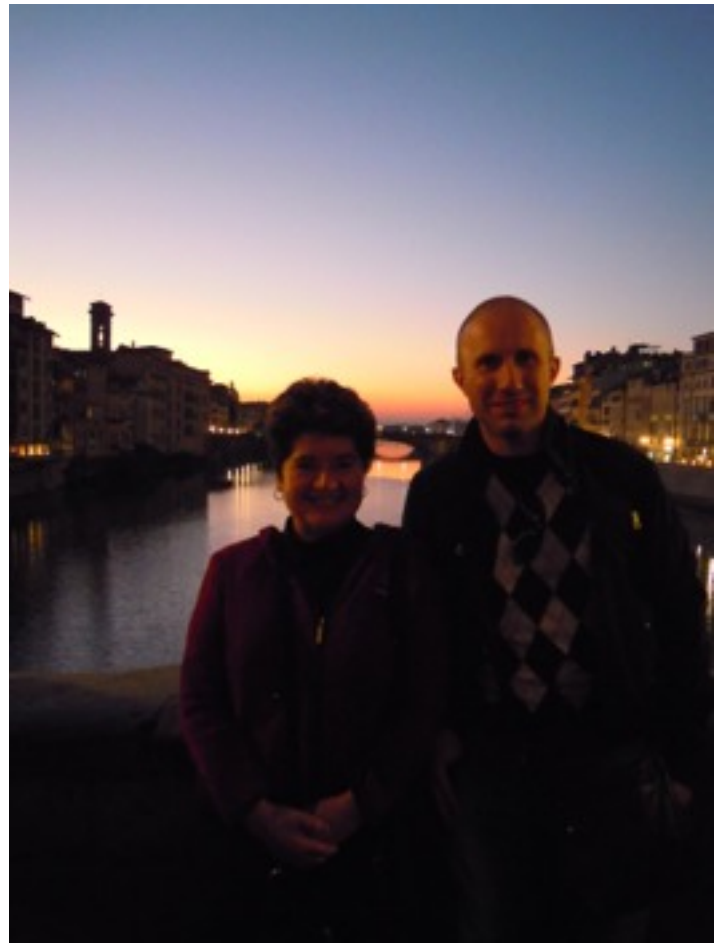
I have asked for help from the Global Greeters Network ([www.globalgreeternetwork.info](http://www.globalgreeternetwork.info)) several times in the past. In Kyoto the greeter-guide and I did the Philosophers Walk, in Madrid - museum row, Buenos Aires (visiting gardens), Bilbao (helped me three different times) and now Florence. The organization here is just a few weeks old, and the number of greeter-guides available is small -- just about 10 people, but Andrea, one of the organizers, was able to arrange a "greeter" for me on this, my first day in Florence.

I like to think of the Greeters not as tour guides, but as friends I haven't met yet. Without exception, each is friendly, helpful, love their cities and want to share that enthusiasm. In addition to a walking/orientation tour, I usually need help with specific things like getting a local sim card, buying adapters, pointing out good restaurants, etc. And these friendly and helpful locals know the best places to get things like this done.

In this last instance, Paolo (another of the organizers of the Florence Greeters program) gave me a walking tour of the historic area taking me thru passageways in medieval and renaissance palazzos, down interesting side streets/alleyways that only locals know about, and talked to me of Florentine history and traditions and what it was like growing up here. We had a late lunch at a small restaurant (only 2 tables and 4 seats at the counter) just off the Ponte Vecchio Bridge. Paolo marked our route on my map and gave me lots of info. on other things to see and do in the area. And his "X" marked several spots for

good gelato. This four hour walking tour pretty much wiped me out for the rest of this first day.

With Paolo at the Ponte Vecchio toward the end of our four hour walk.



And guess what I did the second day --- using the marked map, I re-walked our entire route and it took me only seven hours! Got lost twice, too. But now it was time to window-shop, go in some stores with amazing jewelry and antiques, and every once in a while stop, sit and people-watch.

I remember when Margaret bought some gold earrings on the Ponte Vecchio -- things were expensive then, but now prices are out of this world. I inquired about a necklace at one store and found it was 400,000 euro ( just over 1/2 million USD)! I'll be back for it..... when I win the lottery!



The Ponte Vecchio is the oldest of Florence's six bridges and its most photogenic. It dates from medieval times.

I'll do tons of museums with the Road Scholar program, so the only museum I was desperate to see on my own was the Salvatore Ferragamo Museum. It is housed in the lower level of Palazzo Spini Feroni (everything is in an old Palazzo here!) - a building about the size of a city block. The upper levels are the flagship store. (\$3000 purses anyone??). Ferragamo shoes going back to the 1920's are on display in the museum - including stilettos made for Marilyn Monroe. The best part is that it is free for those over 65, it has beautiful marble bathrooms and there is a 45 min. long movie and you get to sit in nice soft, squishy leather chairs. My little feet were so tired by this time that I watched the movie twice.



On Saturday it was time for a day trip to Cinque Terre -- a group of five of the most picturesque and charming villages along the western coast. The towns are accessible only by boat or a local train that runs between them. I was picked up at 7am for a 12



hour day. The ride to the coast was lovely, passing the towns of Sienna, Lucca, Pisa and mountains made of Carrara marble.

After the bus deposited the group in Riomaggiore, we took a series of trains and boats to visit Manarola, Vernazza and Monterosso. The town of Corniglia is on a hill so we just sailed past it. The scenery was magnificent and my fellow travelers were from all over the world: India, Uruguay, Venezuela, Slovakia, Spain, Malaysia, Japan and even a few from the US.



Cute stores abound in the Cinque Terre. There is lots of artwork, jewelry (looks suspiciously from India) and hand-made woolen items.



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Each town has its own main square, church and shopping area. The Church of San Francisco in Monterosso was the most magnificent. Its color theme can be seen on souvenir bags -- I have one!

Of course, these buildings are always in need of restoration. Some of the signs are very simple!



Unfortunately the guide was much less than stellar. Though he was good at technical aspects, like counting people and getting us on/off the trains on time, he was lacking in information. I got more information in the first five minutes with Paolo, than I did in eight hours with Amadeus. The tour company was MyTours. Don't go with them!

So now it's Sunday morning and in just over an hour, the Road Scholar program begins. So..... more to come.

Thank you for following along with me on this adventure in Florence. Keep sending those good thoughts!

Esther

November 2, 2014