



Italy: a poetic destination

One of my regrets in life has been that I have spent too much time away from Italy. After a fleeting visit during teenage years, it took a decade to arrange a revisit, then almost another two before I got back there again. It was not until third time lucky that I got hooked, invigorated to return ... again and again. This love for the place fostered a lust to write about it too.

We start with two poems from the same year; Italy as seen from very different vantage points: the hot summer streets of Todi rising from the plains of Umbria, and air-conditioned comfort aboard Eurostar, speeding its way to Perugia.

Hot Todi

Hot

*The heat rises and hangs
Above egg-frying hot stone paving,
Etched and laid on the angle.*

*Frontages packed four and five floors high,
Crowd in on the road down below.
Colours range through greys and blues,
Pinky-beige splashes and mustard-brown hues.*

***Locals and others climb the steep slope,
Engulfed by the smoldering street haze.
Siesta time lingers on metal steel shutters
And unadorned tables outside pizzerias.***

Todi

***Medieval jewel in the crown
A labyrinth of unoccupied streets,
Majestic in its Umbrian form.***

***Hilltop piazza spread under hot sun
To the steps of Christ's towering duomo.
Two cafes stay open for banter and trade
Hosting the hopeful entrapped by the shade.***

***Then slowly but surely,
With shutters unfolded and tables redressed,
This small country town crawls back into life.
As elegant people emerge once again
To reclaim these bare streets as their own.***

Umbria, Italy, June 2000

Hot Todi strives to reflect the heat of that day. Todi is in many ways similar to its medieval-centred, sister towns throughout Italy. I had come with family, parking below then walking the steep slope to its heart on the hill. It was early afternoon and the region was experiencing an unusually hot summer, so the climb tested our strengths ... and patience!

The centre was asleep; little disturbs the Italian siesta. Two cafes remained open at one end of the cobbled square, facing the famed cathedral. Even in extreme heat Italy's medieval ambience was absorbing. Around three o'clock shutters were thrown back, doors unbolted and waiters emerging to cover terraced tables in checks. Then people emerged to bring life to the piazza once again!

Train to Perugia

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| <i>1. Eurostar
Glides out;
Cuts the air
Like a knife.</i> | <i>2. Airline style
Soft seats,
Built-in trays
Sustaining life.</i> | <i>3. Tall black girl
Well formed,
Strolls on board.
Italian men stare.</i> | <i>4. Endless view.
Trees blur,
Across the plain
To Perugia.</i> |
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Italy, June 2000

Train to Perugia was quite a different experience, but Italian non-the-less. Normally we would travel on slow *stopper* trains, but this time, for the experience, we boarded *Eurostar*, for a short journey, as it speared its way across Europe, to Trieste. It was all smoothness and speed: like riding by air, with reclining seats and folding dinner trays. Trees and poles blurred as they passed the wide window view. In a vacuum, the train arrowed forward.

During this moment of comfort and silence, with momentum, I watched, intrigued as men's necks craned to catch a glimpse of a statuesque African lady, walking down the aisle. The knee-jerk reaction from an Italian male audience was illuminating ... and humorous.

Eine Kliene, Roccamusik

***They had come to hear the cream of Umbria play
In the cool of a summer's night:
An Italian elite here to hear such magical sounds
At the Rocca Albomoziana.***

***But first the issue of getting to the grand place.
As we wait for a bus by the gate,
Ferried through arches, up the long winding road
To the Rocca Albomoziana,***

***A procession, that may have frustrated the many,
Calmly accepted by this fair crowd.
The waiting, the banter, heightening the experience
Of the Rocca Albomoziana***

***Rich in colour, rich in sound, rich in atmosphere.
It all became largely evident
On entering the courtyard hall, under a starry sky,
At the Rocca Albomoziana.***

***Not just a musical event, but a historic affair
Within ancient walls and battlements
To enhance the timbre and tone of the notes,
In the Rocca Albomoziana.***

***In smaller tomb-like rooms, the rugged ochre stones
Reverberated to perfection
For crisp brass ensembles and tuneful string quartets,
At the Rocca Albomoziana.***

***Then came the finale, all but rocking the walls.
The baton flashing so high.
A melodious evening that finished far too soon,
Courtesy of the Rocca Albomoziana.***

Spoleto, Umbria, Italia. August 1999

The Rocca Albomoziana – the grand castle - way up on the hilltop, above the medieval town of Spoleto, in Umbria; its ochre ramparts lit with yellow beams in the dark. What an amazing venue for an orchestral concert! I waited with the throng at the entrance below: fashionistas, rich and famous, local dignitaries: all were there ... and me. There was a buzz in the air. An excitement to be a part of such a special night. I clambered aboard a commuter bus to join the party, as we wound our way up the driveway to the castle above.

On arrival the atmosphere inside the *Rocca* was building: orchestra tuning, seats filling, enthralled faces, Italian voices. The internal quadrangle was open to the night and a thousand stars looked down on the scene from a dark and cloudless sky. Then all were seated and hushed by the raised baton: a night of Mozart and Vivaldi was about to begin. Immediately the orchestra started, the wonder of the venue was evident, as the sounds of strings and wind echoed off the castle walls and floated to the night above.

But the real magic lay in what was to come. After the introduction, musicians divided into groups, to play in smaller rooms around the central square and within the castle walls. I found myself free to wander between adjoining chambers listening in one, to violin and cello, in another clarinet and oboe. This was an inspirational soiree for people of all ages. Towards the end we came back together again, as the orchestra joined its many parts into one whole, offering a rousing finale to the stars on high.

It was an atmosphere of close-knit family, as we wound back down to the castle gates. Animated talk in the Italian way: “*Weren’t the woodwinds fantastico?!:*” People sorry the night had come to an end and already planning for the one to come ... next summer!

Looking back

DAYS

***Three days and light years away
From the plain.
Looking back,
Through misty rain, to a shrouded Assisi.
It’s as if the world has turned full circle:
Tourists then,
Travellers now.
The rocca an invisible memory.
The day deemed local, for posterity.***

YEARS

***Spoleto now a scaffolded town.
Constant rain
On our track.
Across the viaduct to a younger past,
Expose those deep thoughts of mortality,
That question when,
And maybe how.
Perhaps it’s better not to qualify,
But just continue to watch, as years go by.***

Italy. 2004

Looking back compares days and years. We flashed past Assisi, where three days before - the first day of Spring - I had spent a relaxing hour in the afternoon sun, with my daughter Alice, lying on the grass outside the rocca. Now, three days later we were on a train heading South, in the teaming rain. That same day, still engulfed in rain, I mused on previous visits to Spoleto, some years before ... a town I knew so well.

Venice

*The body of my life has passed
Since last we met
On winter's day in January,
So many years ago.
You smile at my ageing frame,
As I marvel your resilience
Against the range of elements
That threaten your demise.*

*Your cobbled streets have seen the worst
And sometimes best,
Pass their hallowed sanctuary,
But murmur not a word.
How many more times can we meet
To partake of a dalliance?
For mine is just a mortal shell
Beside your weathered halls.*

Venice, January 2006

Out of the many poems I have written over the years, **Venice** is one of my favourites. It appears simplicity itself but manages to convey so much in just a few lines. Written almost two years after **Looking Back** (above), *Venice* continues along the somewhat morbid theme of mortality, this time commending the built environment for its longevity, but asking a rhetorical question regarding my own meagre expectations of life.

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The poems above give a small glimpse of my Italian experience. I wish I had written more. The most recent (and more frequent) visits began around the start of the new millennium and have covered a variety of places in the North. Some of my favourites include: **central Rome** (of course), **Umbria** (in and around the town of Spoleto), **Pisa** (the town, not the tower), **Lake Como** (Bellagio & Menaggio), **Bergamo**, **Padova** and **Venice**.

There is still a lot to see ... and perhaps many more poems to write!
