

12 Italy--A Peek into the Boot

Ljubljana, Yugoslavia, to Venice, Italy
Sunday, May 9

Off to an early start, we crossed the Julian Alps on our way to Trieste, Italy, on the Adriatic Sea. After a fifteen minute border stop (the Italians hardly looked at our passports), we entered the hilly suburbs of Trieste and suddenly beheld a picturesque city with boats and ships silhouetted against a choppy sea. How I would have enjoyed a walking tour of this Roman built city. However, Graeme drove us to the railway station where Neil gave us twenty minutes to change our Yugoslav dinars into Italian liras because the exchange rate here was supposedly better than in Venice.

My banking completed, I stopped at a newsstand in the station and bought an English paper. A front page article with picture told of an earthquake which had rocked an area northeast of Venice three days before. The quake had measured 6.5 on the Richter scale. Over 900 bodies had been recovered, 2000 persons had been injured and 400 were missing. Aftershocks were still

being felt. Reading this made me wonder if our delays in Afghanistan and Iran were perhaps blessings in disguise.

Driving along the scenic and sunny Gulf of Trieste, I looked for signs of earthquake damage, but saw none. At 2:00 P.M., driving through a rundown suburb of Venice on the mainland, we passed a small oil refinery exuding fumes. Nearby we found the entrance to our campsite. The sign above the camp entrance read, "Leaving Italy, Welcome to Camp Fusina." Neil jokingly said that the camp which was managed by friendly Australians had only two rules, "no fighting and no complaining." As we drove to our space, we passed a large felled log on which was painted in white lettering, "Virgins Only." The notoriety of some Australians as carefree travelers had no doubt made its mark here.

We could see by the tents which had been pitched on the austere grounds that other Aussies were here, although now the camp was deserted. By 3:45, we had pitched our tents and the cooktent, freshened up and were on our way to the Piazzale Roma to take a vaporetto (small ferry) to Saint Mark's Square.

On this short drive, Neil told us that the reputation of Venice as a great commercial power emerged with the Crusades which subsequently led to flourishing trade with the East. In 1203, the Crusaders and Venetians invaded part of the Byzantine Empire taking Constantinople. Here, they set up the short-lived Latin Empire (1204-1261) launching Venice as the dominant European power in the Mediterranean. The "Queen of the Adriatic" ultimately declined in power when Constantinople fell to the Ottomans, the Americas

were discovered and other trade routes were found. The commercial power thus passed to nations west of Italy, especially Spain and Portugal. Nevertheless, Venice then experienced her artistic golden age during the Renaissance.

Neil concluded with a reminder of the importance of the Polo family as Venetian and world citizens. Marco Polo's overland experiences compiled in a book gave Europe her first significant detailed record concerning China and other Asian lands. Nearly two centuries later, this book influenced and encouraged another Italian, the Genoese Christopher Columbus in his westward explorations.

Nearing the Piazzale Roma, Neil told us that we would be on our own and that we would have to rely on watercraft and footpaths for transportation around Venice's 150 canals and 118 alluvial islets. He said we should be back at the bus by 6:00 P.M.

We drove across a long bridge to the Piazzale Roma which was lined with parked cars and European tourist buses. After parking our bus, we disembarked and followed well-dressed Venetians and tourists to the crowded dock. Here we joined the queue to buy tickets for the vaporettos and then boarded two of these swaying ferries.

Turning into the Grand Canal which serpented through the length of Venice, we passed countless palaces and some cathedrals of Byzantine, Italian-Gothic and Renaissance vintage all reflecting the city's former prominence and wealth. The Canal was busy with other vaporettos, occasional gondolas and other small boats.

Midway, our cruise brought us under the Rialto Bridge named for the islands which formed the nucleus of Venice in the 5th century when mainland refugees fled there from barbarians. Today the bridge seemed to be full of interesting shops catering to tourists.

Debarking near Saint Mark's Square, our group followed the crowd along the waterfront and turned into the square passing on our right the pink and white marble Doges' Palace and then imposing Saint Mark's Cathedral which fronted the square. When we reached the campanile on the square, our group scattered.

Jen and I took a few steps back to view the cathedral and the palace. The cathedral, an extremely ornate and intricate structure, is considered to be one of the most impressive examples of Byzantine architecture. According to Neil, it had been built originally to house the remains of the Evangelist Mark, Venice's patron saint. Similarly, the palace, of Italian-Gothic with traces of early Renaissance design, is considered to be an outstanding example of medieval architecture.

Besides these two fabulous structures, the square was flanked on three sides by exclusive shopping arcades and cafes. It was also flocked with pigeons and tourists feeding them. Other tourists and locals were seated at a large outdoor cafe sipping drinks and listening to a band.

Jen and I entered Saint Mark's Cathedral first, but saw very little of it due to all the tourists and worshipers. We left and contemplated climbing the stairs of the campanile for a panoramic

view, but the idea gave way to browsing through the arcades instead where we feasted our eyes on beautiful Murano glassware and mirrors and fine Venetian lace.

Leaving the square, we turned onto a lane where we passed more quaint shops and outdoor cafes. Crossing several arched bridges spanning the ever-present narrow canals, we watched decorated gondolas gliding smoothly along. We also discovered several trendy boutiques featuring chic fashions tempting me to buy.

Our cursory tour of Venice ended with our return to the Piazzale Roma on another crowded vaporetto. As we waited for the others to return to the bus, the T-shirt Committee presented us with our new cotton T-shirts. They came in a variety of colors and predetermined sizes and were emblazoned with a combined Sundowners/Christian logo of the sun and the fish. Over the logo was written "Sundowners" and below it, "CYTA." On the left sleeve was a squat cartoon figure over which was imprinted, "It's a Boris!" The T-shirts were an instant hit, with all of the fellows and some of the girls donning them on the ride back to camp.

Simultaneously, Jen, with me beside her, turned to her character sketch of Boris and began to read aloud, drawing others around her to listen:

Boris--Our Mascot

Boris was the shortest one of us on the trip, a fact that strongly influenced her view of herself. She had a clown's tragic-comic outlook on life and

a little round, plump body to match; a rounded face, not unattractive, and blonde hair. She was our clown and we loved her for it.

She was christened Boris by "ring-leaders" on our trip mainly because she used the word so frequently. Objects, feelings, other persons were "boris" to her when they were good, "bad boris" when they were bad. She was a person whose name needed more expression to suit her personality, and "Boris" fitted the bill very well.

I have never met a person before or since who giggled as much as she did. When in an elevated mood, Boris was sometimes unbearably high, giggling uncontrollably at the boys or amongst the younger members of our group, who were rather mischievous themselves. Making statements whose ridiculousness often surpassed all others, she at times saddened some, irritated others but most often made us laugh.

Wherever we went in the Muslim countries, Boris would in no time be surrounded by hordes of Muslim men. I think they liked her littleness and roundness and innate goodness. She charmed them, and we often had trouble extricating her from the middle of the pack. Such was our Boris!

Back at Camp Fusina, Aussies abounded everywhere--in their two buses, in front of the camp's restaurant and store and at the

bathrooms. Before dinner, we joined some of them in the restaurant and shared travel tales.

One of the groups was on a nine week tour of Europe and the other was bound for London, having covered much of the territory we had as well as the Middle East. They were all very ready for London too. From them we learned that this campsite was one of only a few in Italy where Australians were really welcome.

The obstreperous behavior of some members of these two groups made our group seem mild by comparison. While in Australia, I had heard about the loud, overindulgent, beer-consuming Australian traveler, and here he was at Camp Fusina. As we ate our watery spaghetti, salad, french bread and burgundy in a section of the restaurant reserved for us, our attention was frequently drawn to the tables where we saw this traveler in action, drinking and singing his way into oblivion.

After eating, most of our group congregated between some tents for evening devotions while the others lingered over cups of cappuccino before retiring.

Venice
Monday, May 10

Over a tasty breakfast of french toast and scrambled eggs prepared by our cooks, we learned that during the night there had been an aftershock of the May 6 quake. Fortunately, except for the shelved goods in the small camp grocery store which had fallen to the floor, there were no injuries or noticeable damage in the camp.

By 10:30 A.M., we were back at Saint Mark's Square where we

followed Neil on foot to a Murano glass factory. Here we saw professional glassblowers at work. We were then taken into a shop containing the finished products in a variety of colors. Many of us made purchases of the lovely glassware.

After the tour, our group split up agreeing to meet the bus at the Piazzale Roma at 5:30 P.M. Nino, Tanya, Jen and I considered a gondola ride and a tour of the Doges' Palace until we learned the prices. Instead, we took pictures of others enjoying the rides and settled for a walk with Brenda under the palace colonnade. Brenda had made it her goal while in Venice to see the interior of this palace, and told us that the former doges of Venice had ruled from it for nearly a thousand years. She said that paintings by Titian, Veronese and other great 16th century Venetian painters adorned many of the palatial rooms.

Leaving Brenda at the palace entrance, we browsed among several waterfront kiosks selling snacks, water colors and prints of Venetian life and other souvenirs. While I was buying a print of a gondola gliding on a canal, Nino, Tanya and Jen bought ice cream cones.

Back on the square, we took turns taking pictures of each other feeding the pigeons. Wanting a respite from the crowds, we left the square for a side lane and soon found a quaint outdoor cafe where we settled in for an hour's rest, eating delicious pizza, drinking cappuccino and watching stylish Venetians parade by. It was obvious by now, at least with our foursome, that we were all tiring of playing tourist. We just wanted to enjoy this city like

the natives.

After lunch, the sunny day turned cloudy with intermittent showers. Nino and Tanya had errands to attend to leaving Jen and me to investigate more thoroughly the boutiques we had seen the day before. These exclusive Italian designs were the epitome of high fashion, again tempting me to buy; but the prices were high and it was getting late so we were soon on our way to the waterfront to catch a vaporetto for the Piazzale Roma.

On our return to camp, I showered and repacked my case for Austria. At dinner, while we were all congregated in the camp restaurant, the gentle shower turned into a torrent. Another noisy wild evening followed with the other Australians as we enjoyed a tasty meal of lamb chops, spareribs, salad, cheap wine and cappuccino. The rain made it necessary to hold evening devotions in the bus. But Nino and I lingered on at the restaurant until late engrossed in conversation.