

Italy - August 2008 - By Barb Hurley Peterson - Artist (and author!)

Picture yourself sitting on a patio with a cool beverage in hand as you gaze out at panoramic hills of grape vines, olive trees and sun flower fields dotted with an occasional castle, church steeple or red tile roof farmhouse. This is the image that will come to mind instantly when I reminisce about my trip to the Tuscany and Chianti regions of Italy in August 2008. Top it all off with the bold and brilliant colors, sounds and smells of Venice and you have the makings of a trip that will remain rich and vibrant in the wine cellars of my mind for a long long time!

Gina Ruggiero, travel agent/tour guide/language translator, of Villa Vita International, is meticulous about travel details and genuinely cares about her clients. The lodgings selected, transportation provided, and the diverse and exciting itinerary she custom designed for our travel group, made for a flawless and outstanding 19 day travel experience in Italy. Gina's positive personal energy and her gift for developing friendships and business connections with all the right people, greatly contributed to the success of this trip.

In addition to succulent wine, delicious food, and mind-blowing scenery, the people who traveled with me during the 19 days were most importantly the best part of the trip! I want to thank Liz Kenyon for being such a great roommate. We had fun talking and laughing late into the night, critiquing our plein air paintings that we generated on the trip, pointing out great photo shots to each other and sharing many lunch and dinner dishes.

During the first week of the trip I thoroughly enjoyed the company of Gina, Liz and two other Arizona Art Alliance "legends" - Kelley Smith, former AAA President and Al Arne, current AAA Events/Shows Director. In addition, Al's long time friend from Alaska, Anton Corey, brought fun and good humor to the group's conversation and seemed to feed off the comic comebacks of Kelley's husband, Dennis. The seven of us had a blast shopping in Pienza, visiting an Abbey, the Brunello winery, museums in Florence, an organic farm, the studio of artist Aleardo Paolucci, taking a balloon flight (Liz and Kelley), experiencing the excitement of the legendary Palio horse race in Siena, and celebrating Al's sixth decade birthday at a wonderful restaurant on August 16th.

The second week of the trip was the REAL reason I went on this trip - to paint in Tuscany! My eyeballs were popping and my mouth voicing "ooohs and aaahs" at every hairpin turn around a scenic corner. Gina was a real trouper, schlepping around 4 artists that week to various spots to set up and paint. Plus, we had the option of walking right outside our door at the Il Borgo Villa Bossi-Pucci to paint, swim or just ponder the beauty before us. Gina took us to a ceramics factory, a local Pasta Festival and we savored the cuisines and home made wine of several family owned restaurants.

The last three days of the trip Liz and I ventured off to Venice. Gina made the transition seamless and stress free by providing us with a guide (Isabella) who met us at the rail station, made sure we found our B&B, and who accompanied us at the end of the trip to the airport. Venice is a spectacular city and the nearby islands of Murano and Burano gave us ample opportunity to unload our Euros and take hundreds of photos for future paintings! Thank you again Gina for making this trip *benissimo* (great)!