



England and Italy, December 2011-January 2012

Bob and Molly Hillery

For this Holiday Season we decided to spend Christmas at home and then leave to enjoy the New Year in England and stay for the month of January. As usual, our time in the apartment in Ilkley was very enjoyable, with lots of walking, pleasant dining and relaxation. We were also able to visit many of our relatives and friends.

This trip was a little different, however, in that Geoffrey had arranged for us to spend a week in Tuscany at his son Mark's villa. This was a First Class experience in every sense and a very memorable visit to a beautiful part of the world.

The whole was a wonderful trip and a great way to start a new year.

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Monday December 26/Tuesday December 27

We left home around 12:30 and stopped at our local Starbucks before driving down to the airport. It was actually a little anxious at times as we soon were caught in virtually stopped traffic on I-75 just south of GE. We turned around and went across I-275 to get on to I-71. This also soon slowed to a crawl due to slow traffic – and a fender bender – near Kenwood Mall and things were looking a bit tight for our 4pm flight. However, once past Kenwood, the traffic eased and we had a stress-free drive the balance of the way to the airport. I turned in the Budget rental car and then we were able to check in, still over an hour before the flight.

The flight to Atlanta was on time and we had about three hours layover before the unusually late departure of 9pm for Manchester. We decided to have a meal at TGIF and, once on the plane, we soon settled down to sleep rather than eat. It was a fitful sleep with at least one significant interruption for turbulent weather over the east coast of Canada but we reached Manchester on time at a little after 10am.

We were quickly through Customs and Immigration and even the rental car pick-up went smoothly so we were on our way before 11am. This got us to Ilkley (with relatively light traffic and dry roads) by 12:30 and our first stop was at Caffe Nero for a late breakfast.

We then got settled in the apartment – and promptly fell asleep for a few hours! We were awake in time to clean up and go out for a very pleasant meal at Piccolino to end our first day here.

Wednesday December 28

It was 10am before we woke and dragged ourselves down into town for breakfast at Caffe Nero, after which we shopped at Tesco for essentials for the apartment. I went for a walk as far as Keighley Gate in the afternoon (3 miles round trip) and had all on to make it up the hill against a very strong wind (30-40 mph estimated). It was a much easier return trip!

Again we both napped for a while before going out to dinner at Monkman's where we were greeted like old friends (we have eaten there perhaps ten times in all by now) and enjoyed another excellent meal. We turned in by 10pm.

Thursday December 29

It was still very windy with on-and-off rain showers (some quite strong) but we decided to take a walk into Ilkley later in the morning after breakfast at home. Molly went straight down the hill and spent time at the framing shop and the wool shop while I took a somewhat longer route down via Queens Road, Victoria Avenue and along the river. We met for coffee at Caffe Nero and then took our separate ways back home.

We then spent the rest of the day in the flat and had dinner at home while watching TV. It was 11 before we were ready for bed.

Friday December 30



Airedale General Hospital

It was a little earlier when we woke up today (9:30) but we are obviously still not completely over jet lag. We had breakfast at home again and around noon we left to spend some time in Skipton. It was raining quite heavily when we arrived so we did a quick pass through the market and headed to the new Caffe Nero to warm up. To our surprise, one of our Ilkley baristas (Jodie from Haworth) was working there and had been for about a month. She immediately recognized us and even remembered our drinks!

After "lunch" we left Skipton and drove to Airedale Hospital where we visited with Cousin Keith.

He seemed to be in remarkably good spirits and has made dramatic progress since his stroke in late November. So much so, in fact, that

he is anticipating being able to go home next week – a full month before expected. Both he and Eileen (who was also visiting) were looking forward to it and she was getting the house prepared by having additional handrails, etc installed.

We left at the end of visiting time (4pm) and drove back to Ilkley (already dark) and spent a quiet evening at home.

Saturday December 31

We were up late again on another overcast but mild (50F) morning. We walked to Caffe Nero for breakfast and then I continued for a walk along the (muddy) river bank and back via Ben Rhydding. Molly did some shopping and walked back, arriving about 30 minutes before me.



We spent the afternoon in the flat (with a brief interlude when I walked into town for some wine!) and then left for Eldwick soon after 5:30. We picked up Keith and Zena who were to stay with us overnight after our New Year's Eve dinner at the Farsyde restaurant. We had dined there last December 31 and had enjoyed the evening of dinner and a pleasant jazz trio.



Tonight the “trio” was just one man and a synthetic backup “group”. He played saxophone and flute and a good combination of jazz and standards. It seemed a little noisier than last year but the meal was excellent, as was the company. The four course meal stretched over about 3 hours so there was a relatively short gap between finishing eating and the ringing in of the New Year.

I'm afraid that we weren't there much after midnight and we drove back to the apartment (in a slight drizzle) and turned in almost right away after a very pleasant evening.

Sunday January 1, 2012

We were all up soon after nine and had breakfast in the apartment before Keith and Zena got ready for their walk home across The Moor. The weather didn't look too bad at 11 when they left (not raining and about 45F) but unfortunately it soon changed. I had decided to take a walk on the moors and was soon battling a fairly stiff breeze and some heavy showers as I walked towards Keighley Gate. It got quite misty on top also as the clouds came down and almost hid the radio masts.

The path up as far as the top of the moor and the cairn was in good shape – recently paved – but after that the walking was somewhat difficult. I seemed to be either in ankle deep mud or ankle deep running water and the rain never let up. There is a short stretch of paved path on the way down to White Wells but, other than that, it was a very wet and muddy walk. Despite the conditions, however, there were literally hundreds of people out “enjoying” a family walk on New Year's Day. Obviously they had said that they would go for a walk on the Holiday and a little wind and rain wasn't going to stop them!

I got back about 1:30, after which Molly and I went into Ilkley (by car) for coffee and to get a few things from the shop. We then returned to the apartment where we waited for Geoffrey to arrive for the afternoon and evening.

We had a very pleasant seven hours and a home-cooked meal. We also spent quite a lot of time playing with Geoffrey's new iPad and iPhone. He left for Huby soon after 10pm.

Monday January 2

We drove into Ilkley for breakfast, did a little shopping and then returned to the apartment. The day had started with showers – some of which seemed to contain a few snow flakes – but by noon it was sunny but cool, with a fairly stiff breeze. There was a dusting of snow on the hills across the valley and as I went for my walk to the top of the Moor I saw a few more isolated patches of snow. I walked as far as the cairn via Keighley Gate and retraced my steps back to the apartment, as opposed to doing the full circuit as yesterday. The total distance for the entire walk was almost identical with that of yesterday so the cairn must be essentially half way. Once again there were dozens of people out enjoying the moors as this was a Bank Holiday.

After returning to the apartment and having a coffee in town, we relaxed until dinner time. Tonight we ate at the Bistro Pierre in the Crescent Hotel and enjoyed a good meal and a pleasant evening.



Tuesday January 3

After a late breakfast (we are still getting up late) I decided on a walk that I thought I could follow from Guiseley station to Shipley via roads and pathways along the river and canal banks.

I got the 11:40 train to Guiseley and, after walking the town streets for a while I was essentially at the top of Hollins Hill but on a quiet road parallel to the east. This took me steeply down to Esholt (Emmerdale) and then right alongside the River Aire,



which was very full and flowing extremely rapidly. I soon left the road on a footpath which should have taken me directly to a bridge that crossed the river. However, after crossing one field, the path disappeared into the river! I decided to try to follow the route in an adjacent field which required climbing a stone wall and then ducking beneath a barbed wire fence before I was back on the path and across the bridge.

I then followed the canal bank – itself very muddy and waterlogged – as far as Shipley where I got the train back to Ilkley. The total walk was about six miles, including the one mile round trip from the apartment to Ilkley station. Throughout I encountered strong winds and occasional heavy rain showers and even a brief hailstorm but it was nevertheless a pleasant day out.

Molly and I had coffee on my return and then relaxed until going to Pannache for dinner. This was an Indian restaurant on Skipton Road which we had never tried before and turned out to be quite good – well worth another visit sometime.

Wednesday January 4

We were up late again and it was almost noon before I left to do some errands in Keighley. I got a couple of things for the flat in B&Q and some ink for the printer at Curry's. I had planned to take a walk in Keighley but it was raining heavily and very windy so I called Molly and we decided to simply go into Ilkley (by car) for coffee before staying home for the rest of the afternoon.

In the evening we met Geoffrey and two of his old friends, Peter and Pat Thomson at Martha and Vincent's restaurant in Ilkley. I had known Peter in my youth but had not seen either him or Pat since 2002.

We had a very nice meal and it was a pleasant evening of chatting and catching up. It was about 10pm before we left the restaurant.

Thursday January 5

We had breakfast at Caffè Nero and then I took a walk around Ilkley (four miles). At noon we left for Harrogate where we had tickets for the pantomime at the Harrogate Theatre. The show was "Beauty and The Beast" and was the usual collection of

corny jokes, sing-along and some pleasant singing and dancing. Obviously the place was packed with young children who were clearly well versed in pantomime etiquette and the art of participation.

We stopped in Marks for a couple of “instant meals” and then drove home for the evening. The winds of the past several days had diminished considerably and the forecast is for some more pleasant weather over the next few days.

Friday January 6

It was much cooler this morning with frost evident on the rooftops. I left for my walk about 9:45 and by the time I got to Bingley it was still cool but there was bright sunshine. The relatively flat and short walk was very pleasant after the wind and rain of the past days and I thoroughly enjoyed being out.

I was back home by 1:30 – not too long after Molly had returned from her trip to Ilkley – so we waited until after 3pm for our afternoon coffee. We then stayed home for the evening.

Saturday January 7

We had breakfast at Caffe Nero, after which I took a walk via Ben Rhydding to the river and then back into town. I called Molly and she walked down the hill to join me for coffee and then we made our way slowly back up the hill.

About 3:30 we left for Ripon and had afternoon tea with Dorothy and David in their new home. They seem to be getting settled in nicely and enjoying the “down-sized” workload.

We had dinner with them at a very nice pub in Aldboro (near Boroughbridge) and we were there about three hours. Surprisingly there were only a few other diners and the place was empty when we left at 10pm. A sign of the times, or just the lull after the Holidays?

We were back at home just about 11pm.

Sunday January 8



Molly woke up feeling a little under the weather and decided against going to church. She felt like trying to sleep so I got the bike ready and went for a ride. The temperature was about 45F so it wasn't cold with several layers of clothing. I went on the north side of the River Wharfe as far as Pool and returned via Otley and Burley. I was gone about two hours and covered just over 21 miles.

Molly was still sleeping when I returned. However, when she woke up later she seemed to be a lot better and we were able to go for a nice meal at Piccolino in the evening.

The River Wharfe near Otley

Monday January 9

It was another mild morning as we had breakfast at Caffe Nero, after which I drove over to Saltaire for a relatively short walk under overcast skies and some light showers. On the way back to Ilkley, however, it became very sunny and the temperature approached fifty before clouding over again and becoming cooler as a breeze sprang up.

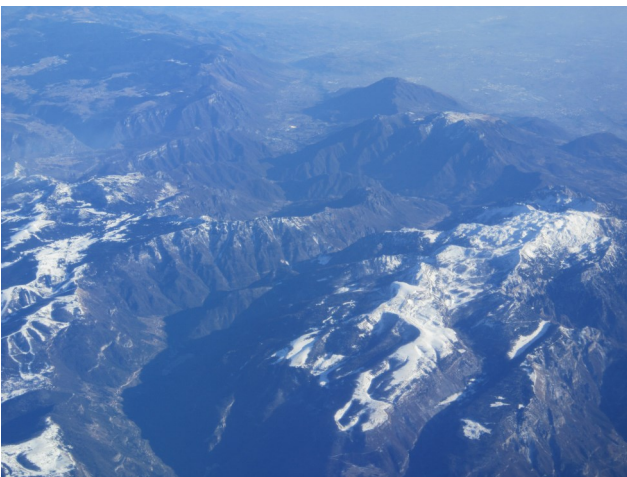
We had coffee in Ilkley and then stayed home for the rest of the day and prepared for our trip to Italy tomorrow.

Tuesday January 10

We had breakfast at Caffe Nero before loading the car and driving to Leeds-Bradford airport. It was a relatively clear morning but cool and there was a stiff breeze blowing. Geoffrey was already at the airport as I returned our rental car and then he drove us to the “back side” of the airport where the private planes are parked. We were greeted by the receptionist in the “Multiflight” lounge and offered a hot drink while our bags were being loaded onto the plane. We were then greeted by the pilot who told us that the weather in Siena looked good for our landing.



Soon we were escorted to the plane and settled into our seats, ready for take-off. We were given clearance about 20 minutes before our scheduled departure time and were soon in the air and looking down on Ilkley Moor as we did a 270 degree turn from the northwest take-off direction to our eastwardly heading. We actually crossed the east coast to the North Sea just south of Hull and hit the continent over Holland before heading south across Germany to Northern Italy.



Lunch en route was set out at a table for four and there was an amazing array of food. We had a Caprese salad (presumably to get us in right Italian mood), followed by a green salad, several shell fish and salmon slices and enough sandwiches to feed a small army. This whole was washed down with frequently replenished white wine and followed with a rich chocolate mousse dessert and coffee.

By the time we had completed the excellent meal – in the rich splendor of this well-appointed aircraft (an Embraer regional jet built for probably 30 commercial passengers but now set up with 13 first class seats) - we were over the Alps and beginning our descent to Siena.

The whole flight was very smooth and we landed to clear blue skies and relatively mild temperatures at the tiny Siena airport. Our taxi



for the onward journey to Mark's villa was not actually waiting for us which caused Geoffrey to have a word with the pilot but all was soon OK as the taxi appeared – a little “late” because of our early arrival. It was then a 25 minute drive to the villa which is set near the top of one of the many hills in this area and has tremendous views of the surrounding terrain. This is mostly farmland and fruit-growing country but is dotted with dozens of small hill towns as far as the eye can see. These towns, often containing a number of towers, vary from very small (a few hundreds residents?) to some of quite a size and which draw thousands of tourists to this region.

Arrival in Siena by Private Jet!



Tuscany

Views from the Villa Patio

The villa is more than we could have imagined and is very difficult to describe and do it justice. First, it is at the end of a long driveway lined with cypress trees and is in hundreds of acres of its own grounds. With the exception of the surrounding hill towns (the closest being about 2 miles away) and a far distant geo-thermal facility, there is only one other domicile we can see – and then only its roof. Not surprisingly, therefore, the silence is almost deafening and the phrase “away from it all” says everything but doesn’t fairly describe it.

The house is divided into two major parts – the main residence in which the three of us are staying and which contains Mark and Melissa’s suite as well as his communications and entertainment center; and an attached (via courtyard) second building which contains additional guest suites. The internal décor is predominantly tiled floors with rough hewn stone and brick walls with frequent rugs to add warmth. All furnishings and fittings just “fit” in a quintessential Tuscan villa and all furnishings have been meticulously chosen for comfort and style.

On the other hand, the climate control, lighting, audio-visual and communications facilities are state-of-the-art and, at least in principle, it is possible to control everything from virtually anywhere in the house. However, it helps significantly if you were a product of the latter part of the twentieth century and I am afraid that three 70+ year olds have not – and probably will not – master the system before it is time to return to England.



The Villa



After watching a marvelous sunset we retired indoors to a warm fire and reveled in the wonderful smells emanating from the kitchen as Lisa (the chef assigned to us) prepared our first evening meal. This turned out to be a four course delight (crostini, pasta with duck, veal scallopine and ricotta cream dessert) all helped with a bottle of Sicilian wine from the well-stocked cellar. We had arranged for just two dinners to be cooked for us on site (intending to visit local restaurants on the other nights) but tonight's treat made us wonder if we had made the right decision.



The rooms inside.....



Wednesday January 11

It was after nine when we emerged for breakfast and prepared a simple meal of tea, bread and jams which we were able to enjoy outside in the warm morning sunshine.



We then set off in Mark's Lexus SUV to explore the surrounding countryside. Our first stop was at the village of Mensano which is only a couple of miles up the road from the villa. Here we walked the almost empty streets and admired the stone buildings built clinging to the hillside. The panorama from the top of the village was stunning and well worth the short walk up some very steep streets. We also found a café for coffee and – even better – ascertained that it was open for dinner, at which point we made our evening's booking.



Mensano



We then drove on, via narrow twisty roads to what is perhaps the most famous of the hill towns, San Gimignano. We were able to park right outside the ancient city walls and walk up the shop-lined streets to the main square and the duomo. Again, there were very few visitors in town and many of the shops were closed but it was very pleasant to slowly take in the wonderful stone buildings and the views across the valleys. In addition, San Gimignano is famous for its towers, built successively higher and more ornate to impress the neighbors and once numbering about 35. The number has dwindled to about 15 now but they still form an impressive sight to add to the equally impressive ancient buildings that form this beautiful place. We did find a café open for a light lunch before slowly returning to the car and navigating a slightly more direct route back to the villa.





San Gimignano

We returned in daylight which gave us a couple of hours to relax and clean up before driving up the hill for our dinner in Mensano.

The meal turned out to be very good but we were the only patrons in the two hours we were there so it would appear that they may have opened just for it was another beautiful morning and we had breakfast on the terrace again. Then Geoffrey and I took a three mile walk along tracks through the fields and woods. It was a very pleasant and relatively easy walk but

Thursday January 12

It was another beautiful morning and we had breakfast on the terrace again. Then Geoffrey and I took a three mile walk along tracks through the fields and woods. It was a very pleasant and relatively easy walk but there were a few uphill climbs.



A beautiful day for a walk in a beautiful area



After this we drove to Siena where we spent about three hours wandering the streets of the ancient city and admiring its architecture. The streets from each of the entrance gates (themselves impressive pieces of history) lead to the Campo (opposite page), a huge semicircular “square” which is surrounded by magnificent buildings, the most impressive of which is the Palazzo Pubblico (essentially the City Hall) with its magnificent façade and enormous campanile. The square – actually sloping upwards from the Palazzo - is segmented to represent the committee members who were essentially the founding fathers of the city back in the thirteenth century. It is also said that the nine segments represent the folds of skirt of the Virgin Mary. Perhaps the most famous annual event in the Campo is the “horse race” (Palio) which is held twice each year.

The **Palio di Siena** (known locally simply as *Il Palio*) is a horse race that is held twice each year, on July 2 and August 16, in Siena, Italy. Ten horses and riders, bareback and dressed in the appropriate colours, represent ten of the seventeen *contrade*, or city wards. The Palio held on July 2 is named Palio di Provenzano, in honor of the Madonna of Provenzano, who has a church in Siena. The Palio held on August 16 is named Palio dell'Assunta, in honor of the Assumption of Mary.

The race itself, in which the jockeys ride bareback, circles the Piazza del Campo, on which a thick layer of dirt has been laid, three times and usually lasts no more than 90 seconds. It is not uncommon for a few of the jockeys to be thrown off their horses while making the treacherous turns in the piazza, and indeed, it is not unusual to see un-mounted horses finishing the race without their jockeys.

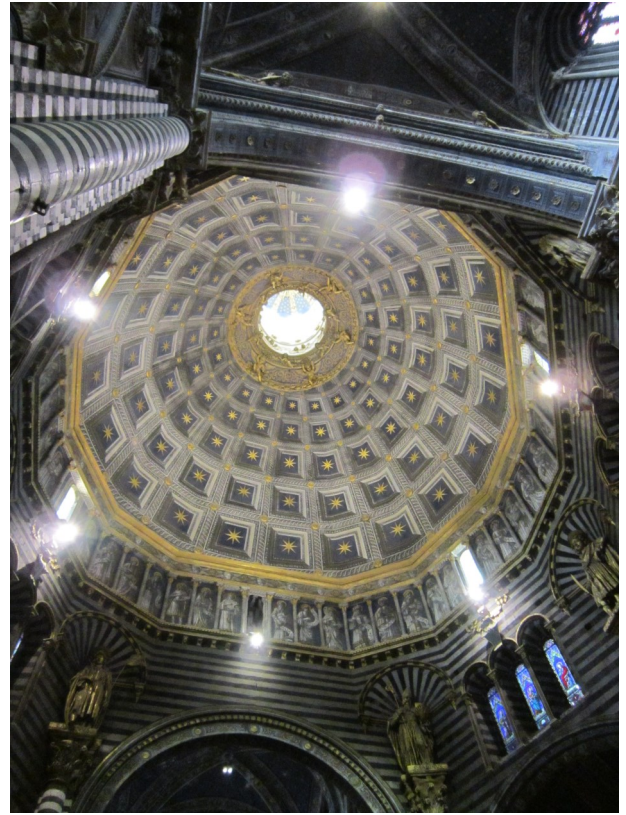


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Near the Campo and raised somewhat above the surrounding area is the Duomo, an absolutely magnificent building both inside and out. We arrived mid-afternoon at which time the sunlight highlighted the western façade in a perfect light which showed the white and pink marble at its most magnificent. In addition there are many fantastic sculptures and paintings on this frontage – which only serve as a teaser for the columns, domes, stained glass windows and paintings inside this enormous and beautiful building. I was particularly impressed with the black and white striped columns (of which there were dozens and which are far more beautiful than they sound) and the two enormous racks or organ pipes. What a wonderful and moving experience it is to simply stand in the midst of this physically and spiritually emotive building.





It was by now beginning to get late in the afternoon and both the light and the heat were falling so we made our way back to the car and then drove home, arriving just as the daylight faded.

Tonight we dined at a restaurant only a few miles from the villa that Geoffrey had selected. We had another excellent meal but once again were the only ones dining throughout the 2 1/2 hours we were there. One wonders how they stay in business until one thinks of the draw that this part of Italy must be in the spring, summer and autumn tourist periods.

Friday January 13

It was overcast and threatening rain as we had breakfast this morning – indoors for the first time. We decided to drive to Pisa, nevertheless, and left around 11. We took the non-motorway route, which was scenic for over half the distance but it was a little slow. Consequently it was after 1pm by the time we were enjoying our lunch in a nice café right in the center of Pisa.



We then walked along the main shopping street (Cassa Italia) and across the River Arno to cover the remaining half mile to the main attractions of the city: the cathedral, the baptistery and, of course, the tower. This was our first visit since it had been re-opened after its “straightening” so Geoffrey and I decided to go inside and take the walk to the top. The safety aspect has changed significantly since we went up many years ago with the children and shoulder height guard rails are in place on the only three walkways that are open to the public. Even so, it is still a little un-nerving to walk around a structure that appears to be leaning far more than it is. All told, however, the views from the top made the 250 step climb worthwhile. Certainly, January is a good time to visit as there were no crowds either on the tower or in the surrounding area.

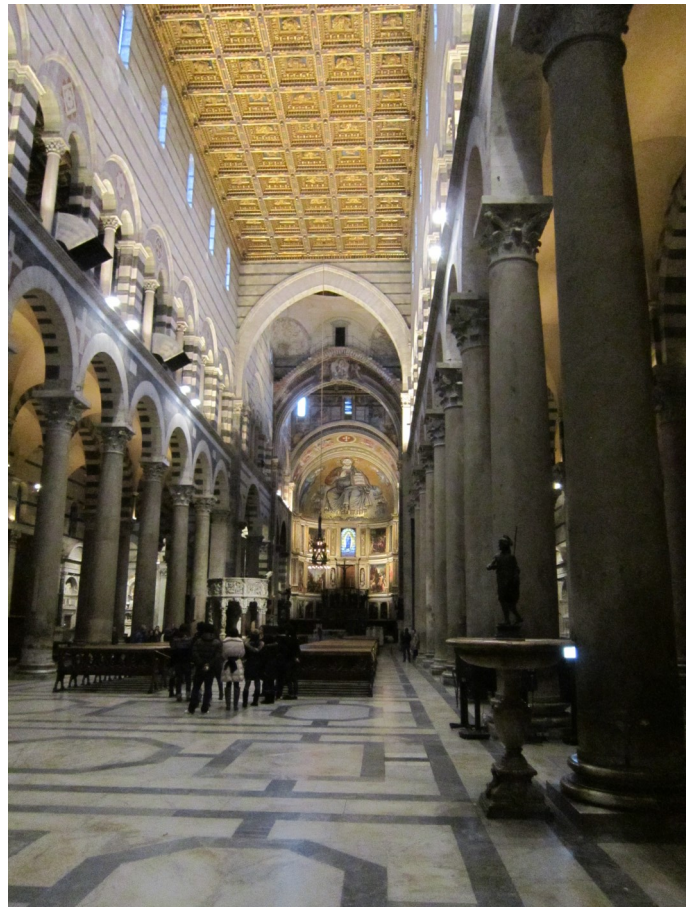


*A Tough
Climb
But
Worth It!*



Still leaning but still standing after more than 700 years

We then spent a little while in the magnificent cathedral before slowly walking back to the center of town – passing many impressive buildings that hardly make the tourist list when compared with the Tower – and had another snack before leaving town.



***The Baptistery
and the
Inside of the Cathedral
Pisa***

We drove back via a slightly faster motorway route and decided to try to find somewhere to eat dinner in a town not far from the villa. It turned out to be a comedy of errors, however, as we were 30-60 minutes early for the opening times for those most convenient which made us, in effect, go past "home" to seek out alternatives.

In the village of Radicondoli (where two of us were convinced there were at least two restaurants listed in the literature in the villa) we didn't find anything (although we did find one the next day: read on) but we did end up on a one way street that got narrower and narrower until I was concerned that it was getting too narrow for the Lexus on one of the bends. So, we ended up reversing about ¼ mile and then following the one way system the wrong way until we finally reached a two-way street. At this point we made a hasty retreat and went to the place that we had visited in Mensano two nights previous. Again we were the only ones there (until a few minutes before we left) but we were extremely thankful to find an eatery open after 8:30. Fortunately it was only a five minute drive home after the meal.

Saturday January 14

It was another sunny morning but too cool to eat outside so breakfast was in the dining room again.

We had decided to have a relatively easy day today with minimal driving so we made our first stop Radicondoli to see it in daylight and to see if indeed there was a restaurant there. It was a very pleasant little hill town with (as we had found last night) essentially one street and it had some fantastic views across the valleys. It also had a restaurant – indeed it was on our list; but it was closed until March 6 for the winter break!



Typical Tuscan Hill Towns

Radicondoli (above) and Casole D'Elsa (opposite).

We then drove on perhaps another 10 miles to Casole D'Elsa. This, too, was a very pleasant village high in the hills and had another recommended restaurant but this too was on "winter break". We did find a café for lunch and had a stroll around the (mostly closed) shops before making our way back to the villa.



En route, however, we stopped in Colle di Val D’Elsa and checked on another recommended restaurant for dinner tonight. This was indeed open and the person we spoke to indicated that we would have no problem in getting a table later.

With our evening meal planned and having seen three very picturesque towns, we called it a day and actually arrived home in daylight leaving a few hours in which to relax.

Tonight we went to the very nice restaurant mentioned above and had a wonderful meal. Molly and I had the Tuscan Degustation five course menu while Geoffrey chose from the a la carte menu. Both were excellent.

Sunday January 15

It was cold (around freezing) but bright and sunny as we had a cup of tea/coffee before setting off for Florence. The journey there was quite straightforward and took less than 1 ½ hours, but finding a central parking place was a little more harassing. We did end up at the station, however, which Molly and I knew from past visits was very central.

We visited the Medici Chapel (with two famous statues by Michelangelo on Medici family tombs) and the chapel itself – a huge tall room with more family sarcophagi – but which is undergoing major construction which masks some of its beauty.

We then went to the Duomo, a magnificent building from the outside with a wonderful façade but which is relatively unadorned inside. “Unadorned” in Italy is of course a relative term and to say that about the Florence Duomo is a little like saying a Rolls Royce is a car.



The Duomo



The Baptistry across the square is, on the other hand, wonderfully adorned with bronze doors that have magnificent detailed panels by Ghiberti, the most famous covering the life of Christ and have been dubbed the Gates of Paradise since these are the ones through which the newly baptized pass.



We then walked via the main exclusive shopping street to the Uffizi Gallery area and the square which contains the (copy of the) statue of David. From there we headed to the Ponte Vecchio and a look at the River Arno again (we had seen it in Pisa two days ago). A welcome cup of coffee and a pastry preceded our walk back to the car.



Florence



We were in town for about four hours and saw a remarkable amount in that short time and, although the weather was cool, it was not at all unpleasant in the sun and it provided some perfect conditions for photographs of the fantastic buildings here.

The journey home was uneventful once we got out of town (sat navs are great) and we were home just as it got dark about 5:30. We stayed home for the evening and enjoyed a cold meal of cold cuts, cheese, fruits and wine.



Monday January 16

It was another cold morning but it was bright and sunny once again. After breakfast we drove about 25 miles to Volterra. This is a relatively large hill town with absolutely huge walls that must be over two hundred feet high in places. The town itself has a large main square and many small streets leading from this, the highest point in the area. Many of the shops sold alabaster products and Volterra appears to be the center of this industry in northern Italy. There are also many cafes, trattoria and small hotels so it would seem to be a nice place to spend several days.

The area was first civilized by the Etruscans (from the near east: Greece and beyond) who settled here for the mining and agriculture rich to the region. Later the Romans were influential but, of course, it is the Renaissance that defined this whole part of Italy (bounded by

Florence, Pisa and Rome) as it became the cultural and artistic center of the world.

It was bitterly cold as we walked the town and we made two stops for a meal and a snack simply to get warmed up a little. However, the visit was one of the more memorable of this trip for me and I believe it should be on our "repeat" list in the not-too-distant future.



We drove back in daylight and had our final views (for this trip) of the magnificent hills and valleys and, most of all, of the dozens of hilltop towns that personify Tuscany. Wonderful

Tonight we had dinner at the villa again (fish as opposed to the meat of last Tuesday) and once more it was a simple but absolutely delicious meal.

Tuesday January 17

After a very light breakfast, Geoffrey and I did a last minute run for gas, clean the car and get some wine that Joanne had requested. At 11:50 (right on time) the taxi arrived to take us to the airport. The plane was already there when we arrived and was de-icing naturally in the sunlight. The air temperature wasn't much above freezing but the bright sun felt good and it must have done the trick as far as the ice was concerned as we were on our way by 12:30.

The flight back to Leeds was every bit as pleasant as the outward journey and we enjoyed another great meal onboard. Generally the skies were very clear and we had some fantastic views of the Alps. The highlight for me, however, was the final 20 minutes or so when I was allowed to sit up front and watch the approach and landing. The pilots were very good about answering questions and pointing out ground points. As we approached Yeadon for a southeasterly landing we did a circle around Ilkley Moor and I was able to see many of the places that I have walked and visited around the area. There was some snow or very thick frost on the northern slopes of the hills and the panorama I had was amazing.

Once on the ground, however, it took almost as long to rent the car from Hertz as the flight from Siena had taken so it was just about 4pm by the time we reached Ilkley – in time for coffee at Caffe Nero.

Once settled in we made a reservation for dinner at Piccolino for 8pm and it was almost 10:30 by the time we returned home and went straight to bed.

Wednesday January 18

We had breakfast at Caffe Nero and then did some local shopping. I went for a walk, starting in a slight drizzle but ending up under cloudy and quite mild (mid forties) conditions. In the afternoon I was headed to meet some old colleagues in Manchester so we had a light sandwich lunch and then I walked down to the station.

The evening was spent having a very nice dinner with three of the employees of the company I had "helped" a couple of years ago. This was a courtesy visit at my request (and expense) but one I had wanted to do for some time.

Thursday January 19

The morning was spent visiting the site of the facility I had worked on (very interesting and informative) and, after a light lunch, I was taken back for the return train journey to Ilkley. Molly and I spent the rest of the day in the flat before going to Monkman's for another very nice dinner.

Friday January 20

We drove to Harrogate for a fry-up breakfast and then a quick trip through WH Smith and Marks and Spencer. We both spent the gift certificates that Dorothy had bought us for Christmas and then decided to return to Ilkley for coffee since we had had breakfast rather late.

After getting back to the flat it was still only about 3pm so I went for a four mile walk to just beyond Keighley Gate and back. It started to rain quite heavily on top and – as I hadn't bothered to go in waterproofs, I was soaked by the time I got back. Still, a warm bath and a nap before dinner at home was all that was necessary for a full recovery!

Saturday January 21

It was extremely windy (gusts to 60 mph predicted) but relatively mild (mid-forties) so I decided on another walk after breakfast. I had heard that the Bingley Five Rise Locks were undergoing major repairs (replacing some gates, for example) so the locks had been drained. I thought this might make an interesting visit so I walked over the top, past Keighley Gate again, down to East Morton and then along the canal bank to Bingley.



The Five-Rise Locks
 Designed By
John Longbotham of Halifax
 And Built In 1774
 By Local Stonemasons
Barnabus Morvil, Jonathan Farrar,
William Wild all of Bingley
and John Sugden from Wilsden

The Locks Raise Boats 59 ft. 2 ins.
Over A Distance Of 320 ft.

Distance By Canal
To Leeds 16 miles 2 furlongs
To Liverpool 111 miles

National Heritage Award Winner 1975

***My walk across Ilkley Moor to
 Bingley and the Leeds-
 Liverpool Canal***

They were indeed working on the locks but unfortunately that meant that the towpath was closed from the top of the Five Rise. I was able to see the top lock without its usual water (but with lots of mud and debris) but then had to take a detour via the streets into town.

The whole walk had been extremely pleasant (just one brief shower) and the extreme winds just seemed to add a dimension that made it all the more interesting. There were occasions when I seemed to make no progress against the wind and other times when I was almost blown across the road but, as it was relatively traffic free, this was little more than an inconvenience.

I got the train back to Ilkley and met Molly for coffee after she had walked down the hill. Our walk back included a short but very heavy shower so our waterproofs came in useful.

Tonight we tried several restaurants before we could get a reservation at Kashmiri Aroma – where we had a very good meal.

Sunday January 22

We were up late and had only just enough time for breakfast at Caffe Nero before the 10:45 church service. We were greeted by several members who remembered us from October and the priest also had quite a long chat with us after the service.

I then got changed and went for a walk. I estimated the route I wanted to follow as being about 6 miles – on the main road towards Addingham, up the hill to beyond Addingham Moorside and then back to Ilkley via the north ridge of The Moor. However, I underestimated significantly and had already covered 5 miles on the roads before I got to the entrance to the moor. The previous two miles had been very steeply uphill so I was ready to get on the relative flat pathways of the ridge. Unfortunately there was first a 300 yards very steep climb up a muddy path and then a very wet stretch of about ½ mile before another climb to reach the moor itself. By this time it was about 4pm so I called Molly to tell her that I would be later than my



estimated 4:30 and not to worry as I now knew this stretch very well and it was a well-used path. It was, however, somewhat longer than I had anticipated once again (even though I had done this stretch of walk many times) and it was almost fully dark by the time I reached the Swastika Stone and a well made gravel path. Even then it was another 1 ½ miles to home so I got back to the apartment after 5:30 in total darkness. I was very tired but felt solace in having covered almost nine miles.

About 6:15 Geoffrey arrived bringing a huge painting of York which some Scottish friends had given him for the flat. It needs a little work before hanging but it is certainly well proportioned for these rooms. We then went for a very nice dinner and chat at the Bistro Pierre before Geoffrey left for home.

Monday January 23

We drove to Skipton and had breakfast in the Caffe Neo there before spending an hour in the market. It was overcast and cold so it wasn't long before we were headed back to Ilkley via Bingley and the Moor. We had a lazy afternoon before leaving at 6 to join Dorothy and David, Keith and Eileen and Geoffrey for dinner at the Hopper Lane Hotel at Blubberhouses. The meal was quite good although the service was so sloppy as to be amusing. Despite that we had a very pleasant three hours together and Keith held up remarkably well. He certainly has made significant progress in just the few weeks we have been here so the prognosis of a full recovery seems almost certain. It was a perfectly clear and cold night as we drove back to Ilkley.



Tuesday January 24

We had breakfast at the local Caffe Nero and then drove to Sheffield to see Richard and Elizabeth. Richard had been diagnosed last week with cellulitis and had been given two weeks of bed rest. However, it appears he made a more rapid recovery than planned and only spent 1 ½ days in bed before he couldn't take it any more. When we arrived at noon, he was as chirpy as ever and both he and Elizabeth seemed to be in very good spirits. We had a very pleasant two hours with them and enjoyed a light lunch (including meat pie, cheese and scones) and a good long chat.



After our drive back to Ilkley and a little rest and clean up, we drove over the moors (very foggy) to spend the evening with Keith and Zena. We had a super meal (fish pie, vegetables, dessert, cheese and coffee) and then had a fun game of Scrabble. They are such good company and we get along very well. It was after ten by the time we left and we chose to take the longer route home via Shipley as it still appeared to be a little foggy on the tops.

Wednesday January 25

After breakfast and a little shopping in Ilkley, I drove over to Bingley for a short walk along the canal bank and another attempt to see the "empty" Five Rise Locks from the bottom end. Unfortunately there wasn't much more to see than the view I had had from the top of the locks during my Saturday walk but it was a pleasant stroll anyway. Molly and I went for dinner at Martha and Vincent in the evening, where we were greeted like old friends.

Thursday January 26

We had breakfast at home and then I went to meet Vanda for lunch. We had a good chat (she seems to be getting in control of her colitis) and then I returned to Ilkley for coffee with Molly around 3pm.

Tonight, for our final evening in Ilkley of this trip, we enjoyed a very good meal at The Farsyde and looked forward to our next visit, hopefully in May. On the way into town we had experienced a short but intense snow shower which left a one inch coating of wet snow on everything. This was the first real inclement weather we had seen on the entire trip.

Friday January 27

We had breakfast at Caffe Nero while the first load of washing was in the tub at home. Then it was just a case of cleaning and packing in the flat before leaving for Manchester. I managed to get a walk in while the final bedding was drying and then we were on our way around 3pm. Once again there were several snow showers en route (we had left a covering on the hills around Ilkley) and the drive back via Colne and Burnley was not a particularly pleasant experience with very wet and some-time partially snow covered roads.

However, we made it to the Manchester Airport Marriott about 4:30 and got settled in before going out for our usual Plough and Flail pub dinner at 8pm.

Saturday January 28

We had breakfast in the hotel and then checked out. We needed to scrape the ice from the car windows but we were soon at the airport, the car returned and checked in for our flight to Atlanta. The flight left the gate on time at noon but stopped short of the runway for about twenty minutes for a "minor system problem". Obviously the problem was fixed satisfactorily as we took off and had an uneventful flight across the Atlantic.

We arrived just a few minutes late at almost 5pm and – since the connection time to get to Cincinnati tonight was almost five hours – we chose instead to stay overnight. So we collected our bags and made our way to the Skytrain and a two minute ride to the brand new Marriott Gateway hotel and were checked in and settled in the room by six. We had dinner in the somewhat disappointing hotel "sports" restaurant.

Sunday January 29

We decided to get to the airport and check in before having a Starbucks breakfast there. Then it was time for our last bit of the journey to Cincinnati and then home after another great stay in Ilkley and a wonderful visit to Italy.

Our trip to England for the New Year and the month of January was a little different this year in that Geoffrey had arranged for us to spend a week in Tuscany at his son Mark's villa. This was a First Class experience in every sense and a very memorable visit to a beautiful part of the world.

This is the journal of a wonderful week in Italy.

We drove back in daylight and had our final views (for this trip) of the magnificent hills and valleys and, most of all, of the dozens of hilltop towns that personify Tuscany. Wonderful

Tonight we had dinner at the villa again (fish as opposed to the meat of last Tuesday) and once more it was a simple but absolutely delicious meal.

Tuesday January 17

After a very light breakfast, Geoffrey and I did a last minute run for gas, clean the car and get some wine that Joanne had requested. At 11:50 (right on time) the taxi arrived to take us to the airport. The plane was already there when we arrived and was de-icing naturally in the sunlight. The air temperature wasn't much above freezing but the bright sun felt good and it must have done the trick as far as the ice was concerned as we were on our way by 12:30.

The flight back to Leeds was every bit as pleasant as the outward journey and we enjoyed another great meal onboard. Generally the skies were very clear and we had some fantastic views of the Alps. The highlight for me, however, was the final 20 minutes or so when I was allowed to sit up front and watch the approach and landing. The pilots were very good about answering questions and pointing out ground points. As we approached Yeadon for a southeasterly landing we did a circle around Ilkley Moor and I was able to see many of the places that I have walked and visited around the area. There was some snow or very thick frost on the northern slopes of the hills and the panorama I had was amazing.

Once on the ground, however, it took almost as long to rent the car from Hertz as the flight from Siena had taken so it was just about 4pm by the time we reached Ilkley – in time for coffee at Caffe Nero.

Once settled in we made a reservation for dinner at Piccolino for 8pm and it was almost 10:30 by the time we returned home and went straight to bed.

What a fantastic trip.



Italy

January 2012