

Roadtrip Italia



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Summer 2006
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7/20/2006 Paris - Nancy

11:30.

3 suitcases, a bag full of books, another full of food, my backpack, and a few other minor things packed into our rented *beige argent* Renault Mégane and we're off, blasting the AC at a fresh 19°C. At around 6pm, we're in Nancy, and finding the Hotel Americain, we're comfortably settled. Nancy is a fabulously beautiful town, *une ville élégante*, apparently one of the cleanest in France. The *Place Stanislas*, named for the ex-Polish king whose daughter Marie married Louis XV, giving him the role of Duc de Lorraine, is considered the most beautiful royal square in Europe. The old town is full of history, with buildings dating back to the 14th century.

Hotel Americain €63

7/21 Nancy - Luzerne

We leave for Aarau, Switzerland. We change plans and go forth to Luzerne, where we stay at Hotel Alpina, in the city centre. The lake's close by, but we leave visiting the famous Chapel Bridge until morning, for we are exhausted. It's nice to be in Switzerland, for the Swiss are fiercely patriotic, with even the most remote mountaintop chalet proudly showing the tell-tale square red flag.

Hotel Alpina 180 Sfr w. bf

7/22 Luzerne - Milano (Milan)

10-ish.

A brief stop at the bridge, rebuilt in eight months after a destructive fire in 1993. I penned the following while I was there:

With a backdrop to Luzerne's famous wooden bridge and the swans basking comfortably in the morning sun that washes the clear lake such that it shimmers turquoise and blue, I hear the Swiss-German that dances around the market as it fills up with the crowd eager to procure fresh goods.

Later, the highway comes to a standstill as patrols control the flow of traffic with signals. Fearing that our car's engine would overheat, we rested for a bit on the sidepaths, coming across by chance a route that led to a passage up a mountain and over the San Gotthard tunnel we were waiting so long to pass. On the way we stopped at a panorama point that offered a breathtaking view into the valley below. The tap water for washing our hands was truly glacial.

Our stop that night was in a rather luxurious hotel that, very ironically, we stopped at last in our search of at least ten different (and excessively expensive) hotels for a place to stay. A Robbie Williams concert nearby had caused such an influx of fans into Milan that most hotels were fully booked. That night's rest was one of amazing luxury.

Hotel Atlantic €150 w. bf

7/23 Milano (Milan) - Verona

10-ish.

After a brief visit to Milan's Castello Sforzesco, we headed east to Verona. Our rented Renault, with a mere 1899km on its dials, gets a flat tire right outside a pay toll, and we replace it in the inhospitable heat. We assume it's due to the heat and excessive wear; I'm still rather wary. Arriving at Verona in the early afternoon afforded me to take a bit of a tour around town. The crowds were many, but I nonetheless did get to see Juliet Capulet's residence, with the famous balcony and two walls in the entrance covered with declarations of love between couples. The Arena, under renovation in certain parts, is still an imposing structure in the middle of town. I also got to go to Saint Peter the Martyr's church, with frescoes dating from the fourteenth century still visible on the pale walls. Pizza and spaghetti to wrap up the evening made for a splendid dinner, with accordions playing in the background.

Hotel Cavour €136

7/24 Verona - Venezia (Venice) - Ferrara

7-ish.

Savagely awoken by a group of people talking loudly (the doors are thin) in the lobby, we decide to take advantage of it and leave early, visiting the Castelvecchio and Juliet's grave on the way out of town. We're headed to Venice, and I'm excited, for it's the one place I've always wanted to go to. Arriving at around 10:30 we hop on a ferry, upon which I penned the following:

Standing precariously close to the waves that rise next to me on the ferry Fusina 2000, I see the first glimpses of Venice as the smell of the Adriatic washes over, the odour of sweet amaretto biscuits. Three wooden posts tied together serve as guides on either side of the invisible 'road' that the boat follows, like a skier's slalom path or a plane's landing lights. A lone seagull stands upon post #60, another on #62, #64, #65, and #66, as though contemplating the passage of a group of human beings on a small boat.

Up ahead, to the left, three large cruise ships wait in port, their upper-most cabins much higher than Venice's tallest spires.

The water gets choppier as we slow down, a myriad of ships, big and small, speed boats and lugboats, carrying passengers and cars alike as we enter the Canale de Giudecca.

*This is what I'd imagined Lyra's world (from *The Golden Compass*) among the gypsies would be, though it's my first time here.*

After visiting the pigeon-filled and crowded, yet splendidly elegant Piazza San Marco and taking a glimpse at the gondolas on the canals, we took the ferry back and drove towards Ferrara, to the south. It's what they call the City of the Renaissance, and rightly so, as I later will discover. Apparently the entire city and the delta upon which it is located is considered a UNESCO World Heritage site. We come across a simple yet adequately supplied hotel, and take up camp there.

Hotel San Paolo €80

7/25 Ferrara

A nice breakfast at a cafe started off the day on a good footing as I visited with the *Palazzo dei Diamanti*, so called because of the more than 8000 pyramid-shaped stones on its outer walls, and the *Castello Estense*, which dates from the 14th century and is apparently one of the few castles in Europe that still has water in its moat. A visit to the *Cattedrale di Ferrara* of Saint George the Martyr, a 12th-century monument, also afforded an awe-inspiring view of the ceiling and the delicately arranged designs on the walls. It's churches like these that make a person truly feel small. After a hefty lunch and a brief rest I borrow a bike and ride northwards towards the brick and stone walls that still stand, forming a semi-circle around the city like it did ages past. On the way I stop at the *Basilica di Santa Maria in Vado*, another amazing church that leads me to the conclusion that belief is a very powerful source of creation, inspiration, and sustenance. I get slightly lost in the one-way roads of the city, and finally resort to barelling down the wrong way down a one way road, then following other bicycling Ferrareneses to the city centre.

Dinner was at the place we had yesterday's dinner and today's lunch at - Pizzeria Woodpecker - and the person we assume to be the owner does us such a service that we feel compelled to tip rather generously. Graciously, he refuses, but we

come out of the restaurant not only filled and satisfied (Limoncello aside) but also realising the true generosity and kindness of some here in this beautifully untouched city.

Hotel San Paolo €80

7/26 Ferrara - Ravenna

9-ish.

We leave the comfort of our hotel and head south towards Ravenna in hopes of visiting a city much like Ferrara, but Ravenna proves to be a bit different. The city, though comparable to Ferrara in population size, has its centre spread out over a wider area, so accessing each monument is difficult, and though a lot of the city is on UNESCO's World Heritage List, the evidence of it on the streets is scarce. I do spend the afternoon walking through, including the duomo. The hotel is rather spare in its amenities, so we cut short what was to be three days here to a single night. The dinner at Trattoria Rustichello is blissfully homemade, pure and unadulterated Italian capelletti and tagliettes.

Hotel Ravenna €98

7/27 Ravenna - Ancona - Perugia

7-ish.

It's amazingly hot so we decide to wake up early (we = my parents) and leave town. Our plan is to go to the seaside port town of Ancona, the place where cruise lines depart for Croatia and Greece, according to our now entirely unreliable *Guide Vert* from Michelin (we had reserved the prior evening's stay via the guidebook). Not finding any hotels in the areas we were most interested in, we decide to change plans and move ahead to Perugia, a hundred kilometers or so inland (I silently lamented the loss of opportunity in going to the beach on the Adriatic, but I'm hoping there wasn't much to regret). Arriving in Perugia in the early afternoon, we come across a fairly reasonably priced four-star hotel and are convinced enough of its *qualité de prix* that we decide that it's worth staying a few more days. I stroll the streets in the evening, scouting for good restaurants and interesting monuments. The evening's meal, at a place I had found, was simple, adequate, yet very good.

Sangallo Palace Hotel €110 w. bf

7/28 Perugia

The morning was spent visiting various monuments and going through the narrow alleyways of Perugia's *centro storico*. In a rather curious mix of modern technology and the relics of the past, one can reach the hilly historical centre by a series of escalators, four in number and climbing into a passageway carved by an ancient fortress. A tune accompanies visitors over a PA system.

Sights to see include the *Palazzo dei Priori* (13th century) and the Duomo/Cattedrale di San Lorenzo (14th century), though parts of the cathedral are under repairs right now. There's also the *Fontana Maggiore* (1277-78), which stands rather inconspicuously between the two imposing previously-mentioned monuments. Just strolling through the streets is amazing, and some structures, old as they are, seem to be barely capable of standing upright were it not for supports and curious metal bars that extend outwards through the exterior walls and keep the building from collapsing. A quiet afternoon preceded by a quick swim at the hotel's deserted swimming pool and a reasonable evening dinner made for a nice Friday.

All the while war is raging in the Middle East, what the news media craftily and somewhat hesitantly calls the "Middle East crisis", just short of the dangerously loaded word, "war". But if senseless politicians are sending armies to kill others, including innocent civilians, I find it hard not to call it a war. It's also interesting to note that the two major news network, BBC and CNN each take different stands on how they report the conflict. CNN is very subtly supportive of the American government (and with good reason), preferring to broadcast it from the perspective of the Israelis. BBC, on the other hand, takes a more or less balanced view, taking care also to report the suffering that the Lebanese must bear in the conflict. My respect for CNN hasn't been significant in the past, but it's diminished further in recent times.

Sangallo Palace Hotel €110 w. bf

7/29 Perugia - Assisi - Perugia

9:00.

We headed off to Saint Francis' home town, Assisi (from which you hear Saint Francis *of Assisi*). The hilly town some 20 kilometres from Perugia is the pilgrim's stop for the patron saint of Italy, whose remains are interred in the lower basilica. According to an audio-visual guide my dad and I listened to, the double basilica (one constructed on top of the other) was built in merely two years, from 1228-1230, for "practical purposes", probably because of Saint Francis' death two

years prior. The frescoes adorning all walls and the ceilings are amazingly well-maintained, and also bear witness to the splendor and artistic genius of Giotto, the "Master of St. Francis", who evokes in simple colors but with vivid images St. Francis' life.

Later in the evening, after a fulfilling dinner at the restaurant I had found, we came across a group of performers wearing traditional clothing selling Russian-esque wooden dolls and other interesting items in front of a large stage at the town square (near the *Fontana Maggiore*) as though they were getting things ready for a show they were going to put up. Seeing rows of plastic chairs already filling up with people, we thought it might be worthwhile to sit down and wait.

The show, from the moment it started, had me blown away to bits and smithereens. The performers were from the Russian city of Dom, and they gave a splendid rendition of Cossack dancing. With beautiful dress after beautiful dress, the women, about ten in all, twirled about like ballerinas, and the men, coming onstage with Cossack uniforms or other traditional clothes, made stunning and impossible moves to accompany the music.

The surprise came midway through the first half of the performance, when a man dressed rather simply in a suit appeared onstage and said a few words in broken Italian as though he were some MC welcoming the troupe. To the surprise of no doubt many gathering around (there must've been at least 150 people now in the square), he began singing arias in tenor like no other. He had a lot of people applauding just a few seconds into his singing, and to call it impressive would be an understatement in its greatest degree. It was a highlight of high quality.

7/30 Perugia - Passignano - Montepulciano - Siena

9-ish.

With it being a Sunday, we thought it might be wise to dedicate to the day to travelling. Bidding farewell to Perugia we headed west, to the Trasimeno lake, where we stopped for a bit, admiring the blue-green colors reflecting the clear, cloudless sky. The vastness of the lake would have had me thinking it was an ocean if I hadn't known more about where we were.

Off towards Siena, but we spot Montepulciano on the map and take a 20-some kilometer detour that brings us to the vineyards of the pretty famous, relatively cheap wine. The fact it was Sunday did not seem to deter stores from proudly displaying the wine bottles from their respective estates. A brief stop, and back to our Renault.

Once at Siena, we have considerable difficulty both finding a hotel and getting to the city centre, in large part because the best-located hotels were located within the historic city's walls. We settled for a bed and breakfast a small distance from the town. I walk to town for a bit of a brief tour and then rest for the night.

Podere Le Vigne €90

7/31 Siena - San Gimignano - Piombino

8-ish.

A quick breakfast and off we go again, though I can't help but feel disappointed in leaving such a picturesque town so early, without having done sufficient justice to the Duomo and the Piazza del Campo. We decide that a detour to San Gimignano is worthwhile (for the wine, and as I would later find out, its numerous stone towers) and stop there for a morning's tour before the hoard of tourists arrive. A snapshot of town, a glimpse of the breathtaking panorama of the valley that extends below us, and then we're off again. As we roll along the narrow and curved paths that will lead us eventually to the western coast, I can't help but notice the number of cars with Dutch license plates. I envisaged a sort of mass exodus, for I counted at least 30 vehicles with the distinctive yellow front plates.

Upon our arrival at the port city of Piombino, we find a well-situated hotel that sets us back a hefty sum, but given the fact that we all sleep best with a cool temperature, we decided it would be worth it.

Hotel Centrale €120

8/1 Piombino

I have realized that Italians, like the French, aren't very big breakfast-eaters. After that and a trip to the port to find out about prices of the ferry that would take us to the Isle of Elba tomorrow (about €50 each way for three and an average-sized car), we headed into town for a walk and a bit of shopping before having lunch at the seaside. I took a bit of a dip in the beautifully crystal clear ocean after lunch, enjoying the sunshine and the warm upper surface of the sea. It was a bit lonesome considering that my parents weren't going to join in the blissfully fun, but I guess that's that.

Hotel Centrale €120

8/2 Piombino - Portoferraio - Lido di Capoliveri

Taking the 9:30 *Toremar* ferry line out of Piombino, filled to capacity, I relished every moment of the hour-long trip. It was the first time I'd been on a car that drove into a boat, so the whole experience was enthralling. The sun shone ever brightly in the sky, rendering the ocean, even at its darkest, deepest depths, a sort of comfortably acceptable navy color.

I can never stop being fascinated by the sea, from the waves that create white creamy foam that seems to skim the surface of the ocean like glass marbles on a polished floor to the seagulls drifting peacefully on the waves, watching us as we steam by in the mammoth of a sea-faring machine.

From Portoferraio we headed south towards Capoliveri, stopping a slight distance before to arrive at our hotel. Located at *Lido di Capoliveri*, it offers 'villas/residences' located just about 10 minutes from the beach, at relatively reasonable (for the season on this island) prices. We had lunch by the beach and I went for a small dip, before spending a quiet afternoon. With half-board, a hearty dinner was served at the hotel.

I've observed that there are an extraordinary amount of cars that have Dutch license plates, and it all seems like a massive exodus is taking place at a place so distant and foreign.

Residence Villa Giulia €187.5 half-board

8/3 Lido di Capoliveri

With clouds in sight and an overall gray, spottedly rainy atmosphere, we drove around the island in search of pockets of sunlight and beautiful (if not darkened) beaches and for hotels to stay in, for we had planned to stay on the island through the weekend, and our hotel was fully booked for Sunday. We rested a bit on the north end at Scaglieri, which lies next to Biodola, which we had picked because we had previously purchased a postcard with a picture of it. Quite naturally, whatwith the weather and the fact that places don't quite look like the postcards that have them on the front, the beach and the ocean looked rather forlorn and disappointing.

I don't recall when this almost ritualistic hobby of mine started, but I began collecting postcards and, since they fit perfectly well, I would slide them into photo albums. The postcards would not have any writing on them, and they would be bought on their artistic/phone/event-based merit. Cheaper and easier than taking photographs, postcards provide a lasting memorable souvenir to keep and are fun

to go looking for, especially on car trips where stops and visits to various places are often frequent and brief.

The hotels we came across were all rather expensive or fully booked, so we changed plans later in the evening, deciding instead to leave the island on Saturday. The ferry fares fluctuate wildly depending on demand, and though we were told that ferry trips on Friday, Saturday and Sunday would be exorbitantly expensive (i.e twice a one-way trip on any other day of the week) we calculated it still would be cheaper to go ahead rather than spend another night on the island.

I lament our change of plans, and feeling slightly guilty for not having taken full advantage of the previous day's sun, go off to the beach in front of our hotel and go for a swim, despite the clouds.

Residence Villa Giulia €187.5 half-board

8/4 Lido di Capoliveri

Much to my relief, the day dawned bright and sunny, and we head down to the beach shortly after breakfast. Feeling the need to have *some* evidence of having been on a beach, however briefly, I sit down on a deck chair with Sartre in full sunlight, while my parenting relish the comfort of the shade. Little would I realize then how fast one can literally *burn* in the sun. Lunch, a few snapshots, and I come up with another wacky idea (must've been the pizza): to walk to the five kilometers to Capoliveri, a larger hilltop town we had passed by the day before yesterday without much appreciation. Setting out at 14:30, I arrive at Capoliveri at 16:00, following the paved roads. After noting that stores here only open from 17:00 (most Italian stores follow a divided schedule where they open in the morning, close for several hours after lunch, and reopen in the early evening hours; on the mainland most stores reopen at 16:00) I decided that rather than being bored sitting somewhere I'd visit Madonna della Grazie, a church nearby that was listed on the map. The winding roads take me out of my way for another 40 minutes, though the spectacular ocean view I had was worth it all (the church, beautiful and simple from the outside, was closed) and the additional 40 minutes to return to Capoliveri.

On the way back, I come across my dad walking in the opposite direction and we head back together to the hotel, the two lone travelers who dare risk their lives walking so near to Italian (and a few German ones too, thankfully) cars whizzing past us on the winding, narrow paths.

Residence Villa Giulia €187.5 half-board

8/5 Portoferraio

We had planned to return to land today partly because hotel prices increase significantly from this evening for the height of the tourist season, and partly because our hotel hadn't a space for us Sunday, and we thought that rather than pay more and have to move out tomorrow, we would do better to move to the mainland and start spending less. As misfortune would have it, the ferry line we had reserved for our return on Monday (we thought it wouldn't be as hard as it eventually turned out to be to find a hotel, and ferry lines are cheaper on weekdays) had *no* available spots for our return, despite the fact that we had arrived at the ticketing office at 10. We had to resort to changing our ticket to a departure tomorrow morning, and we spent a good hour searching for cheap hotels along the north coast. I never would've imagined it would be this hard to *leave* an island!

After some bargaining, we managed to find a hotel within Portoferraio, and settled there. I went for an afternoon swim and a brief walk around the historical center of the city. It's nice having access to a beautiful beach like the one at Capoliveri, but it's also nice to be able to walk around town for a change. There are lots of tourists here too, and I spotted an unbelievably exquisite cruise boat (not one of those large commercial lines) from London, with the name of *Lady Ann Magee*.

Crystal Hotel and Residence €160 w. bf

8/6 Portoferraio - Livorno - Pisa

Leaving the island at 10, we headed north, along the shoreline toward Livorno. Finding a rather desolate and emptied town (due in large part because it was Sunday and we had arrived in the afternoon, when most stores are closed), we left Livorno and moved to Pisa, where we figured we would be able to find a place to stay. we were rather fortunate in finding a reasonable place to stay, and took the opportunity of a beautiful afternoon to take a walk around town.

Hotel La Torre €90 w. bf

8/7 Pisa - Tofori

A brief visit around Pisa's most memorable monuments, including the leaning tower and the cathedral next to it (though the lines of tourists made going inside an impossibility) and then we headed to the estate of my father's colleague, Mr. B,

now retired but once a high-ranking WHO diplomat, a medical doctor and long ago an official of the Italian navy. His farm/estate, located on the hills of Tuscany near Lucca, remind one of the typically Italian atmosphere of beautiful trees covering equally exquisite hills with a breathtaking view of the countryside.

8/8 Tofori - Lucca - Tofori

Voices echo unintelligibly in the vastness of it's interior, and the sound of feet rearranging the gravel competes with the barking of a dog somewhere far away and the klaxon of a car as its owner drives hesitantly down the narrow gravel pathway.

I count five bug bites on my right arm, now a bumpy hill punctuated by mounds created by beasts underground like moles. Golden Bond is worth its weight in that precious metal, but I'm too lazy to get up.

A bit of Yann Tiersen (from the movie Amelie) adds atmosphere to the scene, but I turn it off in favour of the calm. Perhaps it's time for me to go back to the dusty and sandswept world of Joad and Jim Casy. Maybe turning on the fan would be nice.

Ah, but that would disturb the mood.

We visit Lucca, another time-capsuled city with ancient walls encircling the centre. Many churches have strange towers that reach up into the sky, standing high against the blue sky.

8/9 Tofori - Firenze (Florence) - Prato

Leaving the comfort of the estate in the morning, we headed towards Firenze, arriving there just after 1. Given just about an hour to walk freely through the city and it's attractions, I went to the Ponte Vecchio, filled with jewel store after jewel store, the Duomo, with its green-black and white marble façade, and the Palazza Uffizi, with a long line of tourists snaking out the front door. I had pizza by the weight before heading back to the car.

From Firenze we headed to Prato, a quaint town whose hexagon-shaped city centre contained picturesque churches and palaces dating back to the 12th and 13th centuries, with even paintings by Donatello on the walls.

Hotel San Marco €80 w. bf

8/10 Prato - Parma

To my horror I discovered, when my father brought the car to the front of the hotel, that all four hubcaps of our wheels had been stolen, leaving behind the ugly black color of the wheel, unsightly with the shiny frame of the car it supported. We could do little but hope the insurance that came with the car's rental would cover the cost of replacing them. We briefly covered ground in the city centre in our morning walk, and moved on before noon.

Our next stop would be Parma, famous for its ham and it's proximity to Regio, where Parmeggiano cheese is made and shipped out worldwide. A typical afternoon, where I spent time to walk through town before resting, then having a hearty dinner with pizza (Pizza Parmigiana, with ham and eggs) before setting down for the night.

Astoria Executive Hotel €100 + 10 (garage) w. bf

8/11 Parma - Genoa (Genova)

After a torturous 10-hour car drive, of which fully half was spent looking for hotels along the Italian Riviera, from La Spezia, using the via Aurelia mountain road winding from, to Genoa, following the coastline, we arrived in Genoa, exhausted and tired, and found a reasonable hotel in the city centre. Most hotels along the beaches were either fully booked or exorbitantly expensive, and I got tired of going into hotels and repeating the same question:

Chè una camera per tre persone per questa sera? Quanto costa? É aria condizionata?

(Do you have a room for three flr this evening? How much does it cost? Is it air conditioned?)

After about 15 hotels, it became slightly repetitive and tiresome. All in all a very tiring day.

Hotel Della Posta €87.5 (€175 for two nights) w. bf

8/12 Genoa (Genova)

A late morning as testament to our fatigue, we took our car (ticketed for parking in a handicapped-persons area, though we thought otherwise because the line on the pavement had been erased at the spot where we were) and headed northward to Arenzano, a picturesque oceanside town bustling with people despite the less than

ideal weather, which has cooled significantly in the past few days. Had foccacia pizzas for lunch, and headed back to Genova.

Walking around the area of our hotel was particularly interesting because of the immigrant population, making for an eclectic mix of people walking down the streets, though admittedly some sections were rather, pardon the term, 'sketchy'. Telephone centres were occupied with people eager to call home, and others clustered around stalls selling clothes, sunglasses or DVDs.

Dinner consisted of the most delicious, plump and juicy 'moules' *cozze alla genovese*, that I had ever had on this trip.

Hotel Della Posta €87.5 (€175 for two nights) w. bf

8/13 Genova - Torino (Turin)

Heading ever northward as we head back to Paris, we left Genova in the early morning and took the highway to Pavia, where at its outskirts lies Certosa di Pavia, a cluster of churches and monasteries known for its herbal concoctions. The church, in which we attended midday Mass, was beautifully carved out of marble, and the monastery was quiet and peaceful, where one can easily meditate on God's word.

After a brief nap we headed to Torino, where, without any intention, we stumbled upon the hotel we had stayed at twice before when visiting Torino, the *Dogana Vecchia*, where we were to learn that Mozart himself stayed for two weeks in January of 1771. I recognized the lady there (who apparently also remembered us).

Hotel Dogana Vecchia €120 w. bf + garage

8/14 Torino (Turin)

I had the opportunity to visit the Cathedral of Turin where, in a glass case 5 metres long and 1.6 wide (hidden from view with another magnificent piece of heavy cloth), the famous shroud of Turin, upon which is traced the shadow of a man that many believe to be that of Jesus. His features, including his face and hands are clearly visible on the photograph that is mounted on a display in the right sept of the church. It's amazing to have a tangible element of the Bible, kept securely and safe from harm for centuries, though I can't say anything certain about its origins and I dare say it shouldn't be considered 'proof' of His existence, because we needn't such devices to prove He existed.

I have visited many a church on this mega-car trip, but I have to say all are different in their own way, and yet all are similar in another different fashion. The upper tier includes notable and oft-visited monuments like that of Assisi, the Duomo of Florence or Turin, but one cannot omit visiting some of the lesser known ones. I particularly liked the church of St. Theresa, here in Turin, because of its warmth despite the dark, and because of the amazing architecture that allowed *cupolas* to be built on top of magnificently painted domes.

I also went to the crowded market at Piazza Republica, where I managed to procure a belt for my fire uniform at a ridiculously cheap price.

With tomorrow being the Italian national holiday, *ferragosto*, many stores were shut, and walking downtown was somewhat strange in that there were many people walking about but very little to do or visit.

Hotel Dogana Vecchia €120 w. bf + garage

8/15 Torin (Turin) - Chamonix - Martigny - Montreux

Leaving Turin, we headed towards France, putting behind us the Italian cuisine, the unbeatable fashion sense of passerbys, the delicious gelato, the unforgettable historic monuments and churches, the rolling hills and the beautiful ocean, the smooth Italian language...

Just after passing the Mont Blanc tunnel (at 11km long and costing €31.90 to pass, no doubt the costliest passage around) we stopped for lunch near a valleys edge. We saw paragliders descend from the skies near the mountaintops and observed, with morbid horror, a paraglider circle uncontrollably, let go of something, and descend rapidly towards the bottom of the valley and the city of Chamonix. The other paragliders were visibly concerned as they approached the flailing flier though with no success. I've tried to reassure myself that he or she arrived without injury as there was a hint of recuperation, but I can't be too certain. It was harrowing to watch and horrifying to not be able to do anything.

We arrived at the ski resort of Chamonix a little later and we had a bit of a break before deciding that we would be best to head on rather than spend the evening there.

We passed a giant propeller rotating slowly and heavily in the valley, a sign of wind power being experimented with. Its rotation was surprisingly intriguing.

The mountains are imposing, snowcaps covering the tips, and impressively magnificent.

We crossed the border into Switzerland and headed to Martigny, where we found little and thus decided to head towards Villeneuve, where the Chateau de Chillon, a Swiss postcard staple item. The hotels overlooking the lake Lemman were a bit too expensive so we followed through to Montreux, where we found a reasonable establishment. It is here where the Montreux Jazz Festival is held annual.

Hotel du Parc et Lac 180 SFr. (€180) w. bf

8/16 Montreux - La Vrigne - Besançon

It proved to be a *very* interesting morning. During breakfast we learned that the man in charge of the hotel was exceedingly rich, having met royalty and earned much by way of his wife. To assuage our initial doubts, he showed us a room that had antiques and treasures fit for a museum. An 18th century French clock worth at least a couple tens of thousands of dollars, rugs and carpets that could be exchanged for apartments, a painting by Raffaello (!), antique Italian tables, an exquisite vase apparently offered by an emperor... enough to blow a person to the moon and back. Though the man had many things to say and share with us (apparently he likes Japanese people very much), we had to make leave of him and head to France.

After Lausanne we stopped at La Vrigne, having lunch there before moving towards Besançon, the birth town of Victor Hugo.

Hotel du Nord €56

8/17 Besançon

Visiting the town's old town centre, the Citadelle, involved going up a steep hill to the east of town, and though the going wasn't easy, it offered a splendid view of the hills and town beyond. Another quiet afternoon and evening promised a good and restful.

Hotel du Nord €56

8/18 Besançon - Beaune - Avallon

Leaving Besançon, we headed deeper into Bourgogne country towards Beaune, but failing to find a suitable hotel and realising that the city was much too touristic for our liking, we had a brief lunch of sandwiches and Tex-Mex chicken wings and

took the car again on the narrower roads, driving just fast enough to appreciate the scenery and slow enough to annoy those other drivers keen on getting somewhere fast.

We stopped for a few moments at Saulieu, where the famous French chef Bernard Loiseau has his restaurant, a highly rated, expensive Michelin-rated place that, having lost a star from the Michelin raters, sufficiently despaired the cook that he took his own life. Apparently you need to make reservation months in advance even now to have a meal there.

Arriving at a quaint town by the name of Avallon, we promptly found a reasonable place and settled down, leaving in the evening for a nice dinner of Brittany cuisine.

Hotel Avallon Vauban €90

8/19 Avallon

With a gloomy and rainy morning, we had little choice but to visit a bit of the market at walk around, before buying takeaway lunch at a Chinese restaurant. I procured a firefighter magazine called *Soldats du Feu* to while the time away, but it proved unnecessary when the morning clouds gave way to a beautifully clear afternoon. A bit of an afternoon walk led me to a nice and empty park, and also the town's small stores, but there was very little that I could entertain myself with.

The evening, however, was a surprisingly entertaining one, since we were able to attend an outdoor concert of "Emile & Images" who were there for the evening. There singing was both catchy and rhythmic, and though the crowd was noticeably tepid towards the beginning, when other less-known people were singing, they were soon clapping and singing along, as though trying to ward off the uncomfortable cold that started to seep in towards the later part of the evening. We were finally treated, at the environs of 11pm, to fireworks that went on for a surprisingly long time, and it proved to be a wonderful culmination to a wonderful trip the likes of which I'm pretty sure won't happen for a while in my life (though I will make every effort to make a similar adventure a reality).

Hotel Avallon Vauban €90

8/20 Paris!

Lost: a hot water kettle.