

"You're the Guy with Parkinson's"

POEMS, PROSE AND PONDERINGS
ON THE 'ITALIAN CAMINO'



WITH WILL & CORRIE BOAG

Content - 43 days on the Italian Via Francigena

- Day 1 Vercelli to Robbio
Sonnet - Coping
- Day 2 Robbio to Mortara
Sonnet - A Touch of Shade
- Day 3 Mortara to Tromello
Sonnet - Getting Lost
- Day 4 Tromello to Gropello-Cairoli
Sonnet - Pasta Rules
- Day 5 Gropello-Caroli to Pavia
Sonnet - Pavia
- Day 6 Pavia to Belgioioso
Sonnet - An Alternate Route
- Day 7 Belgioioso to Santa Christina
Sonnet - The Donativo
- Day 8 Santa Christina to Orio Litta
Sonnet - A Special Meeting
- Day 9 Orio Litta to Piacenza
Sonnet - The River Po
- Day 10 Piacenza to Fiorenzuola d'Arda
Sonnet - Agreeing
- Day 11 Fiorenzuola d'Arda to Fidenza
Sonnet - Back on Track
- Day 12 Fidenza to Medesano
Sonnet - Understanding Signs
- Day 13 Medesano to Sivizzano
Sonnet - Italians
- Day 14 Svizzano to Berceto
Sonnet - The Geranium
- Day 15 Berceto to Pontremoli
Sonnet - Incentives

Day 16 Pontremoli to Villafranca-in-Lunigiana
Sonnet - The Fall

Day 17 Villafranca-in-Lunigiana to Aulla
Sonnet - Falling

Day 18 Aulla to Sarzana
Sonnet - Reflection

Day 19-20 Sarzana to Massa
Sonnet - Earthly Sounds

Day 21 Massa to Camaiore
Sonnet - An Accidental Sculpture

Day 22 Camaiore to Lucca
Sonnet - Puccini

Day 23 Lucca to Altopascio
Sonnet - The Animals Saint

Day 24 Altopascio to San Miniato Alta
Sonnet - A Painting in Alta

Day 25 San Miniato Alta to Gambessi-Terme
Sonnet - Pasta and Vino

Day 26 Gambessi-Terme to San Gimignano
Sonnet - The Pencil Pine

Day 27 San Gimignano to Colle di Val d'Elsa
Sonnet - The Paper Factory

Day 28 Colle di Val d'Elsa to Monteriggioni
Sonnet - What Use, a Castle

Day 29 Monteriggioni to Siena
Sonnet - Siena

Day 30 Siena to Ponte d'Arbia
Sonnet - Soiled Paint

Day 31 Ponte d'Arbia to San Quirico d'Orcia
Sonnet - Affitacamere

Day 32 San Quirico d'Orcia to Gallina
Sonnet - The Honeymoon

Day 33 Gallina to Radicofani

Day 34 Sonnet - Tuscan Hunters
Radicofani to Ponte a Rigo
Sonnet - A Kind Robber

Day 35 Ponte a Rigo to Acquapendente
Sonnet - Moosic

Day 36 Acquapendente to Bolsena
Sonnet - Our Walks

Day 37 Bolsena to Montefiascone
Sonnet - The Street Table

Day 38 Montefiascone to Viterbo
Sonnet - The Puddle

Day 39 Viterbo to Vetralla
Sonnet - That's Me

Day 40 Vetralla to Sutri
Sonnet - A Fountain

Day 41 Sutri to Campagna di Roma
Sonnet - Campagna di Roma

Day 42 Campagna di Roma tp La Storta
Sonnet - Friends from Afar

Day 43 La Storta to Rome
Sonnet - The Last Day

Day 1 - Vercelli to Robbio

Our journey starts in Vercelli founded around 600 BC in the region of Piedmont astride the river Sesia on the plain of the river Po. The area is virtually treeless and seemingly totally flat with abundant water from Italy's longest river and regular rainfall, lending itself perfectly to the cultivation of rice, and..... people who don't like shade.

The people speak both Italian and Piedmontese and have the uniqueness of having the world's first publicly funded university established in 1228. Today, this university's uniqueness is represented through its twin passions of literature and philosophy.

It was later than I expected when we prepared to leave this highly cultural town. It's 0620. I felt a little tired but thought that was normal. We showered, Corrie retrieved her watch from me (I'm the time keeper and anal around this at times, so I'm usually good at it), and anxiously asked why we were leaving at 2350! I had the watch on upside down and my reputation was quickly going the same way.

We slipped out of the old town of Vercelli, its ancientness eagerly seeping into those unused parts of our memory cells, and its romanesque architecture gleaming in the rain. I was concerned that I only had non-waterproof shoes, but it was the perfect temperature. Nearly an hour before sunrise we left wearing all our rain gear, with the dripping street lamps straining to show us the path until the unseen sun took over.

We were accompanied by mosquitoes in the rain's humid aftermath as the only other signs of life were two sets of footprints in the soggy ground. A high embankment alongside a bustling river between rice and corn fields, ushered us through grand poplar trees which stood like huge sentinels in their natural palace, with their wet rustling sounds so unique. We later contemplated how interactive we were whilst walking through these poplar groves, and reflected on the Romans, who created meeting places for the greater populace, surrounded by these gregarious trees, thus from the Roman - populous.

We soon walked under a motorway, the overhead bridge a huge umbrella that offered us a dry spot: as a reprieve from the rain, for a breakfast of yoghurt and banana, and a pack rest. Carrying the packs was a new thing for us thus the reason why we nearly crawled into Robbio, taking the first lodgings we could find. And what we found, was an albergue for gratis, and if you saw it you'd understand its rent free status, but it's a bed, and it's free, and with no-one else at the Inn we can behave as miserably as we want.

As we await sleep, the over communicative town clock noisily reminds us of the time. We can't wait for 0100 and the sound of only one bell. Corrie can keep her unreliable watch, as pretty as it is, as the clock tower is much more predictable and anal than even I am.

Philosophy gives us meaning - literature gives us the book.



Coping

*Alone we left this old Etruscan town -
Vercelli, down its damp, lamp-spotted street,
One soul not seen, not heard one breath or sound
Save cobbled echoes from our well worn feet.
A bridge not far provided welcome shelter
To rest and eat and ponder steps ahead,
The forecast tells us that we may soon swelter
The one thing on our walks we really dread.
A long and high dirt wall was now our road
Still no-one else to share our atmosphere,
With packs, our aches and pains now showed
But could we cope? Our only other fear.
We crawled towards that bed, the one that beckoned
If we wake up, we'll make it, so we reckoned.*

Day 2 - Robbio to Mortara

We continue to make our way through the huge rice growing area that is northern Italy. We never knew about this type of agriculture in Italy because the country is all about pasta which comes from the ideally suited soft 'durum wheat' which is also a major crop here. But now when I think of the north, I think of the two hundred thousand hectares that today produce over one million tonnes of rice, and, I think, risotto.

So where did it all start? It was believed to have begun on a commercial basis in the 14th century, about the same time as pasta, which Marco Polo is thought to have brought from China. The Arabs imported rice from India for sale in Spain and then a short hike through the Alps and it found its way into Italy's famous Po valley. This valley was ideal because of the great yield that was produced from its fertile swampy plains. It might however have arrived earlier from India where it was used as a medicine for upset stomachs - maybe from eating too much pasta! Another story is that Benedictine monks introduced rice to combat famine in the 15th century.

The task of planting and harvesting first began in 1475 during the Italian renaissance and was left to the women who came mostly from the Veneto region, and always alone, thus leaving their families behind. While it gave them a sense of newfound freedom, conditions were harsh and supervisors were often cruel. It was said that their songs of hardship endured and their longing for love and home became famous.

Until the mid nineteenth century only one variety, Nostrale rice was grown. Then in 1839 Jesuit priest padre Calleri brought forty-three varieties back from the Philippines, where they began trials to determine which ones would adapt best to northern Italy's temperate climate.

We spent days walking through these world famous rice fields getting a real sense of their magnitude. We saw the extensive irrigation system that Cavour designed in the second half of the 19th century. I imagined him leading his large team of farmers to build a huge sophisticated and efficient irrigation system flooding the rice fields to protect against the heat. In 1866 he went even further when the Cavour canal was constructed, to allow the transfer of water from rivers Po, Dora Baltea, Sesia, Ticino and Lake Maggiore, a magnificent project.

More than three hundred tonnes are milled each day in Robbio where we stayed last night, making a huge contribution to its country's production - the biggest producer of rice in Europe. Around sixty percent is risotto rice: arborio, carnaroli, and the black venere. I find it interesting to note that risotto must use Po valley rice because only those medium grained fat ovals can tolerate the unique cooking method - arborio, vialone nano and carnaroli (the most prized and therefore expensive having especially good flavour).

How did this one tree remain



A Touch of Shade

*“A tree”, I yelled, in quiet exhausted voice
Her eyes they spoke and told me that she’d heard,
The ‘shady’ Gods had offered little choice,
Agreeing nods had shown we both conferred.
We closed in fast with water running low
The tree, so small, but what a giant reprieve,
Alas, so close, but then an unseen foe -
A fence, too high, our shade it was to thief.
We looked across the paddy fields of grass
The Sesia river idle, its summer job done,
Its sight, relief, we knew it could not last
So fixed our mind imagining no sun,
Until a little church became our tree
A little bit of heaven, and no fee.*

Day 3 - Mortara to Tromello

It's really hot (0600 - 0900 is pleasant) and for some reason I didn't expect that, so it has slowed us down a little and gives me a chance to rest my nearly cartilage-free foot and the continuing bursitis in my hip, that appeared last year following a joint replacement. Both renewed hip bones have otherwise been a complete success, their ancestors would never have been able to do these long European walks. Corrie's mostly well, as usual, but our thighs seem to notice the extra weight more than any other body part. Prescribed medications have reduced inflammation and taken away any bodily pains and associated emotional stress, but not the embarrassing pain of loss.

Yes, we got lost! Following a no signage, fewer kilometres, "alternate route" (meant to be more shaded which it thankfully was), we soon got back on task with a bit more thinking and a lot less reading. We are finding the directions in the book a bit hard to follow at times and would recommend it, only because there is little else. It is called the 'Lightfoot Guide'. Walking has often been along shadeless irrigation canals, substitute rivers you might say, and today is no different except for some sun reprieve as it lets itself be hidden behind the drifting, floating clouds. We collected our thoughts on 'the bridge not far enough' and performed a temporary tactical retreat to a known point on the map and soon found our way.

We sat on the only chair in the village of Tromello and rested a little before leaving Corrie on this most valuable chair and searching for a bed for the night. The church had the only beds in the village but no-one was there so I went to the nursing home next door. They were great ... once they recovered from the shock that we are walking to Roma, and aren't all that far away from being possible occupants of a similar facility. They found the cranky cycling churchman who showed us our donation room (our donation being an hour's clean up of the room, a little price to pay). The place was filthy and under any other circumstance we would not have stayed there.

Some nursing home staff including a former architect, a doctor, staff supervisor and chef sat down to lunch with us in their dining room. It was a lovely meal of gnocchi, fruit, salad, yoghurt and iced water. The former architect, who is sitting for his chef exams tomorrow, entertained us and left his number with us, saying if we get into trouble of any kind – "I know many people", which sounded like a scary line from the godfather, which is applicable with where we are. When he informed us that the Apennines are very steep, I said he may be able to help if he had access to two of the home's motorised wheelchairs!

We left our new friend with lasting smiles on our faces along with clean sheets and towels that he offered us after seeing the state of our digs for the night, and I'm sure he would have agreed with our creative donation.

Haven't been able to post photos, sorry – we are trying!!!

When you are lost, try to make new discoveries



Getting lost

*With no-one at the inn we get to choose
Our bed, it's vital that we get good rest,
So we can rise with little time to lose
And make good time before the sun is west.
Alternate route today some time may spare
While hoping that there's no alternate cost,
Our guide at times proceeds with little care
This was such time, and duly we got lost.
We carried out our normal 'got lost plan'
Revised, retraced, and looked for hidden arrow,
To look for 'unlost' souls, woman or man
Retraced and found a clue where not to go.
Not-lost once more, some cool time we had wasted
And such a feeling! - must be done and tasted.*

Day 4 - Tromello to Gropello-Cairolì

Breakfast in the plaza of a little village at 0530 was a gorgeous start to our day. The locals were all there, drinking coffee and talking in the cool of the early morning on this delightful little square. So many 'little' things have become such a 'big' part of our many walks throughout Europe. We get to feel a part of this country for a while, not simply as a visitor. Having coffee with the early risers who are all locals; sitting in their piazza as though it's ours; for a moment speaking their language as we order our bits and pieces; bid good morning as though we are there every day; and then going off to work as we put our work pack on and then step out into another adventure and sometimes with a packed lunch.

We continued on similar terrain, flat, through grain fields fed by two six metre wide canals, a system started, I believe, by the ancient Romans. Visually, the canals have a cooling effect, while every now and then when the water flows to another level it sounds like a small waterfall, followed by sudden rushes and tiny waves, otherwise there is simple silence. These are the smaller canals that we often come across on our daily walks.

Ordering coffee at a village en route, I asked the owner if he had Wifi. "None in this town" he replied. I thought he was a bit surly, and not happy with the back packing invaders. So I went to pay with a 'lot of attitude' (not very useful currency no matter what country you are in) and not much of my 'good will' which I had left behind with the 'surly' sound. I was thrown right off 'balance' (not difficult for a person with Parkinsons) when he said: "it is free for you", and pushed an also free, bottle of cold water into my hands. Things happen when you are old and carrying a pack and looking upset, or did I just get it completely wrong as he maybe had an unrestrained belief that we deserved a reward for doing work for God on our pilgrimage to Rome.

Our destination was sure to have Wifi, we thought, but the town's 'A' and 'B' Grade hotels that would have it, were booked out. Corrie had developed a blister (the first in 1,600kms), and it was too hot for us to continue anyway, so there was also some urgency. I approached the San Roco's 'donativo' for a bed. Not only our own room, but a new a/c to cool us down in a spotless apartment which we now share with three nice men (Swiss, French and Mexican), the first walkers we have seen on this trip, so they do exist!

We ate Spaghetti Marinara at nearby Al Capriccio, a classy restaurant with fair prices. Corrie, the normal class act she is, had the audacity to ask for cheese, and the waitress walked away muttering "no cheese with fish" as she gave her the Italian 'you should know better brush' on her arm. Of course she knew that ... and that she wouldn't get it. However, we loved the food and wine from Costa D'Amalfi, and will probably have to go back this evening for dessert so that I can post this..... Sorry, didn't make it!

Reading someone's mind is improbable if you know them, impossible if you don't



Pasta Rules

*“No cheese with fish” my God what are you thinking
It’s close to blasphemy to mix these two,
Must have to do with cheap plonk you are drinking
Or all that walking’s cooked your brain - miscued.
Corrie’s hard to toss but I agree
Italians have been doing this for years,
The pasta’s their religion - can’t you see?
Insist, and it will surely end in tears.
And marinara sauce - Italian not
Al Pomodoro you should have instead,
Forget Italian dressing, oil’s the shot
And cream, beware, is only lightly spread.
While meat with pasta really is ‘forbito’
Just eat authentic, until you finito.*

Day 5 - Gropello-Cairolì to Pavia

Quietly we crept out and down flights of stairs, careful not to wake the other pilgrims. People leave at different times for varied reasons so it is a pilgrim rule to understand and respect that. To ensure this 'quiet' rule is respected it is normal to have your gear packed the night before with just the basic ablution necessities and technical stuff set aside for the morning. What seemed like the main gate (the one we entered last afternoon) would not open, but luckily someone starts work the same time as us and buongiorno'd to me from another gate. He then signalled for us to come over to that one which was open for the 'early leaver' - maybe we missed some earlier directions in Italian.

The early opener (for early leavers from anywhere) was open and occupied by the older men. I don't know whether this is a cultural thing; or at their age they are finding it difficult to sleep; or while they're up going to the loo, they might as well stay up. We of course have different reasons - it's the cool of the day and we have 'miles to walk before we sleep'. So, as they do, we sat in the coolness of the street having our usual coffee, chocolate and the first croissants of the day, as good as anywhere. We paid the man then made an observation. Nearly all the bars we have been in have Asian owners with varying grasps of the Italian language. I am thinking that the younger Italians are moving to the cities to find work, so not available to take over the business.

Walking on a narrow road high above our fields, we eventually moved down as we got closer to the imposing river Ticino. The walk becomes more varied and interesting as our paths wind through woods alongside small river beaches and a waterfall, but it is hard to 'totally' relax as the enthusiastic and speedy cyclists race by. We are soon caught by our Mexican friend, John, and we talk about his close family, and his demanding work on an oil rig. He also demands a lot of himself when he does these walks and vanishes in no time. As John disappears, the stunning old town of Pavia comes into sight, where its narrow car-free but crowded main street looks like a miniature via Veneto in Roma.

We went to the local information office and were totally spoilt by three young Pavians who found us the 'best' accommodation in town. It meant retracing thousands of our already trodden paces but there are places that are worth rediscovering, and this is one of them. Tomorrow it will be back again across the imposing Pavian bridge and another chance to gather in the special flavour of this ancient town. Our 'best' accommodation is quaint, cool and decorative, with double doors opening onto a garden for sitting in, and attended by Angela, the most charming hostess you can imagine. Her fridge, full of welcoming drinks, fruit flavoured yoghurt and chocolates give a glimpse into her generosity and thoughtfulness. Her recommended restaurant is sure to live up to expectations, if it only has half of her Pavian flavour. Buon appetito!

A special connection lasts forever



Pavia

In Pavia in two-eighteen BC
It was a Roman village for a while,
Four-seven-six AD in Italy
It ended and the Romans lost their smile.
The Ostrogoths then saw their chance to play
Four-ninety-three AD it was all theirs,
The Eastern Romans then moved in to stay
Five-sixty-eight now time to swap their chairs.
Seven-seventy three the Lombards had to go
When Charlemagne did so frankly win the spoils,
In thirteen-fifty-nine it's Milano
The Spaniards then rewarded for their toils.
Napoleon then followed Austria,
Italian now, it's peace in Pavia.

Day 6 - Pavia to Belgioioso

After superb pasta, Angela invited us to chat with her, her husband and a young pharmacist, in the courtyard near the peach tree under the lights of the sky. The next morning she hovered around quietly and curiously as we ate her delicately prepared breakfast. Two peaches from the peach tree were 'for our camino', as she kissed and hugged us on our way.

The walk took us along the shadeless highway for some kilometres. As we stopped for coffee, Batista, our French friend, called by, and we joked in our own languages and bits of each other's, relishing our first glimpse of the Apennines. Our Swiss friend had taken the alternate route over them due to his dislike of flat terrain. After following Batista with his rhythmic pace, we farewelled and sat for a while in the shade of a listless tree, dodging white-furry caterpillars falling from its branches. While dodging, a friendly biker pulled over and introduced himself as the mayor of Orio Litta, where we will be in two days. Pierre Luigi offered us a free bed (by donation) in his 'parrocchia' and will look after us on our arrival.

Passing through a pretty garden village, two women offered us shade, water, and a chair, while the heat-exhausted black cat lay motionless with its pink tongue flopped out, while the dog couldn't raise a bark. A few more sun drenched, partly shaded kilometres and we were in Belgioioso, and eating the best and only kebab in town made by an engaging muslim mum, after her kids guided us around to check out the hotels. It's very hot, so we chose the nearest one and turned on the a/c. The restaurant in our hotel was atmospheric, serving 'one metre long pizzas, elegantly, on trolleys. Our pastas, carbonara and amatriciana, were high-scorers, and the white wine with gas tasted more like prosecco.

It was not about gas in our room though, it was the a/c, but first the tariff. The tall excitable waiter-man said it was 'eu40'. When we got to the room he read a note on the wall that stated 60, saw my downcast face and said: "okay 50", then saw my excited face and tried 55, I then said a final: "50". While eating our evening pasta, the a/c topic came up. The other waiter-man said he would see to it but didn't, then the previous waiter man who spoke some English said he now wouldn't, then winked and nodded towards the young waitress who said it would work only when the hotel closed but it didn't (work that is) then said: "why don't you go for a walk?" But that was why we wanted the a/c in the first place.

What we did do, was open the top door at the end of our hallway creating an effective wind tunnel, so we needed to leave our room door open, thirty metres away. Outside the door was a huge unused balcony with lots of natural a/c, so we stayed there until our room at the other end had been cooled. At the time of writing, we may not be able to post. Such intrepid travellers are not daunted by a twenty nine letter password challenge, though we haven't yet won. Hopefully they don't add a few more letters while we try.

A great loss can be made from a small profit



An Alternate Route

“Why don’t we take the ‘alternate route’ this time
It’s harder than the one we usually take?
It weaves its way up through the Apennines
To sight an Italian wolf our day would make.
These routes may help to save a lot of hours
Or keep you off a very busy road,
A chance to view and smell some other flowers
And walk a path that many have not strode.
In life these other routes appear by chance
An opportunity presents itself,
To sing, to write, to carve, to paint or dance
Remove the dust or take it off the shelf.
These routes are always there, but often hidden
So search for them, then no regret you didn’t.

Day 7 - Belgioioso to Santa Christina

With our ineffective air conditioning still chugging out warm air, I collected the breakfast they had left for us – fruit, fruit juice, cakes and biscuits and strolled down the hallway between resident doorways wondering how their cooling systems were going, or whether they even cared one way or another. The hallway end opened out on to a naturally air conditioned balcony where stacked cobweb chairs and tables seemed to be relics of a bygone eating place. Having experience in ‘paying by cleaning’, it was second nature to restore part of this to its former glory and was also a handy ‘appetite improver’. This was no ordinary balcony and reminded us of the ‘Istanbul rooftop decks’ where tradition insists on open air dining rooms and gathering spaces. How could we have guessed that failed cooling could lead to such a cool success.

A short walk today, because of the long distance between sleeps. It was either a 35km walk or a 15km and 20km split. It worked for us by leaving late, discovering our village a little more and walking at a more gentle, sight absorbing pace. A long bitumen road with lots of early morning farm trucks and tractors keeping us watchful, and increasing my awareness, which can tend to switch off in many with Pd. We stopped for a coffee as early breakfast was not hot, and were given a small heavy ‘carving’ by the cafe owner, who then wanted to export wine and oil to us, a bit of a mystery. We left with our ‘hard to say no to’ heavy present which I carried faithfully. Through mostly corn fields and canals, barking dogs, quiet cats and lots of bunnies kept us entertained, as we walked around in rings to avoid cropped areas with short, well-shaded spots, softening the sun.

After approximately 100kms of walking there has been no hint of a hill, and oh, how we miss the hills. They stand like monuments to surrounding fields, identifying symbols for open spaces that otherwise are often forgotten, unobtrusive spans of dirt. They enrich the mind and eyes as one looks for differences, knowing that they are free of pasture depending on their slopes, and then there is the mystery of the other side. Other muscles now get a chance to test their strength and pliability as they are called upon to do the work. The vista expands and while we are looking down on similar fields we gain a new perspective, especially when looking back to where we came from.

It is still only Batista we have seen on the track, but today we met briefly with three older Italian pilgrims, as they settled quickly into a dormitory next to our ‘matrimonial’ one, which Corrie has nearly turned into what could be seen now as a pleasant hotel room. On further exploration of our new abode we were surprised to see more of the same ‘carvings’, that also must have become too much of an added burden to already heavily laden walkers. So I added ours to these ‘will be talked about’ treasures of the future.

We also have an air conditioning unit that works, and, in a donativo, to boot!

When one thing fails look for its resultant success



The Donativo

The choices are many and varied if you want to find
A place to stay when walking the Camino,
Especially when in choosing you don't mind
A basic pad they call a 'donativo'.
At times a share-bunk, maybe a bed of your own
One bathroom for many it's not a place for kings,
A peaceful sleep will shatter with that groan
No privacy, nowhere to store your things.
But it's a place where others you might meet
And sharing is a noble thing to do,
It may be yours alone, no-one to greet
It now presents a different venue.
You've had your rest 'tis now time to vacate,
The pressure's on, how much do you donate.

Day 8 - Santa Christina to Orio Litta

We ate pasta with Sabine and Bertrand from the south of France, and had a wonderful time with these avid walkers. So easy to be with, and with enough English to communicate with us, two very funny people. Our night in another well-equipped church property was luxurious as we made good use of our own room and its highly efficient cooling system. With five men in the room across the hall, and no snorers, it was a gloriously quiet night. Everyone was up at 0430 because the cafe was open at 0500 so no problem with anyone being disturbed and short bathroom visits. Anyway, as I said earlier, most shower and do other things the night before, so it all works well.

It was a little too dark after we had exhausted the street light area and so had to wait on an old station platform for a few minutes. Then it was our first really cool morning, as we walked a few kilometres between the railway line, canals and crops, and for quite some time we walked on main roads with little traffic. Our guide book calls it dangerous, but if you obey basic road walking rules (walk on the side of oncoming vehicles, so you know when someone is coming on your side, and getting off the road when a vehicle comes), it is relatively safe. Stopping for coffee in a quirkily decorated osteria, an Italian walker from last night's lodgings paid for us, because we are in his country. On the tarmac road again but soon out into fields for our last turn for home at Orio Litta.

We caught up with Pierre the town mayor, who was the cyclist we met two days ago, and stayed in the tower of his beautifully renovated donativo, where we caught up with our French friends who are sleeping on the floor below. Pierre also took the opportunity to take our photo and publish our story. He is well known for the enormous work he puts into anything Francigena and his local region is awash with his energy, ideas, and enthusiasm, especially for those sporting an issue. He later joined us for a chat over dinner.

As we stood in the pizzeria for a take-away lunch, Bertrand suggested we take up Pierre's offer of a car ride to a place that had great food. Pierre was not available to drive us, but his friend gleefully drove us for twenty minutes to an osteria which is only one kilometre out of town, but turned out to be three. "The roads are closed", he explained, as he met yet another road block. Finally arriving, the owner/chef Paolo cooked us his special spaghetti marinara, calamari and delicately fried fish, followed by a lemon sorbet drowned in 'grappa'.

Wondering how we would return, another one of the mayor's copious friends collected us for the return journey of less than one kilometre, only five minutes this time! Keeping our culinary highlight alive, Sabine prepared some delicious vegetables and mouthwatering melon, whilst we slept off lunch. After, we had just enough energy to plot a few days ahead, starting tomorrow morning, when we take a water taxi to join our route on the other side.

Awareness holds danger at bay



A Special Meeting

*So what a stroke of luck - fortuitous
We met him first, a warm gregarious man,
So kind and helpful - all gratuitous
He also had a friend, the 'best' woman.
We dined with them, much laugh amongst the talk
And slept with them, in one parrocchia,
Then left them sleeping cause we had to walk
To beat the heat cause that's 'the folk we are'.
They caught us up, not used to being behind
But not before we found a home to stay,
They cooked our meal with all that they could find
The mayor came too, so keen about the 'way'.
A chord now struck, it won't be easily broken
Our new French friends, much more than just a token.*

Day 9 - Orio Litta to Piacenza

Our matrimonial room was high up in a bell tower, the stair case rising up through our bedroom floor, while Sabine and Bertrand occupied the room below. Others who weren't so lucky stayed in a pleasant dormitory on the ground floor. An expansive view of the landscape stretched out below to the horizon where the sun bid us good night with a splendid golden fire. There are sometimes very special places that host us for the night and this was one of them. It is a time when all the stars are aligned: great company, a joyous and interesting host, a fascinating home for just the four of us, home cooked meals by our friend, and plenty of time to soak it all up.

Today it's hard to leave, so we drag our feet down the steep stairs of our 'home in a tower' to begin a new day with our vibrant and entertaining new French friends. We walked along highways again, some fields, this time heavy with acres of Roma tomatoes, through lively working villages, with many bars for coffee, croissants and alcohol. It's now time to work out the walking rate of our new friends as it is vital that we enjoy a similar pace. It can be awkward to hold people back from their normal rhythm but fortunately, we blended beautifully.

At one stage we had to cross Italy's longest river, the Po. It was with our speedboat driver Giovanni who took us on a glorious five kilometre trip downriver. After risking our lives getting down to the jetty, we had to do the same again on the other side as we struggled up broken stairs. He then took us to his delightful grand home where we had our walking passports stamped. As I filled in my personal details in his large manual I made some mistakes. He seemed to get a little cross, so I hugged this big man (as I know Italians like a cuddle), and we became best friends, mistakes forgiven, angst forgotten.

We sang songs, theirs in French, of course, mine in Italian but with few words; swapped stories as we swapped walking partners; misheard and laughed; presumed and assumed. A lot of traffic near the end meant less of all the above and much more silence and attention.

Our companions had their room booked as the French seem to do, while we had to spend time on booking.com eventually finding a beautiful room after mounting marble stairs in a luxurious 'domus' (a far cry from the donativo), accessed through those magnificent double doors I often wonder what is behind. "Not to be touched", the intercom boomed, as they open and close on their own. Clothes washed, some words typed, photos still not posting (a small disaster as our friends are having no trouble), and a lie down with legs up against the wall to bring fluid back down, so our French doctor tells us. She is also advising us on rashes and blisters so we keep her busy. A stroll around the old streets, dinner in the middle of one of them on the steps, then our luxurious bed. Tomorrow's route is a little confusing so maybe a bit of a mystery tour.

Doing something in harmony with another is an exquisite experience



The River Po

*The spirit river Po its soul laid bare
The Cottian alps its home, not far away,
The longest Italian river had lots to share
In its home, determined not to stray.
This river turns to purple once a year
Reflecting its divineness to us all,
It breaks its banks a lot - more than a tear
Its Venice mouth receives the final fall.
We met it only briefly as we crossed
This glassy river, wide, and still, and quiet,
Our speedy boat ensured no time was lost
And gave our legs a welcome rest - so tired.
Its sound - half wind, half water, tells a tale
Its rocky bottom leaves a ripple trail.*

Day 10 - Piacenza to Fiorenzuola d'Arda

And what a mystery it was. It started when we met on the piazza at 0600 in a bar well into the day's work, and then left under the light of the eerie street lamps, and out onto a major roundabout and a busy highway. It wasn't the normal 'here's the track and the sign'.

Our French friends had Monica's guide book and we had Babette's, and, while sometimes they agreed, today they didn't. And I think the four of us were more interested in getting to know each other than we missed vital clues. We approached a high bank and it seemed (I don't remember why) that to turn right was the correct move. Without a designated navigator we all thought the others knew, so as long as they sounded confident, that was good enough. Something however, told me to hail down this ute driver and check directions. He look perplexed when he realised we were on our way back to Piacenza and we had been doing so for some time. Of course it was impossible now to reach our destination so we caught a taxi!!! We had him drop us off where we went wrong and started again ... so eventually did the kilometres and some.

While our female authors were in disagreement, the two female walkers were not. Sabine and Corrie had personalities that made disagreements look powerless. The doctor often gave the right advice and when she didn't, the psychologist was simply too understanding. The 'psych' was also more than ready to unconsciously empower the 'doc' by respecting her independence. Sabine also loved to provide directions while 'Carolina' (Sabine's translation of Coralie) was happy to follow them, an absolute match made in heaven.

We moved onto tracks and farm lanes, across two rivers in bare feet (which meant a quick change of blister dressing for Corrie), and over small bridges, through more ripe tomato crops (enormous trucks lining up to take the final product to market), quiet villages, asking farmers and villagers for directions (only when Monica and Babette were at odds) which they cheerfully love to give. Lots of barking dogs locked up and probably begging us for their freedom, a few cats who have never lost theirs, a rabbit who is unsure whether it has it or not, and a few birds who are similar to the cats. We wondered at the absence of nature sounds then realised it was the lack of birds in this nearly treeless region.

Somewhat like the Tour de France, we travelled in pairs, taking the lead when needed, then dropping back to travel with others on the same team (to allow the other members to recuperate) – the Aussie-French mixed pair. Another long track without shade areas and we were in our new home (a bed and breakfast) in an old village, and being spoilt by our wonderful friends who made our booking. They had decided not to book into the cemetery we had just passed because it was 'bed without breakfast' and we were told it is impossible not to sleep-in, and, we are early risers.

Cherish good friends for they are very rare



Agreeing

*Agreement is a special way of living
Especially when depending on another,
It often means there is a lot of giving
Where one is simply thinking of the other.
We have such one relationship today
So easy to be with our new French friends,
He books our rooms and leads us on the way
She cooks for us and fixes up loose ends.
But there are times when there is disagreement
More between just two and not the four,
It's more about what each one really meant
And sorting it before they closed the door.
But when our trusty guide books disagreed
At times you just can't fix it, we agreed.*

Day 11 - Fiorenzuola d'Arda to Fidenza

No-one was opening for coffee before 0630 tomorrow so I asked the owner of a popular cafe if he could open at 0600. The French don't mind being asked direct questions like this, in the same way as they don't mind saying 'no', either. But I imagine doing his sums, breakfast for four, seemed not a bad idea and he was probably there anyway, so he said: "oui monsieur", and there he was with his freshly baked croissants at 0545! We, as usual, were early too. Remember the 'blister nurse' wakes us up at very strange hours to ensure we are physically able to join them each day.

We started out on a large highway and Sabine, who now has the book, navigated well. There was no getting lost as we now had a designated guide which also carries a great deal of responsibility. Losing your way is a nearly unforgivable 'no-no', so at times you need to undergo a change of personality where even the most gregarious person can become a tyrant. Out once again amongst the bare fields and tomatoes to the horizon, past large farm houses and tractors, a few trees and the now the very close Apennines, still no hills let alone mountains, no canals or water of any sort.

We asked a woman for directions when we hadn't seen a sign for a while, and she and her young daughter and son joined us for a kilometre showing us the way, then leaving us when we were back on track. I think our navigator wanted a personality shift so her role was temporarily left to the locals. It was lovely walking with some local Italians having some serious conversation with mum while joking with the kids and letting them use our poles. These sticks are still oddities to many Europeans so it was great to share our nordic walking skills (training is essential) with some locals.

Our friends sing a lot so we had lots of French songs accompanied by capable voices, and a few notes of 'Con te Partiro' from me in Italian that Andrea Bocelli would have choked on (if he was listening that is). But the words won't damage the vocal chords but rather sweeten them. "Time to say goodbye to countries I never saw with you, now, yes, I shall experience them". These words with his voice take me to another place with my so very precious wife, so applicable to me now. In contrast to this song, they set a very lively pace today because an increase in kilometres early allows us to escape the mid 30s heat of the day. We still have not passed or been overtaken by another walker (this would not happen in Spain or southern France) for ten days now. It is not because we are fast but, I think, because we leave early.

Sick bay report: Corrie's blister is starting to mend and her swollen ankle also. My cartilage-free foot is pain-free as well, while my bursa and heel pain are mild. Our other friends have walked from France so are now seasoned, they are also fine with the heat (mostly), drug free and no issues.

You can sometimes learn about your own culture from another's experience of yours



Back on Track

*There can be days where all things go so well
A cafe opening when they usually don't,
A navigator who can always tell
Where we should go, and where we surely won't.
But wait - she paused, uncertain where to go
Our faith in her was dwindling just a bit,
We asked a local person - did they know?
She did, with all her family - to keep fit.
The French, they started singing as they do
Distract us and to help us keep on track,
We had to beat the heat, it's oh so true
With miles to go, and carrying a pack,
Our injuries all dealt with - free of pain
We're back on track, just need be free of rain.*

Day 12 - Fidenza to Medesano

Onto the street once more, the sun rising unimpeded in its bright red glow an hour down the track. We were soon into the lower hills of the Apennines and for the first time being shown those masterpieces of nature from the distant mountains to the lower hills and valleys, with crops mostly harvested from the fields preparing for their winter rest. These mountains have some of the best preserved forests and grasslands on the European continent with a high diversity of flora and fauna. They are also 1500 kilometres long extending way south into Sicily, so the chances of rare fauna sightings are slim.

The sighting of signs for the route I believe can also be rare, and can seem to be in disarray, so it is becoming difficult to find any clues of where to go, with some signs stuck on posts with bandaids, and fading arrows that are barely able to identify the way, but most fortunately the wild waving of local Italian arms are leading us towards our destination. It is however all part of the journey and adds some spice and challenge which is good for my Pd (Parkinsons disease) in a cognitive sense, and a healthy meal for the hungry neurons.

We overtook a young resting walker who, once rested, overtook us quickly, which not only shows the benefits of youth, but of resting. At a crucial unmarked junction we asked a woman for directions, but first asked her if she spoke either French, Spanish or German which we had fully covered. This was all possibly unnecessary, as quietly standing beside us was the young 'rested one' whom we thought might be the most obvious because he spoke Italian. It didn't really matter because the woman could not help us anyway, and we simply followed the 'rested one' around until he found someone who knew.

A lot of 'once were' professional bikers on the road today and there are always reciprocal greetings and arm waving between us. Great camaraderie exists as they show either awe for our attempt to walk to Roma, or wonder why we don't simply learn to ride a bike. We are all very tired today, probably the hills and the sun partnering to challenge us, while many young women fruit pickers, maybe backpackers, were being happily tanned by the same fire in the sky and doing very little walking and with no pack.

Marco the engineer/architect turned chef from the nursing home is still our very special local supporter, and is waiting for the time we can use one of his many Italian friends. In the meantime we arrived at our new home in a small village where they have a/c that is not working; wifi that has technical difficulties; and no breakfast, so I'll go looking for a cafe that has all three as I reconnoitre the start of our route for tomorrow, after a short rest. Five hours have passed and had wifi but lost it; we now have a fan to keep cool; and thanks to yet another Asian/Italian cafe owner, breakfast starts at 0500. The luck seems to be holding for our pre-heat breakfasts.

When your emotion begins to affect your Pd, use your cognition to convert it to a neuroplastic solution



Understanding Signs

*The signs abound, they're everywhere we go
Informing us in many different ways,
Can be our closest friend or scary foe
Some guiding us, while others lose us days.
Some signs for food, accommodation too
And iPhones, sim cards, telegraph and mail,
For medicine and clothes including shoe
All can be found when walking on the trail.
Internal signs, more subtle, can be missed
Do you have thoughts and feelings to be shared?
Apologise, for this you can be kissed
Assert yourself so misperception spared.
Whatever happens, understand the sign
To save that grief, and lots and lots of time.*

Day 13 - Medesano to Sivizzano

We're now well into the mountains and their cool breezes and shaded sanctuaries draw us up easily into their welcoming embrace. We walked along the highway for a while until a familiar sign leads us off one way through low bushes, and then another up into the hillside through some small quiet villages until we reach one holding a trail bike rally. We're not fans of vehicle rallies of any sort, but when you are on a peaceful, sometimes meditative, sometimes hard and tiring walk, the sudden hectic pace of even these unmotorised machines can mess with your head a little. On the other unselfish hand, a rule of thumb of mine is to look for the positive, and how can you not, when a fistful of kids are outside footing it around with big happy smiles on their faces. And remember, they are Italian, so if you were to complain about the noise, they would say: "noise, what noise"?

While stopping at a boisterous cafe (not by Italian standards), there were about eight people that sounded like a busload, I had a thought. How could I avoid being annoyed by this rumpus. I remembered an old saying, 'if you can't beat them join them'. I recalled my time singing harmonics where sounds often blend together like I was hearing now. So I started to sing 'O sole mio', very softly at first, then gradually moved up to full voice continuing for about twenty seconds ... and would you believe, no-one noticed. I was not just another sound, but I had become one with theirs, and not even in their own familiar language.

Further up into the hills and for us it's tough, for our French friends not so bad, but now using new muscles. They are making life for us a little easier as they book us in with them each day, saves looking when we arrive. So we arrive today (after our now usual six hours), at 1230 (and before the sun gets too hot) at our new home. It is our first dormitory, and with only two pleasant and quiet German men.

Dormitories have to be quiet because there is nearly always someone sleeping, as there is now at 1400. We've showered in the one bathroom available, dried ourselves with our old t-shirts, and I've done our washing, while Corrie, under doctor's advice, airs her blister and keeps her feet up high. Everyone is now resting, writing blogs or sleeping in an arched, cool, stone tunnel-like room flanked by an ancient cloister and garden, with about twenty beds. Our host Enrica is a hoot as she loudly explains in Italian, to those who spoke little or none, in that colourful hand waving way that sometimes needs no voice, her energy stark, in its contrast to that of the sore weary walkers.

Sitting in a small leafy setting under a huge tree across from the village bar, we listened as the locals sang loudly. Some songs were about foreign walkers accompanied by a lot of laughter and finger waving, so I guess there are things they like about us and things they don't. We like that we have a kitchen tonight so Sabine is the chef, I will prepare dessert, and Corrie and Bertrand will be kitchen hands. Dinner will be served under the archways.

You can sing the same tune, even when the lyrics are different



Italians

*Italians like to talk, to wave and sing
It helps them get their message to another,
They talk in melody, it has a ring
It starts way back in cradle with their mother.
Their hands describe each small apostrophe
A shrug, an 'eh', a strident ending 'O',
It's how they are, and who they're meant to be
It also brings a phrase that has a flow.
Another way they emphasise their point
Is share a song that often tells a story,
Or rocks your soul where you don't need a joint
Or talks to you and covers you in glory.
Whatever way they choose communication
Their creative ways identify a nation.*

Day 14 - Sivizzano to Berceto

The kitchen is an extension of our sleeping quarters so the four of us simply moved our packs into their culinary arts room, so as not to disturb the Germans who were having a sleep-in on their last day. Our friends made breakfast, and we were away again higher up in the Apennines which are a little cooler with much more shade. This mountain range has what you might call three fingers: one leads towards the Adriatic Sea, one towards the Ionian Sea and the other towards Sicily. Many volcanos were formed and it may be of interest to know that many of the more well known are on this range. Many are extinct but some are still active. We walked to the summit of Mount Vesuvius some years ago and peered into its molten belly. We also saw Mount Etna blowing smoke in Sicily but from a distance, and there is also activity on the Eolie Islands.

What an eclectic walk today as we walked from tarmac roads across undulating hillsides, with those beautifully shaped hay bales spotted all over the backyard that they grew up in. It is most likely they will return home one day as fertiliser to make more hay in the future. They are made in the shape of a giant rolling pin and it would be obvious to all why you only see them cleverly put together on flat ground. If they weren't, it would give a whole new meaning to 'rolling pastures' or rolling hillsides. Back to the tarmac which we would cross again, some busier than others and then up into the mountains, near-vertical climbs at times needing all our concentration so as not to fall backwards, through thickets of rain forest and some precipitous edges less than a foot away.

The mountain villages are so attractive with lots of delightful flowers, the geranium being the standout, peering from their window boxes down into the folding hills outside the windows of terraces giving colour to blank walls; mostly red, but all colours and all year round so no need to wait for a particular season; and taller ones with purple faces, a motherly figure for all the new season baby flowers. Tractors are busy at work with the whole family collecting winter firewood, older people looking out from their balconies presumably unaware of their million dollar views, kids playing in the streets with street signs ensuring that they are safe from unsuspecting cars and motor bikes and then there's us, lucky enough to experience the basic simplicities of life.

We had an extra long walk today so sitting on the nob of a steep hill we ate lunch and rested before home. Our biggest day, so our longest rest before venturing out to see the wonders of our new surroundings. I find the resting such an important adjunct to walking. Mostly, whenever I have pain, the immediate thought is to walk or rest. Many times on our walks, especially in the morning, walking relieves my aching joints, so even though the mind might not want to move, I know the body does. Equally, the mind may want to keep going but the body wants to rest. Now, it's home and rest for the body, but work for the 'blog waiting mind'.

Your passion can lead you to places you can't imagine



The Geranium

At times I see a bright red flower and think
Of countries wide and far across the globe,
That decorate their homes with also pink
Geraniums that have forever, glowed.
The colour purple stuns its audience
The white, so placid, shows its saintly ways,
Delightful orange then escapes the fence
They'll grace our gardens and for many days.
Their birth place was in eastern Europe's forests
They travelled far and wide in all their glory,
Now most at home in Europe further west
We will go anywhere, that is our story.
Outside we grace our windows everywhere
And love it, when admirers stop and stare.

Day 15 - Berceto to Pontremoli

Up into the mountains again through villages, high up and low down in the valley, with spectacular views from 1000 metres on Cisa Pass, we relished the spectrum of this intriguing mountain range. The steep climbs and slippery loose shale declines meant we had to be extra careful, so interspersed with taking in the spectacular alpine views it was a long day. Forests of chestnuts, pines, oaks, beech trees and others, some clinging to the especially steep slopes, shaded and delighted us as we walked delicately on the challenging terrain and along ridges, the width at times less than a metre wide.

The Cisa Pass is a mountain pass that marks the division between the Ligurian and Tuscan Appenines near the source of the Magra river, meaning of course that we are now leaving the Ligurian region to soon enter the rolling olive hills of Tuscany, but first the mountainous part at over 1000 metres. Beckoning just to our west is the famed 'Cinque Terra five village no car paradise', a 'laureled Ligurian landmark' that was hard to ignore, but keep on track we must. It's probably the most colourful region in Italy as its 'crema di crema' is the production of flowers, highlighted by the ubiquitous geranium I have talked about previously.

We overtook our two German friends, were overtaken by the tall young Italian man who helped us earlier, and once again saw no-one else on the track. A strange quietness enveloped, with only an occasional bird darting off at the first hint of our intrusion. Because the day was long we stopped at two bars and took about three breaks for snacks and water during the steep climbs. From the coolness of the morning, to the unrelenting afternoon sun, we were finally treated to some lightning and rain as we trudged our final steps into Pontremoli, over a 4th century bridge, staying at a delightful b&b where generosity and hospitality seem to know no bounds. Afternoon snacks, cake, a well-stocked fridge and an array of breakfast fare that offers too much to mention, or eat. We needed it however, remember that we slip away before 0630.

Pontremoli, situated in the lush Magra valley, was the target of wealthy aristocrats and warlords who saw an opportunity to gain even more land and wealth. The struggle was between the 'guelfis' (merchants who supported the Pope) and the 'ghibellinis' (landowners who supported the Roman Empire). The wars between these two, defined this region for centuries. To separate these two warring factions, a great bellow was constructed which stands defiantly near the medieval 'trembling bridge' which is English for Pontremoli. I'm not sure how this kept them apart or whether it stopped further feuding.

After much research it is still a mystery how it got this name. Less of a mystery is why I tremble at times, as the lack of dopamine and any added stress will make the trembling worse. Maybe there is a connection, for when I debate with my wife and the trembling gets worse, she tells me to 'build a bridge'.

Trembling is just one of many diverse symptoms that those with Pd suffer from



Incentives

*I trembled when I heard the voices say
“Just catch a cab, it’s not that far to go”,
Amazing thing - the pain just went away
Still hurt a bit I wobbled to and fro.
Then lightning struck with dark and scary thunder
It spurred me on ‘cause these are my conditions,
I powered ahead - I won’t be put asunder
They knew it not but I was on a mission.
The rain fell hard so close to Pontremoli
The water rushed beneath its trembling bridge,
That carried pilgrims trying to be holy
On crawling knees and shaking off their garbage.
I tremble like this spinning universe
As sufis dance ensuring they rehearse.*

Day 16 - Pontremoli to Villafranca-in-Lunigiana

We stayed in a quiet and quaint village by a falling rocky river. After a small sleep-in we walked slowly out of town, glancing about us at the ancient buildings huddled together, while a few locals mimicking these houses with their own huddle nodded with a 'bongiorno'. Always older men walking about, with a few younger ones earnestly off to work and shop shutters being noisily raised. At all times when leaving a village, we are aware of our dropping noisy poles on the cobblestones so use them sparingly usually for balance and ... we're used to using them, they almost never leave our hands. Maybe we could synchronise our village walking with the the regular roller door openings and dog sounds and no-one would know, especially the local barkers.

Narrow paths through backstreets took us past quite large homes with a large choir of dogs greeting us or not, with their varied pitches, while cats either sat unmoved or moved stealthily across the pathways, probably not caring one way or another whether I entered their village or not. I passed one barking dog and waited for my walking companions to round the bend. The dog's owner did not know I had stopped, so she let her dog out. This now snarling dog headed straight towards me so I went into self protection mode and found yet another use for my walking poles, and thankfully it works.

Out of town along a main road for a few minutes then up once again into the foothills, across rocky rivers searching for stable round stones beneath our falling feet, gradual climbs then a sudden short steep section, falling autumn leaves cushioning our feet, a quick rest as we wait for each other, a drink of water and then off through dark thick rainforest areas with colourful thick moss decorating the rocky edges of the path.

A halfway visit to the bar was next, where young vibrant youth sat with their coffee, their dogs entertaining us with their play rather than treating us as potential intruders. Into the bushes once more, up, down, around, chatting or quiet, depending on the climb and the desire. Once more a final stretch into town, asking passing locals for directions to our sleep place which took us down the usual but varied back lanes.

Villafranca-in-Lunigiana (V-i-L) is unique in its mission to offer free internet to every one of its citizens. At the same time they wish to use this technology to provide video surveillance especially in public areas: back streets, parks, squares and schools. Along with internet safety, (thanks to this state of the art technology) V-i-L provides effective security to all its citizens.

Effective security is important for everyone. I have a rather unique one with my Pd. To feel secure I need to reduce my stress levels which I do by being organised; not over-obligating myself to situations outside my control; and doing as much as I can to alleviate my Pd symptoms.

When your poles are quiet then so are your muscles but when they are noisy, your muscles are talking - this is nordic walking



The fall

*The falling river hops and skids on stones
That never know that feeling to be dry,
They make a spray, and play so many tones
This is their life for it will never die.
The falling leaves spread colour on the fields
And tracks are covered so they can't be seen,
A painting made that nature often yields
One sees as magic if their eyes are keen.
The falling feet on stones alter the quavers
And add their sound, thus music to the river,
Then press the leaves that never seem to waver
The art remains despite a silent quiver.
The fall: it sings, it cries, moved by the skies
This beauty and its cycle never dies.*

Day 17 - Villafranca in Lunigiana to Aulla

It's raining heavily but the walk must continue because, as pilgrims, we might get free accommodation, but for one night only, unless you have an injury that can't walk. So wet gear on except for my non-waterproof 'New Balance' shoes (but so far in the rain my wet feet have not caused me any concern), the risk I took by leaving the heavy waterproof shoes in Sydney. I find it so much easier walking in light shoes that getting them wet is not an issue, as long as I de-sock on arrival and dry them for the following day. Quite a lot of wet weather has been a good test for them on this trip.

Early traffic brought us to acute awareness on the slippery road but drivers appear to be extremely cognisant of walkers and bikers, stopping or slowing down to give us a wide berth, respecting us as they would those in any sporting event. Gradual climbs out of our village took us through a beautiful rain forest with the odd streams renewing their journeys as they re-emerge from the heavy rain.

One of the advantages of walking in this type of weather is you see nature in more abundance - new streams appear, small waterfalls flow again, the vegetation is refreshed, raindrops cling to leaves, and of course you have puddles for the kids. The rain became showers for a while but the sun chose to remain hidden with the temperature, a cool walking one.

We passed a dad and his boy on a bike, a young woman in a hurry, a young cyclist, and an older couple with walking sticks that simply allow them just to move, a bit different to ours, although I use mine now and then to keep my balance as well. We continued on quite a short and easy walk today which also: gave Sabine relief for her knees which didn't like the steep parts; calmed Corrie's blister which was unhappy with the down bits; stopped my back complaining on the very long straight sections; while Bertrand was as usual fine, but for the rain, (he is a worshipper of the sun).

Coffee in a village, no water or relief stops, and we were soon in our new village in the 9th century Abbey of San Caprasio. Bombed in the war by American and British forces, it has been considerably reconstructed using glass to reveal elements of its former grandeur. This donativo sparkled within its confines, a five bunk dormitory all to ourselves makes it like a little flat with friends.

The routine continues, shower and the luxury of soap and towel, washing clothes, constructing an internal clothesline with clothes pegs of course (Bertrand's task) looking for wifi connection (none), and plug adaptors (none, they changed as we moved south). I'm writing this, letting our French friends speak their language for a moment and plan for tomorrow's accommodation and walk, resting with feet high up on the wall, and taking a short nap. There is also a search for lunch soon which provides a short exploring opportunity, and then a dinner place which will take us down some other cobbled lanes.

When conditions change a strong focus is necessary to prevent a fall



Falling

*My balance has been a big issue with me for years
Blood pressure is low, takes time to get to the brain,
If I rise too quickly my head then totally fears
I'll end on the floor in close company with a drain.
Now I've got Pd, I have to take lots of things
That lower Bp, I get dizzy and want to faint,
Slow walking I wobble, to my knees it often brings
So I need to be careful, or my image will surely taint.
But there are ways to keep myself upright
I can take salt pills, the blood will quicken its flow,
Or lower my meds, they make my head feel light
Get up more slowly to feel much higher when low.
Then use 'New Balance' to rock and spur the pace
To keep my new balance and not fall flat on my face.*

Day 18 - Aulla to Sarzana

The great bonus with staying in a parrocchia or donativo is because not only are they cheap (mostly what you can afford), but it is a chance to meet others doing the same walk, swap ideas and experiences, talk intimately about life and chat to people from varying cultures. So one is not just experiencing Italy, but other cultures as well (mainly European), and the bonus for us is walking with our French friends.

A short cool walk across the river Magra with no pack, no guide book, and no need to search for a restaurant, because someone in the know had organised for all of us from the abbey to go to this special dinner place for pilgrims. There were sixteen of us at dinner where we had soup, bread, some chicken or beef, salad, water frizzante and wine and all for just ten euros. There was an older Dutchman, a Frenchman and a Swiss, a younger Spaniard, an even younger Italian biker, a still younger Englishman with his new Italian bride on their 'walking honeymoon', and the four of us.

An entertaining night mostly engineered by the 'multi-tongue Spaniard' who could converse with everyone and wasn't backward in his approach. It gave Sabine and Bertrand yet another chance to have a break from English, and us an opportunity to talk English easily and more deeply with others. All this happened at one long table (no-one else in the restaurant, so very intimate) on the other side of a long bridge stretching over a light flowing stony river, from the delightful ambience of the old town that melted into the foothills of the Apennines.

Nearly everyone was up at 0530 so no need for whispering at that time, in and out of showers and toilets quickly, last minute preparations for the day – water bottles filled, bandages and tape applied, medications taken, paper stuffed in shoes the night before to dry them removed, and washing packed. Goodbyes in many languages then out into the coolish morning for breakfast and over another bridge on to a busy tarmac road.

Walkers sometimes have to choose a busy road when the alternative is very long and there are no villages, more a test of great endurance, that is if you can make the distance. It is a pity because time is spent watching cars and looking out for each other rather than enjoying the scenery. But for me with Parkinsons it was another opportunity to increase my awareness by taking the lead and ensuring the safety of my companions.

We will meet up with Bertrand's wife today as she arrives on another camino with two girl friends. In the meantime we hope to explore a bit of this ancient village. She has been walking a different, longer route, adding to the thousands of kilometres walked previously. Later, and sadly, we will then have to say our 'au revoirs' to our French friends. We will miss them, their great sense of fun and their enthusiasm for life.

Different people with the same passion gather for reflection



Reflection

*A sanctuary to rest your weary feet
Reflect on life and wonder what lies next,
Renew your thoughts as you lie 'neath the sheet
And ruminate on things outside the text.
Restore what's good that you have put aside
Retell those stories that were meaningful,
Reveal those crucial insights - not to hide
And resurrect what's honest and truthful.
Return to track, a more enlightened being
With refreshed eyes much more is clearly seen,
Rewind the clock to see from what you're fleeing
Rejoice, walk on, it's not just where you've been.
Relish what's there, you'll find it if you look
Rewrite your life, and then it's your own book.*

Days 19 & 20 - Sarzana to Massa

I love thunder and lightning, especially when I'm not out in it, and tonight the thunder seemed to shake our little room, while our window was in a position where the lightning would simply shine up our room. It was real theatre for me while Corrie was too tired to attend, and slept through the entire performance.

It did not happen. The bandage was too tightly attached, the doctor could not withdraw from the bandages 'need to bandage', and the patient could not bear to 'not to be bandaged'. So one more day travelling along roads again with our friends (how lovely to have a long 'au revoir walk') starting with a long hill climb and a slippery descent. All of us slipped at one stage or another but just one non-fatal fall. It was great to be off road again and still with our friends.

We had to backtrack a little and the information we received for our route was underestimated so we had to walk faster to arrive before 1400, else we would have waited until 0500. On the way, we came to a roundabout that was fenced off to pedestrians, but luckily a driver was being booked. A 'hoy' from Sabine had one of the polizia come over to help us over the barricade while the other escorted us across the different exits. By the way, the booked man was drunk. Bertrand just had to find out!!

We made our way through two piazzas and at the far end of the second was our hostel, and I have to say it, not much more cost than a donativo (for we are pilgrims!). This newly renovated building sensitively retains traces and fragments of former grandeur and our ceiling preserves a fragment of frescoe that hints of its former glory. This is the very first time we have roomed in a piazza (I've always dreamt of this), so now is the occasion for a rest day in the city of Massa where, maybe, some of your marble may come from.

And all we did was rest and walk about in this curious town. It was time for wound healing and reflection. Firstly wounds. I am the apprentice bandager (I have been watching my highly trained predecessor closely). I am also navigator, time keeper and room finder, while Corrie retains her position as financier, passport controller and technical advisor, while both of us continue our roles as scroungers for things we didn't pack, or old people need, but aren't feasible to carry e.g. 'between knee comfort, extra pillow, etc'.

And then there are Parkinson's things: 'my leaning to the right' as I walk has corrected itself; I usually have tremors early, but because that is our busiest time, they just don't happen; and I'm not getting tired, I guess because the continual exercise and daily adventures keep me stimulated.

Sick bay things: Corrie's blister is getting better, I don't know how she keeps walking but I have an idea, and a bit of a sore neck which probably happens carrying a pack for six to eight hours; otherwise in good shape. My sore back is a lot better, now a sore shoulder, otherwise going well.

The loud thunder mocks my silent tremor.



Earthy Sounds

*The lightning struck, the thunder roared behind
The window of our room the stage it set,
The scenes so vivid, you will never find
Such theatre just nature can present.
The striking light, result of many ions
Their interaction lighting up the sky,
Then sounds that mirrored that of many lions
Expanding air it seems, creates this cry.
I thought of earth's great audience tonight
They'll see it in their individual way,
And won't forget this extraordinary sight
Where for a moment night turns into day.
One final rumble sees the curtain fall
We close our eyes and draw our fading shawl.*

Day 21 - Massa to Camaiore

We walked as though we were nearly seven, not seventy. A day off and cool, we were renewed, what a difference a day makes. We miss our friends but that is eased by our ongoing adventure. Along a highway for a short distance past early bar openers, a couple of locals, lots of cars, cats on every corner, free, doing as they wish, with their barking friends disallowed the same freedom, penned up with their wishes confined.

Mountains all around, the marble-mined ones obvious in the background with their grey starkness. Huge slabs of the marble stacked neatly over a wide area, their original home marked by giant steps carved into the mountain side, waited for transport to their new village homes. Slowly we passed through these white villages, crossed their tiny streams, greeted their quiet inhabitants, taking in scene after scene, ready for our next hill climb.

This long gradual climb showed us scenes of the sea, seaside towns, far away hills and coastal mountains, the cool breeze keeping us comfortably climbing. Not long at the top and the same gradual, this time descent, allowed us more easy viewing as we neared sea level once more. Along the side of a river we could see still more of the mountain marble slabs being cut, carved, washed and processed for the village park benches, footpaths, statues and household uses as well as for similar projects on distant shores.

Through a large town, and heading to a village, we soon became concerned it curiously was not in our guidebook! We must have missed a crucial turn though we were still following major signs. 'Passers-by' kept telling us our trajectory was good, but it was probably difficult for them to guess that we wanted the more direct route as they may have been unfamiliar with this walk. We ended up in a mountaintop village, even further away than we were an hour earlier and sat down to feel sorry for ourselves. Then round the corner came a big black four wheel drive, its driver seeing our sorrow, said: "can I give you a lift?"

Michele informed us he had mastered the Italian driver survival technique, that we noted, as he adeptly manoeuvred multiple hairpin bends with impressive skill. A South African with Swiss parents, he has been working in Italy, looking after holiday apartments, while back in Cape Town he turned his wits to whatever crossed his path. As he let us off right outside our lodgings we were so glad we also crossed his. We recalled our South African friend, Johnny, an adventurous creative entrepreneur himself.

Comfy in our chic Tuscan bedroom, we puzzled why the Via Francigena had led us half way up the mountain and suddenly deserted us, taking us to the top of another mountain instead of down. Mr Google informed us that there had been a landslide and the way was not to be taken till clearing could be done. Let's hope no more landslides for a while.

A slab of marble hides something ordinary or maybe a masterpiece



An Accidental Sculpture

*Twas art itself that marble left behind
As huge white stairs that climbed the mighty hills,
Uncovered as they were so they could find
Those pieces that were prized by those huge drills.
No longer cries from countless tiny creatures
Who long ago gave up their lives for 'marmo',
To Michelangelo: sculptor and teacher
Who captured us so many years ago.
These mighty snow-like mountains standing proud
So carved to make a mighty sculptor kneel,
By ordinary men lost in a crowd
Cut stone for which they had a special feel.
This precious marble stone will fade away
Its white stepped home, this sculpture, it will stay.*

Day 22 - Camaiore to Lucca

At dinner last night we caught up with 'an earlier met young Australian couple'. We had fun swapping stories, a lovely twosome who we hope to see again. We also keep in daily contact with our gorgeous French friends whom we still miss a lot. We thought of them as we rose early from our bed with its rattling metal bedhead painted with over-sized cherubs. It was the only noise in our lodgings, as we set off for another day. Along the lamp-lit street we walked until our 'night before researched early opener' appeared. We thought we'd be the first at 0600.

They patiently stood there, their loud voices exercising the morning calm. As long as they are talking, nothing else seems to matter. She turned on the lights, signalling they could enter. Two men carried the boxes of croissants inside, as hands felt for favourites, ours thankfully were not theirs. They ate greedily while the coffee trickled. Only a dog glanced at us, as the daily routine unfolded, and more came. 'I'll have yours soon' she seemed to say, as she served the croissant munchers their daily short blacks. When ours was ready, it was efficiently relayed back to us through local hands as it was too difficult for us to reach the counter. This appeared to be the normal routine.

We moved away from lantern street and into a grand tree lined 'via', one of the indications that we were moving into Tuscany. No more lamps, so I held a torch down by my side to let oncoming cars know that we wanted to live. The close dark mountains made 'mockery' of our existence as we took care to move nearer to them when there was 'both way traffic'. Soon we were off the road once more walking through small streets and past well kept houses, then into a challenging steep hill climb.

Light appeared behind the 'mockers', so we could more easily search for footholds as we carefully danced between loose rocks like children playing hopscotch, but with a pack. We joined the traffic once more, most cars kindly giving us a wide birth, a few testing our 'desire to live reflexes', others gave us a 'bip of encouragement' while cyclists nodded with experiential empathy. To assist us in our 'will to live', the track planners created off road paths where they could, so we would exit the road for some distance until it became too difficult, re-enter, and then exit again etc.

A couple of village stops for a rest, medications of all sorts (long walk today), a chat with school kids who didn't know what Australians looked like and we were just about home again. A final long riverside walk led us into Lucca, a very big village with an extensive old section. I asked a well dressed friendly woman for our 'bed directions' and she led us through crowded streets for about ten minutes to our destination. It is like a loft high up in the rafters, with two other rooms joining a common lounge/kitchen area. Now a welcome shower and an extended rest in our long narrow rafter room.

While the old folk drink their coffee, the kids ask them why they aren't stopping the sea rising



Puccini

*Some huddle in the crowd to not be seen
Protected from a fear that isn't there,
While one stands up and says: "who needs a screen"?
And sees no fear, the cross is light to bear.
The oak is one of these - it dares to grow
On tower of Guinigi it cries out loud,
Attack me if you can but I will show
That I am king, not of the earthly crowd.
In Lucca there was one who loved the people
Mixed music with their world to tell a story,
'Great sorrows in small souls' and not the steeple
'Always intensely moving' was Puccini.
His operas were so real - verismo style
The music of the folk - true and virile.*

Day 23 - Lucca to Altopascio

We had to walk two-three kilometres this morning to find a bar. If I didn't tell you before or you didn't know, a bar sells alcohol, coffee and a tiny amount of croissant variations. As usual, mid-century men were the main guests eating and drinking their regular morning delights as we did ours, watching tv or gathering together to talk. While I saw mostly older Italians, the bar is open to all ages as drinking is not the focal point of these establishments.

Off through the outskirts of the famous and beautiful Lucca which we didn't give the respect it deserved and spend more time there. Instead, we saved that respect for our ageing bodies, lying them down, carefully moving them to close-by eateries, then washing and oiling them, before putting them to sleep once more so they can do it all again tomorrow.

Today's walk was without the usual bumps and holes, simply level and mainly on tar and gravel roadways with mostly little traffic. Three or four villages ushered us through, as we stopped in one for a fuel stop of nectarines and peaches. Two large industrial sites were the only other attractions as we poled on to our new digs for the night. With less mileage today we had time and energy to explore this one street village. We sat in the church square, surrounded by archways, turrets and towers, enjoying the novelty of an antipasti plate for lunch, comprising many more delicacies than were ever encountered, and fascinated by the irregularity of the surrounding architecture. As we ate, we greeted a number of walkers from days and weeks past.

Once explored I reflected on our regular morning bar rituals and googled cappuccinos. This is what I found. When cappuccinos were first invented, they were very different from the ones you'll find at your local bar today, made from coffee, sugar, 'egg yolks' and cream. The resulting light brown shade reminded people of the hooded robes traditionally worn by Capuchin monks, so they christened the new kind of coffee 'cappuccino' or 'little capuchin'. The Capuchin monks themselves got their names from their hoods (the Italian word for hood, 'cappuccio', comes from the Latin 'caputium') which were long, pointed and brown hoods inspired by Saint Francis of Assisi's 'clothes of poverty'.

But when it comes to the drink, an even bigger shock is in store for the Italians. The cappuccino didn't even originate in Italy and there is no evidence of it existing anywhere on the peninsular until the twentieth century (when the invention of fridges allowed them to swap the egg and cream for milk). However, the early forms of the beverage were attested in Austria as a 'kapuziner' two hundred years earlier. The traditional version of the 'kapuziner' can still be found in Austrian cafes, with just a drop of cream, while the Austrians have also re-adopted the Italian term cappuccino for the milkier version.

A true saint is rarely seen, their ego is transformed for a higher purpose



The Animals' Saint

*A special monk he was - Assissi's Frank
Lady of poverty he chose to wed,
His duty to this role - it never shrank
Content to spend his life with little bread.
Patron of animals was soon to follow
Made peace between the wolf and local folk,
He lived with them inside his tiny hollow
His life was rich while others thought him broke.
His passion for his work set him adrift
Jerusalem was first but his boat sank,
Morocco next but illness gave short shrift
To Egypt for to end crusades drew blank.
St Francis spent his life to help the poor
His home a simple cave without a door.*

Day 24 - Altopascio to San Miniato Alta

It was an eclectic walk. We started on a 'five car a minute road' for a short while, then off on those various 'exit to avoid the traffic pathways', all the way to our next destination. These varied from narrow sunny embankments, a bit like walking on a castle wall but without going in circles; to tree and bush lined 'up and down small hill and gully tracks' across creeks; to gravel roads through undulating farmland and back streets.

These took us through a village having its market day in a tiny piazza where we had a rest with a French and a Swiss man; strolled through a quiet village high up on a hill which flowed down into its more vocal and busy part, where on the way down an Italian woman chatted to us about time she spent in Brisbane, but returned to her small Italian terrace here on a windy sloping narrow village street, because her sister was ill; then it was a tiny silent village in a nest of fields where we asked four funeral people having a street break, for directions. We were on the right track to our destination they told us but we would have saved three kilometres if we had taken an earlier right turn which we did not see, maybe because we were too tired. It would have been okay if this wasn't already a very long day.

Our final stretch seemed to last forever as we could see the town but couldn't seem to get closer because of the zig zags of our path. Our backs were hurting because of the long walk today, but had little choice if we wanted to sleep under a roof for the night. No cafe, no bench, no tree stump, no embankment to lean upon, but heaven soon appeared. There were two plastic chairs on the street and a table with water and biscuits and a note which read: 'sit a while, eat, drink, take a photo and email it to a Via Francigena website and we'll pin it on the table'; how lovely to know someone is there, even when they aren't! So we sat and did all the things the welcome gregarious note suggested.

As we were climbing the last steep hill home, three French women we had met previously joined us. We've found a hill is never so daunting when you have new company, our minds now becoming involved in other enjoyable topics, and away from those less palatable. They accompanied us up to our room tonight in a convent which is more upmarket than the 'by donation ones' so costs a bit more. The place is huge, with wide tiled hallways lined with beautifully painted urns and vases, one fifty metre long wall painted with religious figures, but so unique with the doorway into our room looking like part of the painting itself. Room views range from pleasant cloisters to views back over the Apennines.

And it has a little village or maybe just a piazza, as well, tucked away below us which we did not even know was there! It's now time to check the emails to see what our friends (Sabine and Bertrand) have been up to. They are just one stage ahead but there are some more longer stages that we may have to split into smaller stages, We'll see.

Our own creativity gives life meaning



A Painting in Alta

*We could have been a painting, oh so still
In three dimensions we could barely breathe,
As living statues we weren't there to thrill
And couldn't stay because we had to leave.
Like a buddhist monk - destroyed the art
We thanked our absent angels for our drink,
The final hill so high, and very sharp
We left before the artisan could blink.
Our home at last, our door was in the picture
Between a work of art, our room we found,
Collapsed again, we could become a fixture
No-one would know - no sign, no trace, no sound.
To rest within a painting here in Alta
This convent had much more than just an altar.*

Day 25 - San Miniato Alta to Gambessi-Terme

Dinner with ten others in the Convento de San Francesco, including our three French fellow walkers, three Italian men and a Dutchman. The Dutchman has walked from Holland on his own for his partner doesn't like to walk. I felt a bit sad for them but maybe it works. Our Italian friend also walks on his own for a similar reason but his love for walking is passionate and he is so self-contained that he is able to enjoy his own and others' company (those who also have a passion for walking) over long distances.

We left San Miniato in good spirits though a bit weary. Weaving our way through this fascinating hilltop village, we lowered ourselves down through twisting roadways, 'one car every two minutes', until we moved onto gravel roads that carved their way through undulating topography from slight and long, to steep and short, while at times following high narrow ridges with steep cultivated (I don't know how) cropping fields.

Far off, the Apennines and friends sat like tall ominous shadows framing the rolling hills with their various crops or resting fields waiting for the right season to show their wares once more. It's grape picking time so we passed many young female pickers, and tractors crawling up (again, I don't know how) the seemingly impossible steep hillsides. A little further on and half the road had collapsed about a half metre in width but not sure if it's earthquake (there were recent quakes in Italy) related, but it was enough to send shivers down our spines.

Because we start so early we get a lot of shade from the earth still not ready to let the sun appear, then later on some trees replaced the earth, and then hills took over their role when in the valleys, but then it was the sun's turn for the most part of long climbing sections. It may not have been so bad but for the long day before. So many breaks, then fast bursts to get through the discomfort of sore backs and necks. We also kept pace with the 'flying dutchman' for a while to take our minds off ourselves.

Just one village today but with no bars, so no longer spoilt by the usual plethora of food outlets, we needed to take our bananas with us and ensure a good water supply, because there was no opportunity to refill or buy on the way. We passed two young English speaking girls coming the other way but not sure what their story was. I usually engage in conversation, but didn't on this occasion as they were totally engaged in their own 'testa-a-testa'.

One kilometre from home and a bar and a seat appeared. So happy, and the long 'lemon soda hill' home was a breeze. Our lodgings were b&b, and often there is no all day reception, so had to wait an hour 'til 1500. Two young girls arrived and organised our rooms. All the pain and deep and meaningful thoughts about the day and what we may, or may not, have got from it, melted away when I read one of the girl's t-shirt: 'Believe in your selfie'.

To believe in yourself requires a self worthy of believing in



Pasta and Vino

*Sweet grapes on bread reveals it can be jam
Some cream will top the grapes when they are jelly,
It adds a new dimension to the ham
As vinegar, with food, delights your belly.
They also make a sweet delightful juice
With raisins there is little change in form,
In seed extract the grapes they let them loose
With grape seed oil there comes another norm.
But when you put your foot down on a bunch
And liquid flows in colours: red and white,
It adds a new sensation to your lunch
No matter full, or soft, or smooth, or light.
This vino is the life blood of a nation
With pasta it's the number one relation.*

Day 26 - Gambassi-Terre to San Gimignano

Our wonderful hosts had decorated the breakfast table with flowers and laid out breakfast beautifully for us. 'Believe in your selfie' and her sister had said they wouldn't be there, and to help ourselves at any time. As we were leaving, an Italian man came in. We said hello and goodbye, and as he was going further than us today, said we may not see him again. We walked outside and there was our French friend standing on his balcony with a massive grin (remembering our very funny dinner conversation the previous night) as we swapped 'goodbye torch flashes' beneath the hazy stars.

These Tuscan medieval towns, olive groves, grape vines and pencil pines certainly lend a unique charm to our recent daily meanderings. As we walked past splendid haciendas and villas this morning, along our gravel road (one car or tractor every five minutes) Corrie dropped her scarf (that incidentally matches all her outfits), but on a camino you don't go back with a heavy pack. Other walkers just pick things like this up and keep them until they reach the owner. If they're faster they will catch you, if you're faster, you just need to slow down for a bit. When we stopped for five, that Italian man (who said he may not see us again) had his very important hankie in one hand and her 'scarf that matches all', in the other.

The scarf giving ceremony was soon interrupted. We heard one shot, then two quick ones to our left then soon after, three shots to our right. We had a pretty good idea that the only danger we would face in Tuscany would be a 'too close car', so we debated what the shooting was about and decided it would be the ubiquitous hare or bunny being pursued.

Soon after, a small car stopped, not quite in the middle of the road, and Mario wound his window down for a chat. He informed us that some Australians had passed through a week ago, a couple and three others. When more shots were fired, he told us they were bullets from Italian hunters who hunt pheasants, rabbits, hares, deer and boar in the woods, the deer because they eat the grapes. He expressed his thoughts on religion and the troubles of the world, and asked if we were carrying a backpack full of "peccatinis" (sins) to Rome. It wasn't the best time to give him an answer, as cars manoeuvred between Mario, his car, and us, but we will check our backpacks just in case.

We're in San Gimignano, and have decided to spend two nights here, since, confessionally, and somewhat serendipitously, Corrie stuffed up the hotel booking. "My mind has gone to mush from too much walking", she said. Fortunately for us though, it's a magical place, and one which she has always wanted to return to since our day trip in 2007. I also have a soft spot for this famous ridge top town. Our room in a Palazzo sits on the fortifying walls, from where we can help protect the town if needed, as we survey nature's gently rolling hills. Hopefully there is no hunter fodder here, but if there is, we have our sticks at the ready.

Take every chance to perform a good deed and your life will be enriched



The Pencil Pine

*No sprawling branch to reach out far and wide
Or pretty seeds adorning glamorous trees,
No space for wind to whisper an aside
Or leaves that turn or rustle in the breeze.
No flowering pods with colour to contrast
Or spring time flush that warms a tender heart,
No autumn bronze that glows and then falls fast
Or winter bare and summer full, just smart.
It is the humble pencil pine no less
Its elegance - its strength, there is no doubt,
It graces streets and driveways - flash address
And contrasts with the grape vines all about.
Its steeple look, so fine and full of grace
In Tuscany it's found its home, its place.*

Days 27 - San Gimignano to Colle di Val d'Elsa

Left the feuding towers of San Gimignano in the dark, with the corridor of street lights illuminating our footings on our way past the monastery that sits proudly admiring the UNESCO town from afar. But we had our own feud, because there was no food as we had been assured the night before that this bar would be open, and it was....but just for cooking and receiving supplies. Two other bars were also open but for cleaning and preparing.... not for us.

Our feet are now itching, to walk that is. No breakfast, so that usual pre-sunlight time was spent walking with a torch. Not ideal, but a chance to look back on this pretty town with its towers and lights, as home ones came on and street ones dimmed, with the worldly light bringing into sight the picturesque countryside. A short day meant we could do a lot of looking back and what a place to do it, but with many black photos to delete.

As the sun rose, our trails continued up and down hills, through fields of grape vines, olive trees and small woods, as well as crossing three river beds, one dry. It was a relatively short and cool stroll as we meandered like a small stream, but this one also climbed. It was Tuscany at its best with the close landforms coming together as they met in different designs that then went on to make other delightful shapes before reaching a large open space.

We passed numerous haziendas and villas, and through a number of small hamlets that were too small for bars, so we sat under a tree with a cute cat and two barking dogs and had some biscuits and water. We reached Colle di Val d'Elsa where at last we found one, a bar that is. But this was Colle di Val d'Elsa 'alto', and we would have to descend past 'mezzo' to 'basso' to find our sleeping place, and tomorrow's way out of here.

Down in the 'basso' we found it. It was a huge old paper factory that had been converted into a hotel at one end, with four shops taking up the rest of the street frontage. The restaurant ran the opposite way to the shops, from the hotel and underneath them, to do a right turn at the end to form another shop frontage and a public entrance. The ceiling of the tunnel restaurant was done in a gothic style. Out the back the factories open space became a piazza. It was a fascinating and productive use of space.

We wifi'd for a while, and sat in a huge square that looked like a movie set, eating a 'four out of ten' pizza for lunch. Tonight we'll eat at the hotel restaurant as our new friend/hotel manager told us it is the "best". As we reconnoitred tomorrow's exit, we bumped into an Australian couple who are doing the 'hilltop towns of Tuscany tour'. We laughed, as they shared, that perhaps they had missed the fact it meant lots of climbs and descents. At least they are with a company, not carrying packs, and will be driven part of the way tomorrow. It lightened their stress load even further when we told them what we were doing.

The health of the olive leaf reflects the wealth of the city towers



The Paper Factory

*A reminder of our six week walk in France
Our paper factory tunnel told us so,
Above we saw the Gothic in a glance
Just a touch in Italy we know.
The Classic influence was still so strong
The Romanesque, Italian art defines,
Those dark and gloomy rooms, remove the song
It needs more light to take away the blinds.
Twelfth century marked the time - it's catching fast
From French to German quickly to the rest,
Sculptures, paintings, manuscripts, stained glass
Religion was its theme but on the crest -
The secular came by and took a hold,
Madonna was her name - in from the cold.*

Day 28 - Colle di Val d'Elsa to Monteriggioni

A late start because there was a giant breakfast to eat and it will be another short day. We don't sleep in much but we had good reason to. It felt very strange to go from a hardened walker to a tourist and then back to the hard yards again the next day. Because we went on an alternate route yesterday it was impossible to follow the guide book, so we asked locals for the direction of our next sleep-over and look forward to finding our comforting camino signs.

The first chill in the air was welcome as we leave the factory and look for signs. A good clue if there aren't any, is to find a 'via Roma' because, as you know, we're going to Rome, and the government seems to ensure that this street is on the camino. Via Roma is just another street but it always means you are on the road to Rome. A long stretch took us out of town and straight into a 'one car in five minutes road', very quiet.

Soon we were off the road and walking down steep washed out gullies that turned into tracks through plowed fields; past more olive groves and vineyards now very heavy with black grapes; across heavily shaded creeks; through a dark rain forest; and along narrow gravel roads. At one stage we spent some time walking over smooth, irregularly shaped rocks pockmarked with a range of variegated moss's here and there, very beautiful.

Even though the area is lush and the soil looking eatable, there was evidence that long dry stone walls were built from what was once a very rocky area, those shapes I just mentioned giving these walls an exquisite look. We sauntered through some shop-free villages which hasn't been usual. They are therefore very quiet, very private and very pristine, and the locals shopping not so local anymore. Instead of the village shops, huge supermarkets now service many. I was surprised that locals don't know much about the village only minutes away.

Our sleep-over was high up on a hill, the town, a large piazza-plateau with one street circling the plateau and tiny ones interconnecting them both, a bit like an alien spaceship that's sitting on a few flattened out legs (the streets). Quite a sight, the village of Monteriggioni, filled with walkers, cyclists and tourists just strolling or sitting at one of the three outside eating places.

But we didn't eat there. Instead, my smart wife chose a restaurant underneath our room with a wifi area out the back and underneath our window. There is no wifi where we are staying so we are using the password of the eatery below to access the internet, clever girl. While we were being clever, a young Israeli and an older Frenchman arrived (both walkers), and we are discussing maps. The Frenchman, like our French friends, has metre long Italian maps for each section of the camino and unlike ours, it highlights the shorter routes. We weren't sure whether the Italians were in a very big hurry, not fit enough for longer distances, or just like my wifevery clever!!

Why does our home have to be our castle?



What Use, a Castle

*So many walls were built to so defend
A barren piece of soil - no consequence,
With turrets all around a scary trend
To end young lives not far beyond this fence.
Why do we use brute force to solve our issues
What is the point of killing all our foes,
It always ends - an empty box of tissues
And brings with it a lot of other woes.
Our wounded self does also need protection
It's barren too because it wasn't loved,
We cry out for that love and missed affection
Instead of hugs we were so roughly shoved.
The castle wall may have a short term use
But soon we must descend and call a truce.*

Day 29 - Monteriggioni to Siena

No early opening bars these days as we enter the heart of popular tourist towns, so no need to open for the locals. They all own shops, they're open well into the night and the tourists are still sleeping, so why would you open for two old people wandering along a road to Rome.

The street lights took us out far enough so we could see our narrow track deviation up and down narrow creviced pathways, through the usual Tuscan delights, onto a busy highway for too long, then off onto smaller roads. These are usually quiet but at rush hours quite busy so all the more vital to follow road walking rules.

A line of about fifteen joggers overtook us going the way of the traffic and we winced from the other side as it seemed they could not see the potential hazards. As they wandered just a foot onto the road, cars behind had to swerve. As well as this, a woman walking her dog was coming towards us being followed by a car. Usually we would pull off the road and stop but she was unhappy and went to step onto the road instead, lucky. Still alive and still able to have breakfast, we came upon a bar about eight kilometres into our walk, the only one. There's a shortage of villages today, especially bar ones.

Some of the inhabitants of the one tiny village we blinked through, were however very welcoming. As I was doing my Parkinson's voice exercises some dogs noted the poor quality and one after another began to bark, I think an even worse sound. So I continued my exercises in the shadow of theirs. Then they got serious and started howling, quite good, so I began to harmonise with them (harmonic singing once was part of my life). It was a great session and one that I will try out with other dog choirs in the future. I know there will be lots of opportunities, and..... I won't say anything about a dog's breakfast.

We soon came upon a man from Yorkshire who, like many, drives to a town and then goes for a day's walk, while others might do this through a travel company, so many walking options. He wanted to take his family with him but they preferred bed and food so he was reluctantly on his own but enjoying the exercise. We did a lot of map talk, he deciding to take one route and we, another.

Now back off-road through a rain forest and once again, no-one overtaking us. We do leave early, but now go at a slower pace since our French friends went ahead. A short stop to smell the grapes as well, so an indication there aren't many walkers, or they leave very late. While on grapes, maybe to keep them from the pinchers (not pickers) they either have a deep gulley or electric fence, maybe to keep the deer out as well! We soon arrived in the familiarly vastly spread out old city of Siena, and searched out old haunts from many years before. After that we settled in to a little albergo with a large roof deck (for all patrons) that has the most stunning view of the old city I could imagine. So lovely to be back in this ancient Etruscan town.

Similar to old people, the essence of an old city still remains, even though the external framework changes



Siena

*Sienna with two n's describes earth paint
Used much by Rembrandt and Caravaggio,
With one, it names this city, with two it aint
A tribe Saina, first of this trio.
A legend has it Senius, son of Remus
Who fled there from his beloved city - Rome,
His murdered dad the reason for this fuss
Or senex, being old, could be its home.
This medieval marvel has it all
Its high renaissance art, a sight to see,
A horse race that will start Siena's ball
And then the marvel that's their library.
A coffee house is one of Italy's best
Then view this gorgeous city as you rest.*

Day 30 - Siena to Ponte d'Arbia

It was strange, but lovely to walk out of Siena with just a few people wandering about, mostly wheelies off to their next holiday destination; five-ten others going somewhere, but I'm not sure where; delivery trucks miraculously finding a millimetre between the shops and parked trucks; a delicatessen opened; and one bar only with very loud rock music, that was for us! The tv stays on, the music plays, we don't like it, but if it's a breakfast place and open, and removes the stress of not knowing when you might find another place. What a contrast to yesterday where in this very sought after town it is peak season, so the day before we just went where we were pushed.

Out through Porta Romana, onto the long white tracks over the curved ridges of mostly carved-up rolling brown fields, and only a few green fields of winter crops. We stopped at a bar eight kilometres out and re-met Stephania, a young Italian woman on honeymoon with her English husband whom we had met earlier. He, Daniel, had a fever, so was bus-ing it, while she walked and even though it was their honeymoon, she seemed very relaxed about it. On these walks, many couples and friends often take time out and enjoy a rather different experience. We chatted, laughed about past experiences, and moved on as a French Canadian and Philippino couple arrived for a pause.

Stephania wasn't far behind and soon passed us. I watched her ahead, crouching down and taking a photo of some giant plowed bits of earth! Later, as we passed her, I asked about what I imagined would have been a very uninteresting photo. She wasn't surprised as she had received perplexed looks before. She told me she was an artist and the soil in this area was used by medieval monks for colouring paint. When we sat down for lunch I decided to look at the paint colouring soil, closely, and noticed the wonderful slightly different soil colours.

On this near-shadeless long walk we passed philosopher Basil from Belgium going from Roma to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. He also studied to become an artisan chocolate maker, and quipped that he might add a philosophic booklet to his chocolates. I'm sure you've heard of these famous Belgium delights.

We arrived at our bed and breakfast 'affittacamere' (a place that rents out rooms with breakfast included, like a 'chambre d'hote' in France, except without dinner) situated right next to a large Roman bridge. The name appropriately was, of course, Ponte d'Arbia.

We finally heard from our Italian friend Marco who was to walk with us a little, but a family illness has put that on hold. Sabine and Bertrand write daily and give us news of what lies ahead. As tomorrow is too long, and impossible to break, our host Sergio has offered to drive us a few kilometres out of town so we can actually make it – phew.

Many things are not what they seem - just look a bit closer and contemplate.



Soiled Paint

*Around these parts there was a special dust
Sienna 'twas a pigment from the earth,
Hydrated iron oxide was their lust
Just here was where this tincture had its birth.
Renaissance woke so many from their slumber
And artists quickly chose their major dyes,
Sienna with its friends, ochre and umber
Were snapped up by the painters who were wise.
Now Caravaggio was one of these
His 'darkening shadows pierced with shafts of light',
With Rembrandt that great visual artiste
Their pigment paintings shined throughout the night.
This rich sienna played a vital part
Enriching some of Europe's greatest art.*

Day 31 - Ponte d'Arbia to San Quirico d'Orcia

Sergio (our host) is up early to prepare our breakfast, feed his four donkeys and get ready for his day as bank manager in San Quirico. He directed me to the back seat and Corrie to the front. He loves to talk and must have realised that Corrie understood more Italian than me. She also speaks a lot with her hands. He drove us to our starting point about five kilometres away. A hug for me and a hand kiss for Corrie and we left this exuberant Italian.

Off into a deep fog, we could see little but the sagging cobwebs on the bushes flanking our narrow pathway. By 1000 the fog had mostly lifted as vestiges hung in the valleys, like low clouds dropping from above. Our pathway led high up into the hills and we delighted in the cool breeze on our 'so narrow ridge' where we could see the whole scene on both sides. After Marco heard where we were going he described it thus.

"You are entering the Val d'Orcia (Orcia Valley) with the beautiful colours of the countryside, the smooth shapes of the hills and the food. You're in the temple of the Tuscan kitchen and every product of the ground is a masterpiece of nature". He loved this area and suggested we try to eat directly from the farms, and taste the unusual wine in the caves.

Alas, we didn't eat in the farms or drink in the caves because it was too early, but we will try tomorrow. It's all that he said it was and more. The Tuscan countryside is becoming more grand, the hills steeper, the valleys sharper, the crops brighter, and I presume the soil is still exciting the artist's eye.

Because we mostly walk into the sun, I often need to look back to take photos so my camera is forcing me into taking in a panoramic vista. It is so quiet on the track, a few local cars and tractors, a dog and a cat or two, some Africans picking grapes, one walker, and a few people in a village, were our only potential relationships.

Weary from our walk I leant up against a street sign as Corrie and I tried to work out where Sergio's friend was, someone he recommended to us last night. As we were leaning and looking, a middle aged Italian couple pulled up in their car and gave us two freshly picked apples, how about that! I've never tasted a crunchy apple in Europe before, and tried to portray this to this thoughtful couple, with my amateur charades. They smiled, but it looked like a pitiful one.

Refreshed, we strolled down the street looking for our villa, and while dawdling outside what I thought could be our new home, Alessandra bongiorno'd to us from a top window and asked if I was William. She took us into their 'marble staircase mansion' and showed us to our inexpensive, but expensive looking, beautiful log furniture room. The bed, side tables, dresser, mirror, drawers and wardrobe and..... a rocking chair, were all made from logs. An added delight is viewing the stone walls of the old city from our bedroom window.

No spoken word needs to be the universal language, the hands are more descriptive and don't discriminate.



Affittacamere

*An affittacamere is like a chambre d'hote
Except that you don't get to eat at night,
However I would like for you to note
If village not too small then you just might.
Near roman bridge he fed his hungry mules
When we were fed he drove us to his work,
Because so far, we broke one of our rules
But still quite far we walked and did not shirk.
Our driver had a friend where we could stay
Past hugging bush, thru sagging webs and damp,
Through heavy fog we sightless felt our way
'Til Sergio's friend cried: "this is where you camp".
By word of mouth, two beds were found for us
Like family we were treated with no fuss.*

Day 32 - San Quirico d'Orcia to Gallina

We re-met the honeymooners in San Quirico and had a fun catch-up, swapping stories while reflecting on Stephania's other love affair with the Italian soil. I am sure Daniel is not fearful that this ongoing soiled affair will threaten their relationship in any way, rather, after some time, they could possibly make it a 'sesso a tre'. We wished Stephania a happy birthday, explored the local streets, then home to our mansion for the night.

Up late with lots of fog and only a short day ahead, so that gave us a chance to have breakfast with our hostess, Alessandra, following a young man's earlier departure. If we were on our Spanish walk we could not have imagined having someone leave before us. It made no sense that I once had to be the first to leave maybe it was the fear of missing out on something; spotting a deer before it was disturbed; or some other issue in an undisturbed part of my mind. A lovely cool morning, the sun, like a person without sight, feeling through the fog obstacle preventing it from lighting up the day.

Tracks and gravel roads led us nearly the whole way with very little traffic. The hills were long and the valleys deep, and what was supposed to be a short day lengthened as we walked. It was either longer than the book said or the degree of difficulty was making it feel that way. We passed four other walkers, a dozen holidayers going for their morning walks, the walking traffic being as sparse as the motor traffic, An uneventful day ended when we arrived at our sleeping village for the night – Gallina.

Walking home after finding no internet here or anywhere in this 'off the air' village, I bongiorno'd a cyclist as I always do (great camaraderie between them and us) and surprise, surprise, it was Daniel with the birthday girl. He had fully recovered and was so excited to be able to continue his journey and his honeymoon. Lovely to catch up with them both on her birthday, correct my blog address with them and maybe we'll hear from this delightful couple.

No place to eat or buy food in this small town, so the bar owner's Romanian wife cooked extra dinner as well as dessert with theirs, and gave that to us for our dinner. Lovely couple. Gallina is on the camino –and not promoted very well (hardly on the map), so it needs pilgrim's support to keep it open, and it is nearly the only place to break the otherwise 32 kilometre journey. Their bar is called 'Il Parallelo', and they are struggling. It is not a village as such, more just a 'time out from walking or driving type place', so the generous owners are very uncertain about their future prospects.

At home we have a kitchen, lounge and bathroom downstairs, our bed upstairs with a balcony, and the best, quietest and most friendly dog on the planet next door. The kitchen does not sit well with a local restaurant trying to get a business going, so we hope our support encourages others.

Losing your sight provides an opportunity to see more



The Honeymoon

*They probably did not know this but it's true
For honeymoons today, they can be journeys,
Before 'twas intimate for me and you
But now may be a long walk overseas.
The boy was English where it all began
The girl Italian, where they usually went,
Inside they go, no chance to get a tan
Adventure now, it's really time well spent.
15-4-6 where first month was the sweetest
In ancient times where sweetest was the bee,
We hear from them just only when they 'tweet us'
In days long past first contact when you 'see'.
At first the moon is shining, it's alright
But soon you'll need the skills on how to fight.*

Day 33 - Gallina to Radicofani

It rained all night but at the hint of dawn the stars could be seen, so only some patchy cloud danced around in the sky. We put our rain pants on as a precaution and then out on to a quiet tar road with my tiny torch our headlight. It is my favourite part of the day. Nearly everyone is still asleep, so no voices, no motors of any kind, no barking dogs, just us, and that eerie sense of being alone in this magical looking universe.

The bar owner had given us a 'heads up' re where to turn off, so didn't need to be acutely awake and stayed on the tar for a few kilometres, because we knew it had the only coffee shop until home again. Priorities often change on the camino depending on what is happening at the time. If you've just had a meal or a coffee, you look forward to all that the unbeaten track has to offer. It is not so much a camping trip, it is a route of villages, and to enjoy the fruits of what they have to offer, is part of the adventure.

Rain clouds hovered all around, mist lifted from the valleys, while raindrops dripping off the red berries were evidence of a wet night. For a change, we were walking along the valley floor (we dropped down a lot coming into Gallina) and it gave me a whole new perspective with a feeling of smallness, rather than a more dominant one.

The landscape remains similar to days gone by but more open, and it is now possible to see the landforms well into the distance. We walked with the sound of a trickling creek for some time, such a soothing feeling, crossing it a few times as our paths met. Up into the hills was not so calm as there were gunshots all around. This has been a constant since we entered Tuscany with ducks being added to my growing list of victims.

Radicofani is perched on the dome of a hill so our last five kilometres were a mostly gradual climb with a few challenging bits in between, but a cool overcast day made for perfect walking conditions, the sun appearing close to the village like a welcoming yellow carpet.

We looked at various places to stay but were not happy, although part of this journey is about not being too fussy, but we're old so we need to be a bit precious at times. The last shot was the macelleria owner who was closing for lunch and offered us a room in his house – lovely man, good price, and as I've always wanted, a clothes line outside our window above the street. We feel like part of the community now.

Other benefits were a lounge, a kitchen, and bathroom of course. It's really a house because he lives elsewhere and the other room is vacant. There was also fruit in the fridge, washing powder and a real double bed. How could we be any happier? The village was pristine, sitting on a sharp hill, that was unusual with its often very steep streets.

The 'maremma dog', a natural guardian angel providing a safe sanctuary to the vulnerable



Tuscan Hunters

*We heard a shot and then there was another
A shock at first cause it has been so quiet,
Then just in case, we dove to get some cover
And watched to see the person who would fire it.
They looked through us as though we were not there
We knew at once that they were Tuscan hunters,
Two men, two dogs, a rifle and a spare
To kill migratory birds and wild boar grunters.
The women stay at home to cook the kill
While men pursue this sad and cru-el sport,
Then come back home, their catch goes on the grill
While activists have stood and cried and fought.
The blackbirds, thrush, no longer overhead
To prison you will go if wolves seen dead.*

Day 34 - Radicofani to Ponte a Rigo

Another short walk today so a sort of sleep in, the fog obscuring even the nearest house. I think it's true, that mist becomes fog when you can't see something only a metre or two away. We are on the top of a high hill, and therefore in that place where we mostly and recently have been obscured, hidden from the world where nothing else exists. It is so quiet as we wake, the only sounds are ours. As Corrie heats up the milk for morning coffee I open my clothesline window, now an old hand at street laundry.

I wandered around our five-room house high up on via Roma (we don't need a map to tell us we are on track for Rome) on a narrow sharp sloping lantern-lit street in the ancient village of Radicofani, a fruiteria to one side, a piazza on the other. The fruiteria is open, the owner fussing about with his fresh produce, and the bar in the piazza just outside the archway is serving coffee to two walkers. It is not cold, my t-shirt still being adequate, and as we move out a kilometre from town we are warm.

Now it's down time as we start our gradual decline, (the topography that is, and so far not us), on our morning's walk. We are soon passed by a Swiss woman in her fifties and chat for a while as she struggles to keep down to our relatively slow pace. We've noticed the Swiss mostly travel alone, at a fast pace and for long distances at a time – she was travelling from Canterbury in England. Soon after a Swiss man hurried pass just in case we talked too much and held him back. Then a pensive Spanish man walked by steadfast in his focus, so I talked briefly to a young Italian girl struggling to keep going.

Down and further down we saw more sheep being cared for by these large white dogs, just quietly strolling about them keeping them safe, but with the odd disdainful bark at us as we come closer on our gravel road. Just a few cars joined us but without the normally predictable dust due to the early morning moisture. Nearing a small church which are our lodgings tonight, we found a bar to rest at and get a key from, because they happen to be the caretakers as well, and that's the whole village.

It's another large house and it's all ours. There are eight beds in two rooms, but just us tonight, so we have a four room 'donativo' home where we took ownership of the usually shared bathroom, made a double bed from two singles, put our feet up, and looked out onto tomato vines and poplars framed from behind by a large bare hill. For a moment we thought we would have to share our home with a large scary looking middle-aged walker as he peered in and saw Corrie and I lying on a bed staring out the window. He kept going probably thinking it was a nursing home!

The bar opens at 0600 tomorrow so no need to boil milk, and we'll be prepared for our longer day.

The real thief is the one who steals the truth



A Kind Robber

*The outlaw Ghino di Tacco lived up high
A medieval robber with a heart,
In Radicofani his trade he plied
And 'robbing people' his one special art.
He 'punished injustice and powerful men'
Forgave them if they chose to be more prudent,
Would leave them with some thing to eat and spend
Especially kind to poor and youthful students.
Boccaccio and Dante Alighieri
Both had a bit to say of his strange past,
So famous he became in history
This Robin Hood ensured his legend last.
Now buried high up in the 'Eagles Nest'
Lies Ghino and his stories, now at rest.*

Day 35 - Ponte a Rigo to Acquapendente

Putting our donation in the tin, we turned off the air conditioning and lights and left our exquisite nursing home. Around the corner there was coffee with some 'truckies' and a few early motorists. We stamped our credentials (proof of walking to Rome), before we tucked ourselves into the edge of the highway with hand light on. This was only for one kilometre then off into the Paglia Valley. This vast open space swallowed us up and nursed us along for most of the morning. So used to up and then down again, this seemed quite comforting.

We looked all about and saw landmarks that we knew, villages we'd been to and passed over, and rivers we'd seen from above adorned with their Roman bridges. We passed through wooded areas with their heavy shadows keeping us cool, thin tea-tree-type areas with their filtered light making pictures on the path, and warm wide open spaces lighting up the whole valley.

We passed no cycle, no walkers, a few sheep, a couple of horses, and a huge dairy farm. As we neared the farm we could hear Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons'. We passed a house we thought it came from, a paddock with a large silver tin on a piece of wood, and another house it didn't come from. So, the paddock, and the silver tin, it was not. It was, a large radio on a classical music station, for the cows' pleasure and to produce 'classic' Italian milk.

There is a lot of controversy around music, milk production, and quality, and we may never know the connections or results, but it is the idea of it that fascinates me. If I were choosing the music, I would probably choose Vivaldi's classic. After all, cows do produce milk over the four seasons and how appropriate to play the relevant season at the time. There could be a 'Spring milk', that puts a bounce in your walk; a 'Summer one', like a frozen yoghurt drink to cool the body during the hot months; an 'Autumnal drink', skim milk that helps shed unwanted addendums on your body; and then the hot and comforting 'Winter delight' that warms the soul. Maybe that is milking it a bit too much but I think the innovative advertisers would at least whey it up..sorry again.

The inspiration for this music came from the Mantuan countryside, where the cows live, so it's music from home. In his own home, Vivaldi may have felt the thoughts of his mother who wanted to send him off to the priesthood, whereby influencing him to have this music played by orphans. The music was written for the all female orphans music ensemble. How fitting, knowing the milk was produced by females and only available due to their calves being orphaned!

We climbed to our morning tea bar in a village once again perched on a hill. The place seemed nearly empty, a couple of men sitting about, shops closed, unusual for mid morning, but there was a bar. We moved out into the shaded areas once more steeply, very slowly and carefully until we joined a highway. A side path took us safely off the road but a long high hill made us work for our next sleep.

Find 'your' music and let it inspire and enrich your life



Moosic

*The music, it's the soul of Italy
When words cannot be found then there's a song,
Of love, romance to serenade your filly
Or simply show it's here that you belong.
In cafe doors, the bar, and on the street
On boats, in parks, the shower with a friend,
Combine it with a hug goodbye, or greet
A message to someone you need to send.
But what about to stimulate an udder
Produce more milk by simply playing moo-sic,
And does it work on every bovine mudder
Or fantasy and simply just too sick.
When too much stress, the Oxytocin slowed
When moosic played the more the milk then flowed.*

Day 36 - Aquapendente to Bolsena

I'm at that stage where I see the finish, but don't really want it to stop. I've found a type of emptiness before on these trips when I wake up and there's nowhere to go, the tracks come to an end but I want to keep going, but what for? That is my reflective moment for now.

While last night's dwelling was superb with a small exquisite dining room (closed tonight) just across from our room, the medieval nature of the village was spoiled somewhat by cars speeding through its narrow cobbled streets. It also meant the people couldn't really gather peacefully and talk, as happens in nearly all other villages we have passed through.

Away from this noisy street in the main part of town, was a quiet lane in the back part. Through a narrow door into a quaint bar area we ordered drinks. The friendly man added chips and tapas for two to the order. We ordered another two drinks and this time prosciutto, cheese and toast were added. When paying the bill we expected an inflated one but he had seen we were walkers so the food was free! Trying to be Italian I just paid and walked out trying to show my in-depth knowledge of Italian bar eating. Luckily, Corrie 'got it', and thanked him.

A flat path for most of the day was really handy because Corrie twisted her ankle early this morning and twisted ankles don't like hills and persistent people will not stop. So, at last, the final item in my medicine kit was used, the bandage, to strap the ankle that won't rest. Fortunately, the last 4kms was mostly flat, so Corrie defied her painful injury by racing home as per usual.

I passed a couple in their thirties, he was Italian, she was Spanish. Corrie was not at top speed yet, and it was a hill (my best slope) so she didn't get a chance to have a Spanish catch-up. The Swiss couple that passed us at different times yesterday, caught up with us in the piazza in a small village. As most people seem to complain about politicians, not so this middle aged Swiss couple. "There are seven people in charge in the Swiss government (very harmonious) and we vote on nearly everything", he said.

Our book told us that there was an access dispute just out of town where we might have to use the unsafe 'no path' highway bridge. It seemed the people on the safe 'back lane path' would not allow walkers through. Deciding to give it a go we took the safe lane. Immediately an angry older woman jumped on to the path with four angry dogs, and all we heard her say was "dogs", so we took the unsafe lane because it seemed safer!

A huge lake took our focus today as we left a small village. It showed us its fullness as we climbed and it peeked through the trees at us as we poled along a ridge in and out of woods and olive groves that swept down to its edges. In full view again it was a welcome companion, a new one, and it will also meet up with us again tonight.

Assuming prevents us from enriching relationships



Our Walks

*I'm at that stage, I see the end is near
It's then I feel I'm set to do much more,
To stop, a waste, we come just once a year
We travel from our home, a distant shore.
Is it, we, don't see what drives us on
Or leads us up those unfamiliar tracks,
That calls to us long after we are gone
To ask us both, when we are coming back?
Is it time is slowly running out
Or maybe it's that challenge that I need,
Or if I stop, may lose what life's about
Then time to focus on, what is, my creed?
Simply I think they work for us, these walks
Inspiring us, and enriching our talks.*

Day 37 - Bolsena to Montefiascone

Dinner in a lantern-lit street. I'm back in heaven. No-one much seems to sit outside, but we do, watching locals wander in and out of mysterious 'doors in a wall'. Behind them there may be a room; a noble or tiny courtyard, leafy or not; a long hall or narrow laneway; a place for your bike; a rubble of decayed house parts; an artist's studio; a spiral staircase; or a grand one like ours leading to our room. We watched people move in and out of shadows left by dimly lit lanterns; in and out of more types of '..erias' than you could imagine; bold dogs, wary cats, bikes, and no cars. A village street backdrop to our reminiscing.

Some hours later and back in the same street, was an older man on his way to a bar, a cat and us. Lanterns are still alight providing an imagined cosiness to a cool morning, the sky lights obscured by the grey and white blanket below, a few drops not encouraging enough to let our rain pants out for a walk. Six men in a bar watched as we placed our poles against the entrance wall and removed our packs, their loud exchanges falling silent for a moment as though their morning sanctuary was being violated. I moved to the bar like a gunman under siege in the wild west, until I cleared the air with an 'aussie bongiorno'.

The lake, like an ocean without the huge waves, was a special treat, with huge trees making a splendid entrance and large old mansions showing weary signs of previous grandeur, now maybe getting a glance from the busy tourist. It washed in and out of our walk today as we glimpsed it from up in the hills or as it laid itself out in full view. As we moved out of a small forest past sheep with their white dog shepherds, noticing two shooters with their retrievers ahead of us, we decided to talk, so we couldn't be mistaken for the shooters' lunch.

The Italian and Spanish couple soon came into view in front as we emerged from our forest track, after a long period of open field paths and gravel roads. A bit weary we sat by a river amongst magnificent old tall trees, the undergrowth manicured for our comfort. A very tall Dutchman approached just as our grapes and nectarine had departed for another world, and we walked and talked together until our destination, but only once we were satisfied our walking paces were conducive. He was very easy to be with and we talked on many interesting subjects, one he was especially fond of was the difference between 'managing the mind and managing people'.

Past a real waterfall then one more, with that special sound of falling water adding a soothing background to conversations that lessen the strain of steep paths. Philip left us to stock up at the supermarket as we climbed to yet another hilltop village, where the clouds were still shutting out the lights, as we looked for a place where we could, tonight, also shut the lights out. After combing the village Piazza and laneways we found ours, just outside the old city with a balcony the size of a small Piazza overlooking the valley we had just visited.

Try something different for the first time, and see where it takes you.



The Street Table

*There's nothing like a table in the street
To sit and watch the village do its thing,
The smells and sounds, it's where the locals meet
And you can see the tower and hear it ring.
I've seen them take the whole footpath as theirs
The road, the new and only place to go,
At times it's raised, and so nobody cares
It's much the same, you're still in the front row.
It's here you can engage with passers-by
"Excuse me can you take our photo please?"
Or ask directions, use Italian, try
Your conversation then will flow with ease.
So try and get the table on the street
And with your food you'll get an extra treat.*

Day 38 - Montefiascone to Viterbo

It rained all night but it was only a dense fog that blurred the steep cobblestoned lanes as we walked past the hazy lit shops. Once again just a few people wandering the sloping streets with their newly washed smoothed stones. This main street continues its long slightly curved journey for over five hundred metres then back down on a tarmac road, and then, the longest, steepest, downhill gravel and dirt path we have seen so far. Cars were going so very slowly in case they started to slide or run us over.

Then it was flat and straight. The boy from Israel passed with his gps. This technical marvel can be really helpful when in difficulty, but really not needed on most occasions. A bit of rain and we'd come prepared so no need to stop. Then a Roman road. Large smooth grey stones were the evidence of this ancient road about two metres wide, surprisingly not slippery after the washing, and, it added a bit of feeling to the track.

Along a puddled track two white shepherd dogs jumped out on the road barking loudly, one especially confronting, three puddles away. I put my sticks on ready and quietly manoeuvred our way around. Just one metre past and he showed no interest at all. Our Dutch friend soon caught us, so we walked and talked together on a narrow white gravel track that we could see far into the distance. We passed some people attempting to cure their ills in outdoor rock spa baths, about six people big.

Then it decided to rain for about an hour, so we tested our rain gear. Philip's cheap Aldi coat probably did the best along with Corrie's two dollar shop poncho. My New Balance non-waterproof shoes are okay in light rain but could not hold out this constant waterfall. We looked at the graffiti tunnel under the motorway and entered it with the dignity expected in a five star hotel. We removed our gear and prepared a snack. I leant against a graffiti wall, Philip sat in the ditch with his legs high up in front and Corrie stood, while two cars drove respectfully through our new instant dining room.

We were getting cold, Philip's 6'6" frame looked ensconced in the ditch, and the rain was not going away, so another hour of heavy rain stayed with us until the end of our days walk. A small hotel in a side lane with a wifi password that made us feel right at home - 'Australia'.

Inner soles were removed, newspaper stuffed in to shoes, rain gear hung in the shower space, undried clothes from the day before laundry were laid out to dry, and half a ham sandwich leftover from yesterday's lunch was consumed with a squashed grape and broken biscuit desert. My one pair of shoes were too wet to take me to lunch and Corrie's ankle needed some long awaited rest. The good thing about being in a hotel when things are wet, is that they have a hair dryer, which on these walks, are used for everything but hair.

A reflection of the protector, mirrors an aggressor as well



The Puddle

*The puddle's insignificance seems great
Inconsequential to the passer by,
Distraction at the most, it doesn't rate
A nuisance to avoid, at least to try.
But when you walk a lot, in it you tread
And blisters gather to impede your way,
The puddle now becomes a thing to dread
No longer can you walk the same each day.
But if you can avoid this travesty
And see this pool now in another light,
Reflections show this puddle tells a story
And now it rates a special pure delight.
When passing puddles take a look within
They do much more, than irritate your skin.*

Day 39 - Viterbo to Vetralla

The big light had the sky all to itself today and painted the few whispers of cloud with those fiery colours only it can do. Along the ubiquitous gravel tracks deep down in eroded earth we earnestly trod; through gated pathways we assertively went; up short eroded and rocky hills we purposefully strode, down loose rock roads we joyously danced, but.... carefully.

Along this morning's Via Francigena we were alone, and experienced similar feelings to our first few days. All experiences of walking for us (Corrie and I have talked about them), have been a mixture of good and not so good. The good parts of walking alone, for us, have been: a chance to contemplate, stop when we want, listen to nature, and observe and walk at our pace. Even walking alone, there is always the farmer's greeting, the twelve touring bike riders' nods, the well wishes of the lone girl riding the track as we walk it, and the friendly waves from the not so common camper vans.

So it was special to hear the tumbling of the water under a small wooden bridge for only a few noisy waterways have crossed our paths. We delighted in hearing the little birds that conversation can exclude, and passing through so few wooden areas has meant fewer of them. The silence probably allowed the greenish-black snake to slither across the track in front of us, and our tired bodies may never have been accommodated by those well shaped rocks, that broad based tree, and that just 'right-in-size' crash barrier.

The different greens of new grass that gives the olive trees a renewed glow, of freshly sown winter crops that flow out to the edges of the raw soil, and of the long bent bamboo trees that fold together above our track, of the statuesque pines, majestic firs and laden fruit trees that have graciously decorated large farm estates for many decades past. All these provide a spring freshness, even though the patient winter hovers on the grassy verges.

We arrived at our albergo, yes, on the top of the hill, and did all those things we always do that you already know about. Wandering through the isolated streets looking for a pizza (it's been a while) we found a shop with freshly cooked ones, but we really wanted a seat in this unusually seatless shop. After asking if I could take the one chair outside, she brought out one from her dining room, and a table, and set them up on the cobbled footpath next to her broken sign.

After this special treat we did some more exploring and went home. As we walked in, we saw the Swiss couple whom we had some fun with a few days back and being fast walkers, we thought they had moved on. However Roland's knee had refused to even get out of bed one morning so they had to wait for it to revive, which it reluctantly did. When I asked him how it was for him to have this knee uncertainty now he's so close to the finish line, he said: "At my age I am happy just to wake up in the morning". I laughed in nervous agreement.

The sounds of silence



That's Me

*At times I wish to be there in the centre
To be a part of that fast flowing stream,
And then a bridge calls out for me to enter
And takes me there, so I can live my dream.
At first a rock, the water gathers round
A log, it carries on its deep blue shoulders,
A bird that sings a tune, a quiet sound
That disappears when I become the boulders.
The rock stays strong as feelings swirl about
The log lies back and just goes with the flow,
The bird, a tender, loving cry, no shout
The boulders try to block, no wish to grow.
The bridge, across its feelings, speaks to me
"I once was whole, I used to be a tree".*

Day 40 - Vetralla to Sutri

We left Ros and Roland and the Englishman, who began in Canterbury, England, Philip and the Canadian foursome, at home, and went looking for our path. A huge stately forest garden invited us in, and we walked through it quietly as it seemed to warrant. Through fields of hazelnut trees we came to a 'no-sign' corner of the field uncertain where to go. Soon the Canadians arrived with a 'gps' that immediately found us a road.

Today just one town, but what a town, another hilltop one with intricate paths, steep, oh so narrow streets, bend after bend, ivy covered walls, small nooks in their various shapes and decorations. This and more was the curious village of Capranica. We stopped here as all our other companions arrived one by two by four. Just Philip joined us for coffee, the others preferring to get to their next sleep. We left Philip looking for pasta, and ventured off into a small jungle with so many birds, happy they had found an oasis amongst the treeless fields. Small waterfalls splashed behind half broken narrow wooden bridges, as the river's many moss-covered rocks caused an array of sounds as the water washed against them.

We moved along dark leafy pathways, round intricate bends and past stunningly shaped rocks, climbing and dipping narrow paths, and nature's orchestra. These types of days do not make us weary, as it is an adventure inside an adventure as we were constantly entertained with something new but also very old.

A dog stood in our path appearing very frightened then ran away with an anxious bark. A man with a mobile asked us if we had seen a dog on the track. After receiving a 'yes', two cars roared past, then after a minute, another, and then one more. We could hear the dog's bell ring (bells are used so they don't eat the shooters' loot) and were worried the dog was in trouble. We'll never know, but it takes little to remove the silence of nature. Soon we were back on the tarmac and climbing that hill for our bed. We will need a lot of rest tonight, for it is a long way between sleeps tomorrow.

The Bronze age village of Sutri has a very long history. The unusual caves they lived in, the amphitheatre they built, and much more, lay the foundation for this still serene and intimate town. We threaded our way up a meandering central silent street to the main piazza. With a glorious fountain in its centre, this communal part of every village invited silence, and that's very difficult when there are thirty people eating at an osteria and a dozen at a bar.

Just a stone's throw away was this beautiful stone building. The most delightful elderly couple invited us in to their luscious upstairs apartment that reeked of antiquity. After a short tour it was back down the ample marble staircase with our also large breakfast prepared for tomorrow in our kitchen, we relaxed. Soon I was pretending to be a local once more as I nonchalantly hung the washing again, on a line overhanging the street.

Its vital to look to your source before you can see your goal



A Fountain

*Piazas are the living throbbing heart
Where temples signified a war victory,
Today with peace there is a brand new start
With people choosing now, community.
Some are grand, imposing in their size
Italian cities host the very best,
Hotel De Ville, their exceptional prize
The Mairie close behind is on the crest.
Then there are all the smaller hearts that beat
Their intimacy is their greatest gift,
Each building has a story to repeat
Emotions that once dormant seem to shift.
In Sutri with its fountain centrepiece
Is one of these, no hint of war, just peace.*

Day 41 - Sutri to Campagna di Rome

On our way out in the dark we used our torches to look for walking signs which did not necessarily want to be found, and, to explore a couple of the caves which were easy to find, the early birds the only sound. Another gorgeous walk as we intermittently crossed minor traffic roads where our torch flashes again were a good solution to a longer life.

A white dog again, but not caring for sheep this time, just cars, as he/she walked down the road. I think it's true that there is an intuitive part in your breeding that says: 'this is what you will naturally want to do'. So when your sheep is no longer there and something else moves, there is a natural instinct to round it up, even though the risks are greater. Maybe our natural human instincts are squashed by our need for money, so we work at something we may or may not like while our natural abilities (which we may even be unaware of), get left to slumber. I did not want this dog to be 'slumbered' by a car.

I went to the nearest property and pressed their intercom, saying in poor Italian: "cane blanco". "Arrive" came back with a female voice, as the huge gate drew itself back. I couldn't 'arrive' because the 'just as large mansion' was way down the white gravel road, and two massive Alsatians sauntered out as though to handcuff me and take me to their boss. Being a bit dog savvy myself, I didn't run, and as the gate was closing, they went back inside, which made the gates open again and out they came again, and then..... I'm sure she thought I was saying her canes were out when they weren't but when the gates opened they were, and then... Sadly I had to leave the shepherd dog to its fate.

This was all too much for us, so we took time out in a park by a river and let the vertebrae just do their normal job. Our Dutch friend Philip (who is walking for pleasure) sat with us, bringing his brand new Italian friend (who was discovering the regions around his home, Milano) with him. We now have an interpreter through to Rome, a room reserver and a guide. Thank you Ermanno. A fun time was had with these two convivial middle-aged men as we had a snack by the little wooden bridge over the river.

The little bit older (but younger than us) Swiss couple joined us as we reached our second last night on the track. In the piazza we ate lunch and had a long discussion. Roland the Swiss man, said (without any sense of ego), that the Swiss and Dutch rail services are the best in the world. Philip disagreed, saying the Swiss were well ahead of everyone. They all agreed that Europe was a great place to live and there were only small differences. Roland said the Germans weren't their closest friends, especially the high Germans who go to Switzerland and take their jobs (the Swiss pay more). The Italian man nearly choked on his panini when I said even red wines had screw tops in Australia, and nearly fell off his chair when I followed up with: "and we take our own wine to a restaurant".

To rediscover your instincts, stop thinking for a while



Campagna di Roma

*The morning light escapes the darkened clouds
Two people stand as stranded, and still souls,
A journey stopped just while some distant shrouds
With hidden thoughts and feelings of their goals.
Some curious trees bend down as if to hear
The silent meditations on this track,
Of hope, regret, and any other fear
That questions to keep on or turning back.
A giant lake or ocean lies before
The cloudy water back from whence it came,
A swamp reflects the trees close to the shore
The shadows of the two reflect the same.
The artists of the world, it's here they flocked
Campagna di Roma now, is never mocked.*

Day 42 - Campagna di Roma to La Storta

Home was a sixty bed parrochia split into six, ten-bed-bunk rooms that were not actually for walkers but for young people, which we were obviously not. However, only a young German biker arrived (and later ate with us) so there was plenty of room for us all. The two men had a room to themselves as did we. We left the two of them sleeping and spent the morning with the birds and the river, and, as is often the case, seeing no other walkers.

This low lying region of Lazio was an important agricultural and residential area prior to the middle ages. The Roman Campagna, which lies just short of Rome was abandoned at this time due to a lack of irrigation water for farming and a large prevalence of Malaria. This pristine area is bordered by mountains to the north, hills to the south-east and seas to the south-west. Wilhelm, Boddington, Lorraine, Bocklin, Coleman, Corot and hundreds of others crowded into this 'artists' paradise' in the 18th and 19th centuries to keep the memories of these wonderful landscapes alive, for today, all that remains pristine, is the Appian Way.

The men soon caught us for coffee as a Danish couple we had seen on the track earlier, also walked in. The four of us, now an inseparable item, moved out through a busy rainforest, past our first major waterfall and over small crusty stones (used for paving in wet spots) called tufo, which they get from nearby caves. We passed the Danish couple and I chatted with this amiable physiotherapist about Parkinson's and new developments, while she talked about new therapy for those with Multiple Sclerosis.

I joined Corrie and the boys and we walked together in a very relaxed way, taking a long break on a corner of the track. After another hour or so we had another break a few kilometres from home. The four exhausted Canadians now joined us for drinks before we left in the rain on our final leg. Rosmarie and Roland soon came by and walked with us until they arrived at their home. A lot of fun, discussion and laughter formed the theme of all these encounters.

Our new residence (also a donativo) has a similar ambience to the last, and each pair of us once again has a six-bunk room to ourselves, only one other room is occupied. So we rest once more and for the last time, about twenty kilometres from Roma. It's been another great experience where we have met some wonderful people from so many places. Sadly we will miss Sabine as she flies home to France tomorrow and we promised to see her next year, but we will see her good friend Bertrand who will still be in Rome.

Just a note on one of the photos I sent. Those trees over the house are called pino mediterranean trees. They are all over Italy as is the similar cypress or pencil pine. We love them as Corrie also loves the cypress, so they are in many of our photos. On this penultimate day mixed feelings have the body wanting to finish, but the mind wanting to walk amongst the trees.

A photo, a painting, a poem all keep a story alive



Friends from Afar

*Sabine and Bertrand, French that we first saw
Their joy de vive, we loved them at first sight,
Then Dutchman, Philip with his thoughts so raw
Philosopher, he brought new things to light.
Ermanno then, a very passionate guy
From Italy he won us with his charm,
Roland and Ros, the Swiss they seem to fly
With ready wit to share and she so calm.
There is a bond because of what was shared
We've stayed with them and ate food at their table,
And walked again, for them we really cared
Our time together is a living fable.
The stories that we shared will never fade
We'll see them once again - the past parade.*

Day 43 - La Storta to Roma

The rain has left us a freshly washed path as the sun tempered the morning chill. We had our last breakfast with the flying Italian, Ermanno, with his natural ease and his ready smile, and the ever steady towering Philip, before we began our noisy walk through outer Roma on the via Cassia. Two large parks quietened us as we reflected on the final stretch of a long and rewarding journey.

At our last morning bar break, three walkers of the long camino from Canterbury joined us, Roland and Ros, the Swiss couple who have been a constant joy, and determined Nicholas from England. Nicholas was the man who peered into our donativo and who I had said, may have seen us and thought it was a nursing home. Roland and I stood at the bar drinking our last cup of coffee like two old Italian locals, while the others filled the bar noisily like the younger Romans would. The Danish couple later joined us as we paused for panini, and the Canadians dropped by as we looked out over the seven hills of Rome.

With Ermanno setting a lively pace, maybe to get us more quickly off the streets, we walked like Parkinson's people doing John Pepper's fast walking (a technique used in an attempt to reduce those nasty Pd symptoms). Or maybe our Italian friend thought that this exercise may prevent Pd because he had shown great interest when I explained it to him earlier. The real answer, we discovered later, was that he was so excited about getting to Rome, he could not wait to finally get there and receive his prized 'camino certificate'.

Then the final three kilometres through the busy streets of Rome to St Peters. It was a surreal feeling. After forty three days of constant walking, rarely in crowds of any size, just one or two walking companions with whom we shared everything, a close companionship formed through a common purpose, a new home every night, and with the same daily goal of walking and reaching a certain village to sleep. Then suddenly in the space of fifty paces we are on crowded streets in one of the most populated cities on earth. We look different to the locals and the tourists, with faded, dirty walking pants, worn out shoes, hiking poles, a bush hat and a weary look, that don't blend easily with this exciting city.

So many thoughts are going through my mind on this, the last day. Is this the last time we will see our friends? Will we catch up with our French companion? There is regret that we arrived a day late to spend some time with Sabine. Will we get a chance to say a proper farewell to our Swiss friends because we don't know where they are staying? And what will the next few days bring as we adjust to life as watchers more than participators?

Hugs and kisses with the two boys, and Corrie and I were off again in search of accommodation. Eating pasta on a pavement cafe, we accidentally found a small three-star hotel near the station (that is where you go when Rome is booked), and received a large five star treatment from the best hotel owner in town.

I attempt to treat each day as the last



The Last Day

*I struggle for words as I think of my last poem
The feelings collide as my mind tries to take it all in,
The people we've met and loved since we left home
The sights we've seen, the places that we have 'bin'.
Each night a new town, new food, new host, new bed
Each day a new path, new temp., and natural things,
The pains, the gains, the life that we have led
It's time to ponder this journey and see what it brings.
To be in the present is the thing that I've learnt most
Do it now while I can, I'll never know when I can't,
It's good that I'm able, it's not a good thing to boast
I can do these things but I'll never be a Rembrandt.
Be there for each other, there's no greater quality
We loved this walk, a special reality.*

