I fell in love with Italy the first time we met in 1961, and my love has grown more passionate with every visit since. It surrounds me with splendor, this land of ancient memories. All of it permeates you…your heart, your mind, your blood, your soul.

It’s “Bella Italia 2006” with Prof. Maria Mansella in CCRI’s Summer Travel/Study Program in Italy. Once again, I rediscover what is magical, life-enriching, and memorable in the land of my forefathers. This is my third outing with Professor Maria C. Mansella, who so expertly runs the program, and whom I am privileged to call my friend. (She has no choice but to befriend me…I keep coming back, like a bad penny!)

Prof. Mansella and I start out in Milan a couple days before the rest of the group arrives. In this fashion center of the world, “fare bella figura” is the fabric not only of the city, but of life. We see designer-dressed young women in the highest heels riding their Vespas to work, and those drop-dead gorgeous Milanese businessmen, in fashionista suits walking to work in the broiling heat without a bead of perspiration on their foreheads. Our timing couldn’t be better: It’s soccer’s 2006 World Cup and we witness Milan erupt with jubilation when the Italian “Azzurri” team wins the semi-finals. (Azzurri means “blue,” the color of the team’s shirts, and anything good and holy in Italian symbolism.) We manage to fit in a quick visit to DaVinci’s “Last Supper,” the majestic Duomo, and the Galleria (where I buy Zanichelli’s Italian dictionary, the best and heaviest on the planet).

Once the group arrives, we depart for Siena. Memorable sunsets paint everything a golden reddish orange gave the color “sienna” its name. We arrive in time for the elaborate pageantry and trial runs leading up to the Palio, an annual horse race that defines Siena. Its Piazza del Campo is converted into a race track, where ten horses are matched by lottery with 10 of Siena’s 17 neighborhoods (contrade) as a throng of thousands cheers them on. Each of the 10 contrade selects their jockey. This dangerous race, something like a “civil war”, lasts all of 90 seconds. It has nothing to do with skill or speed, and everything to do with contrada pride and the ability of the winner to knock the other jockeys off their horses! The winner is awarded the prized silk banner, the Palio, said to protect the neighborhood and bring it good fortune in the coming year.
Ah, Florence. Magnificent Florence is next, the birthplace of the Renaissance and the mother of the Italian language—Dante was its father. We visit the Church of San Miniato outside of Florence. With its bi-colored white and green marble façade, it is one of Florence’s finest examples of Romanesque architecture. Next, the Church of Santa Croce, with its glorious tombs of Italy’s artistic elite (Michelangelo, Galileo and Rossini, among others), the Duomo, the Piazza Signoria, Ponte Vecchio—all topped off with some serious shopping.

On to Orvieto, we reach our home for the next two weeks and the base of operations for our weekly day trips. Orvieto is in Umbria, Italy’s only landlocked region; it is more extreme in its climate than much of the country, suitable for growing grapes and certainly olives. With its scalloped cobblestones and medieval alleyways too narrow for a car, Orvieto is a hilltop town that centuries ago afforded views of any invading armies or rival kingdoms. It is a town of warmth and simplicity, not luxury and snobbery, and, although it gets its share of tourists, it almost never feels overrun.

Michela, Simona, Patrizia, Monia, Miro, Giampietro, the staff at Hotel Grand Italia where we’ve stayed for the last three years, awaits us with open arms. Hugs, kisses, happy tears of welcome. This is no ordinary hotel, no ordinary city, because its people who make everything extraordinary. Another friend shows up within one hour of our arrival, Maria Tilli, a schoolteacher, with a heart of gold and big brown Umbrian eyes that speak more eloquently than her voice. A few days later, Mario and Luisa Costantino welcome the entire CCLI group for a lovely dinner at their house. We are fortunate to have made some lasting friendships here!

Things have not changed much; the Orvietani—like most Italians—remain set in their ways. Very soon, I settle into the Umbrian rhythm, rediscovering what is primary and soulful: Shopping with the locals at the market in the town square on Thursdays and Saturdays for just-picked fruit, flowers and vegetables; strolling the streets greeting passers by with a “buon giorno,” or “buona sera” and “buona domenica” after mass on Sunday mornings. I take afternoon “sonnellini” (naps) like the natives; have dinner at 9:00 p.m., and go for a “passeggiata” (evening walk) with my friends. I’ve learned not to commit the heretical act of asking for cappuccino past noon, after a waiter explains it is only “for idiots.”

Each night, with gelatos in hand, we go to the Piazza del Duomo (the town square with a towering 1300th century cathedral that lords over the city. We sit on the steps of the Duomo and gossip in Italian, while a musician plays sweet Italian folk music and the children play soccer in the square. This “passeggiata” lasts until midnight. Then I go back to the hotel, take a Zantac and Mylanta to digest my late-night dinner and try to get to sleep by 2:00 a.m., before starting all over again the next day. It is like bulimia in reverse...but in Heaven!

We start our cooking class with Chef Lorenzo, owner of the Zeppelin restaurant. The kitchen opens to a little garden where almost everyone sits. The more formal dining room inside with its lovely wainscoting and assortment of old black-and-white photographs has a very chummy atmosphere, the kind where everyone claps when a birthday cake is brought out from the kitchen.

The cooking lessons are delightful: We have six 3-hour lessons over three weeks with a master chef who is a combination Dave Letterman and Wolfgang Puck. We learn how to make “stringozzi”, umbrichelli, an Umbrian pasta specialty, along with cinghiale (wild boar), truffles, breads of all shapes, i dolci (sweets), sauces and soups—everything carefully prepared and wonderfully seasoned. As he teaches, Chef Lorenzo explains the history of basic ingredients like flour and salt interspersed with humorous tales of old. Of course, we taste everything we make, washing our “assaggi” (little tastes) down with the best of local wines from Zeppelin’s vineyards. At night, we savor every glorious bite at our banquetts, wondering what’s next.

In the warm months, Italy is dun-colored, the sun having burned an orange, yellow or sienna hue into the land, a magical, bucolic land, and rich in tradition, art, and history. During our day trips, we have an enviable choice of vistas as we circle the Tuscan and Umbrian hillsides dotted with villages that defy gravity and the ages. On the itinerary are Montepulciano, built along a narrow limestone ridge some 2000 feet above sea level and encircled by walled fortifications. The streets are crammed with Renaissance-style palazzi, churches, and little shops, but the town is chiefly known for its Vino Nobile wines.

We visit Spoleto during its world-renown music festival; Bolsena with its perfectly round lake in the mouth of an extinct volcano; Assisi, the city of pink stone, where St Francis heard and saw the Cross speak to him, "Francis, repair my church. It is all falling in ruins"; the capital of Umbria, Perugia, is next. It lies on a
hill inhabited ever since prehistoric times. First an an Umbrian settlement, Perugia it passed on to Etruscans, becoming one of the most important cities in the High Tiber Valley, and it is the home of Peruginas “baci” chocolates.

Here’s the topper: We’re in Orvieto for the World Cup finals. The eyes of every living, breathing Italian soul are glued to the TV. The entire country literally rocks down to its 600 BC foundations when ZuZu head-butts Matterati and Italy clinches the title. We’re caught up in the moment with the young and old, going wild parading and singing through town till 3:00 a.m. Two days later, Orvieto really rocks with minor earth tremors, common around these parts we’re told. Really.

After a memorable two weeks, we exchange teary farewells to our Orvietani friends.

Our trip winds down in Roma, where we spend two days visiting the majestic Vatican and Sistine Chapel. I manage to hook up with my Roman friends, who treat me to a performance of “Aida” at the Terme di Caracalla and a visit to the Campidoglio museum with its peerless collection of Roman art and relics. I can still taste the fried zucchini flowers and pizza we had in Trastevere, the real Rome, where the locals go to escape the tourist crowds. More hugs and farewell tears until we meet again “a presto” (soon).

Italy. “Puoi avere l’universo se io possa avere l’Italia.” That’s Verdi’s Italian for “You may have the universe if I may have Italy." The lush hills golden with sunflowers, the ubiquitous churches, vineyards, frescos, paintings, the patterns of everyday life in small towns, every luscious mouthful of food and wine, the occasional accordion or guitar player, or the sound of a distant tenor singing Puccini, every mouthful of food and wine, the welcome of warm, passionate people...all are forever etched in my memory. *Mille grazie*, CCRI and Professoressa Mansella. “Arrivederci per ora bella cara Italia, ti voglio bene.” (Goodbye for now my dear Italy. I love you.)

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