

Europe 2011

Paris, France - Rome, Italy - Reggio-Emilia, Italy - Evian-les-Bains, France

Bonjour Paris!



After hauling bags from the airport through the subway and changing trains which required too many stairs, we exited the Paris Metro in the shadow of the Arc de Triomphe. While trying to figure out which of the twelve streets to take from the Arc to our hotel, we ran into our first tourist scam. A guy walking by pretends to find a gold ring and pick it up. Then he tries to get money from you for the ring. All my reading paid off and we sent him quickly on his way. Gotta love Paris!





The hotel was very nice and the location was perfect. We dumped our bags and took off walking. That first afternoon we checked out the neighborhood shops, strolled down the Champs Elysees then walked over to see the Eiffel Tower where we bought crepes from a street vendor and sat and watched all the people going to and from the tower.

It's true that keeping moving the first day you arrive in Europe will help beat the jet lag. We were in bed by 9:00 p.m. though.



Our second day in Paris was rainy and cool but that was fine as it kept the number of tourists down and there were less scammers around. We took a walking tour through the village of Montmartre, which we had only briefly visited on our previous trip to Paris.

What an amazing place. It was a country village on a hill which wasn't really a part of Paris until the 19th century. This is where artists like Van Gogh, Degas, Renoir and Toulouse-Latrec lived and worked because it was so cheap.

We started at Place Abbess and the "I Love You" wall where the phrase I love you is written in hundreds of languages. Next we walked by the Bateau-Lavoir (boat house) where Picasso lived then visited a great Dali museum.







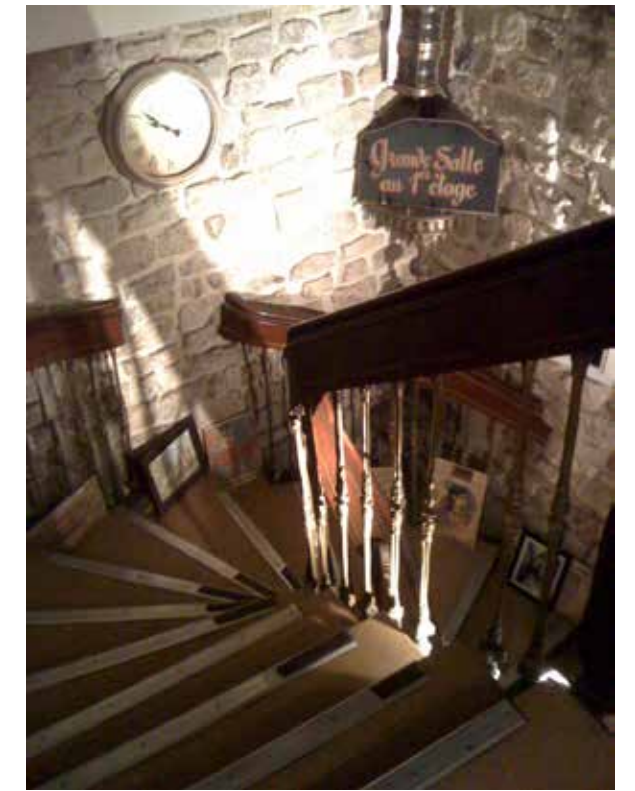


After the worst onion soup, actually the worst food I've ever tasted in Paris, we walked on to the top of the hill of Montmartre to see the Basilica of the Sacre Coeur, a great huge domed church with awesome views of the city and tons of tourists.

We snapped a few photos there and walked on past the last remaining vineyard and a 400 year old windmill then on to Pigalle, the Paris red-light district where the Moulin Rouge and Le Chat Noir have their risque shows.



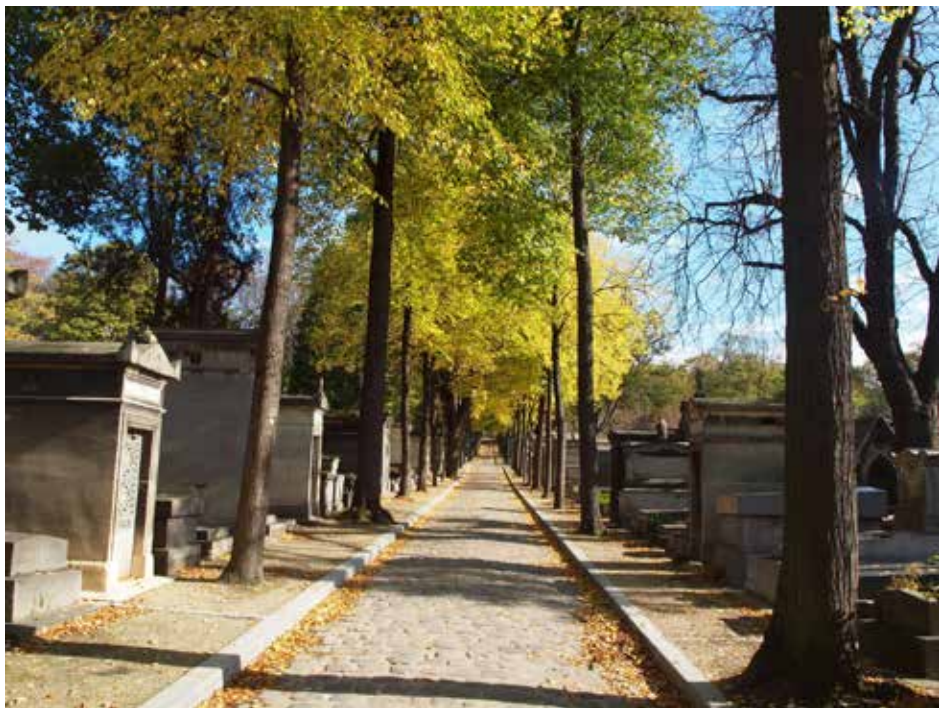
This is when it really started raining so we grabbed some sandwiches and headed into the nearest Metro and back to the hotel.



That night for dinner we headed to the Rive Gauche (left bank of the Seine River) and the Latin Quarter which has all kinds of restaurants, lots of students from the Sorbonne and many colorful characters. We found a cute little restaurant with old stone walls and excellent boeuf bourguignon.

After dinner the rain had stopped so we did the tourist thing and browsed the shops for souvenirs and made a stop by Notre Dame.





Our third and last day in Paris, we picked up a breakfast of croissants and toured the Père Lachaise Cemetery. Established in 1804, it was named for a Jesuit priest who lived in the time of Louis XIV. The cemetery is built on a hillside and is enormous, it contains over 1 million burials not counting those in the columbarium where cremated remains are kept.

An interesting thing about this cemetery is that the plot is only temporary unless the person is exceptionally famous. After 30 years if the lease is not renewed the remains are removed and a new burial can take place. A person may only be buried in Père Lachaise if they were a Paris resident or if they died there.

Some of the famous graves are Jim Morrison, Frédéric Chopin, Oscar Wilde, Georges Bizet, Maria Callas and Eugène Delacroix. Besides the famous people, the cemetery is beautiful, it's like walking through a huge sculpture park. The art is quite diverse and beautiful.





For lunch we bought street food and headed to the Luxembourg Gardens and people watched. Parisians really enjoy their parks. There was one old gentleman strolling around who I think was channeling Maurice Chevalier. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd started singing songs from the movie "Gigi".

The gardens surround the Luxembourg Palace, built by Marie de' Medici, the widow of King Henry IV of France in the early 1600's. It is now the seat of the French Senate.



Benvenuti a Roma!



Since Kirk had never traveled by train, we decided to take the night train to Rome. We had a private compartment with bunk beds which was nice, although Kirk wasn't too impressed with the European idea of a light comforter that's about a foot shorter than he is for covers. We settled in for a fifteen hour train ride to Rome.

I learned the hard way on my first trip to Europe not to over pack. Since then when I've traveled with Kirk I have insisted that we each take no more than one carry-on suitcase and a small backpack no matter how long we'll be gone. He resisted for a while but after watching a couple with multiple large bags struggle to get on the train that evening he changed his tune. That poor man took one big bag at a time to their cabin while his wife waited with the others on the platform.





Early the next morning we arrived at the Roma Termini in the midst of a very loud protest. I would have liked to know what they were protesting but, they were blowing vuvuzela horns (like at soccer games) so loud we couldn't stay in the station. Fortunately we only had two blocks to walk to our hotel.

Since we had hotel points to use on this trip in Paris and in Evian, I splurged on the Albergo Mediterraneo hotel in Rome. I am so very glad I did. The location was convenient for walking to the major sites, their breakfast had a great selection and the rooms were huge and had a refrigerator. They also had room service which turned out to be very important.

Again, we had a great location on Via Cavour. Just a couple of blocks to several museums and the Piazza Repubblica, the ruins of the Diocletian Baths and some of the most amazing churches in Rome. My favorite was the Basilica Santa Maria degli Angeli e dei Martiri which was design by Michaelangelo using a portion of the Diocletian ruins as the base for the structure.





Another interesting feature of the Basilica Santa Maria is the meridian line, a sort of sundial. In about 1700 Pope Clement XI commissioned the Italian scientist Francesco Bianchini to build a meridian line inside the church. The sun comes in an opening high up on the wall and strikes the line at various points during the year, such as the summer and winter solstice and Easter.

One reason this church was chosen was its age. Since it was so old, the ancient walls had stopped settling and wouldn't move the observation points out of line.



On our second day in Rome we set off to see more ruins, churches and museums. A walk straight down Via Cavour took us to the Forum, Coliseum, Monument of Victor Emmanuell II (aka The Wedding Cake) and the beautiful Capitoline museums.

We started wandering without consulting the map and found ourselves at the Tiber River where we took a break and checked out the vendors on the foot bridge leading to an island in the river where we found, of course, another church.













We eventually made our way to the Pantheon where we circled with the other tourists. It's pretty amazing that this building was finished in 126 by Hadrian on the site of an earlier building dating from about 31 BC when it was a temple to the ancient Roman gods. In the 7th century it was taken over by the Roman Catholic church. Even at 2,000 years old, it's still the largest unreinforced concrete dome in the world. At the top is an oculus which is open to the elements and in the floor below is a drain for the rain water that comes in.



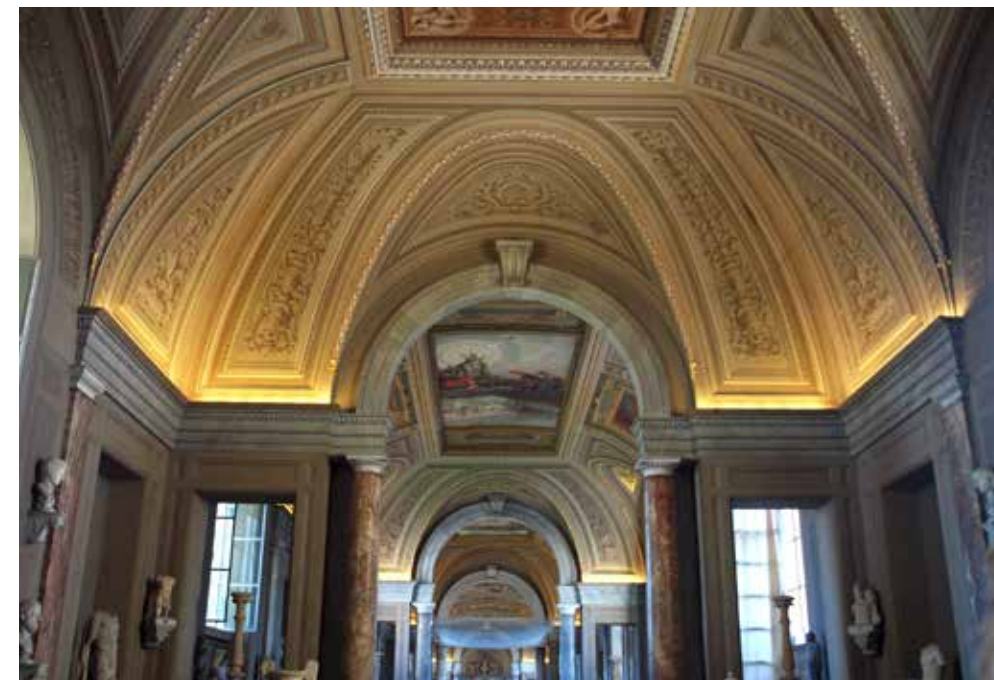
After all the walking we were ready to sit so we headed to my favorite place in Rome, the Piazza Novona. This is a long piazza containing Bernini's sculpture, "Fountain of the Four Rivers" and it is an amazing people watching spot. Especially the people selling knock-off bags. When the police come by, they bundle up their wares in blankets looking innocent until the officers pass on then they carefully lay them out for sale again.

When we finally made it back to the hotel I was really sick, fever, chills and all. There was no way I was going out for food. That's when we discovered that Italian vegetable soup is excellent. It was so good, I had it the next night also. Gotta love room service.



Our third morning in Rome the cold I had felt coming on the day before was in full force. I took Ibuprophen and we decided to use Rome's subway to get to the Vatican. I must say, using Rome's subway really is best when you have a stuffy nose.

As soon as we came up out of the subway we were bombarded by people selling "no queue" tours of the Vatican. They wanted €50 for a tour where the only advantage stated was not standing in line. We declined and actually enjoyed the 45 minutes we stood in line people watching. We met two Greek ladies who were tickled over their purchase of a scarf at less than half the street vendor's asking price. We also only paid €15 to visit the Vatican.





Another great guidebook find was that there are two exits from the Sistine Chapel, one back into the museum, the other to a short path leading right into St. Peter's Basilica which is used by tour groups. We slid right in with a bunch of Asian tourists and out the back door. It cut at least an hour off going from the museum to the basilica, thank goodness because the drugs were wearing off and my cold was making itself known. It's just not polite to blow your nose in the middle of St. Peter's.





I had become a fan of the 15th century Baroque artist Gianlorenzo Bernini on my first trip to Rome so I was really excited to see his work in St. Peter's. The canopy he created over the Papal Altar is so worth the trip to see. All of his other works there are a bonus. He also designed St. Peter's Square. Ok, yes, I love Bernini. I even stopped in a museum just to buy a book on his work and visited several other places to see his sculptures and the church where he is buried.



After a nice lunch we were back on the subway and made a brief stop at the Spanish Steps (built by the French). This served two very important purposes. The first is that I knew Kirk would love the Via Condotti, the very high end shopping street of Rome, comparable to Chicago's Miracle Mile. All the best are there; Armani, Hermes, Vuitton, Vanentino, Ferragamo. The second is that I needed a pharmacy as I was feeling worse by the minute.

It's very interesting to walk into a pharmacy where you don't speak the language and try to get a decongestant. My first words were "parli Inglese?" (Do you speak English?) and the response was "no." After a big sigh, I sniffed my nose hard, pointed to it and said "decongestant." It worked! At least I'm pretty sure the spray she gave me was for my nose. It sure did un-stuff my head.



Unfortunately for my feet, Rome is built on hills, everything seems to be up or down from where you are. Also unfortunate, the only place you don't have to pay to sit is outside on public benches, stairs or curbs. If you go to a cafe to have a coffee or snack, you pay one price to stand at the counter and more to sit at a table.

I've heard people wonder why there are always so many people sitting on the Spanish Steps. I figured out why, it's *free!* There's really nothing that remarkable about the Spanish Steps other than they're very tall (138 steps) and there are always a bunch of people sitting on them.

Near the Spanish Steps in the Piazza di Spagna is another Bernini sculpture. It's actually a creation of both Gianlorenzo Bernini and his father Pietro Bernini. It was completed

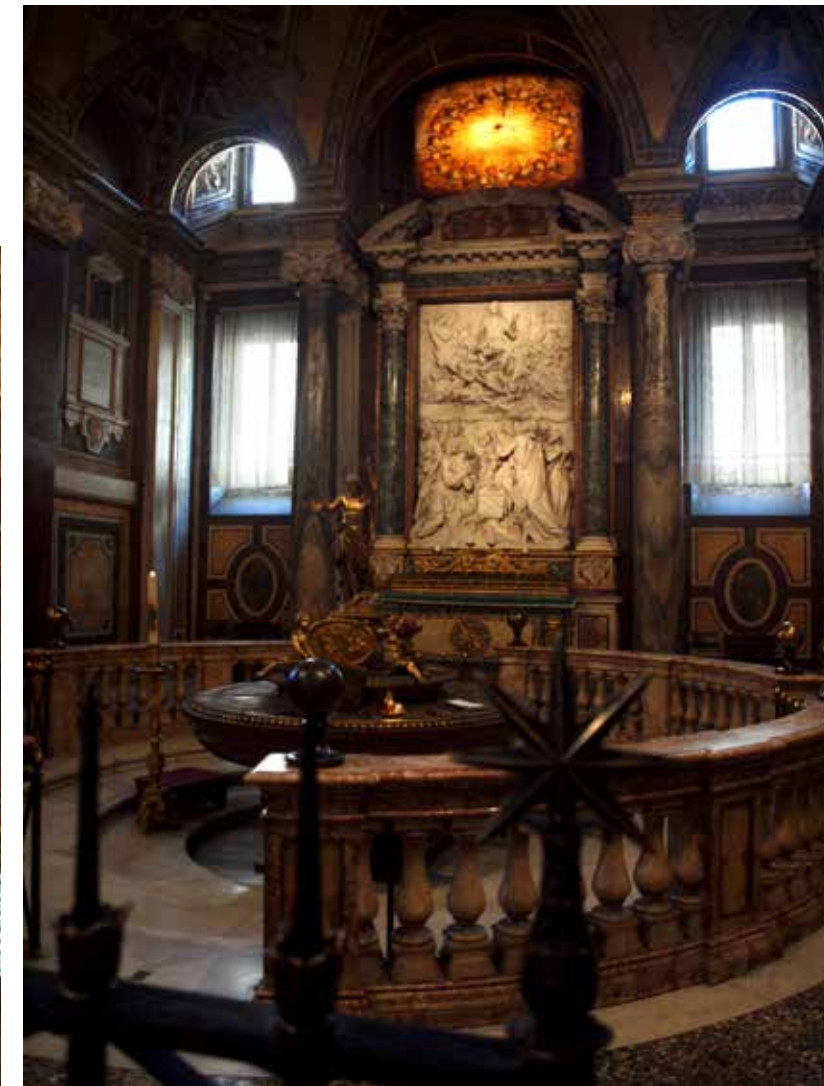


in 1627. It's not one of my favorites and apparently there's a good reason, the name of the sculpture is "Fontana della Baraccia" (Fountain of the ugly Boat). It's supposed to be a half-sunken ship but to me it looks more like a dying fish. However it looks, it is a good place to sit for free.



Our last day in Rome, a Sunday, we started wandering again. I wanted to see the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore just down the street from our hotel. At the time all I knew about it was that Bernini was buried in 1680 at the age of 81.

While we were there being tourists they rang the bell for mass so we took a seat in the back row and Kirk attended his first Catholic mass, said in Italian. We understood about one



in twenty words but it was interesting. We did slip out about twenty minutes into the service.

From Santa Maria we walked on to the church that has the one Bernini sculpture I just had to see in Rome, The “Ecstasy of Saint Teresa” which is in the Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria. It was everything the photos had promised and more!



We walked more that day than any other in Rome. From the churches to the Presidential Palace to the Trevi Fountain where we had Gelato. We moved on to the more reasonably priced shopping street, Via del Corso, where I think Kirk looked in every shop.

That night we had great food at da Robertino on Via Panisperna. It's a little neighborhood restaurant with no tourists and little English. I finally had my favorite Roman dish, Carbonara. Lovely!



Ciao Reggio Emilia!



We arrived in Reggio Emilia on Monday afternoon and again only had to walk a couple of blocks to our hotel. Our friend Monica, who is from Reggio, arranged our hotel and it was excellent. The Albergo Morandi is a small, family run hotel and everyone is so friendly. Our room was very nice, quite large really, on the top floor with a great view of tiled roof tops and the main street of Reggio's old town.

After a great pizza from a small pizzeria around the corner, we took a walk in the rain down a very nice covered walkway where Kirk happily window shopped. We decided the Italian idea of an afternoon nap was excellent and we went back to the hotel and relaxed until dinner time.

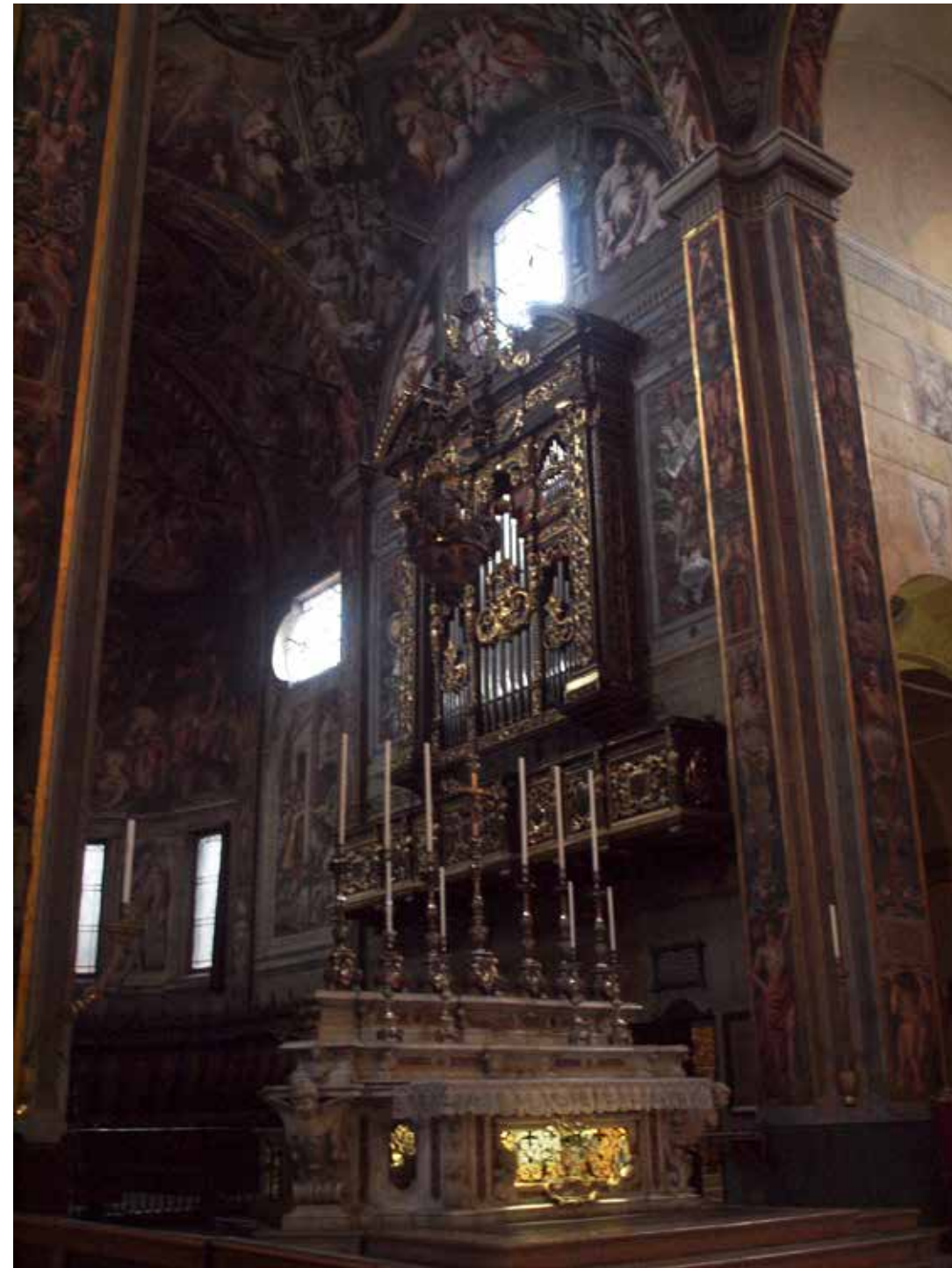
Kirk discovered the coffee machine in the hotel lobby where he could get free espresso, cappuccino, etc. 24/7. I think he loved that coffee machine.

We ate dinner at a restaurant the lady at the hotel suggested. For starters we had cappelletti in broth for a soup and then the special which was



a trolley of various meats and sausages that were boiled or roasted. I have no idea what most of them were and only tasted three out of six but Kirk ate it all and liked it. I actually tried to order something else but the waiter said no, we had to have the special.



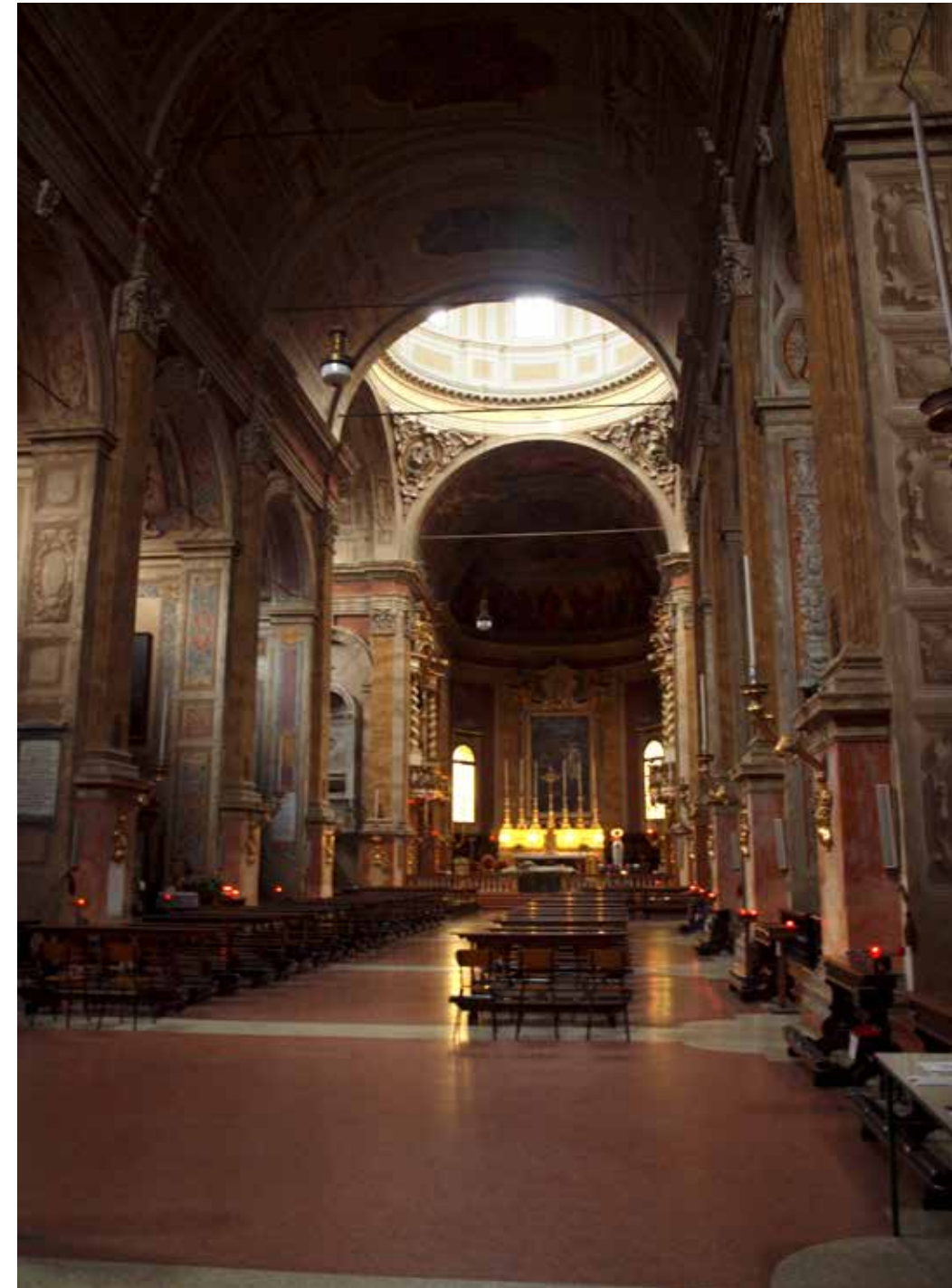


The rain hadn't let up on Tuesday morning but the town markets were in full swing. Everything was for sale from socks to sausage, coats to cabbage. All the stalls were under tents and there were quite a few shoppers. We visited three separate piazzas with markets. The rain started up pretty heavy and we couldn't walk around and take pictures so we visited a church, had some lunch and lazed in the hotel again until dinner time. This could easily become a habit!



On Wednesday over breakfast we saw on the news that Rome had flooded Tuesday morning, one person killed and the subway flooded. The city was a mess. We sure lucked out with our timing. Fortunately that day there was no rain in Reggio and we got out and walked the streets of the old town.

What an amazing place. There are no tourists and I got looks as I carried my camera around but I didn't care. Everywhere I turned was another great photo waiting to be taken. There is a large park at the edge of town that is really beautiful. We walked around it for at least an hour taking photos.



The churches in Reggio are deceptively designed. The outsides are relatively simple and the insides are beautifully ornate with amazing art. Reggio was the perfect place to be after being in Rome for four days. It was time to relax and that's just what we did.









The largest and most beautiful church in Reggio is the Temple of the Blessed Virgin of Ghiara which was completed in 1619. Unfortunately they do not allow you to take



photos in the church. It's really too bad that they told me this after I had taken about a dozen shots.



We caught the train again on Thursday morning, a much easier process in a town the size of Reggio. Surprisingly the easiest train change we had was in Milan. A whole fifteen minutes to make the change and by that time we could read the signs.

Traveling by train is really quite comfortable. Much more so than an airplane. Also, the snacks are about the same price but taste a whole lot better and there are many more choices. We loved the paprika flavored chips and salami sandwiches.



The part of the trip between Milan and Geneva was the most beautiful. We were riding through the Italian lake district. We passed through the town of Stresa, Italy on the shore of Lake Maggiore which extends from Italy into Switzerland just before the Alps. We passed into Switzerland and first saw Lake Geneva when we passed through Montreaux. The train took us around the lake on the north side through Laussane and into the city of Geneva from the Swiss side.



In Geneva we not only changed trains but we had to change stations. We hunted for signs for a bus or some other public transportation but finally gave up and in the interest of time, we took a taxi to Gare Eaux Vives on the French side of the city. When the driver let us out, we weren't sure where the heck we were. This place gives real meaning to the term "end of the line." No information desk, no up to date signs or schedules. The trax were overgrown by weeds and everything was covered in graffiti. Finally a train came in and we were able to ask about the train to Evian-les-Bains and found out we really were in the right place. Whew!



Bienvenue à Evian!



We arrived in Evian, yes where the water comes from, at dusk and were picked up by the hotel shuttle. This was quite a luxury after walking and subways. The hotel was wonderful, right on the lake, and thanks to all the traveling I've done for work we were upgraded to the executive floor with access to the executive lounge which we took good advantage of for drinks, snack and a really great breakfast. This is where Kirk fell in love with French style scrambled eggs. They looked like cheese soup to me but he said they were the best he'd ever eaten.



We only had one day in Evian which was a bit of a mistake on my part. It's a beautiful little town where it's good to just wander the streets or sit and watch the lake. It's very lazy in October when all the tourists are gone. We did happen to be there for their Friday market and bought our lunch from the vendors there. We bought four kinds of salami and some amazing cheese. We picked up a baguette and a couple of drinks and headed to find a place for a picnic. We found a park just up the mountain from where you can fill your bottles with free Evian water. We had a very nice lunch with a great view.



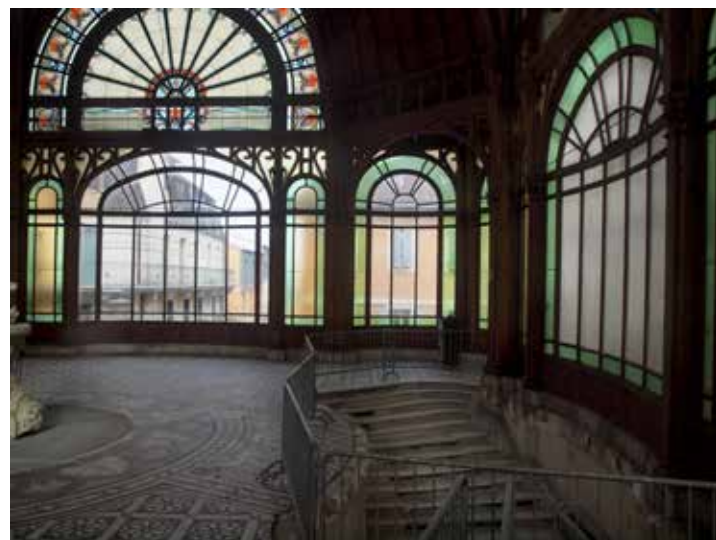




The water source Cachat was named for the man who owned the land the spring was found on in 1789. People claimed the water from the spring improved their health so the owner started bottling and selling it.

The old thermal pump room (“Cachat pump room”) for Evian is a beautiful Art Nouveau building with the front a full story below the back. It has beautiful fan windows and curving lines. You can't go in the upstairs part but I took a peek and snapped a couple of photos.

The downstairs was the pump room and the upstairs had reading and lounge rooms. There used to be concerts held in the front courtyard.





After wandering around for a few hours we headed back to the hotel to meet our friend Emmanuelle from Switzerland who came and spent the afternoon and evening with us. We were able to take advantage of the hotel's executive lounge to just hang out with drinks and snacks. Emmanuelle gave Kirk a lesson on the fancy French coffee machine.

We had a fabulous visit which extended into dinner. It was really nice to go to a restaurant with Emmanuelle so we didn't have to decipher the French menu and try to order. A translator is a wonderful thing!

We decided we must go back to Evian and Lake Geneva, we need to see more of the area and to visit Emmanuelle in Switzerland.





Our last train ride of the trip took us from Evian along the Rhone River through the Auvergne Rhone-Alpes region of France. We saw some lovely small towns and the trees were turning beautiful fall colors. At Lyon we caught the TGV, France's high speed train (averages about 175 mph) and then into the Paris Charles de Gaulle airport.



Once we reach the Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport we searched to find how to get to our hotel. When we finally found the shuttle to the hotel we were again able to take advantage of the upgrades and executive lounge to relax the night before our flight home. It's good we had a chance to relax as Charles de Gaulle is the most confused and annoying airport on the planet. It took forever to locate Terminal 2A from 2F and a couple of miles of walking. Once we were on board the plane it felt like we'd already been traveling for a day and we still had a ten hour flight home. Oh, well.... we made it!

