

Trains, boats, planes, buses and bicycles.

Chester U3A's holiday in Italy, September 2013.

Liz Flanagan had arranged for a coach from Chester to John Lennon Airport and Mistral, the organisers of our holiday, had done the on-line Ryanair check-in so we got off to a smooth start.

Italy's Versilian Riviera was our destination. The La Pace hotel in Forte dei Marmi was our base, with Mediterranean beaches protected by the Apuane Alps where Carrara marble is quarried.

43 Chester U3A members took part in the holiday with 6 couples, 2 sisters, 2 sisters-in-law and lots of individual travellers. Some were sharing rooms with friends, others had one of the few single rooms or were sharing with new friends and had wisely met up in Chester before the holiday to get to know each other.

The La Pace hotel was set in an up-market residential area but then there was lots about Forte dei Marmi that was up-market. Gucci, Prada, Dolce & Gabbana, all had shops in the town.

Our first day, Wednesday, we had to ourselves though our tour guide, Christina, took some to the local fruit and vegetable market. There was also a street market with lots of designer clothing and cafes and ice-cream parlours to tempt us.

After our rest day we then embarked on 4 consecutive and sometimes hectic day trips, 2 included in the cost of the holiday and 2 as extras.

Thursday took us to Puccini's birthplace, the walled-town of Lucca, which has a Roman amphitheatre now surrounded by houses. Lucca's ramparts are wide with room for pedestrians and cyclists, providing views of the graceful town's churches, piazzas, and palaces. After lunch we were off to Pisa. Sadly there wasn't time to climb the tower's 296 steps up and 294 steps down – 2 fewer steps on the 7th floor because of the leaning. If you made it up the 296 there would have been another 7 to the bell-tower.

Friday saw us in the Cinque Terre, five delightful little fishing towns perched precariously above the sea.

Saturday was Portofino and Santa Margherita and another boat ride between the two. Several of us walked to the lighthouse at Portofino and some enjoyed a glass of fresh orange though the enjoyment waned when the bill arrived – 7Euros each! Santa Margherita was once a coral-fishing town also famous for the Villa Durazzo and its gardens.

The final trip was on Sunday to Florence on the day the World Cycling Championships started so it was busy and roads were closed but our day-trippers managed to see most of the sights.

On Monday we had a free day, although Liz arranged bus tickets for several of us to take the local bus to Pietrasanta Marina and one or two even walked back.

As our flight home was not until the evening on Tuesday we had another day to relax in the sun and enjoy the local area which is where the bicycles came in. The hotel had its own hire service and with miles of promenade and cycle-ways around the town cycling was a joy.

As there was a free bar at the hotel from 6-10pm most of us stayed at the hotel after each evening meal enjoying the company and the laughter.

Highlights for me were seeing a manuscript actually written and annotated by Puccini, displayed in the window of a tiny house in a back street in Lucca and a letter written and signed by Michelangelo in the museum in Forte dei Marmi. The weather was sunny and warm enough for swimming in the sea.

Special thanks to Liz Flanagan who helped Mistral's tour guide so much and ironed out any problems that we had on the trains, boats, planes, buses and bicycles.