

Mediterranean Cruise

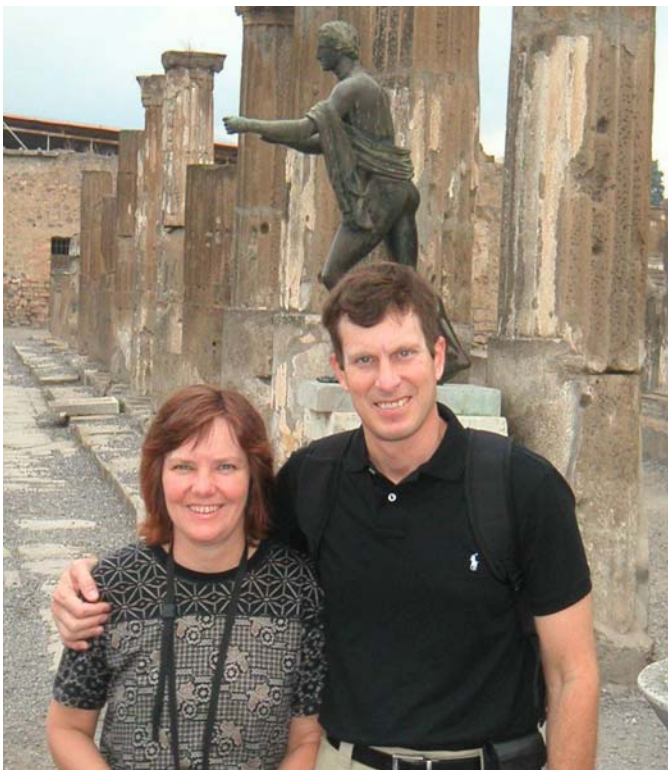
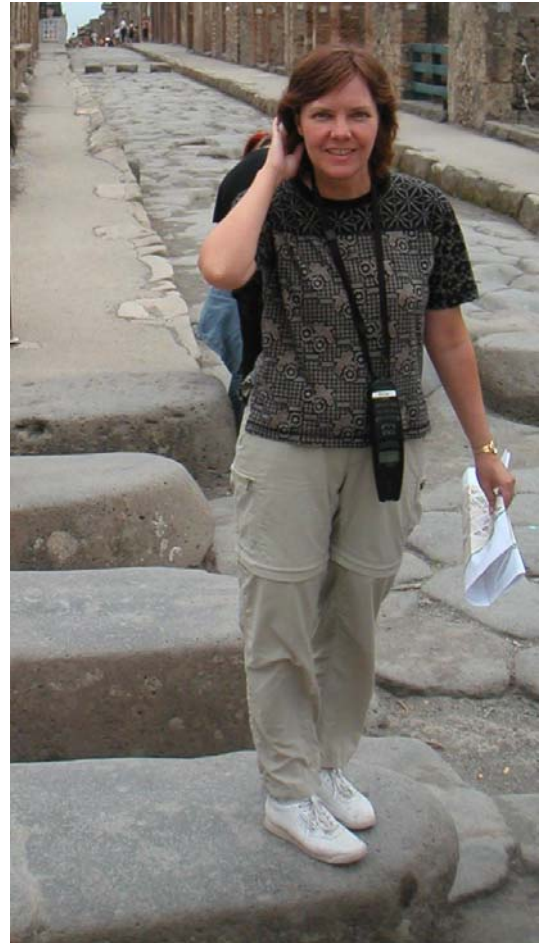
Naples/Pompeii, Mykonos, Santorini, Taormina (Sicily),
Villefranche (France), Genoa/Cinque Terre, Rome



Robert & Robin Charlton
September 2005

Pompeii

We explored the amazingly well-preserved ruins of Pompeii for four hours, using audioguides to learn about its history



Naples

The Archaeological Museum in Naples houses some of the finest mosaics, frescoes, and statues from Pompeii



Mykonos

Greek salads, gyros, and a half bottle of retsina on a shady patio on this lovely white-and-blue island—what fun!



Delos (Excursion from Mykonos)

The famous marble lions of Delos looked more like seals to us, but we kept our opinions to ourselves during the tour



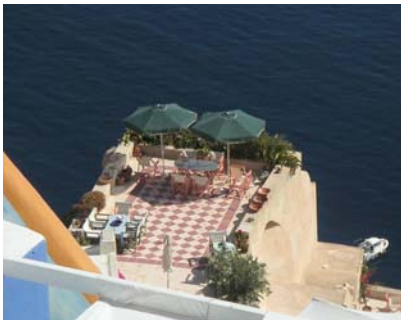
Santorini

The four of us got to share a special lunch of traditional Greek foods in Fira. This island really is a magical place.



Santorini

The jumble of whitewashed buildings in Oia is so romantic—we took a local bus full of Greek schoolkids to this town



Days at Sea

Three days at sea let us catch our breath in between fast-paced shore excursions. We walked off most of our dinners!



Taormina, Sicily

Taormina's Greek amphitheater is justly famous for its views—on a clear day, Mt. Etna would be visible behind



Taormina, Sicily

We had four hours to explore Taormina at a leisurely pace. Note all the Italian Vespas in the courtyard (lower right).



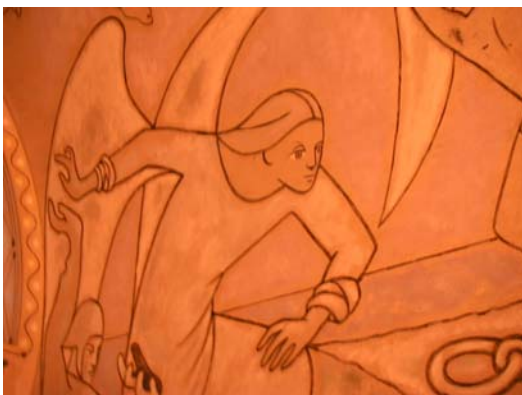
Villefranche

We promised ourselves we would come back someday to this romantic little town on the French Riviera



Villefranche

We loved the cobbled medieval streets and colorfully painted buildings of this quiet waterfront town



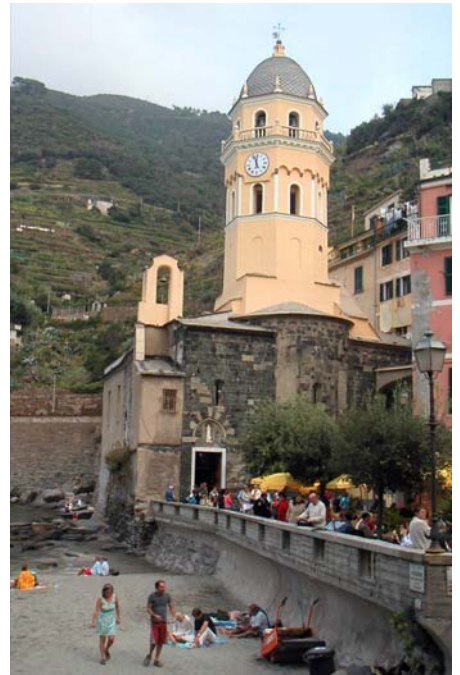
Monaco & Monte Carlo

This place dripped money—from the marina with million-dollar yachts to the tightly packed million dollar apartments



Cinque Terre

We pushed the envelope getting there and back in time. Despite the crowds, these five towns were undeniably quaint.



Rome & Vatican City

We made the most of our last day—Vatican Museum, Sistine Chapel, St. Peter's, Spanish Steps, Trevi Fountain!



Mediterranean Cruise

September 16-26, 2005

Okay, what's not to like about a 10-day cruise of the Mediterranean? I mean, c'mon! We explored the ruins of Pompeii, visited the beautiful Greek islands of Mykonos and Santorini, and promised ourselves to return to the quaint town of Villefranche on the French Riviera. The trip left us hungry for more—although preferably at a slower pace the next time. Three days at sea let us catch our breath in between fast-paced shore excursions. Getting to share the experience with my mom and dad made the trip extra-special. The lunches the four of us shared on Mykonos and Santorini were among our favorite memories.

September 16 (Fri) – Board Cruise Ship

We boarded the Celebrity Galaxy by 4 pm. The first thing we did was call my mom and dad in their cabin to let them know we had arrived. The ship was set to sail at 7 pm, so we figured they'd be relieved to know we were on board. We were very sorry to learn that mom had sprained her foot badly just the day before in Rome, tripping on a grate as she was walking down the street. As a result, she was mostly confined to a wheelchair, although she could hobble around a bit with the use of a cane. Talk about bad timing! But she was in good spirits despite, and we did our best to cheer her up further with talk of all the fine dinners we were going to have.

We unpacked, talked to the concierge about our baggage woes (the bag with all our dress clothes never showed up at the Rome airport), and got ready for dinner. We were in cabin 4167, an inside cabin towards the aft of the ship and on the lowest passenger level, and mom and dad were "around the bend" on the other side of the bulkhead in cabin 4164. We met up with them at their room and exchanged hugs. Dad wheeled mom upstairs to the dining area just one floor above. Our first dinner that night was a casual night. We were seated at a table for six and ended up having a wonderful time with a couple from Nova Scotia named Bud and Cathy. They run four doughnut stores in Nova Scotia and were a fun, exuberant couple who we all hit it off with right away. They also had family on board and ended up changing their dinner seating the next day to sit with their family, so we were back to just the four of us on the next evening of the cruise. Our waiter Andre (Indian) and his assistant Marius (Romanian) were both wonderful and attentive, and the food of course was fantastic, just as it has been on every Celebrity cruise we've taken.

We skipped the introductory entertainment that evening and spent our time unpacking instead. Celebrity offered to launder all our dirty clothes for free since we didn't have the use of one of our suitcases, so we got all our dirty clothes into two laundry bags and had clean clothes by the next morning. Around 10 pm, Robin and I took our first stroll around the ship. We had been so busy earlier that we hardly felt we were at sea, but now we got to know the public places on board. By midnight we were in bed.

September 17 (Sat) – Naples

We awoke before 6 am and started getting ready for what we knew would be one of the busiest days of our trip. The noise of the engines rumbling in reverse as we pulled into Naples woke us up anyway. We ate an early breakfast in the buffet area, took apples, yogurts, bread, butter, and

raspberry jam with us for a picnic lunch, and headed off the ship as soon as we pulled into the dock around 7:15 am. We were very early off the ship. Based on info we had received from David and Natalie, we caught the #1 shuttle from the port to Stazione Centrale, then caught the Circumvesuviana train from Naples to Pompeii. This all went very smoothly. We asked for help now and then and the locals were always more than willing to oblige.

We arrived in Pompeii right around 8:30 am, opening time. We rented audio guides (a good move) and spent the next four hours exploring Pompeii on our own. You really get the sense of the layout of the Roman streets and the pleasantness of the ancient buildings (basilicas, temples, theaters, and wealthy private homes) by seeing Pompeii. The sun, fortunately, stayed shrouded behind light clouds, making the day much more enjoyable. In full sun, it might have been miserable. We saw most of the key buildings in Pompeii, including the House of the Faun, House of the Vetti, Forum, Eumachia Building, Temple of Jupiter, Stabian Baths, Amphitheater, Odeon, Temple of Isis, and more, before getting too foot-weary to see any more. The long, straight streets with slots for cart wheels and stepping stones for pedestrians in wet weather were interesting in their own right. The plaster casts of the citizens of Pompeii in their final resting poses after the eruption of Vesuvius were a moving sight.

We ate a basic picnic lunch on a bench while waiting for the train back to Naples. A half-hour train ride, followed by a short ride on the metro, brought us to the National Archaeological Museum of Naples. Here we saw most of the original frescoes and mosaics which had been removed from Pompeii. Despite the steep cost of entry, it was worth it—there were some dazzling pieces of art here in a great state of repair. The Battle of Alexander was a fantastic mosaic. There were also playful mosaics of dogs, snakes, octopi, and fish. The tiles used for the mosaics were very small. The frescoes from Pompeii were still brilliantly colored in blues and reds. We also toured the "Secret Room" where much of the erotic art from Pompeii is stored. Even if you don't typically like museums, most people would find this exhibit interesting!

In addition to all the great art from Pompeii, we also saw some famous Greek and Roman statues on the first floor of the museum. The "Farnese collection," as it's called, includes an amazing statue of the Farnese bull (3 AD) as well as statues of Hercules, Dorofo (a spear thrower), Athena, several Caesar statues, and Isis.

After about two hours in the museum, it was close to 3:30. You can imagine how footsore we were after touring Pompeii and then touring the Archeological Museum, but we still had one more thing on our list. We started our "Slice of Life" walk across Naples. Naples is a big city, full of speeding Vespas, gesticulating Italians, and the aroma of pizza. A favorite section of the walk was down a dark pedestrian avenue with university students and a host of colorful characters. We each bought a slice of pizza in Naples, the home of pizza, and ate it while sitting on a stoop. Robin's was all-cheese and ham (no tomato sauce at all), and mine was traditional margherita—tomato with

mozzarella. It made for a much-needed snack, along with a Coke to wash it down.

The highlight of our walk across Naples was a visit to San Severo church, where we saw the fantastic sculpture of Guiseppe Sammartino's "Veiled Christ." Christ lies on a soft pillow under an incredibly realistic veil. Another amazing statue called "Despair" (carved out of a single piece of marble by Francesco Queirolo) shows a man struggling out of an intricate marble rope net. The statue called "Chastity" seems like a misnomer as the woman poses coyly under her full-length marble veil. It was definitely worth the trek across Naples to see these statues alone.

The rest of the walk back was more hectic. Robin and I disagreed, sometimes vehemently, over directions and the best and quickest way to get back, but we made it to the pier on time, only to find a "traffic jam" of people trying to pass through security to get onto the ship. That left us all of 30 minutes to shower and get dressed for dinner. My black shoes were a disaster of dust from our tour of Pompeii—just getting them cleaned up enough to be presentable took 15 minutes.

After dinner, we went to a great marionette show that was like nothing we'd seen before. Two men maneuvered a wide variety of marionettes to different kinds of music. Of particular note was the little animal-like figure trying to get his leg up onto the table, the jazz band of ten marionettes all playing at once (followed by a drummer solo), the xylophone player who always hit the one high note right on cue, and the romantic gypsy violin player. The show was really fun and left us all in good spirits.

September 18 (Sun) – Day at Sea

Boy, did we ever need this rest day after the exhausting day in Naples and Pompeii. We didn't do much and we liked it that way. We slept in for the first time in a long time, had a late breakfast at the buffet, then enjoyed a full lunch with mom and dad in the formal dining area. Dad and I played a game of "Battle of the Sexes" while mom and Robin attended a wine tasting seminar. I took a very deep nap in the afternoon. After our first formal night dinner, we went to a Broadway-based show and saw Natalie singing for the first time. She did a great job singing "Memory" and "All That Jazz." Afterwards, all four of us listened to a duo playing dance music, but before too long we agreed to call it a night and headed to bed. We were tucked in by midnight.

September 19 (Mon) – Mykonos

Since we weren't scheduled to pull into port until noon, we got to sleep in again this morning. The ship actually arrived an hour early and we were able to disembark at 11 am. A short bus ride took us from the cruise pier to downtown Mykonos. All four of us toured Mykonos together; I pushed mom in the wheelchair through a maze of streets with shopping opportunities galore. We went at a slow pace, looking in shop windows, especially at jewelry. After several winding streets' worth of window-shopping, we were hungry for lunch. It was also blazingly hot and we needed a shady place to relax. We stopped at an outdoor café. Mom and dad each ordered a Greek salad, and Robin and I split a gyro plate—although in the end we all split the meal four ways. The half bottle of retsina (Greek white wine) made the meal complete. Just having all four of us together, sitting on a shady patio on a Greek island soaking up the atmosphere, was great fun.

We did a bit more window shopping after lunch and actually got far enough for mom and dad to have a view of the windmills on the hill—a famous sight on Mykonos—before turning back. We returned to the ship just in time for Robin and me to make our Delos tour at 2:30 pm. We boarded a ferry boat packed with people. Robin and I sat on a wooden bench, her resting against me, for the pleasant half-hour ride to the island of Delos, about 5 kilometers away from Mykonos. The boat's breeze kept us cool on an otherwise hot day. Once off the ferry, we needed sunscreen, sunglasses, and hats to survive the heat.

Thankfully, we had a very informative guide who made the excursion interesting. Compared to Pompeii, the ruins of Delos are more...um, ruined...but entire sections of the residential areas are more or less intact. The streets are still clearly outlined, many of them with sewers running underneath. The guide helped bring the place to life, telling us that the forum-like square on which we were standing used to be a huge slave market. This was once a very wealthy place—home to the cult of Apollo and center of the Delian League, which kept its treasury on Delos. When the Romans came to power, they declared Delos a free port (think "no taxes"), which made Delos even wealthier.

Because Delos was considered to be the birthplace of Apollo and thus holy ground, the priests passed a decree that no one could be born or die on the island. Pregnant women were quickly shipped off to neighboring islands as was anyone who became ill. We saw the mythical birthplace of Apollo at the base of a palm tree in what is now a dried lake bed, and the remains of the huge Temple of Apollo. Pirates left the temple and statues in a state of ruin.

We saw the famous marble lions of Delos—which in their current state of repair look more like barking seals. Robin sat in one of the "box seats" in the amphitheater and imagined all the important Greeks and Romans who must have sat in that same spot. There was an enormous cistern near the amphitheater with vaulted stone arches above it that served as the main water supply for the city. Since Delos has no fresh water sources, all the water collected in the cistern had to be trapped from rainfall. Our guide pointed out several private cisterns in the wealthier houses. It was interesting to see the "impluvium"—a sloped, typically mosaic floor—at the center of each courtyard which channeled rainwater into the private cistern. Occasionally the collapsed floor of a house would reveal the deep-dug cistern underneath.

It was hot enough that, after three hours, we were relieved to head back to the boat. The ferry took us directly to Mykonos town. We spent an hour or so strolling the maze of streets—designed to confuse pirates and allow ambushes. They certainly worked on us! We passed whitewashed houses and white churches with blue domes and finished our explorations at the windmill-lined hill in the Kastro area. We each had an expensive shot of ouzo at a bar in Little Venice with a balcony overlooking the windmills, a line of waterside taverns, and the ocean beyond. We couldn't resist ordering a lemon sugar crepe just after sunset. By the time we came back to the ship, we had missed the sit-down dinner with our parents, so we went to the pasta bar and the Ocean Bar buffet for dinner. Afterwards, Robin e-mailed her family and went to bed early. I decided to go to the late show of the "Four Elements" production and went up on deck for the sail-away party and fruit buffet at midnight.

September 20 (Tue) – Santorini

The cruise ship dropped anchor in a deep blue harbor just offshore of Fira, Santorini. All four of us tendered ashore around 9 am. Mom chose to use her cane instead of the wheelchair, which turned out to be a good decision since there were lots of stairs and cobblestones in Fira. Mom, dad, and Robin took the cable car to the top for 3 euro each. I paid the same amount to take a mule up a switchback stairway. It was such a long way up that I felt sorry for my mule by the end. The mule didn't go quite all the way to the top, so I climbed the last few sets of winding stairs and met Robin at the top. The four of us slowly made our way down several quaint streets with jewelry, knickknack, and clothing stores. Mom did a good job keeping up and was enjoying herself enough that she ventured into several stores on her own for a look around.

Robin and I did something we hardly ever do—we went on a shopping spree in Fira. By now, we knew for certain our bag with all our dress clothes would not be arriving. It was never sent from London to Rome despite the concierge's three urgent e-mails. Instead, it was sent back to our permanent address in Colorado! The concierge spoke with a British Airways representative who said it was clearly their fault and that we should buy what we needed and save all the receipts for reimbursement. We decided to make the most of it. The first clothing shop Robin visited had a snazzy black dress she liked straight off. Even though she kept looking in other stores, that was the one she ended up buying.

By noon it was getting blazing hot. We found a restaurant called "The Greeks" a block away from the cable car terminal with a shaded patio for lunch. The English owner recommended we start off with fried Saganaki cheese as an appetizer (delish!) and melitzanes imam (even more delish!—eggplant that melted in your mouth it was so tender). We also split a plate of six traditional Greek dishes—fava (hummus-like split peas), tomatokeftes (lightly battered fried tomatoes), caper leaves drizzled with olive oil (ohmigod!), fresh feta cheese, gorgozela (tomato and egg mix), and potato egg pie. What an excellent and memorable lunch with lots of new tastes! We split a half-bottle of Vendema white wine and Robin also had a Mythos beer (part of her continuing quest to have a beer in each country she visits). This was my favorite meal of the trip, and I'm glad we all got to spend it together.

Mom and dad headed back to the ship after lunch, taking Robin's new black dress with them. Almost immediately after seeing them off, we went into a shop right next to the cable car terminal and ended up buying white linen shirts, one for each of us. Robin also bought a matching linen skirt at another store down the street. Then we made our way to the buses near the center of town and caught the 1:35 pm bus to Oia (pronounced EE-ah). I wore my linen shirt by now as it was extremely hot. There were lots of Greek school kids on the bus, which added to the local charm of the experience. We traveled 30 minutes over winding, scenic roads to get to Oia. We sipped on a Coke as we strolled past numerous shops. Did I mention it was hot? We bopped in and out of stores "stealing" air conditioning whenever possible. I developed a love for a certain piece of porcelain pottery that happened to be located right in front of a powerful air conditioning unit at the back of one of the shops. I must have stood there admiring that blue piece of pottery for ten minutes.

Oia is very scenic with its jumble of whitewashed buildings and blue roofs. The posh cliffside town offers great views of the blue ocean, and some fantastic restaurants in which to sit and enjoy those views. The right way to "do" Oia would be to stay overnight so you could be in town at sunset to enjoy the cooler temperatures and ambience. At mid-afternoon, with the crowds and the heat, it was all too much, and we only lasted an hour before deciding to head back.

The bus brought us back to Fira. With less than an hour to go before we had to be back at the ship if we wanted to make dinner, we found a men's dress clothing store. I tried on a charcoal-gray suit that fit well and decided to buy it on the spot. I also bought two dress shirts and a tie. Robin, feeling like she was getting left behind, also bought a sexy top for herself. I accompanied the young shop attendant to a store a block away to get my suit pants hemmed on the spot for 5 euro. Total cost of the Bitsiani suit, two shirts, and a tie: 275 euro.

We were on a shopping high after all this fast-paced purchasing, and we both found ourselves thinking that Fira was wonderful as a result. We would have used our last euros to take the cable car down, but the line for the cable car went around the block. So instead, we walked down the mule path, a series of long switchbacks over cobbled steps that took us 15 minutes and left us perspiring. The cool cloths provided to us by Celebrity at the tender pier felt heavenly, as did the breeze once we got underway.

Back on the ship, we barely had ten minutes to get ready for dinner. We took ultra-quick showers and were only a few minutes late. All four of us had a delicious rack of lamb dinner. While we ate, mom told us that when she got back to the ship and went to ask for ice for her foot, the medic x-rayed it (for free) and ended up putting a walking cast on. It turned out she had a hairline fracture instead of just a sprain. So no more walking around on cobblestone streets with a cane! She felt like taking it easy that evening, so we wheeled her back to her room after dinner. The rest of us took in the evening show—a very good juggler (spinning plates; comedy routine with him as director and four participants from the audience; human-sized spinning cube). Afterwards, the three of us listened to some classical music near the atrium while Robin and I had a flight of three red wines. Dad served as our "counselor" as we told him of our sometimes contentious (and in retrospect humorous) walk across Naples. We were in bed by midnight.

September 21 (Wed) – Day at Sea

I went up for some breakfast and met dad by chance in the buffet area. Afterwards, we went to a morning trivia game. Anna from Portugal was the hostess. She kept looking over at our answer sheet and shaking her head no when we got the wrong answers. Our teammates were Joel and Marilyn, a nice couple from New York. We met up with mom and Robin and had lunch at noon in the dining room. The trout almandine was delicious. An older woman seated at our table turned out to be from Greenwich!

After lunch, we all played Battle of the Sexes trivia and had lots of fun. The men and women tied on this day. The men didn't know that a maillot was a one-piece bathing suit, and the women didn't know that DAT stood for digital audio tape.

I took a rest in the cabin that afternoon—my stomach was upset, so my day was pretty quiet. I worked on our journal and read Vince Flynn's *Memorial Day* until nearly 5 pm.

Robin put on her new black dress (very sexy) and accompanied mom to a Captain's Club cocktail party. Meanwhile, I headed to Deck 12 and sat in the Stratosphere Lounge looking out at the sun on the ocean. Then I came downstairs, showered, and got dressed in my new formal wear. Dinner was excellent—filet mignon for all except me. I had the coq au vin. Of course, I got plenty of filet mignon, too. The show that evening was rock n' roll based and a bit too loud for our taste.

September 22 (Thu) – Taormina, Sicily

Robin and I shared a quick breakfast before meeting in the Celebrity Theater for our 10 am tour, "Taormina on Your Own." It was raining when we left, but the weather improved during our hour-long bus ride. We arrived at 11 am, took an elevator up, then walked as a group to the Piazza Duomo at one end of Corso Umberto. From there we were on our own.

We strolled through the busy shops, had a gelato (pistachio/chocolate chip/crème caramel), then continued on to the Greek amphitheater. After paying our 6 euro each, we entered and enjoyed the beautiful views—which would have been even more spectacular if the top of Mount Etna hadn't been hidden by clouds. We strolled to the end of Corso Umberto, then turned around and started back.

We had a "granita" (a lemon-strawberry flavored slushy), then two small canolis with cream and a tasty pineapple-shaped marzipan. We still had lots of time, so we explored down a side street and stopped at an informal restaurant with a patio, basically in an alley, with umbrellas and an overhanging grape vine. We ordered two Vino Rossos di Etna and a bruschetta. The glasses of wine were very generous and the bruschetta tasty—warm crostini and cold tomatoes, onions, and olive oil. It started drizzling so we hid under our patio umbrella for awhile, then continued our walk once most of the rain had stopped. The sun came out and made everything extra-lovely. We made it most of the way back on Corso Umberto and stopped in a bar where Robin ordered a wine Marsala (a sweet wine liqueur like sherry). Then it was back to the main square to meet our group and a return trip on the bus. A very relaxing tour for a change, and we even had time for a nap before dinner!

September 23 (Fri) – Day at Sea

Robin went to the disembarkation talk in the morning. I decided to make this my "pool day." I found a cozy spot next to the bulkhead where it was less windy, with a view down to the pool from the deck above, and read my book. All four of us shared lunch in the dining room, then played the final game of Battle of the Sexes at 3:30. The women managed to win despite being behind. The men got stuck on questions about lip liner, selvage (sewing edging), and trousseau tea. Afterwards, Robin, mom, and I headed to Deck 11 aft and enjoyed a half carafe of red wine while looking out at the Mediterranean. I got more pool time in before dinner.

This was our last formal night. Robin wore her new black dress again, and I wore my new suit with a light beige shirt. Dinner was shrimp cocktail, Caesar salad, mushroom soup, lobster tail, and baked Alaska—fantastic. Then we went to the last Broadway-style show, which was Dance Around the World, probably the best dance show of the cruise. Because there was no quartet or other late-night musical entertainment on this cruise that we all enjoyed, we called it a night early.

September 24 (Sun) – Villefranche

The ship arrived at 7 am. Robin and I ate a leisurely breakfast up in the buffet area and took the tender to the pier after the first crowds had dissipated. Our morning and early afternoon in Villefranche were particularly wonderful, and Villefranche became one of our favorite spots of the trip. It's a quaint, quiet harbor town on the Cote d'Azur. Rick Steves got it right when he wrote, "Villefranche is a romantic's top Riviera choice. Come here for upscale, small-town Mediterranean atmosphere. Narrow cobbled streets tumble into a mellow waterfront."

We walked along the sea wall all the way to the edge of town, past numerous seaside cafes and restaurants. The enclosed bay was dotted with small fishing boats. Eventually we reached Villefranche's beach. We saw one woman bathing topless, which made it feel a bit more French, but otherwise everyone was clothed. We had a very pleasant stroll back toward town along the pebbly beach (very small pebbles—like getting a foot massage with each step). We cooled our feet in the brisk waters of the Mediterranean—our only direct contact with the sea on this trip—then sat on a stoop and let our feet dry before brushing the pebbles off.

We made a stop at tiny Chapel St. Pierre, one of the few "must-sees" in Villefranche. The inside is decorated by the artist Cocteau in a childlike and beautiful way, and on the outside it's painted an invitingly soft shade of yellow.

Next we walked into the heart of the 13th century medieval quarter with its picturesque, narrow streets, stone buildings, and tromp l'oeil style on the facades of the houses. Rue Poilu was one of our favorites. Eventually we found Rue Obscure, which we didn't like as much as we expected. The vaulted street was described in our guidebook as "mysterious" and "like an African casbah," but when we visited, it felt like we were walking through a deserted alley or subway tunnel, complete with graffiti. But everything else about the town we loved. We saw it pretty well, all the way up to the non-tourist area at the top (butcher shops, cheese shops, bakeries, lots of cars and Vespas). Then we headed the other direction, toward the fortress, through a garden area, and eventually to the new harbor bristling with yachts. We turned around and headed back along the seashore.

We still had about 1½ hours before our shore excursion to Monaco and Monte Carlo. It was noon, so we had lunch at a quaint café (Caffe dell'Arte) on the Rue Poilu. We had a memorably delicious lunch—a 50 cl bottle of red wine from Provence (enough for three small glasses each), a delicious bruschetta with thin ham and a round medallion of creamy goat's cheese on top drizzled with olive oil (amazing!), sardines with lemon (tasted like tuna), and the "main course," a Salad Nicoise, appropriate since we were only 5 km from Nice. Lovely!

With about ten minutes before the start of our excursion, we strolled back to the pier (only a block away). There we met my parents and took a van to the bus for our Monte Carlo excursion. Mom and dad sat in the front, and we sat next to them until we gave up our seats to an older couple and moved to the back. The drive to Monaco was scenic, along the Middle Corniche Road, with views down to Villefranche, Beaulieu, and other small Mediterranean seaside towns. We saw Eze from a distance.

At the Rock of Monaco, an ancient walled city overlooking the sea, we were escorted on foot through the Old Quarter. I pushed mom in the wheelchair up a steep incline, and we had to navigate a wearying series of stairs, escalators, and elevators before arriving at the Rock proper. We all gathered around the guide near Monaco's aquarium, but she was so soft-spoken it was hard to hear her. Just looking around, though, you could tell this place bled money. We saw a marina with million-dollar yachts below us, perfectly manicured gardens, policemen at every corner, and tightly packed multimillion dollar homes and apartments. A highlight of the tour was seeing Palace Square and the 19th century cathedral where Princess Grace and the prince of Monaco were married, and eventually buried.

Then it was back to the bus and on to Monte Carlo Casino. En route we drove along a portion of the Grand Prix Motor Race Circuit. Once again, we had a lot of difficult ground to cover (stairs, elevators, and escalators) and lots of crowds to deal with before we arrived at the casino. Security was tight. The inside of Monte Carlo was all gilt but antique feeling. It was quiet like a church and surprisingly subdued. A guard gestured for dad to remove his cap as if he were on hallowed ground. There was no slot machine noise, and the gaming tables were mostly patronized by small groups of well-dressed men. The inside of the casino was much smaller than we had imagined. There were only three rooms—one for slots, one for blackjack, and one for other gaming tables. We watched a few hands of blackjack being played for minimum 100 euro stakes, then tired of it and spent the rest of the time sitting on a bench near the entrance, waiting for the hour to pass. There was a female attendant in the male restroom, which took some getting used to. The overall feel of the place was snooty, and not really Robins' or my cup of tea. The outside of the casino was actually more interesting to me than the inside, what with the sleek Corvettes and Ferraris parked outside.

We were nearly 45 minutes late getting back to the ship and almost missed our dinner in the main dining room. We showed up very late, but Andre and Marius were very gracious about it. We were all ravenous after such a busy day. Dad and I went alone to the show that evening (a violinist we had heard once before), while Robin and mom enjoyed a relaxing evening in their rooms.

September 25 (Sun) – Genoa/Cinque Terre

We got up at the crack of dawn in hopes of getting to Cinque Terre and back before the ship departed at 5 pm. We were the first people off the ship at 7 am. We walked to the Principe train station in Naples along a highway underpass. We made good time, bought our tickets for Cinque Terre (very reasonable), and boarded the train at 8:15 am. The ride, which should have taken 1½ hours, actually took two. We passed many quaint seaside towns along the way like Camogli, Santa Margherita, and Chiavari (a lot of Italian hikers got off at Chiavari, sparking our interest).

We arrived at the southernmost of the Cinque Terre towns, Riomaggiore, around 10:20. From the moment we got off the train, this place was a zoo. The Via dell'Amore (Lover's Lane)—a level walk along a paved cliffside path with lovely views out to the ocean—was so choked with Italian and foreign tourists that it was all but impossible to enjoy the scenery. All sense of a small town was lost. We literally walked in line behind an endless row of tourists, laughing at the absurdity of it.

After about twenty minutes, we arrived in Manarola. The crowds diminished somewhat, but we felt so pressured for time that we barely stopped to see this town before pressing on. The hike to Corniglia was pleasant, with beautiful views and the sound of the sea finally audible now that the crowds were less. There were still plenty of people by normal hiking standards, but it wasn't laughable like before.

We arrived at the train station for Corniglia, which is separate from the town itself. We had a decision to make because of limited time and less than perfect knowledge of the train schedules. We decided to take the train to Vernazza instead of doing the 1½ hour hike there. Unfortunately we missed seeing Corniglia itself, a quieter-looking town on top of a hill that I think we would have enjoyed.

In Vernazza, the crowds were back in full force. There were just too many people to really enjoy the experience. We did see the tiny main square of Vernazza along the seashore, and there was no denying it was quaint and lovely in a ramshackle way. We heard the bells chiming noon, strolled out to the edge of the jetty, and snapped some pictures of the multi-colored buildings. We were surprised to see a Celebrity Galaxy tour guide in Vernazza—it turns out she was leading a private tour.

We flirted with the idea of eating at one of the restaurants along the pier, but in the end we looked for a quieter restaurant further in town. This was a mistake—we ended up eating at a small pizzeria next to a parking lot at the far end of town. Not quite the romantic setting we had in mind. We ordered a single piece of bruschetta, enough to keep us going. We agreed to throw in the towel and take the next train back to Genoa. We were just too stressed about missing our cruise ship to take the risk of staying longer, especially since the trains in Italy weren't always reliable.

We arrived at Genoa's Brignole station at 3:30, but there was a hitch—the train didn't go on to Principe station as scheduled (we never learned why). We had to switch trains and wait nearly a half hour before covering the short distance to Principe station. We met another couple from the ship who were also touring on their own, and together we made our way back to the ship. It felt good to get back on board in time. In fact, I had an hour or so to enjoy the sunshine near the pool. This was very pleasant, and it was still warm enough to go for my one and only swim in the (salt) pool. Robin played "pool girl" and served me a Coke.

I joined Robin in the room and spent twenty minutes packing after getting dressed for dinner. This was our last dinner on board—thick veal chop for Robin, seafood brioche for me, turkey with all the trimmings for mom and dad. The last show was a double-header, with our friend Natalie singing on stage—she did a great job singing an Italian aria, Porgy and Bess, and some blues numbers—followed by the violinist from the night before. We said our goodbyes to mom and dad and spent the rest of the evening packing, getting to bed around 11 pm.

September 26 (Mon) – Rome

We awoke at 6:15 am and had an early morning breakfast at the buffet. We ate a lot since this was our last free meal on board—eggs and bacon, corned beef hash, yogurt, hard-boiled egg, melon, OJ, coffee. We happened to run into dad one more time for a brief goodbye up in the buffet area.

Mom and dad took the shuttle straight to the airport since this seemed easiest with mom's limited mobility. We disembarked at 7:30 am and took a free shuttle to the edge of the port, then walked for ten minutes along the ocean to the train station in Civitavecchia. The train only cost 10 euro for the two of us. Getting back to Hotel Sileo was a breeze—having been through Termini before, it was all very easy and the hotel felt like home. We put our bags in our room, took a brief nap, and headed out around 11 am.

We stopped for pizza at a nearby takeout place—cheese with sausage and green olives, and margherita with lots of tomatoes. Then we headed by subway to Vatican City. We arrived at 12:30 and were astonished at the long line snaking around three sides of the Vatican Museum. But we got into line anyway, determined to see the Sistine Chapel at all costs. I went off to get us a gelato, and by the time I returned, I was surprised to find Robin very far forward. The line moved very quickly. After forty-five minutes, we were at the entrance, paying 12 euro each to get in.

We started our tour of the Vatican Museum with the Pinacoteca art gallery. We passed an incredible number of ancient Madonna and medieval religious paintings including a Giotto triptych, then came to a single dark room that contained three Raphael paintings, including "Transfiguration." Other rooms contained Leonardo's unfinished "St. Jerome" and Caravaggio's "Deposition from the Cross," which we particularly liked for its emotion and realistic faces.

We began a one-way tour through the rest of the museum on the way to the Sistine Chapel, at the far end. This tour took us past the Pigna (Pinecone) Courtyard, through the Egypt exhibit, and past numerous Greek and Roman statues—including the famous Laocoon Group (Laocoon and his sons in the grips of a sea snake). We saw two porphyry sarcophagi with incredibly detailed, almost three-dimensional bas reliefs of horses and humans. We passed through whole rooms devoted to tapestries and numerous other works of art before eventually coming to Raphael's stanzas. The Stanza della Signatura contained his "School of Athens," newly restored. We spent a long time gazing at it. This was a painting we both knew, and it was one of our favorite works in the museum. Comparing it to the works of his pupils in the room next door, you realized how much more detailed, accomplished, and colorful Raphael's were.

Then it was on to the Sistine Chapel. There's nothing like taking this all in at once, as a single masterful work of art—something you can't do very easily from a picture in a book. We craned our necks upwards, staring at the ceiling, marveling at the beautiful colors Michelangelo had used. Robin particularly liked the image of Jonah. I liked the obvious—God touching Adam's hand and bringing him to life. No photos were allowed, but we used our binoculars to see the ceiling details. One of my sharpest memories of the experience is the guards going "shhh" to keep the crowd hushed. The room was literally packed with people, all staring upwards. After a long wait, we found seats on benches along the side wall and drank in this masterwork, knowing it might be the only time we saw it in person.

We exited the museum through the "tours only" exit that took us straight to St. Peter's (a useful tip from Rick Steves). We were both tired after having spent three hours in the Vatican Museum, but we simply had to see St. Peter's Cathedral. It was so huge inside that it left me feeling small. Imagine being a peasant from a small hill town and walking into St.

Peter's for the first time! You couldn't help being impressed by the size, but that same vastness left me feeling a bit empty. Michelangelo's sunlit dome was beautiful. We also got to see his "Pieta" (behind bulletproof glass). This has always been one of my favorite Michelangelo statues and I only regretted I couldn't circle around it and get a closer look. We joined a line of people in rubbing St. Peter's toe, burnished to a fine sheen (this statue predates the church itself, having stood in the smaller church that was here before it). We saw the bronze canopy and the candlelit area below which St. Peter is said to be buried. Then we headed out of the cathedral and found the entrance to the crypt, where we stood in line to pay our respects to Pope John Paul II. Afterwards, we stood on beautiful St. Peter's Square, in the shadow of the obelisk, for a final look at the cathedral and the Pope's quarters.

On the way to the metro station, we stopped in a store and bought a nice Italian tie to go with my suit. We made a good decision then and headed back to our room for a much needed rest. It was 5 pm and the subway was packed. "Sardines in a can" is an apt description. We napped for an hour, then regrouped and went to dinner at a restaurant right across the street from our hotel, called Ristorante Donati. We had a lovely dinner out on the patio. Half carafe of wine and a mixed appetizer plate with salami, prosciutto, black and green olives, artichoke hearts, and zucchini. Robin had very thin-pounded veal with a tasty Marsala sauce. I had pasta arrabbiata with lots of garlic. We finished off with crème caramel for dessert, nearly as good as John's.

After a very satisfying last dinner in Italy on a balmy evening, we took the metro to Spagna stop and walked to the Spanish Steps. A large crowd of Italian teenagers sat on the steps quietly enjoying the evening—eating gelatos, drinking wine, even opening a bottle of champagne. We strolled down Via Condotti; the shops were all closed but we window-shopped past many designer stores. We continued to Trevi Fountain, the last on our list of must-sees in Rome (for this trip anyway). I bought a gelato with some of our last euros—death-by-chocolate on top with refreshing strawberry underneath. We sat on the steps and enjoyed the scene. Quite the crowd had gathered at the Trevi. Lots of people were throwing in coins and taking pictures (we did, too). Hawkers sold roses and Polaroid pictures.

Since the closest subway stop was closed at that hour, we walked to our hotel. We passed the Fountain of Triton and Piazza Repubblica on the way, and got home before 11 pm.

September 27 (Tue) – Rome to Denver

We awoke at 7:30, paid our 62 euro for the room in cash—leaving us with a grand total of 1.45 euro—took the train from Termini to the airport, and used our Visa to buy a croissant with crème and jam, a slice of apple strudel, a banana, and a Coke. We spent the last 1.45 euro on a small bag of "Crik Croc" chips. The flights went smoothly. I happened to look out my window at one point, expecting to see ocean, and saw white-capped mountains leading down to the ocean instead! It turned out we were passing over Greenland. Cool!

We arrived in Denver on time, around 6:30 pm local time (2:30 am internally). Our long-lost luggage was waiting for us at the Denver airport—hooray! We were home by 9:15 pm and in bed by 11:00 pm (7 am internally). Of course we were totally exhausted by that point and slept like the dead.