

TRIP DIARY 2018

To England

Tuesday 1 May

Took a limo again to the airport for the 1605 flight to Dubai, back to Emirates. Quite a good flight, and Norma had a couple of empty seats to her right. Food not bad either, and movies a lot better than last year's Singapore Airlines.

Wednesday 2 May

Flew into Gatwick for the first time, some work in figuring how to get around an unfamiliar airport, but found the train to Clapham Junction and change to Gillingham without much trouble. Met by Richard as usual, van all OK with MOT done and necessary work done too: new front tyres and brake pads, and a new front wheel bearing. Thanks to Sean the mechanic at the farm.

Spent the rest of the day getting a bit organised – cool but dry weather.

Thursday 3 May

Drove first to a Calor Gas main centre in an industrial estate south-west of Hereford – in fact, in the depth of the English countryside and very hard to find, as the people there agreed! But got two new bottles, so started the trip with three full.

Then to Katie's for usual welcome. Got the van taxed on line, so all the bureaucracy done in good time.

Friday 4 May

Some useful shopping, including getting a couple of new blankets to replace the two that had been substantially holed by the mice that had slept in them during the winter!



A great welcome from Richard's dog.

Rob Price turned up in the afternoon to help Nicki deal with Tony's affairs, as he is now in a home. So a chatty get-together as Rob showed us pictures of the work he is doing on their new house.

Saturday 5 May

Drove down to Portsmouth to spend the night before the ferry. It was a Bank Holiday weekend, and as we drove through to Southsea with a view to staying the night in the car park we have been to before, we found everything too crowded. So we went back up to Port Solent and its very pleasant and quiet (at night) car park, where we had a peaceful night.

Into France

Sunday 6 May

Took the 0815 ferry to Ouistreham – not at all crowded in this big ship, so we settled in good seats by a window facing forward and enjoyed a calm and sunny ride.

As planned, we drove first down to the city of Caen, and to the “aire” by the parking lot by the huge Cora supermarket. No-one around this day, being a Sunday. We could see only a small dump site but no sign of the electric plugs noted in an aires book, so we decided to press on south for an hour or so to an aire which looked promising.

The first part of the run was through flat Normandy countryside, with some motorways, but then the Tomtom took us off along some minor roads through typical French farmland. Initially flat, it became very pretty, with quite steep hilly countryside covered by bright green trees.

The aire was near the village of Pont d'Ouilly, and turned out to be an absolute star, once we had managed – with some help – to negotiate the electromechanical gadgetry required to open the barrier. The parking places were laid out along the River Orne, which runs north to Ouistreham. Each space was demarcated by trimmed hedges. Between us and the river was 15 or so metres of grassy riverbank, and across the river the green farmland rose to a crest with forests in the background.

The weather continued fine all day, and it was a lovely evening.

Monday 7 May



Clear blue morning after a peaceful night. No thoughts of moving quickly from this splendid place, so we walked about 600 metres to the village. This had the requisite boulangerie and a small market, so we gathered sufficient provisions for a day or two.

During the fine and hot day we watched the activities of the kayakers running downstream, mostly incompetently, with screams from some as they navigated the drop down the weir along the way.

Tuesday 8 May



Early coffee, then back into the village in the cool of the morning, as the sun slowly rose above the hills close to the east. We bought croissants and bread for breakfast and the day.

Did some minor maintenance, including the once-again stuck starboard blind. Norma did a good cleaning and brushing-out.

With some cloud, not quite as hot as yesterday, but still very pleasant, especially for the time of year and a great deal better than we had feared a few weeks ago. It's a holiday, "Victory Day", celebrating the anniversary of de Gaulle's announcement in 1945 that WW2 in France was ended. We wondered how many of the youngsters out in the kayaks knew this or its significance.

Cooler with some cloud later afternoon, but staying fine into the evening. At dusk we had the pleasure of watching otters play in the meadows on the other side of the river.

Wednesday 9 May

Very cool, misty and dewy early morning – but still with blue skies. Away about 0900, and some pleasant country driving for a while to Argentan, where we did a big stock-up at a massive Carrefours supermarket. Massive choice of foodstuffs, as ever!

Then on down to bypass Alencon and Le Mans, mostly typical “A” and yellow roads, avoiding motorways, nothing outstanding by way of scenery but pleasant enough, again in good weather.

And so to Tours, a big and busy place but bypassed the worst of it down to the west. Target for the day was Azay-le-Rideau, not for the castle (although perhaps for a walk around the park) but because we remembered an ACSI camp site near it and an acceptable aire. But all had changed – they were building a huge new car park and aire, but the latter was not accessible yet. So vans were parked all over the place. The car park was no longer ACSI, and a barrier was closed.

Back to the books, and decided to drive on a bit to Richelieu. The aire looked good, and possibly one we had been to before. Again, no good – the aire was simply a waste facility outside a camp site. On the way through we had noticed campers parked in a gravel car park alongside the walls of the old town and so returned to park among the handful already there. Perfectly fine after a busy day and longish drive, so settled about 5:00 pm.



Thursday 10 May

Dawn “chorus” of screechy caw-caw crows, with a few monotonous pigeons thrown in. A terrible noise! Initially cloudy, and a light sprinkle shower, but brightened by 10:00. Took a walk round the pleasant little town, laid out symmetrically based

on two squares: commercial and gardens. The main square was the site of a big antiques market, with the better stuff under an impressive roof, based on old timbers with a new slate roof. During the day’s drive found out that many other towns had “brocages” markets on the go.

We also found out that the reason that it was so quiet generally and most shops were shut that it was Ascension (of Mary) Day, which has caught us out before. Three (1, 8 and 10) public holidays in May? Very French.

Fairly uninspiring drive on straight roads for the first couple of hours or so, but did stop an attractive old church and adjoining abbey, now used as a retirement home. It had interesting polygonal towers over the church and chapels. The landscape became more attractive as we approached Limoges, the capital of the Limousin, the principal region in France that we had planned to tour.





In Limoges we intended to visit only the Old Cite, because the cathedral sounded more interesting and there was a Resistance museum nearby. We walked up from the River Vienne to the city and the Cathedral St-Etienne, which tops the hill and is surrounded by medieval half-timbered terraces and houses lining narrow streets and lanes. The cathedral is one of the only Gothic churches south of the Loire, and while very tall is still rather sombre and stolid, like the Romanesque churches of southern France. There were some beautiful frescoes, looking as if they were painted yesterday (which is probably when they were last “refreshed”), and a black Madonna is in a featured chapel, one of the many in the Auvergne.



We walked across the cathedral square and a small garden to the Museum of the Resistance. We were not very impressed – even given that such a museum is very hard to put together – but I was drawn by the evidence of the heavy propaganda, Goebbels-style, that Petain put in place after the collaboration in order to persuade the people of France that it was a Good Thing, and justified assaults on Jews and so-called Communists. A poster welcomes “La Grande Croisade Europeene” and shows an armoured crusader spearing these new enemies of the state. But generally it was not as good a representation of the ill-fated Resistance as the one we visited in the Pyrenees last year.

Not far to the east of Limoges is St-Leonard-de-Noblat. This does not feature in the main tourist guides, but Saint-Léonard-de-Noblat was an important stop on the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage trail during the Middle Ages. There are lots of bronze scallop shells set into the cobbles of the medieval lanes. We walked up (inevitably!) to its impressive and very typical Romanesque church, with massive columns and simple domes, which has the UNESCO World Heritage Site tick of approval. The tiered apse and chapels from the outside look almost Byzantine. We fluked some practice by an organist, and hugely enjoyed the music as it filled the stony confines of the church.

It was once a wealthy town in the 13th-15 centuries, with agriculture, tanneries and mills supporting the building of some grand houses. A very nice place, well worth the visit.

We then continued generally east to Bourgneuf, where a claim to fame is that it was one of the first towns in France to be connected to mains electricity. It has a museum to celebrate this event, but we did not visit. (Was Tesla featured, we wondered?). The very pleasant aire was backed by the towers of the adjacent chateau.

Friday 11 May

South of Bourgneuf lies some of the loveliest countryside in the Limousin, the prettiest of the trip so far. Farmland ranged over gentle green hills, interspersed by the occasional old watermill and little lakes, glassy still in the morning.

We came then to Uzerche, one of the most famous of the villages and towns of the Limousin. From the approach road





they are known, from the 15th and 16th centuries. The prosperous town never surrendered during the conflicts of the Middle Ages, and earlier withstood a seven-year siege by Moorish forces in 732.

we could see the town up on its promontory within a curve in the Rive Vezeze. It looked a steep place to walk up, but Norma spotted possible parking places on the steep road half way up, where we did indeed find a spot that allowed a little less strenuous access.

Uzerche is very pretty indeed. It features masses of conical grey slate roofs over every little tower – turret houses, as

The classically Romanesque abbey church, Eglise St-Pierre, is set at the crest of the promontory. It was originally consecrated in 1097 and was named after Saint Peter. The latest repairs and reconstructions date from the 17th century. It has a peaceful, dark and cool interior. It looks down over a light-tiled square with a handsome Mairie the other side.



From there it was a short run further south to the last of the Limousin villages we were to visit, Colloges-la-Rouge. We parked in a very pleasant aire within walking distance, with a choice of shade in the trees and sunlight – still quite hot in mid-afternoon – out in the open. We moved twice!



A prominent feature of the 8th century village is apparent in its name: the buildings are constructed of the local red sandstone, and the total effect is somewhat surreal. France still seems to be in holiday



mode, and the narrow lanes were thronged by local visitors enjoying poking through the many artisanal shops and good-looking (but expensive, understandably) restaurants. We did lash out on an ice cream, though. In the centre, near the Romanesque church, is the old marketplace, with a large communal oven at one end.

The weather has continued sunny and warm, with cool nights and mornings.

Saturday 12 May

The first stop was to a nearby SuperU supermarket for more basic provisioning, then off we went further to the east. The first part of the drive was very picturesque, winding along minor roads until we reached Aurillac. The route then became fairly dramatic, as we entered the higher parts of the southern Massif Central, the Region des Volcans. The whole area was once a massive volcano, the biggest in Europe, but which over the centuries has collapsed into a series of hills, domes, valleys and gorges. It is lushly covered with forestry and a good deal of farmland featuring the Cantal cattle.



We climbed the Col de Lioran, just to the east of the higher Puy Mary, and for the first time this year encountered a few ski resorts. Spots of snow lay in the higher north-facing gullies. Latterly we cut down southwards through a valley, and then back up the hills again to the town of Chaud-Aigues and its aire.

Most unfortunately, during a quick lunch stop earlier, I had inadvertently moved the van a few inches while Norma was standing, causing her to fall heavily on her back. Later in the day she was in pain walking through the town, terribly disappointing and depressing, as she was doing so well with her walking because of her reconstructed knees. We hoped that this was a temporary setback.



It was getting cooler and cloudier in the late afternoon, and there were some sprinkles of rain.

Sunday 13 May

Very cold in the night, and on opening up the van in the morning were amazed to see sleet! This had turned to rain by 10:30, but there was snow on the roofs of houses further up, and a car came down with packed snow falling off it. The weather map for Europe showed that the worst precipitation over the continent was right over us.

So, further exploration of the Massif seemed unwise, and we decided to head south for the Mediterranean coast, somewhere near Montpellier. But to join the A75-E11 north-south motorway we had first to climb up the hill behind our village and head east on a minor road. This was a beautiful run scenically, but this was because of the snow that was rapidly covering all the trees and fields. We could not remember the last time we had driven through falling snow!



Once we got on to the motorway the snow eased, but rain continued all the rest of the day. We had a fast run down, with little traffic in our direction and – being Sunday – a serendipitous treat, no trucks. Hordes of cars were heading north, we guessed returning home from a holiday week by the Med. The motorway stays high in the southern reaches of the Massif, at nearly 2,000 metres. We decided at the last minute to take the short stretch of peage (€12.40) to cross the Millau

bridge rather than go down and through the gorge underneath, all very familiar territory, including last year. The motorway finally falls very steeply to sea level relatively close to the coast, with speeds strictly limited and lots of warning signs.

Via a circuitous route through Montpellier we reached the coast at the head of the Golfe d'Aigues-Mortes, in the settlement of Palavas-les-Flots. This lies on one of the outer strips of land enclosing the line of etangs, and there is a marina – for generally small boats – and a huge and expensive (€16.66, of all silly amounts) aire with all facilities. We settled in overlooking a corner of the marina, in continuing cold and wet conditions.

Monday 14 May

Yet another cold and wet night and morning. Norma's back still painful, but probably a soft-tissue injury and possibly a damaged right floating rib. Responded well to pain relief.

Decided to stay here another night and move to a nearby camp site tomorrow, hopefully after the rain has stopped.

Did clear a bit during the day, with a very cool NW Mistral wind.

Tuesday 15 May

Showers again early, some blue patches in the sky. Norma in pain after getting up and before taking any analgesics. However, during the day she experienced a fair improvement. And after a while the weather improved also, except that the showers were replaced by a howling Mistral from the north west.



First stop after leaving this big, busy but acceptable aire was at a nearby Intermarche supermarket. In a poor area, it was a rotten shop, but provided enough to keep us going for a few days. We then headed west, against the flow of the general plan, to see if a camp site near Sete that spoke well of itself – small, family-run, near the beach – would suit us. But it did not – gloomy, walled in and quite crowded.



We stopped for lunch nearby, by the side of one of the etangs that are the feature of this region. The Mistral was blowing at full gale force by then, and the Rhone-Sete canal, which completes the trans-European canal system was very quiet indeed.

Returning to the east, we retraced our route past the Palavas aire and on past the salt marshes of the Petite Camargue. A few flamingos had their heads down in the waters of the lagoons. This brought us to Aigues-Mortes, the now very touristy town with a magnificent walled centre that we had visited in times gone by. Through narrow streets we found the small aire we had used before, looking straight over a canal to the old walls – but, like pretty well all of the town, it is now closed to camping-cars.

On the approach to the town we had spotted a sign to an aire set back in the marshlands, and so we returned to it. An enterprising young couple have done a good job in creating a big aire there, one that easily takes the bigger and bigger vans that now typify the fleet and for which towns like Aigues-Mortes simply cannot cater.



The wind was still whistling as we arrived, but we managed to sit out in the sun with some protection given by the van and a line of casuarina-like trees behind us. Clear blue skies by drinkies.

Wednesday 16 May

We started off by viewing the process of extracting fish from the many fish farms around us. A net was dragged along the pond, scooping up fish as it went, and was then hooked into one of the corners. A man then went into the water with a garbage bin, and picked out the larger – but still to our eyes small – fish from the net and threw them into the bin.

It was to be a rather complicated and frustrating day, to say the least. The original plan was to dive once again into the depths of the Camargue and return to the coastal village of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. In previous years we have enjoyed camping out on the spit of land between the etang and the sea, to the east. Approaching from the west, it rapidly became apparent that we had not taken sufficient attention to the fact that May is the month of the place's celebration of gypsy culture. Local legend has it that Sarah, then a black attendant and later the patron saint of gypsies, was there with the two Saint Marys, Salome and Jacobe, and recognised their holiness.

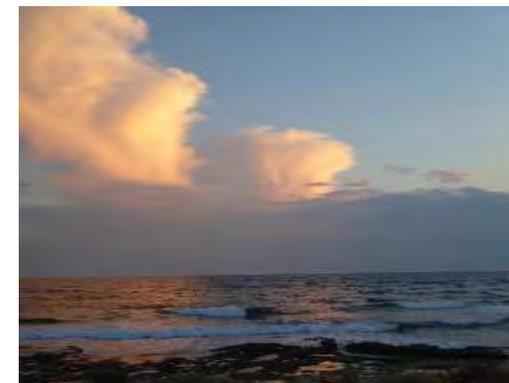


The only places it is allowed to park motorhomes in Saintes-Maries are the two official aires, and both were completely taken over by the gypsy hordes. We tried going out to our erstwhile sand spit, but there was a barrier now preventing us getting out there. So we had no choice but to find another place, and set out for Salin-de-Giraud, also on the coast. This entailed a drive back into the Camargue and round to the north of the huge Etang de Vaccares before turning back south again. The Camargue is of course as flat as a tack, marshland encircling lakes large and small, some rice paddies and other aquacultural pursuits. Otherwise, it's all a bit bleak, and it was still windy.

After this circuit we finally got to Salins, and found only a dismal village and an equally dismal and empty aire in a backstreet car park. So we pressed on.

To continue east and leave the Camargue we had to cross the Grand Rhone, about 10 kilometres before it finally reaches the sea. (Down the western border of the Camargue runs the Petit Rhone.) The crossing is by ferry, so this was a mini-adventure. After the crossing we immediately encountered the massively busy truck traffic associated with the monster Port de Fos and other ports in the Golfe de Fos, to the west of Marseilles. Quite a contrast to the near-deserted Camargue!

Back south again to the coast and a repeat visit to the fishing and summertime tourist village of Carro. The aire is large and was busy, being popular for its seafront location – and notorious for the often strong wind that was this day blowing from the choppy sea across the aire. But it was good enough, and we had done enough driving for the day. We took a short walk into the nearer part of the village.



Thursday May 17

A peaceful night, during which the wind died down. We took another walk, viewed the unimpressive fish market – typical “Med fish”, plus a few imports – and bought a baguette from the good boulangerie.



We then headed generally north towards Provence, using (non-peage) motorways to pass by Marseilles and Aix-en-Provence. We then moved on to Michelin “red roads” and some lovely scenery, with the countryside becoming divided by ridges and gorges, filled with trees. Where rocks and cliffs were exposed, the sandstone looked very rugged, but golden in the sun.

And so to an aire by the village of Sainte-Croix-de-Verdon, on the Lac-du-Barrage-de-Sainte-Croix. The lake was formed in the 1970s by the damming of the River Verdon, which goes on to run through the famous gorges. Originally the village was high on the hillside, but while the rising water in the valley covered acres of farmland, the village was spared except for some older parts and Roman remains. It now sits well above the water, but

close enough to give lovely view from the terraces and cafes and allow access to the small boats and water toys for the tourists.

The aire is simple but we got there in good time to establish a place with a view of the lake. We walked into the village, which is at the same level as the aire. It’s a lovely place with, obviously, a gorgeous view over the turquoise blue lake – the second-biggest man-made lake in France. The little lanes meander up and down through the houses, and around





the church square and another in front of the mairie. It is abundantly clear that the village has been very substantially rebuilt or renovated throughout, and we deduced that this was as part of the reparations made following the flooding of “their” valley and how it must have affected the village.

Friday 18 May

After a busy few days it was good to decide to stay put here for another day. It started out fine and sunny but after our morning walk back into the village and then lunch in the van, the cumulus built up and the thunder started. As for yesterday, the air became quite full during the day, huge vans predominating.

Later, there was a full-on thunderstorm with lightning.

Saturday 19 May

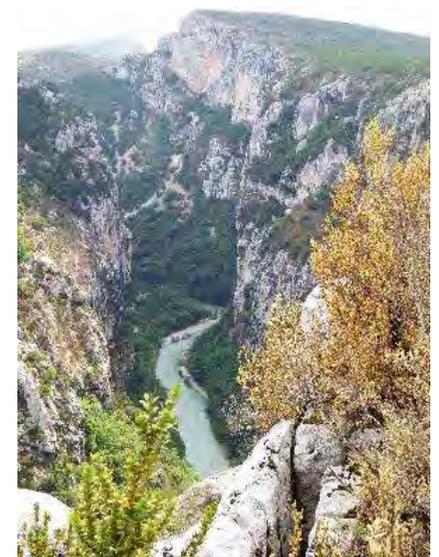
Good start for one of the more dramatically scenic runs of the trip so far, through the great Gorge du Verdon, the largest canyon in Europe. Initially it was through rolling green countryside as we wound around the north of the lake via Riez and Moustiers-Sainte-Marie; the latter is set in a steeply cleft valley, but to approach any closer than the bypass road we deemed unwise. And thus we came back down to the north corner of the lake and entered the gorge.

The 26 km of the Grand Canyon du Verdon was cut through the Jurassic limestone by the River Verdon, and the height of the cliffy sides ranges up to 600 metres.

Our intention was to traverse the southern route, the Corniche Sublime, because we had not driven this road east about previously, but we failed to take a turn and climbed up to the start of the route along the northern route. So we experienced for a while the more dramatic scenery of this wider and more travelled road before retracing our steps and turning down to the southern road.



The road begins right down at the lake at a bridge with views of the cloudy green river as it emerges from the gorge. The



route is narrower than the other, but twists and turns just as much. Each has magnificent views, not all of which are easy to stop at and photograph – but there's always another view just around the bend. Pictures are the easiest way to describe the magnificence of the landscape here.

We left the gorge shortly after crossing the impressive Pont de l'Artuby. From there we were aiming for an aire at the village of Trigance, but this turned out to be a cramped and sloping car park.

We then went on down to the village of Comps sur Artuby, and just beyond it we came to the aire there, quite close to the road – and high-speed motorcyclists! – but adequate. We were joined by a Kiwi couple, Margaret and Peter, very experienced Eurotravellers with a brand new version of our van that they were only just getting used to.



Sunday 20 May

This day's route took us down out of the hills of Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur. We joined the Route Napoleon, and enjoyed this tremendous drive through rolling countryside, through crowded Grasse and down to the coast just west of Nice. On the upper reaches of the run, Norma much enjoyed a stop, talking to a group of donkeys being readied for some kind of donkey festival – lovely creatures!



The coast road was familiar, crowded but full of interest and some outstanding views over the Mediterranean at Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat and Monaco. By early afternoon we were through Menton and the border with Italy.

Into Italy

Along a very busy road through Ventimiglia we got to a scheduled camp site on the coast at the town of Vallecrosia. A large market had been set up along the beachfront road, and access to it was cut off. But the desired approach to the camp site would have been along this road. So, following the satnav – which was not advised in the ACSI book – we had to make a very tight and dodgy turn through its gates to get in. But it was OK, and we settled in next door to new Kiwi friends.

Norma got a wee man (a coloured migrant very keen to come to Australia!) to work the washing machine, and while the washing was being done we took a walk to the market. We made some good purchases: a new skirt for Norma, and a new cable connection for the iPod, so that I can charge up the thing from its current completely flat battery state,

Evening chat with Peter and Margaret – who at the age of 23 suffered severe brain damage as a pedestrian casualty, and has recovered well apart from the loss of sight in one eye, emotional lability and some speech difficulty. He is an ex-teacher with some interesting interests, including building replica aircraft and sports cars.

Monday 21 May

Decided to stay on for the day for the rest and to get more things sorted out. We walked into the town and got some essentials. A large part of the market, with more food stalls than yesterday, had relocated up from the beachfront into a road leading up to the town.

The weather remains fine, with sun in the afternoon, but by no means hot. There were few people this morning on the stony beach, and we saw only one man brave the water.

A light spot of rain in the late afternoon, and as we spent yet another hour or two with the Kiwis we discussed what looked like a forecast of poor weather in the near future.

Tuesday 22 May



Sure enough, the rain came in with a vengeance overnight. We lay under big trees, so that the size of the rain drops was large and the resulting noise terrible! Decided that there was no value in moving, although our Kiwi friends moved on.

Sat out the rain for most of the day, but it slowly cleared. Took a gentle evening walk.

Wednesday 23 May

Fairly relaxed start, cleaned and watered, and pulled out of this good camp site with neat and clean facilities and friendly staff.

The primary plan for the day was simply to follow the SS1 coastal road, the only alternative to the motorway and its



tolls up in the hills inland. The first major city to be traversed was San Remo, described by a guidebook as a “pleasant resort of faded elegance”. In its heyday it was a resort for the elite of British and Russian society in the mid-to-late 19th century, but most period hotels are well past their prime. We were intending to drive straight through, but we ended up seeing a lot more of inland San Remo than we wanted or intended, as for an unknown reason Tomtom Kate directed us into the suburbs where we got stranded by winding roads that were closed off.



We finally untangled ourselves and re-joined the frenetic traffic of all Italian coastal – and many other – towns, heading east to Arma di Taggia, where our database told us there was a Lidl, a shop that we have been

needing for a few days. It was not one of the outer suburban kind that we usually seek for ease of access, but when the actual access down a narrow lane was negotiated, there was the customary big car park. We did a big shop including a fair bit of alcohol at a remarkably low price by Australian standards, and stayed in the car park for lunch.



The next big place to be negotiated was Imperia, by which time we were once again getting used to the near-suicidal behaviour of the huge number of scooterists, and the aggressive driving of cars. In our experience, both these elements are unique to Italy, and the visitor simply has to get used to them. We are getting there.



After Imperia things eased up a bit, and we went through the two primary phases of driving this route: battling through towns with densely packed traffic, such as Cervo and Albengo (reportedly the most attractive of the strip) and winding through steep hillsides across capes and promontories with no housing or settlements between the road and the sea. For the latter, the views are quite good, with wooded hills inland and the blue Med the other side. The towns, big and small, all have massive marinas, the bigger towns have bigger boats. We wondered, what do they do in terms of boating? There is little choice other than going out to sea a bit, rushing around, and perhaps visiting another marina. There are no bays or coves for peaceful anchoring along this part of the Italian coast, named on the maps as the Riviera di Ponente.



Our planned stop was at Pietra Ligure, where we knew there was a large camper parking site. This was fine, with power (but not enough for cooking on the hotplate!) and water at each place. We walked down into the town, and enjoyed the typical Italian view of a



brownish beach covered by serried rows of beach loungers and awnings, almost completely unused this afternoon. We walked into the old part of town, which was very attractive, with a nice piazza by the church and some intriguing little lanes of medieval appearance. We enjoyed local gelatos in another piazza.



Back in the van, after the afternoon sun it was a little cool in the late sea breeze, but the weather does look a lot better than yesterday.

Thursday 24 May



Clear morning, and off on a long and varied drive – initially, a pleasant run along the coast near the rocky shore, with cliffs on our left side, and a relatively quiet road. We passed some typical Med seaside resorts, with the usual arrays of loungers and awnings. But then, up towards the northern extremity of the Gulf of Genoa things got a bit more complicated and busy. On the way we battled our way through the big port of Savona, in the 16th century a major competitor to Genoa until the latter destroyed it in 1528. It was later destroyed again by bombing in WW2. Unsurprisingly, it does not display an attractive face to the passing motorist.

Genoa is a huge, sprawling city that takes a long time to get through – and no doubt there are marvellous things to see, if one is inclined to dive into its busy centre. Lonely Planet, however, paints a picture of a rather seedy centre, despite its artistic treasures. Christopher Columbus was born here, and the city makes the most of it – the maritime museums are reported to be the best and biggest in the Med. We passed close by the docks and saw the full-size replica of a 17th century Spanish galleon, a full-rigged ship which was built in Tunisia and launched in 1986 for Roman Polanski’s film *Pirates* and later for other movies. It’s an impressive sight from the road, although the sight only lasts for a few seconds!

As we drove further round the coast and started heading south-east down the Riviera di Levante, as usual we wondered at the number of small cars parked by the roadside. It is a solid mass. How does anyone ever find a place to park, we wondered.

We were now on the Via Aurelia, the original coastal road that was later superseded for those in a hurry or impatient with traffic by the Autostrada that runs east-west along the whole gulf. This winds along the route through countless small towns and endless traffic, and then climbs into the hills that are the base of the peninsula at the end of which sits Portofino. This is, of course, closed to likes of us, with our camper, as the roads are all clogged up with tourist coaches.



In the coastal town of Trigoso we missed a turn out of a roundabout and got hopelessly lost in docklands the “wrong” side of a railway line. We were persuaded by a helpful local to take a road signposting La Spezia, but we were worried about a bridge under the railway that was possibly too low for us. Nevertheless we went that way instead of backtracking for miles (in retrospect, a better choice!). As we approached the bridge we confirmed that the clearance would be marginal. There was no way of backing out of the situation, as traffic built up behind us and there wasn’t room to make a three-point turn. We did just make it with inches to spare, with Norma out of the van checking. When I stopped to let her climb back in, we were assisted by the sound of multiple horns telling us to get going out of the way.

More tortuous driving along the Via Aurelia took us to a turn southward and up into the high range of hills that are the start of the range behind the villages of the Cinque Terre. We had seen that the hilltops were in the cloud, and indeed



as we climbed the visibility became worse and worse. Once over the top it cleared, as the narrow road twisted and turned down through the hairpin bends to our destination for the day, the coastal village of Bonassola, where we knew there was a parking place for campers.

Not much room there, but we slotted ourselves into the row of vans along the rocky waterfront, a pleasant enough location. We walked the boardwalk along the “beach”, with the stony



grey sand that is pretty universal on this part of the coast. A sign referred to it as the “Bagno Sabbia d’Oro”, or the beach of golden sand. Some “golden”! Bonassola refers to itself as one of the Cinque Terre villages, because of its similar location, on the sea at the bottom of a cleft in the mountains behind – but it’s not, really, as its access is at least reasonably possible by road, and if it was, there’d be six such villages, not five. But it was a nice little place to walk around, and we had a peaceful night there.

Friday 25 May

Norma’s birthday, which I at least remembered this time!

We climbed back up the mountain in less cloudy weather than yesterday, with views down to the coast and a couple of the villages of the Cinque Terre, Monterosso and Vernazza. Then inland a bit before diving down again, this time to the big port city of La Spezia.



We were intending to stay the night at a camper site in the village of Portovenere, right at the outer end of the Golfo di Spezia. But it is a very busy tourist village now, and the roads to the end are blocked to larger traffic. We pulled into a small parking area signed as for campers, but it was also needed for huge tourist coaches, so we retraced our steps to La Spezia. The city was easier to traverse than some, and we had an uncomplicated run down to the seaside resort strip below the mountains of Carrara to a camp site that had identified itself as “relaxing”. We selected a pleasant space in time for lunch.

Late afternoon, we walked down to the beach, much the same as all the others in this part of the Italian Riviera.

Saturday 26 May

Considering the site we chose had a road the other side of the hedge, we had a surprisingly quiet night. It was a fine and sunny morning and 26 degrees in the van by lunch, perfect.

A quiet and peaceful day, with following qualifying for Monaco being the main activity. Also had a first go at fixing the sliding step, the forward mounting for which has failed. Some trip planning, with worries about crowding in Tuscany!

Sunday 27 May

Another quiet night, followed by a quiet day reading, cleaning up the van, and having another go at making a basic repair to the sliding step. Not really effective – proper tools required!

Monday 28 May

On the road again, for a drive that looked dead easy but turned out to be less so. First, though, we headed for a nearby Carrefour megastore, not only for stores but also to see if they had any folding lounging chairs that might replace our ageing and disintegrating pair, but if all else failed, to get some nuts and bolts to make the latter a bit safer. They did have some that looked promising, so we bought a couple at only €24 each. On the way we passed scores of processing plants for the Carrara marble that is mined in the mountains clearly visible inland. We visited the mines in 2001 in the Ferrari trip, and had to find a small pension that allowed us to wash off the marble dust without damaging the paintwork!



The Tomtom then took us down the seemingly endless coastal road, past all the resorts and private beaches. Further south, they did look a bit posher, and there were some decent-looking hotels on the inland side of the road. On the map it did seem that there were some acceptable albeit minor roads to Lucca, but we missed the turn on to the suggested road at a complicated intersection and found ourselves facing the pay station for a motorway! Fortunately there was little traffic and an opening in the road divider, so we did a quick U-turn and got back on an extremely minor road that did finally get us to the ancient city of Lucca.

We parked in the large camper sosta about half a kilometre outside the western gate in the city's fortified walls, and after lunch walked in.

Lucca, like many other Tuscan cities and towns, was founded by the Etruscans, who migrated from Asia Minor in about 900 BC. They settled mostly in middle Italy because of its mineral wealth, but after a fierce war with Rome, were eclipsed by Roman rule by 390 BC. Many aspects of the city's layout demonstrate the Roman influence. We entered the walled town by one of the gates in its impressive fortifications and ramparts, built in the 16th century but although designed under the most advanced principles of defence they were never used for their purpose. We walked through narrow pedestrian (nearly) only streets and lanes, laid out in a generally rectangular pattern, Roman style.



Our first visit was to the beautiful Chiesa di San Michele in Foro (implying it was next to the old Roman forum). It is a dazzling Romanesque church, clothed in shining white Carrara marble. The complex, multi-layered wedding cake of a façade is topped by a huge stature of St Michael slaying a dragon. Internally, it is unusual in being quite plain and undecorated by Italian Catholic standards. The other big church is of course the Duomo, the Pisan-Romanesque cathedral, dates back to the 11th century. Again, it has a magnificent façade. But this we could only see in pictures as it was shrouded for refurbishment. The bell tower is weirdly placed alongside the façade and all

but its upper parts is of incongruous red brick, rather than the marble used elsewhere. Inside, in the north aisle there is a beautiful little circular temple with a graceful ivory statue on its wall. There are large paintings all around the walls of the single nave, including a magnificent Tintoretto picture of what he must have seen in his mind as a lively last supper.

The best-known example of Roman influence is the Anfiteatro Romana, a piazza bounded by buildings that mirror the shape of the original amphitheatre. Fundamentally, what is there now is a reconstruction of the dwellings and workplaces that once abutted the outer walls of the theatre. It is an amazing space now, ringed internally with cafes and restaurants of course. Lucca is a musical town, and soon upcoming was a choir competition. One such choir, obviously British, was singing *a capella*, and pretty awful they were too!

We meandered back out of the walled town, getting lost most of the time but helped by Google maps to get out and back to the van. Hot in the sun all day.

Tuesday 29 May

Earlyish start for the first drive of the day, a short run down to Pisa. Once again I misread a junction and we got on to a motorway. But it's quite easy once you know (or remember) how, in



Italy: press a button and take a ticket, then pay on the way off the motorway using a terminal with a graphic of a hand passing coins over it. Cheap, too.

So, not a particularly inspiring run south to Pisa, and parked by a couple of other motorhomes in a big car park near the sights with no apparent limitations. Then, followed some of the earlier groups of tourists from the buses, building up in numbers by the minute.



And so, of course, to the Campo dei Miracoli, where lie some of the most marvellous, picturesque and famous Romanesque buildings in the world. We first visited the Battistero, the circular baptistery that was started in 1153 and finished in the 14th century by the Pisano brothers. Inside, there is a carved brown marble pulpit with scenes depicting scenes from the life of Christ, and a white marble font. It is possible to walk round the gallery about half way up under the dome. The acoustics, it is said (and we had to wait outside for a minute while they were demonstrated to a tour group) are outstanding.

Then to the Duomo, clothed and decorated in Carrara marble, the majestic cathedral that is a model for all Romanesque churches throughout Tuscany and Sardinia. It was begun in 1064, and features the striped green and white marble panels that became the model for the Pisan-Romanesque style, and the Moorish look of which may be a bequest of the settlement and influence of immigrants from Asia Minor. The façade features enormous bronze doors and a multi-tiered colonnades, all patterned with multi-coloured sandstone, marble and glass. The interior is graceful, with a gold and blue carved roof over the nave.



Giovanni Pisano's (1302 to 1310) amazing pulpit, perhaps the most important work in the cathedral, features all the most significant biblical stories somewhere, on or between the columns or on the panels of the pulpit. The carving is simply exquisite, with the facial expression of each of the scores of figures clear and eloquent. Lions appear to be in anguish as they support two of the pillars on their backs.

What is now known as the Pendente, the Leaning Tower, was simply intended to be the campanile for the Duomo, and was begun in 1173. Unfortunately, it started to tilt before even the third storey was completed. But they pressed on and finished it in 1350. Much more recently its lean increased, and for several years engineering efforts have gone into stabilising the sand and clay on which it sits. This now appears to have been completed, and for the first time in decades people can now walk up the interior stairs. This is now an expensive endeavour, and as we did it at some 20 or more years ago, we simply stood with thousands of others and marvelled at the sight.



Finally we walked round the imposing Cimitero alongside the other buildings. It is built in the style of an enormous cloister, and features wonderful frescoes all round its extensive walls. The frescoes were damaged in WW2, and are now being restored, but their original glory is apparent. There is also a large collection of Roman tombs around the colonnades.



The Campo is one of the most beautiful and famous historic sites in Europe, and is therefore justifiably popular. By the time we left, in the late morning, the compound was seething with tourists, and we were pleased this was supposed to be the “off” season. Where the buses will park in the high season is a mystery! But it’s still a place that everyone should visit in their lifetime.



After lunch in the van, off and away at last into attractive Tuscan countryside and to Volterra, in the heart of the original Etruscan settlements. Over the centuries its attraction has always been its location, high on a plateau with wide views of the surrounding areas. The Etruscans gave way to the Romans, who came into conflict with Firenze, and the Medicis took possession in the 15th century.



We settled in a large camper sosta – the Parcheggio Docciola – which is adjacent to a car park close to the eastern gate in the Etruscan walls of the city. During the afternoon, which was initially very hot and humid, the clouds came over and we were presented with a vicious thunderstorm. It dried out by bed time.

Wednesday 30 May

We started quite early to visit the town, before the heat built up, and entered through the Porta e Fonti di Docciola. There followed a long flight of stairs up the plateau, which Norma managed very well, most encouraging. We then generally simply meandered round this mostly pedestrianised little town, with narrow streets and alleyways leading to a variety of piazzas. The biggest is the Piazza dei Priori, which is lined with impressive medieval palaces and public buildings. The Duomo was firmly shut by big doors, we assumed for extensive renovation. We did see extensive roof work from a viewpoint on the ramparts.

The city is known for its workmanship with alabaster. We walked through one of the biggest showrooms, and much admired some of the beautiful sculptures,



expensive as they are. Alabaster is a mineral which in this case is mined locally, and explains why it was Volterra craftsmen who made the trade famous here.

Alabaster is basically either a soft calcium sulphate, or a harder calcium carbonate. It carved by hand or machine such as a lathe, and can be coloured by dyes. It can't be used for external decoration because it will absorb water and turn to mush.



The other primary visit was to the Museo Etrusco Guernacci, which displays hundreds of Etruscan tombs and funerary artefacts. The best known of these is an extraordinary bronze statuette of a young man, elongated like a shadow in the sun. It is probably a fertility god dating from about 205 BC. Such slender objects were stuck in the soil to encourage crop growth. We also visited the impressive remains of a Roman theatre and forum, just outside the city walls.

Back to the van for lunch, just in time to get out of the rain that developed into a substantial downpour, with thunder and nearby lightning. A good time to stay put.

Thursday 31 May

Clearing enough, and away on a pleasant and classically scenic Tuscan route from Volterra to San Gimignano, arriving mid-morning. We had been aiming to stay at a *sosta* in all the books, with a free shuttle bus up to the town; but on arrival, it became clear that the site was shut and defunct. So we pressed on up to the town and parked in a suburban street, quite a quiet place with a couple of other vans there. A “No Camping” sign was the only stricture.



We walked up into the 14th century walled town made famous by its 13 towers and kept famous by being fairly unchanged since medieval times. The towers were symbols of the power and wealth of the competing medieval families, notably the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. Today, the streets, alleys and piazzas were a seething mass of tourists, as San Gimignano is solidly on the tourist bus circuit. We could hear as much English spoken as Italian. Unfortunately the two main piazzas were taken over by market stalls, and it was hard enough to walk around let alone look up at the sights and the towers.

There are, however, some lovely medieval buildings all around, including palaces and smaller mansions, and there was a beautiful view of the countryside from a viewpoint on the ramparts at the edge of the hill on which the town is perched. There were also lovely views of the town from the valley below, where vineyards, poppies, green fields and cypresses were as abundant as ever in this part of the world.

Back at the van, we decided to move down to the other recognised *sosta*, at Santa Lucia, about 2.5 kilometres down from the town. That was fine for a night stop, but devoid of any facilities whatsoever. It did turn out that you could take the public bus up from there, so it would have been a good place to go first.



Friday 1 June

The immediate need was for stores, as the next day was a public holiday. So we went into the nearby commercial town of Poggibonsi, where we had established there was a Lidl. It turned out to be a massive load, but we still managed to get it stowed away. Then down south again, firstly on (free) motorways of no particular interest except when working out intersections while bypassing Siena to the west. Then more attractive

scenery, along the valley of the River Arbia, and finally to Montalcino.

This is yet another hilltop town, partly protected by 13th century ramparts and a fortress. It seems to spill down one side of the hill on which it is perched. It is centre of the local wine-growing industry, which features the Brunello red. Every other door along the main street offers “free entry” for tasting and buying the wine. Brunello was originally thought to be unique to the region, but it has been identified as being in the same family as the Sangiovese grape, but Brunello di Montalcino - 100% Sangiovese – gained DOCG recognition in 1980. It is one of Italy’s most expensive wines, and we have not tasted it yet!



It is a pleasant town to explore, way less frenetic than San G, but we pressed on a little further down the beautiful Valle d’Orcia to yet another on a hilltop, San Quirico d’Orcia. This was the quietest town we had so far visited in Italy, let alone Tuscany, and it was most relaxing

to stroll the nearly empty and completely traffic free streets. The Collegiata, the main church at the top of the town, has three doors with ornate porticos, and commemorates the 3rd century martyr St Quiricus, who was killed by the Romans at the age of five for declaring himself to be a Christian.

Another feature of the little town is a formal boxed-hedge garden, created in the 16th century as a refuge for pilgrims and travellers.



There is a good sosta in Quirico, and we settled on the edge by a football field, for a while getting out the chairs and sitting on its grassy fringe. It cooled off later, after a hot day, and the sounds of kids kicking the balls around became annoying, so we moved across to a quieter spot – quieter, that is, until the sosta filled up with cars and a concert of modern (but not rock) music in a nearby theatre broke out at 9:15 pm. But we’ve heard worse, and didn’t last too long – a truly local live event, from what we could hear.

Saturday 2 June

This was Republic Day in Italy, and a public holiday. Through WW2 and immediately after, Italy was a constitutional monarchy. In 1946, after a referendum, the constitutional monarchy was abolished and a republic was established on the second of June, the day this anniversary now commemorates.

Since then, however, Italy has grown economically in the 72 years over the period – particularly in the sixties and seventies – to become the third largest economy in the Eurozone, despite its massive debt. Politically, however, it has been notoriously unstable and has had more than 65 governments in this time. The present situation hardly reflects a change in that situation. In March there were inconclusive elections, with the two most popular parties being at different ends of the political spectrum: the Five Star Movement from the left, and the League from the right. They then formed an unlikely coalition, to be led as prime minister by a little-known law professor, Giuseppe Conte. Following the parties' nomination of a far-left, anti-Euro economist as financial spokesman, President Mattarella withdrew his support for the coalition. Within the previous two days, however, after replacing him with a less extreme finance spokesman, the President did swear in Conte and Europe's first populist, Eurosceptic government, which threatens to abandon EU spending rules and deport half a million immigrants. Among other things. Brussels is worried sick.



It seemed that there were not going to be any local celebrations of the day, and the weather was gorgeous. So we decided to stay, and spent most of the afternoon on the new lounge chairs under some olive trees in a grove close to the van, looking down over the valley below, extending right to the green horizon.

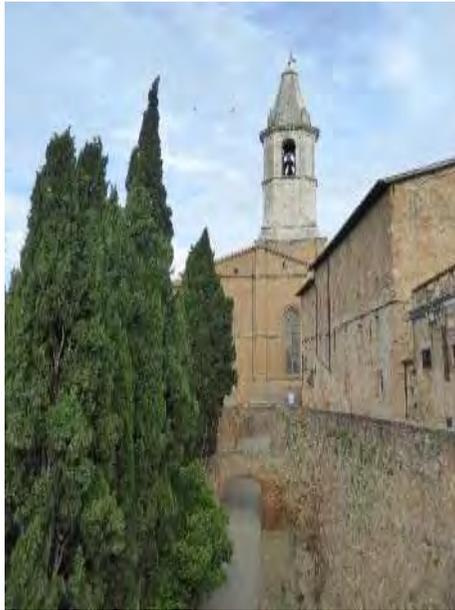


Sunday 3 June

Had such a nice relaxing day yesterday that we decided to do it again, relaxing with books in the shade of olive trees close by the van. Nothing else happened.

Monday 4 June

A good start for what turned out to be quite a day, starting well with a lovely run through the hills to the first stop of the day, Pienza. In the early sun, glowing green and gold fields spread lazily over gently rolling hills under a blue sky. The inevitable cypress trees stood sharply against a backdrop of hazy mountains.



Compact Pienza was a lovely little town, and an easy walk up from a motorhome car park. The humanist scholar Pope Pius II decided in 1459 to redesign the centre of the town along classic Renaissance lines. Within its walls there is an enchanting piazza and town hall, and an impressive Duomo of classic proportions which is flooded with light from enormous windows – Pope Pius wanted this effect to symbolise the enlightenment of the humanist age. In retrospect, Pienza became one of our favourite old Tuscan towns, complete – as ever – with expansive views all round.



A downside, however, was the grumpy nature of some of the local people in towns popular with tourists, especially including those who were supposed to be trying to sell us something. An elderly pharmacist was frankly dismissive and rude. A woman selling local produce in a good-looking shop could not have cared less whether we bought any of the cheese we were obviously interested in, let alone offer us a taste – which is a common custom in friendlier local markets.

We saw lots more of this kind of scenery on the next leg, to Montepulciano, the last of the villages we would see along the marvellous Valle d’Orcia. As it happens, we decided not to stop and go up into the village, as all the information was that its roads and alleys were exceptional high and steep.

Continuing east but beginning finally to ease northwards, we passed Cortona. This is a bigger place than most others, and sits spread out on the side of a high hill the other side of a major valley through which runs the important Florence-Rome motorway. Cortona is another town that is hard to get to without taking a lot of time, as well as being very steep, so we simply passed by, admiring its location. We had been reading a book by an American writer who has a house there and has written extensively about life in Tuscany and travel in Italy. Her style is not altogether to our taste!



The major visit of the day was the city of Arezzo, one of the major settlements in Italy that we had not previously visited. We parked outside the walls in a motorhome park, very hot in this early afternoon, and walked up to the town. There were no directions of any kind, and the road maps we had were no help, so we made our best guess on the route in and started walking. Our guess was wrong: we climbed a tortuous route up, only to find that we had to walk a long way round the enormous fortezza, which was not open.



We finally made it to the big town, one of the wealthiest in Tuscany. Parts are looking a bit run down and untidy, but this is normal in Italy, and there are some wonderful sights nevertheless. We started with the immense 13th-15th century Duomo at the top of the hill, with its spire visible for miles around. We then plunged down into the narrow streets of the centre, trying hard to keep track of where we were.

The sloping central square, the Piazza Grande, is one of the most impressive of its kind we have seen, and wonderfully free of traffic or other obstructions. It is lined with an assortment of medieval mansions and palaces, one Palazzo being decked out with the coats of arms of previous governors of the city. Facing the square is the lovely apse of the Romanesque church of Santa Maria della Pieve. At the other end of

this church it features an extraordinary façade, a three-tiered loggia with countless columns at each level.



A visitor highlight is the Church of San Francesco, whose statue with a friendly lion stands outside. The drawcard is one of the world's most important paintings, a cycle of frescoes recounting the Legend of the Cross. (Which is all a bit complicated to outline here, but is basically the mythological history of the cross of the crucifixion, from sprig to Tree of Knowledge.) They were painted by the great Piero della Francesca, of the Florentine school, and have just become available to view again after a long period of renovation.

He created this masterpiece between 1452 and 1466 on the walls of the choir and apse, with each segment of the whole depicting a scene from the legend. Only a few people are allowed in at a time, a dozen or so, but we only had to wait half an hour after booking a place – and paying a €2 “booking fee” on top of the entry fee. Never come across that scam before, but the €8 overall ticket cost was not high, given the importance of the

exhibit.

The renovation has been highly sympathetic, because all the colours have an old and faintly faded look while the peoples' features are still sharp and expressive. A marvellous thing to see, but you'd have to have been there for hours to get a real feeling for the whole and there was something of an emphasis on getting people through.





A quick walk up to the Duomo revealed what we had missed on arrival: stairs down to the street far below, a direct route to where we had parked. Moreover, with ill luck for Norma's aches, we missed the fact that the stairs were duplicated by escalators! We did ride the final flight down, though.

It was about 4:15 by the time we got back to the van. It was not much of a place, and we made what turned out to be the ill-fated decision to drive on for an hour or so to an Agriturismo in the countryside near Bibbiena that looked good in the guides.

The drive there was without problems, simply following the route of a very young River Arno along its valley. At Bibbiena, in the foothills, we turned off the main road and climbed quite substantially into a forest in search of the agriturismo, but where the coordinates took us was only a broken-down farm looking unoccupied for years. A little way further was a good-looking farm with temporary fencing around it, and some young people who looked at us quizzically. We deduced that this was probably once the agriturismo, but it had been sold.

So back down to the "main" road, which was appallingly rough – it turns out that Italy's financial problems are having a bad effect on infrastructure and its maintenance, even in popular regions like Tuscany. Another blight on the landscape was a proliferation of "Spazio Libero" signs, advertising for advertising, in some places every 100 metres or so along the roadside. Horrible to look at, and distracting too – one thing you do not want to be on Italian roads!

There was nowhere suitable to stop in Bibbiena, so once again, although getting late by then, we pressed on to Poppi, where our database did suggest a couple of possibilities. We tried the official camper stopping place first, but didn't like it, and went down to a vast parking area by the local sports stadium and field. This seemed OK, so we settled in for the night.

Tuesday 5 June

Well, it wasn't OK. As dark fell, we were conscious of some coming and going, but thought they were just youngsters out with their cars and bikes. By 1:00 am it was getting really worrying, with cars whizzing in, staying a short time then going out again, which we came to assume was for devious or perverse purposes. So, unusually for us, we pulled out and drove into the town, parking in the main car park in the central square.

In the morning we felt tired, and not like undertaking some difficult driving past Florence, so thought we could stay another night there. But first, after doing a stock-up in the local supermarket, we drove up to the camper sosta from where we walked up to the imposing hilltop Castello di Poppi that is prominent from everywhere in the town, with its high tower. It was shut until later in the morning, but there was a good view of the Tuscan





landscape from all around it. The hill top is also the site of the old town of Poppi, and we enjoyed a pleasant walk around the typical alleys, along nearly all of which were colonnades, very attractive.

The next local outing was to the Zoo Park just outside the town. This is in all the guidebooks and heavily advertised by signs all around. It is supposed to be an important centre for the conservation of threatened wildlife such as wolves. It covers a large area, but is terribly run down now and showing no signs of upkeep. There were few animals to be seen, except for a sad-looking macaque monkey, a few deer, donkeys and tortoises, and a buffalo. There were several aviaries for raptors

and owls, but they didn't really have enough room to fly. No attendants were in evidence, apart from the nice lady at the desk who took our money.

For the rest of the day, which was going to be quiet (we hoped!), we returned to the sports stadium park and parked by a

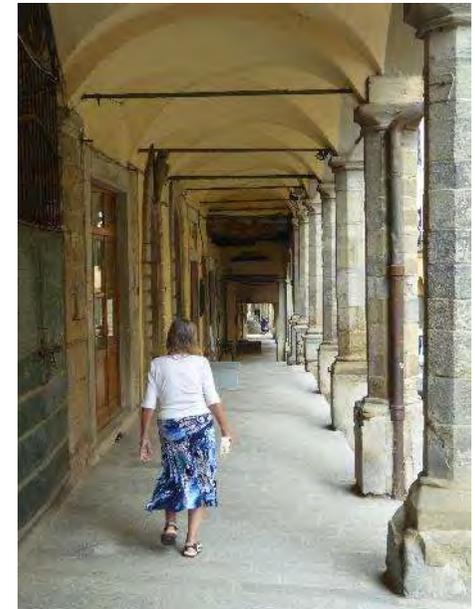


green sward under some trees – not a bad spot at all. But, inevitably, the place was raided in the late afternoon by a talkative gang of young people and two noisy trail bikes, which zoomed up and down until we pulled out again and returned to the town car park!

Again, the part we were in – probably primarily for trucks and buses – was remarkably peaceful, the only problem being very bright floodlights that made us shut up the van completely. But they, and the fact that the police station was just across the road, made us feel sufficiently secure.

Wednesday 6 June

On the road again, north and west through hilly countryside on winding roads, and up and over the Consuma pass at just over 1,000 metres. It continued to be a pleasant drive until we came down out of the mountains from this minor road and encountered the inevitable traffic in the greater Florence region. We by-passed the city to its south on motorways, some of which we paid a few euros for, on our way to Pistoia. Here we turned south for a camp site, which was something we were beginning to feel the need for. But about 10 km past where the camp site was supposed to be (we couldn't see it) is the town of Vinci, which Leonardo made famous, and where there is a museum honouring him.





We parked in a camper stop about a kilometre past the town, and walked back up the hill to its centre and the museum in a castle at the top – Norma’s knees doing outstandingly well, although her back was still troubling her. Leonardo was probably born nearby, in the village of Anchiano, and we visited that traditional birthplace many years ago.

The museum, which has recently been refurbished, shows many models built on the basis of his drawings and sketches, as well as his explorations of human and animal anatomy, and the science of flight, physics and optics. We have always been in awe of the ability of this genius to investigate and manage all these interests, while producing some of the world’s greatest paintings and other art. Extraordinary.

Finally, a longish walk back to the van, but downhill. The weather has stayed hot, with occasional afternoon clouds and thunderstorms, cooling by sundown. The camper stop seemed adequate, so we settled down to stay the night here.



Thursday 7 June

Away about 10:00 after a peaceful night, and back up to Pistoia. The whole area round here features a vast array of orchards for trees and other large plants. They all look immaculate and well ordered, and are altogether a unique sight.

We then headed up into the Apennines for our south-to-north crossing, starting with a great run up the mountains on winding roads with splendid views. All the villages seemed very quiet, and lots of houses appear unoccupied and businesses defunct. We stopped for lunch at Abetone with a good view over some ski facilities – the place is supposed to be renowned as a ski resort. But most of the activity would be further up the mountain and out of sight of the village.

Down the northern side of the mountains on mainly quite good roads by Italian standards, and to Pavullo, where we had stopped at a sosta for the night a few years ago. We called in to it, but it seemed a bit gloomy and was only just off the road, so we decided to press on for the sosta at Maranello.

We took the scenic route to Maranello rather than the main road, and enjoyed again the excellent views of the area from the road, which runs along a ridge between two valleys. Trouble was, we had to go into Maranello and out again on the main road to get to the sosta.



This was a low key facility to say the least. We had to make a phone call to the owner to get the code for the keypad to open the barrier, which was an endeavour itself. We were supposed to pay the (low) fee at the adjoining restaurant, which belongs to the same man, but it was shut and remained so all evening. But we were plugged in, shared the place with just one semi-permanent, and the surroundings were green and pleasant.

There was a slight shower and sounds of thunder late evening, hot and very humid.

Friday 8 June

In the middle of the night we had a vicious thunderstorm, long lasting, with constant lightning in the clouds and torrential rain. This carried on and off until the early hours.



Dried off under high white overcast and cooler air, as we headed into Maranello to visit the first of the two Ferrari museums. This was of course what is now called the Museo Ferrari, where we had met and enjoyed the company of a senior curator three years ago. We confirmed that he had now left.

The first disappointment was that the exhibition, which changes its theme every now and then, was undergoing one of these changes – so a lot of stuff wasn't there (the Regazzoni F1 car was being unloaded as we left) and the narrative was shambolic. There were two themes under development: the creative and engineering development of a selection of cars over the years; and another selection of cars representing 70 years of Ferrari for road and track. There was also a sub-theme, describing the relationship of Ferrari and some special cars with women, mostly showbiz stars. Norma commented that the original Madame Ferrari got hardly a mention. The influence of the now powerful Piero Ferrari, who is not her son, perhaps?

So, rather less interesting or enjoyable than expected, then. So off we went up to Modena for the Museo Enzo Ferrari, the two museums now formally twinned, in terms of ticketing and all. Attached to the house in which Enzo Ferrari was born is a futuristic space with an assembly of particularly gorgeous cars – iconic models from different eras – with a theme picked up by pictures, text and a huge AV display based on the early history of his life as a driver and founder of the firm.

The adjoining house is in two parts – the shell of the original living quarters, and the workshop of Alfredo Ferrari, Enzo's father. There is a reproduction of Enzo's office and conference table, but the rest of the building, where the engineering works were, is taken up by Ferrari's engines over the years, V12, V8 and V4. Norma sat outside while I had a quick look at the engines.



Away again, and to the only reasonable motorhome stop in the area, the local Camper and Caravan Club's site about 10 km west of Modena. A weird place, had to get a man up to open the gates – seems mostly to be a storage location. But acceptable. Joined later for a chat with a Brit of Italian origin, whose family lives down in the south, to where he's on his way. Sunny afternoon, looking forward to a quieter night!

Saturday 9 June

Just a driving day, really, and not very enjoyable.

Pulled out in good time after getting the three (!) barriers and gates opened after paying, then on a run to Venice. We had chosen not to take the pay motorways but just the red roads for more interest, not to speak of no hassle with terminals. The first part of the route took us cross-country through farming land to the south of Ferrara, flat as a billiard table and with lots of evidence through flattened crops of recent tempestuous weather. The road then became free motorway to the east, but no-one could have justified a toll for the dreadful road surface we endured for so many kilometres – plus putting up with loony, aggressive and illegally fast Italian drivers and motorcyclists.

That took us down to the Po delta with lots of flood protection banks and rice paddies. Then north again along the coast but without any sight of the sea, through Chioggia – where we had considered stopping, but we were close to Venice by then – and across a long causeway fringing the muddy-looking Venice lagoon.

Just before we got to Mestre we turned down for several kilometres through a massive industrial area, including the very posh-looking Lamborghini factory, and finally to Fusina and its camp site on the southern shores of the lagoon. A better and quieter place than we had anticipated, and it was easy to locate a waterfront spot after changing our minds a couple of times.





Hot when we arrived at about 3:00 pm, but some tree shade developing and pleasant by 6:00. Site pretty full. Lots of coming and going of large and small runabouts from the adjacent marina, which is part of the same complex. To the north we could see the multiple chimneys of the Marghera, the industrial complex we had passed coming in – a few years ago an environmentally toxic area, now much cleaned up and with no chimneys emitting anything. About 5 km away to the north-east, in the setting sun, we can see across the lagoon to the buildings and towers of Venice, with several huge white cruise ships moored in the docks of Santa Croce. Right in front of us was the narrow shipping lane for commercial freighters out of the Porto Marghera docks, and it was a surreal sight to see them gliding by, the larger ones shepherded by tugs, only a few metres away from us. The cruise ships have to go in and out of the lagoon via the Giudecca canal, as there's no other way for them.

Sunday 10 June

After the warmest night we'd had on the whole trip so far, it warmed up quickly in the rising sun, from which we had no shade. There was plenty of shade in the trees throughout this big park, but then we couldn't see all the action on the water we were much enjoying! This was a day of R&R&R, rest, rehab and research. And Norma did the laundry.

We did anticipate that this would be a moving day for many, and a large number of vans did leave in the morning, leaving the camp site relatively quiet. The small-boat activity really did rev up, with scores of them roaring off down the south-bound shipping lane, we guessed mainly on their way over the lagoon to the island of the Lido. There was also a constant line of aircraft on the approach to the very busy Marco Polo airport.

We checked out the options for water transport for the next few days, and in the afternoon sat in the shade reading and researching the city, and watching the ceaseless activities of the small boats, roaring in towards the narrow entrance to the marina, most being driven in exactly the same way as they do on the roads. We were struck by the lack of sun protection for most; any, including kids? Not a chance. being had by all. Most of the boats ashore, lifted from the water on to cranes in the marina.



Monday 11 June

After a hot night followed by a very hazy morning, took the 9:00 ferry across the lagoon to the Zattere station. This is on the south side of

and lifejackets for
But good fun
were stored
their trailers by



hazy morning, took the 9:00 ferry





occasional directional signs. Along the waterways, gondolas, water taxis and working craft jostled for space between the waterfront buildings.

the main island, looking across the Giudecca Canal to the Giudecca island. We had decided to buy a pair of three-day passes for all ferry trips – although seemingly expensive, they probably saved money and certainly saved a great deal of time and trouble.

We walked north to the Accademia and its bridge (being reconstructed, like much else), and took a meandering and confusing walk to the east towards Piazza San Marco. As we well remembered, navigating this mass of alleyways, small canals and bridges is hard, and helped little or not at all by studying maps and

We made it to the square, beautiful as ever, and initially it did not look too crowded as we walked past the cafes. But as we approached the basilica, the campanile and the piazzette, for the first time in this visit we came into contact with the vast throngs of people who now come to Venice and (admittedly including us) are placing an unmanageable burden on the tourist and other infrastructure. These days, there seem to be more people than pigeons in the eastern part of the square! Like Barcelona, suggestions for mandatorily reducing the permitted number of visitors are being mooted, but the money they bring is a substantial contribution to the city finances . . . Catch 22.

Last time here (2008) we could not face the queue for entrance to the Basilica San Marco, but because we were a little earlier in the day this time, and despite the even bigger crowds now seeking entry, we felt we had to. During the long wait I left Norma to hold the place while I went off to deposit our small backpack, which we had seen would not be allowed in. Finding the cloakroom – in an alley separate from the church – was a task in itself.

The basilica, inside and out, remains one of the great sights of Europe. It was originally the chapel of the Doges, and is a building of mixed Byzantine and western styles constructed between 1063 and 1073. The façade is a masterpiece in itself, with its glowing mosaics, arches, colonnades and statues, but frankly it's impossible to wander, study and match what you see with the information in the guidebooks because of the crowds. The same applies to the interior, as we shuffled around trying to give due attention to its complex architecture and extraordinary features. It simply has to be absorbed as a whole, with hopes that some memories will remain in addition to the jostling visitors – many trying, as we were, to snatch a photo or two that was not permitted. Later, gazing at the pictures, we could realise what we missed, but the only way to make the most of such a visit is to go in the true off-season. Which mid-June used to be!





Sadly, we decided not to go through it all again for a visit to the Doges' Palace, especially as we would have had to wait for the afternoon – the morning was confined to tour groups with guides. However, we did have the consolation that we have visited Venice and seen all these glories several times before, including with toddler Anita during our return from Cyprus in 1966 and in *Cera* in 1987.

Getting quickly out of the crowds, as is possible quite soon after leaving San Marco precinct, we took a vaporetto out to the naval museum out in the Castello region. But to no real surprise, we found it was closed for reconstruction.



We chose then to go for lunch at a nearby ristorante pizzeria (which they nearly all are called) on the quayside, where we had a pleasant but inevitably expensive lunch with refreshing beers.

The plan then was to find a ferry to take us round to the north side of the island, where we wanted to visit the large San Giovanni e Paolo and the beautiful San Maria di Miracoli. But with no recent experience it was simply impossible to work out which vaporetto went to where and when, so we gave up and took one back



to San Marco and another to Zattere. From there, we took the ferry back to Fusina and the camp site by 4:00 pm, enough for a tiring day in the heat. Thundery, humid conditions all afternoon.

The visiting cruise ships we had seen yesterday had all gone by the morning, so the crowding we experienced could have been worsened by their 10,000 or so passengers!

Tuesday 12 June

Got an early start on the 8:00 ferry from Fusina, along with a few office workers on their commuter run. Our first visit was to the Accademia di Belle Arti, a museum that we had never visited before. It was founded in 1750, and about 50 years later Napoleon enriched it with major works of art “removed” from churches and monasteries. The main body of the collection is, therefore, composed of huge, wonderful paintings, largely of the Renaissance and Baroque eras, full of drama and colour. The detailing is amazing, with something to see and examine every few



inches.

Unfortunately, and not unusually for Venice, there was a substantial degree of renovation going on, and two of the paintings we most wanted to see were in rooms that were shut. Still, there were plenty more. A favourite was Giovanni Bellini's beautiful 1504 painting of the Madonna and Child between St John the Baptist and a Saint. The Madonna's expression is calm and contemplative, and the figures are set in

A quiet and peaceful day, with following qualifying for Monaco being the main activity. Also had a first go at fixing the sliding step, the forward mounting for which has failed. Some trip planning, with worries about crowding in Tuscany!

Sunday 27 May

Another quiet night, followed by a quiet day reading, cleaning up the van, and having another go at making a basic repair to the sliding step. Not really effective – proper tools required!



Monday 28 May

On the road again, for a drive that looked dead easy but turned out to be less so. First, though, we headed for a nearby Carrefour megastore, not only for stores but also to see if they had any folding lounging chairs that might replace our ageing and disintegrating pair, but if all else failed, to get some nuts and bolts to make the latter a bit safer. They did have some that looked promising, so we bought a couple at only €24 each. On the way we passed scores of processing plants for the Carrara marble that is mined in the mountains clearly visible inland. We visited the mines in 2001 in the Ferrari trip, and had to find a small pension that allowed us to wash off the marble dust without damaging the paintwork!

The Tomtom then took us down the seemingly endless coastal road, past all the resorts and private beaches. Further south, they did look a bit posher, and there were some decent-looking hotels on the inland side of the road. On the map it did seem that there were some acceptable albeit minor roads to Lucca, but we missed the turn on to the suggested road at a complicated intersection and found ourselves facing the pay station for a motorway! Fortunately there was little traffic and an opening in the road divider, so we did a quick U-turn and got back on an extremely minor road that did finally get us to the ancient city of Lucca.

We parked in the large camper sosta about half a kilometre outside the western gate in the city's fortified walls, and after lunch walked in.



Lucca, like many other Tuscan cities and towns, was founded by the Etruscans, who migrated from Asia Minor in about 900 BC. They settled mostly in middle Italy because of its mineral wealth, but after a fierce war with Rome, were eclipsed by Roman rule by 390 BC. Many aspects of the city's layout demonstrate the Roman influence. We entered the walled town by one of the gates in its impressive fortifications and ramparts, built in the 16th century but although designed under the most advanced principles of defence they were never used for their purpose. We walked through narrow pedestrian (nearly) only

streets and lanes, laid out in a generally rectangular pattern, Roman style.

Our first visit was to the beautiful Chiesa di San Michele in Foro (implying it was next to the old Roman forum). It is a dazzling Romanesque church, clothed in shining white Carrara marble. The complex, multi-layered wedding cake of a façade is topped by a huge stature of St Michael slaying a dragon. Internally, it is unusual in being quite plain and undecorated by Italian Catholic standards. The other big church is of course the Duomo, the Pisan-Romanesque cathedral, dates back to the 11th century. Again, it has a magnificent façade. But this we could only see in pictures as it was shrouded for refurbishment. The bell tower is weirdly placed alongside the façade and all but its upper parts is of incongruous red brick, rather than the marble used elsewhere. Inside, in the north aisle there is a beautiful little circular temple with a graceful ivory statue on its wall. There are large paintings all around the walls of the single nave, including a magnificent Tintoretto picture of what he must have seen in his mind as a lively last supper.

The best-known example of Roman influence is the Anfiteatro Romana, a piazza bounded by buildings that mirror the shape of the original amphitheatre. Fundamentally, what is there now is a reconstruction of the dwellings and workplaces that once abutted the outer walls of the theatre. It is an amazing space now, ringed internally with cafes and restaurants of course. Lucca is a musical town, and soon upcoming was a choir competition. One such choir, obviously British, was singing *a capella*, and pretty awful they were too!

We meandered back out of the walled town, getting lost most of the time but helped by Google maps to get out and back to the van. Hot in the sun all day.



Tuesday 29 May

Earlyish start for the first drive of the day, a short run down to Pisa. Once again I misread a junction and we got on to a motorway. But it's quite easy once you know (or remember) how, in Italy: press a button and take a ticket, then pay on the way off the motorway using a terminal with a graphic of a hand passing coins over it. Cheap, too.

So, not a particularly inspiring run south to Pisa, and parked by a couple of other motorhomes in a big car park near the sights with no apparent limitations. Then, I followed some of the earlier groups of tourists from the buses, building up in numbers by the minute.



And so, of course, to the Campo dei Miracoli, where lie some of the most marvellous, picturesque and famous Romanesque buildings in the world. We first visited the Battistero, the circular baptistery that was started in 1153 and finished in the 14th century by the Pisano brothers. Inside, there is a carved brown marble pulpit with scenes depicting scenes from the life of Christ, and a white marble font. It is possible to walk round the gallery about half way up under the dome. The acoustics, it is said (and we had to wait outside for a minute while they were demonstrated to a tour group) are outstanding.



Then to the Duomo, clothed and decorated in Carrara marble, the majestic cathedral that is a model for all Romanesque churches throughout Tuscany and Sardinia. It was begun in 1064, and features the striped green and white marble panels that became the model for the Pisan-Romanesque



style, and the Moorish look of which may be a bequest of the settlement and influence of immigrants from Asia Minor. The façade features enormous bronze doors and a multi-tiered colonnades, all patterned with multi-coloured sandstone, marble and glass. The interior is graceful, with a gold and blue carved roof over the nave.



Giovanni Pisano's (1302 to 1310) amazing pulpit, perhaps the most important work in the cathedral, features all the most significant biblical stories somewhere, on or between the columns or on the panels of the pulpit. The carving is simply exquisite, with the facial expression of each of the scores of figures clear and eloquent. Lions appear to be in anguish as they support two of the pillars on their backs.

What is now known as the Pendente, the Leaning Tower, was simply intended to be the campanile for the Duomo, and was begun in 1173. Unfortunately, it started to tilt before even the third storey was completed. But they pressed on and finished it in 1350. Much more recently its lean increased, and for several years engineering efforts have gone into stabilising the sand and clay on which it sits. This now appears to have been completed, and for the first time in decades

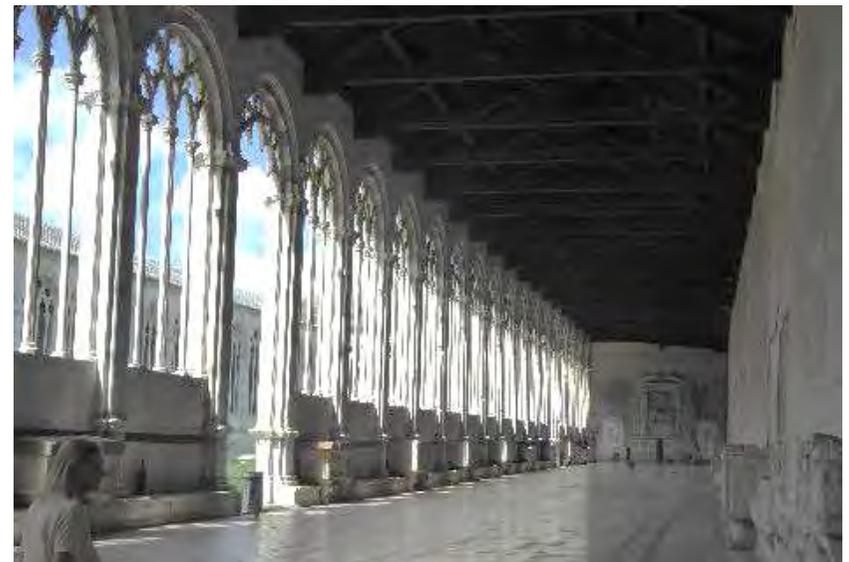
people can now walk up the interior stairs. This is now an expensive endeavour, and as we did it at some 20 or more years ago, we simply stood with thousands of others and marvelled at the sight.

Finally we walked round the imposing Cimitero alongside the other buildings. It is built in the style of an enormous cloister, and features wonderful frescoes all round its extensive walls. The frescoes were damaged in WW2, and are now being restored, but their original glory is apparent. There is also a large collection of Roman tombs around the colonnades.

The Campo is one of the most beautiful and famous historic sites in Europe, and is therefore justifiably popular. By the time we left, in the late morning, the compound was seething with tourists, and we were pleased this was supposed to be the “off” season. Where the buses will park in the high season is a mystery! But it’s still a place that everyone should visit in their lifetime.

After lunch in the van, off and away at last into attractive Tuscan countryside and to Volterra, in the heart of the original Etruscan settlements. Over the centuries its attraction has always been its location, high on a plateau with wide views of the surrounding areas. The Etruscans gave way to the Romans, who came into conflict with Firenze, and the Medicis took possession in the 15th century.

We settled in a large camper sosta – the Parcheggio Docciola – which is adjacent to a car park close to the eastern gate in the Etruscan walls of the city. During the afternoon, which was initially very hot and humid, the clouds came over and we were presented with a vicious thunderstorm. It dried out by bed time.



Wednesday 30 May We started quite early to visit the town, before the heat built up, and entered through the Porta e Fonti di Docciola. There followed a long flight of stairs up the plateau, which Norma managed very well, most encouraging. We then generally simply meandered round this mostly pedestrianised little town, with narrow streets and alleyways leading to a variety of piazzas. The biggest is the Piazza dei Priori, which is lined with impressive medieval palaces and public buildings. The Duomo was firmly shut by big doors, we assumed for extensive renovation. We did see extensive roof work from a viewpoint on the ramparts.

The city is known for its workmanship with alabaster. We walked through one of the biggest showrooms, and much admired some of the beautiful sculptures,



expensive as they are. Alabaster is a mineral which in this case is mined locally, and explains why it was Volterra craftsmen who made the trade famous here.

Alabaster is basically either a soft calcium sulphate, or a harder calcium carbonate. It carved by hand or machine such as a lathe, and can be coloured by dyes. It can't be used for external decoration because it will absorb water and turn to mush.



The other primary visit was to the Museo Etrusco Guernacci, which displays hundreds of Etruscan tombs and funerary artefacts. The best known of these is an extraordinary bronze statuette of a young man, elongated like a shadow in the sun. It is probably a fertility god dating from about 205 BC. Such slender objects were stuck in the soil to encourage crop growth. We also visited the impressive remains of a Roman theatre and forum, just outside the city walls.

Back to the van for lunch, just in time to get out of the rain that developed into a substantial downpour, with thunder and nearby lightning. A good time to stay put.

Thursday 31 May

Clearing enough, and away on a pleasant and classically scenic Tuscan route from Volterra to San Gimignano, arriving mid-morning. We had been aiming to stay at a *sosta* in all the books, with a free shuttle bus up to the town; but on arrival, it became clear that the site was shut and defunct. So we pressed on up to the town and parked in a suburban street, quite a quiet place with a couple of other vans there. A “No Camping” sign was the only stricture.



We walked up into the 14th century walled town made famous by its 13 towers and kept famous by being fairly unchanged since medieval times. The towers were symbols of the power and wealth of the competing medieval families, notably the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. Today, the streets, alleys and piazzas were a seething mass of tourists, as San Gimignano is solidly on the tourist bus circuit. We could hear as much English spoken as Italian. Unfortunately the two main piazzas were taken over by market stalls, and it was hard enough to walk around let alone look up at the sights and the towers.

There are, however, some lovely medieval buildings all around, including palaces and smaller mansions, and there was a beautiful view of the countryside from a viewpoint on the ramparts at the edge of the hill on which the town is perched. There were also lovely views of the town from the valley below, where vineyards, poppies, green fields and cypresses were as abundant as ever in this part of the world.

Back at the van, we decided to move down to the other recognised *sosta*, at Santa Lucia, about 2.5 kilometres down from the town. That was fine for a night stop, but devoid of any facilities whatsoever. It did turn out that you could take the public bus up from there, so it would have been a good place to go first.



Friday 1 June

The immediate need was for stores, as the next day was a public holiday. So we went into the nearby commercial town of Poggibonsi, where we had established there was a Lidl. It turned out to be a massive load, but we still managed to get it stowed away. Then down south again, firstly on (free) motorways of no particular interest except when working out intersections while bypassing Siena to the west. Then more attractive

scenery, along the valley of the River Arbia, and finally to Montalcino.

This is yet another hilltop town, partly protected by 13th century ramparts and a fortress. It seems to spill down one side of the hill on which it is perched. It is centre of the local wine-growing industry, which features the Brunello red. Every other door along the main street offers “free entry” for tasting and buying the wine. Brunello was originally thought to be unique to the region, but it has been identified as being in the same family as the Sangiovese grape, but Brunello di Montalcino - 100% Sangiovese – gained DOCG recognition in 1980. It is one of Italy’s most expensive wines, and we have not tasted it yet!



It is a pleasant town to explore, way less frenetic than San G, but we pressed on a little further down the beautiful Valle d’Orcia to yet another on a hilltop, San Quirico d’Orcia. This was the quietest town we had so far visited in Italy, let alone Tuscany, and it was most relaxing

to stroll the nearly empty and completely traffic free streets. The Collegiata, the main church at the top of the town, has three doors with ornate porticos, and commemorates the 3rd century martyr St Quiricus, who was killed by the Romans at the age of five for declaring himself to be a Christian.

Another feature of the little town is a formal boxed-hedge garden, created in the 16th century as a refuge for pilgrims and travellers.



There is a good sosta in Quirico, and we settled on the edge by a football field, for a while getting out the chairs and sitting on its grassy fringe. It cooled off later, after a hot day, and the sounds of kids kicking the balls around became annoying, so we moved across to a quieter spot – quieter, that is, until the sosta filled up with cars and a concert of modern (but not rock) music in a nearby theatre broke out at 9:15 pm. But we’ve heard worse, and didn’t last too long – a truly local live event, from what we could hear.

Saturday 2 June

This was Republic Day in Italy, and a public holiday. Through WW2 and immediately after, Italy was a constitutional monarchy. In 1946, after a referendum, the constitutional monarchy was abolished and a republic was established on the second of June, the day this anniversary now commemorates.

Since then, however, Italy has grown economically in the 72 years over the period – particularly in the sixties and seventies – to become the third largest economy in the Eurozone, despite its massive debt. Politically, however, it has been notoriously unstable and has had more than 65 governments in this time. The present situation hardly reflects a change in that situation. In March there were inconclusive elections, with the two most popular parties being at different ends of the political spectrum: the Five Star Movement from the left, and the League from the right. They then formed an unlikely coalition, to be led as prime minister by a little-known law professor, Giuseppe Conte. Following the parties' nomination of a far-left, anti-Euro economist as financial spokesman, President Mattarella withdrew his support for the coalition. Within the previous two days, however, after replacing him with a less extreme finance spokesman, the President did swear in Conte and Europe's first populist, Eurosceptic government, which threatens to abandon EU spending rules and deport half a million immigrants. Among other things. Brussels is worried sick.



It seemed that there were not going to be any local celebrations of the day, and the weather was gorgeous. So we decided to stay, and spent most of the afternoon on the new lounge chairs under some olive trees in a grove close to the van, looking down over the valley below, extending right to the green horizon.

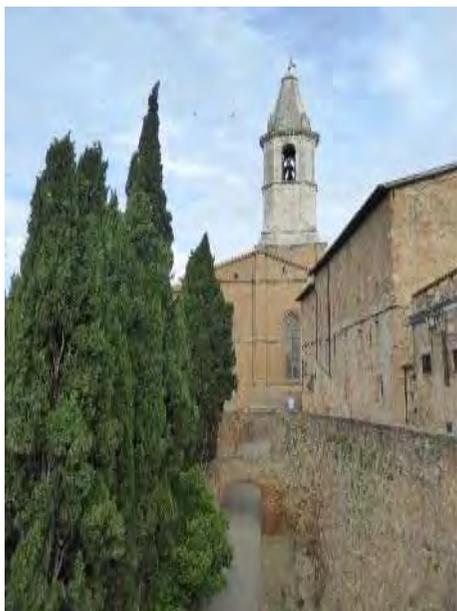


Sunday 3 June

Had such a nice relaxing day yesterday that we decided to do it again, relaxing with books in the shade of olive trees close by the van. Nothing else happened.

Monday 4 June

A good start for what turned out to be quite a day, starting well with a lovely run through the hills to the first stop of the day, Pienza. In the early sun, glowing green and gold fields spread lazily over gently rolling hills under a blue sky. The inevitable cypress trees stood sharply against a backdrop of hazy mountains.



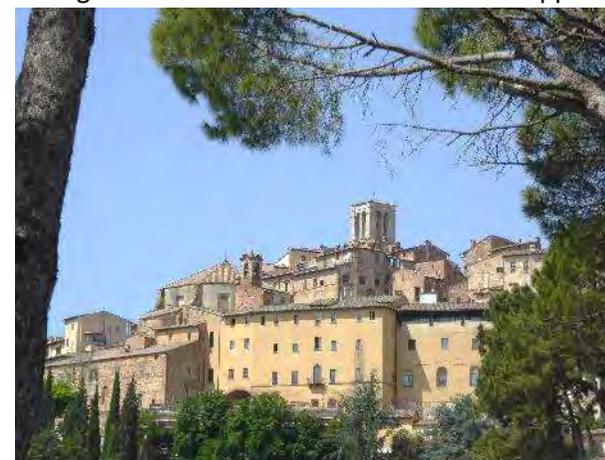
Compact Pienza was a lovely little town, and an easy walk up from a motorhome car park. The humanist scholar Pope Pius II decided in 1459 to redesign the centre of the town along classic Renaissance lines. Within its walls there is an enchanting piazza and town hall, and an impressive Duomo of classic proportions which is flooded with light from enormous windows – Pope Pius wanted this effect to symbolise the enlightenment of the humanist age. In retrospect, Pienza became one of our favourite old Tuscan towns, complete – as ever – with expansive views all round.



A downside, however, was the grumpy nature of some of the local people in towns popular with tourists, especially including those who were supposed to be trying to sell us something. An elderly pharmacist was frankly dismissive and rude. A woman selling local produce in a good-looking shop could not have cared less whether we bought any of the cheese we were obviously interested in, let alone offer us a taste – which is a common custom in friendlier local markets.

We saw lots more of this kind of scenery on the next leg, to Montepulciano, the last of the villages we would see along the marvellous Valle d’Orcia. As it happens, we decided not to stop and go up into the village, as all the information was that its roads and alleys were exceptional high and steep.

Continuing east but beginning finally to ease northwards, we passed Cortona. This is a bigger place than most others, and sits spread out on the side of a high hill the other side of a major valley through which runs the important Florence-Rome motorway. Cortona is another town that is hard to get to without taking a lot of time, as well as being very steep, so we simply passed by, admiring its location. We had been reading a book by an American writer who has a house there and has written extensively about life in Tuscany and travel in Italy. Her style is not altogether to our taste!



The major visit of the day was the city of Arezzo, one of the major settlements in Italy that we had not previously visited. We parked outside the walls in a motorhome park, very hot in this early afternoon, and walked up to the town. There were no directions of any kind, and the road maps we had were no help, so we made our best guess on the route in and started walking. Our guess was wrong: we climbed a tortuous route up, only to find that we had to walk a long way round the enormous fortezza, which was not open.



We finally made it to the big town, one of the wealthiest in Tuscany. Parts are looking a bit run down and untidy, but this is normal in Italy, and there are some wonderful sights nevertheless. We started with the immense 13th-15th century Duomo at the top of the hill, with its spire visible for miles around. We then plunged down into the narrow streets of the centre, trying hard to keep track of where we were.

The sloping central square, the Piazza Grande, is one of the most impressive of its kind we have seen, and wonderfully free of traffic or other obstructions. It is lined with an assortment of medieval mansions and palaces, one Palazzo being decked out with the coats of arms of previous governors of the city. Facing the square is the lovely apse of the Romanesque church of Santa Maria della Pieve. At the other end of

this church it features an extraordinary façade, a three-tiered loggia with countless columns at each level.



A visitor highlight is the Church of San Francesco, whose statue with a friendly lion stands outside. The drawcard is one of the world's most important paintings, a cycle of frescoes recounting the Legend of the Cross. (Which is all a bit complicated to outline here, but is basically the mythological history of the cross of the crucifixion, from sprig to Tree of Knowledge.) They were painted by the great Piero della Francesca, of the Florentine school, and have just become available to view again after a long period of renovation.

He created this masterpiece between 1452 and 1466 on the walls of the choir and apse, with each segment of the whole depicting a scene from the legend. Only a few people are allowed in at a time, a dozen or so, but we only had to wait half an hour after booking a place – and paying a €2 “booking fee” on top of the entry fee. Never come across that scam before, but the €8 overall ticket cost was not high, given the importance of the

exhibit.

The renovation has been highly sympathetic, because all the colours have an old and faintly faded look while the peoples' features are still sharp and expressive. A marvellous thing to see, but you'd have to have been there for hours to get a real feeling for the whole and there was something of an emphasis on getting people through.





A quick walk up to the Duomo revealed what we had missed on arrival: stairs down to the street far below, a direct route to where we had parked. Moreover, with ill luck for Norma's aches, we missed the fact that the stairs were duplicated by escalators! We did ride the final flight down, though.

It was about 4:15 by the time we got back to the van. It was not much of a place, and we made what turned out to be the ill-fated decision to drive on for an hour or so to an Agriturismo in the countryside near Bibbiena that looked good in the guides.

The drive there was without problems, simply following the route of a very young River Arno along its valley. At Bibbiena, in the foothills, we turned off the main road and climbed quite substantially into a forest in search of the agriturismo, but where the coordinates took us was only a broken-down farm looking unoccupied for years. A little way further was a good-looking farm with temporary fencing around it, and some young people who looked at us quizzically. We deduced that this was probably once the agriturismo, but it had been sold.

So back down to the "main" road, which was appallingly rough – it turns out that Italy's financial problems are having a bad effect on infrastructure and its maintenance, even in popular regions like Tuscany. Another blight on the landscape was a proliferation of "Spazio Libero" signs, advertising for advertising, in some places every 100 metres or so along the roadside. Horrible to look at, and distracting too – one thing you do not want to be on Italian roads!

There was nowhere suitable to stop in Bibbiena, so once again, although getting late by then, we pressed on to Poppi, where our database did suggest a couple of possibilities. We tried the official camper stopping place first, but didn't like it, and went down to a vast parking area by the local sports stadium and field. This seemed OK, so we settled in for the night.

Tuesday 5 June

Well, it wasn't OK. As dark fell, we were conscious of some coming and going, but thought they were just youngsters out with their cars and bikes. By 1:00 am it was getting really worrying, with cars whizzing in, staying a short time then going out again, which we came to assume was for devious or perverse purposes. So, unusually for us, we pulled out and drove into the town, parking in the main car park in the central square.

In the morning we felt tired, and not like undertaking some difficult driving past Florence, so thought we could stay another night there. But first, after doing a stock-up in the local supermarket, we drove up to the camper sosta from where we walked up to the imposing hilltop Castello di Poppi that is prominent from everywhere in the town, with its high tower. It was shut until later in the morning, but there was a good view of the Tuscan





landscape from all around it. The hill top is also the site of the old town of Poppi, and we enjoyed a pleasant walk around the typical alleys, along nearly all of which were colonnades, very attractive.

The next local outing was to the Zoo Park just outside the town. This is in all the guidebooks and heavily advertised by signs all around. It is supposed to be an important centre for the conservation of threatened wildlife such as wolves. It covers a large area, but is terribly run down now and showing no signs of upkeep. There were few animals to be seen, except for a sad-looking macaque monkey, a few deer, donkeys and tortoises, and a buffalo. There were several aviaries for raptors

and owls, but they didn't really have enough room to fly. No attendants were in evidence, apart from the nice lady at the desk who took our money.

For the rest of the day, which was going to be quiet (we hoped!), we returned to the sports stadium park and parked by a

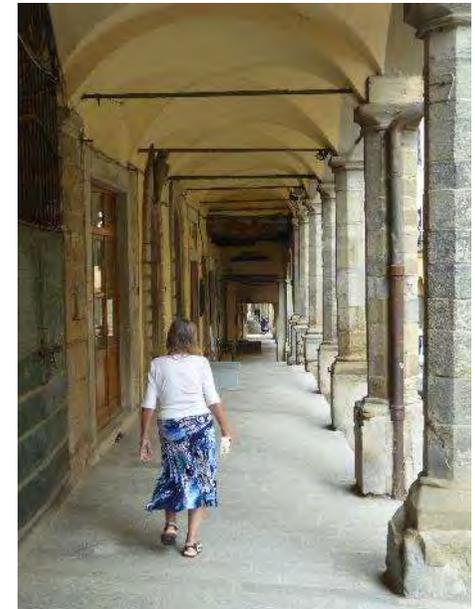


green sward under some trees – not a bad spot at all. But, inevitably, the place was raided in the late afternoon by a talkative gang of young people and two noisy trail bikes, which zoomed up and down until we pulled out again and returned to the town car park!

Again, the part we were in – probably primarily for trucks and buses – was remarkably peaceful, the only problem being very bright floodlights that made us shut up the van completely. But they, and the fact that the police station was just across the road, made us feel sufficiently secure.

Wednesday 6 June

On the road again, north and west through hilly countryside on winding roads, and up and over the Consuma pass at just over 1,000 metres. It continued to be a pleasant drive until we came down out of the mountains from this minor road and encountered the inevitable traffic in the greater Florence region. We by-passed the city to its south on motorways, some of which we paid a few euros for, on our way to Pistoia. Here we turned south for a camp site, which was something we were beginning to feel the need for. But about 10 km past where the camp site was supposed to be (we couldn't see it) is the town of Vinci, which Leonardo made famous, and where there is a museum honouring him.





We parked in a camper stop about a kilometre past the town, and walked back up the hill to its centre and the museum in a castle at the top – Norma’s knees doing outstandingly well, although her back was still troubling her. Leonardo was probably born nearby, in the village of Anchiano, and we visited that traditional birthplace many years ago.

The museum, which has recently been refurbished, shows many models built on the basis of his drawings and sketches, as well as his explorations of human and animal anatomy, and the science of flight, physics and optics. We have always been in awe of the ability of this genius to investigate and manage all these interests, while producing some of the world’s greatest paintings and other art. Extraordinary.

Finally, a longish walk back to the van, but downhill. The weather has stayed hot, with occasional afternoon clouds and thunderstorms, cooling by sundown. The camper stop seemed adequate, so we settled down to stay the night here.



Thursday 7 June

Away about 10:00 after a peaceful night, and back up to Pistoia. The whole area round here features a vast array of orchards for trees and other large plants. They all look immaculate and well ordered, and are altogether a unique sight.

We then headed up into the Apennines for our south-to-north crossing, starting with a great run up the mountains on winding roads with splendid views. All the villages seemed very quiet, and lots of houses appear unoccupied and businesses defunct. We stopped for lunch at Abetone with a good view over some ski facilities – the place is supposed to be renowned as a ski resort. But most of the activity would be further up the mountain and out of sight of the village.

Down the northern side of the mountains on mainly quite good roads by Italian standards, and to Pavullo, where we had stopped at a sosta for the night a few years ago. We called in to it, but it seemed a bit gloomy and was only just off the road, so we decided to press on for the sosta at Maranello.

We took the scenic route to Maranello rather than the main road, and enjoyed again the excellent views of the area from the road, which runs along a ridge between two valleys. Trouble was, we had to go into Maranello and out again on the main road to get to the sosta.



This was a low key facility to say the least. We had to make a phone call to the owner to get the code for the keypad to open the barrier, which was an endeavour itself. We were supposed to pay the (low) fee at the adjoining restaurant, which belongs to the same man, but it was shut and remained so all evening. But we were plugged in, shared the place with just one semi-permanent, and the surroundings were green and pleasant.

There was a slight shower and sounds of thunder late evening, hot and very humid.

Friday 8 June

In the middle of the night we had a vicious thunderstorm, long lasting, with constant lightning in the clouds and torrential rain. This carried on and off until the early hours.



Dried off under high white overcast and cooler air, as we headed into Maranello to visit the first of the two Ferrari museums. This was of course what is now called the Museo Ferrari, where we had met and enjoyed the company of a senior curator three years ago. We confirmed that he had now left.

The first disappointment was that the exhibition, which changes its theme every now and then, was undergoing one of these changes – so a lot of stuff wasn't there (the Regazzoni F1 car was being unloaded as we left) and the narrative was shambolic. There were two themes under development: the creative and engineering development of a selection of cars over the years; and another selection of cars representing 70 years of Ferrari for road and track. There was also a sub-theme, describing the relationship of Ferrari and some

special cars with women, mostly showbiz stars. Norma commented that the original Madame Ferrari got hardly a mention. The influence of the now powerful Piero Ferrari, who is not her son, perhaps?

So, rather less interesting or enjoyable than expected, then. So off we went up to Modena for the Museo Enzo Ferrari, the two museums now formally twinned, in terms of ticketing and all. Attached to the house in which Enzo Ferrari was born is a futuristic space with an assembly of particularly gorgeous cars – iconic models from different eras – with a theme picked up by pictures, text and a huge AV display based on the early history of his life as a driver and founder of the firm.

The adjoining house is in two parts – the shell of the original living quarters, and the workshop of Alfredo Ferrari, Enzo's father. There is a reproduction of Enzo's office and conference table, but the rest of the building, where the engineering works were, is taken up by Ferrari's engines over the years, V12, V8 and V4. Norma sat outside while I had a quick look at the engines.



Away again, and to the only reasonable motorhome stop in the area, the local Camper and Caravan Club's site about 10 km west of Modena. A weird place, had to get a man up to open the gates – seems mostly to be a storage location. But acceptable. Joined later for a chat with a Brit of Italian origin, whose family lives down in the south, to where he's on his way. Sunny afternoon, looking forward to a quieter night!

Saturday 9 June

Just a driving day, really, and not very enjoyable.

Pulled out in good time after getting the three (!) barriers and gates opened after paying, then on a run to Venice. We had chosen not to take the pay motorways but just the red roads for more interest, not to speak of no hassle with terminals. The first part of the route took us cross-country through farming land to the south of Ferrara, flat as a billiard table and with lots of evidence through flattened crops of recent tempestuous weather. The road then became free motorway to the east, but no-one could have justified a toll for the dreadful road surface we endured for so many kilometres – plus putting up with loony, aggressive and illegally fast Italian drivers and motorcyclists.

That took us down to the Po delta with lots of flood protection banks and rice paddies. Then north again along the coast but without any sight of the sea, through Chioggia – where we had considered stopping, but we were close to Venice by then – and across a long causeway fringing the muddy-looking Venice lagoon.

Just before we got to Mestre we turned down for several kilometres through a massive industrial area, including the very posh-looking Lamborghini factory, and finally to Fusina and its camp site on the southern shores of the lagoon. A better and quieter place than we had anticipated, and it was easy to locate a waterfront spot after changing our minds a couple of times.





Hot when we arrived at about 3:00 pm, but some tree shade developing and pleasant by 6:00. Site pretty full. Lots of coming and going of large and small runabouts from the adjacent marina, which is part of the same complex. To the north we could see the multiple chimneys of the Marghera, the industrial complex we had passed coming in – a few years ago an environmentally toxic area, now much cleaned up and with no chimneys emitting anything. About 5 km away to the north-east, in the setting sun, we can see across the lagoon to the buildings and towers of Venice, with several huge white cruise ships moored in the docks of Santa Croce. Right in front of us was the narrow shipping lane for commercial freighters out of the Porto Marghera docks, and it was a surreal sight to see them gliding by, the larger ones shepherded by tugs, only a few metres away from us. The cruise ships have to go in and out of the lagoon via the Giudecca canal, as there's no other way for them.

Sunday 10 June

After the warmest night we'd had on the whole trip so far, it warmed up quickly in the rising sun, from which we had no shade. There was plenty of shade in the trees throughout this big park, but then we couldn't see all the action on the water we were much enjoying! This was a day of R&R&R, rest, rehab and research. And Norma did the laundry.

We did anticipate that this would be a moving day for many, and a large number of vans did leave in the morning, leaving the camp site relatively quiet. The small-boat activity really did rev up, with scores of them roaring off down the south-bound shipping lane, we guessed mainly on their way over the lagoon to the island of the Lido. There was also a constant line of aircraft on the approach to the very busy Marco Polo airport.

We checked out the options for water transport for the next few days, and in the afternoon sat in the shade reading and researching the city, and watching the ceaseless activities of the small boats, roaring in towards the narrow entrance to the marina, most being driven in exactly the same way as they do on the roads. We were struck by the lack of sun protection for most; any, including kids? Not a chance. being had by all. Most of the boats ashore, lifted from the water on to cranes in the marina.



Monday 11 June

After a hot night followed by a very hazy morning, took the 9:00 ferry across the lagoon to the Zattere station. This is on the south side of

and lifejackets for
But good fun
were stored
their trailers by



hazy morning, took the 9:00 ferry





occasional directional signs. Along the waterways, gondolas, water taxis and working craft jostled for space between the waterfront buildings.

the main island, looking across the Giudecca Canal to the Giudecca island. We had decided to buy a pair of three-day passes for all ferry trips – although seemingly expensive, they probably saved money and certainly saved a great deal of time and trouble.

We walked north to the Accademia and its bridge (being reconstructed, like much else), and took a meandering and confusing walk to the east towards Piazza San Marco. As we well remembered, navigating this mass of alleyways, small canals and bridges is hard, and helped little or not at all by studying maps and

We made it to the square, beautiful as ever, and initially it did not look too crowded as we walked past the cafes. But as we approached the basilica, the campanile and the piazzette, for the first time in this visit we came into contact with the vast throngs of people who now come to Venice and (admittedly including us) are placing an unmanageable burden on the tourist and other infrastructure. These days, there seem to be more people than pigeons in the eastern part of the square! Like Barcelona, suggestions for mandatorily reducing the permitted number of visitors are being mooted, but the money they bring is a substantial contribution to the city finances . . . Catch 22.

Last time here (2008) we could not face the queue for entrance to the Basilica San Marco, but because we were a little earlier in the day this time, and despite the even bigger crowds now seeking entry, we felt we had to. During the long wait I left Norma to hold the place while I went off to deposit our small backpack, which we had seen would not be allowed in. Finding the cloakroom – in an alley separate from the church – was a task in itself.

The basilica, inside and out, remains one of the great sights of Europe. It was originally the chapel of the Doges, and is a building of mixed Byzantine and western styles constructed between 1063 and 1073. The façade is a masterpiece in itself, with its glowing mosaics, arches, colonnades and statues, but frankly it's impossible to wander, study and match what you see with the information in the guidebooks because of the crowds. The same applies to the interior, as we shuffled around trying to give due attention to its complex architecture and extraordinary features. It simply has to be absorbed as a whole, with hopes that some memories will remain in addition to the jostling visitors – many trying, as we were, to snatch a photo or two that was not permitted. Later, gazing at the pictures, we could realise what we missed, but the only way to make the most of such a visit is to go in the true off-season. Which mid-June used to be!





Sadly, we decided not to go through it all again for a visit to the Doges' Palace, especially as we would have had to wait for the afternoon – the morning was confined to tour groups with guides. However, we did have the consolation that we have visited Venice and seen all these glories several times before, including with toddler Anita during our return from Cyprus in 1966 and in *Cera* in 1987.



Getting quickly out of the crowds, as is possible quite soon after leaving San Marco precinct, we took a vaporetto out to the naval museum out in the Castello region. But to no real surprise, we found it was closed for reconstruction. We chose then to go for lunch at a nearby ristorante pizzeria (which they nearly all are called) on the quayside, where we had a pleasant but inevitably expensive lunch with refreshing beers.

The plan then was to find a ferry to take us round to the north side of the island, where we wanted to visit the large San Giovanni e Paolo and the beautiful San Maria di Miracoli. But with no recent experience it was simply impossible to work out which vaporetto went to where and when, so we gave up and took one back to San Marco and another to Zattere. From there, we took the ferry back to Fusina and the camp site by 4:00 pm, enough for a tiring day in the heat. Thundery, humid conditions all afternoon.

The visiting cruise ships we had seen yesterday had all gone by the morning, so the crowding we experienced could have been worsened by their 10,000 or so passengers!



Tuesday 12 June

Got an early start on the 8:00 ferry from Fusina, along with a few office workers on their commuter run. Our first visit was to the Accademia di Belle Arti, a museum that we had never visited before. It was founded in 1750, and about 50 years later Napoleon enriched it with major works of art “removed” from churches and monasteries. The main body of the collection is, therefore, composed of huge, wonderful paintings, largely of the Renaissance and Baroque eras, full of drama and colour. The detailing is amazing, with something to see and examine every few inches.



Unfortunately, and not unusually for Venice, there was a substantial degree of renovation going on, and two of the paintings we most wanted to see were in rooms that were shut. Still, there were plenty more. A favourite was Giovanni Bellini's beautiful 1504 painting of the Madonna and Child between St John the Baptist and a Saint. The Madonna's expression is calm and contemplative, and the figures



are set in front of a spacious landscape, which is unusual and innovative for the period. Paintings by Canaletto and Veronese are among the other masterpieces we marvelled at.

There were few other people there, and the calm and quiet was matched by the cool of the air conditioning – but we had to re-experience all the opposites of that by emerging into the real world of today’s Venice. From the vaporetto stop outside, we rode to Rialto, from where we walked over the bridge – of course – watching for a while the mass of watercraft in the Grand Canal. From there it was along the canal through the busy fruit and fish markets, with busy Venetian housewives negotiating with busy vendors. The fish looked good and smelt fresh, according to Norma.

We had lunch in Cannaregio, the old residential region of the city, once centred on the Jewish ghetto. From there we took a vaporetto back to Accademia, from where we walked back to Zattere and the return ferry to Fusina. By this time we felt we were getting on top of the ferries. Norma heard some Americans discussing their visit, with one bemoaning the fact that it was impossible to keep to their “schedule” in Venice! Even *thinking* about a schedule in this city is a mistake – it’s better to go with the flow and see what you can. It’s impossible to see all you want without living here for weeks.

Laughingly, the schedule for the first of a two-day visit suggested on the official Venice City map would take in a walk to the customs point and Santa Maria della Salute, the Peggy Guggenheim Museum of modern art, the Accademia bridge, the Basilica and Doges’ Palace at Sn Marco, and a walk along the Schiavoni waterfront to the naval museum and the Arsenal. Totally impossible!

It was still very hot during the day, but the evening brought a windy cool change – and a German van plonked itself close next to us, in this by now very quiet site with plenty of space, so we chose to move along the waterfront a bit.



Wednesday 13 June

A cool start after yesterday’s change, but warming up later as usual. Early again to Zattere, then an interesting ferry ride – along with many local commuters – round the region of the Dorsoduro on the west end of the island, into that end of the Grand Canal at Piazzale Roma, then a left turn into the island’s second-biggest canal, the Canale di Cannaregio, along the “back streets” of the waterways. This emerges into the lagoon to the north of the island, and the ferry tracked along the “coast” past many little boatyards and other small commercial works to the stop at Fondamente Nuove.



This is from where the ferries to the other major islands depart, and we soon caught a boat to Murano. This is of course the island famous for its glass industry, and our first visit was to be to the glass museum, the Museo Vetrario. No such luck, of course, as it was shut for reconstruction and renovation. So we resorted again to simply wandering around Murano, which is itself a group of small islands separated by canals and joined by bridges, just like the city. There are plenty of glass shops to view, of course, and a couple of glass-making furnaces to peer into. For ourselves, we are not that keen on most Murano glass, as in one word too showy, but in one upmarket and expensive shop we did see some very attractive and simpler glass models and statuettes.



A good sight was Murano's 12th century Basilica dei Santi Maria e Donato. It has a lovely colonnaded exterior to its apse, and its interior – which is otherwise quite simple – has a marvellous medieval mosaic floor, made of marbles and stones, dating from 1140, full of colour and depicting symbolic birds and beasts.

From Murano it was quite a long vaporetto ride to Burano, the most colourful and picturesque of all the islands in the lagoon. By this time the tourist groups had caught up with us, so there was some struggling on the bridges to get the best spots for photographs of the canals and multi-coloured houses – not helped by the new obsession with selfies, multi-selfies and selfie cameras on sticks. Each to his own.

We walked around the island to some quieter parts, but returned to the busiest section and the principal thoroughfare for lunch. This was very good, the best we have had in Venice – we shared two dishes which were jointly composed of a fillet of sea bass, calamari and scampi.

We had intended to go on to the little island of Torcello after lunch, but the day was getting on and it was getting hotter. And we had been to Torcello and its beautiful and important basilica twice before, even anchoring off it in 1987. So it was back to the ferry stop, and as we were learning, took the first one that seemed to be going in the





right direction without stressing the details. Norma was by this time saying she wanted a ride in a “proper” ferry, not another vaporetto, and we completely fluked a passage in just such a big ferry. Being pleased that our unlimited three-day ferry ticket covered all ferries and all journeys, we found ourselves first on a long ride across the lagoon to Punta Sabbione, at the lagoon’s entrance to the Adriatic and where we had camped on our previous visit in the van. From there it was another good ride south across the lagoon entrance and the foundations for the tidal defence gates that are still being constructed, and on to the long island of the Lido. Finally, the boat took us back to the Zattere stop, from where we got our usual ferry



back to the camp site. That ride, which completed a full circle during the day around the entire complex of the lagoon’s main islands, was a fitting finale to our Venetian experience for 2018.

Thursday 14 June

A relaxed start to the next stage of our trip, north across the Veneto to the Dolomites. First, we travelled along minor roads, through village after village, generally up to Bassano del Grappa. We were battling with the satnav at times, as it had different ideas to us as to the importance of motorways, and after a crash resulted in extra disruptions, the satnav recalculations gave some bizarre directions.

But we got sorted out and soon entered the foothills of this spectacular mountain region. We were heading for a camp site on the Lago di Corto, Camping Gajole, which by coincidence was the same lake we had stayed by – using an adjacent site – in 2008.

It’s a really good site, and we scored a prime position, with an unobscured view from the hillside overlooking the lake. The limited staff in the reception/shop area had a somewhat Fawlty Towers manner, but were obviously getting ready for the season in a newly refurbished site. In the book it’s described as a simple, quiet, family-run site, but it’s obviously been being substantially reorganised. So the facilities were excellent and outlook sublime.



Friday 15 June

Took a walk along the lakeside in the morning after a good quiet night. Otherwise, a lazy day, reading, researching and writing again.

Saturday 16 June

Took another little walk, the other way along the lake, and down to the “beach” owned by the camp site. This is actually just a grassy space, but it would be a good place to lie in the sun. Swimming in the rather murky water did not look appealing. This is a lake formed by damming a river, and must have been established for quite a while. Weather continuing warm and sunny, cool overnight – blankets back on the beds!

Sunday 17 June

A very Italian sort of day! Started well, with an early start from this excellent camp site, with the owners being much friendlier than when we arrived. (They are very busy, getting lots of the new facilities organised,) The idea was to run up to a Lidl south of Bolzano for a much-needed stock up, then see how far we might get on the road to Canazei.

Initially we drove along a fast-running river, dammed from place to place so that we passed a string of attractive blue/green lakes. Mountains ahead grew higher in sight and with more jagged tops, as we approached closer to the Dolomiti, which form a vast part of the eastern Alps.



The mountain range is formed of limestone rocks named after a French geologist, Gratet de Dolomieu, who was the first to study the formations at the end of the 18th century. They are actually ancient coral reefs. During the Jurassic era the entire area was covered by tropical forest and a shallow, warm sea. The sea receded as the Alps were being formed, raising what had been the sea bed some 2-3,000 metres. Marine fossils can still be found among the pinnacles, sheer drops and towers of these mountains. A fascinating story.



We soon encountered the green and heavily forested Gran Passo de Rolle, one of the longest passes in the range although not the highest, at nearly 2,000 metres. But its length includes an amazing number of hairpin turns and winding roads, all well surfaced, and all – on this sunny Sunday – swarming with motorcycles at what looked like racing speed, often in long groups.



There had been warning signs at the southern end of the pass that it would be closed in a couple of hours or so for a race – for bicycles we assumed, although it could have been for motorbikes, because there were hundreds in groups before the pass – but traffic was continuing up the road and we thought we were all clear and ahead of any race. We certainly saw many preparations being made along the run over the pass.

However . . . just as we were completing the descent, a carabinieri officer stepped out and flagged us down; the road was closed for three hours and we could go no

further. We could not stop where we were, so we back-tracked a short distance up to the village of Bellamonte and parked by an inn at the side of the road. Sure enough, after a short while a short convoy of vans and flag bedecked cars led the first of the cycle riders as they sweated up the first stages of the pass from its northern approaches.

European bicycle races are impossible to fathom. Cyclists, in their hundreds, keep passing by as you watch, and you realise that they must be making a long circuit which they ride around a few – how many? – times. The only circuit I could see on the map was about 50 km. So, all you see is a constant passage of cyclists, some in groups or obvious teams, others alone, at varying speeds and in various stages of tiredness or exhaustion. There is no indication as to when the race is finished, it seems to go on for ever. After three hours the cyclists seemed to be thinning out a bit, and traffic was running with some difficulty, so we went back up the mountain a few kilometres to stay at an attractive lakeside park that was in one of our camper guidebooks.

It was a pleasant park, indeed, but was in a National Park, so no overnighting was allowed. Being mid-afternoon we had long missed the deadline for Lidl on a Sunday, so went back down again to an actual camper park in a village at the bottom of the pass. But it was an uninviting place, with no facilities, a high fee, and it had no shade.

We knew – or thought we knew – of a better camper stop near Bolzano, so off we went again – but on passing the small ski resort town of Cavalese Norma spotted several vans in a pleasant-looking park down by a river. This turned out to be the car park for a cable-car lift in to the surrounding mountains, mostly for mountain bikers at this time of the year, and was perfect for us. Settled at last! Yes, an Italian sort of day.

We sat out in the shade of the trees until the cool evening breeze cut in, and had a chat with a French couple with an old camper who were interested in the van – she wanted to buy it!



Monday 18 June

Started with some high white overcast – and we were disappointed to see the French couple pinching a chain that was separating spaces in the parking area. Does nothing for the reputation of all of us.

Pleasant run along minor roads down to the big, wide valley of the River Adige. Along the valley also runs the major north-south motorway down from Innsbruck through Bolzano, Bologna and Firenze. Then a short run up the valley towards Bolzano, where along the road was supposed to be a Lidl. Well, there was, but it was small and on a little side road, so we drove right past – and had to traverse a long tunnel before getting back to it. Then we found we couldn't park in the underground car park of the little village. Gave up, so back through the tunnel we went.

The last time we were here we got muddled and went at least twice through one of the several tunnels. So here we were, doing the same thing again.

Finally we were on the minor road along the Eggental valley and the Lago di Carrezza. We first visited this in 1960, nobody else around, in the Mini. We have been here again at least twice, the last time in the van when we had difficulty parking in the road. There is now a vast new car park, charging motorhomes an extortionate €10 minimum fee for two hours, the same as a bus, and with hardly any space for campers anyway. We did beat the system by Norma having taken the entry ticket from the lower, "car" slot, so we only paid €1 for the half hour we needed.



The lake is now a seriously major tourist attraction, so we joined throngs of Japanese photographing each other, themselves, and the lake, and the sounds of myriad languages being spoken at the same time. Not the peaceful pace it was in 1960 by a very long way!

So, took the pictures and got away over the easy Passo di Costalunga and on to Canazai, the central tourist town for the Dolomites, with motorcyclists in their hundreds being their now typical menace to mankind. I used to rather sympathise with them and envy their fun, but not now.

We checked in before lunchtime at the Marmolada camp site we have used before. It is now a good three-quarters full of permanents, with complex wooden enclosures tacked on to tacky and often mouldy old caravans. We settled into the space that was probably the one we used before, near the far end of the site. In the late afternoon, once the shops were open, we walked up to the “supermarket” for basic provisions. Scenically, with the mountains all around us, a great place to be.

Quite cloudy all day, cool when the sun goes in, and warm to hot in the sun. A temperature gauge in the town read 20 degrees. We hope the clouds stay high for tomorrow’s planned walk.

Tuesday 19 June

Woke to a cloudless morning that turned into a beautiful cabin then big cabin, to Col di Rosc, at 2382 metres. We then did a pretty good walk, all things considered, about a kilometre each way up to the nearest refuges. Staggering scenery each way, as ever – to the east, we could see the little lake to which we walked ten years ago, along the mountainside and then steeply down.



There are block-like mountains, sheer cliff faces, spires, towers – an extraordinary variety of rock formations, many with patches of snow still to melt, some down at our level. We were very pleased to see a near-tame marmot looking curiously out of his burrow, and we saw many more burrows around. Wildflowers were everywhere. Sunlight and shade spread across the bright green alpine meadows in this fairly early morning.

Then back to the van for a quiet afternoon, and a late shop (once the shops were open again) at a farmacia and Despar supermarket at the other end of town.

Wednesday 20 June

Away in good time for a day of driving in the mountains on roads shared, as ever, by countless bicyclists and motor bikers.



day. So, early up the cable car in two stages, small



We had thought of taking the cable car up the highest mountain in the Dolomites, but this morning there was some high cloud that was covering the higher peaks, and there didn't seem to be much point – on our last trip here I did go up, but unforgettably was shrouded in cloud and caught in mid-trip by a violent thunderstorm.

So we headed north for the start of a clockwise circuit of the Sella Mastif, Gruppo del Sella, or whatever the various languages used in this region call it. First was the Sella pass, at 2244 metres just the highest in the circuit, and with some of the most jagged scenery. There were beautiful views back down the valley.



We crossed the Gardena pass as we started our run across the north of the Sella group, and came to the ski resort town of Corvara. We had decided to take their long cable-car run to take another look at the scenery, and were a bit dismayed to hear that the run was soon to be closed for the day. This would have been more important if, like most people, we were wanting to spend ages up there hiking, but as it turned out we had plenty of time to take the ride, with its very steep final part up to a rocky peak, and get back before it was switched off.



So, another gorgeous set of views, with an incredible panorama laid us before us. We could see all the way across to the Falzarego Pass, which we would be taking on our final approach to Cortina. But first, down the easy Ariana and Campolongo Passes to Arabba, before turning east. Along the early part of the narrow, wild and very rugged Falzarego pass we were struck by the sight of the ruins of a castle in a little valley, half hidden in the pine forest, perched on a spire of limestone. We took a tiny road down to have a closer look at this Castello, and – while stupidly closed until the end of siesta time, although there was someone there to tell us so – confirmed its amazing presence by walking around outside. From what we could learn from the description on boards outside, the castle was an important piece of

defence for the pass, and was employed as such by several different lords and other military worthies. There was no-one there but us and a handful of hikers. There was nothing in any of our guidebooks about it, so it rates as our “discovery” of the trip, so far.

Cortina can be clearly see from the top of the steeply winding road that leads down to it, and a camp site we stayed at last time (in heavy rain, in July). This time, the weather was set fair. The site was busy, with many tents, and again is obviously favoured by hikers.



Into Austria

Thursday 21 June

To our relief, because today was going to be a big driving day, it started with bright blue skies and just a few clouds around the mountain tops. Up out of Cortina through a pine-forested pass, then within about 30 km we crossed the border, virtually imperceptibly, into Austria and were driving along valleys walled by immaculate green slopes. Shimmering blue-green lakes were spaced along the roadside, and cute gabled houses and the white spires of churches in picturesque settings were scattered around the countryside.

We soon started climbing towards the big pass of the day, and indeed of the trip: the Grossglockner Hochalpenstrasse. At Heilingblut, just before the start of the climb, we passed one of the iconic views of Austria, that of the pretty 15th century church, built by monks from Admont, sitting on an outcrop over a tree-filled valley. There is a camp site at the bottom, where we have stayed, but it was a stiff climb up to the church and the village.



We have done this run twice before: in 2008 from south to north, as in today's case, and again in 2013, in the opposite direction. The required fee, €38 this time, covers the maintenance of what is a major national park, including the infrastructure to satisfy the needs of the thousands of tourists it attracts. The road is excellent, well surfaced, and as a result exceptionally popular with motorcyclists. There was also some sort of Porsche PR/press/VIP junket, with a fleet of their latest and fastest sports cars howling up the turns. There are a few waterfalls, and some lovely little lakes to be admired.



The main visitor centre is at Franz Josef-Hohe, at 2,369 metres. The altitude makes it quite a stiff walk up from the car park, where we had lunch overlooking the mountains, valleys and lakes. The highest mountain in Austria is of course the Grossglockner, and it towered above us at 3,797 metres.

The best views of the Fasterze glacier, unless you want to walk even further up the hillside, is along the lookout veranda by the main enclosed car park at the end of the road. The occasional wary marmot emerges from a burrow below to look up at the tourists and hope for a bit of bread to be dropped – not approved of, undoubtedly, but much enjoyed by one we watched eat some.

The glacier, the longest in Austria, has been retreating since the little ice age some 150 years ago, and looks pretty grey these days. But it is an important component in what is one of Europe's grandest and most scenic landscapes.



There were a few clouds building up around the tops of the highest mountains, and the sun was disappearing at times, so it was soon time to move on to the highest point in the road, the Hochtor, which is a tunnel of 2.3 km in length. Going down, we passed many herds of cows recently brought up to the high pastures, and large patches of snow all around the hillsides, particularly on their northern faces.

And so on down to Zell am See, and Camping Panorama – the panorama being of the mountains all around, although at quite a distance by this time. We were slotted in to what was obviously a popular and very busy site. The weather was looking menacing, and sure enough broke into a thunderstorm with heavy rain, continuing on through the evening.

Into Germany

Friday 22 June

Rained much of the night, with noisy drops falling from the birch tree alongside us. First stop of the morning was at the local Lidl, not gourmet shopping but enough to keep us going for a few more days.

This time, after days of pass climbing, we had a fairly easy day of driving, initially north for about 45 km to the imperceptible border with Germany. Obviously, we had not spent much time in Austria this year, but we did explore it pretty thoroughly in 2013, and recognised it as one of the prettiest and easiest countries in Europe to tour – perhaps mainly because it's so rich!

In Germany we immediately were in Berchtesgadener Land, in southern Bavaria. It is a highly attractive region, with more mountains and hills, and, as is not mentioned a lot in these parts, was Hitler's favourite region and part time headquarters.

We took a short deviation in the delightful little village of Ramsau. Its church is set alongside a fast-running stream with a series of watermills along its sides. The whole picture is as well-proportioned as a film set, which it has probably been from time to time. The colourful little cemetery has a macabre picture on the arch of its entry of a skeleton holding an arrow.

For the night we headed to a stellplatz, German for a motorhome resting place, up in the hills of the Oberau. It was very quiet when we got there, but became quite busy. The weather didn't improve, with grey clouds and showers during the early evening, turning to steady rain for a while. A cold wind, too, at 808 metres up, and very cold when we went to bed (15 degrees in the van).

Saturday 23 June

Rain stopped overnight, which made it a quiet night among quiet neighbours. Relaxed start after some route planning, not easy, for a long day over mostly pleasant roads.

First, down through the timber yard just below the site, then backtracked the latter part of yesterday's run rather than going down to Konigsee – not really propitious weather for taking the boat trip. Then through typically Bavarian scenery, with fields of cows in green valleys backed by pine-covered mountains. Some of the villages here are gorgeously pretty, bedecked with flowers on the houses and road furniture, with well-matched floral arrangements. Many, if not most, of the Tyrol-style dwellings and hotels have painted figures and patterns all over their facades.

Excellent driving conditions on good roads, enjoying the sight of many groups of classic cars out on a cool but sunny run. Dipped into Austria for a while, roads not so good, and then back into Germany where the roads had become very busy. Nice not to have to tangle with or avoid loony Italian drivers, though.



At a junction in Krun, to the east of Garmisch-Partenkirchen, we were unexpectedly directed into an attractive private road for which a €7 toll was required. Turned out that this was part of a Bavarian state park, and that it was a very popular weekend destination, mainly for walkers but also for picnickers lying out on the stones of a largely dry bed of the Isar river.

In Garmisch decided not to go on to Ettal, as planned, but to stop at the large impersonal stellplatz there. Sunny with clouds by this time, much warmer. Followed French GP qualifying on the web, with scratchy wireless data connection.

Sunday 24 June

After a cool night, got told off for not “registering” and paying the evening before, during the one hour that the office was open and a long queue was waiting. Germans (mostly) love the paperwork, but what some refer to as the regulations are very inconsistently applied, so they can’t mean much.

Anyway, off for not a very long run, because we had decided to go only to Lake Constance, Bodensee, from where we had several options for deciding where to go next, on the final set of destinations for our travels in the van.

First, we went through some pleasant countryside on the northern fringes of the eastern Alps to the village of Ettal, where we remembered visiting the extraordinary Benedictine abbey there a few years ago. Its foundation was in 1350 and consecrated in 1370. It was remodelled from Gothic to Baroque structuring the decoration in the mid-1700s. The abbey fronts a huge symmetrical cloister. The interior is richly decorated with colourful paintings and lacy gilded stucco everywhere, simply amazing.

Then away again cross-country generally to the west, past rolling green valleys with myriad crops, backed at times by romantic-looking castles old and new. We



approached Lake Constance at Lindau, where we knew that nearby there was a stellplatz associated with a camp site. It was a small site, but we still had to go through the painful registration process to pay our €10 and be told sternly that we had 24 hours only. Which we knew. We established ourselves in a good place at the end of the line-up and followed the French GP, again with a scratchy wireless data connection. Took a short walk along the lakeside, but nowhere near the pretty-looking Lindau island itself.

Monday 25 June

A long and quite hard day of driving. Started up the northern side of the lake, but as usual not a lot we could see from the van and practically nowhere to stop to take any pictures. There were a few nice views of the countryside beyond the lake, to its north-east, but it was basically a not very interesting run. Then we started hitting some industrial towns. The worst was the first, Tuttingen, a place of no significance except for its capacity to jam traffic. To get through it from east to west, many busy lanes of traffic had finally to combine to get through a two-lane tunnel. There was no option. At the various traffic light intersections and roundabouts police were trying to help, but they had no chance. So for nearly half an hour we were stopped or crawling along, convinced that some major disaster must have occurred. Nope, all normal as far as we could see. The next big pair of towns was Villingen-Schwenningen, but they were not quite so bad, possessing a realistic bypass system.

The little German country towns we thereafter went through were much more attractive, many impressively demonstrating their prowess in flower display. We were heading in the general direction of Strasbourg, but were aiming for another stellplatz attached to a camp site, at Freizelt. This was a wide open place with plenty of space and no formality about settling there, but suitable for a night stop only.

Tuesday 26 June

This day we started our planned trip up the Rhine, along the eastern side, but along this stretch not a lot to see of the water because the topography here is very flat, a flood plain, and the roads are a fair way away from the river. Lots more pretty German villages with picturesque half-timbered exteriors.



The Celts called the river *Renos*, the Romans *Rhenus*, and for Germans it was the Rhein, or *Vater Rhein*. It is 1,320 km long and arises in Switzerland. The Germans have long claimed it as theirs, and there is a long history of battles with the French, with the river as a boundary.

There are several camp sites along the most pretty and often spectacular stretches of the Rhine further along, and we had selected our first one to be at Giesenheim, on the river as it curves away from Mainz to the west. But we hadn't thought some things through. Soon after leaving our night stop we had crossed the river from the east (right bank) side to the west (left bank) and gone inland

for a while. Our destination was on the right bank. The only bridge in this region is in the middle of Mainz, which we had wanted to avoid. So we unexpectedly found that our satnav was directing us down a little slip road on to a ferry!

This took us over the Rhine as we faced towards the expansive opposite hillsides covered with vineyards, to near to the camp site we had chosen. I had some trouble establishing friendly relations with the bossy camp site female gauleiter, but did manage to negotiate an excellent position with an unrestricted view of the river.

Over previous years we have spent many days watching the passing river traffic, and it never ceases to amaze. The big ships seem to get bigger by the year, and the flow is continuous – as those going upstream seem to crawl along while those heading towards the sea rush on their way.



The weather had become fine and settled by this time, so it was time for sitting out in the sun to watch the river world go by.

Wednesday 27 June

A fine but rather cool night, and a sunny morning quickly turning hot in the sun. Morning walk into the adjacent village, a simple place, but with many attractive 16th-19th century half-timbered buildings and a mini-schloss with a mini-vineyard in front of it.



Back to our river-view site in the sun, for a quiet afternoon reading and watching the river traffic, cruise ships, gas and fuel tankers, bulk carriers and container ships. When a long powered pusher barge is connected with another unpowered barge, the total length is astonishing. Those carrying containers need to be able to raise their bridges to see over their cargo.



Thursday 28 June

A quiet day, anticipating a busy and possibly stressful three weeks ahead, selling the van. Walked downstream along the footpath for a kilometre or so, competing for space at times with cyclists – mostly polite, I have to admit:

"danke".

Another warm to hot day, plenty of sunshine, cloudy by the evening but 28 degrees in the van. More discussion about future endeavours and adventures!

Continued watching, as ever, the Rhine ship traffic going to and fro – and taking scores of pictures.

Friday 29 June

Checked out of what turned out to be a very pleasant camp site, from where we had an excellent view of the river, and off along the eastern – downstream, right bank – side of the Rhine. This was a generally familiar route, and not a long run today, just to the free camp at Sankt Goarshausen we had visited twice before. This is fabulously located, overlooked by the Lorelei headland immediately to the south and lying on the very bank of the river. It is on a long disused commercial wharf, where still rests an old crane. The main disadvantage of this site is that it is closely adjacent to the busy and at time very noisy train line just



across the road.

However, we decided we would put up with that, and sat for the afternoon under the awning watching the shipping. Our position faced west across the river, and as the day went on it got hotter and hotter, despite a wind that came in for a while.

Had a little walk around the village, which has a compact (to say the least) old town, with lovely little half-timbered fronts. Plenty of beer gardens, restaurants and the like, but no useful shops, though.



The Rhine must be in full spate just now, although within normal seasonal limits. The longer vessels going upstream had a tough time getting round the left-hand bend immediately approaching the Lorelei, because the forward part of the ship is caught first by the contrary stream. This makes it hard to get the bow round to port – no thrusters or tugs – and we did see one freighter go aground and get off again, fortunately. Another had to reverse out of the approach and have another go at it.

Continued very hot into the evening, so went late to bed.



Saturday 30 June

Too noisy and hot to stay longer, but over breakfast watched more difficulty by the longest ships in getting south round the Lorelei. One was so slow manoeuvring that he caused quite a concertina jam of ships behind, freighters and cruise vessels alike.

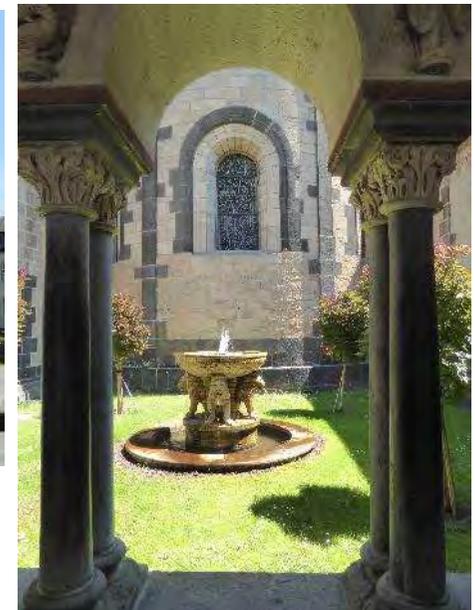


Then off and away continuing our trip along the eastern side of this great river, with Norma taking countless snaps of picturesque Rhine castles on the way, some on hillsides and others on crag tops. All the less steep slopes were completely covered with vines.

The speed of the stream, as shown by the “wake” thrown up by the stationary channel buoys, was amazing, and certainly accounted for the difficulties we had seen the ships having. Another amazing thing about these buoys is that none of them that we saw were lit, even on the Lorelei approaches. How the skippers navigated the channels in poor conditions we could only guess at, but must have been electronic only. They certainly ran radars at the bow at all times, and must have had a very accurate chart of the river for the GPS.

We’d been intending to take motorway hops to the Channel coast, but now with a day in hand we took the low road, as determined by the Tomtom in non-motorway mode. As usual, this took us to many pleasant little places along pleasant little roads, with two highlights.

The first was a visit to the abbey at Maria Laach, deep in the heart of the Rheinland, which Norma had spotted as a possible visit during a lunch stop nearby. We had passed by years ago, but not stopped because of the mass of cars in the large car park and the conclusion that there would be too many people. We were wrong. A tourist complex has evolved round the church and the associated Laucher See, a circular lake formed by an extinct volcano. There are restaurants, shops, playgrounds and the like all making for a big day out with many attractions.



The attractions only attracted a tiny proportion of visitors to the church, which can be seen in comparative peace, even on a busy weekend in fine hot weather.

The abbey is regarded as a masterpiece of German and European Romanesque architecture. It was created in 1093 at the behest of Heidrich II, who is buried here. Until secularisation in 1892 the abbey was the home of Benedictines, who still sing Gregorian chants here. But not today. And we also missed an organ concert that happened while we were having lunch. Such is life, touring!

It’s a lovely place, with six conically-topped towers. The entrance is through a charming little courtyard with a fountain modelled on the one in the Alhambra. The interior is as austere as Saint Benedict, but still decorated with some gleaming mosaics and a beautiful Romanesque canopy over the high altar. The crypt is a

completely peaceful haven – we had it to ourselves for a while, and could only whisper, seated among the columns and arches that are also reminiscent of Moorish times. The tomb of Count Palatine Heinrich II dates from about 1280, and his effigy has been reproduced by a magnificent walnut carving.



Less austere are some of the carvings on the column capitals in the western entry, including people (women) pulling each other's hair out, devils and non-human creatures.

This serendipitous visit was a memorable (a word used appropriately at this time!) example of how casual touring can throw up some beautiful surprises.

We had seen signs to Adenau, but the next surprise was that we were at the Nurburgring itself. We stopped at one of the public viewing places – at Pflanzgarten – to see if there was any action, but it was simply a public day. So all

we saw, in a part of the track that I remember as winding back out of the Schwalbenswanz towards the long finishing straight, were road cars. Many had passengers, helmets were obviously optional. A few were going quite hard, amateurs in Porsches mostly.

Then on past the enormous newish Nurburgring headquarters, everything very busy because of the big “Ring” pop music festival that happens each year at about this time.

Finally, looking for a stellplatz for the night, we came to one at Kronenburg, next to the Kronenburger See and under the dam which has created the lake from the river. The site was nearly full, because there was some kind of big watersports event this weekend, and most vans seemed to be well enough established to be part of it for a few days.



Sunday 1 July

A pretty awful night, as a German couple in an adjacent van gabbled on loudly until about 2:00 am, after which it was still difficult to sleep.

Today was very much a transit run, entering Belgium early and using extensive stretches of motorways (no tolls in Belgium). It was a long run by our standards, not very inspiring, with lots and lots of wind farms and huge factory complexes. We bypassed Liege and Antwerp and finally made it to a stellplatz in northern Belgium that we had visited before (but which had forgotten until we arrived), in the little industrial centre of Eeklo. What made it memorable on entry is the line-up of modern stone statuary along the canal side that runs along the site to a small harbour, well inland. It was very hot when we arrived.



Monday 2 July

Another drive in the first part of the morning through suburbs of massive industry. One tends to forget what an industrial (and bureaucratic!) country this is. The factory buildings, power stations and shopping complexes feature massive blockhouses. A heavy goods vehicle sales centre we passed had enormous platforms jutting out from the main building over a water feature, sloping downwards and outwards in what looked like a precarious manner as they supported gleaming prime movers. (Missed the photo, of course, as we drove past in heavy traffic.)



The little towns look boring, with flat-faced frontages, shut blinds and no gables. All the domestic and commercial buildings are of smooth red brick and white cement.

Our experience for the day, and one of the major ones for the whole trip, was our visit to the Memorial Museum, “Passchendaele 1917”, in Zonnebeke, east of Ypres. We had already visited the outstanding Flanders Field museum in Ypres, and as the Zonnebeke museum commemorates the Third Battle of Ypres, or Battle of Passchendaele, this would enhance our knowledge of these horrific events.



The museum starts with a general story about the First World War and culminates with accounts of the great, apparently senseless battle. Between 31 July and 10 November 1917 around 600,000 casualties were recorded for a net advance of eight kilometres.

The British army had hoped to break through the German defences on the ridge where the museum stands and liberate the Belgian coast within three weeks or so. This would free the ports of Zeebrugge and Ostend. But after more than three months of exhausting and deadly fighting against the mud, the barbed wire and the enemy, the battle reached a deadlock in the debris of what used to be the village of Passchendaele.

After the First and Second Battles of Ypres the Germans had strengthened their defensive line along the ridge, with parallel defensive lines defended by numerous rows of barbed wire, machine gun posts and bunkers.

The museum tells the story well. There are several lifesize representations of both German and Allied positions, including gunneries, communications, cooking and medical facilities. Many of these places were located in extensive dugouts, and there is a stand-out exhibit of one such dugout. It was well underground, with passageways and cave-like enclosures that

provided protection for those working with these facilities. A related exhibit is an extensive reconstruction of trench systems, noting the differences in the ways that French, Belgian and British trenches were built and defended.

In all, a memorable experience that was reinforced after a short drive to the Tyne Cot cemetery and Visitors' Centre. Tyne Cot is the biggest Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery, it is stated – but we think that must be on the basis of the number of graves, rather than acreage, as the graves are tightly packed. There are nearly 12,000 soldiers' graves, with 8,300 unidentified.



The cemetery is on the top of the ridge, where stood Tyne Cot, which was a blockhouse disguised as a cottage. Standing there, it is possible to make sense of the strength of the German defensive position. It is not so much its height, which is not much, but its range and clear sight over the flat land all around, extending as far as Ypres. In early October Australian and New Zealand troops did reach the position but failed to advance any further, with devastating losses. By the end of the month Canadian troops had managed to advance the line a little further. The bunkers in the then battle-scarred and barren land became medical centres. Those who died from their injuries were buried at the scene, and that was the start of the cemetery.

In the visitors' centre there are some moving displays. They include several private and official letters of condolence sent to relatives of the deceased. A video screen depicts the faces of a tiny fraction of the number who died, changing every few seconds as a calm voice records the name and age of each.

The cemetery itself is both beautiful and beautifully kept, as are all the CWGC cemeteries. Red was the outstanding colour for most of the flowers currently decorating the simple headstones. The cross at its centre is sited where the Tyne Cot blockhouse stood. A wall around the site records the names of 35,000 UK and Commonwealth servicemen who were killed between August 1917 and November 1918 and who have no known grave.

After this visit, quite a short drive to the car park at the ferry terminal in Dunkirk. We had been aiming for Calais, but at the last moment diverted to Dunkirk instead. This did mean getting to the ferry port by looping right round the city via the freighter ports and the central city, pretty much back to where we had changed our minds, but did get to the comparatively quiet AFDS terminal and booked passage for early the day next day to Dover.



Tuesday 3 July

No ferries in or out overnight, but still quite a few car, van and truck movements overnight and in the early hours. Ferry lightly laden for the two-hour crossing in fine, calm conditions.

Back into England

First in a series of quite long drives was up to the M25 and curving down to Southampton where we visited Dolphin Motorhomes. We had bought the van there originally and still sold the same model (including a good example of the same year as ours). We thought they might give us a first impression of present value for sale to the trade. They were helpful but not optimistic, not dismissing our first suggestion but being pretty doubtful we'd get it.

From there another long drive up to Milton Farm, where we were able – at last! – to confirm to Richard Light that the van was definitely, finally for sale and we would not be returning it to storage. Stayed for a couple of nights, though, and were able to give it a good external wash in the washing area.

Thursday 5 July

Another longish drive up to Warminster and Webbs Motor Caravans. This turned out to be a very professional organisation and well set up facility, and we were courteously looked after by the relevant sales executive, Andy Cahill. He had a good look round the van and gave us an idea on its value to the trade, based on Glass's Guide – less than we hoped, but more than our bottom line.

Then to the home of Henry Blacklidge and Rachel for lunch, probably the last time we will see them. Henry and I put together the Lotus Seven nearly 60 years ago! He is still an avid Lotus enthusiast, with an Elite and an Elan, plus a valuable original Mini Cooper. Excellent lunch, with conversation rather biased not only to cars but also age and ailments!

Finally to a good ACSI camp site just outside nearby Cheltenham, Briarfields, for a necessary last clean-out of the van facilities.



Friday 6 July

Another, and final, call into a motorhome sales centre, South Hereford Motor Caravans. Not much use – not interested in a van of our mileage, but we were not impressed with them either!

And so up again to Katie in the afternoon, at the beginning of a couple of weeks getting organised for the sale of the van and the sending of our goods and chattels from it back to Sydney.

To start with we got immersed in the British Grand Prix over the weekend, merging into soccer in the evening, England losing to Belgium in the World Cup semi-final.



During the following week it was all tennis on the box, so we spent more time watching sport than much else! But by mid-week we had decided on Pickfords for the baggage move, and accepted Andy's offer of £11,000 for the van. We also started getting stuff off the van and into Katie's garage for sorting, pending receipt of the Pickfords cartons on Thursday.

On the Tuesday we had the first cultural event, a lunchtime organ concert in Hereford cathedral. We had a pleasant lunch at the cathedral café, sitting outside, and enjoyed the concert too. It was all quite modern music, and while

we might have more appreciated music of a century or two earlier, any music in this setting has to be memorable.

Friday night we ate out at the Kilpeck Inn, a typical posh pub in the region, a pretty good meal at about a Sydney price, but a limited

selection of "real" ale.

Sunday 13 July

Got going with assembling cartons and sorting out books, clothing and all the stuff into categories: keep, dump, and charity.





Sunday afternoon we did enjoy a “Summer Choral Service” at St Mary’s Church in Kenthurst, one of the multitude of little churches in the villages in the area. Not spectacularly beautiful but rather workmanlike, probably originally the chapel for the adjacent large Kenthurst Estate and its public gardens.

The choir was the Kitchen Singers, which includes Katie and Niki – the latter featuring as a soloist in an Elgar Ave Verum, one of the short pieces performed during the afternoon.



Monday 16 July

A big event in the morning saw the end of our 11-year motorhoming exploits in Europe, as the van of which we had grown so fond and done us so well was driven away to the dealership. We were sorry to see it go.

Total mileage showed 76,880 miles, 123,726 kilometres, showing 6,620 km this year – a short driving year, confirming a general average

of something over 3,000 km a month over the cumulative four years we have used and lived on the van.

But then back to more organising and packing of personal effects, as defined by the shippers, Pickfords.

Wednesday 18 July

To the Hereford tip to deposit a variety of accumulated junk, and out to lunch at the familiar Loughpool in Hoarwithy, a very good meal in a lovely place.



In the evening we were visited by Roger and Alison Judd, at their house the other side of Clehonger. Alison is in Katie's Hereford Choral Society, and Roger is a very eminent organist. He was an organ scholar at Pembroke, and from 1985 to 2008 he was Assistant Organist of St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, where he accompanied the Chapel choir in their services, broadcasts, concerts and recordings. He has played all over the world and recorded several CDs, as well as writing a book on the history of the organ at St George's. He still plays locally. They have a VW camper, so we shared various van camping experiences.

Alison does part-time work at a charity shop in Hereford, so we handed over to her our "discards" those books, maps and travel guides that we are not returning home.

More stuff remained for charity – camp chairs, a table and so on – so that was the trip of the next morning. In the evening we visited Roger and Alison at their house the other side of Clehonger, and had the privilege of enjoying his playing a Bach piece on his own organ, put together in his man's shed outside the house.

Friday 20 July



Another Big Day, as we saw off five Pickfords cartons, on their first step on a long voyage to Church Point.

Saturday 21 July

Another good lunch out at a local hostelry, the Butchers Arms in the tiny village of Woolhope. Excellent food, but service without much in the way of personality – maybe new people, suggested Katie.

Tuesday 24 July

After a couple of days doing nothing much but getting ready, Katie finally took us to the station in the morning.

Sad farewells. We couldn't have done we'd done this month without her.

A slightly complicated series of train journeys, via Newport and Reading, to Gatwick, but no problems.

Walked to the Premier Inn near the terminal from which we'd depart the next morning. A pretty basic place,



popular with people using budget airlines. Dinner there, a right old zoo, the restaurant packed with noisy families just getting off on their summer holidays.

Wednesday-Thursday 25-26 July

Over to the terminal 0800, and a reasonable first leg on the Emirates flight to Dubai – but disturbed by a child with pathological behavioural problems just across from us.

The Dubai-Sydney leg was pretty awful, as the plane for this flight had been changed from a 380 to a 777 – and our seats had changed also, to the second row from the back. And Norma's AV was faulty, touch screen not working (after it had been rebooted to get going at all).

But finally arrived in the late afternoon, and home in the limo and fine weather.

And so ended our last European adventure in the van. What next, indeed?

