

Bell' Italia

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The ears of my grade 11 students perked up as I diverted from our regular Language Arts instruction to make an announcement that would reverberate through my classroom long after the students had filed out. “The School Board has given me permission to take you on a European tour during spring break of your grade 12 year.” It took a couple minutes for the announcement to sink in, but once it did the students were ecstatic as all eyes sought mine for the reassuring look that “Yes, this is for real. I am going to take you guys to Europe, and there is no better time than right now to peruse the travel booklet and start dreaming.” The electricity of that special moment did not diminish as we not only dreamed but worked hard to make our trip a reality. A year and a half later, spring break of 2009, **my** European tour announcement was replaced with “Lufthansa, Flight 495 is now ready for boarding.” Eleven of us, two supervisors and nine students, from Chinook Winds Adventist Academy, were waiting at the Calgary Airport to board our plane that would take us to Milan, Italy – the beginning of our Bell' Italia tour.

Our descent into Milan created quite a stir of excitement – we were finally here! We were about to share the adventure of travel and adapt to unfamiliar surroundings as we eagerly disembarked the plane to clear customs and meet our tour guide who would remain with us throughout our 8-day stay in Italy. Our real journey had begun!

Verona, the home of Shakespeare's famed *star-crossed lovers*, Romeo and Juliet, may have created romantic notions for some of the students as they stood under the *Capulet* balcony where Juliet's statue jealously guarded the “sacred” site. The guys could not resist stealing an embrace as they posed for some special photos. The departure may have caused some “sweet sorrow,” but it was short lived as we anticipated our next stop -- Venice, regaled by St. Mark's Square, which, according to Napoleon, was “the finest drawing room in Europe,” the Doges' Palace from which mighty Venetian dukes once ruled, and the Rialto. Holding on to our flavourful and delectable gelatos, (my favorite was the lime and coconut), we scurried the tourist-filled streets of Venice, bidding farewell as we boarded our tour bus that would take us to Florence, the birthplace of the Italian language, the Renaissance, the opera, and Michelangelo's *David*. The elaborately designed edifices with their imposing heights, the Duomo, or dome that dominates Florence's skyline and the Campanile (bell tower) designed by Giotto fascinated and mesmerized the students. That fascination continued as we traveled to Pisa, an old and quaint place recognized for its Leaning Tower. Our challenge: climbing the 294 steps to the top of the tower., A few of us eagerly accepted (at the price of 15E) and we were not disappointed. The breathtaking skyline view accompanied by the resonating chiming of the tower's gigantic bells has etched its features and sounds into our memories forever. The imprinting continued as we anticipated another new adventure in the morning – a delightful countryside bus ride to Assisi, birthplace of both Saint Francis and Saint Clare. I witnessed the veneration in my students' faces as they turned the pages of St. Francis' life frescoed by Giotto on the walls of the Basilica. The sacrificial life of St. Francis continued to haunt and inspire us as we once again boarded our tour bus to journey to Rome, *bella Roma*, the Eternal city where Charlemagne was crowned emperor by the pope in A.D. 800.

Our first tour of the day was the Vatican City, the world's smallest country. Students were awed, and maybe shocked, by the richness, the gaudiness, the ornateness of such a colossal power. From the Sistine Chapel to St. Peter's Basilica, the grandeur and pomp both mystified and challenged. We were thankful for our Biblical and prophetic knowledge that helped in not only understanding but redefining our place as Seventh-day Adventists Christians in a world immersed in the worship of and homage given to human greatness. The splendor of the Vatican was left behind for the remains of the mighty Colosseum, Rome's largest amphitheater. I was thrilled to observe my students as they eagerly absorbed the history of gladiatorial combat, mock sea battles, animal hunts, executions and even dramatic performances based on classical mythology. Even the chill and rain could not dampen their spirits. Before leaving our gladiator guards, we lingered briefly at The Forum, the heart of the Roman Empire.

Our final day in Italy took us to Pompeii, one of the richest archaeological sites in the world. Winding our way from Rome to Campania, passing the Bay of Naples and focusing our attention on Mount Vesuvius we soon arrived at our destination where the history of an ancient Roman settlement that had been buried under ashes and soot was preserved in the roots of our minds. We were transfixed – was it the debonair and handsome local Italian tour guide or the historic streets, villas, temples, theaters, baths, shops, and forum of Pompeii? Either way, we were immersed into the first century life of the privileged rich man and the ordinary slave. Misty eyes clouded over as Pompeii climaxed our Italy tour. As we packed our suitcases and contemplated the life-changing experience of seeing history in the making, we knew that our Bell' Italia trip would never be forgotten and would challenge us to go back home and contemplate learning in a different and perhaps more respectful way.

We had been awed by history, inspired by artistry and sculptures, transported back in time as we glided through the streets of Venice in a gondola. We were challenged by men like St. Francis who desired so much to emulate his Master that he forsook all to follow Him. We were overwhelmed by such masterpieces as Michelangelo's pictorial images on the Sistine Chapel's ceiling and educated by our well-learned and knowledgeable tour guides. We had been enriched by blending and spending time with those from another culture; spiritually enlightened as we compared our biblical knowledge with what we experienced at the Vatican, and, finally, gripped with the realization that our DREAM to travel as a class to Italy had come true.

I consider the opportunity of traveling with my students both a privilege and an honor. No textbook or classroom could ever replace such an experience. Not only did the trip benefit my students, but I, too, was enriched. What I learned and have brought back will add depth and colour to the tapestry of my classroom. When we study *Romeo and Juliet*, I can now show photos and share stories – I have been there; when we study Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, again I can speak from experience, but more, I am able to speak with passion and reality. The benefits of travel are amazing: lives are changed, students are inspired, professional development is enhanced, education is enriched, barriers are broken down and stepping stones are formed. Thank you, EF Tours, a division of EF Education, leaders in educational travel for over 40 years, for such an absolutely amazing trip that allowed my students to see their world in a new way – the Italian way.

Would I do it again? Absolutely! I want other students to have such an experience. I'd like to give all the students I teach the opportunity to travel abroad with EF. In case you are wondering, the planning stage has already begun for another trip in 2012 – another electrified DREAM that, with God's help, will come true.