

ITALY - A GRAND TOUR APRIL 1997

DAY 1 Arrive in Rome at 7.45am on a cool, clear morning. After a delay in locating our coach and its non-English speaking driver, Armando, we transfer from the airport to our hotel near Santa Maria Maggiore. Freshen up then head off towards the Colosseum - stopping en route for a history lesson and a picnic in Trajan's Park. Outside the Colosseum some of the girls have their first encounter with Italian men! Suitably impressed by the stadium, we inspect the nearby Arch of Constantine and the Circus Maximus, before entering the evocative Palatine Hill area and exploring the ruins of the ancient Roman Forum. By now the group is showing signs of tiredness, and are happy to board our coach for a quick tour of the city sights. We drive back to the hotel passing Teatro Marcello, following the River Tiber towards the Piazza del Popolo, cutting back through the city to the Piazza Venezia, and continuing past St. Peter's. A short rest and it's time for dinner, so we head off in search of a suitable venue. Find a trattoria near the Trevi Fountain - which looks wonderful in the twilight! The locals in the restaurant don't seem to be impressed by our arrival, but the size of the pizzas certainly makes a favourable impression on us! Sleep is calling, so after the meal it's an early night for most of the group - except for a few brave bodies who struggle on to the Spanish Steps.

DAY 2 An early start for our trip to Pompeii which takes us along the A1 past settlements of cheap high rise apartments on the outskirts of Rome and through the downmarket suburbs of Naples. Vesuvius looms threateningly and the Bay of Naples can be glimpsed from the road - but only through a forest of TV antennas. The entrance to Pompeii is like a funfair, with school groups, souvenir stalls and would-be guides thick on the ground. Grab a bite to eat then negotiate a free entry to the ruins. After a brief chat in the basilica we stroll along the Via dell'Abbondanza admiring the shops and villas en route to the amphitheatre. Spend some time sketching in the sun before heading back via the Garden of Fugitives - but once there we discover we have a fugitive of our own! Luke has gone missing! Searching amongst the ruins proves fruitless, but sensibly Luke has made his way back to the bus and eventually we are able to board for the return journey. Back in Rome we settle in the lively Piazza Navona for an outdoor meal, where we are entertained by a Spanish finger puppeteer and Amy is mistaken for Claudia Schiffer. Make our way back to the hotel via the Pantheon and the Spanish Steps, accompanied by some local hoons in their Fiat.

DAY 3 Leave Rome on the A1 for our journey to Siena, travelling through the beautiful Tiber valley as far as Orvieto, then veering west to Acquapendente where a visit to the local supermercato is compulsory. "Tronkys" are a hit, but "Fonzies" are given the thumbs down! The winding road towards Castelnuovo dell'Abate upsets a few stomachs, but once the stunning abbey of Sant'Antimo appears in the valley below any discomfort is forgotten. Taking up our drawing kits and pilgrim's hats we head off across the fields in the warm April sunshine. The simple, Romanesque church and the sounds of monks chanting within sends Nash into a deep trance and inspires Michelle to clamber up a nearby hill. It is an ideal time for quiet reflection, and diaries and sketchbooks are put to good use. Reboard the coach around 4pm for the final stage of the journey to Siena, and arrive at our modern hotel on the perimeter of town with time to relax before dinner and enjoy the view from the rooftop balcony(?). Drive into town and wander down the narrow streets until we reach the magnificent fan-shaped Campo. After a bout of hacky we settle at an outdoor restaurant and enjoy a quiet meal in the shadow of Siena's towering campanile. A brisk stroll to the Duomo and then it's back to our lodgings.

DAY 4 The fog begins to clear as we make our way into the centro storico to visit the bank and the Palazzo Pubblico. Explore the Palazzo, particularly enjoying the Council room with its superb Lorenzetti frescoes on the theme of good and bad government. Miraculously we have the room to ourselves before an invasion of school kids and German pensioners spoils the atmosphere. The more adventurous members of our group scale the 102 metre bell tower while the others go shopping. Jess's knee length boots are a great hit, and Tarun's soccer ball is a popular purchase. Rejoin the bus for our afternoon tour of Tuscan hill towns, and travelling via Monteriggioni we wind our way towards the "Town of the Fine Towers", San Gimignano. The local lolly stall provides much amusement, and Ollie learns to ask for a bottle of acqua minerale. Enter the walled town and head up to the Rocca, where a rest in a shady grove is most welcome on this warm afternoon. Enjoy some free time to sketch and write or just to take an extended coffee break in the picturesque Piazza della Cisterna. Marshalling our forces for the afternoon constitutional, we head off at about 4.30 for a visit "a piede" to the little Romanesque church at Pieve di Cellole. Having negotiated the traffic near the town, we branch off into a

beautiful undulating rural landscape of farmhouses and vineyards - even more beautiful in the soft afternoon light. Armando, meanwhile is worrying, and he comes to rescue us just 500 metres from our destination! We are the only visitors at Pieve di Celvole, and we slow down briefly to enjoy the relaxed atmosphere before boarding the coach for the homeward journey, via Volterra. Despite the generous beauty of the rolling landscape, Dvora's stomach begins to roll as we approach the historic hill town and a quick bathroom stop is in order just as the sun is about to sink slowly in the west. Armando suggests a dinner stop en route, and we locate a suitable pizzeria at Colle Valle d'Elsa. The meal is almost spoiled for Stoney when he gets locked in the loo! When we return to Siena the natives are restless, and it's a while before everybody is settled.

DAY 5 A clear, sunny morning for our visit to Siena's Duomo, where we spend an hour or so admiring its elaborate facade and lavish interior. Some free time satisfies those irrepressible shopping urges before we rejoin the coach for our journey to Florence. Our hotel receptionist has suggested a likely winery in the Chianti region, but when we arrive it is closed for the day. The manager suggests another, further from the main roads, but it too turns out to be closed. No time for a further search, so it's off to Radda, along a gravel road - but Armando is worried for his coach, and doubles back seeking an alternative route. The alternative is even narrower and Armando needs some convincing from a local farmer before he will go on. Eventually we rejoin the bitumen, and push on towards Greve, where we stop briefly for a bite to eat before continuing on to Florence. Our hotel near San Marco is comfortable enough, but it has a distinctive aroma in the stairwell which encourages speedy entrances and exits. Saturday night and downtown Florence is humming! Walk through centro storico to the Ponte Vecchio, where Lachlan and the girls attract some unwanted attention. Armando has found us a good restaurant for a good price, and we enjoy the pasta and the interesting accent of the English speaking waiter. Ollie, however, decides to wear her dinner!

DAY 6 An early arrival at the Accademia beats the crowds, and we spend some time sketching the impressive Michelangelo sculptures, including the famous "David". Our visit to San Marco is thwarted by the unpredictable visiting hours, so after a snack from the gourmet cafe near the San Marco Piazza, we head towards the Duomo, but it too is closed for a Sunday service. Try Plan C, but the Bargello is also having a day off - despite what the guide books say! The only feasible alternative at this time of the Italian day is....shopping, and the San Marco market is

given the once over. Leather jackets are the order of the day, and Marc looks particularly cool. Ellie's bargaining skills have also reaped rewards. Pick up some lunch near San Marco before exchanging our booty at the hotel for our drawing and painting equipment. The Boboli Gardens is our target, but a few stragglers lose their way amongst the Sunday afternoon crowds. Eventually we all assemble inside the courtyard of the Pitti Palace, and then wind our way up through the gardens to the Kaffeehaus - being careful to keep off the grass of course! A pleasant hour or so is spent relaxing and sketching in the afternoon sun before returning to our hotel and heading off again for dinner. Armando's choice again, and a good meal is rounded off with birthday celebrations for Leila, Sara and Luke, much to the amusement of the other patrons.

DAY 7 The Convent of San Marco is our first stop this morning, where a brief resume of the New Testament is provided for the post Sunday School generation in the downstairs museum. The Fra Angelico frescoes which adorn the monks' cells are enjoyed for their freshness and sensitivity, and the library and cloister still seem to evoke a contemplative mood. Stroll down the now familiar Via Cavour to the Duomo and inspect its magnificent, freshly restored facade and its vast interior. The queue to the cupola is ominous so the campanile seems a more attractive option to the fitness fanatics, who find the view well worth the climb. The Duomo Museum, with its marvellous collection of Renaissance sculpture proves very popular, and provides some fascinating material for sketching, as well as offering a relaxed environment to reflect and diarise. Lunch and shopping until 4.30, when we meet back at the Hotel Genesisio to prepare for an early evening church crawl. First we visit Santa Maria Novella then wind our way through the streets to Brunelleschi's San Lorenzo, which draws a variety of responses - some finding its pure, rational beauty inappropriate for a church. Crossing the Arno, we journey up the hill towards San Miniato al Monte in time for the sunset. The view from the Piazzale Michelangelo is impressive, but those who climb the extra distance to San Miniato are rewarded with a special experience as the sun filters into the darkened Romanesque interior to the accompaniment of ethereal organ music. After a strenuous hill climb McDonalds seems a fitting reward, and Michelle B leads the charge. Cravings satisfied, we return to the hotel, but a few nightowls nip out for a coffee before turning in.

DAY 8 This morning has been set aside for a visit to the Uffizi Gallery, so it's up early to pack and load the bus ready for takeoff. Unfortunately we were unable to pre-book entry, so when we reach the Uffizi, we have no choice but to join the

enormous queue which is already stretching towards the river. After about 90 minutes we gain entry, and the next two hours pass quickly as we admire room after room of masterworks and decide on our personal favourites. Out in the courtyard, the cartoonists are at work, and they find a few customers in our group - much to everybody's amusement! A quick bite to eat in the San Marco Piazza, then its off to Assisi. A pleasant relaxing drive provides a chance to catch up on sleep, and the snoozers in the back of the bus miss seeing some beautiful countryside as we wind our way through Tuscany towards Pienza. Walk straight into a guided tour of the Palazzo Piccolomini with its well proportioned rooms and impressive ceilings and furnishings, but it is the magnificent vista from the first floor loggia that takes the breath away! The undulating tapestry of Tuscan countryside seems to dissolve in the soft afternoon sunlight. A snack, a kick of the soccer ball and a tryout of Jess's new skateboard, and we are on the road again, pausing briefly at the distinctive church of San Biagio at nearby Montepulciano, before passing into Umbria and winding our way around the northern shore of Lake Trasimeno. The setting sun evokes an amazing harmony of blues, greens and mauves from the lake, its islands, and the distant mountains - but most of our passengers are too tired to notice! As darkness settles, the lights of Assisi become visible on a distant slope. Our hotel is down on the plain, and we arrive just in time for a welcome meal in the enormous dining hall. A small posse head up the hill to Assisi, which is quiet and cool at this time of the evening, whilst the remainder hit the sack.

DAY 9 Yet another clear sunny morning as Armando delivers us to Assisi, where we spend time exploring the lower church in the San Francesco complex. The dark, cavern like spaces contrast strongly with the light filled upper hall and its great cycle of frescoes on the life of St. Francis, and it is here that the students are introduced to the work of Giotto. Enjoy some free time exploring Assisi before meeting at the fountain in the Piazza del Comune and embarking on a pilgrimage to the Eremo delle Carceri, St. Francis' mountain retreat. Taking a cypress avenue outside the Porta Cappuccini, we soon join a steep, rocky path which climbs its way up Mt. Subasio. Hard going for some, but the track eventually levels out and joins the road. The advance group eagerly push on for a well earned icecream at the Eremo kiosk, but a wrong turn delays the backmarkers. Eventually we all meet in the delightful shady wood behind the Eremo, and enjoy a relaxing hour or so of tranquil contemplation. The return journey along the bitumen is easy going and we are back in town by sunset, and eating dinner soon afterwards. Armando suggests a night out at a disco, and an enthusiastic group of Aussies with energy to burn

show the Italians and Frenchys a thing or two on the dance floor! Luke's stage diving and Libby's impersonation of Olivia Newton-John are particular highlights.

DAY 10 Walk to the huge basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli, a short distance from the hotel, and then catch up with the banking. Armando meets us at about 10.30, and then its off to Gubbio, en route to our next overnight stop, Urbino. Gubbio is another rugged hill town seemingly cut out of the surrounding rock, and after we've climbed up the narrow streets to the extraordinary Piazza della Signoria, Marc says that he's had enough of these hard towns that all look the same! It's another delightful Spring day, and we have time up our sleeve, so we split up to find some lunch and catch up on the diaries. Next we stroll off towards the "funivia" - the chair lift up to the church of St. Ubaldo at the top of Mount Ingino, but it's closed for lunch so we have another excuse to laze in the sun. Eventually the lift starts up again and we glide up two by two in steel cages. The slot machines and the cafe at the summit prove more popular than St. Ubaldo's remains, but the view is enjoyed by all. The gelati shop does good business as we pass by on the way to the bus, and the girls are an instant success with the local boys who hang around the bus expressing their undying love! It's almost 4.00pm when we finally leave Gubbio but it's a quick trip along the highway to the Urbino turnoff, and we can afford to take the last leg of the journey in more leisurely fashion. The afternoon haze is softening the already beautiful countryside, and the pinkish stone of Urbino is beginning to glow as we pass the town in search of our hotel which turns out to be a few kilometres along the coast road. We unload our gear, put the feet up for a brief moment, then bus back into town, just in time to catch sight of the sunset and play on the swings near the monument to Raphael. A restaurant search proves fruitful and we all pile into an underground eatery which satisfies our needs. The rabbit is particularly delicious! We return to the hotel hoping for a quiet night, but boisterous groups of Italian and French schoolboys put an end to that idea!

DAY 11 Leave hotel for early visit to Palazzo Ducale, but discover that a new system of booking is in place. The earliest we can enter is 11.40, so free time is granted wandering around the lively little town and enjoying the warm sunshine. Finally we are granted access to the spacious, light interior of Duke Federigo's tasteful Renaissance palace, accompanied by a stern woman with a mobile who is part of the high-tech, state of the art security system that the palace now boasts. (One of her tasks is to warn the guard in the next room when we are coming). The Duke's study with its intricate wood panelling

is a great hit, and Piero's mysterious "Flagellation" impresses. Caroline and Stephanie have managed to get a message to Armando, and we join the coach at about 1.00pm for our journey to Bologna, via Ravenna. Travel towards Pesaro then follow the particularly unattractive road that stretches along the coast through industrial sprawl and the downmarket holiday resorts of Rimini etc. Just outside Ravenna we stop at the Byzantine church of San Apollinare - like every other coach in Italy! Church fatigue seems to be setting in, and while the enthusiasts enjoy the cool interior of the basilica with its beautiful mosaics, those with energy to burn boot the soccer ball in between the buses. Fortunately, the real glory of Ravenna, San Vitale, holds everybody's interest - the atmosphere in this extraordinary octagonal church is spoilt only by an over-amplified message requesting silence in Italian, English and German! The exquisite floor to ceiling mosaics in the nearby Mausoleum draw a pleasing number of oohs and aahs, but by now most minds are on other things.... Arriving in Bologna a little after 6.00pm we are met at the Liceo Artistico by an excited group of Italian students. After some nervous introductions and a glass of cordial, our travellers depart with their respective hosts for a home cooked meal and a chance to practise their language skills(?)

DAY 12 Saturday is a school day in Italy, so its another early start to meet at the Liceo Artistico by 8.15. Students join a serious lifedrawing class where the model holds a lengthy reclining pose and the emphasis is on perspective. Local students are more practised at this, but everybody makes a pleasing effort. After an hour our concentration begins to lapse, and we drift off to explore the school. Although facilities seem limited, and the building is a bit run down, the focus of the place is clear. Life size copies and casts of Classical sculptures abound, and there is even an anatomy room and an elaborate casting and copying studio. We are shown some impressive work by the Italian students, and this, along with the relaxed, almost Tertiary atmosphere of the place encourages more than a few expressions of interest by members of our group. Hosts and guests then pile onto our coach for our first visit to the centre of Bologna. Today we are visting an exhibition of imaginative bronze sculptures produced by a local foundry. Some interesting work supported by a clear presentation of the casting procedures, but the accompanying video sends Luke to sleep. Back on the bus we head out of town and into the beautiful Emilian countryside. Lunch has been arranged at an osteria set on an old farm. The weather is perfect, and the walk from the road is delightful - as is the meal. Course after course of soup, risotto, pasta, meats, cakes, etc. all prepared according to local culinary customs and washed down with vino and acqua minerale. Well satisfied, we relax in the sun for a while before returning to town via San

Lucca, an impressive basilica set atop a hill overlooking Bologna, and connected to the town by a 3½ kilometre portico. Back at the school we part to go our various ways for an evening of entertainment Bologna style.

DAY 13 A free day in Bologna with our host families is spent in a variety of ways....

DAY 14 Meet at the Liceo at 8.00am for the next stage of our journey. We are heading north towards Venice, but our first stop is Padua to view the marvellous fresco cycle by Giotto that adorns the Arena Chapel. Unfortunately the excitement of a weekend in Bologna has reduced the groups' aesthetic awareness, and with a few exceptions, the Giotto's don't seem to hit the mark. Grab a bite to eat and then its back on the bus for the short trip to Venice. We arrive at Tronchetto under overcast skies, and leaving the coach, we take a water taxi around the Guidecca to our hotel, close by the Zattere stop. After settling ourselves at the Casa Messner, we stroll off towards San Marco, where the sun shines and the pigeons enjoy our company. Dvora and Lara are given a free lesson in photography by a pedantic old German tourist. The interior of San Marco is an impressive sight, with the afternoon sunlight playing on the golden mosaics. Wander off along the Riva degli Schiavoni to check out the Venetian scene, but a flu bug has begun to make inroads into the group, and several victims feel compelled to return to the hotel with Caroline and Stephanie for an early night. The remainder enjoy the relaxing atmosphere of the Park of Remembrance and the hacky re-emerges. Getting hungry now, so it's off to find an appropriate venue for dinner. Led by Michelle B. the junk food freaks sniff out a McDonalds, but the more discerning diners select a nearby trattoria. A good meal is marred only by an argument with an excitable waiter who insists that Ollie hasn't paid.... when we know she has! Having won the argument we wander slowly back towards the hotel, enjoying the distinctive atmosphere of Venice by night.

DAY 15 There is general concern for Lachlan's health when he arrives at breakfast with orange hair, but he assures us that it's cool. A lethargic start to the day forces a change of plan as our entry to the Accademia is delayed and Stoney spits the dummy. There could be major difficulties in rescheduling day as per itinerary, due to lunchtime closing in most places, It is therefore decided to grant the group a free morning in which to seek out museums and exhibitions of their choice. The opportunity is eagerly grasped as most visit a Dali exhibition, which receives rave reviews, and an exhibition inspired by Van Gogh's Japanese Notebook. Other sites visited included the Scuola di San Rocco, Ca Rezzonico etc. Reconvene at the pleasantly untouristified Campo Margerita for a bite to eat,

then we split again for another self-directed session. Some head to the Accademia, while others go shopping. Rendezvous at the hotel late in the afternoon then reassemble for another foray in the direction of San Marco, this time for dinner, which is followed by enjoyable adventures on gondolas and vaporettos. The girls are treated to long stemmed roses by the gentlemen of the group - a fitting gesture in this most romantic of cities!

DAY 16 Unfamiliar cool and cloudy conditions as we meet the boat for our morning cruise of the lagoon and its islands. Led by a local woman who is our "escort and guide", we head off in the direction of Murano. Her commentary is interesting and appropriately pitched for an Art tour. At Murano we are bundled off the boat and straight into a glassworks factory. A brief viewing of the craftsmen at work and we are herded upstairs to a tacky showroom with over-zealous salesmen hovering around. Back on the boat, and forty minutes later we arrive at Burano. The multicoloured houses and leaning church tower attract interest, but there isn't really time to explore at leisure. Next stop is nearby Torcello, where we walk to the historic cathedral and are given a thorough tour of its scaffolded interior. The weather begins to pick up as we return to Venice, and Campo Margerita is once again the venue for lunch. Ollie gets more than she bargained for in her pesto pasta! There's still a lot of sites we haven't sighted so we push off to the Frari church to see the Titians, then we wind our way in dribs and drabs to San Marco, via the Rialto. Most of the group do a brisk tour of the Ducal Palace, some do shopping, and others rush off to the Peggy Guggenheim Museum - some manage to do all three! Freshen up at the Casa Messner before seeking a suitable venue for our final meal in Venice. Eventually we settle at some outdoor tables near San Marco, but it's quite cool now and although the food is fine, the atmosphere is less than ideal. When rain begins to fall, it's everyman for himself (and herself) as we make our way back to the hotel.

DAY 17 Catch a watertaxi to the Tronchetto, and rejoin Armando and the coach for our return journey to Bologna. Although Amy manages to leave her pack on the boat, and Lachlan almost gets left in the loo, we depart shortly after 9.00 and travel along the picturesque road which follows the course of the Brenta Canal to Padua. Our first stop is the Villa Pisani at Stra, and the weather is so delightful that we decide to linger a while, sketching and catching up on our diaries. Although the interiors of the villa and its summerhouse are temporarily out of order, there is still plenty to see and enjoy in the beautiful gardens. It's schoolies week in Italy, and Ellie and Sara soon attract the attention of some Italian schoolboys... Next stop is Vicenza, where we are dropped from the bus and stroll towards the town

and Palladio's Teatro Olimpico. After a leisurely lunch at various outdoor cafes, we enter the little theatre. The response is good, so we sit in the auditorium and sketch for a while. Rejoining the coach we wind our way out of the town and park a short walk away from the Villa Rotonda. Perfect conditions for sketching, photographing or just relaxing in the sun! At around 5.00pm we reboard the coach and travelling on the Autostrada we make it to Bologna in just over two hours. The group splits and everybody moves off quickly with their hosts.

DAY 18 Meet at the Liceo at 8.00am for a busy day of arty activities. (Will we ever get to sleep in?) First stop is "Venturi Arte" the largest bronze foundry in Europe, where we are shown around by a woman who is one of the directors. Groups are not often allowed visits, so we are fortunate to see the various stages of the casting process demonstrated so vividly. The pouring of the molten bronze is particularly entertaining. A well known Polish sculptor, Magdalena Abakanowicz is busy working on a large abstract piece as we pass through the workshop. Returning to the centro storico, we are given a short tour of the local Medieval Museum which is housed in a partially renovated Renaissance palace. After a break for banking and eating, we reassemble at our now familiar meeting place - the Neptune Fountain, and move into the nearby palace which houses the Morandi Museum. A comprehensive exhibition of the Italian artist's work fills a number of rooms, and Stoney provides an interpretative translation of a running commentary offered by Ms. Diana from the Liceo. By now, concentrations are waning so it's just as well the nearby jewellery workshop can only accommodate a limited number of visitors. Returning to the Liceo, we separate for another evening of Bolognese entertainment. A select few attend a concert of Baroque music in the vast church of San Petronio - the remainder find more down to earth ways of enjoying themselves!

DAY 19 The long awaited shopping day arrives! Meeting at the Liceo we are driven by Armando to the market on the Via Indipendenza where we scatter for a leisurely few hours of browsing and spending. It's another mild, sunny day and Bologna continues to impress as a large but attractive city. At 1.30pm we meet again at the Neptune Fountain and rejoin the coach for a short trip out of town to a printmaking workshop. The small studio is set up for etching, lithography and block printing, and when we enter a woman is busily preparing a set of five etching plates under the supervision of her boss. The group is a bit restless in the confined space, but most seem interested in the process and the end result. We walk to a nearby park where those with excess energy can burn it off on the swings and with the soccer ball. After a relaxing hour in the sunshine,

we head back into town to visit the unusual studio of an unusual man, the sculptor Guglielmo Massacci. The studio is a converted 12th. Century church tucked away amongst the narrow Bolognese streets. The sculptor meets us outside where a huge monolithic wooden sculptor is displayed, and speaks passionately about the role of art and artists - in Italian of course. The interior is impressive - the nave is a studio and display area, the apse a screened off carving workshop, the aisles have been sealed and mezzanined to create living areas for he and his family. Despite his apparent intensity, he Massacci turns out to be a very friendly and obliging fellow, and Ollie is so smitten by his charm that she asks for his autograph as we leave! Back on the bus, we return to the Liceo and then break off for a busy night of dining, dancing or partying to celebrate our last night in Bologna.

DAY 20 There are a few sore heads as we meet at the Liceo to farewell our hosts and embark on the final leg of our journey. Good friendships have been made and there are plenty of hugs, kisses and arrivedercis. Eventually we pile onto the coach and at about 8.45am we head off towards Rome on the Autostrada. Unusually, the weather is dull and drizzly so we see the Italian countryside in a different light today. A pleasant trip through valleys and tunnels as we approach Florence, then we continue on as far as Orte, where we turn off towards Viterbo. Plan to grab a bite to eat at Viterbo, but when we arrive at about 1.00pm it is cold, grey, and virtually deserted. Resort to a bar and a cake shop for sustenance, then make our way to nearby Bagnano and the Villa Lante. A short uphill walk brings us to the Villa and its magnificent garden which spreads across a slope overlooking the town. Not many people around today so we enjoy the gardens virtually alone. Thankfully, the drizzle has stopped and the general feeling is positive. The gardens really are extraordinary, and we climb to the highest point and follow the flow of the water down through its various falls and fountains to the formal parterre. The grey skies bring out an amazing range of subtle greens, and shades of brown in the town's rooftops. After about forty minutes we're off again to nearby Bomarzo and its famous Parc dei Mostri. Winding down through the town's narrow streets we notice it is bedecked with the flags of its various parishes - no doubt in readiness for Liberation Day on the 25th. The Parc dei Mostri is pretty much ours for an hour or so as we wander amongst the fantastic rock carvings, sketching and photographing. The atmosphere is pleasant and tranquil. A bus clean up is organised, and we say our official farewells to Armando who will be leaving us in Rome. It is only a short trip to the Eternal City, and after lugging our gear to the hotel and up the inevitable stairs, we push off to find food. Dinner at a local eatery, before turning in.

DAY 21 Today is Monday - Vatican day. Unfortunately the drizzle has been persistent overnight, but we take advantage of a slight break to make our way through the streets of Rome on foot. It's a good hour before we cross the Ponte di Sant Angelo and arrive at St.Peters. Wander around towards the Vatican museums where we are confronted by the not unexpected queue. At about 10.45am we enter the vast complex on what feels like a human conveyor belt. The crowds of tourists make it impossible for us to travel together, so we agree to meet at 12.30pm and follow the green arrows as best we can. Of course the Sistine Chapel is the ultimate goal, and it doesn't let us down, but the recently restored "School of Athens" by Raphael is well worth a look. It's a pity we can't sit and discuss it in a civilised manner! Eventually everybody gathers at the exit, and then we're off to find some lunch. It's still raining, so we do the best we can in the circumstances. Pizzas and paninis for most, but nothing less than a Chinese banquet is sufficient for some others. Meet up in dribs and drabs under the immense dome of St.Peters. The interior looks a treat in the dull but even light - clean, spacious and impressive. Nobody questions Bernini's genius! Those with money remaining in their kitty head off on shopping missions, whilst a small group choose to go on a church crawl which takes in S.Andrea del Valle, St.Luigi's with its Caravaggios, St.Minerva, St.Ignatius with its fake dome - and the Pantheon, with its interesting drainage system. The last stop is Il Gesu, which is being restored, but is absolutely stunning nevertheless! On the way back to the hotel Hugh's umbrella explodes. Our final meal in Rome is enjoyed in a crowded trattoria near the hotel, then it's back to base where the group settles at various stages of the evening (morning?) in preparation for the return flight to Melbourne.