

Thursday 16 April London

Malcolm and Elaine collect me at ten for the lift to Amersham station. We arrive early enough for me to catch the train before the one planned: 10.16, and it arrives at KXStP just under an hour later. And soon I am in the reception at the Renaissance Hotel. There is a room ready for me to check into, but it has no view even though it is quiet. It's comfortable, but not really any different from any other comfortable hotel.

Before long I am on my way to the Masala Zone at Islington, which is very quiet at lunchtime. I enjoy the predictable Grand Thali with Railway Chicken, and a glass of Malbec. I walk back partly along the canal as there are few drops of rain, after the warm sunshine of the last few days. I also feel very tired, partly no doubt partly because of yesterday's long walk. So I retire for a rest during the afternoon.

In the early evening I set out to Euston to pick a snack from Mr Gopal: two samosas and some sweets. I eat them back in the room, and have an early night. It turns out to be quite a good night.

Friday 17 London to Strasbourg Hotel Mercure Gare

I am up at about 5.45 for a bath and breakfast soon after 6.30. There is an excellent buffet for £19 (plus service) and I could have a cooked meal for an extra £9. But there is plenty including smoked salmon and various cheeses, and I shall be having 'a light meal' on Eurostar.

After breakfast I find the GRJ desk, which is just around the corner on the same level as the breakfast bar. There is plenty of time to get back to the room and finish packing, to meet the Tour Manager, Jane Brookes, and to take some photos around the station, which I don't remember doing before.

Eventually we are on the train and it leaves spot on time. The light meal is served after about half an hour with muesli, juice, yogurt and coffee. It is an opportunity to get to know some of the other members of the group, including Charles from Harrogate and Andrew and Catherine from Linthwaite. I switch my mobile on in France to receive a text from Pippa about Elaine's birthday.

It is quite a hike from the Gare du Nord to the coach; I am sure that it would have been no further to walk directly to the Gare Est. Although it is a fairly tight connection, we comfortably catch the TGV for Strasbourg, which has just the one stop in Saverne. As predicted on the BBC weather app it is rainy as we cross over to the hotel which is facing the station, with its new glass and steel canopy around the original facade; cf Kings Cross.

The room is small and hot but comfortable. The AC can't cope, and the window opens onto the area above reception. I take a stroll around the old town and the canals but it is very grey and damp. We have dinner at a restaurant very close to the hotel: onion tart, fish with choucroute, and a sweet tart. I have some Gewurtztraminer and HC.

After listening to the Archers I have an early night; but it's too warm for decent sleep.

Saturday 18th Strasbourg to Rome Hotel Universo

I eventually get out of bed at 6.45 for a bath and a decent breakfast. And this time there is a beautiful sunny morning for my stroll and photos. It is also leisurely as we don't have to meet until 10.05 for the short hop over to the station where there is plenty of time before the 10.51 departure to Basel. It is bright sun as we leave, but the clouds amiss as we approach Switzerland. I am surprised to see snow remaining on the Vosges. Some police come through the train, but no documents are requested.

We have just enough time in Basel to catch the Eurocity train to Milan, which is Swiss setting standard stock. There is at seat service, and I have a quarter of Fechy and a bowl of asparagus soup, very tasty, with bread. I also have the pizza slice that I bought earlier at the station. The weather turns increasingly clouded as we go through Canton Berne with views in Kandertal poor. Unfortunately we use the basis tunnel, but on emerging at Visp the sun is out again with excellent views. The Simplon tunnel soon disappears and Italy with Lago Maggiore looks to have a more advanced season with the trees and shrubs more advanced. We arrive at Milano only a few minutes late, and there is time to view the magnificent station before catching the Red Arrow train to Rome. For a lot of the way we are on a new high-speed line which unfortunately goes through many tunnels with short bursts of daylight for the views. Later the terrain is flatter and therefore more of the views are visible, with an attractive sunset. We arrive at Rome at about 2030, for the short walk to the Hotel Universo in the dark.

Check in is efficient and we leave our bags in the room to go to a nearby restaurant for dinner but it is still 930 before we start eating. Of course this is too late for me, but I enjoy risotto, aubergines, vegetables, creme caramel and a couple of glasses of red before finally getting to bed at midnight.

Sunday 19th Rome Hotel Universo

It was a slightly better night and I am out of bed by 6.45 for a bath and a reasonable breakfast. There is time to get organised and we are for our tour at 9.30, with plenty of warm sun. We drive around the city to see many of the sights, and stop at some for an interesting description and short walks through parts of the city. We get back to the hotel at 12.30.

Soon I set out for lunch and meet the retired doctor from Edinburgh in the foyer and we go across the road for a simple lunch of pasta, sweet for me and a glass of decent white wine. Then it is a siesta for a couple of hours.

Out again for a longish walk around the city as the weather deteriorates, with cloud and light rain as I get back to the hotel. There are many tourists around, and many seem to have little consideration for others.

It is a relaxing evening in the room followed by an early night, which is a little better than yesterday.

Monday 20th Rome to Lecce Hotel President

I am up at 5:30 for a bath and down to breakfast at 6.30. It is already busy and the buffet is just the same as yesterday. It is a sunny morning with a clear blue sky and a fresh feeling.

At 7.15 we leave for the short walk to the station. After ten minutes or so, the train is announced and we get onto the coach at the front. Today it is a silver arrow with first not business class. However it is comfortable and a treat to have a through train to Lecce. The first third is along the high speed line to the outskirts of Naples, then east through the mountains, and finally generally along the coast from Foggia to Lecce. A drinks biscuits are served. Reading, snoozing and looking out of the window.

At Lecce it is warm and sunny as we walk the short distance from the station to the coach which takes us through the town to the hotel. It is much bigger and more spacious than that in Rome. We get to our rooms, which are again bigger. Several sockets don't work, and the AC hasn't been switched on for the season. The former is soon sorted.

I spend the first half of the afternoon resting, and then go out at four. The sky is clear blue and the light is wonderful for photographs of the many interesting buildings. I find the post office and buy stamps (0,95€). Then it is wandering around the old town, into and out of churches, with plenty of photos and some postcards. On the way back to the hotel, there is a supermarket where I get some snacks.

There is time for a shower and organisation. At 7.30, after prosecco and snacks we get to dinner which is good, with pasta, sea bass, a mixture of sweets, water and wine. At nine I get off to bed. Decent to one, and then more sleep after an hour or so.

Tuesday 21 Lecce Hotel President

Up at 6.15 for a shower and down to breakfast at seven; reasonable.

At 9.30 we set off for our walking tour of Lecce with a local guide, who unfortunately has fractured English and quite difficult to hear. Quite a lot is what I saw yesterday but there are some new bits, and of course some explanation. Afterwards I have a coffee with Charles and walk back to the hotel for a quiet afternoon.

The first job is to sort out photos. The wireless transfer to the iPad is proving straightforward and uploading to picasa is not too fraught. Locating them on a map within photos is easy; the detail of labelling varies in usefulness. I also write some postcards and hand them in at reception. The hotel garden has no chairs because of the wind, and so I take my book to read in the public gardens, about ten minutes walk away. It is good to leave all valuables in the safe, and walk along with just the book. I continue afterwards walking through the old town including several streets I haven't seen, and there are few people. Walking back to the hotel I stop for a cornet of pistachio at Natale.

Rest, shower, dinner: risotto, cheese and asparagus omelette, ice cream.

Wednesday 22 Lecce Hotel President

A little better night with an hour awake at one. I am up at 6.30 for shower and down to breakfast at seven. Charles is the only one there but as we have been told to change tables I don't sit with him. The breakfast is just the same as before.

There is plenty of time to get ready for our nine o'clock departure. The bus takes us on a scenic route, largely along the Adriatic coast to Otranto, where I elect to see the place by myself, as the guide is the same woman as in Lecce. There is a clear blue sky, with pleasantly warm but windy weather. The old town is delightful and I guess much quieter than it will be late in the year. There is plenty to see, and only the cathedral is busy, including a large group of noisy children.

We meet again at 1.30 and drive along the coast to the oil processing plant, with a stop for photos along the coast. Explanation, tasting and selling. Then it is a drive back directly to Lecce arriving at about four for relaxation before dinner.

Thursday 23 Lecce Hotel President

A long day, starting with breakfast at 6.30 and into the coach by seven for the drive to Matera, which takes about three hours with one stop, it is quite attractive, particularly as we approach Matera. Our first stop is on the hill opposite the town with a good view of the gorge and the sassi (troglodyte houses). The countryside is limestone with a lot of wild flowers, similar to the dales.

We have a tour of the town with a local guide who speaks English much better than the one in Lecce, and gives us a considerable amount of information. There is a lot of walking up and down with a lot of steps, but all interesting. We visit the water museum to see one of the cistern and a house preserved as it would have been pre 1950. Then there is 'free time' which some spend eating; I don't know how they manage two full meals. Then it is in the coach to Alberobello. I expect just a view of the the trulli, of which there are many with tourist shops, but it is an interesting town with a basilica and an interesting small trulli museum. Charles and I have excellent cakes and coffee/chocolate.

The return to Lecce takes about ninety minutes, with good views of the sea and along a decent fast road. There is time to get ready for another good dinner, with excellent buffet starters, a good chunk of grilled salmon and ice cream.

Friday 24 Lecce Hotel President

A decent night from 9.30 until three and then snoozing.

I am down for breakfast at seven to an empty room and have a peaceful breakfast for most of the time.

There is plenty of time to get organised before we leave at 9.30. First of all we have half an hour at Galatina, mostly for the frescoes in the church, which we are not allowed to photograph, but they are impressive, framing the white altar. Another half hour takes us to Gallipoli on coast of the Ionian Sea. We go through the

the modern town and over the bridge to the fish market on the shore of the old town island. It is very smelly, and Charles and I have coffee before setting out to explore. It is very windy on the coast with plenty of white horses, and showers. In the narrow streets one gets away from the wind.

C has his swim whilst I reconnoitre a lunch place. Of the two that the guide recommends one is a full blown restaurant while the other, Caffè del Duomo, which we choose, has drinks and snacks. I have a glass of white and a few savoury pastries. It is agreeably cheap. More walking around and photographing as the sun comes out, although the wind remains. Ice cream and return to the bus for a return to Lecce.

Rest and a good dinner.

Saturday 25 Lecce to Vieste Palace Hotel

Reasonable night and breakfast as before at seven. There is plenty of time to pack and get ready.

A coach takes us to the station where we are in good time for the Torino train which we are taking to Foggia. It is a comfortable White Arrow train, which starts on time, but is twenty minutes late arriving in Foggia, where one of the doors is out of commission. Another coach is waiting for us, with plenty of room and good AC. Initially our journey is across the plain, but then we get to the Gargano Peninsular where the road is very windy when not going through tunnels. There is a lot of up and down and steep drops, and excellent views towards the sea. We get to the hotel a little before four. The rooms are comfortable, with efficient wifi, but rather small and I have a shower.

During a walk I meet Charles, and we have an aperitif overlooking the sea, at the Grottino. Back to the hotel for a shower and to dinner at 7.30: savoury flan, pasta, mackerel with vegetables and ice cream. We share a bottle white wine.

A rather better night.

Sunday 26 Vieste Palace Hotel

Up at six, and after a shower out for a walk before breakfast at 7.30. It is rather better, but still with tinned fruit.

We walk to the harbour where our boat is waiting, but we can't get on until after nine. The vessel is rather basic with no awning, and bench seats, but the trip is good along the coast to the south east, with several rides into grottoes. There is plenty to see, and the weather is ideal: mostly sunny, with a breeze and not too warm. The whole trip takes nearly three hours. After a change in the hotel to lunch with Charles: Bruschetta, a glass of white and an espresso.

Monday 27 Vieste Palace Hotel

Out for a walk to check the bus stop, and buy the two tickets for the out and return journey to Peschicci, 1,70€ each way. Breakfast at 7.30, and walk to catch the 8.50 to Peschicci, which is on time, but has few passengers other than our group. Peschicci is almost dead with little open; it turns out to be early in the season and early in the day. It is built on a cliff high above the bay, with lots of steps, alleys and improbable buildings. An ice cream and I am ready to return at one, especially as there are some spots of rain.

It has been raining heavily in Vieste, and I rest for part of the afternoon. After that I try to do some shopping but most shops are closed; I manage some cards. At 5.30 I join Charles for a glass of wine and nibbles at our local. Dinner follows at 7.30 in the hotel with pasta, fish and sweet.

Tuesday 28 Vieste to Turin Hotel Concord

It is a relatively leisurely start with time for a stroll and breakfast. Packing and coach by eight. The one we were due to use had broken down and we had two smaller ones. We used the seaside route, and then across the plain to Foggia, arriving in plenty of time for the slightly late running 10.40 to Milan, a Frecciabianco, and more comfortable than the higher speed trains. It is a pleasant journey along the coast and then across the Po Plain, with plenty of time to read and listen to music.

We are fifteen minutes late into Milan but still have half an hour to comfortably catch the train to Turin. Prosecco and nibbles, with wonderful views of the mountains in the evening sun. We get to Turin at eight for the short walk to the hotel. Dinner is after a hurried bath and change, at 8.45: pasta, plaice and rice and chocolate mousse, with white wine and water; good.

Wednesday 29 Turin to London Renaissance Hotel

A much better breakfast at eight, and time for a short glimpse of the city before the coach transfer to the station at nine for the 10.15 TGV departure for Paris. It only takes 10 minutes to get to the station which is a modern aluminium and glass structure. We have about 40 minutes to wait for the slightly delayed train which is coming from Milan. It is a standard TGV.

The journey is comfortable with excellent scenery for the first couple of hours up to the total from Switzerland Italy to France and then down through the Savoy Alps. In between reading and listening to music I manage to have a reasonable lunch of lasagna red wine and Panna Cotta. We get to Paris about 20 minutes late, and the journey across the city in a coach is a little fraught but in the end we have plenty of time to catch the Eurostar back to London. This train is on time and serves a meal of cheese, cracked wheat and a sweet with a couple of bottles of red wine and a hot chocolate.

Within 20 minutes I am in my room at Saint Pancras which has a view of the British Library. I am in bed soon after nine for a good night's sleep.