

### **TRE AMICI IN GIRO PER L'ITALIA (Three friends around Italy)**

It had been 39 years, but here I was back in Europe. In Nice airport to be exact, after an interminable 24 hour flight from Sydney via Dubai. I was trying desperately to get excited but the weariness from the flight and the stationary cue at the customs counter was winning. Poor Warren would be the victim of our first corny jokes that we used to try to pass the time and lift our spirits.

Eventually we made it past the military-style attired customs people (trying desperately not to let them think that I may be smuggling in a koala under my jacket). When asked "where are you from" I thought I was in for a systematic body search but the reply of "Australia" resulted in a shrugged indifference. We proceeded as quickly as our weary bodies would travel and sought out the car lease desk.

Once that was all sorted we exited into the heat of the European summer to find our lease car. There it was: a white Peugeot Partner Tepee – about the size of a FIAT Doblo van. My first thoughts were "that's a LOT bigger than I was expecting – how the hell are we going to make it up the Stelvio Pass in THAT?" The Stelvio, as it turned out would not be our only problem!



Once we'd been briefed by the lease company's representative on the basics of driving a car - and how to use a safety triangle and vest, we loaded up our gear. The very first necessity was to find the USB port for our music. After much agonising, we reached the conclusion that the vehicle did not indeed come equipped with such a state of the art option after all. "FOUR WEEKS WITHOUT MUSIC – HOW WOULD I SURVIVE!" Bravely, Warren mounted the drivers seat, Tony took the front passenger seat to "ride shotgun" while I sought the sanctuary of the back seat and we drove off into the Nice

traffic to find a petrol station – the car came with barely a few litres of diesel! That was our first adventure. The ground was awash with spilled fuel (one discarded cigarette butt and the whole place would've gone up!) and the attendant wouldn't accept the cash we had wisely bought back in Oz so as to avoid initial financial problems. So we tested our "plastic fantastic" for the first time and set a beeline for Monaco – our first overnight stop.

On the way to Monaco, we stopped at an ancient fortified hilltop town on the Riviera called Eze (pronounced "Es-se") which was recommended by our travel agent. It was absolutely fascinating – a complete rabbit warren of narrow streets and stone buildings. There was a lookout on the top that I was keen to gain but there was a 6 Euro charge which didn't seem to appeal to the other guys, so I didn't bother either. Instead I spent probably ½ an hour trying to gain it by other means, but failed miserably. From then on I was determined to check out fully any such intriguing places we would visit during our trip.



Upon arrival in Monaco, we checked into the Hotel Olympia, which was on the northern (French) side of Boulevard du General Leclerc. The other side of the road was Monaco and we were just a few minutes walk to the Casino – talk about central!



As it was approaching dinner time, we trawled a few restaurants, but the prices were (not surprisingly) expensive. But squeezed between 2 such expensive places was the little “cheap and cheerful” Tip Top Bar (recommended), which we decided would do nicely.

During the course of the meal, Warren noted that the road outside looked familiarly like a section of the race track. But how could that be? Large flower tubs lined the side of the road, making it far too narrow for high speed F1 machinery. But when we emerged from the restaurant, it was obvious that the tubs were indeed removable, and lo and behold, isn't that “Mirabeau” corner just down the hill? Excitedly we hastened downhill and there was Lowes hairpin, complete with red and white track edge markings and tyre marks.



We WERE on the track! Whoohoo! Further investigation revealed the holes in the edge of the footpath where the removable Armco fencing would fit. Then it was down to the seafront and the tunnel. It all looked so different with huge pot plants strategically

placed to prevent any F1 hopefuls from recreating the exploits of their heroes. I don't know how many photos I took, but my batteries died and then night fell, so further shots were out of the question. Along the harbour's edge we were amazed at the size of the "boats" of the rich and famous. To say they were massive is probably an understatement – they were so big that they were obscene. People flaunting their wealth – and how do you acquire THAT much money to have toys like these? And there were dozens of them! Then it was past the swimming pool (the area a mess due to the F1 grandstands still being dismantled), "La Rascass" corner and onto the start/finish straight.

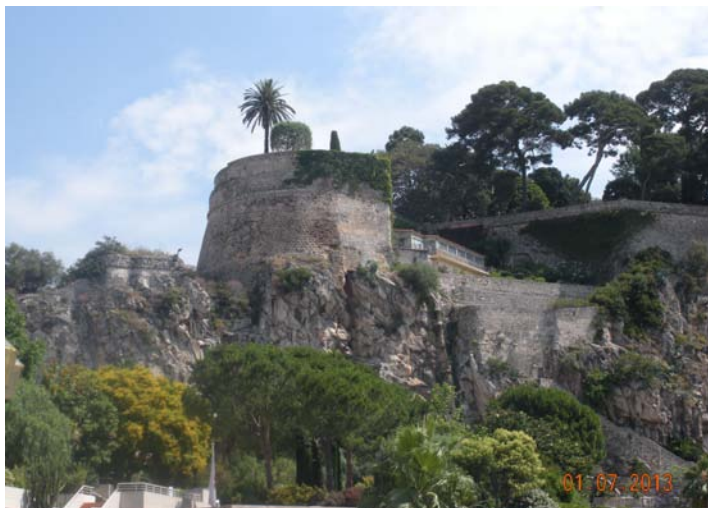
By the time we had walked half way along the start straight, poor Tony's feet had called it quits so he and Warren decided to head back to the hotel. Would I be OK making my way back? I have a terrible sense of direction, but I assured the boys that I would be fine and that I'd go for a walk and see them back at the room. After all it was just a straight forward stroll up the hill – couldn't be easier!

The Casino was pumping that Sunday night. Outside there was a multi-million dollar traffic jam of the latest Ferraris, Aston Martins, Maseratis, etc, and I even glimpsed a Bugatti, unloading their elegant passengers for a night of gambling and "being seen".

So I set off on my own to explore the streets of Monaco. It was AMAZING! There are no ugly people in Monaco – all the beauty-challenged people must have been arrested and thrown into gaol. One young lady was a jaw dropper in her low cut knitted blue short, short miniskirt, with long blonde hair and legs that went all the way up to her armpits. I gave her "11 out of a possible 10". She was obviously on her way to see her race driver boyfriend or billionaire "sugar daddy".

Before long I realised that I was delightfully lost, but no problem, I'd just follow my nose back to our digs, enjoying the surroundings. By 10.30 I was getting tired and the harder I tried, the more lost I got. Eventually I had to ask directions, but of course no one spoke English. Eventually after following a series of hand signals, I arrived at the hotel – which actually was just 2 flights of stairs away.

After a good night's sleep we breakfasted at the hotel, loaded the van (which gratefully we were allowed to keep parked under the hotel) and ventured back into Monaco. I wanted to buy some F1 memorabilia and take the remaining track photos denied to us the night before. The F1 shop had very little, in fact nothing to tempt us, not even a period poster from the pre-war days, so we headed off to the car museum. There was



some good stuff in there, but nothing too unusual so we ventured into the shop (which was the exit from the museum – naturally). A friendly lady sales assistant, with limited but adequate English skills was helping me choose a ‘T’ shirt but they were all very tacky and none appealed to me. Eventually I found the only pre-war poster they had but when I went to the counter to pay for it, I discovered that she suddenly didn’t speak any English, – obviously I wasn’t spending enough to warrant it(?).

From Monaco we steered north onto the road to Turin via Cuneo and it was my turn to take the helm for the first time. Not too far along, the road started to get narrower and twistier as it started to climb towards a mountain pass. The oncoming traffic seemed to have no regard for centre lines, and with our van being almost as wide as the lane we were using, it was a tight squeeze. Eventually, the hazard of the approaching drivers straddling the centreline, the van’s width, acclimatising to the left hand driving position and right hand gear-changing I managed to clip the kerb. “Bugger!”. Apparently I had destroyed the wheels and ruined the tyres so I was frantically instructed to pull over as soon as possible, but that took several kilometres before a layby was found. Inspection of the “damage” revealed 2 scrape marks on the nearside wheel trims – no big deal, but I could do without that sort of stress, so I surrendered all such driving in future to the others. I would stick strictly to driving the autobahn sections only.

The scenery along the way was spectacular as we drove in and out of France, through ski resorts and past farmland, eventually arriving in Turin where we booked into the NH Lingotto (4 star) Hotel. The place is beautiful and I highly recommended it, even though it’s expensive, but to a Fiat tragic the fact that we were staying in the actual old FIAT factory is amazing and we were even granted access to the roof top test track! The staff there must think that we are sad little people (and probably they are right?).



Once settled in, we went straight to the “500A Bar” where a bare metal Topolino body and chassis hang from the ceiling. Several Peronis later (Tony and I had been in

training before we departed from Sydney), we set off in search of a feed inside the hotel's mall. Not knowing what to order, the waiter recommended the mussels and spaghetti which seemed unusual but proved scrumptious, accompanied naturally by a few Vino Rossos plus a glass of "something" on the house.

Up bright and early we breakfasted – helping ourselves to an amazing spread – everything from cereals, bacon and eggs, cold meats, boiled eggs, breads, yoghurts, juices, etc, etc. We just HAD to try everything!

Our booked cab arrived dead on time and we were off to the FIAT Mirafiori plant to meet our guide for the day, one Patrizia from the PR department.



While we waited we were treated to the pantomime that is Italian traffic. The road rules are obviously a guide only and appear to be open to interpretation(?). It's quite literally a case of "the quick and the dead" and sadly the annual death toll from motorbike and motor scooter accidents demonstrates this. Someone even parked across the pedestrian crossing near where we were standing. We thought that the driver would obviously be just a few minutes, but the car was still there when we returned later that afternoon! Oh yeah, and despite flashing lights and signs to the contrary, Italian drivers don't stop at pedestrian crossings ("we're not in Kansas anymore Toto!")– be warned!

About 20 minutes past our due meeting time at the gates, Patrizia emerged from the Mirafiori offices apologising that security hadn't notified her of our arrival. Actually security didn't speak English so our enquiry upon arriving at the entrance gate didn't achieve anything. So we bundled into Patrizia's Fiat Panda and set off into the chaos of the Turin traffic.

First stop was the Centro Storico – FIAT’s private museum where access is attained by special permission only. Thanks to Warren, FIAT Australia had organised it for us. I had fond, if hazy memories of the place from 1974, but it seemed a lot smaller now with fewer cars and no wooden Fiat 500 buck(?). There was however a Fiat 600 buck, but the biggest disappointment was the fact that Mephistopheles was absent AGAIN!!!! No one had any idea where it was – BUMMER! However the most beautiful Fiat 8V coupe (I couldn’t recall seeing it last time) almost made up for it.



Then it was off to the Abarth factory where several classic examples including some of the record cars from the 1950s were on display. Photography was restricted to the old cars in the foyer as the factory area was strictly “NO FOTO!”. Our guide for the remainder of the tour would be Frederico.



FIAT bought us lunch at the Mirafiori Motor Village and afterwards we were directed to the shop. “Beauty!” I thought, I can buy my seat covers for my NEW500, but no such items were available. In fact nothing of any interest WAS on sale. In desperation I decided on an Abarth belt, only to be told that it was available in children’s sizes only. I left the shop empty handed. I was hopeful that the Abarth shop might be able to help with the seat covers, but apparently the place is now closed.

After lunch we were taken to the new hi-tech Maserati Factory, which has recently been moved from Modena to Turin, to see Quattroportes being assembled. Again it was a case of “NO FOTO” which seemed strange as I have a documentary of the old factory saved on my TV at home – go figure.

At the conclusion of the tour, we were given both FIAT and Maserati “show bags” and then driven back to the Hotel in the huge, specially kitted out long wheelbase FIAT Ducato van which had taken us to all the venues after the Centro Storico. More beers, food and vino in the mall at the Hotel were the order of the evening, then off to bed after a terrific day.

We had the following day in Turin to ourselves. First stop was the National Car Museum. We’d missed it in 1974 and I was keen to finally get to see the Lancia D50 F1 car from the 1950s – one of the greatest looking race cars of all time in my estimation – and such a fascinating and tragic tale. There was an astounding display of famous cars, from Abarths, to Ferraris, Mercedes F1s, Lancias, Alfas, Cisitalias, you name it. But where was the D50? I had come ½ way around the world on a pilgrimage to see it and it was gone! Once again, no one could tell me of its fate. I was shattered.

Back into the city centre, we caught the Metro to Porta Nuova and then walked to the Duomo San Giovanni to see the Shroud of Turin (or at least a copy of it as the original is safely stored away). One sign said that the museum below the church where the Shroud is on display is open 7 days a week, but another said Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays only. And as it was a Wednesday, we were once again, out of luck. An alternative would be a visit to the Museo Della Sindone where the story of the Shroud is on display, but I was outvoted and knowing my poor sense of direction, reluctantly gave in. So it was off to the “Mole Antonelliana” (the symbol of Turin) where we took the lift to the viewing platform for a fantastic panorama of the city and then on to the Egyptian Museum. We must have been looking particularly geriatric after our tiring day as we were told at the ticket booth that people over 65 could get into the museum for free. Tony took up the offer, whilst Warren and I (both being kids of just 63) gracefully declined – although no ID was asked for! D’oh!

The next day, Thursday July 4<sup>th</sup> a date familiar to all Fiat 500 enthusiasts, we tried to leave Turin but it was much harder than anticipated. Apparently affected by the buildings, by the time “Tommy” (the Tom Tom GPS) had given directions we were past the intersections, so we drove around and around until with familiarity of the GPS instructions, we were out of the city and on our way to Garlenda via Albegna.

The Fiat 500 Club of Italy had cheekily hung banners announcing the coming weekend across the entrances to several tunnels on the autostrada, apparently (we found out later) when the authority’s “backs were turned!” The town of Garlenda welcomed us with a banner that read “Welcome to Our Australian Friends” (obviously left over from last year, but touching nonetheless!).

We found our accommodation at the Rosalina B&B, which was just around the corner from the Fiat 500 Club’s headquarters – quite convenient! First item on the agenda was to display our Aussie flag from the vine covered sundeck at the side of our room. Sadly, it hung forlornly due to a lack of breeze!

Before venturing out, we did a bit of washing as clean undies were getting a bit low (read that as you will), using the mysterious detergent we had bought which just didn’t lather for some reason. It would take almost to the end of the trip until Tony would



notice the “wool” symbol on the label – we had been using wool wash all this time!  
Men – HONESTLY!



At the Club’s headquarters, we enquired if Alessandro was available and were told that he was down in the Parco Villa Franco (the “hub” of the weekend) finalising the preparations. We discovered him in a lather of sweat at the stage venue, but he welcomed us warmly, promising to pick us up when he was finished to take us to his home for dinner. We had bought some wine at the “Eataly” slow food shop in Turin to give to Alessandro and his wife Wilmy that evening, but not long after we arrived at their home, we realised that we had left it back at the B&B! “No problem” Alessandro assured us – “I have my own wine cellar – I bottle my own wine!”.



Alessandro and Wilmy live in a restored farmhouse which is hundreds of years old, situated on a hillside high above Garlenda, with spectacular views of the village and down the valley all the way to the sea. The house occupies one side of the access road whilst their yard is situated across the road on the edge of the precipice. The single-lane road is only for access to the few houses in the area, so traffic is not a problem. Dinner was a feast of home cooked Italian cuisine and our hosts made us feel very welcome. Alessandro’s selection from the cellar went to my head, so it was decided to take us back to Rosalina’s in Wilmy’s 500C. It’s the 1.2 litre version, but performance is quite adequate even with 4 blokes on board!

Tomorrow the fun would begin!

The next morning at the Club headquarters we registered our involvement in the event (even though we didn't have a 500) and were issued with a showbag, a 'T' shirt and car number. There were several maps on a wall and we were given a pin to indicate where we lived. On the large map of Australia, there was a pin indicating Melbourne, but unfortunately we didn't come across any other Aussies on the entire weekend – such a shame!



Due to confusion on my part, we missed the dedication of the event and went instead to the parts market. It was so tempting to buy wonderful items, such as alloy wheels, but getting them home would be so difficult that we had to restrain ourselves. I bought some very small parts, such as a dipstick, but then found another that I preferred, so ended up with 2. Other than those, I bought some locking tabs for the camshaft timing gear (always handy to have – or not?) and some brackets to help neatly route the high tension leads on Buzz's engine. Whilst visiting the Axel Gerstl stand we were talking to a couple of fellows when we were joined by a third. With nothing to lose, I asked him if he was Axel and he replied that he indeed was – amazing! He assured me that he recognised my name, but I'm confident that he was just being diplomatic.



That afternoon we joined Alessandro in the Club's Fiat Marea station wagon on a run to Toirana (we even had a police escort out of town!) and then on to Pietra where the piazzas were filled with Cinquecentos. One car in particular grabbed my attention as it didn't have a sunroof. It was produced by the Carrozzeria Fissore and featured as well a full headlining and detailed interior refinement. There were Gamines, Steyr Puchs,

Bianchinas, Jollys, Gianninis, Abarths and other examples of variants that I had never seen or heard of before!



Back at the Parco Villa Franca (I love the way that rolls off the tongue!) we found a seat at one of the long tables and waited for dinner, courtesy of the Fiat 500 Club, to be served. I was seated beside a Dutch born Garlenda resident by the name of Robert Boot who was is married to Wilmy's sister, and we were deep in discussion when suddenly I could swear I heard Aussie accents from the other side of the table. The people turned out to be ex pats from Adelaide, Steve and Cynthia who also are now

permanent residents of Garlenda. How amazing is that? There was so much food to eat and it was all delicious!



For the Saturday morning entertainment, Tony and I chose to join the walk to Paravenna, a village 11 kilometres away on a steep track that rose 600 metres. We had to miss breakfast as the restaurant associated with the B&B didn't open in time, so we were famished by the time we reached the village.

The vegetation was very similar to Australia if you squinted your eyes and the birdsong was just beautiful, whilst the views of the valley and all the villages scattered along the hillsides took our breath away (or was that the exercise?!). The leader of our group kept up a constant commentary about the area (or so we assumed), but unfortunately it was all in Italian and we didn't have an interpreter! One of the ladies kindly lent me one of her walking poles, which I accepted graciously but wondered what use it would afford. Upon reaching the village we were served slices from three different tart platters, each decorated with the number 500. Then it was on to another area where a proper breakfast was awaiting our taste buds. Ravenously I selected a few morsels on a plate but all too soon I got the impression that it was time to go - probably due to the fact that everyone had moved off on their way back down the hill to Garlenda (I guess they'd been fed before our departure). That walking pole now came in very handy as a third leg to prevent me from sliding down the hill in the more precipitous sections! Back at the bottom we had a beer to slake our thirst and I dozed off under the shade of a tree for an hour or so (and I think Tony may have as well?).

Another run was planned for that afternoon to a beach resort - Marina di Andora, so Robert (the ex pat Dutchman) took Warren and Tony in his kangaroo-decorated Giardiniera whilst he found a ride for me in a Dutch 500R belonging to "Gordon". Gordon and I swapped many tales of the trials and tribulations of Fiat 500 ownership and it seems they are just the same in Europe as they are in Australia. It was odd sitting in the right hand side of the car without a steering wheel and I was constantly checking for mirrors that weren't there.

We were part of a "conga line" of 500s that just seemed to go on forever and which would stop occasionally at which time everyone could get out of their cars for no obvious reason.

Finally we rolled into Andora and parked on the beach front. There was a group of Dutchies cheering every 500 that went down the main street. At one point the occupants of a Ferrari which had stopped in traffic right at that point thought that they were the recipients of the cheering until told that it was only for the Fiat 500s – they seemed a little embarrassed – very funny!



For 3 days the village of Garlenda constantly echoed to the sounds of 500s putt-putting around (just where they were going though, I have no idea) and blowing their horns in celebration throughout the day. It was not a place for anyone who was not a Fiat 500 aficionado!

After dinner at the Parco Villa Franco that evening, we stayed for the entertainment provided by Club members on the stage. Alessandro found us and excitedly reported that by the following morning there would be 1,100 Fiat 500s attending the event. Eventually sleep beckoned and we dragged our weary bones back up the hill to the B&B.

Sunday was the big day at the Hippodrome. For entertainment, a soccer “penalty shoot-out” between Germany (the “guest” nation for 2013) and Italy was planned. But this one was different. It consisted of Alessandro’s car dressed up as a “football boot” and a Giardiniera sporting two huge leather gloves on its side as the “goalie”. The idea was for teams from both nations to attempt to “kick” an oversized football past the goalie and into the appropriately large goals without crashing into each other. Alessandro was the referee. It was very entertaining and eventually to Alessandro’s comical “disdain”, Germany had beaten Italy by 2 goals to 1.



The German delegation went to the trouble of decorating their cars as World War One aircraft for the day. There were “biplanes”, an “eindecker” and a “Zeppelin” which would have been just wonderful except for the fact that it had sustained some “ground fire” resulting in several holes, which caused it to sag sadly onto the top of the car. Before we knew it, all 1,100 cars had completed their circuit of the Hippodrome and were filing out of the grounds. We stood at the exit with our Aussie flag flying proudly. If anyone had been unaware of our presence, they weren’t now!

Back in Garlenda we hit the market again for some last minute purchases (some of the vendors were already packing up!) and then back to the B&B for a well-earned rest before dinner. Arriving at the tennis club for dinner ½ an hour early, I decided that we should try to find the Fiat 500 sculpture that I had seen in magazine articles years ago. We set off in a direction that we hadn’t been, but to no avail and returned to the restaurant only to find the sculpture in a small park adjacent!

So, what was my favourite 500 I hear you ask? A Dutch owned car with a trailer made from a barrel was both mine and many others’ choice. But there were so many to choose from: from the sublime to the ridiculous, that in truth I probably could’ve chosen several.

Come the Monday morning we packed up and prepared to leave Garlenda and head to the Cinque Terra. Responding to Steve and Cynthia’s invitation, we walked to their beautiful house for a drink and to say our goodbyes. Imagine my surprise when I

discovered that their Aussie made outdoor barbecue unit sported labelling which the company I work for produces! It was a small touch of home.

We found Alessandro at the Club headquarters where he was entertaining some Dutch Fiat 500 owners, whom I discovered were mutual friends of Margo Hoogendoorn who had visited our Club in Sydney several years ago. After thanking Alessandro for his hospitality and a great weekend, we were once again on the road.



Taking Steve's advice, we decided to check out Portofino because it was a Monday and the crowds are apparently smaller then. He was right! We drove all the way in and even parked at the end of the road (in a parking station, but what the heck – it is normally impossible to do it on any other day!). We walked freely about the town, paddled in the water, had our daily ritual gelato and departed without any trouble at all!



Arriving in Levanto, we checked into the agriturismo Villanova (literally a B&B on a working 17<sup>th</sup> century farm). We walked the town, ate pizza for dinner (along with a few more beers) then sweltered through a hot night without air conditioning, waking up literally dripping with perspiration!

We left before breakfast to beat the crowds to the Cinque Terra, grabbing some fruit to see us through the morning. We had heard that some sections of the walk were closed but information was thin and contradictory. The plan was to catch the train to

Riomaggiore and walk back to Monterosso (a 5 hour journey supposedly). We asked at the tourist information office in Riomaggiore about which paths were open, to be told that the only path safe enough to walk was between Vernazza and Cornaglia. Such a disappointment, but what the heck, we'd catch the train back to Vernazza and walk to Cornaglia before it became too hot. We waited for over an hour for a train to come (who said that Mussolini got the trains to run on time?) so we boarded it only to find that it was a "through" – all the way back to Monterosso. We tried to walk to Vernazza but naturally our way was blocked. What to do – the morning was disappearing and we hadn't achieved anything! Desperately we decided to catch a ferry to Vernazza. The



place was packed with tourists but amazingly was almost fully recovered from the horrific mudslide, which had engulfed it a year or two ago. We grabbed a bit of lunch and caught the train back to Levanto – with our plans of conquering the Cinque Terra now in tatters. On the advice of Alberto who ran the B&B we opted for the walk north west along the coast to Bonasolla via a disused railway path. The day was extremely hot but the old tunnels were delightfully cool!

Back at the agriturismo, we grabbed a nanna nap after an exhausting and disappointing day. I wonder if the Cinque Terra will ever recover?

The following day I drove the van via the autostrada to Florence, where we booked in to the Nill Hotel, which is on a par with The Hotel Lingotto. After settling in we caught a bus into the city using return tickets purchased at the Hotel. Florence is such a beautiful city, full of shops selling so much wonderful stuff - IF only we'd had the money! After endless hot days, a hail storm hit the city which dispersed the crowds and cooled the temperature dramatically! It was amazing to see things that I'd only recently read about in "The Agony and the Ecstasy" such as the site of the Bonfire of the Vanities and Savonarola's demise. The place was teeming with history!



On the Thursday (July 11<sup>th</sup>) we'd booked tours of the Accademia and the Uffizzi Gallery. Michelangelo's statue of David is still magnificent despite the deterioration it is suffering. Our tour guide recommended the Bargello museum for further works by Michelangelo and others such as Donatello as we had several hours to kill before the Uffizzi Gallery tour. The place is off the tourist trail so there is no need to book.

We arrived with time to spare at the Uffizzi Gallery, but just as our tour was about to begin, there was a medical emergency in the place and we had to wait quite some time. This left us with less time than normal before the gallery closed for the evening so it was all a bit rushed – but SO worth it! Our guide was a real character who enjoyed taking the piss out of the Yanks. I loved his wicked sense of humour such as when he pointed out “delicate” details on some of the ceiling decoration that made me laugh out loud (embarrassingly, I was the only one!). The artworks in the Gallery are just stunning and are a “must see” for anyone travelling to Florence. We should have allocated an extra day here – there is so much to see and do, if only we'd had the time.

Up early on Friday morning, we feasted at the Nill Hotel's breakfast spread and hit the road to Rome, via San Gimignano - an Etruscan/medieval fortified hilltop town, dating back 3,000 years! The fashion - in the town's hey day was to build a taller tower than your neighbour(!). Many have since disappeared but the view from the top of the clock tower revealed a set of outdoor furniture in the top of one of the remaining ones! I managed to buy a tube in one of the shops to prevent further damage to my Monaco poster (it had already been sat on once!) for the princely sum of EU8.50. Believed to be an investment at the time. Later on I would find them for just EU3.50. D'OH!!!



Leaving San Gimignano, we drove past Lake Bolsena then on to Orvieto – another 3,000 year old fortified hilltop town with Etruscan origins. They must have been dangerous times to be alive! This time we were staying at the nearby Hotel Villa Ciconia not far from the foot of the hill.



The view of the town from the roadside across the valley was amazing! We had a brief look around the place and feeling peckish, decided to search for a restaurant. Avoiding the larger premises in the piazzas, we wandered down a side alley and came upon the *Restaurante dell Ancora* which had a pizza menu beside the front door. It was a unanimous decision to eat here, so in our best Italian we inquired if they did indeed have pizzas on the menu(?) and would they have a table for three. The waitress replied with a smiling “si!”, so we knew we had nailed it. As we entered the restaurant there was just one customer feeding on a plate of pasta. He enthusiastically told us in excellent English that this premises did indeed sell the BEST pizzas and that we wouldn’t regret our choice. We never did find out if he was the owner, but how did he pick that we weren’t Italian despite our “fluent” enquiry? We’ll never know. Anyhow, the waitress led us outside to a beautiful vine covered patio and showed us to our table. There had been a shower of rain apparently that day and the furniture was still a bit wet, but being wicker chairs, they were OK to sit on and soon dried. We ordered our pizzas and as it always seemed to happen, people started to arrive at the restaurant. It was as though the message went out: “those Australians are eating in this restaurant so it must be great!” It seemed to happen at every place we went. The place would be empty when we arrived but within a few minutes (or so it seemed) the restaurant would be filled(?). At one stage we considered asking for a discount, having attracted all these customers!

The others were mainly Americans and they found fault with everything – we were as happy as pigs in muck, so couldn’t really understand what they had to gripe about! The pizzas WERE delicious (now that we had learnt the Italian for “anchovies”), and were accompanied naturally, by beers and vino.

Straight after breakfast the following day we were back in Orvieto, descending the 250 helical steps to the bottom of the St Patricks well. It is an amazing construction as the steps down are a different set to those that lead back up. It is a spiral within a spiral – so clever, no – so brilliant – so hard to explain!



To get a better picture of the town, I climbed the 250 steps of the Torre del Moro or "The Moor's Tower". While I was up there, the bell rang – which scared the sh!t out of me! My profanity bringing giggles from a couple who were up there with me. I think swearing must be a universal language! But the view was magnificent with the Tuscan countryside all around and the ancient town far below



The Duomo was reported to hold frescoes which were the inspiration for Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel and I could see what they were getting at. The paintings appear as fresh as the day they were finished and are just full of clever tricks by the artist. There was also a beautiful Pieta statue in the cathedral which was very similar to Michelangelo's in St Peters in Rome, except for extra figures and the skill of the sculptor, Ippolito Scalza, was exceptional. I'm not sure which Pieta was created first, but my money is on Michelangelo.

We booked in to visit the "underground" where people lived and sheltered during times of trouble even up to an including the Second World War! There was an Etruscan-dug well, less than a metre wide and some 60 metres deep as well as pigeon roosts where



the birds were trapped as a source of food during times of siege. Apparently "pigeon" is still on the menu in some of the restaurants in the town! Ah ..... no thanks!

The next place on our itinerary was Bagnoregio – another hilltop fortified town, but this one with its own tragic story. Due to the geological instability in the area the town is collapsing, with several of its more famous dwellings just a pile of rubble at the bottom of the cliff. Imagine the town depicted in Disney's Pinocchio and you get the idea of how lovely the place is. The locals are optimistic that their home can be saved and are pumping everything into stabilising the ground and propping up the damaged, but not yet collapsed buildings. I hope for their sake that they succeed!





We rolled into Rome later that afternoon staying at the Tibur Metro hotel in Ribibbia on the NE outskirts. It is the last stop on the linea B Metro line, making it difficult, if not impossible, to catch the wrong train.



On day 1 we were free to wander around, so we caught the “hop on-hop off” bus and toured the city so as to get a feel for the place. Unfortunately I ran out of battery power in my camera and my spare was still charging back at the hotel. BUMMER! My hopes of visiting St Peters to see the Pieta were dashed by the length of the queue – it looked as if it would take an entire day for those at the end of the line to gain admittance! So we walked from the Castel St Angelo, over the Ponte St Angelo to try to find the Bartolucci wooden toy store to buy unique presents for the grand kids, but no luck. I’d need to do more research in the evening and find the place tomorrow! So we visited the Piazza Navora (where the ancient Romans held their “sea battles” for the populace), the Pantheon, Area Sacra, the Trevi Fountain (so different from how I remembered it in 1974, but I was assured it hasn’t changed – maybe it was just the massive amount of people!), Piazza del Popolo (the scene of outrageous behaviour by Contiki girls on my last visit, for which I publicly apologised to anyone in earshot – basically Tony and Warren), the Spanish Steps and then eventually back to the Colosseum Metro station. By the way, the drinking water in Rome (in fact in many of the places we visited) is excellent. There are drinking fountains all over the place where

you can simply refill your bottle with cold, fresh water and it's free, unlike in some shops where you can pay EU2.50 (almost 4 bucks Australian) for a bottle!



I had the misfortune to order the worst pizza for dinner in Rome that evening – I couldn't eat it. I swore that it would be a while before I'd risk another! Strolling along the Via del Corso, I ventured into one of many tourist shops and bought the grand kids a 'T' shirt each and myself a rather nice FIAT mug, which I promised myself, would be USED once back home and not just be left to sit idle in a cabinet gathering dust.

Come day 2 of our Rome adventure and we are booked in for a guided tour of the Colosseum, Roman Forum and Palatino Hill. I was absolutely fascinated with all the history. I didn't know that Christians actually weren't martyred in the Colosseum itself, but at other, smaller venues around the place. People come on pilgrimages from all around the world to pray for the souls of the early Christians, but they have the wrong address!



The workings below the arena were so sophisticated and from the remaining stonework, it was possible to see how wild animals and scenery were lifted up from below as required. One grim depiction by our guide described how, if the gladiatorial battle was a little slow, suddenly a lion, tiger or whatever would appear to make things a little more interesting! The fights were usually between an expensively trained gladiator and a prisoner who had been sentenced to death. Subsequently the victim was only very lightly armed as they didn't want to lose their gladiatorial investment and it was a "laydown misere" that the poor fellow would die a gruesome death, either by gladiator or wild animal. Just horrible.



We finally found Bartolucci's wooden toy shop, but the range wasn't nearly as extensive as I'd hoped. It was either wooden motor bikes, rocking horses (both too large to post home) or small items like Pinocchio dolls, aeroplanes or wall plaques. I had hoped to buy a marionette, but they were not available. So I asked at the counter if they could post to Australia anything I might buy and after consulting another saleswoman was assured that it would be possible. So I made my purchases and asked to have the items shipped back for me. Suddenly no one spoke English so I was doomed to drag a box of toys around with me for the remainder of the trip. Exhausted, we returned to the hotel for a bit of R&R!



Arriverderci Roma!

Next stop was Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli. A massive ruin that was once known as the centre of the Roman Empire during Hadrian's reign in the 2nd century AD. The boys preferred to sit it out under the shade of the trees, but I climbed all over the place, finding ornate mosaic floors, fish ponds, baths, temples and pools plus all manner of mysterious structures. Mischievously, I jumped a fence to lay, Caesar-like just like Monty Don had in his "Italian Gardens" series.



Back on the road, by early evening we arrived at another fortified hilltop town called Gradara, although this one didn't have 3,000 years of history, but was interesting enough in itself. Actually a castle, its history dates from the 1200s. We found our accommodation called Al Castello B&B, down the hillside from the castle after a bit of mucking around and were delighted to learn that it was a self contained unit, comprising the entire downstairs half of a house! Once settled in we climbed the hill up to the castle for dinner.

Summoning up my courage after the experience in Rome, I ordered a pizza for dinner (mainly because I couldn't fathom anything else in the Italian-only menu) and was pleasantly surprised by the quality. Having promised those back home to have a Vino Rosso for them, and having actually drunk more beer than wine, I ordered ½ a carafe of house red for myself and Tony whilst Warren stuck with the Coke. It was quite a pleasant drop, so we ordered another carafe, which similarly went down well. I was now in the mood for some more, so we ventured off to find a bar (the only one in town as it turned out) whilst Warren wisely went back to the B&B.

Tony was his usual charming self with the bar staff and we were soon sampling various drops of selected reds. After answering the call of nature, I was returning to bar when I heard the dulcet tones of Sinatra singing "Young at Heart" and having been denied music for some time, instinctively broke into song - to the amusement of the other patrons. Back at the bar, Tony had ordered a round of grappa. Now I haven't had much experience with grappa so downed the first one. I remember selecting the second, but after that I have no recollection whatsoever as to what occurred for the remainder of the evening - but I had a great time apparently – I have seen the photos, but we won't go there.

The next morning I awoke fully clothed on the double bed, still quite intoxicated, but miraculously without a hangover. In fact I never suffered a hangover for the entire trip – heaven knows I deserved to!

I was incapable of driving for the entire day, so was ostracised to the back seat of the van.

By lunch time we had made it to San Marino and the Maranello Red Collection. There are two museums within the one – the Ferrari and the Abarth museums. With an entry fee of EU12.00 to each museum plus only 1 hour before closing, we chose the Abarth side; after all there were more Ferrari museums to visit (I hoped!). Once again it was a case of “NO FOTO” as the museum apparently hasn’t been officially opened yet(?). There was a great collection of cars, but my pick was the Boano spider with its asymmetrical bodywork (so hard to pick in photos but quite obvious “in the metal”). I was keen to look at the engine cross member in the 1300/124, so dropped down onto my hands and knees. This bought a swift reaction from the caretaker – I wonder what he thought I was up to? The Abarth Simcas were amazing. The engines are so large – no wonder they were so difficult to drive hard!

It was late in the afternoon by the time we arrived at Maranello and checked into the Planet Hotel.



Our room overlooked the entrance to the Ferrari factory – the actual one walked through by James Garner in the 60s movie epic “Grand Prix”. It looked so much smaller in real life, but I was assured that it has never changed (except for a boom gate and more of those ubiquitous “NO FOTO” signs). To kill time before the “happy hour” (in reality a free feed) we wandered about the town looking in the shop windows and enjoying a gelato. There was amazing stuff for sale, both in the items themselves and the outrageous prices they were asking! We did find a toy shop though in a side street with 1/43<sup>rd</sup> scale models with very tempting prices – we’d be back tomorrow.

We were up bright and early to visit the Ferrari Museum which featured some of the most amazing cars, especially the Ferrari 500 F2/F1 car and a couple of 250 GTOs (both 1962 & 1963 versions) – the first ones I have ever seen in the metal. The Drogo Bertone and 250LM were the icing on the cake!



The factory tour was a bit disappointing, but it is all you can get at the moment. Just a bus tour through the grounds with a commentary describing what happens in each building. Hopefully they will provide proper tours some time in the years to come(?).

So it was off to do a bit of shopping. The Ferrari shops lived up to their expensive promises, so we weren't tempted, but Tony managed to find a couple of Abarth caps buried on a counter beneath some Ferrari ones. The price was a bit rich, but Tony said "leave it with me" and he returned with a negotiated price that was most acceptable – nice work Mate!

We returned to the little toy shop in the side street and found it just opening after the afternoon "siesta" break. I was determined not to buy any more models as I have run out of room back home. So I idled my time just browsing. Suddenly I spied a Lancia D50 model with the separate pontoons, not the flared in ones of the Lancia-Ferrari. After the disappointment of the museum in Turin, I believed that it would be the closest I'd ever get to see to real one, so I grabbed it. "Damn the torpedoes – full speed ahead!". Before I knew it I had picked up an Abarth 2 litre America, an Abarth Alemano spider and a Lancia D24 sports (I'd seen the original in the Turin museum).

I'm hopeless! Luckily I was able to fit the models into the same box as the wooden toys.

After dinner that night, Tony and I decided to go for a walk as the sun was setting. Just past the Ferrari factory gates and on the opposite side of the road was a bar with several Ferrari workers engaged in conversation at the outdoor tables, so we decided to enter the premises for a vino or two. The lady behind the bar was marvellous. For some reason she took a liking to us and although she couldn't speak English, she proceeded to have a conversation with us. It turned out that she was a friend of ex chief Ferrari engineer Luca Baldisserri who was responsible for the likes of Gerhard Berger, Eddie Irvine and Michael Schumacher. She toddled off at one point and came back with a signed copy of his biography as written by Baldisserri's wife. Searching through the book she pointed to photos of Luca in Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and in the outback. Her eyes gleamed!

Then she produced another signed copy and with the aid of a friend, who had popped in, explained that she wished us to have the books. When we produced a small kangaroo badge (which we carried for such "emergencies") for her, she was over the moon! It was a great evening and typical of what can happen when you make the opportunity happen. Go out and look for it – it won't come looking for you!

Away early the next morning it was on to the Panini private Maserati museum where I hoped to see at least a Sebring coupe and hopefully a 250F. We arrived just before opening time and wandered about looking at the row of tractors and three rather sad little Fiat 500s parked along the side of the museum. Once the museum's doors opened, I was in like a flash. Before me in the centre of the room was a row of old race cars, to my left a row of beautiful road cars (mostly sport coupes) and on my right a mixed assortment of various brands of automobiles, including a lovely little Fiat Ballila roadster and a couple of Stanguellini race cars.

Bits and pieces such as engines, trophy cases and race car suspensions were scattered about. There was no 250F, instead a Birdcage, which more than made up for it! Upstairs, the display continued with bikes, Formula 2/3 racers and a Birdcage chassis – a real work of art! The streamlined Lambretta on display is a 125cc record holder from 1949-1951, which achieved a top speed of 200kph!

Needing to answer the call of nature, I found the loo at the back of the museum, and to my surprise it was the European "starting block" style, something I hadn't had the "joy" of using since the 1970s. I can remember having difficulty the first time I used one, but by the end of that 5 month trip I could've sat there and read a newspaper! It was just like riding a bike, but I did remove my duds as a safety precaution.

But part way through, the lights went out for some reason, so I had to finalise the process by braille – a little tricky in unfamiliar surroundings!





From the Panini collection, it was on to the Stanguellini museum in Modena. If it wasn't for the GPS we would never have found it – just a non-descript office building with a single Stanguellini sign, amongst car dealerships. The building was closed up and appeared empty from the street, so Warren went searching for anyone who could help us. He returned with a little elderly gentleman by the name of Arturo. He had no English skills, but was fluent in German – which helped (or not). We eventually got the message across that we would like to visit the Stanguellini museum and Arturo produced a set of keys, which opened a massive sliding door in the side of the building.

Inside, parked nose-to-tail were a line of classic Fiats in absolutely perfect condition. Fine, but no cigar, what about the Stanguellinis?



Arturo then opened a glass door at the far end of the room and we entered an Aladdin's Cave. There before us were some of the most amazing, beautiful little cars I have ever seen plus display cases holding all manner of Stanguellini automobilia.

Arturo in his Italian/German described the history of the company and the success the little cars had attained during their competitive years and we struggled to understand, but were able to get the gist of what he was saying. He was SO enthusiastic that you couldn't help but be impressed. Another set of doors opened, then another, revealing road cars which had received the "Stanguellini Touch", including a Fiat 2300S race car, various Porches, Alfas, an Austin Healy 3000, Jaguars, even a Lotus! Being an excellent salesman, before we knew it Arturo had sold us caps, badges, a sports bag and DVDs. Then it was downstairs to the workshops to see vintage engines and gearboxes in the process of being rebuilt, plus racks of spare parts manufactured I suppose, to supply all the cars competing around the world in historic events.

Leaving Maranello the next day we were off to the Enzo Ferrari Museum, which is a new venture in Modena, having just opened during the past 12 months or so. I was expecting a collection of road cars, so imagine my surprise when the car in the foyer was the Alfa Romeo 158/159. Maybe, just maybe, this place could be a little better than I had expected.



We purchased our tickets and entered the museum proper. Imagine my surprise when the first car I laid eyes on was the Lancia D50! The sound of my jaw hitting the ground must've been heard throughout the museum! I had wandered straight past the chap collecting the tickets and he came running after me. But he took it light heartedly and laughed – he could obviously see the incredulous look on my face!



So this is where the D50 had gone after the National Car Museum - if this was indeed the same car - as 2 examples still survive – but what the heck either one would do. It was still in “as last raced” condition, but whose bum last warmed the seat, I do not know.

It had heaps of patina – this was the “real deal”! I just stood and looked at it for ages, then took so many photos that I wondered if I’d have enough batteries for the rest of the museum. I would cross that bridge when I came to it. The other guys had finished the entire display and I had only looked at one car!



Eventually tearing myself away from the D50, I discovered one of the two V12 Maserati 250Fs in existence, the Niki Lauda T2 & T5 Ferraris, the Ligiers of Rene Arnoux and Jacques Laffite, an ex-Dan Gurney Porsche, an ex-Senna McLaren Honda, a Cooper Maserati, Carlos Reuteman’s Brabham, Mario Andretti’s 312B Ferrari and Damon Hill’s Williams. All famous Formula 1 cars from days gone by. There were helmets from some of my heroes as well: Alberto Ascari, Juan Manuel Fangio, Graham Hill, Phil Hill, Gilles Villeneuve and Niki Lauda. It was all so surreal!

The next stop was the Mille Miglia Museum in Brescia. Another collection of amazing, rare cars! At the end of the museum was a room dedicated to the Beatles featuring photos, posters and a display of original(?) instruments. It was nice to hear music again!

Then into the shop – always strategically positioned at the exit. Not much tempted me until I found a copy of “Abarth, The Man, The Machines”. But it was in Italian, thanks, but no thanks. Then Tony noticed an English version, so I enquired at the counter as



to how much it cost – EU 60.00. That's less than ½ the price in Australia! I had bought it before I realised! But the thing was so heavy that it would prove a headache to carry with us (it even ripped the bottom out of my backpack!) and was a worry when it came to excess baggage costs!



Then we were off to Lake Garda to stay the night at the Il Fiore Del Garda Apartments in Manerba. The place is very popular with the Swiss, Germans and Dutch, so the camp sites and accommodation were all pretty well fully booked. We even had to make a booking for dinner in the town – that was a first! Our host tried very hard to encourage us to stay longer (as one night bookings are quite unusual), and we were very tempted, but we had to be on the road the next morning. It was quite a hike up to the actual town of Manerba, which is another ancient village set high on a hill with

narrow, virtually one-way streets and no footpaths, making walking around a bit risky, especially when the likes of an old Chevy El Camino came chugging down the street!



Leaving Manerba the next morning, we were off to Sondalo via the Stelvio Pass. Along the way, we wondered if our plan to take this route was, in fact, a good idea after all, but as we reached the foothills of the Alps, the mountain scenery simply became beautiful and the Tyrolean styled buildings just charming.



Eventually we reached the famous Stelvio Pass, a series of 60 blind hairpin corners (according to Wikipedia – I didn't even think of trying to count them) and steep climbs with at least one section that had no wall to keep you from falling hundreds of metres, should the unimaginable happen! Dozens of motorbikes - some with pillion passengers(!) and even pushbikes reliving the Giro de Italia were making the run (it was after all a Sunday – so what else is there to do?), but the most outrageous vehicle was a bus – without any passengers! I still can't figure out how it made it around the corners!

Well if a full-sized bus could make it, so could the Peugeot!



The technique to get the wide Peugeot around the right hand bends was to cross to the wrong side of the road(!) and hope no one was coming downhill as there was no way to see back and up the hill. Left hand bends weren't as bad, as you could see up the hill and if nothing was coming down, you could use all of the road. At one point we were passed by a motorcyclist, wearing white leathers, MONO-WHEELING up the Pass! He either knew the road like the back of his hand – or else....!

Once we were at the top, we knew the effort had been worth it. Above the tree line at 2,750 odd metres there were snow drifts – in the middle of summer – and the air

temperature was cool, but not cold and so much more preferable than the heat back down on the plain. The only buildings were a couple of hotels and several small tourist shops, but the place was packed with motorbikes and bicycles – their owners all with a satisfied smirk on their faces – and deservedly so! We grabbed a German sausage with sauerkraut roll and a coffee for lunch, bought some trashy souvenirs from the tourist shops and began the descent on the other side.



Not too far from the top on the way down we encountered a flatbed truck loaded with a little Citroen which had failed to make the climb. It got interesting in the narrow tunnels when vehicles coming the other way weren't prepared to give way to the truck, resulting in a temporary road blockage until common sense prevailed and the downhill vehicle backed up. The whole time though we had to be aware of motorbikes and even pushbikes flying down the hill behind and past us – crazy, just CRAZY!

Finally we reached the bottom of the Pass and it was on to Bormio and then to our stop for the night – the Hotel Rezia in Sondalo. Our hotel, high on the side of the hill



above the town had magnificent views of the valley and mountains and as we sat in the bar (having a few beers – again – nothing wrong with that!) we just couldn't believe the scenery. This was one place that we really had trouble leaving!

But leave we must, so the next morning we were off the Lake Como. The GPS took us on a meandering course through the north Italian countryside through countless towns until we arrived at Cadenabbia on the lake. Leaving the van at the water's edge, we

paid for a couple of hours parking and caught the ferry for a short trip across to Bellagio, which is on the tip of the peninsula which juts into the centre of the lake.



The town of Bellagio is a pretty place but the number of tourist shops is a little overwhelming. There are narrow cobble streets with quaint shops up the hill but they are in constant use by even large motor vehicles which means that you have to find the sanctuary of a doorway to clear a passageway for them.

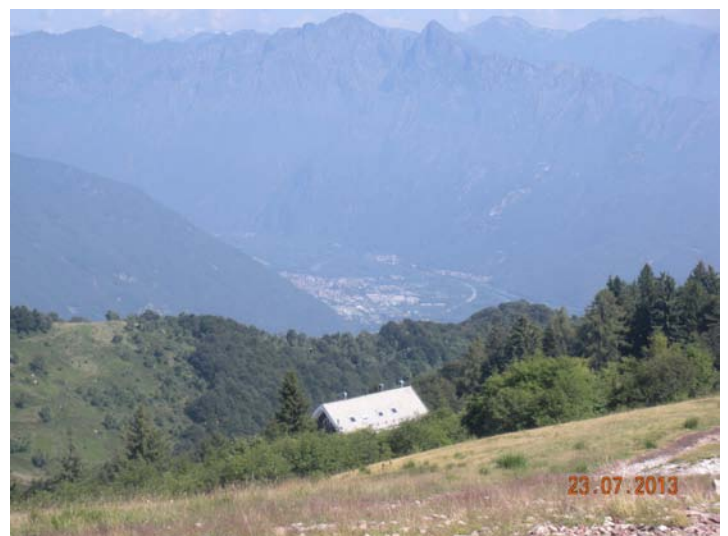


Back in Cadenabbia, we collected the van and set the GPS for Stresa on Lake Maggiore.

Our accommodation in Stresa would be the Albergo Sempione on the main drag opposite the lake. A quaint, but a little run-down hotel, which had such features as padded wallpaper (desperately in need of replacing), a single ceiling fan (no aircon) and a loose lavatory pan that meant any ablutions were a bit of a balancing act! We wandered about before dinner, but the shops were starting to close for the night so we chose a table at the restaurant in the middle of the Piazza Cadorna, ordered a round of beers (so?) and our meal. The place quickly filled after we took our seats (another example of our ability to draw a crowd!) with Dutch and Germans, whom, I must say are easily entertained. Suddenly this idiot, a one-man-band, entered the piazza and commenced to murder a small repertoire of songs to the delight of the crowd. He was WOEFUL, but the audience couldn't get enough of him, so he'd proceed to start his limited number of songs all over again! We finished our meal as quickly as possible and beat a hasty retreat to some back streets out of earshot of the "boom boom boom" of his drum.

Tony and I eventually made our way to a bar just down the street from our hotel and were enjoying a second glass of vino, when a massive storm (which had been threatening for some time) hit in all its fury. We were forced from the outdoor tables into the restaurant section where the proprietor and myself struggled to close the large concertina doors against the driving rain. Then there was nothing else to do but to have....another wine? Eventually the storm eased and we made our way back to the hotel where the staff were mopping and squeegeeing out the entrance foyer. Phew, what a night!

We had a whole day in Stresa to fill so we walked a kilometre or so along the edge of the lake to the cable car which would take us, in three stages, to the top of Monte Mottarone – a winter ski field at an elevation of 1491 metres. The trip up the mountain consisted of two cable cars and a chair lift but when we finally reached the summit, the pollution haze was so bad that we had to almost guess what the scenery would be like. The lake from the very top was almost invisible, but I have read that on a clear day you can see the Matterhorn in Switzerland from this vantage point!



At the top of the lower cable car we took a table at the café and ordered coffees all-round. Amazingly on the wall of the café were some of those tacky miniature Aussie roadside



signs of “kangaroos/wombats next 5km” – another reminder that we’d be home in a matter of days.

Once back down in Stresa, we bought tickets for the boat ride out to the Borromean islands of Isola Bela and Isola Superiore. Unfortunately, the islands were mainly a tourist trap and I was rather underwhelmed, although I did complete my gift purchases with some caps and ‘fridge magnets for the family. On Isola Superiore you can visit the palace and its gardens, but at an additional cost of EU13.00, I thought it better value in the “guitar bar” as I named it, .....to have a round of drinks. We spent the rest of the day back in the town sampling fermented beverages in various establishments (otherwise known as a pub crawl) and had a great meal in a little restaurant in one of the back streets. The fish I ordered just melted in my mouth – yum!



Despite the threat of another storm that evening, nothing eventuated and the next morning we were heading for our final destination: Nice, France where we were to stay at Les Bastides(?) Saint Paul B&B. On our way to dinner, Tony popped into the local Renault dealer for some brochures and we headed for the historic village. Without the GPS, we managed to get nicely lost and ended up at another historic village by the

name of Vence. We chose a little restaurant in a shady location, ordered a round of ales and watched the world go by. We were opposite a rather tricky intersection, and although there must be road rules in France (one would imagine), none seemed to apply here – it was first-in-best-dressed. One fellow who managed to momentarily block the road was deliberately run into by another motorist, but no one got upset – and the two cars went their own ways - many of the cars had accident damage! We ordered a meal in our best French (even worse than our best Italian) and afterwards wandered the streets to discover a Latin-American band playing in the main square and the locals dancing the Samba. It was quite an unexpected sight in France, but entertaining to watch nonetheless!

Then suddenly it was all over. The next morning we drove the van back to the lease company's car park at Nice airport, finalised the paperwork and checked in for our flight home. Within 24 hours we'd be back in Australia and the previous 4 weeks would just become a memory.

My worries about excess baggage proved unnecessary and the fact that I now had 2 pieces of carry on luggage didn't raise an eyebrow with the airline staff. What a relief, as it would've been such a shame to have to leave the toys (including my models) after having dragged them around half of Italy!

I must congratulate Warren for his fastidious planning of the trip. Everything went off without a hitch – all the bookings ran like clockwork and the places we visited were amazing – even more so when I look back at the pictures. And thanks to Tony for his good humour and support for the times when the going got a little tough.

Alan Steele