

## TEN GO TO TUSCANY

*Aug.29 – Sep.12, 2014*

2014 provides the five McCaffry siblings and their spouses with many reasons for rejoicing. Theresa and Mike celebrate 55 years of marriage – and Mike reaches 80! Sheila and Bryan celebrate their Golden Wedding – and Bryan, too, reaches 80! Frances and John also have their own 50 years to celebrate with their Old World family – just one year late! Anthony and Nina met 50 years ago – and were married five years later. Michael and Barbara rejoice that the young man told not to expect to reach his fortieth/fiftieth/sixtieth birthday hits 70 – and counting! This unique collection of reasons called for a unique shared event.

Mike helped us through the discernment process to find a place and a plan which would be memorable – for all the right reasons! The resulting choice was to spend a fortnight together in Florence, with a Bed & Breakfast base at the Machiavelli Palace Hotel in the old city. (The hotel was chosen as much for its name and former status as a convent as for its facilities – not coldly rational decisions, but they felt right!) Why Florence? Because it was not well known by any of us – but deserved to be!

We travelled from all directions – airports in Birmingham, Stansted, Gatwick and Boston, train from Rome for Michael & Barbara after flying in from San Francisco via Copenhagen. Anthony & Nina were last to arrive, after a delayed flight, thus allowing themselves the first of many opportunities to get lost, this time in the short walk from the station. Mercifully, a night-time road-sweeper put us right and Marcello, on duty in Reception, produced midnight beers from the bar to get us more into holiday mood!

Rendezvous was at breakfast – good to see everyone so bright-eyed and bushy-tailed – well, awake and smiling, anyway! Breakfast had its own staff team who soon got the message that this set of ten liked to do things their way! The goods on offer in the ‘Full Italian’ included juices, cereals, fruit, meats, cheese, jams, breads – and drinks from a machine purveying hot beverages, many of which we had not heard of! Travel broadens the mind as well as the waistband!

The better-experienced recommended that we take the open-topped tour bus (with pre-recorded commentary) to get our bearings – good thinking! Our days, particularly in the first week, were built around the fixed points of breakfast and evening meal, the time between very much our own, as twosomes or combinations. There was little chance of bored thumb-twiddling!

Florence is a vibrant combination of the old (much influenced by the De Medici dynasty) and the new (post-war development outside the old walls). The Florence we got to know was the old one, with its many Churches, galleries, museums, piazzas and other spaces of distinction. The narrow streets and alleys of the old town have their own charm and excitement, with much to entertain the people-watcher as well as the window shopper. It is a tourist city, with many languages spoken and many groups following broolly-waving guides. It’s an expensive city (our two-bob bit, the ‘florin’, might have got its name from here but wouldn’t buy you much). There were uncomfortable reminders that the wealth of some makes for a rough life for others.

Churches abound, often the legacy of wealthy patrons from the past. Many were impressive for their architectural features and the art works displayed, but challenging to our view of Church buildings as a safe haven, a place for a quiet moment. There was sometimes officiousness on the part of the authorities, and paying for entry felt divisive. However, we did find places where the ambiance was encouraging - and where it felt good to be thankful for the many blessings and productivity of all our lives and across the generations.

Our bus tour went up into the hills to reach Piazzale Michelangelo, a famed vantage point from which to take in the city and its prominent features. Sundown from there was magical and introduced us to the special quality of Tuscan light: it is no surprise to find that the city and region attract artists – it is hard to resist being encouraged to awe and wonder. Newly-weds choose this spot for wedding photos – lovely to see the warm smiles from close (and distant!) admirers. Long live love!

Bryan, with his quiet prowess in close observation and endearing people-skills, was our early guide to good places to unwind over a pleasant meal, sharing our stories from the day. It was Bryan, too, who located a little-known terrace at the hotel, on which to gather, under the stars, for post-prandial spirit and jovial chat – a happy initiative which proved habit-forming! Sadly for us, Bryan could only share a few days, an eye operation demanding him home. Others picked up the food-find baton, and his good health was a frequent toast. (News of health and healing are reassuring: thanks to Bryan for his positive impact – and for leaving Sheila to ensure our lives could never be dull or laughter-free for long!)

Our hotel's transfer from nunnery to its different status had not always been without complication, new and old not necessarily blending without gaps. Theresa and Mike had no sooner settled into their assigned quarters than water began to cascade from the ceiling! The change of room evoked some perturbation of operatic quality from the administration, but was achieved successfully. Most guests stayed two or three days, then moved on: to have a bunch of guests, none of them shrinking violets, for a fortnight raised fresh challenges for the system. Fortunately, we soon knew whom to contact for helpful response.

Michael's 70<sup>th</sup> fell on Sunday, September 7<sup>th</sup>. By happy chance, some of us, earlier in the week, had followed a nudge from a Jesuit friend of Frances and went up into the hills to the village of Fiesole, site of an Etruscan settlement long before Romulus and Remus were into their stride. Rather than ancient archaeology, we fell on the Aurora Restaurant (and its terrace overlooking the city and to distant mountains) where we ate well and were graciously served. A cunning plan was formed: a birthday Sunday lunch, en famille, at the Aurora! The surprise package worked well: gifts were offered and blushing received; the birthday song was sung (to the consternation of the locals, more accustomed to opera of a different sort) and "70" (in Boston candles) blown out. The Focus of the Feast was duly chuffed! The evening found us back in the city to witness the "Festa Della Rificolona", a procession of lanterns traditional on the eve of Mary's birthday. A brass band played (Village People hits, oddly!) and children (of all ages!) were wide-eyed about their lanterns – the best of which were home-made and self-decorated. It felt more like a 'happening' than a structured event: the 'family' dimension of the celebration was not lost on any of us.

The weather throughout our time in Florence was pleasantly warm and sunny, the rain only coming occasionally, most often by night and accompanied by theatrical thunder and lightning. It was good to be able to stroll in comfort. In this most style-conscious of cities, it was also gratifying to see heads turn as the graceful ladies of our group set forth of an evening, looking and feeling good, positive and confident. (The old boys were not too bad, either! Your scribe is the only Gary among them: all others are Arians! My Duomo shines brightly still!)

'Life' happened in the lanes next to the hotel. From early morning, sounds of trundling could be heard as the leather goods market set up round the corner. To walk between the lines of barrows was to enjoy a wonderful aroma – and to fend off the eager attentions of the stall-holders, playing their range of languages to entice the punters to barter! The Central Market, a great indoor space blending the old and the new, was a hit with us all. The food stalls were fascinating, for the variety and freshness of the good things on offer, while the variety of outlets offering food for all tastes was endlessly impressive. (Most of us snacked and mealed there at some time – and remember it with a smile! Good times!) San Lorenzo vied with Santa Maria Novella as our nearest Church: impressive, both of them, but not particularly uplifting. Central to Florence is Santa Maria del Fiore, the historic Duomo of the Cathedral: it stands out, even today, as a remarkable building achievement by Brunelleschi – and he did it in 1420! (91m high; 43m span!) With 463 steps to the top, we all thought to save our euros (and puff) for other exploits! Work is underway to make a more coherent unity between the Cathedral, bell tower and baptistry, at least for visitor purposes. What might result we saw in Pisa (an hour away) where the cathedral, baptistry and famous leaning bell tower make a clear and lasting impression.

For those of us more used to the Surrey Hills, greenery was generally hard to find in the city. What seemed on the map to be a public park turned out to be the private garden of a very up-market hotel! We were cheered, however, to fall on a community garden, comprising an area of shade-providing trees and a busy area of raised beds for vegetable growing: there is hope! The De Medici family gardens, Giardino di Boboli, state of the art in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, intrigued rather than pleased. As with so many of the Churches, emphasis seemed to be on political statement rather than inherent worth. More encouraging were the two botanical gardens visited, a sixteenth century one in Florence, a nineteenth century one in Lucca (a couple of hours away), both linked to academic institutions and rated internationally. Florence is a great university/student town, but the year had not yet got going in the time we were visiting. It was only on the last day that we fell on the Biblioteca delle Oblate, a free and open library housed in a fourteenth century building. It was lovely to see students of all ages relishing the space and environment: we enjoyed the cafeteria giving us a great view of the Duomo across a complex roofscape – as well as providing necessary nourishment!

Fine art in Florence is breathtaking in its richness. We 'did' the three world famous galleries, The Uffizi (the oldest in the world); The Bargello (the Town Hall in 1255); The Accademia (Europe's first Art School, 1563). So much to see, so easy to suffer overload! (We were thrilled to discover the beautiful embroidery of the Coronation of Mary by Iacopo Cambi, 1336 – a joy to behold, especially for the Lewes embroiderer in our midst!) We only scratched the surface, but gained much, even so. The city's

giant talents, the likes of Dante, Galileo and Buonarroti (aka Michelangelo!), are worth closer study (a focussed visit?): at a time when our 21<sup>st</sup> century world needs fresh vision, better appreciation of visionaries of another time may just help. What stood out in our fortnight were the occasions when art impacted informally: a play of sunset and shadows; light through grilled windows; buskers playing or singing with quiet passion; the story of women's fashion in the twentieth century told through individually styled items; the discovery of the multi-talented Jacopo Ligozzi, of whom we had never before heard and of whom we are likely to become fans. Unexpected, too, was meeting the monastic cell walls painted nearly six hundred years ago by Fra Angelico – and recognising his shading of blue sky as being luminescently Tuscan!

The buildings of Florence are a wonder in themselves, not just the mighty palaces but also the less flamboyant ones. It was a constant puzzle to discover that a narrow entrance led to a much more spacious interior, sometimes with a central garden! People were, in the main, kind and helpful: yes, the city depends on tourists (even taxing them 3 euros each per night stayed) but there was also the sense that there is a pride in the city, too. We fell on Aqua Flor, by chance, and were welcomed into the interior showroom and workshop of a perfume manufacturer! The rooms were furnished with storage cupboards and display cabinets to die for: we were told they were made, long ago, for the place and the purpose. We will keep the memory of the scents - and the gentility.

There is a synagogue in Florence, gifted by a successful Jewish businessman in the late nineteenth century. From the exterior, it echoes the shapes of the Christian places of worship – but with its green domes making a distinctive contribution! Inside, it borrows from the Spanish/Moorish tradition. Unusually, the synagogue boasted a pulpit and a pipe organ, very much the result of local influences. Our young guide was both informative and attentive. We were conscious of destructive events in the Middle East: it was good to have seen a street banner earlier in the city proclaiming Florence as a City of Peace. The walls had sad stories to tell: the naming of those of the community exterminated in the dark days of the not too distant past. And the line, seven feet above the floor, marking the height of the 1966 disastrous floods – and this was a mile from the Arno River. Memories fade with aging, some of us have noticed: but we would do well to ensure that some memories are vividly preserved.

It would have been all too easy to spend all our time in the city – but the wider Tuscany needed attention! As well as a day out to Pisa, we spent time in the Roman town of Lucca, with its impressive red brick fortifications and roads still in the Roman pattern. These towns are slower paced than the big one - and all the more agreeable for that. (Retired Brits seem to thrive there!) At the Botanical Gardens, we found ourselves in the middle of a three day Garden Festival: not as aggressively competitive as other such closer to home – and all the more civilised for that! It was interesting to see a “Peter Weston” named as one of the fifteen most influential horticulturalists in Europe, having learned his trade three centuries ago at Sutton Court – down the road from Ashted! We clearly have work to do on the history of gardening!

Fiesole, the birthday town, laid on an arts and crafts fair for us – but also, on the hill top, a Franciscan monastery, a place of pilgrimage (it's a stiff climb!) and with a calm chapel plus cloister gardens of great tranquillity. It was important to discover that

Albert Camus (a hero of mine for a number of reasons) had visited and found the experience gentling. I will go back there – in my mind if not in person. Special!

We bit the bullet and bought into a commercial “Tuscany Tour”, to make sure we saw something of San Gimignano, Siena and Monteriggioni. The day gave us chance to sense something of the nature of these places – and the wild hills between – but we all preferred to be less pressured and able to be more whimsical in our sightseeing.

A private, but still family, pleasure for A&N was their meeting with niece Melanie, (daughter of brother Alan) her Italian husband, Max, and their three fine sons, William (13), Sebastian (11) and Ethan (2). We last saw Melanie in the late 1970’s when she was young enough not to remember us! Max is a professional soldier, Melanie runs a language school. They have recently moved to Pisa from Milan, so we were able to show them round ‘our’ city! It was a great joy to get to know them – and to admire what a great job they are doing as a family. The education system leans heavily on local culture: the older boys spoke eloquently (in English, their second language) about Renaissance culture and their reasons for their preferences in art and architecture. This came across as friendly chat rather than pretentious arrogance. (We met another example of enlightened education another time: a very high-class exhibition of gold and silver work contained a section for the young people, from an early age being schooled in jewellery design and craft – thus ensuring a coming workforce suitably skilled to continue traditional industries. This seems a better option than forcing the recalcitrant to fit into moulds not of their choosing – or liking.) We will not be leaving it 30+ years before we meet up again: this was a helpful and healing get-together which mattered a lot.

So, what are the after-thoughts, one week on? There is a warm glow from a shared family occasion, a further episode to rank with the others in the USA, Ireland and France. Yes, age does weary us, but we also know when to take a rest – or have the loved ones who will remind us if we try to deny it! There are risks in putting ten strong characters together, but not if there is an understanding that difference is part of our richness and need not disrupt our essential unity. The capacity to wonder and laugh together across the years is precious to hold and to exercise. Mike had it right at the group’s “Last Supper”: he toasted the assembled, with a generous Chianti Classico Reserva, rejoicing in his 80 years – and expressing his gratitude that his acquired family could also be his good friends.

Thanks, everyone: here’s to the next time!

*Anthony McCaffry- participant observer. 21.09.14*