

OUR TRIP TO ROME
Christmas 2002
21 December 2002 through 1 January 2003

Allen began his journey to Rome on 17 Dec., flying on Algerian Airlines from Mali. He had a layover in Algiers on 18 Dec. and did not arrive in Rome until the 19th. He said the layover was interesting. First of all, the US embassy in Mali told him not to stay in the airport overnight, but to call the US embassy and they would pick him up and take care of him until his next flight. But Allen said the Algerians were very friendly and he never felt uncomfortable about staying there. They brought all the airline passengers beverages and plenty of good food, and cots and blankets, and made them very comfortable. He spoke only French while he was there, and the other passengers thought he was Spanish for some reason.

We began our journey by driving to Minneapolis after breakfast on Saturday, 21 Dec. and checked into the Airport Hilton Hotel. After a lovely dinner we retired rather early, because we needed to be at the airport by 9:00 AM. The buffet breakfast was very good, and, when we were ready, the hotel shuttle zipped us over to the terminal. Because of security regulations, the van could not pull up to the doors by the departure gates, so we had to get out across the roadway, and go up and over the roadway on a skywalk and down on the other side to check in. This was very annoying, but a baggage handler brought a luggage cart and found a wheelchair quickly, then placed me at the head of the check in line with our luggage. A US Airways person came over to me and allowed us to check in at a kiosk rather quickly, instead of waiting in line. He then sent us to an employee entrance to go through security. We then zipped over to our departure gate and had a long wait, because we had gotten through everything without any waiting.

Our flight to Philadelphia on Sunday, 22 Dec. was uneventful. It took us the entire 1 hour and 45 minutes between flights, however, to make it from one terminal to another on an electric cart. The Philadelphia airport is sprawled out all over and it is a real pain for anyone to get anywhere quickly, let alone a handicapped person. The plane to Rome was boarding when we finally arrived at the gate, but we still had plenty of time before we took off, as overseas flights board about a half hour early.

The flight from Philly to Rome was a new definition of eternity, only to be redefined on our return trip, which was 2 hours longer, and the A330 is very noisy. The crew was nice, and the food was o.k. They served beverages, an evening meal, then beverages and or snacks every hour or so, and we had a delicious muffin with coffee or juice about an hour before landing. We arrived in Rome about 8:30 AM.

The terminal in Rome was interesting: vast, clean and modern. There were armed police everywhere, but not many passengers. A wheelchair attendant met us at the plane door with a wheelchair and proceeded to whisk both me and an old woman, one wheelchair with each hand, through the endless corridors of the terminal, up and down elevators, through customs and on to the baggage claim area. Mary could hardly keep up. When we got to the baggage claim area at arrivals, Allen was not there as he had told us he would

be. I was extremely tired from the trip, and hoped that Allen would appear quickly so we could get to our hotel. We used the restrooms, got some Euros at an ATM and waited about an hour. (ATM machines and the Euro are true blessings, and make European travel a breeze.) I soon asked an information booth person how we should make our way to our hotel. A hotel shuttle service was much cheaper than a taxi, so we chose that. The driver spoke English and pointed out the sites as we entered Rome. We were the last of 3 different hotel stops, and I thought we would never get to our hotel. I sat in the front seat of the van, and, needless to say, the man's Italian/Roman driving techniques left me breathless. The warm moist air, canopy pines and greenery everywhere were very refreshing in spite of my fatigue.

We checked into the Hotel Nova Domus and the front desk person informed us that our son had called and would be at the hotel by noon. We then made our way with a porter to our beautiful room, with plush red carpeting, shiny woodwork, damask wall covering, paintings, French doors opening on to a balcony, and a huge, all marble bath with a Jacuzzi, bidet and heated towel rack. A complimentary bottle of Frascati white wine and 2 wine glasses were on the desk. We had a chance to rest before Allen arrived.

What a joy it was when Allen knocked on our door! He looked so good and so happy, with long hair, and just a very new beard, and he was very brown and very lean and strong in his appearance. He had shed his long beard quite a while ago. We chatted for a while and then arranged for Allen to have his own room, because we did not have room for a rollaway in our room. (We were not sure if Allen was going to stay with us or with his ISU friends in Rome. He had stayed with an ISU friend of his in Rome since he arrived there on the 19th.) Allen presented us with gifts: Malian peanuts, and two magnificent hand carved mahogany cabinet doors made by his Malian "dad," Musa. Allen and Mary took off for some touring before supper, and I slept until they returned. We then cleaned up for dinner. We chose to eat at the hotel and enjoyed antipasti with a bottle of fine Italian wine and some delicious, tender veal dishes with roasted potatoes and grilled vegetables. Allen was the only one who had a pasta course and he devoured everything.

On the 24th we tried unsuccessfully to arrange for a larger room that would accommodate a rollaway bed for Allen, in order to save money. The new room turned out to be not nearly as nice as our previous rooms, so we were not pleased, but that was all the hotel could do for us that night, because they were full.

On Christmas Eve we also chose to eat at the hotel, for their dining room was lovely, and the hotel had planned special dinners for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and 26 Dec., which is a holiday, because many restaurants are closed those days. The prix fix Christmas Eve dinner was elegant, very reasonably priced, and included a before dinner cocktail/punch, a bottle of fine Italian wine, a 5 course meal, and champagne. The holiday cocktail was a mixture of Campari, gin and sweet vermouth on ice, with a half slice of orange. Antipasto was smoked salmon, grilled Portobello mushroom, marinated sun-dried sweet red pepper, artichoke heart and ripe olives. There were 2 kinds of pasta for the pasta course: risotto with squid, and penne in tuna sauce. Delicious! The main

course was a superb slab of baked salmon fillet with a delicate sauce, served with grilled vegetables: thinly sliced zucchini, eggplant, fennel heart and a slim wedge of red cabbage. Marvelous! The wine was a white Frascati. A salad, then a desert of mixed fruit followed: fresh pineapple, kiwi and orange with Italian vanilla ice cream and fancy, thin chocolate wafers, surrounded by a drizzle of chocolate syrup. Desert was accompanied by a choice of coffee, espresso or cappuccino. The final treat was a tall chilled flute of Spumanti. We had all we could do to waddle our way back to our rooms.

Christmas morning I was still terribly tired from jet lag and from sheer exhaustion, so Mary and Allen did some major touring on their own. I talked to the front desk people and to the manager about a better room. Nothing seemed to be available until after the holidays. I then made my way to the bar and had a cup of tea. The bar had food all afternoon, every day: sfizi (appetizers) and bar snacks and cake and various holiday treats, and whatever one ordered at the bar, a plateful of goodies was always offered. I found "tea" to be an adequate substitute for lunch. After tea I went to the mezzanine next to the bar and watched a live broadcast of Italian Christmas music from a Rome church. I was somewhat down in the dumps because of the disappointing room arrangements, and wished that we had kept the 2 lovely rooms we had at first, even though they were expensive, at least through the holidays. Then the manager appeared, and told me that he had a suite available that would accommodate us nicely. I told him I would rather wait another day before switching rooms again, but he indicated that the suite, which had just become available, might not be available the next day. He also said that we could have it for the duration of our stay, through the 29th. I asked if I could look at it, and I did. It was lovely: a huge room with a high ceiling, thick dark blue carpeting, a king size bed, a sofa and comfortable chairs, and desk and bar, and a lovely anteroom with a marble table and chairs and a convertible sofa for Allen. I took it, and went upstairs to pack our things. A porter helped me change rooms before Mary and Allen returned. Our Christmas had been redeemed. The best part of the deal was that the huge suite, after Christmas, cost less for the 3 of us than our original reserved room. We were delighted.

Our rooms included a full breakfast each morning. The breakfast buffet was impressive and varied every day: bacon, eggs (scrambled, soft and hard boiled), baked custard, sliced ham and cheeses, soft cheese, coffee rolls and cakes, breakfast breads stuffed with spinach and ricotta cheese, and small rolls topped with tomato paste and herbs, delicious Italian yogurt that reminded me of Icelandic yogurt, fresh sliced fruit (pineapple, kiwi, etc.), prunes, canned fruits, cereals, granolas, fresh squeezed orange juice, and fresh whole fruit (oranges, bananas and tangerines with fresh green stems and leaves). The coffee was wonderful, from a marvelous machine that brewed one cup at a time, and served with hot milk. Italians also seem to like espresso and cappuccino in the morning. This was indeed a grand way to welcome each morning, and a joyful time to meet the other guests from all over the world. We routinely had an afternoon snack between breakfast and dinner, but we never needed to have a lunch, per se.

Christmas dinner was a feast for the eyes and the palette. The first course was a delicious consommé with beaten egg dropped into it. The pasta was ravioli stuffed with cheese and herbs in a tomato sauce. The piece de resistance was the main course of roast lamb with

roasted potatoes and a green salad on the side. Desert was Italian Christmas Cake with warm vanilla cream sauce and coffee, followed of course by a chilled flute of champagne.

Thursday, 26 Dec., was a holiday, and museums, tours, etc. were not available, so Allen and Mary took off for self-guided touring in the morning. It was a beautiful clear day. They returned at 1:30 PM and we all took a taxi to St. Peter's where we spent the entire afternoon. The crowd was immense in St. Peter's Square, and it was mostly Italians on holiday. We made our way slowly through the basilica, and Allen did some sketching. I was amused by how quietly the huge crowd moved through the great reverberant space. I stopped several times in chapels to pray, i.e. to rest, and I was quite pleased with myself for the stamina and endurance I managed to muster in spite of so much walking and standing. With the holidays, the hotel could not get me a wheelchair until 27 Dec., and they had none of their own.

We didn't think we could survive a third 5 course dinner at the hotel, so we chose to have supper at a local, family owned restaurant that the hotel recommended, one of a very few that were opened on the holiday. It was a charming place with numerous autographed photos of movie stars on the walls. As soon as we entered the place, we were whisked to a table covered with a bright checkered tablecloth and presented with a bottle of fine Italian white wine, plates, and 8 bowls full of antipasti, a basket of breads, focaccia, bruschetta, and a board heaped with Prociutto. After such a feast even Allen waved off a pasta course and we settled for Terno Secco's special pizza. Real Italian pizza is out of this world. Cappuccino finished things nicely. (We all know that Italians drink only espresso in the evening, but I find it too strong and prefer cappuccino.)

On Friday, Allen and Mary toured in the morning and we all took a 2 and ½ hour guided bus tour around Rome in the afternoon. This was a great way for me to see most of the sights, and the narrative, in English, was very informative. The wheelchair allowed us to walk/ride to St. Peter's Square to get the bus, which was only a few blocks from our hotel. We had dinner at the hotel and enjoyed soup as a first course. Mary had pasta with shrimp and zucchini blossoms, and Allen and I had beef fillet with a variety of accompaniments.

Saturday morning was rainy, and looked as if we would have to change our plans, but during a pause between showers we made our way to the entrance for the Vatican Museums. The line was more than 3 blocks long and extended all the way to St. Peter's Square. We didn't think we would even get in the place, as the museum closed at 1:45 PM. Mary inquired at the door about my wheelchair, and the guard said we could skip waiting on line, and in we went to enjoy the entire morning until closing time. The crowd was immense, and lines moved slowly, but the collection of art here is truly unimaginable until one sees it. Frescoes and paintings by famous artists including Raphael and Bernini cover the walls of the rooms in part of the Vatican palace. The ornate ceilings are also a wonder. The tour route ends in the Sistine Chapel, where we remained in awe until the guards signaled that the museum was closing. The return corridor/gallery seemed endless, but we eventually made our way to the modern entrance/exit building. We stopped at a

delightful pizzeria for a snack and made our way back to the hotel. Mary and Allen toured a bit before dinner.

We decided to try another local restaurant for dinner at 8:00 PM. La Fiorentina was larger and fancier than Terno Secco, with a sleek modern interior. We started with Campari on ice for an aperitif. We had soup first, and I started with a thick soup made with diced vegetables, chopped greens, and beans that was thickened with bread cubes. It was delicious but rather filling. Mary had a tender veal chop. Allen had a yet another grilled steak, and I had thinly sliced rare steak with sautéed mushrooms in a delicious sauce, one of their specials that day, with a salad of baby greens on the side. I ordered a limoncello after dinner while Allen and Mary had cappuccino. The waiter seemed to be amused with us and later offered all three of us a limoncello on the house.

Sunday was a beautiful clear day and we left after breakfast with wheelchair via the Metro to attend a morning mass at San Giovanni in Laterano, the cathedral in Rome. The only music was the traditional Gregorian alleluia before the gospel, "Silent Night" sung by a soprano soloist during communion, and a short improvisation for a postlude. Even such a brief excursion into the musical world was quite delightful with the perfect acoustics, and the organ is a beautiful instrument, divided on either side of the chancel, and with a huge division in the east transept. The console is in a balcony in the chancel, from where the soloist sang. The music traveled majestically through the arches of this magnificent space. Allen sketched during the mass and for a while after as we toured the church. We then made our way about 10 blocks to Santa Maria Maggiori. This is a well-preserved ancient basilica with much of its original mosaics and its columned nave intact. San Giovanni was beautiful, but obviously renovated continually through the ages. We then made our way to the unparalleled magnificence of the Villa/Galleria Borghese with its magnificent collection of Bernini sculptures and paintings by most of Italy's most important artists. The villa itself is a grand work of baroque art at its finest, filled with ancient Roman artifacts, and paneled and paved with marble and mosaics. The ornate ceilings, alone, are a marvel. Admission to the gallery is by reservation only, and each group is allowed only 2 hours. Truly, this gallery and the Vatican Museums are the art experiences of a lifetime. I have been to nearly every major art gallery in the world, but these two places are unsurpassed for the quality of their treasures. We then walked all the way through the vast and beautiful park to the Metro, as the sun set, stopping to see the Piazza del Popolo on the way, and returned to the hotel to rest before dinner. Allen explained that the Piazza had been used as a parking lot for a long time, but was now returned to a grand public space, and it was crowded with gathering groups of people on holiday and enjoying the pleasant evening.

Sunday night we chose to return to Terno Secco for dinner. We started with their wonderful antipasti once again, which was slightly different from the previous visit, but equally magnificent. The waiter convinced us that their steak special was a must, so we abandoned our original desire to eat light. Their Italian steak was unbelievably tender and delicious. They cut huge boneless prime rib, rib eye steak about 3/8 inch thick and grill it to perfection over a hardwood fire, preferring to cook the thin steaks to well down for tenderness, and serve the hot, sizzling steak with 1/2 lemon to squeeze over it. This was

accompanied by a bowl of salad, and Al added fried potatoes. A bottle of fine Chianti accompanied our feast. We could not even think of desert, but all enjoyed a limoncello after dinner.

Monday, 30 Dec. Allen took his backpack to the hostel where he would stay until he leaves on 6 Jan., and then returned to the hotel. We took a taxi to the airport Hotel Hilton after checking out of the Nova Domus at noon. The Hilton was very expensive, but contiguous to the terminal, so it was convenient, and, since we had a morning flight, it proved to be a good choice. It is a very plush, very modern, very upscale hotel. We had a modest dinner. Mary enjoyed a fillet with white beans and rosemary and grilled vegetables, Allen had yet another fantastic grilled steak, and I enjoyed baked fresh sea bass. The waiter's wine ceremony was quite a show. We ordered a bottle of fine Italian wine as we did every night, but for 2 or 3 times what we had paid during the week before. Instead of just presenting me with a taste, he proceeded to pour a small amount into one glass, swirl it around, then turn the glass sideways in order to coat the sides with wine, then poured the wine from the first glass to the second, repeated the procedure, then repeated this with the third glass. The room was filled with a most pleasant aroma. Finally, he poured a small amount into a glass and presented it to me. Superb! But, what a show.

We were up early, so we could eat breakfast and get to our flight 2 hours early. Again, we zipped through everything. Airport security was very tight. Besides the armed police, there were uniformed military at all the entrances armed with automatic rifles and their fingers on the safety. No one indicated a problem, so we figured this was just a precautionary measure on 31 Dec. for the New Year holiday. Before we reached the security checkpoint, we embraced Allen and said goodbye. That was not as difficult as I had anticipated it to be. We had had a vacation of a lifetime with our son, and our joy and gratitude for the time we had spent together in "The Eternal City" was a treasure that I carried inside of me more precious than gold. What a Christmas! What a way to begin a New Year! What a blessing!

The flight west to Philadelphia was 2 hours longer than flying east, and seemed to never end. The crew was not nearly as professional or pleasant as on the flight over and the food was horrible. Arriving in Philadelphia was a big pain in the ass. We had to claim our luggage and then check it again to Minneapolis, and customs seemed to be endless. One jackass in the security line really annoyed me as he searched me, asking me to remove my shoes and my AFO (leg brace). I seriously doubt that all the security nonsense we experienced adds any increased margin of safety to air travel. It is just very annoying and very time consuming and it is obviously done by idiots. It was a good thing that we had a 3 hour delay, or we might not have gotten to our connecting flight.

Our flight from Philadelphia to Minneapolis was a delight. It was a very clear night and the pilot announced that we would be flying at just 18,000 feet to avoid turbulence at higher elevations. This allowed us to see everything below, and Detroit, the outline of Lake Michigan, Chicago, and making our approach over Minneapolis were especially beautiful. We landed about 8:30 PM, found our luggage quickly, and the Hilton shuttle

was there to meet us. The hotel invited us to their New Years Eve party, but after we got cleaned up and comfortable in our lovely room, we were too tired to even go downstairs for a drink, so we just went to bed. We slept well and had another wonderful breakfast and relaxed until we needed to check out at noon. Staying at the Minneapolis airport Hilton was a great idea. Not only did it smooth out our departure and arrival, but also, because we stayed the 2 nights, the hotel kept our car for the duration of our trip, free. As we compared the very reasonable prices of the lovely Minneapolis Hilton to the extravagant costs at the Rome Hilton, we were amused to realize what a bargain it really is to live in the USA.

Our drive to Nashua on New Years Day was uneventful with little traffic, and our dear Toby greeted us as always. Our house sitter had taken good care of him and of everything else, and our lovely home was warm and inviting. We had had a glorious vacation, but, truly, home remains one of the most desirable destinations in this world.

--tlm