

TRAVELS WITH TAMA

Lake Como

Traveling on airlines lately is anything but a pleasure. Gary and I were supposed to get to Milano two days early, but due to a cancelled flight, we missed the first night. However, per usual, once we got to Italy, things improved right away. Our hotel allowed us to apply our prepaid room fee for the missed night to our restaurant charges, which basically paid for our meals.

On **Saturday**, we went back to the airport to meet up with the rest of the reunion attendees. We weren't the only ones that had plane troubles: flights were late, George missed his, and Kaki and Rob were rerouted. Roberto immediately got the bus pickups rescheduled and things were under control again. We were all taken by two buses on a short drive to our two hotels in Varenna. The main hotel with most of the attendees and the site of two of the dinners was the Hotel Royal Victoria. Gary and I were at the secondary hotel, the Villa Cipressi Isimbardi, a smaller hotel with beautiful gardens. In fact, the night we arrived, they were having a wedding reception just below our window. Just after arrival of the second bus, there was a short walking tour of the town to familiarize us with the area. Afterwards, Roberto had arranged for a welcome dinner at the Royal Victoria. Talk about loud and happy, the food and wine kept coming while we all had a chance to get reacquainted with old friends and making new ones.

Sunday morning, after a very nice breakfast buffet, we met at the main hotel lobby for our tour. We all walked down to the pier behind the hotel and got onto the boat that took us. One of the nice features of the entire reunion was the use of "whispers." They are individual receivers with earphones that pick up what is being said by the individual guide. We had two guides while in the Lake Como area, Brad and Donald, both who live locally. The group was divided between the two guides, but the assignments were switched for the second day on the lake, so that we had the benefit of both points of view.

The boat took us along the lake edges and while we traveled our guides were pointing out various points of interest, sharing bits of color and giving us historical information. Our first stop was the Villa Carlotta, named for the Prussian Princess who received it as a wedding gift. It is full of works of art and surrounded by extensive gardens that ranged from cactus to ferns. The second villa we toured was the Villa del Balbianello. For movie buffs, this villa was used in the recent James Bond film. It used to be the site of a Franciscan monastery that was turned into a personal residence. The most recent owner, before it was turned over to the Italian Ambient Fund, was Count Guido Monzino and a lot of his collections are still on display in the villa. The Italian Ambient Fund continues to maintain this villa and others for the enjoyment of visitors to the area. They do an amazing job on the grounds of this villa with the tree and shrub sculpturing. We finished the boat tour with a stop for lunch in Bellagio at the Hotel Suisse. Afterwards we had time to shop, but, frankly, the area was a little pricey. We still managed to find a fruit bowl we were looking for and of course, a stop for gelato.

The evening was free, so Gary and I went to the little sidewalk café in front of the Royal Victoria hotel. We weren't the only ones with that idea and I am sure we drove the staff a little crazy with the talking and sharing going on between tables. The pizza and desserts we had were so good that we ended up going there again on our other free evening.

Monday was the optional tour day to St. Moritz. It was a total picture postcard day. We were picked up at the hotel by bus and driven to a train station where Roberto had reserved two train cars just for ARA. Roberto hired a lady to tell us about what we were seeing on the "whispers," but frankly it was more a matter of enjoying the scenery we were passing through. We saw fresh snow and glaciers and lakes that were unusual in color and mountains that took your breath away. When I showed the pictures of that day to my friends at home later on, I got nothing but oh's and ah's. At the end of the train ride, we were picked up by the bus and taken to the Hotel Sonne for another delicious lunch. After lunch we were dropped off at the old town square for shopping and sightseeing. Only shopping that Gary and I did was at the Coop where we bought Swiss chocolate, although he did see a 7-ply cashmere sweater that he liked...for only \$3500. And if that doesn't give you an idea of the area, three Rolls Royces drove by the bench I was sitting on in the square. But from the same bench, I could see cows grazing in a field on the mountain.

We were taken back to Varenna by bus, passing more of the postcard scenery. Dinner that night was a group dinner at the Royal Victoria. Lots more food, wine and happy noise.

Tuesday morning we met again for the second boat tour of Lake Como. This time the cruise went a lot further down the lake. Along the way, we passed the villas owned by George Clooney and the crew was nice enough to slow down for us to have a good look and picture opportunity. Clooney not only bought this one villa with a very nice extended garden on the side, he also bought the one next to it for "beach" access since his own had only a dock entrance. Then he bought the villa behind for a guest house. Brad and Donald kept us entertained with local insight to what we passed. The boat dropped us off at Como where we had time for sightseeing and shopping before going to lunch at the Antica Riva. Prices in Como were a little more reasonable than what we had seen at Bellagio and St. Moritz, so we did do a little shopping, but we also enjoyed sitting at the dock area and watching the birds and people. We were returned to Varenna and had a free evening. Gary and I returned to the sidewalk café for another great dinner with Pete and Bea.