

Rome and Umbria

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October 18-30, 2005

We had first two nights at the Crowne Plaza in Rome. They offer a free shuttle from the airport at specific times of the day, but we missed it.

Taxis now cost 80 Euro to get to town. We were headed for the rail station when approached by a driver who could offer a shuttle bus for 45 Euro to our hotel since we would share with another couple going the same area of town (near Vatican). We opted for this and am glad we did. It turns out the other couple in the van were also going to Crowne Plaza. Given the train would have cost 10 Euro per person and then a cab from Termini would have cost us probably another 25, the shuttle is a good deal. Very nice new minivan and pleasant drive.

Hotel is predictable...comfortable and efficient, but not recommended for first time tourists since it is outside the normal tourist areas. Crown Plaza is about 5 blocks from the Vatican...on the same road as the Princess hotel. This is not convenient for tourists, but is very quiet and worked just fine for us. They do offer shuttles into town at specific times of the day but the times never worked for us. We bought tube/bus tickets from the front desk at 1 Euro per person...took a public bus just outside the hotel door to the metro station and then the subway into town. One ticket is good for unlimited use of buses and subway for 75 minutes. This took us about half an hour.

Rome only has two subway lines in the shape of an X, where the center is Termini rail station. It is very simple to use as long as you know what direction you want to go.

Went to **Borghese Gallery** the first day. This is a beautiful little villa in the middle of the park in Rome and the building itself is worth the entrance fee. The sculptures by Bernini are what you go there to see...they are phenomenal. You must have a reservation to get in....I emailed the museum just before leaving PDX and they responded immediately with a time. We paid at the door. The email address: book@ticketeria.it I put this little museum down as a "must see" on any itinerary. They allow you 2 hours to visit the museum...we probably stayed there about an hour and a half.

Next three nights were at the **International Domus** apartments located at Spanish Steps. This is a **perfect location...the subway is right there at the hotel. We had rooms overlooking the steps and square and it was very nice. Even the groups of singers sitting on the steps at midnight singing "Volare" was fun. If you have a family or group requiring two bedrooms and a pull-out couch in the livingroom, the prices of these apartments are competitive. They have little kitchenettes or full kitchens depending on the unit you book. I personally saw three different units. I have also stayed at the Palazzo al Velabro apartments in the Forum area of the city - these are great as well, but not as central and not near a subway stop.

We spent several days showing off the city to first timers to Rome, so most of the normal tourist sites: Trevi, Coliseum, St Peters, Campo de Fiori, Navona, Pantheon, Via Veneto, Forum and lots and lots of walking! Bought a GREAT pair of shoes this time...the most comfortable shoes I have ever worn - and reasonably priced. Enjoyed some very nice

relatively inexpensive restaurants which I can pass along as well. Wine bars are a great option for eating...they offer a good selection of simple and inexpensive choices.

We rented a car at the Europcar location near the Vatican...this ended up being perfect for us - we could take the subway to just 2 blocks from the office and from there it is a straight shot on Via Aurelia to the coast. One reason I picked this location is also to avoid airport fees. Rented a Nissan Micro, which was a very nice little car.

We drove to Spoleto, just an hour and a half north of Rome where we stayed for five nights. We used Spoleto as a base while exploring the many interesting and varied cities and towns in Umbria

The countryside in Umbria is beautiful - trees, lakes, mountains, very green....seems more varied than Tuscany. It also is not as touristy as Tuscany. Each town has its own personality and its own specialty (wine, olive oil, ceramics, truffles, meats, etc . They all have wonderful restaurants and much to see and do. The vistas are great and the narrow medieval village streets are fun to explore. This is a good trip for active people who are comfortable with driving and capable of difficult walking.

The town of Spoleto is a good choice because it has a lot to offer: good restaurants, interesting shops, culture, great walking in forests just beyond the city, a beautiful duomo. It is the right size city. If there were one drawback, it is that it basically is in the southeast corner of Umbria, so as you explore the region, you may have a few days where you are driving the same road to get to the northern towns. As are all the towns in Umbria, it is built on the side of a hill. We had to walk very steep sidewalks and roads to get to the top but by the end of the week, it didn't seem too hard. Umbria would not be a good destination for anyone who can't handle walking and steep hills!!

Our days were worked out as follows:

Day 1: Assisi, Gubbio for lunch and back to explore Spoleto in the afternoon/evening. Good meal at La Turette in Spoleto - great local specialty choices and nice atmosphere.

Assisi is a wonderful little town although some say it has gotten a bit touristy. The Basilica of St Francis is spectacular and has an upper and lower sanctuary. A walk around the town would take about half a day. Assisi's location would be a good central spot to make a base for exploring Umbria. The drive to the northern border of Umbria was along some winding roads with spectacular scenery. Gubbio is a favorite for many with an imposing main square and the Palazzo dei Consoli. We ate lunch at one of the better restaurants in the town called Taverna del Lupo. It was fun trying to locate it as we wound around the small streets. All on a steep incline.

Day 2: Todi, Orvieto and Civita:

Todi was one of our favorites...it had a bustling feel to the city as we climbed up to the main square. Enjoyed cappuccino on the square. Orvieto has a spectacular setting atop a huge plateau. The duomo is the main reason to visit Orvieto, but it offers much more - many shops and historical sites. We parked in a lot just next to the duomo for about a euro per hour. Otherwise, you would take the funicular from the big free parking lot below to get up to the main town. Civita is a tiny, tiny little town that is on a pinnacle and is reached by walking along a long, steep walking bridge. It can be explored in about an hour since there is not much there other than a few restaurants and a tiny museum. The

views are amazing. That evening a fun restaurant in Spoleto called Osteria del Matto... there is no set menu - the owner just brings lots and lots of little samplings of foods (we counted 13 different selections). The meal took over two hours as we listened to jazz.

Day 3: Perugia, Cortona (our only Tuscan stop) and Montefalco. We had planned to stop at towns around the Lake Trasimeno with perhaps a ferry to the island, but there was too much fog that day. By the time we got to Montefalco, which is reached through rural countryside on twisting, unlit roads, we realized it would be dark if we stopped and we didn't relish that thought, so we decided to return the next day in daylight.

Perugia is the largest city we visited. It is the location of two universities and has a lot to offer. Parking was a problem here since all their lots surrounding the city were full when we arrived but we did find a metered space near the center. We had just missed the chocolate festival by a few days - that would have been great fun.

Cortona of "Under the Tuscan Sun" fame was a fun stop for lunch. Had a great lunch at a restaurant called Dardano. This little town is special - we hiked up to the church at the top of the hill and the views were spectacular. Lots of art galleries and interesting shops. It is smaller than I had anticipated.

Montefalco is considered the "balcony" of Tuscany with its views looking out over the valleys. We enjoyed the drive to the town through farmland and vineyards - very rich looking. We returned there on day 4 to do some wine tasting and olive oil tasting. Spello is a wonderful small village on the side of a steep hill that intrigued us. It is quiet and friendly - one of our favorites. Bevagna was the last of the towns we visited - the only one that isn't on top of a hill! It has an interesting center square. We ate at a wonderful restaurant for lunch called Osteria del Podesta.

We drove through Terni and climbed up the mountains to get a glimpse of the biggest man-made waterfall in Italy, only to find out it wasn't "turned on" when we were there.

Driving is always a challenge in Italy, but Emerson enjoys this luckily. He had to back up about 4 city blocks in a space just 3 inches on each side of the car so that a truck could go by! Parking is ALWAYS a problem... you can always park outside the walls for free in areas painted with white lines. Within the city walls, there are meters that look very much like our smart meters here....normally charging about a euro per hour and the spaces are all marked in blue paint so you know you have to pay! There were only a few instances when we drove on the Autostrade which costs money....we paid about 2 Euro each time....you take a ticket upon entering the autostrade and then as you leave, you put the ticket in a slot along with your credit card and the machine figures out how much you owe and even says grazie and arrivaderci as it gives you your card back.

The key to getting around is **GOOD MAPS!!** I recommend spending the money to buy good Michelin or similar maps of the area and as they get to each city, find the information office to obtain a map of each town...these towns are not small and they can be confusing...there is no way you can wing it to get to all the places you want to see.

Even devoting 5 days to Umbria, we didn't see as much as we would have liked and didn't devote enough time to each town, but we left with a better appreciation of the area and we would certainly go back.