

Limoncella – 2016

Under the Umbrian Cloud and Other Adventures



Left to Right: (top) Micropia, kindergarten, wooden tulips, gouda, Brasilopia; (middle) Lucca labyrinth, Sant'Antimo, Florence Duomo, Civita di Bagnoregio, Florence Lion; (bottom) Gubbio window, San Gimignano, Tuscan Sunset, Rocky Mountain High, Yellowstone

Introduction

In writing about this challenging last year, the term “lemonade” came immediately to mind because making that is all you can do when given so many lemons; given associations with Beyonce, I am using the Italian version for my title. After last year’s supremely successful and busy year, I was a little nervous that my great summers are often followed by setbacks. Nonetheless, I vowed that if I made it across the grueling Swiss Alps/Bernese Via Alpina I would continue to train hard for a repeat of the John Muir in 2016, this time with Allison and Marshall. But keeping up with that regimen come fall 2015 was immediately hard – marred by bad weather and a drawn-out sinus infection that made me finally commit to surgery (scheduled late January because of our pending holiday trip to Patagonia). Although Patagonia had some high-points, it was also marred by challenging weather. And within weeks of returning, I succumbed to flu/bronchitis that lasted a month, postponing sinus surgery from early January to spring break. Despite 4 hard days, though, sinus surgery was a piece of cake in the grand scheme of things this year. Borrowing from Allison, I started keeping a hiking log – and this is where things stood come May. Additional weekly training activities included 600-1000 feet up/down nearly every day (either climbing the stadium and walking a few miles at the track, or doing 3-4 mile “city-hillwalks” in Salem with Allison).

Date	Hike (not including daily exercise)	Mileage	Gain	Max-Elevation
2/07/16	Silver Falls Loop	6.5	1,300ft	1,562ft
2/25/16	Lewisberg Saddle	6.5	1000ft	1300ft
3/06/16	Forest Park Loop	8.0	1500ft	1800ft
3/17/16	Lewisberg Saddle	6.5	1000ft	1300ft
3/22/16	Sinus Surgery – 11 days off			
4/02/16	Silver Falls Loop	6.5	1,300ft	1,562ft
4/03/16	Hamilton Mountain	7.4	2,376ft	2,473ft
4/09/16	Stahlman Point + Salem	8.0	2200ft	3700ft
4/15/16	Powderhouse Variation	6	1400ft	1800ft
4/16/16	Hamilton Mountain	7.4	2,376ft	2,473ft
4/23/16	Powderhouse Variation (stress fracture)	6	1400ft	1800ft
4/24/16	Powderhouse Variation	5	1500ft	1800ft
5/01/16	Dome Rock/Detroit Lake	7.8	2800ft	4200ft
5/08/16	Dog Mountain	7	2900ft	3000ft



Michael and balsamroot on Dog Mountain - some fabulous lemonade despite this being my last major hike of the year!

On April 23 (ironically, the same day Beyonce released Lemonade), I stress-fractured the 4th metatarsal of my right foot. I didn't know it at the time – but that was the day I developed the diagnostic top-foot pain associated with this injury. It came on after a 5-mile hike I have done dozens of times – the Powderhouse Loop from Peavy Arboretum. At the time, I assumed it was nothing (I had been breaking in new boots) and kept pushing through... 20 more hard, steep miles over the next few weeks. Making matters more confusing, Allison thought she had a stress fracture last fall after ramping up running. At the time, she was so concerned that she quietly went to a podiatrist who said no but gave her orthotics. Consequently, when I complained to Allison about my foot for 2 weeks, she said there was no way I could be hiking so much with a fracture. In the end, though, my intuition was correct – confirmed mid-May by Allison's podiatrist. As I quickly discovered, many active and accomplished people have written many interesting, powerful, and useful things on-line about stress fractures. Even so, it is hard to know why exactly I wound up with one: Had I ramped up too quickly? Had my training been too uneven because of the many bumpy breaks in fall and winter? Was my training too focused on repetitive motion walking/hiking? Was my increased walking on pavement (e.g. city-hillwalking and stadium climbing) to blame? Had I not broken in my new boots enough – even though they were the same brand/style I've been wearing for 10 years? Had my always-exciting bunions gotten worse/changed my gait? Was menopause/calcium loss to blame?

I spent almost 5 weeks in a walking boot (stationary biking 5-10 miles a day), only to be given an excellent prognosis but less guidance on how quickly to ramp-up. At the time (mid-June), there was a lot of pressure from Allison to try to train back up for the John Muir because Marshall had now dropped out with serious foot problems. In addition to Roger's cheerleading (he came back in that timeframe from a 5th metatarsal break when he was in his late 50's), it was also easy to cherry-pick blogs by elite runners who completed marathons 2-3 months after the same injury. Although I am an experienced hiker, I am not an elite athlete and my first walk around the track without the boot was frightening in the sense that I knew in that instant I was going to have to learn to walk and then hike all over again because everything felt wrong: my gait, my hips, my feet, my knees, my back. Fortunately, I had the sense to cancel the John Muir immediately – focusing all my energy now on a much easier volcano-focused hiking trip to southern Italy in early October. Given that my podiatrist felt I could work back up to a Powderhouse-level hike in the next month, though, I was determined to make the most of the sunny and tempting days. Unfortunately, I reinjured the fracture area over the next month and was told "limited walking" between mid-July and mid-August. It was at this point that I realized several things: (a) I needed to see a PT for guidance and because stationary biking had messed up my knees; (b) I needed to find other ways to work out – like aqua fitness, which most highly athletic bloggers mentioned; (c) Southern Italy/Volcanoes was going to be too hard so I should probably trade that in for a less strenuous tour of Tuscany/Umbria before I stood to lose more money.

Despite hardships, I made some good lemonade in August: As a teenager who wore a brace for extreme scoliosis, I had always enjoyed my 7 years of swimming, the only time I could take off the brace – even though I never learned to swim properly. Despite working at WOU for 20 years, I had never visited the pool... probably because early on in my career I used to let my students plate whatever they wanted to test and many pool samples were, in a word, gross. Having taught immunology since 2013, however, my view of poop has become more positive (think: free fecal transplant!)... and so I finally accepted our pool and its microbes. Specifically, I joined the daily deep-water aqua fitness class. Thankfully, too, I had an amazing and hard-working undergraduate research student (Parker) – and threw myself into research again (notably, on snail poop/microbiome studies). We've been churning out data, national meeting presentations, on-campus award/grant applications/funding, well-received graduate school applications, and a full-on manuscript submitted. By late August, I was approved to ramp up very slowly again – slowly being defined as 1 lap around the track the first week, 2 the second... and so on. Although things went initially well, I was briefly spooked on a 2-day jaunt to Ashland when I bugged my foot while trying to walking around Lithia Park too much. Thankfully, that episode was short-lived. Come late September, I was up to nearly 2 miles every other day... which was good but the prospect of managing 2-4 miles of daily hilltown-focused walking remained daunting. But there was no turning back now.



Left to Right: Microplate gallery, me and something multicellular, Ellen and wall of rot, somewhere in Utrecht

October 1-5: Netherlands

Having not seen Ellen in over a year (since our 2015 Swiss Alps/Bernese Via Alpina), I flew into Amsterdam (via CRAZY Reykjavik) for a few days prior to Italy – the goal being to visit Ellen and hopefully (NOT) get rid of my jetlag. With Ellen working, I also booked an independent sightseeing daytrip to visit some of the small fishing villages north of Amsterdam. What I hadn't factored in, though, was Ellen's newfound professional development/leadership travel schedule – the significance/impact of which was that she was off at a math conference in Zurich when I arrived mid-day Saturday, October 1. Thankfully, she has a great friend in teaching assistant John, who picked me up and guided me back to her apartment in the Hague. Although Ellen hoped to be home by 10, she didn't stumble in until nearly midnight. By then, I had taken a nap, walked around the block, eaten a little, gone back to bed, and was fully awake again with jetlag. In general, my sleeping habits had been hideous since May; at the time, I chocked it up to less intense daily exercise... but in retrospect, it was more about menopause! Indeed, my jetlag has gotten worse every year. The next day, I didn't wake up until 11 – after being unable to fall back asleep until nearly 4. And so Ellen and my one free day together was significantly reduced. Originally, we had been considering a more extensive trip to some outdoor history museum 2 hours away. Between my zombie state and the

horribly rainy forecast, we decided to head into Amsterdam for a few hours – the goal: to visit Micropia, the world's only museum devoted to microbiology (notably located by the zoo).

Now on my third trip to the Netherlands, I was surprised that I had not previously noticed how crazy their traffic is. That said, I had only been into Amsterdam proper once before – and we made a point to park outside the city center (at Olympic Stadium) and then use public transportation from there. This time, we spent 30 minutes in very slow rainy traffic – penetrating each city ring all the way to the central zoo. Once there, though, the parking situation was straightforward and the museum was not too crazy – probably because it was a downpour. In general, Micropia was interesting and I appreciated that they focused on positive environmental microbiology and tried to stay away from disease, death, and scaring people. That said, there were – IMO – too many viewing scopes with microscopic multicellular things (e.g. Daphnia, Volvox)... and not enough bacteria. There was a human-sized Winogradsky Column, which Ellen seemed shocked to realize I knew all about without reading the signage. There was an amusing touch-activated exhibit about the human microbiome, a large jar display of different kinds of poop, a rotating wall display of plates showing microbial colonies (many representing samples from familiar objects), and an impressive cabinet full of rotting foods in different states of decay. A tiny display near the end did mention several important infectious pathogens, the most amusing of which featured a graphic cartoon about an STD scenario wherein a man cheats on his wife with a prostitute; the drawings left nothing to the imagination. After 90 minutes, we returned to an ongoing downpour and made our way an hour south to Utrecht, a smaller and charming university town (similar, IMO, to Leiden) where, following a 20-minute walk through old town, we met Bruno for Indian fare. I spent Monday (with Ellen at work) catching up on sleep, working on sabbatical research/manuscript development, enjoying Indian leftovers, and doing a couple short and sunny local walks to/around what I like to call the Queen's Forest (this sprawling woods a few blocks from Ellen's apartment). At the end of the day, we joined John for Thai food in downtown Hague (a modern area I'd never seen on previous trips) via public transport. In John's honor, I enjoyed my first gin and tonic (or John and tonic, as they are now known in my vocabulary). Sadly, there are no pictures of John.



Left to Right: class Q/A, Ellen reveals who I am using childhood picture of us, the famous wide slide

After strong encouragement from my colleagues and mom, I spent ALL Tuesday visiting Ellen's kindergarten classroom (with John and about a dozen kids that day). Although Ellen had offered up this experience, I don't think she expected me to take her up on it – and, when I said yes, she responded with initial concern and/or crankiness (i.e. lecturing me about all kinds of etiquette things). Of course, I had over-napped the day before, lost some sleep again, and was equally cranky come morning. And so in this state we showed up at 8 a.m. Although it is well-known that I am not a kid person, I do fine short-term with many kids... and, in contrast with Ellen's expectations, I can be very well-behaved – not to mention a patient and excellent listener. Bearing in mind that Ellen works in brand new facilities at an expensive private school, I was impressed or intrigued with many things: the level of security in the school, the fact that her kids this year were very calm and well-behaved, how busy the day was in terms of moving through activity after activity (each lasting about 45 minutes), and the many ways kindergarten was similar to microbiology lab (e.g. lots of teacher voice management, and hand-washing). I was also pleased that the students seemed used to visitors to the point that I spent half the day blending into the scenery (i.e. just observing quietly from Ellen's desk, sometimes even managing a little work on my laptop). But Ellen and I did a short show and tell/Q&A intro, and Ellen had me circulate while the class worked on writing assignments – actively encouraging them to read me their new sentence/page and ask them questions. Plus, I went out with John and the class for both recess periods – notably going down the famous wide slide multiple times. At the end of the day, Ellen and I went into downtown Hague again for another big meal (this time at this quiet bistro) before she took me back to the airport where I booked 2 nights at the attached Sheraton.



Left to Right: short walk through Edam, cheese-carriers in market square, leaving the old town, Volendam residences

One of the other things I learned on this trip is how Amsterdam-centered most Netherlands tourist activities are (and how Ellen really does not live close to Amsterdam). Such lessons, and an early flight to Florence the next day, were key reasons I relocated to the Sheraton. Specifically, I found/booked a well-rated one-day guided trip of several charming Dutch fishing villages I'd always wanted to see north of Amsterdam (Edam, Volendam, Marken, and Zaanse Schans) – but doing it required a 9:30 departure time from downtown Amsterdam. Although I considered staying in downtown Amsterdam, hauling my luggage all over was not appealing... and the prices were obscene (not that the Sheraton was cheap – but the conveniences were plentiful, including a low-cost shuttle downtown). At the

time, I didn't realize that the central train station was close and sort of straightforward (i.e. smaller than the confusing one in Zurich last summer). Nonetheless, having seen how crazy busy and slightly seedy the area is, I'm glad I did the shuttle (particularly after another terrible night of sleep). That said, I arrived too early – not understanding that the tour meeting area (which served multiple very different companies/guide-services) was a total CF. Needing to kill almost an hour, I walked the crowding streets – eventually ducking into a dirty McDonald's for some breakfast (some kind of sex museum a few doors down). When I returned to the tour meeting area, it was another 30 minutes of confusing departures before my group of 26 finally assembled (the maximum for this offering). With our great leader Pieter commanding a brisk pace, we walked about 3 blocks to a big waiting tour bus (plenty of room for each person to have a pair of seats to him/herself) – and then took off north on the highway. As noted by Pieter, it was extremely rare to have blue skies this time of year... but make no mistake, it was nearly FREEZING. During the 40-minute drive to Edam (mostly through very green pastures with lots of cows and sheep), Pieter used the bus mike to talk about all kinds of Dutch history and industry which, despite finding interesting at the time, I cannot recall much of several months later. At the edge of Edam, we left the bus, which picked us up 30 minutes later on the other side of town. While Edam was quintessentially cute, the bracing temperatures and a full memory card completely discombobulated my attention and enjoyment of much of the walk. I was also initially put off because Pieter's pace was sort of wicked – not amenable to fixing camera issues or framing nice pictures of the canals. That said, Pieter was clear with the group: few tour buses stop here and we needed to remember this was a living community, not a theme park. Consistent with this statement, there was no emphasis on shopping here – even though we passed this AMAZING-smelling bakery (where I would have LOVED to buy something), and the farmer's market was just getting set up as we blazed through.



Left to Right: windy Volendam waterfront, Dutch history room in waffle house, ferry to Marken

Continuing up the highway another 20 minutes, we arrived at larger and more tourist-popular/oriented Volendam. Skipping the first ring of gift shops, we walked through this interesting maze of closely-spaced housing that was extremely hard to photograph – ultimately winding up along the extremely windy waterfront... which was NOTHING but tourist stuff (although it did not feel crazy crowded). Here, we had a formal tour of the Cheese Factory (not to be in any way confused with Alkmaar, the legendary “cheese market” town farther north). Although the presentation about cheese-making was not very informative (a woman in costume talked dryly about the process in front of a fishbowl kitchen where not much was happening), the group-specific tasting room (with wine) was extremely generous. I think I tasted a dozen different cheeses, many with these really tasty local honey or relish accompaniments. Not surprisingly, I dropped my first wad of cash here (aged gouda, smoked goat, and sweet mustard-dill relish) – all the well-wrapped cheeses completely stable without refrigeration throughout many travels. From here, Pieter encouraged everyone to visit a candy/cookie shop that did a stroopwafel-making demonstration downstairs in their history room/basement. Although I made and ate my own stroopwafel, I did not drop any cash here (probably because I am not a huge fan of stroopwaffle – although fresh/warm ones are better than cold/pre-packaged). Given that we had about 20 remaining minutes before our ferry to Marken, I did visit several gift shops, buying a few pretty wooden tulips (Holland's answer to the real thing off-season).



Left to Right: Marken waterfront restaurant/proprietress, cute Marken neighborhoods, old Marken house detail

There were many ferry concessioners along the waterfront, each taking 50-100 people 45 minutes across the big gray (and today – choppy) inlet. Although our group was supposed to have private access to the upper room, it was quite free-form because the adjacent open deck was really windy and cold (meaning a lot of people came/went), and the captain smoked like a stack (with smoke blowing back into our area). Plus, they were giving away warm drinks downstairs. Pulling into this small protected harbor, we were greeted instantly by this woman in full local costume (which looked super-Norwegian) in front of this incredibly charming restaurant. Although lunch was included on this trip, I assumed we were all going to walk to some outdoor seating area where the bus was going to dole out dry, cold sandwiches. Shockingly, however, lunch was upstairs in the AMAZING restaurant with the friendly woman... and it was REALLY good: tomato soup, curried chicken with chips and salad (for those like me who don't like fish), and tea with apple cake. But the most amazing thing about lunch was that I wound up at this table with 4 Brazilians from San Paolo: 2 pediatricians, and a female Ph.D. microbiologist traveling with her 16-year-old daughter (both are shown at Zaanse Schans in the cover collection). The microbiologist (who had been at an extremophile meeting in Norway the week before) was actually familiar with this other microbiologist studying giant snail gut bacteria (Parker had recently dug up his paper and we'd been discussing it before this trip). That is how small

this world is. After lunch, we continued on a walking tour through the town – first through the charming neighborhoods, into a church and a mini-museum, and culminating at a wooden shoe factory... which turned out to be another tour highpoint. The charismatic shoemaker was utterly entertaining, starting with a simple block of wood (shown below) – and then doing a combination of hand-carving and machine-hollowing to complete a shoe before our eyes. Much as I appreciated the workmanship, I could not bring myself to buy any wooden shoes... but I did get some more wooden tulips. And so our time in Marken, my favorite of today's villages, was over.



Left to Right: wooden shoes of Marken, demonstration – starting block, hand-carving, machine hollow-out, more shoes

From Marken, we drove 45 minutes back towards Amsterdam – the low 4:30 p.m. light golden. The final destination was Zaanse Schans, one of the most famous multi-windmill sites in the Netherlands. Having been to the more remote Kinderdijk Unesco Site (near Rotterdam), I was thankful we were seeing Zaanse Schans late in the day and off-season... because I could tell it would be a madhouse (being so close to Amsterdam and all). Like Kinderdijk, Zaanse consisted of several historic/restored windmills along a pretty waterway. Unlike Kinderdijk, Zaanse windmills seemed more refurbished, diverse, accessible, and representing more different tasks (i.e. there was a working windmill that sawed wood/logs, another that did flour, and a third that crushed seeds into oil). Because we arrived so late in the day, only the oil mill was open for viewing. Getting to it required a 15-minute walk through what felt like a tiny village, and then along the river where the mills were. The oil mill tour was thorough and more interesting than anything we'd seen at Kinderdijk or near the Hague/Leiden – with demonstrations of the seeds being crushed into paste, and then the bagged paste being pounded to release the oil. On the way back, I rushed a little because one of the old stores en route appeared to be selling waffles still – and I wanted one (probably because I rightfully suspected there would be trouble with my return to the Sheraton/airport). These were large, thick waffles (like on the cover area) – not stroopwafel; mine was caramelized with sugar and quite delicious.



Left to Right: all Zaanse Schans – windmills, Pieter and local accordionist, the oil mill, making the paste, the spent/dried paste bags

During the 30-minute drive back to Amsterdam, Pieter played us some traditional Dutch folk songs and passed out some famous cookies – before hugging nearly everyone goodbye. Having skeptically signed up for this day-tour on Viator, I was thoroughly satisfied with this tour. That said, I did a fair bit of homework in choosing this particular version because there are a ton of more poorly-rated ones out there. Unfortunately, I still am not 100% sure who ran our tour (Viator is a front for many groups) and the name on the website (Dutch Windmills and Countryside – With Cheese-Tasting...) did not match the name on my ticket ("Charm of Holland")... even though they were mostly the same product (make sure it is the 8-hour trip that is focused on the villages and includes lunch and a ferry-ride). For basically \$100, though, I felt I got my money's worth and then some. The lunch and ferry ride alone would have justified the trip – everything else (and the fabulous weather) was gravy. Now... what was NOT gravy was the situation that unfolded when I returned a little after 6. Given that the airport shuttle was to pick me up at 7, I found a nice Illy's (European Starbucks-like chain) and took my time eating a proper dinner and warming up with an excellent mint tea. Unfortunately, the shuttle was very late and I became quite chilled on the freezing street in front of the hotel – not to mention hassled a little by a variety of street people. Fortunately, the doorman felt sorry for me and called the shuttle – ordering me inside to wait until they arrived. And then, of course, there were all kinds of traffic delays en route back – making me crabby and restless as I tried to finally go to bed for an even earlier wake-up tomorrow.

October 6-8: Florence, Pistoia, Lucca

The next morning, my travel alarm (the only clock in the room) failed because the batteries were in the process of dying. Luckily, I naturally woke up 20 minutes later and wasn't too concerned given that I always leave a lot of time to check-in. That said, the airport was a complete mess of lines and the KLM ticket I purchased to Florence (using Travelocity) was some weird version that assumed you were not checking in luggage. Ultimately, this meant I had to spend 20 extra minutes queuing up at some separate KLM cashier area, where I was charged \$15 more than the usual luggage fee. But I easily made the flight, and the flight was short and sweet, featuring a few good Alps views – not to mention some big lakes (Como?) and pretty Tuscan hillcountry right before a full-on view of Florence as we circled to land. So I will freely admit that Florence is a city I have wanted to see for a long time – ever since reading (and seeing) Room With a View in college. Seeing the Duomo from the air and then walking across the tarmac under brilliant blue skies certainly gave me cause for heightened anticipation that Tuscany would live up to its idealized reputation in my mind. This tour, however, began an hour east of Florence (in Pistoia), whisking us quickly out of Florence in a small, private bus within the hour. We would never stay in

Florence proper, although we would visit 2 days later. Although there was a part of me that was disappointed with this arrangement early on (i.e. upon seeing very sleepy Pistoia), I felt otherwise after we finally went there and witnessed the obscene level of tourists.



Left to Right: Florence during landing, tarmac, Pistoia hotel (about an hour away)

Driving to Pistoia sometimes felt like driving down Willamette Valley because there was a ton of nursery industry (acres of fancy shrubs and trees). Our hotel was on the hill above Pistoia proper (20 minutes walking distance to the old town center). Arriving around 1:30, we were encouraged to have lunch before the hotel restaurant closed down (this tour featured MANY \$ on-your-own lunches!). Of course, my Italian partially failed me: the salad was excellent, but the pasta featured a seafood red sauce that I BARELY choked down (most was shrimp – but there was some scallop, which I cannot stand!). After lunch, I walked the extensive hotel grounds, which featured lots of unusual things for my eyes: olive trees, pomegranate shrubs, bottlebrush flowers. At 4, our trip leader returned with the bus and our small party (6 total) headed to the old town for a 2-hour formal tour (using a local guide). One of the novelties of this tour was that we were all issued “whispers” that basically let the guide speak softly into a microphone, which then transmitted to our hearing devices. Given the number of churches/museums we visited, such devices were useful and sometimes mandatory.



Left to Right: olives, pomegranates, bottlebrush, San Bartolomeo's church – façade, painted roof, fancy pulpit

Parking just outside the city walls, we walked about 90 minutes with the guide – our first stop at this old (1000) Roman church: San Bartolomeo in Pantano. A consistent feature of the many churches we visited was the mosaic-like use of different-colored regional stones – often resulting in a lot of striping. Like many of the old churches, too, this one had an impressively painted wooden roof. Although the interior of the church was relatively Spartan, the local guide spent a lot of time talking about the elaborate pulpit. Making our way down a few blocks of narrow, stone-enclosed walkways, we then visited the main square: Piazza del Duomo - which featured a big tower, another Roman church, and an impressive baptistery. Prior to this trip, I was unaware of baptisteries as separate buildings... but, as pointed out, most were built during a time when Catholicism was just getting started in these areas – and so more adults needed to be cleaned up before they could enter the churches. Indeed, the central feature of the baptistery (which didn't photograph well) was the stone pool. The Duomo church was very elaborate inside, with many paintings and frescoes. Although we could see another big domed church (Madonna dell-Umlita) in the distance, we were told that was not open because of services in session. We did stroll a few blocks away to the Ospedale del Ceppo - an old hospital (1200) and now museum (closed for the day) – which featured a famous portico decorated with colorful enamel terracotta friezes depicting the seven acts of mercy.



Left to Right dome of Madonna dell-Umlita, Piazza del Duomo – interior, baptistery, nearby market

As was typical for this tour company, we were then turned loose for awhile (tonight – 2 hours) before meeting up for the group dinner. Although I enjoyed “on-my-own” time more as the trip went on, I was a little taken aback to be turned loose in the dark in a town I didn't know at all. Thankfully, there was another sola traveler and we kept each other company this evening – the first order of business being the daily gelato ritual. Of course, today's would be hard to top: an exquisite pine nut version that was very complex and not crazy-sweet. Given that it was cold and we were both a little under-dressed, we spent most of the remaining time drinking hot tea in a

coffee-shop. Indeed, Tuscany was generally much colder than expected – which should not have been a surprise since it’s pretty much the same latitude as the Willamette Valley. Regrouping at the baptistry, we headed a few blocks to the excellent BotteGaia eatery for a marathon of local specialties and very generous quantities of wine. Dinner included individual potato quiches, beet risotto, pasta with duck red sauce, grilled steak and tomatoes, and tiramisu. Needless to say, we waddled back to the bus and slept long and hard.



Left to right: entering Porta Donata, typical main street shop, Puccini, Piazza San Michele in Foro – the big church

The next morning, I was surprised to find a bustling breakfast area – dozens of older tourists occupying nearly every table. Today’s excursion was Lucca, a magnificent town I had never heard of before. Driving as far north and west as we would get on this trip (20 minutes from the sea), we again parked just outside the thick city walls (which provide a scenic and wide promenade) and met our local guide for a 2.5-hour walking tour that began at Porta Donato and ended in the Roman amphitheatre. At Donata, one of about 5 entrances, we climbed onto the wall, where we were greeted by multiple joggers or walkers (some with leashed dogs), bikers, and parents pushing strollers (none looked like tourists). During the on-your-own part of the day, I would walk half the 3-mile circle; I would have walked more but we walked so much during the guided tour that I didn’t want to overdo the foot. From the wall, we made a bathroom stop at the nearby information center (one of the only free restrooms) and then headed down the shop-lined main street. Although we passed a number of impressive churches, we only went inside one today (below, duomo). Heading down a tiny sidestreet, we came to a shaded square with a statue of Puccini located outside his birthplace, an adjacent building/now museum. We then continued to the Piazza San Michele, our meeting point after the on-your-own time. The giant church here was impressive from the outside – featuring diverse rock art and a big metal St. Michael statue that reminded me of the big angel in Quito, Ecuador. Indeed, many Italian churches reminded me of colonial places I saw first in South America – an inverse of history/influence.



Left to Right: Piazza San Martino and Duomo – main door, door by labyrinth, fancy ceiling, first stained glass, complex from wall

From San Michele, we cut perpendicular across town – passing a number of lesser features the guide noted (weirdly, one square was being used for a “comicon” event). Anyway, our ultimate destination was the Piazza San Martino and the gothic-era Duomo – the only church we entered, after spending a long time talking about the stone carvings near the portico. The most interesting carving was the “labyrinth” (see cover), a famously pagan relief (one of a few such examples near Catholic churches in the world). Although the local guide claimed that the text accompanying the labyrinth was about traveling, I have not found any evidence to support this statement. Compared with both churches in Pistoia, this one knocked your socks off. The gold leaf ceiling paintings and stained glass were spectacular. We then cut back across the town, passing tree-topped Guinigi Tower. Here, our guide showed us pictures of what Lucca used to look like in terms of skyscraping towers EVERYWHERE (see below)... seeming status symbols. At least one member of our group paid to climb the 230 steps to the top of Guinigi – which I would have done had I not been nervous about my foot.



Left to Right: Lucca’s former skyline, surviving tree tower, converted Roman amphitheatre (aerial view borrowed from Italy Tourism)

From Guinigi, we continued on to the oval Roman amphitheatre, which was converted in the 1800’s into a bustling market square. This was another place I would have wanted to spend more time in... but, by this point, several of us were done with the whispers and wanted to be free. Once again, the other sola traveler and I spent the on-your-own time together – heading first to the opposite Porto Elisa, where there was supposed to be another free bathroom at that information center. Unfortunately, we hit that during the closed lunch hour; desperate, we made a few unsuccessful attempts at bakery- or bar-looking places a block up by the church – eventually

settling on a pizzeria-style place and just doing lunch. Of course, we avoided pizza because tonight's group dinner was supposedly at a great pizza place in the mountains above Pistoia. Although this restaurant (which I haven't been able to figure out the name of using Googlemap) looked super-casual, it served up one of the best meals on this whole trip: we shared caprese salad and pasta with some kind of squash sauce, along with the BEST wood-fired seedy flatbread. Tonight's pizza meal, by comparison, was mediocre to poor. We then slowly walked half the city walls; even though today would be our hottest day, the wall was lined with shade trees – and offered plenty of scenic benches. We then did some shopping and enjoyed some more gelato (a scoop of pistachio and a scoop of hazelnut) before regrouping and heading back to Pistoia. Arriving around 5:15, we had almost 2 hours to clean up before heading up into the mountains for pizza (alas, I haven't been able to figure out the name of the roadside place we visited). Sadly, we went up too late for what should have been an amazing sunset view of the valley (as far as Florence). Tonight's meal was sadly one of the worst of the trip; not only were too many REALLY heavy appetizers purchased (including what tasted like frozen store-bought onion rings, macaroni salad, shaved zucchini salad, and bruschetta with lard), but the pizzas were not very appetizing. The crust was uninspiring and my supposed margarita was pretty much only flavorless cheese. Despondent, we returned to our hotel (many polite doggie-bags in hand, most never to be eaten again)... unaware of the horrible weather that was about to deluge tomorrow's trip to Florence.



Left to Right: need I say more... the final sculpture precedes David in the gallery and represents later/unfinished work by Michelangelo

Alright – now that I have that out of my system... let us proceed with the RAINY day in Florence. We left Pistoia at 8 a.m. because it is obviously important to arrive early (even on a rainy day) given INSANE crowds (horrible – even on a rainy day!). After our 45-minute drive, we were dropped off at the outer city ring – a 15-minute walk from the Galleria dell'Accademia (where the original David is housed). En route, we met Ellen (like – my sister Ellen)... who was down for the weekend competing in a city orienteering meet (she would join us for the guided tour, leave for an afternoon competition, and then come back with us to Pistoia for dinner at the end of the day). Although our local guide was touted as one of the best, it seemed like he was thrown off his game by the weather and crowds. Nonetheless, I learned more than I thought I would about the David – e.g. how incredibly long it took to sculpt, the problems with the stone, the proportion issues, how he looks different from front vs. side, etc. Some folks in our group were surprised when we skipped all non-Michelangelo art and continued to the Piazza del Duomo. Here, we spent the most time at the gold baptistery door sculptures (Ghiberti), ultimately never entering any structure (the line for the Duomo was incredibly long – and only got longer and longer as the day wore on). With the rain picking up, our guide successfully brought us into a couple quieter locations that took us out of the rain; unfortunately, I did not record or remember either – sufficed to say that one was a tiny chapel with a big fresco, and the other was a lesser church. We were impressed that the guide had interesting and thorough presentations about both lesser-known locations (at times – more interesting than big popular sites) and readily answered questions; he clearly knew Florence well.



Left to Right: (top) baptistery doors, lucky wild boar at Mercato Nuovo, near and then on Ponte Vecchio; (bottom) view of Ponte Vecchio from Uffizi, piazza Uffizi with armoured vehicles and heavily armed military, Piazza della Signoria – sea of umbrellas

We continued on to the Ponte Vecchio – briefly passing the bustling arch-covered marketplace with the lucky wild boar. Although it was nice to see the Arno River, it was a sad gray day... and the famous bridge seemed enclosed with multistory shopping (most expensive jewelry). Continuing, we quickly arrived at the U-shaped Galleria Degli Uffizi. In the space between the U-shape was a plaza where an

armored vehicle and lots of soldiers (one with a machine gun, others with semi-automatic weapons) were positioned – the first of several places where we saw major military presence. This was largely because the line to get in the Uffizi was HUGE, winding up and down the covered walkways flanking the piazza. Just beyond the piazza/Uffizi is the impressive Piazza della Signoria – ringed by the tall-towered Palazzo Vecchio, all kinds of statuary (including a replica of the David), and the Loggia della Signoria – our final guided tourspot of the day. The open arch-covered loggia, a 13th century structure built for government ceremonies, houses many interesting statues (e.g. Perseus with Medusa’s severed head, and the shy lion in the cover collection). Although the rest of the day was free, the company provided free Uffizi tickets, with a 1:30 appointment – if you wanted to go through that museum (which everyone). With 90 minutes free for lunch, Ellen and I headed down a side-street to a nearby trattoria, paying too much for too little soup or pasta, and caprese/potatoes or salad/pork. Still hungry, we then found a gelateria (in my case, another hazelnut). Ellen then left for her competition (notably at a shady public park by the train station) and I met up with everyone at the Uffizi. While I am glad I can say that I shuffled through the entire Uffizi (the crowds about what I thought they’d be), I was probably a little surprised that most of the art seemed homogeneous to my eyes (e.g. so many gold-leaf crosses and panels, so many portraits of rich people). Indeed, Frances Mayes (author of Under the Tuscan Sun) famously noted that, “I think there’s a microbe in Italian painters’ bloodstreams that infects them with the compulsion to paint Jesus and Mary.” For me, the Botticelli’s and were the most amazing – if only because they are so light and modern-looking. And the Caravaggio Medusa was memorable. Of course, I did enjoy the great views from the Uffizi: a commanding one of the Ponte Vecchio, a rooftop one of the Duomo and/or Palazzo Vecchio. I also enjoyed the gift shops, dropping a fair bit on books (the funniest of which was a children’s illustrated version of Dante’s Inferno).



Left to Right: Perseus/Medusa, Uffizi gold panel and views of Duomo and Palazzo Vecchio, nice weather – Duomo, Neptune Fountain

With about 45 minutes before we were to regroup under the fake David, I decided – given signs that the skies were ACTUALLY clearing/turning blue – to take a slow walk back to the Duomo. With even longer lines, I was not tempted to go inside... but I did spy an “organic” gelateria – where I had one of the more interesting scoop combinations on this whole trip: one of walnut-fig, another of chocolate/current. Taking a grand seat in the sun, I ate my gelato slowly – the magnificent Duomo before me. I then retraced my steps slowly back to the fake David. At some point en route, I had to go to the bathroom and, finding nothing public, bought some bottled water in a restaurant so I could use their toilet. After regrouping, we walked back to our pick-up spot – meeting Ellen as she arrived from the opposite direction – and drove back to Pistoia. Ellen, staying in a very rudimentary budget hotel, appreciated using my plush bathroom to clean up before dinner. We even had enough time to enjoy the balcony, while somehow discussing relative experiences in graduate school. After last night’s poor pizza dinner and my so-so lunch at the hotel day one, I was a little nervous tonight’s hotel meal was going to suck – making all the effort to bring her here feel like a waste of time. Thankfully, the meal was amazing (a cheesy potato appetizer, a crepe filled with spinach-flecked ricotta and covered with red sauce, and delicious beef in wine-pepper sauce with spinach, tiramisu, and several flights of different grade chianti – which I actually liked). Although Ellen gobbled down everything enthusiastically, I’m not sure she respected the fanciness of my mode of travel on this trip. Of course, we did have to pay for the visit – albeit in the form of an expensive (about \$100) cab-ride back to Florence. But because the other sola traveler was laid up sick in her room all day, Ellen did the morning tour, the bus, and dinner table without charge... and we really appreciated that and seeing each other for the day in Florence.

October 9-11: Pienza, Montalcino, Civita, and Orvieto

For our next leg, we took our time driving to Pienza. Like Florence, Pienza and the hilltown country near Valdorcia all represent UNESCO World Heritage sites. When I booked this trip for fall, I was worried that all of the scenery would be brown; while that was sometimes the case (e.g. the clay hills area - Sinesi Crete), it was sufficiently cool and wet that many areas were velvet green.



Left to Right: driving to Pienza, magnificent views from the Senesi Crete... clay hills to surprising greenery

In the morning, we packed up and headed back towards Florence – but then cut south over a low foggy pass that was thick with deciduous forest. Driving for just over an hour through Chianti country, we passed the famous Antinori vineyard/tasting room and had fleeting views of San Gimignano’s impressive towers through the clouds (we would return here at the end of the trip). Shortly after the turn-off for Siena, we took a pit-stop at Monteriggiani – a 14-tower castle-town on a hill. Monteriggiani was a defensive structure built by the Sienese to keep an eye on Florence. Very few people live within its walls and it was barely awake up when we arrived at 10. That said, this was the first place I noticed Via Francigena pilgrimage signage; one of the other trips I had considered pairing with the planned volcanoes trip was an extensive Via Francigena trek... but it didn’t fill sufficiently and was canceled. Anyway, I – uninterested in caffeine - used my 30 minutes to climb the castle walls (which cost \$4); unfortunately, I didn’t realize you couldn’t walk all the way

around... and so, after coming to dead ends, I had to make my way across the town and climb up the other side for the best view. Thankfully, the hillwalking, stair-climbing, and hastier pace did not upset my foot. From Monteriggiani, we left the highway for what felt like a quiet country road curving up and down through mostly clay hills (the Senesi Crete)... blue skies appearing here and there.



Left to Right: (top) Monteriggioni walls, town center, and Via Francigena sign; calanchi badlands; (bottom) more clay hills

The sweeping views from the often-ridgeline road were vast and classic Tuscany. Detecting that many of us were desperately and unsuccessfully trying to take photographs from the moving bus, our leader stopped at a short pullout (these were sorely lacking on such a scenic road!). From here, several of us climbed up this muddy roadside knoll for a grand view. Pretty much in someone's field, I thought it was interesting to see and touch the clay soil (reminded me of Oregon) and also to note the leguminous groundcover (some kind of clover). Off in the distance, the smooth farm lots were often interrupted by these erupting sections of calanchi, which I would analogize to clay-based badland formations. Another 45 minutes down the road, our longest stop for the day was at the Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore. After a brief overview of the site, we were turned loose for 90 minutes of on-our-own time before a group lunch on site. The setting itself for the abbey was striking – in the middle of this forest (it felt cedar but I think it was all cypress) along this long high ridgeline. Parking near the restaurant where we'd have lunch, we walked about 15 minutes – first up, then down – to the monastery/church, which featured a highly disproportionate statue of St. Benedict (his hands almost twice the size of his head!). First, we were encouraged to hit the main church where the monks were actively singing Gregorian chants. Although entering churches in the middle of services is awkward, there were lots of people coming and going – so sneaking in and out for a couple songs was fine. I then took a walk through the dark winery below the church – although I did not do any tasting (there was a monk there offering that). The most famous abbey site is the ground floor of the inner monastery area, which houses a set of frescoes by Signorelli and Sodoma (you can imagine how he got that name) that depict the life of St. Benedict. As would continue on this trip, there was definitely a repeating theme of interesting juxtapositions between plain hermit-like Catholic monks (many of their cherished saints living half-naked and alone in the wilderness) and the often-gay artists who painted the churches... covering every seeming inch of space with decoration (note "fake marble" and 3D stone additions below), and often finding ways to insert themselves into the artwork. And meanwhile, you have to reconcile what the Catholic church expects of its flock – which is neither celibate, nor flamboyant. Baffling.



Left to Right: Abbey – St. Benedict statue and fresco, Gregorian chant, monastery, detailed art decorations under frescoes

I then headed to the abbey product store, which felt more like a natural health/supplement store than anything. Two entire walls were lined with shelves of tinctures dedicated to all sorts of health things. The rest contained books, trinkets, or foods/spirits made by the monastery. I bought the latter, including a bag of faro and a jar of local honey (the latter was used, in part, to make one of the best home-made ice creams I have done: honey-lavender). By now, it was sunny and lunch time. Although the terrace was lovely (albeit a little chilly), the lunch was very basic: cheese-filled ravioli in a simple red sauce, a mostly white iceberg salad, pecorino cheese (young and aged) with fig jam or honey, and a berry-covered cheesecake (which I don't think was part of the group menu... but our leader added because of all the dessert tray ogling). I will say that pecorino cheese (based on sheep milk) was a big specialty in the area and I am not a fan – mostly because it smells SOOOO farmy-pooppy, and you definitely get some of that taste when it's going down. That said, adding jam or honey to it was more palatable.

From the abbey, we were another 45 minutes to hilltop Pienza. Our hotel, 2 short blocks from the town-center, was not as large or fancy as the place in Pistoia. The walls and floors were also thinner, meaning more noise from neighbors or above. Being smaller, though, the place/staff felt friendlier and the breakfasts were definitely more peaceful. I probably hoped to like Pienza a little more than

I did – but it was so tiny that I felt like I superficially blazed through its offerings very quickly and didn't feel any lingering concern that I'd missed something (like I had with Lucca). That said, it was a far more scenic basecamp from which to visit more interesting environs... and, for that reason, I would go back there. Indeed, the vast views over the Valdorcia – including volcanic Monte Amiata and Cetona – were everything you think of when you imagine Tuscany. Arriving around 3:30, we took a short, guided walk through the old-town (again – not much to it) and then it was our first dinner on-your-own. Although our leader encouraged us to visit more sites in detail over the next 3 days (e.g. go into the Duomo, the Palazzo Piccolomini, the small art museum), I needed a little break from churches and art – and the guidebook descriptions of the Palazzo were not very inspiring. Mostly today, though, I was preoccupied by two things: the sunny, commanding-view promenades around the town, and our leaders' insistence that the COOP (15 minutes down the hill) was open until 6 (a COOP dinner – imagine that!). Indeed, after the tour, I made my way down there only to find it CLOSED (it was Sunday after all). After a leisurely repeat walk through the old-town (with more narrow side-streets), I found a quirky smoothie-gelato shop where I had a mango-banana smoothie, followed by a rosemary-chocolate chip gelato... all enjoyed on the promenade.



Left to Right: farmy pecorino cheese and olive oil shop, pignolo tree (pine nut source), cute streets, promenade sunset

The next day was an interesting variety of activities, which was good because it would be easy to get overloaded by museums and churches on a trip like this. Amusingly, we began with a foggy drive to a women-owned/run winery specializing in Brunello – which meant we were tasting at, like, 10 a.m. Going into this trip, I was confused about the winery (which the tour company touted as “women-owned”) because a few years ago Morley Safer (60 Minutes) went to Antinori (mentioned during our drive through the Chianti region) and presented the notion that said winery was being handed over to female family members after 26 generations of male-ownership (consequently, I thought we'd be visiting them). In contrast, however, the little gem we visited (Casato Prime Donne) is managed and run – top to bottom – by women. As I learned during the visit, they also run an impressive women-focused foundation, awarding an annual humanitarian prize and then commemorating the recipient via an art installation on their sprawling grounds (one awardee was a virologist, which I – of course - found fascinating even though I didn't know them/their work). The winery was quiet when we arrived and the tasting involved 4 generous half-glasses with cheese/bread at different points in the tour: in the shop, grape-crushing area, fermentation room, and culminating in a Brunello in the barrel-aging room (alas, I lack a sophisticated palette because I liked the cheaper “drink-me-now” rosso blend the best). Notably, the fermentation room featured at least 4 different styles of chambers – metal tanks being retro-replaced with these cement or ceramic containers that mimic the old school way of fermenting wine in a giant terra cotta jug in the ground. Alas, my camera batteries died as we entered the barrel-aging room! Before leaving, I did spend a small fortune to send home 9 bottles (Brunello, rosso, and grappa) – to repay my wine-loving friends for all their support this year.



Left to Right: Casato Prime Donne – tasting, spent grapes, crushing area, fermentation; Montalcino with castle and views

We then took some interesting backroads (including some dirt/gravel) that eventually made their way up the winding route to hilltop Montalcino. Parking at one of the entrance gates (farthest from the fortress/castle), we walked up our steepest hill yet – our leader giving us a short orientation tour before setting us loose for several hours (including lunch on-your-own). Given that the other sola traveler was up and about, we paid to climb the fortress – which was still in the process of being remodeled but offered really great views of the town and countryside. We also challenged ourselves to tackle some of the super-steep connecting walkways. But the

best part of Montalcino was lunch. We picked this restaurant with huge windows looking out over Valdorcia and shared/enjoyed a scenic and memorable meal of big fresh salad, roasted vegetable platter, and Tuscan bean tasting appetizer (the best was a fascinating paste of beans and faro). Needless to say, fiber-related poop production was excellent! After lunch, we walked some more – although we never went into any of the churches or museums near the big piazza/town-center, which was (I believe) on the highest point of land. Hopes to walk this visible promenade that seemed to go around the town at a lower level just outside the city walls were repeatedly dashed by our inability to find our way down there... and needing to get back to the entrance gate for the regroup time.



Sant'Antimo and grounds, complete with American painter

From Montalcino, we took a different way back – first visiting nearby Sant'Antimo, an abbey/church complex set in this breathtaking green/hilly valley that screamed Tuscany. Although there wasn't a lot to our short tour inside the big church, walking the grounds and just staring at the scenery was sufficiently interesting. Indeed, a couple from North Carolina was here – the husband napping in the grass and the wife painting the scene with quite the easel set-up. The church itself was very simple inside, although the stone was dominated by all kinds of interesting travertine and the builders (12th century, said to be more French-inspired) definitely wanted the stone to speak for itself more than, say, frescoes; I swear you could teach a whole geology class of Tuscany just using churches!



Left to Right: one of Sant'Antimo's many animal carvings, Bagno Vignoni – main pool, old baths, REI pilgrims in natural run-off

On the way back to Pienza, we made one short surprise visit to the tiny spa-town of Bagno Vignoni – a very short drive up this hill. I don't think there were more a dozen buildings – most surrounding the mucky old warm pool (notably built by the Medici). Continuing down from this upper square, we descended a little down this open hill that instantly felt like Yellowstone: bare, bony sinter surface, a much hotter stream cutting down the middle – complete with a colorful thermal gradient. It eventually flowed down a steep hillside to this aquamarine warm river that looked like Norris Geyser Basin. A few old catch-pool baths that used to catch the stream were either bone-dry gray or overgrown with weeds and disrepair. A large group of hikers – most likely REI – showed up and soaked their feet in the run-off. Hitting the road again, our leader pointed to this five-star new spa hotel (Adler) out on this side-hill in the distance – which notably runs \$1000 a night per person. Returning to lower-budget Pienza at 5, the other sola traveler and I had made dinner reservations at one of the leader-recommended places within the old town for 7:10. FAMISHED, we headed out into the VERY cold night a little early – trying to shop unsuccessfully for warmer gear (sweaters, fleece, or an extra coat) because the forecast looked to be getting even colder. Unfortunately, we were both disappointed with the underwhelmingly simple meal (I had super-oily bruschetta with garlic, so-so tagliatelle in red sauce, and a good bib lettuce salad with shaved carrots and tomatoes). In contrast with our opinions, one of the other couples (also there) RAVED about their meal, which featured a mushroom/white-sauce lasagna and looked great. After dinner, we – of course – indulged a gelato (in my case – another hazelnut).



Left to Right: Civita di Bagnoregio – bridge, final climb, center, private garden, stairwell to big calanchi viewpoint (next section)

The next morning, we made a long daytrip out of Tuscany to Lazio (where Rome is – farther south) and Umbria (where we would spend the next big leg of the trip). At the time, I didn't realize that we were up on this high plateau of land (the hilltowns even higher points) – but today's longish drive took us quickly down – via this sort of tacky-looking town called Montepulciano, in this wide flat valley,

culminating in the big autostrada (a real freeway) that leads to Rome. Near the end of our time on said freeway, we came into view of our second stop of the day – the magnificent cliff/hilltown of Orvieto. It reminded me a little of seeing Montserrat (albeit with buildings) in Spain. But our first goal of the day was a little more south – accessed via remote-feeling two-lane highways winding up and then across higher plateaus of mostly farmland estates. After an hour and fifteen total minutes (no breaks today), we arrived at this moderate sized parking lot in the town of Bagnoregio and were given about 5 minutes to use the bathroom and trinket-shop. Then, a small mini-bus arrived and took us maybe 7 minutes through town to this very small/narrow street that lead to the bridge to Civita. I'm sure walking would have been possible and cheaper (given that it seemed like there was quite the racket in terms of not allowing external tour operators/cars get near the bridge) but this was not a hiking group and, honestly, it was REALLY, REALLY cold this morning. Plus, the walk up to Civita was challenging and, given a lot of harder walking (both in terms of distance and steepness), my foot was definitely talking to me by the end of the day. Even though Civita was both cliffy and teeny-tiny (I walked the whole thing in about 20 minutes), I LOVED Civita: poking around all the little dead-end side-walks to these cliff-side views, seeing all these charming gardens, and admiring the big view of this massive calanchy formation at the far end of town. Although I'm not sure it counts as gelato (because it wasn't frozen), I am a sucker for weird desserts and so when I saw the sign for some local ricotta gelato with honey and cinnamon, I wasn't going to turn that down. Watching the man scoop out raw cheese from this questionable bowl in the fridge – and then hand-mix it with the cinnamon and honey, I did have a few second thoughts (like – hmm: did I remember Pepto Bismol?)... but, as with the Swiss man-shed apple juice incident last summer (or Rick Steves moment, as Ellen called it), I ate it. Not my favorite. But not bad. Speaking of Rick Steves, there was an actual hotel with a big Rick Steves placard on the door. Our leader, like other leaders I've met in Europe, does not like Rick Steves and feels he has destroyed many formerly quiet gems (most notably the Cinque Terre). The Steves "bump," however, was not noted in Civita.



Left to Right: calanchie from Civita, part of Orvieto from viewpoint (last image of Italy section is whole town), funicular, LUNCH!

Returning to the Bagnoregio parking lot, we then made our way towards Orvieto – approaching it from a backroad that, at one point, offered a commanding view of the whole high plateau. Riding the funicular to the top, we took a free local bus around to the other side of town – winding up by the main piazza. By now the weather had changed from sunny and cold to cloudy and cold. Given that it was lunchtime, we were given 2 hours to grab lunch and do whatever we wanted... before a short guided tour of the caves and duomo. Thankfully, our leader gave us some good advice about her favorite “quick option” – the Italian equivalent of fast food (Montenucci's)... you saw all the daily salads and pasta, ordered, and they brought it out to you. Totally my kind of place: clear, fast, and reasonably priced. I got a big bowl of chicken soup with a delicious pasta salad – and it came with a chunk of bread. My only faux pas was asking for butter; I thought the guy was going to reach over the counter and slap me (they ONLY have olive oil!). After lunch, I was the only one interested in visiting a well-rated Etruscan Museum (Museo Claudio Faina) back at the big square. Although I know there are lots of Etruscan museums and sites in Tuscany (including another one in Orvieto that I didn't visit), I fully enjoyed this one – if only because it was super-quiet (I think I was the only one in there), it had great bathrooms, and it was a break from the rain – which began to POUR soon after I arrived. Many artifacts (circa 500 B.C.) were notably from necropoleis (i.e. taken out of tombs) right here in Orvieto.



Left to Right: Etruscan Museum (Museo Claudio Faina) artifacts – my favorite is the olive oil duck container at the end

By the time I finished with the museum, it was time to regroup. Departing from the museum, I passed through quite a gauntlet of military/soldiers (many with huge guns/assault weapons) who had ducked into the alcove from an impressive downpour. Meeting the group/local guide a few buildings away, we headed down to this lower trail level hugging the upper reaches of the plateau. Here, MANY doorways entered the tufa – each a man-made cave locals had drilled interesting corridors, storage rooms, etc. into the rock. The one we toured was so large – housing several mills and presses for olive oil, multiple well shafts, rooms for wine/food – that its former owners was repeatedly fined for endangering the city by excavating too much (sort of like fracking). Eventually, a big cement pillar was installed in the largest room because of fears that upper parts of the city could collapse inward. I personally would have liked to see way more caves and unfortunately I sensed that the local guide took us to the one with the shortest overall walk because some group-members were winded just going down to the entrance. I remain unclear whether one can visit the caves unguided. Climbing back up, we were greeted by half a dozen stray cats down on this stone patio.

We then went to the Duomo, which had so many decorations that it made the Sodoma abbey/church look plain. The outside was striped rock (white travertine and gray basalt), its fancy entrance façade wall made up of multiple spires, mosaics, and stone carvings. Several long windows were made of either stained glass or thin-cut agate/stone (similar to what Ellen and I saw in Zurich). Many floor sections were made of elaborate geometric inlays – which reminded me of San Marco's/Venice, which had similar design everywhere. Although some big church walls were left plain, several side-chapels were explosions of amazing fresco art – the most notable of which was the Chapel of San Brizio with its Signorelli (presumably the same artist who worked with Sodoma). There was also some excitement because the pipe organ area had just been restored and the artist in charge of that project happened to be on site.



Left to Right: (top) Orvieto cat, Duomo – façade/detail, ceiling, cut stone and stained glass windows; (bottom) more Duomo – frescoes, the famous antichrist (is that Donald Trump?), geometric floor, remodeled organ

After the Duomo, we were given another 2 hours of free time, which included getting back to the bus (i.e. making our way a mile across town, then down the funicular). The other sola traveler (who had no rain-gear/protection to speak of) and I spent about 30 minutes trying to find a bakery/coffeehouse (stopping in multiple shops) before we finally gave up and just walked straight across town and descended the funicular. Within said building, we found a utilitarian place with great shell-shaped cannelloni and hot tea. Of course, you had to pay to use the restrooms. Correctly sensing everyone was probably waiting in the bus, we returned there 20 minutes early... and all headed back to Pienza. Given that one of the spouses came in with a bad cough that had grown considerably worse, three of us wound up dining at this restaurant a block away (outside Pienza's old town/city walls) that had AMAZING food... one of the best steaks I've ever had. Unfortunately, we were ignored when this big tour-group showed up and then I grew crabby – uninterested in waiting around any longer. Demanding the bill multiple times, we enjoyed panacotta with caramel sauce back at the hotel.



Left to Right: morning stop along Lake Trasimene (volcanoes in the distance), view up at Assisi, fortified security entrance

October 12-15: Umbria – Assisi, Gubbio, Spoleto

For our next leg, we headed east to Umbria. After 75 minutes, we took a 20-minute stop at Lake Trasimene, the fourth largest lake in Italy. While others headed straight for the barely-open coffee shop, I used my time to power-walk the pignolo tree-lined promenade. Today's weather was blue-sky pleasant and not too cold. From the lake, it was another 75 minutes to Assisi, passing what seemed to be more urban and suburban sprawl than we'd seen before (in the form of Perugia – which sort of reminded me of Portland). The medieval town is situated on Monte Subasio. We made a short photo-stop in the farmlands on the flat plain before the climb to the old town began. I was really looking forward to seeing the church of St. Francis and, although I was initially surprised how massive the complex was, I thought it was super-impressive... even though you couldn't take any pictures inside (meaning that I had to buy a well-illustrated guidebook later). Security here was second only to that in Florence at the Uffizi, with a security check where armed military officials looked through all your personal belongings. For such a pretty day, though, there was no line and – honestly, the church (or churches) were not overwhelmingly crowded. Indeed, the complex is made up of three churches that are more or less built on or in each other. The lower church was the most elaborately decorated to me (featuring so many geometric patterns and flatter-looking gold-leaf paintings). Within/below this church was the tomb of St. Francis – a church in and of itself. It was simple, dark, grotto-like, and probably most reflected what St. Francis would have wanted. The upper church felt more like a classic cathedral – with HIGH walls, long stained glass windows, and more colorful and lively frescoes, many depicting the life of St. Francis (including the famous preaching to the birds). The high ceilings were ethereally painted deep blue with golden stars, feeling more folk art than Renaissance.

Major sections of the upper church had been heavily damaged in a 1997 earthquake and still bore uneven evidence of the damage. Exiting onto the upper deck, we enjoyed an amazing view over the valley; nearby, a boat used by Syrian refugees was displayed in front of a grassy field with the words peace (PAX) and St. Francis' mushroom-like cross cut out of shrubbery.



Left to Right: (top) upper church deck with Syrian refugee boat; (bottom) Assisi streets, cyclamen, bakery, piazza pizza

Our leader walked us to the central piazza meeting point, about 10 minutes up the hill. We were then given a couple hours to lunch and shop. Having passed a number of REALLY great shops that I wanted to explore more, I did not waste time with a sit-down lunch. Today was a simple pizza from a “by the slice” shop in the main square; slices were basically broiled on something that looked like a cross between a Panini-maker and a salamander. At less than \$4, it was DELICIOUS and totally worth it... meaning I could spend WAY too much money on things like the guidebook, a carved olive-wood statuette of St. Francis with birds, and some Christmas presents for Ellen (light scarves that the Italian women knew how to wear so well – and which I knew Ellen could use, being more fashionable than me). Although I resisted NUMEROUS amazing bakeries, I indulged a double-scoop gelato: cantaloupe and pine nut (alas – MUCH sweeter and not as pine nutty as the original in Pistoia).



Left to Right: last view at Assisi, Gubbio & coliseum (note church on hill with cage-lift), Palazzo dei Consoli, old wine cellar restaurant

At around 3:30, we regrouped by another church at the far end of town and walked down to the bus. Our drive north to Gubbio involved this rather scenic two-lane mountain road through the Apennines; unfortunately, looking at the map, I am not sure which road it was (although I am going to guess 296). Alas, there were no pull-outs and the road was so curvy that you couldn't take in-focus pictures when it mattered. At one point, we came to a high open spot where you looked down on the big valley where the new/sprawl section of Gubbio was – its medieval old town climbing up this big hill in the background. Near the top was a big church; tomorrow, a stated trip highlight was driving to the church and then riding down in a 2-person cage-style gondola. After descending to the valley, it felt like we spent a long time in a big traffic jam just to get to our hotel on the outskirts of the old town. Although our leader talked up the sprawling hotel, it reminded me more of the government-run paradors we stayed at across northern Spain in 2009: nice but sort of old and worn out, with a dated concept of luxury. For the remainder of the trip, we would only be staying two nights at each location, which felt a little rushed. Our leader gave us about an hour to clean up before our only official pre-dinner time in Gubbio. Perhaps because folks were a little tired, only the other sola traveler and I showed up for this excursion (everyone else elected to walk to dinner – which was 2 hours away). For the excursion, we took the bus to the base of the hill where Gubbio has built this elaborate elevator system to access different levels of the old town. The “tour” exclusively focused on the Palazzo dei Consoli, although we were basically just given free tickets – with only 45 minutes of time to see the artifacts. In general, I enjoyed the Etruscan museum in Orvieto more; this place had some ceramics but seemed more focused on palace furniture from the middle ages. However, the views from the Palazzo were more grand – particularly given the spectacular sunset in progress. With 30 minutes still remaining before dinner, we did a little shopping; honestly, though, I was famished and tired of being out in the dark, walking what were rather empty streets. Thankfully, dinner was not a disappointment: located in this old wine cellar, the restaurant owners had all this cool local art hung throughout. Our courses included a fruit-arugula salad, crostini with roasted cauliflower, fry bread with prosciutto, grilled veal with radicchio, and some kind of mille-foil with cream and chocolate.

The next day was a moderately long driving excursion north to Urbino, the farthest east we would get (about an hour from the Adriatic Sea). Unfortunately, I cannot say I would go back to Urbino... and I felt like the day was a lot of annoying driving for very little. Although the day began with clear skies in several directions, it was raining by noon – and so windy that they closed down the cage-gondolas (such that we never even bothered going up the hill above Gubbio). Driving north to Urbino, the highway was TERRIBLE... serious, serious ruts and cracks almost the whole way. Although we were in the Apennines the whole day, it felt like we went through many towns. At a couple moments, you could see a few high mountains – some with fresh snow on the tops. We arrived in Urbino around 10. While I thought the local guide here was the best, the entire focus of the tour was on the Palazzo Ducale – which was basically owned by a famous Duke (Federico da Montefeltro) whose famous portrait we saw in the Uffizi.



Left to Right: (top) Palazzo Ducale, amazing inlaid wood room, downstairs baths, lunch plate #1; (bottom) painting of Duke/Federico from Uffizi; art in Palazzo Ducale – perspective, “self-caressing” Venus of Urbino, fancy Duke ceiling

Although the Palazzo Ducale was dingy-feeling at times, I enjoyed more art per capita here than I did relative to the Uffizi – perhaps because it offered more variety. But the most interesting room by far was this studio del Duca, which contained elaborate inlaid wood art built into all the walls. The art part of the tour culminated with the special exhibition room featuring Titian’s Venus of Urbino, complete with several explanatory panels (including the obligatory one about whether she’s masturbating). After touring the gallery, our local guide took us on a special tour of the palace bowels, a stark and bare contrast to the fancy Duke residence apartments. We were then turned loose for an hour, the rain falling almost immediately as we hit the streets. One of the confounding aspects of the day was that Urbino is home to a famous art school – and, of course, we arrived in the middle of their graduation day equivalent. Thus, college kids (many wearing wreaths of foliage or flowers) and their families choked every street and square. A few of us tried to escape into this gelato stand, only to be mocked by a group of boys who pointed and said chucking things about us in Italian. Nevertheless, the blackberry-lemon-sambuca gelato was one of the richest and most decadent scoops on the whole trip. Unfortunately, said richness probably spoiled our ability to finish what was one of the most enormous (but annoying) meals on this whole trip. Regrouping a couple blocks away, we crammed into the hyped-up local restaurant... where at least 4 other MASSIVE Italian families (each 12-15 people) were also arriving, celebrating their kids’ graduation. While the spectacle was impressive, you could barely move, service was a little spotty/slow at times, and I felt stressed out by the experience (to the point I have wondered if it set me up for the illness that was about to take me out). The meal began with beautiful, light antipasto plates (shown above), moved through a couple pasta options (including a thick local one made of bread crumbs, and another shoestring variety, the name of which translated to “priest-strangling pasta”), and ended with a meat platter (that hardly any one touched, much to our leader’s dismay). By the time we finished, it was almost 3. As we drove back to Gubbio, it was clear the weather was even worse – causing us to skip the aforementioned drive to the church and ride down on the cage-style gondolas. Arriving back at the hotel just before 5, I was able to enjoy an hour of quiet swimming at the fancy adjoining spa (the only issue being this asymmetric couple who wished I wasn’t there because they definitely wanted to get it on in the pool). Given that we had been warned in advance tonight’s dinner was “on your own,” I had pre-stolen plenty of food from the breakfast buffet and thus enjoyed a quiet night vegging in front of the limited English TV options.



Left to Right: the filthy Tiber River flowing to Rome, Torgiano’s museum of olive with oil press, Deruta ceramics, Vibio’s tiniest theatre

The next day, we made the sort of long drive to Spoleto. Like yesterday, the itinerary felt sort of bumpy, with a couple stops uninspiring and too long. Heading south on mostly small country roads, we had a few glimpses of the infamous and filthy Tiber – which ultimately

flows to Rome. Our first stop was in the sleepy and empty town of Torgiano – specifically at this winery-owned museum of the olive/olive oil. While I was reasonably occupied/impressed, I could have blazed through this museum in about 20 minutes (we spent an hour with the museum guide) and it would have been nice if they'd had more interesting gifts (especially botanical prints). The museum spent about half the space on the history of farming, harvesting, and pressing. Most of the other half was this HUGE display of olive-oil lamps from every seeming era. There as a little section at the end on other applications – like medicinal. From Torgiano, we continued to the truly tiny town of Deruta – a complete waste of time, IMO, because we were basically given 2.5 hours “on our own” (including lunch) but the whole town was dead and there was only 1 place to eat. Known for ceramics, our leader hyped up the local ceramic museum and all the shopping. As usual, I was the only one who actually went to the museum (meh). Most of the ceramics were not exactly my taste (believe it or not – they were too loud and gaudy) and at least one male shop-owner was SUPER-aggressive... to the point I firmly said no and walked away. After finding no simple food, I succumbed to the one restaurant – where most others had pretty much settled from the start – and ate a full-on sit-down meal. This included liverwurst crostini (complimentary because they took so long), noodle pinwheels with red sauce and cheese, and a little lemon sorbetino. Eventually, we regrouped and continued to sleepy hilltop Fattoria di Vibio, our leader going on about how people here live here a long time (though they are not part of the “blue zone” project). After walking around the tiny village, we met with the curator of the Concordia Theatre, which bills itself as the smallest theatre in the world (99 seats). While not earth-shattering, I was not bored with the theatre tour.



Left to Right: Spoleto – escalators, view of church from top, from level, theatre, view of theatre from hotel room

After lunch, we continued in earnest to Spoleto – the closest town we'd visit in terms of the recent earthquake epicenters. Indeed, a regular activity pre-earthquake was to walk into town on the old Roman bridge. Today, however, that walkway was closed because inspectors had not yet deemed it safe enough. And so we took a more modern footpath into the city: the impressive series of escalators climbing several hundred feet up to the near-top level of the hillside town (just below the final fortress). From here, we enjoyed good views of the Duomo, framed by brilliant green trees... lush mountainous terrain beyond. Descending to the middle level of town (passing by said Duomo), we then cut across several blocks to a piazza overlooking a very impressive Roman theatre. Our adjacent hotel actually looked over said structure – although the rooms were REALLY basic and dormy. Of course, a gelato stand beckoned: the BEST dark chocolate I have ever tasted (almost displacing the Pistoia pine nut!). Checking in around 5, we had a couple hours before dinner with the exceedingly quiet company owners (who called Spoleto home). Said event began with WAY too many appetizers down in the hotel bar (along with the popular local drink: the weirdly bitter pink-orange aperole spritz). We then walked a few blocks to this restaurant I thought would be better given how popular it was. Alas, however, it was slow and I must have been totally prodromal with the pending illness! While the fresh green salad was excellent, everything else was super-basic: pasta with red sauce, grilled sausage or chicken, boiled-to-death spinach, and another deconstructed tiramisu cream-bomb. We were not back to the hotel until 10:15 – and, by then, I was cranky and exhausted. Overnight, I developed one of the most intense sore throats in memory (no fever), waking 3 times in pain.

The next morning, I bailed on the guided tour and slept solid between 9 and 12:30. Given that it was actually sunny when I awoke, I spent the next couple of hours on the veranda near my room – completely preoccupied reading the latest book by Siddhartha Mukherjee: *The Gene – An Intimate History* (Mukherjee's first book – Emperor of All Maladies/Biography of Cancer – remains one of my favorite books). By around 2:30, other folks were returning and I thought I was feeling better... so I agreed to accompany the other sola traveler to a pizza stand (being that I was hungry) one level up from the hotel... followed by a double gelato at a different stand (so-so lemon and pineapple). The big error, however, was giving in to a major hike to the bottom of the hill, which the leader insisted had all kinds of shops (alas, my compatriot seemed to love to shop – even though she seldom bought anything... and, more disturbing, she liked to willfully provoke shopkeepers who did not want you touching things like leather bags or shoes). Ultimately, the unsatisfying hike DOWN the big hill and then the LONG hike back up (even sick and with the foot situation, I was in better physical shape than my compatriot) probably caused a full relapse. When I returned to the hotel, I was running 100 degrees and fully sweating – so I showered and climbed into bed for an hour – dragging myself down to the hotel dining room around 7:30 for a clear-broth barley/vegetable soup with bread (incidentally, dinner tonight was on your own). In bed by 9, I slept another 11 hours – feverish and sweating profusely.

The next morning, I woke up running over 100 degrees – the soreness now encompassing both my throat and my entire upper palette. For most of the foggy 2-hour drive to Cortona, I lay fully down in the back of the bus – consumed by fever and body aches. The original plan today was to spend several hours in Cortona, emphasizing the Etruscan Museum followed by free time/lunch on your own. As I learned on this trip, Cortona is the village just outside which Mayes (of Under the Tuscan Sun fame) lives much of the year, having purchased a dying villa and remodeled it with her second husband. Being a moderate fan of that cheesy movie (which, for the record, bears little resemblance to the book – which I read following this trip), I was looking forward to seeing the town. As we approached the hilltop, however, we were stopped by road closures: there was a little “old car” grand prix going on. Initially, our driver thought he could find a back-road into the old town – but even that was fully closed. As we awkwardly turned around on the narrow two-lane highway (this task required multiple point turns), the crowd of local onlookers occupying the access road (sort of tailgate style) seemed more interested in our silly bus' driving than in the race (we did see a couple cars zooming past – still in heavy fog). Although our leader was bummed and unsure what to do, the driver quickly suggested driving another hour to this less crowded, less touristy town called Colle

Di Val E' Elsa – dropping us off at this bridge-like entrance through the upper-most city walls. Given that it was sunny and I was hungry, I did manage to make it a few blocks in for lunch on this big veranda. Although our gaunt, punk, and heavily tattooed waiter was not a people-person, the walnut-faro ravioli in arugula sauce was ALL eaten and enjoyed. Even though I felt a little more energetic after lunch, I rested in the sun during the brief hour of free time before we regrouped at the city gate/bus.



Left to Right: San Gimignano, main square, view from hotel restaurant, Tuscany departure morning

At 4, we hit the road for San Gimignano – 20 minutes away (not including our short photo stop along this vineyard hillside, from which we could take exceptional photos of the multi-towered hilltown). At the base of San Gimignano, we said goodbye to our bus/driver in this large parking complex where most day-trippers parked and then walked up. Given my status, our leader put me in the local luggage taxi that drove the impressively narrow streets up to the main square where our hotel was. This was appreciated given that my fever was now up to 100.7. Although you couldn't beat the location, the hotel was old and basic. That I basically spent tonight and all of tomorrow laid up sweating with fever didn't help my impressions – but, honestly, it was pleasant to throw open my window shutters (which kept the significant crowd noise out) literally onto the main square and at least enjoy a room with a nice view. Tonight was dinner on your own, which meant that I walked about 200 feet to this bakery on the square and ordered a few croissant-like rolls, which go well with Emergen-C. Had I known how good the hotel restaurant was, I would have had their soup delivered room service.

Although my fever dropped to 99 in the middle of the night, it was still 100.3 in the morning, and my sinuses/throat were even more inflamed and sludgy. Weak and now suffering chills, I ate as early as I could at breakfast (trying to avoid the crowds), where I discussed with our leader what my options were for trying to procure an anti-microbial drug (as Allison successfully did in the Dolomites). Long story short, I skipped the group trip to nearby Sienna (which deflates me to this day because that was a town I really wanted to see!) but strangely enjoyed my alternative adventure: successfully visiting the village doctor 2 doors down from the hotel, who prescribed me a penicillin derivative and a bunch of hard-core anti-inflammatory drugs to get my ears cleared before and during the big flights home (the fizzy tablets reminded me of short-term/one-hour prednisone and definitely woke you up). The physician, who looked like a cross between Woody Allen and Mr. Rogers, spoke a little English and memorably waved between my nose and throat saying, "your troubles – they are all between here and here." An American doctor could not have said it better. The pharmacy was 200 feet across the square. Testimony to the power of socialized medicine subsidized by the government, the entire experience (visit and drugs) was \$40 USD-equivalent. Pretty damn impressive. The rest of my day was spent sleeping until 1:30, and enjoying an extremely peaceful, scenic, and classically tasty lunch in the hotel restaurant: big fresh butter lettuce salad, faro and bean soup, and tea. Although I slept more and felt a little more energetic around 5, I declined the final group dinner because now the leader and 2 others were feeling shitty with throat/coughing issues – with patient zero (who had been coughing openly for a week now) still hacking away. I did appreciate that the leader brought me back a box of penne with red sauce and roasted vegetables – even though it didn't taste better than what I could do with boxed pasta and a jar of red sauce here at home.

The next day, the leader put people with similar departure times in Mercedes cabs back to Florence. I was still running over 100 but I didn't feel as chilled or low energy... probably because of the travel endorphins. The flight back to Amsterdam was pleasant and I ate a very white KLM sandwich (we're talking white bread, white cheese, and white mayo-like spread). Landing around 2, I retrieved my luggage and spent my last night at the airport-attached Sheraton – ordering some kind of Asian-inspired chicken, rice, and stir-fry room service dinner, soaking in the tub with hot rags on my face, and lounging in bed with CNN and BBC. The next day, my fever was finally approaching normal and I thoroughly enjoyed the terribly overpriced breakfast buffet – getting 3 plates of different food items (e.g. the savory plate, the fiber plate, and the sweet plate) and 2 huge pots of tea. Although the airport was crazy, I was able to use my business class status to move through the throngs, which was a lifesaver. Alas, however, my seat neighbor was a truly annoying LA-derived woman who ran some kind of pyramid-scheme life-coaching operation and seemed like she did a lot of drugs. Needless to say, we did not speak much – thanks to my pulling out The Gene.



Thoughts About Netherlands, Tuscany/Umbria: *BTW – that would be memorable Orvieto in the picture above!*

Although this trip came near the end of a hard year and was not my first vacation choice, it did represent a turning point in my recovery from the stress fracture – not to mention an extremely necessary break from probably the longest time in 20 years that I have not taken a substantial vacation. This was also one of the more civilized, city/town-oriented trips I have ever taken. Even though I wasn't in the

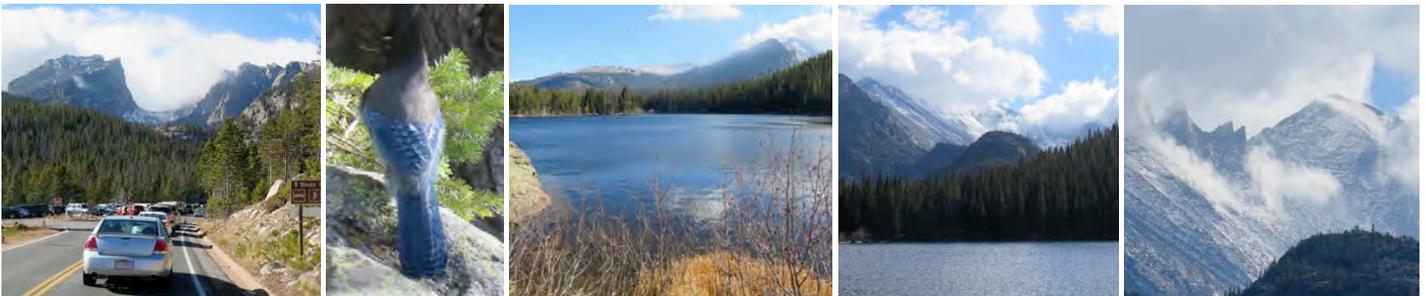
Netherlands long, it was a very rewarding trip – both visiting Ellen/John/kindergarten and venturing north of Amsterdam to an area I probably wouldn't have come up with had necessity not governed my choices. Having been a skeptic of touristy daytrips, I was pleasantly surprised with this longer/smaller group I signed onto via Viator – to the point I successfully used a similar venue on my November professional meeting (Denver/Rockies, next). In terms of Italy, I would say Tuscany was more interesting and beautiful than Umbria – although I was very fond of Assisi. And Tuscany was as scenic as they say – even though the weather was much colder and wetter than I thought it would be. For an “easy” trip, I was still the most in shape of our much older group – even with the gimpy foot. The itinerary was 70% good but, as stated, I would have skipped several stops in Umbria. I think this could be a harder style trip for some single/solo people because this company's style involves a lot of “on your own” stuff. I didn't mind it too much because I was comfortable doing my own thing and had a good Blue Guide for directing me to museums (others in the group spent all their time shopping and drinking wine, I swear). It was also very helpful that I always felt entirely safe in all the towns where we were turned loose. Although I sometimes got a little “churched out,” I thought the variety of sites and activities was actually about right – and, frankly, the leader and local guides hit the right mark for culture presentation length. I will probably annoy folks by saying that I was not wowed by the food as much as I thought I would be. There were certainly some good dishes – but many were mediocre... and nothing topped the famous Cinque Torri gnocchi with fresh herbs from 2013. Nonetheless, since coming home, I have taken up making up gelato at home... and a variety of faro/bean/barley soups and salads.



Left to Right: St. Malo Church on the Rock with Mt. Meeker, Diamond Face of Longs Peak, dropping towards Estes Park

November 2-6: Denver Professional Meeting With Rocky Mountain NP

As mentioned, I made a lot of research lemonade over the summer – both microbial (with Parker) and educational (my official sabbatical). The latter spawned 2 research posters, which I enjoyed delivering in Denver the first week of November. At the time, I NEVER dreamed the weather would be mild enough to do a side-trip to Rocky Mountain... but as the meeting approached, it was clear that Denver would be sunny, and the high (12K) Trail Ridge Road in the park was still regularly open. So I did a repeat Viator day-trip booking, choosing a small-group company who did what I thought was the most in-depth Rocky Mountain trip available this time of year. I was NOT disappointed – even though the park hotline initially stated the Trail Ridge Road would NOT be open. From my hotel in the business district, I used the free mall-ride to access the train-station, the meeting point for the tour. There were SEVEN of us plus our guide/driver, a knowledgeable and laid-back guy who did a great job. Heading out in a roomy bus that seated 16, we headed north an hour – stopping at a granola grocery in Lyons where we picked up sack lunches (delicious – as impressive as the Viator Holland lunch). We then took a more remote back-road to the park, visiting the St. Malo Church on the Rock in front of Mt. Meeker, followed by a photo-stop of the Diamond Face of Longs Peak, before a twisty ride into Estes Park. Before we knew it, we were lined up at the Rocky Mountain NP gate (where we learned the Trail Ridge Road was now open) – and heading to Bear Lake.



Left to Right: Bear Lake – road/parking, jay, lake/view, distant snowy peaks with close-up

My last and only time to Rocky Mountain NP was in graduate school. Following a professional conference at Cold Spring Harbor, I had gone out in May 1992 to do some work with a collaborator in Boulder; while there, members of the lab took me to Bear Lake – which was completely snowed in (to the point you couldn't even walk the short path around the lake). Nonetheless, I vaguely recognized the area – despite the INSANE parking lot. Today, we spent nearly an hour at Bear, hiking the mile-ish trail around the lake and then eating DELICIOUS and HUGE turkey/rye sandwiches with chips and cookies. I think the only thing that was lacking was significantly more water. I personally developed a headache with the altitude – and a week of dry Denver conditions had left me parched. Although clouds swirled by all the mountains, we enjoyed lots of good views of glacier-carved plateaus (highly reminiscent of the Beartooths, IMO), serrated ridgelines, and fresh snow. Of course, it was VERY cold despite the sun – with several icy patches to negotiate. We then backtracked a little to the Trail Ridge Road access point. I do not remember how many times we stopped as we climbed the long, zigzagging road – which began in trees and then turned into high alpine nothingness. I know we stopped at Many Parks Curve first and again on our way back because it had a good pit toilet and the views of Longs Peak were good (almost completely clear as we headed down). After finally getting above tree-line, we next stopped at Forest Canyon overlook and took the full walk out to the stone overlook (that was one of my favorite views – albeit of distant alpine tundra and mountains). But it was bitterly cold and windy – and it was here I could feel the altitude and developed a headache. We then headed out to the Tundra Community area and pretty much everyone gave

up hiking fully to the top because of bitterly cold winds. We drove just a little farther on the road (not FULLY making it to the 12.18K highpoint – but we did go to 12K). The views from the Tundra Community area across the valley to this set of BIG snowy mountains and a shimmering hanging lake were great – albeit hard to photograph because we were looking directly into the light. We then headed back down the same route, stopping again at Forest Canyon for restrooms and our clearest view of Longs.



Left to Right: views from Trail Ridge Road – looking down on entrance valley, high plateau, big peaks/lake, Longs Peak

Leaving the park, we took a different route back to Estes Park – stopping there for an uninspiring 30 minutes of shopping in this strange little cluster of strip-mally shops. Heading back to Denver, we also took a side-highway that passed close to Boulder. Several peaks above Boulder were very familiar, mostly because my Ph.D. advisor hung a painting she made of them in her office. Being dropped off at the CRAZY crowded station well after dark was a little intimidating to me because, honestly, Denver seemed significantly seedier and grittier than I was expecting. Fortunately, this friendly Dutch scientist fresh off the plane/train was hauling his luggage to my hotel – and I glommed onto him for the duration of the mall-ride night version. The next morning, I returned home.



Left to Right: eating prime rib roast, decorating the trees, Bozeman Christmas stroll – santa and spider-lighting

November 21-December 4: Roger/Susie’s Bozeman Basecamp

A few years ago, I visited Roger/Susie’s over Thanksgiving for a short but travel-stressful trip. Given my sabbatical, I wanted to do a more relaxed version of this trip – arriving earlier and leaving later to avoid the hectic travel days. Of course, putting a non-family member up for 2 weeks is a tall order (which baffled some of my friends and coworkers) – but Roger/Susie are family and it was long established that I was bringing work to do... to the point Roger set up an office for me in his media room (with fabulous views of the Bridger Mountains). Knowing I would not be allowed to directly pay for all their hospitality, I did go behind Roger/Susie’s backs and buy a painting of Reine Harbor for them by a famous Lofoten Islands artist (because they had finally visited Lofoten/Norway this last July). Much of my visit/our time was fundamentally about relaxing, cooking, eating, drinking, working, putting up the Christmas lights, and going into Bozeman to shop, visit the university museum, or participate in the VERY busy Christmas stroll. While we didn’t do, like, some big crazy outing every other day, we did a few outings (highlighted below) – and walked 2-4 miles every day, a major milestone in my foot recovery/confidence... particularly given that several of said walks were on snow/ice (which I am not a fan of – injury or not).



Left to Right: Buffalo Jump (Montana Tourism image), capstone scrambling - Sarah’s OK-ass, scrambling, Roger’s turn

Buffalo Jump State Park

Our first major outing was an hour west. There are several “buffalo jump” sites throughout the west – all plateaus with big cliffs where the Native Americans drove herds of buffalo over the edge for food/provisions. Parking at the lower trailhead, you could see the goal right in front of you: a meandering hike/climb to the top of this big butte. The loop we chose went up one side and came down the other. Although we knew it was going to be freezing (as was nearly every day of my trip), the high winds had not been forecast and were challenging. For me, the trail was also rough and rudimentary at times – which was a little foot-scary. That we fully lost the trail at

one point in this side-gully almost sent me over the edge. We avoided fully retracing our steps (which would have added a little over half a mile) by outright scrambling this capstone-like rock, leading to the flat scrubby uppermost plateau. From our capstone exit, the way reminded me a little of hiking along the cliffs above Lake Billy Chinook in eastern Oregon. Given high winds on the summit, we did not dally. We chose a longer route down because my foot did not enjoy the first really steep and loose-rock descending option. Although not quite 4 miles, this trip established some boundaries of what my foot could handle – although things did not hurt the next day (the diagnostic test I use for ramping up still). Thankfully, more intensive PT has really addressed that.



Left to Right: Soda Butte coyote, some sunny buffalo, sagebrush sheep herd, Georgia O'Keefe Mound (formerly Orange)

Yellowstone – Lamar, Mammoth

Our next big trip was a drive to the Mammoth/Lamar Valley corner of the park, which is plowed/drive-able. The day we went was our sunniest day but it was frigid and many of the park roads were compact snow and ice. After a short trip to the remodeled visitor center at Mammoth, we headed on the twisty and sometimes cliff-hugging road to Tower Junction. Although we saw a few clusters of bison here and there, and some excited wolf-watchers who reported a small pack had been seen on some distant ridge (but had then vanished), we saw no wildlife to speak of during the drive. Heading to Lamar, we were surprised how dead the valley seemed... not even the usual herds of bison. After eating our lunches in the car at the Pebble Creek campground (closed) parking lot (a little past Soda Butte), we made our most extensive stop nearby – fully focused on a pair of coyote hunting small prey in this snowfield. We also spied a herd of sheep in the sagebrush. Given the lack of wildlife, we headed back to Mammoth and walked the 1.6 mile Upper Terrace loop – which features one of my favorites: the Orange Mound (which seems to have sprung back to microbial life as “Georgia O’Keefe Mound”). We then returned home for another fabulous meal!



Left to Right: Boomer Family Xmas, snowshoeing to Glacier Point – Rainier in mist, Tatoosh, shockingly clear Rainier

Closing Vignettes – Back to the Trail in 2017

When the whole family was together in Tacoma this December, we lucked out with amazing weather at Rainier on Christmas Day. Although our 3 mile, 1000 foot up/down snowshoe at Paradise (while pretty) was a shock to my overall leg/ankle strength, it didn't mess with my foot, per se. Since returning full-time to work from all my travels (and concluding sabbatical 1A – I have 2 more fall terms off!), I've steadily ramped up to 8.5 mile hikes with 2000 up/down over the last 12 weeks. I have also managed multiple back-to-back weekend hikes and/or snowshoes, the max totaling 12 miles and 2500 feet. The only thing that has bugged me is famously steep Cascade Head – which was gorgeous... but definitely bugged the foot for 3 days! Ironically, the majority of those miles have been at Peavy (often in the rain). Here are some choice pictures! Thanks to Bryan, Maia, and mostly Allison for all their encouragement!



Left to Right: Bryan and Maia Lewisberg Saddle (my first 7 miler), descending Maxwell Butte, Trillium Lake (No Hood View!), Allison and umbrella on Bonsai Road/Peavy (one of MANY rainy, snowy, or hailing hikes), Allison and I – Cascade Head!