

Travelling to Italy



Text and photos by Dr Chie Zhi Ying

It has been quite some time since my family and I travelled and it was after great deliberation that we settled on where we would like to travel to. It was late spring and Italy appealed to us from the long list of travel destinations with her beautiful churches and iconic architecture. I concede that I do not have the flair for planning free and easy trips, so, hoping for a hassle-free holiday, we opted for a guided tour package.

Prior to the trip, I pre-empted my elderly parents that there would be an extensive amount of walking – advice gleaned online has always mentioned training one's stamina when travelling to Europe. Luckily, since both of them have always been exercising and walking daily, they were unperturbed by the fact that there would be lots of walking. This advice mentally prepared us for the long walking journey that was to come when we started our tour.

With much anticipation and excitement, off we went on this trip to explore different parts of Italy!

Rome, Vatican City and Pisa

After flying through different time zones, we finally arrived in Rome, the capital of Italy, and started an intensive day tour of the city. Our local tour guide was a young Italian man who spoke enthusiastically about Rome and its glorious past. As we neared the Colosseum, we were awed by its grandeur set against the azure blue sky. I instantly felt like I was transported back to ancient times, where gladiators battled for their lives against other gladiators or beasts like lions, bears and elephants for competition and entertainment.

As we walked on pebbled stone pavements, we took in the sights of the remnants of the Roman Empire with its significant landmarks like the Roman Forum and Palatine Hill, which were the centres of ancient Rome's politics and residence. We were simply amazed by how well preserved the architecture was and how far-reaching an impact the ancient Romans had on our modern civilisation and society!

The Trevi Fountain was our next stop, which was really hard to get close to as there were throngs of tourists snapping pictures around it. The carvings and craftsmanship were simply mind-blowing, featuring the god Oceanus surrounded by Triton and other figures symbolising water's power and the seasons. As is tradition, we tossed a coin over our shoulders – this is purported to ensure a return to Rome.





Taking a break from the walking, we took our lunch in a scenic cafe near the Trevi Fountain, where we had some simple spaghetti and coffee. After lunch, we hopped onto the famous steep Spanish Steps, a favourite meeting point of ancient Romans, and hurried through winding cobbled streets to get to our coach bus.

Arriving at the Vatican City, we were greeted by the majestic sight of St Peter's Basilica, the largest church in the world and a Renaissance architectural masterpiece. The breathtaking dome is a global religious landmark and a testament to Christian faith and art, leaving thousands of visitors inspired by its artistic magnificence. As we stepped onto the colourfully marbled floor of the Basilica, we admired the intricate mosaics, sculptures and gilding, with Latin inscriptions honouring saints and angels. The equally iconic St Peter's Square features a large central obelisk and surrounding colonnades, which are sure to leave you awestruck for a long time. It was simply a spiritual journey of self-discovery, strength and faith!

After a good night's rest where our legs were aching from the day's extensive walking, we were off to Pisa. We walked through winding cobbled streets again before being greeted by the famous Piazza del Duomo and the imposing cathedral and baptistry. Next thing we knew, we were adeptly



snapping photos in the vicinity of the Leaning Tower of Pisa! There is a variety of ways in which you can picture yourself with the tower in the backdrop: pushing against it, propping it up, putting it on your palm, pointing to its apex with the tip of your index finger and many more. It was so much fun looking at the iconic tower with its unintended lean due to the unstable soft soil foundation. Who would have expected that it would become a world-famous icon because of this? We finished the day with a sumptuous dinner of deliciously roasted chicken drumsticks, pizzas and spaghetti with red wine, before going into our hotel for the night's rest.

Florence, Venice and Milan

The next day, we popped over to Florence where we visited San Gimignano, a picturesque medieval Tuscan hilltop town and a UNESCO World Heritage site. As we walked up the hilltop, we took in the scenic sights around us with its panoramic view of the greenery and vibrant flora merging effortlessly with the ancient historical architecture around it. Once home to many towers built by rival families to flaunt wealth, the town now has only a few towers remaining and it has become a unique tourist destination. It is as if you have stepped right into a scenic postcard, with friendly locals selling souvenirs, ice cream and fashionable items, and al fresco cafes dotting the

area. You will see people strolling leisurely, coffee or ice cream in hand, walking their pet dogs through the winding cobbled streets. Amid this beauty, I felt that time had stopped, the hustle and woes of city life all forgotten. One could spend the whole day sipping on coffee, enjoying a simple lunch leisurely while taking in the spectacular scenery around. This was truly an incomparable holiday!

Coming to Florence, one must not miss the Piazza della Signoria with its delicate sculptures. We marvelled at the famous Fountain of Neptune with its serene water elements and the Palazzo Vecchio, a historic town hall and symbol of Florence. In the masterful craftsmanship of the sculptures, one



sees the strength, resilience, wisdom and beauty of gods, saints and heroes who contributed to the betterment of their fellow men. We had some retail therapy where we shopped at one of the outlets – a great way to look at the latest fashions, grab a bite and have some rest after the sightseeing.

Continuing on our journey, we were off to Venice, the world-renowned city of canals. Against the sunny weather, we hopped onto a private water taxi which gave us time to admire the sights of the city’s charming monuments. We admired the monumental Bridge of Sighs, the remarkable Doge’s Palace as well as the regal Piazza San Marco. There was also the iconic Rialto Bridge, the oldest of four bridges spanning the Grand Canal in Venice. Standing atop the bridges basking in the sunny and windy weather, the serenity was indescribable and simply welcoming.

Venice is well known for its extraordinary glass masterpieces, and what better way to have a peek at the secrets of Murano glass-making techniques than seeing its glassblowing show? With skills and mastery, Venetian craftsmen gracefully moulded hot molten glass, used special tools to imprint patterns and shapes and blew it to make elaborate glass pieces in the likeness of horses, lamps and cups within a few minutes. The audience clapped enthusiastically in admiration of this closely guarded secret of glass-making. We then visited the glass-making factory and shop, where we were struck by the diversity of glass items and pieces on display. The glass pieces were intricately

designed in vibrant colours – it was simply delightful!

Of course, what is a trip to Venice without taking a ride on the iconic gondola? The ride was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity – we wound around quaint houses along the canal covered with thick moss and mould due to chronic exposure to seawater and admired beautifully carved bridges, houses and the intricate network of canals, all while aboard the ornately built gondola. As the gondolier skilfully glided us down the winding canals, he serenaded us with a rich barcarole, a traditional folk song which added to the romantic and tranquil ambience. What a mind-blowing experience!

Our last stop in Italy was Milan, the global fashion capital known for its high-end luxury fashion brands like Versace, Prada, Gucci and Armani. We visited the Castello Sforzesco, a medieval castle and fortress built in the 15th century housing several masterpieces by Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. In the vicinity, one could not help but be impressed by the stately architecture of La Scala Opera House, Galleria Vittorio and Emanuele and Duomo di Milan. We shopped at the Galleria Vittorio, one of the world’s oldest shopping centres with high-end luxury brands, fine dining restaurants and historic cafes – a perfect way to unwind and indulge!

Memorable from start to end

Alas, time flies and it was soon time for us to return home. Looking back, the trip was truly an eye-opening visual

feast where we got to immerse in the rich Italian and ancient Roman culture, leaving us totally in awe of world-class icons and architecture. Notwithstanding the extensive walking, we felt welcomed by the hospitality of friendly Italian people who made our trip memorable and we relished our time in Italy thoroughly.

The travel to Italy marked the start of our journey to explore Europe in a leisurely and fun way, and I am sure that I will be back soon for another family trip again! ♦

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Legend

1. St Peter's Basilica
2. Fountain of Neptune, Florence
3. Yummy pizza at restaurant in Florence
4. The Colosseum
5. Me posing with the Leaning Tower of Pisa
6. Glass pieces at Venice
7. Enjoying the ride on a Gondola, Venice
8. Castello Sforzesco, Milan

