

Autumn in Milan and Padua, 2014

Our holiday to Milan and Padua this year started in late September 2014. Originally it was planned for May, but we were called to Oxford to care for Matthew, always a delight.

We flew from Edinburgh to Milan Malpensa airport, and then took the Shuttle Bus to Milano Centrale Rail Station. This is a station we know well from previous trips, but always as we passed through it to somewhere else. This was to be our first stopover in Milan, to be followed by a short stay with my pen friend who lives in Padua, near Venice.

Milan is a sprawling 1.3 million person city. But perhaps more important is the notion that it has a huge influence on the surrounding area containing 8 to 10 million. So I read on Wikipedia. If you want more facts, read about it on your computer at:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milan>

During our four days we rode on the City Sightseeing hop-on, hop-off bus, we used the tram and the Metropolitana (the Subway). We walked as much as Margaret's now dodgy knee allowed.

A whole book could be written on our experiences over our five nights at Hotel Brunelleschi, a four star hotel (quite upmarket for us nowadays!!!!), chosen because of its location near the Duomo, the Cathedral Church of Saint Ambrose. And yes, our room did have mosquitos (but only four star mosquitos!) and yes they did feed freely on Margaret and yes, they left me alone, as usual.

Just one story.

For our tram trip we picked a random destination on an old style single decker tram with seats along each side. We were joined by a tall young African man who kept looking at us, we thought. There were very few of us on the tram, maybe six or seven others.

We stayed on to the terminus and so did he. We got off. He got off then wandered ahead of us, looking round to see where we were headed, we thought. We decided the area around the terminus was a bit run down. A second tram was waiting, about to leave. We boarded it return to the centre of Milan, heading back to the Duomo, near the busy area where we would feel safer.

At the very last minute our young man loped back to our tram, waved to the driver who stopped for him and he boarded it, sitting almost directly across from us. Two stops later a second even taller young African man joined the tram, nodding to the first one. The second one sat opposite the other door. Was the second young man summoned by mobile phone?

Now we felt trapped, sure that we were targets.

(I should explain we were put in a similar situation in Prague years ago when we were being set up for a pick-pocket attempt while boarding a tram. (Yes, another "trammatic" experience!) It happened quite late at night when there were few people about. When we think of Prague we always think of our lucky escape.)

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In Barcelona I was the target of a half-successful snatch when another dark-skinned young man tailed us and grabbed at my small shoulder bag, ripping its front pocket off, violently, stealing my nearly new and expensive mobile phone before running off into the night. When we think of Barcelona we always think of that incident.

One evening, a Sunday, we were in a quiet little restaurant in Sitges, near Barcelona.

A Scottish family came in, middle-aged Mum and Dad with Granny and two teenage children. They sat opposite us, chatting noisily. Soon afterwards two young, (Spanish?), men came in and stood near the family, engaging the waiter in a long conversation, in Spanish, about the menu.

I caught the eye of the one who was not talking, signalling that the food is very good. He glares at me angrily. I look away. He bends down to tie his shoelace, I think. Shortly afterwards this shoe tie-er nudges the talker and the two men leave.

Ten minutes later the Granny decided to go to the toilet. She cannot find her bag, which she had placed at her feet. I realize what must have happened. I speak out. Margaret kicks me hard under the table, hissing that I should not get involved.

I admit to the others that although I did not actually see what had happened, I think the two men must have stolen the bag. How bold was that!

Nowadays we are very, very careful, everywhere, about where our bags are when we sit at a table, or in crowded situations, always thinking we might be targets. Yes, we are actually slightly paranoid, especially me.)

But now, in Milan, it is Sunday afternoon. The second young man looks along the tram at us, time after time. The first young man looks across at us, time after time.

We whisper to each other and decide that Margaret's bag will be their target. They will jostle us, block me, and snatch her bag. Margaret smuggles her purse from her handbag into the patch pocket on my shorts.

The tram trundles on back towards the centre.

We watch them, covertly. They watch us, openly.

We near the centre.

Then second young man suddenly stands up and gets off.

Is there another 'team member' now aboard who is part of their snare?

We scan the faces, but spot no one who looks furtive.

A very elderly and frail lady comes aboard and sits opposite us.

She is reading a newspaper, her handbag lying in her lap.

The first young man changes his focus, looking at her, repeatedly.

To us this staring is obvious. No one else seems to notice.

She reads on, unaware of his attention.

Perhaps her handbag has become his "softer" target, we whisper to each other.

Two stops before the Duomo, after a brief whispered conversation, we decide to get off. We wait at the tram stop, looking around for a policeman, ready to call for help, if he comes after us.

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The tram leaves with young man number one still aboard.
We feel guilty, relieved and foolish in equal measure.
He was just a young man, we tell each other.
Or have we left the elderly lady to her fate?
Even as I write this I feel that somehow we failed her.

This is the sort of thing that provides spice to our city breaks.
We are nervous in quiet places and we are nervous in crowded places.

A highlight of our time in Milan was a side trip to Lake Como.

From Milano Centrale it is easy and cheap to travel by train almost anywhere in Italy, and to other parts of Europe. One day we took the train to Lake Como, to Varenna.

Now we were in the mountains and despite the haze, it was beautiful. We resolve to return for a holiday here someday soon, to use the ferry system to get about and visit all the lakeside towns and villages.

We had a coffee in Varenna and then took the tiny ferry across to Bilaggio.

Bilaggio is a tourist hot spot. We walked about a bit, had a snack lunch then caught the fast ferry back down the other leg of the lake to Como.

From there we returned by train to Milan.

A great day out which spawned a story called 'Riding on Wooden Wheels'.

So, now we have 'done' Milan. It is too busy for us, we decide, and we will not return, except to pass through, as before, we think. It was enjoyable, but once was enough.

After Milan we travel by train, (2 hours and 10 minutes) to Padua. The return trip for two people with reserved seats costs 69 Euro-what a bargain!

We are to stay for three nights with my Italian pen friend Anna Maria Artusi (77). Anna Maria has very good English, both written and spoken. She is jolly, lively and energetic and makes us very welcome. Last October she came to stay with us for a few days, travelling with the group from Padua University who are learning English, pen friends of others in my class at Strathclyde University.

Anna Maria looked after us very well indeed, and organised every minute of our stay. We saw everything of interest that there was to see in Padua, complete with her excellent explanations, often given in Italian and then in English. This was very good practice for me.

Padua has the second oldest University in Italy with around 60,000 students. The university was founded in 1212 by a few students who left Bologna University. It seems that in modern times the University has made the town into the bustling city it is today. It has major faculties Medicine and Law and several satellite Colleges in other Italian cities and towns.

Students of a particular faculty can be identified by the long pointed cap they wear or sling around their necks or over their shoulders, and by the tabard or gown that they wear.

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The Symbol of the University is the skull of an Ox or Bo, often seen outlined in red on the back of a gown. There are also Confraternities and to show membership of these students also wear large medals around their necks.

When we visited (October 2014) we witnessed an ancient ritual which involved a ceremony during which the coffin of a recently deceased professor was carried by a group of eight students and raised and lowered several times in public, as a mark of respect. It was then taken into a private memorial ceremony prior to the burial. This professor was a lady, a judge who was a well-known person in the Padua community, Anna Maria discovers.

Padua is also the first University in the World have a female graduate. In 1678 Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia graduated in Philosophy.

Padua University also allowed public dissections, despite this being against the laws of the Church. There is a long tradition of intellectual freedom in the University, including a 15 year period during Galileo Galilei was a Professor.

Other personalities of interest to British readers who studied in Padua in the late 1500s are:

John Ruthven, who was Scottish,

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/240301/John-Ruthven-3rd-earl-of-Gowrie>

William Harvey is said to be the father of modern medicine in England.

http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/william_harvey.htm

The city of Padua has many magnificent Churches. The Basilica of Saint Antonio is probably the largest. It is vast, highly decorated and was built around 1313, prior to the current Church of St Peter in Rome. It is very impressive. St Antonio was from Portugal and is renowned for setting free many Debtors from prison, probably kick starting the economy? It seems in those days it was worse to be in Debt than to steal or kill!

The Church originally was said to be the Church of the Saint with No Name.

Padua has a Prada, a large public open space which nowadays has dozens of statues. It is vast, the size of thirty football pitches. In medieval times it was a swamp/shallow lake and so had no grass.

There is a café, (Caffe Pedrocchi), which at one time (late 1800s and early 1900s) was open twenty four hours a day every day of the year and was said to be the café without doors.

So the city of Padua is said to be - *the city with a Church of a Saint with No Name, and a Prada with No Grass and a café with No Doors.*

The city is entirely built on almost flat ground and is organised for bicycles. There are buses and trams galore. The trams are controversial. They were opposed because they took away roads used by cars.

And in the beginning they had many problems, teething troubles. But these have been solved and now Padua's trams work well and further lines are planned. They follow the development of a tramway in the French city of Clermont-Ferrand.

The trams have overhead electricity cables as normal *but only one rail!*

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So far as I could tell this is both a guide rail and provides an earthing strip for the electricity. They seem to run on hard rubber wheels and are reasonably quiet. We made a journey on one, just for fun. They are all single deck and look like the new trams in Edinburgh. They suffered many delays in the making and were very expensive. But now they are popular.

After the Church perhaps the most impressive building in Padua is the Palace of Justice. It is in the city centre, surrounded by semi-permanent street markets for fruit, food and clothing. Each market is cleared and cleaned during late afternoon, allowing the cafes and restaurants to spread out onto the open piazzas for the evening.

The Palace of Justice is very impressive, if almost completely empty. It is the size of a football pitch with a vast clear-span roof, no pillars. It is very impressive and nowadays used for exhibitions and meetings rather than as a working court.

Padua is a busy friendly city and makes a good base for visiting Venice and the Veneto region generally. There is a superfast and expensive train to Venice which takes 14 minutes. We take the cheaper one that takes 27 minutes, allowing us to see the interesting agricultural countryside as we glide past.

In Venice a good trip for 7€ is the ferry from Santa Lucia rail station along the Grand Canal to St Mark's Square.

We paid 43€ for three small coffees with live music at L'Averna Café. To us it was worth it for the experience. Our host and guide Anna Maria said this was a disgrace against Venice. She plans to write to her local paper in Padua to warn everyone about this.

What surprised me about Venice was the number of piazzas and how large some are. We had hot sunny weather up to 24 C for our visit. For lunch Anna Maria found a Self Service Ristorante called Il Gatto che Ride, The Cat that Laughs. Here three of us ate a tasty snack lunch for less than 40€, including free Wi-Fi.

Later, in Piazza Santa Margarita, we have three coffees for 5.30€. Unknown to me Anna Maria had already paid when ordering from the bar. We sit outside and soak up the sun and the atmosphere. Before leaving I went inside to use toilet and paid again. When Anna Maria discovers this she explodes! Another disgrace on Venice! THEY should know she has already paid!

Alberto is Anna Maria's oldest son (56). He is unmarried and lives in the flat below her. He is a very kind and clever fellow and a gifted musician and composer. He is a qualified GP and works in A&E while studying for a Masters in Pain Management. We are treated to a morning of listening to his music. He has composed many pieces over many years and his works have been performed by professional musicians.

Alberto is very kind to his Mum and to us, providing a taxi service to Padua rail station on two occasions.

Our visit to Padua is marked by thousands of words, about twenty percent of which were in English. Margaret is learning Italian by osmosis!

Our visit over, we return to Milano Centrale and then catch a bus to Malpensa. Our short but expensive (!) taxi ride takes us to Osteria L'Pista in Casterate Sempione. This is modern three star hotel and is excellent, with a very good restaurant.

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At dinner we meet Stefano and Danielle and their seven year old son Alessandro, who is small for his age but very bright. They sit at the table beside us. Alessandro does not yet speak English and pretends to be shy. But his parents have excellent English, as do most people we meet on our travels in Italy. I have now established email contact with Stefan and will send some of my stories for kids. Who knows, they might even like them!