

Phylis

At 5:30 in the morning, our bus crossed the Po River on our way to Venice, Italy. Spanning over 400 miles in length, this river is the longest river of Italy. At its widest point, the river measures 1,650 feet across- that's 105 duplicates of my SUV lined up single file!!

With a unanimous vote, we stopped for coffee. I learned that coffee is not simply a beverage for Austrians; it is more like a religion, a social lubricant if you will, a cultural factor, and one of the finest reasons for living! They don't just drink coffee, they live it! I thought about the 'Starbucks hype' back home but it wasn't quite the same. Austrians might even laugh at what little value the average American customer receives in exchange for their overpriced 'cup-a-joe.' Austrians are not purchasing a four dollar cup of coffee to run out the door and head to work; rather, they take the experience seriously and relish in the taste, the comforting atmosphere of the coffeehouse, make their social acknowledgement and conversation with nearby peers (whether friend or stranger), and mentally prepare- without much haste for that matter- for whatever comes next in their day. Talk about savoring the moment, huh?!

We took a water taxi into Venice and, once there, we went strolling alongside St Mark's square and admired the artwork and gold detailing of St Mark's Basilica, also nicknamed "Chiesa d'Oro" or, Church of Gold since the 11th century. This cathedral is said to best represent Italy's Italo-Byzantine architecture.

Nearby, our group visited the most well-known glass factory in Italy called Vecchia Murano. This factory has been not only been nationally acclaimed for its craftsmanship of glass-blown treasures but was also acknowledged with the highest universal honor of receiving the 1989 world prize "Ercole d'Oro" which means Hercules' Gold. Watching the glass blowers at work was simply one of the most fascinating artworks I've ever seen! We watched a vase and horse come to life right before our eyes! According to the proprietor, there are only 14 families who carry the tradition of handmade Murano glass. In fact, the word 'Murano' is synonymous with Venetian glass. Their display of the glass equestrian artwork was displayed in the lobby and I was blown away.

I found an interesting alley in the middle of nowhere and had the opportunity to ride on a gondola which is used on the canals of Venice for transportation. It was almost like getting carried away in a classical romance film! While they are primarily a form of transportation nowadays, gondolas are still used for 'regattas' or, rowing races, that are held in great esteem and competition by gondoliers.

On the ride back to Austria, our tour guide stated that while Venice is a beautiful city, it is also amazing that it still exists. They were conquered by Napoleon and endured two world wars as well as drastic widespread fires and with most of its land being built on a series of island and mud flats, deals with continual flooding. We took a different route home, passing about 20 castles along the way and stopped just before sunset to pose for photos of, yet again, the most beautiful mountains in the world.

Waking up to the sounds of church bells on Wednesday morning was like music to my soul, however, walking through Innsbruck remained a surreal, dream-like occasion for me. There is no better feeling than walking through Austria and feeling the ‘föhn.’ The föhn is a type of gusty wind that loses moisture on the ascension of very high mountaintops and picks up speed on the downslopes of these mountains (such as the Alps), giving way to benefits such as rapidly warming temperatures in the winter. Another nickname for the föhn is ‘snow eater’ since its lack of humidity can quickly absorb snow on the ground.

Later on, we stopped to get a quick outside view of Nymphenburg Palace in Munich, Germany. As we walked the outside grounds, I could see from its picturesque landscaping how it had served as a perfect location for many movie filmings. It had also staged the equestrian events of the 1972 summer Olympics.

We visited the Rathaus-Glockenspiel next, a town-centered clock tower that opens up via two chambers, at 11a.m. daily, and re-enacts two historic stories in a comical, dramatic display to the crowds below. The first of these events represents a tournament held in honor of a royal wedding where one knight carries the colors of Bavaria and the other, of Lothringen; accordingly, Bavaria always wins. The second event of the ‘Schäfflertanz’ or, the Cooper’s Dance, originated in the 17th century when the Coopers danced through the disease-stricken, plagued streets symbolizing hope and new life. During this presentation, the 43 bells of the clock (weighing about 7,000 kilos) play a lullaby in the backdrop.

At first, I wasn’t very impressed with the display until a later strike of fate led me up the opposite view from the Glockenspiel, by way of St. Peter’s tower; or as the locals call it: ‘Alter Peter’ or, old Peter. This church, standing almost 300 feet tall, is the oldest church in the region and presumed to be the first site (then used by ancient monks) of the original city of Munich.

The climb up ‘old peter’ made me feel old and out of shape. Compared to the five minute climb advertised at the ticket booth, it took me eight minutes. But watching other members of our group- more fit and able than me- back out of this once in a lifetime opportunity gave me the determination I needed. “We only live once, Phyllis,” I heaved, breathlessly, to myself. The moment I reached the top and the skyline of Munich bowed to my indulgence, my breath was taken away in a far greater way. Wow! Smiling to myself, I thought of the infamous song by the abbess in *The Sound of Music* (filmed so near to here):

Climb every mountain, Search high and low,
Follow every byway, Every path you know.
Climb every mountain, Ford every stream,
Follow every rainbow, ’Till you find your dream.

I felt so incredibly grateful to have overcome my doubts and fears to reach this final destination. I had heard that the 12 p.m. displays of the Glockenspiel tower were reserved for summers, when a higher volume of tourists came on holiday, and so I was not holding my breath to see the presentation again when, to my amazement, the clock was heard coming alive with sounds and movement. It was like I was on top of the world (with only two other people) and with front row seats to a piece of history taking place before my eyes in this intricate, beautiful device. And, it

was a completely different perspective than the one that had left me unimpressed at the ground level an hour prior.

When the clock finished its performance, I lingered for a while and gazed around at the city once more. It suddenly struck me that so many elements of life must pass through darkness to be brightened, endure hardship to appreciate success, and suffer pain to feel joy. Storms that give way to rainbows, pebbles on a beach that undertake the waves' rhythmic force to be smoothed into precious glass, the soulful cries of a mother turned into tears of joy as she bears new life and, likewise, the acres of history that lay before my eyes. How many bombings and invasions had this sea of rooftops overcome? How strong these citizens of war had been to persevere and rebuild, holding fast to their culture to remind them of the past that had brought them their future. I realized, then, that when the reasons for climbing are so close to heart, it doesn't matter how far or how long you trek- you find your strength in faith, your courage in family, and your resolution in that there is no other option.

Phyllis

Born to Give Myself Away

- See more at: <http://peverette.tateauthor.com/2014/02/17/in-box-me/#sthash.E8HFow2c.VI68TaZa.dpuf>