

Sienna short stops :

It reminds me of that legendary poem by Louis Shrieve Osborne.....About a fellow on a train from Bangor with only a few words changed to suit this purpose.

George Orwell also must have had simular thoughts in 1946 as it reminded him of "a faint vulgarity of language mixed up with a certain cultural pretentiousness" and this sums up the journey to Siena.

Riding down from Monterosso, on an eastbound train
After weeks of drinking, in the woods of Maine
Quite extensive whiskers, moustache as well
Sat an Ozzie fellow, tall and slim and swell.....(a little bit of licence)

Exit the Cinque Terre on a random decision to spend a quick two night cultural stopover in Siena means catching the morning train from Torino to Pisa as the start of a three train tight schedule journey.

A stern announcement of a 'retarded' train due to technical difficulties means synchronicity is turning into a minefield without a single sleeper passed. Il traino chokker with Cinque Terre trekkers ready to be dropped off in Riomaggiore providing space for the odd Gypsy luggage lifter to scramble aboard as the marble icing like hills of Carrara appear on the horizon.

The Pisa connecting train was revving on the tracks but luggage lunacy is thwarted by pulling baggage straight across the railway tracks. A quick trip to Empoli where turn around was to be twenty minutes but the lateness was heart palpitation pressure as a long race down the platform to catch a carriage full of holidaying school children.



Green countryside through Tuscan hills, pretty sidings and small agricultural villages accompanied by singing and chattering from macho boys and provocative girls soon filled any scenery gaps.

Siena Stazione is out of the town and initial enquiries suggested a bus stop right outside with departure every ten minutes that soon had us at the local Psychiatric hospital which after the days rush is almost prophetic. Back to the station to elicit opinions from at least five Italians, hoping two will agree for at least some conformity, to find out a bus does go every ten minutes but not necessarily to the main Campo.

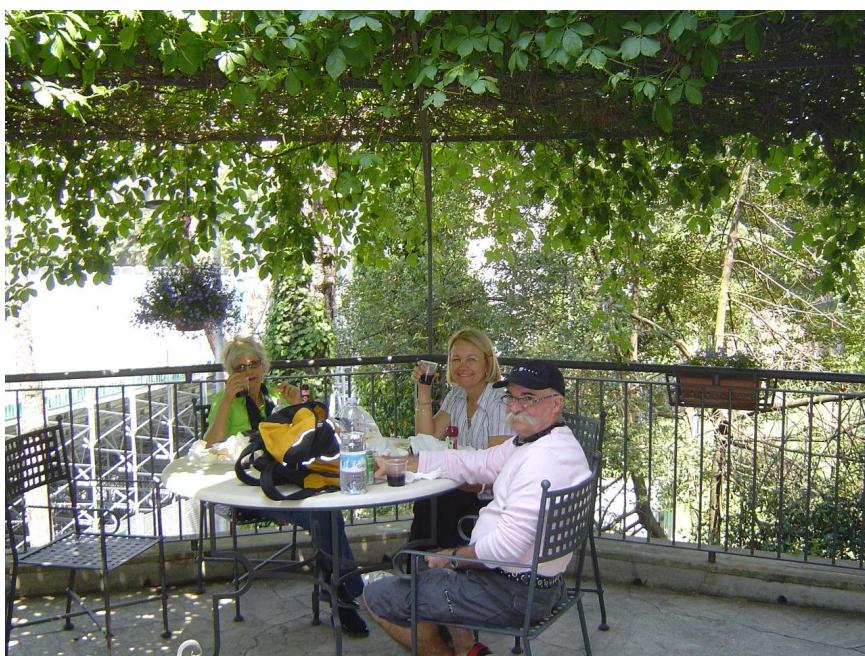
The need to regroup amidst the turmoil had us in a bar -gelato where cold hurry up Heinekens and dialogue with a cheery owner provided a phone and information that Siena is full. A quick trip to the Campo Palio Information Office reveals that Siena has a conference and space is a premium so back to the bar sanctuary to get as much local help as possible.

Help from a resident drunk with difficult translations in Italia pidgin via phone to the Hotel Minerva suggests space and the baggage is lugged for twenty minutes on the cobblestones. Allora. To the chagrin of all sweaty participants the portly house doorman advised the place is full and we do not have a booking.

Remonstrations and accusations of witchery....check the booking.....check the phone number..... finally brings forth a shrugging reply "But sir theeze booking iz Il Minerva in Chiusu in another town".

Not wishing to deal with any more alcoholically impaired folk yon Falstaff was pressed into ringing around to finally find us lodgings at the Chiusarelli Hotel. More tramping to the hotel an aging gem of yester year resplendent in white stone and leafy gardens brought forth an opening greeting of "Sir for you we have a special price of only E100 per night".

Did wish that the target had not been so conspicuously placed upon us.



The town was stalked and reconnoitred in the late afternoon so that orientation for a full day's touristing will at least have a semblance of structure and the food guides suggested eating in the streets off the main Campo precincts. A simple Osteria S'Martino at 25 Via Del Porrione, without coperto and service charges, had a busy but laid back air that felt easy upon the soul.

The traditional bread soup, riboletta Pici ,was a thick steaming bean mud pool soon followed by two primi pastas ,a noodle ragu and penne alla bosccaiola plus the red and white house wine. Relaxing and talking to like tourists had us recommending the meal which was soon taken up by passing folk per the new ambassadors of taste.

The Casa bianco and Rossi was excellent quality as no doubt bottling of the highest concentration of DOC wines in all Italy is in this area, so voila, a good by-product of highly palatable local house wine.

The full flavours of the Terre di Siena DOP olive oil is another taste sensation as this extra virgin press is monitored under strict guidelines only allowed from tree to press not crushed or baled.

Siena has a hue and colour of its own and the light in the Piazza del Campo changes throughout the day as the sun chases around the red buildings in the principle public space (Palazzo Pubblico). All streets lead to this area that holds two Palio Horse races a year and the local theatre has a daily film that explains the history, rules and social impact of the Palio and provided enough information to step out fully versed in this fervent event.

The Palio di Provenzano and Palio dell'Assunta symbolism and colours emanate from the Contrade or city guilds represented in the event harking back to the 1650s. Teams contrive, corrupt, bribe and dope both horse and rider as the devout try to get the Chiocciola(snail), Civetta(little owl), Bruco(caterpillar) or any other of the 17 contrade with its bragging rights over the line.

The winner is the first horse over the line with head ornaments intact ,with or without rider ,and most acrimony is directed to the loser which is the second horse finishing not the tailender.



A Siena decree in 1297 that no houses around the area could have balconies ,but must have columns has made Siena timelessly beautiful by a fusion of architecture from peasant, priest and aristocrat. Art and urban trekking is the theme as cars are banned in the Y shaped design of the city which has only just doubled in population since the twelfth Century.

It is hard not to treat this as a medieval Disneyland as the oldest surviving bank in the world the Monti dei Paschi bank dates from the 14th C, the university is 800 years old and possibly the first Christian hospital is here all mixed into the high buildings and hillside piazzas. A special walking tour was arranged with a history student and a two hour wander taking in the nuances of the Contrada, architectural explanations, and

religious sites proved to be a veritable history-ectomy or perhaps an overdose of Tuscan treats.

The tour ended up at the Siena Duomo and the guide by now at full staccato voice continued 45 minutes extra so that the magnificence of what lay inside would not be missed. The white and dark marble has the appearance of a horizontal pin striped chocolate cake and the sheer size has one wondering how large it may have been if the original design had been completed.

The pulpit by Pisano is a marble edifice that defies reason in the intricate decoration and carving, a fresco attributed to Michelangelo, reliefs by Donatello and the obligatory bits of fingers left from St Catherine all make up the munificence.



In the surrounding piazza an Italian film set was being constructed for the filming of a Boccaccio tale about the Black Death replete with bonfires and effigies of hundreds of plague affected bodies. An invitation to come back at 9.30am to watch the filming created a surreal scene at night as fires were activated outside the Duomo casting sinister shadows into the silent buildings.

Actors were running about shouting and sword fighting around the square giving us thoughts we had stepped back in time is it is possible the original scene of the tale was set here in the 15thC.

This is a university town with all things musical happening in the piazzas with graduation ceremonies from both the drama and musical academies spilling onto the already busy alleys. A friendly bunch of ill kempt students had a frenetic blend of brassy instruments and thumping drums resonating against the ancient walls in organised chaos. Throw the period costumes, trick or treat style harassment of the drama graduates, a good hearted drunken frolic done with alacrity that only Italy or Siena could pull off.



So every place has those that blight the landscape or perhaps do not have the hospitality gene and the experience only adds grist to the mill. The evening before departure the late night search for a meal had been decided upon by the priestess of provedoring so back down to the campo.

Nello Nello in Via del Porrione not far from riboletta heaven had a menu that read well serving a more upmarket product, no onerous extra charges or hidden agendas listed and pleasantly warm. The request for casa Vino was diffidently pushed aside to be told that only bottle sales will be available so a simple DOC Rosso di Montalcino Sangiovese at E17 was the order.

Maybe the radar at this stage should be blipping that tourist pricing is being applied and we would be a one hit wonder. Meal of one course is ordered due to late hour and travel arrangements so the requests for desserts and coffee were passed. This became the catalyst for the pallor of the French owner to change and instantly a bill appeared, previously this being the rarest activity in Italy as countless hours of asking for accounts had proved.

This act of contrariness had probably added to the desire for the ubiquitous coperto to be added in a fit of pique. Questioned to the extra charges and mine host says that even though coperto is not listed if you do not have three courses you must pay. Wrong tact. Wrong people. Reaction now is to pay the amount without the additions leave the bill on the table and depart without copping abuse. Monsieur Arrogance grabbed the receipt, puffed up to five foot tall and proceeded to bump one of the girls before taking off after the now departing ex diners.

Shouting down the street
"You cheep schitz"
"Go home you poor people and eat there'.

The Basil Fawlsetto of Siena was still gibbering, the street chuckled at the free entertainment and four touristimos toddled away shaking heads and musing that this is perhaps why the place was only partially in use while others were full.

Skirting or Flirting with Florence:

Up at sparrow fart to partake in a trolley derby down the Garfagnana valley from Barga to catch the train from Lucca for a day in Florence. Nondescript scenery flashed by as a full May train in every sense defied the main prerequisite, a toilet, for the train's dungeon was beyond description.

Yes Italy is the most expensive country to toilet in and a new high in plot pissoir prevails at \$1.20 a splash as obviously clean surrounds do not also enter the equation.

The super busy Tourist Info Office was the second stop, proving numbers make for efficient brevity, but they informed concisely the current situation straight to the point.

The Uffizi is booked until the end of June but maybe if you ring this number tomorrow there might be space at L'Accademia as street and passive tourism beckoned for a flirt with Florrie.

The day is hot ,the tourists rampant, sirens are screaming so it's a walking tour to hopefully gain entry into some treasured venue while doing the busman's circuit. Up to Piazza Lorenzo towards the church, via the markets, ever onward to the Galleria Dell Accademia which on arrival exposed the dissolute souls in a long snakelike queue, standing in the heat, not moving.

A free venue is the Santa Maria Duomo an awe inspiring monolithic pink, green, white polychrome marble surreal façade with a Giotto campanile and basilica. Built to house 30,000 people and in its varied history, one can stand where a de'Medici was murdered in 1428, cruise the 44 stained glass windows or dawdle with Donatello's paintings.

The crowd's demeanour is tolerable as the cool interior slows the jostle to manageable levels all being collectively spell bound by the outrageous sang-froid the building emanates.

Leave this sanctuary and back into the busy, dry hot, fume laden alleys weaving a course to the environs of the Uffizi to reveal queues of booked punters shuffling forward happily knowing they at least will not die of malnutrition prior to entry.

The statue David is at least visible as a facsimile as it guards the most scriptural series of incredible sculptures open to close observation. Neptune's fountain in Piazza Vecchio, Giambologna's Hercules slaying of the Centaur, the Rape of the Sabine's, Cellini's Perseus with Medusa's head are all in the forecourt of Loggi della Signoria.

Surrounding is a moving mass of guided minions which storm troop with great gusto throughout the areas as tour guides shouting for clarity create the equivalent of human roadblocks. The Ponte Vecchio is too busy to obtain any photos and it seems all the goldsmiths are a cartel as one operator owns 70% of all operations negating competitive opportunities of any purchasing.



The historical treasures are now too crowded and without payment of baksheesh to gain entry the alternative sport is shopping which is easily the second face of Firenze.

This event is a very Italian predilection and here the glitterati have not got the embryonic poodles and whippets of Lucca but the status symbol is to take a wolf to town. The fashionista have had a lifetime of promenading, but the haughtiness plus combination of dog and friend certainly provide relief from the gray lifeless shuffling masses doing their relic pilgrimage.

No doubt the degree of social standing compares the canino exotica and owner but the winner hands down in a main thoroughfare was a mowhawked punkster, space cadet and jackbooted girlfriend. They had tattoo sponsorship with multitudes of studs all over their bodies and faces as their bulldog in matching white studded collar sparkled as it lay in the street suckling six puppies.

Florence is for the trenchant ,committed ,and organised traveller to be well coordinated ,booked at major sites , and possibly only going in the colder months

The pace is frenetic, polluted, and overly expensive but Italy has plenty of iconic places without the weight of numbers bleeding it into submission