



An alumni renaissance

We were busing through the soft rolling hills of the Chianti valley south of Tuscany during a Penn State Alumni Association education and travel program, when I realized that I was in an extension of the general education art history course I had barely passed nearly 40 years ago.

Could I improve my grade?

Education is just part of an alumni tour, and for this one, it was also about seeing old friends—people my wife, Paulette, and I knew when we lived in State College, or people we might have known when we were students. State College was well represented on this trip, beginning with my daughters' Radio Park Elementary School principal, Lynne Sanders. She was joined by Joyce Lee, a retired school district teacher, with whom I share Welsh blood.

The first person we bumped into at the opening night reception was Bob Schmalz, a Penn State professor emeritus of geology, with whom I once shared civic duties. There was Debbie Marron of the Alumni Association, whom I met through my continuing and distance education duties at Penn State, and her husband, Mike Rosenberg, like me, a former resident of Schuylkill County. New State College acquaintances for us were Bernie and Marge Badiali. Marge is an international admissions counselor at Penn State, and Bernie is an associate professor of education and a 1985 alum.

But Bernie's major claim to fame for this excursion was that he found a bottle of wine with the name Paterno II, a Tuscan red.

This alumni trip was not limited to catching up with old friends only from State College. I had a reunion with someone I worked with at the *Pennsylvania Mirror*, then a morning newspaper in State College, in 1968-69. The reunion was with Richard Lytle, a 1970 journalism master's graduate, and his wife, Jacque, a 1967 health and human development graduate. Dick was the assistant city

editor at the *Mirror* before moving on to Elizabethtown College and later to Texas. He and Jacque, from Dallas, were in Tuscany celebrating their retirement.

At least five of us were repeat alumni association travelers. Paulette and I like the trips because travelers are pampered. It is not Europe on \$10 a day, especially given the strength of the euro. We stayed in a villa about 20 miles south of Florence in a town so small it didn't make the index of our guidebook. From there, we enjoyed a great view of the rolling hills, the fields of grapevines and olive trees, and at night we would sip wine beside the swimming pool and peruse the starry sky.

The extension of my undergraduate art history course came about because Florence was the seat of the Renaissance and Tuscany was home to many of the boldface names of the Renaissance: Boccaccio, Brunelleschi, Caravaggio, Dante, da Vinci, the rascally Machiavelli, many Medicis, Michelangelo—to name just a few.

Before embarking on each of our seven day trips, we were treated to lectures on the founding of Tuscany by the Etruscans, the Renaissance and modern Italy. Unlike our undergraduate days, most of us arrived early and jockeyed for front-row seats. During our free time in Florence, we went our separate ways to the many museums, reservations having been made online months in advance so we did not have to wait in line.

We chose to see “David” by Michelangelo in the Galleria dell'Accademia. One group member asked our tour guide for directions to the “bordello” and was quickly steered to the Bargello, which contains works by Brunelleschi, Michelangelo, Cellini and Donatello, again, to name just some. We also stopped by the English cemetery to see the gravesite of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but the cemetery was closed for the month. The best we could do was peer through the gate toward her crypt.

If not art, then history, as we visited several cities around the area. One, San Gimignano, once had 76 towers but has been reduced to 14. Every time I took a photo with towers in it I could not help but mouth the AT&T commercial about more bars in more places. In every city, we were treated to narrow streets, which we unhappily shared with annoying cars and motorcycles. At one city, the visitor center offered bicycles for rent and we noticed fewer vehicles.

Of course, we had pizza (which is really southern Italian) and visited a winery. When in the Chianti valley, once must sample Chianti, although we didn't need to get to a winery to do it. Wine was part of the meal plan.

Speaking of food, we were treated to a cooking demonstration at which we learned how to make potato dumplings with pesto sauce. Paulette returned with a heavily annotated copy of the recipe.

One other nice aspect to this educational venture: No final.

(Information about Penn State alumni trips can be found at www.alumni.psu.edu/travel.)

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The iPhone in Italy

Before we went to Italy in June, I downloaded several useful applications for my iPhone.

One of them was an audio walking tour of Florence. It opens with a map of the historic area of Florence and allows you to pick a museum or church and learn more about it. You can pick a site and ask for directions on how to get there from your present location.

Another application gives you various audio phrases in Italian, such as how are you: *Come va?* Or police: *polizia!* Or fire: *Al fuoco!* I never needed it because most Italians know a little English.

Yet another allows you to type in the English word and get the equivalent. We had pizza at a restaurant and thought two of the waiters were brothers. I looked up the word for brother, summoned one of the waiters, pointed to the other and said: *Fratello*. He nodded and was off to wait on another table.

I set up my clock application so it would give me the time in Florence and all the time zones our daughters live in.

Another great application was EasySpeak. Instead of taking notes by hand, I merely clicked on this app and recorded comments. On our walking tour of Florence, I could quickly log in *Via dei Malcontenti*, which needs no translation. When I saved each entry, I would give it a title for later reference.

We had good maps, so I didn't need my GPS tracker, and having purchased euros at the airport, I didn't need my conversion or calculator app.

However, at our final reception, my cameras packed away, I did use my iPhone camera to photograph everyone in small groups. -- RTB