

Road to Joy – Ebbio

Started off our trip to Ebbio with two pleasant flights, first to Zurich and then to Firenze. However, on the first part of the flight we were on inside seats and did not see anything. However, on the Firenze ride, the scenery was magnificent. We flew over beautiful mountains and many of those in Switzerland had their peaks covered in snow. There were houses located in so many areas, in the valleys, sides of the mountains, and on the peaks. In some cases there were one or two homes, and in other cases clumps of dwellings.. There was the occasional lake and the whole one hour segment of our trip was simply gorgeous.

We arrived at the airport in Florence, which was very small, especially having just been in the large airport at Zurich. We expected to wait a few hours for our driver to transport us to Ebbio. But lo and behold, we saw Bev and Flo in the airport and they said a driver was there for us. Quite a drive to Ebbio through the mountains, but the highlight was the last mile or two on an unpaved road, where I was glad that I was not the driver. Then we arrived at Ebbio. Boy, what a sight. Our lodging was an 800-year-old farmhouse. It would take me hours to describe the place with all of the fantastic details. It really takes you back in history. The walls, ceilings, doorways, furniture, and furnishings were just incredible. I am presently sitting on a long bench and a long wood table writing this little story and just looking at this table, which is probably, no not probably, at least 200 years old. Moved into our room and am writing on a table which is ancient and amazing. I am looking at the headboard of our bed, the hanging lamp, the carpets on the wall, 5 large carpets on the floor, somewhat tattered, an old hanging

large pot, an ancient hand iron, old tile floors, and beautiful log sloping ceiling. It is just too much for words. The sun is baking down on me as I am sitting by the window and looking at the graded slope of the mountain. Looked up at our ceiling and again must describe it. There are two logs about 12 inches in diameter running across the ceiling, and another two logs are placed on top of them, running the other length of the room. Then the ceiling itself is composed of smaller logs spaced about 6 inches apart. Wow.

It is now 1:30 p.m. and the rest of the group has arrived. We are 22 in all, including the four yoga teachers. Apart from Edwin, one of the yoga instructors, and his father-in-law, Bob, I am the only male. I must make sure I behave on this trip.

I keep moving around as I write and am now sitting at a table just outside the house. It has four metal posts, supporting a tree or vine covering a group of tables. There are fruits hanging from the branches and leaves which cover the whole area of the tables. Wonder what kind of fruit it is.

Our group was supplemented by 2 dogs, Ricco and Rocco and about 5 cats. Ricco was one of the most friendly and affectionate dogs I have ever seen and was always looking for someone to pet him.

In the evening, eight of our group went to Monteriggioni for a concert. The concert consisted of several groups of people singing and playing, and the audience were supposed to rate them. The group we saw was really singing and banging the drums and were actually very good. Then Edwin, who was leading our group, said that he had seen something lit in the graveyard. And so he led us down to the graveyard and it was quite an imposing site. There was a little light on each gravestone, as well as

photographs on most of them. It was very touching, especially one of a one-year-old beautiful child and her mother right next to her.

Excuse me. I forgot to write about our dinner. What a meal. The carrot soup was one of the most delicious soups I have ever eaten. I must admit that after eating a full bowl, I went back for another half. All meals were buffet, so nobody could really tell if you gorged. The menu was vegetarian with wonderful soups, great pasta with different cheeses and/or sauces. The vegetables were presented in creative mouth-watering ways, always abundant salad greens and usually a dessert that Franz served at the end. To add to that, we even got some recipes to take home

Now, what else went on today? Went for a walk on the farm to a section where there were geese, donkeys and horses. I went to the geese and started walking with them and it was quite something with 18 of them waddling and chatting away. It was a little sad to see the last goose of the group, limping with one bad foot. Then it was time for the chickens. Walked up to the fenced-in section for the chickens a little up the hill. There was a beautiful bunch of chickens and roosters. I started to have a conversation with them and they responded in a most incredible way. Had a great time with them. And I must say that I am very glad that I do not eat chicken.

Sorry if I have to keep going back to old thoughts of the day, but here is another one. I could not think of a title for this little story, but last night solved it. As Edwin drove us to Monteriggioni and back, I was thinking of that most bumpy dirt road, full of bumps and terrible turns. It is one of the roughest roads I have ever witnessed. And so when we got back to our place in Ebbio, it was a really great joy. And there we have it – “Road to Joy”.

The schedule for this morning called for a little half hour walk to Monteriggioni. Wow, was that off. We started off on the dirt road and then we followed a path through the mountain. The path was narrow, full of rocks, and covered with trees. This was one of the most interesting walks that I have ever taken. We had a naturalist guide, Cynthia, who described all of the various trees, flowers, and history of the place. She mentioned some of the strict Italian laws, such as restrictions on picking mushrooms unless you had a license to do so, and the restriction of not being able to pick more than seven branches of the beautiful little holly trees. Cynthia told us of insects biting into branches of the oak trees and then the branches will produce three different products. The first was some kind of hollow acorn, the second was beautiful little furry balls, and the third was some seaweed type of product. These three products became the home of the larva for the future babies of the insects. There were also many descriptions of the foliage but much too many for me to remember.

We then visited the village of Monteriggioni built in the year 1200 during the wars of Firenze and Siena. And then there were the Etruscan stories. Wow. Exhausted, we got a lift back to Ebbio and had another wonderful lunch. Learned something interesting this morning. It seems like the pilgrims in ancient Italy walked about 20 miles per day and then rested. Consequently, the little villages developed about 20 miles apart as you can see at the present time.

Had a restful afternoon, including a nice walk on the farm and another swim in the cute little pool. Then went to a yoga class and a shake your soul session. Quite an experience and quite a workout as well.

In the evening back to Monteriggioni, but because we were 12 in the van that holds eight, sat on the wheel hub in the rear of the van. We came for the opera, but unfortunately we got there at 8:30 p.m. and the opera finished at 8:00 p.m. However, we went for my second gelato which made that rough ride worthwhile.

Monday, September 12.

Monday's outing was to San Gimignano. Three vans departed from Ebbio for our voyage. We happened to be sitting in the front seat of the van driven by Franz, the owner of the farm. It was a most interesting ride on the small winding roads and seeing San Gimignano way up above in the distance. The vans dropped us off at the historical museum that most of us visited. Fascinating place where we saw replicas of the city 800 years ago. Then we walked through this walled city for about four hours, viewing the historical sites, numerous shops, and loads of tourists. One of the highlights was the walk up to the top of the tower. Wow. And what a beautiful sight from the top. We were told that there were 72 towers in the 1300s but most were destroyed during the Black Plague and now there are 13 remaining. This was quite a day and I must say that I was glad to hit the pool for my daily swim.

Then another lovely dinner just before the sunset. What a wonderful experience to be eating all this delicious food outside just before sunset. And then a bit of writing and was very happy to crawl into bed.

Tuesday, September 13.

Today's outing was Siena. Siena is quite a large town. Siena is reputed to be a very clean little city, and the authorities dating back to the era after the Black Plague kept strict rules about the cleanliness of Siena. About 70 percent of its population was wiped out by the plague, as well as most of its very large amount of towers. The fronts of the residential areas in front of the main squares looked very drab, but supposedly this is the old architecture that is not allowed to be touched. However, the insides are supposedly plush and gorgeous and many are occupied by nobility. Another comment was that the banks control Siena. It was very interesting to see a lot of older women wheeling baby carriages – seemed like grandmothers to me taking care of the little ones while the mothers were working. Another interesting thing was the importance she-wolves had in the past, and Siena is full of their statues. Finished another great dinner and just sat around and talked with the lovely ladies on this trip and it was sincerely a wonderful experience. Then a little more writing and off to sleep. I must say that after two days of walking up steps on the towers, I shall be very happy to stay put on the beach tomorrow. We shall see.

Wednesday, September 14.

Beach day. Our three vans headed out to Grosseto and what a beautiful trip it was. We started out on our terrible dirt road, then to secondary roads, and finally on thruways to southwestern Tuscany on a most beautiful trip. The mountains, tunnels, and the scenery were all breathtaking. Arrived at Alberese Beach which is a very popular public beach and immediately hit the sea for a lovely swim and then walk back

to our area. The weather was beautiful as it has been every day since we have been here. The temperature, the sky, and the humidity have been super. Then Franz made a lovely picnic lunch for us on the beach and everyone had a great time eating it. The beach was beautiful with little huts made from branches providing shade. The seawater was lovely and very enticing – great morning. After lunch, took off and stopped at a hot springs venue. It was very interesting with everyone trying to cover themselves with the mud. Our photos will show you what I am talking about. This was a great day and I was particularly happy because I did not have to walk up a million steps to a tower, which I had done the past couple days.

Another wonderful dinner in the evening and it is not only the food which is delightful, but talking to the various people in our group, who are a most interesting and delightful bunch. Each day we became closer and I must say that I shall miss this group and all the interactions between us.

Thursday, September 15.

This morning they put us to work before leaving for Volterra. They brought us to the vineyards at the rear of our building and provided us with scissors and a pail, and off to work we went. I must say that I have never done this before and it was quite an experience. There are all different sizes of the bunches of grapes. Some are easy to snip and some are difficult as they are intertwined with the branches. We did some tasting as well and I must say they were really delicious. Worked for almost an hour and it was quite a job. Fortunately, Edwin kept coming and emptying our pails so that we did not have to walk back to the trailer each time to empty our pail. Quite an

experience and also quite a chore. The grapes were mostly purple, but there were some vines with green grapes as well.

Then off to the Pinzani cheese factory to witness the production of ricotta cheese. We watched them filling various sizes of containers from the large vats and then saw the liquid emptying out of the mesh type of containers. The floor was full of water and cheese waste – quite a process. We also visited refrigerated rooms filled with various types of cheeses.

Next was the cheese tasting, but what a tasting feast it was. We first had bread which we dipped into two olive oils, one from the Siena area and one from San Gimignano. Then a piece of Italian sausage followed with about six different cheeses. This was all taking place while they kept filling our wine glasses. The jam and honey added to the feast. The jam, which we are bringing home, is Confettura Extra di Pomodori and their famous cheese pecorino was not in production at this time. Obviously, nobody went out for lunch today. Then on to Volterra, another interesting little town with its ancient streets and shops. Visited the old Roman theater, Teatro Romano, which was mostly destroyed, but enough of it remained to fill us with awe.

Our return back to Ebbio was delayed by a very popular bike race, which featured hard-working bikers, motorcycles, cars, some with numerous bikes on their roofs and lots of police. Quite a scene and worth the delay.

Then after dinner, Kathy got us together in the yoga room for some information on airport transportation, tipping suggestions, and comments about our sojourn. A few random comments about a few things. The weather has been absolutely incredible with

beautiful blue skies and sunshine every single day, usually in the eighties during the day, but cooling off at night. They actually need rain quite badly.

Our drivers are great, but a couple of times I was concerned, once when I saw the speedometer hit 140 km per hour, and another when our driver had his face looking at the two women next to him instead of the road for part of the time. The roads going from the thruways, to regular highways, secondary roads and dirt roads were incredible. And the scenery, as we were always in the mountains, is too beautiful to describe. It was hard to believe that Ebbio is located right on the Francesca trail which goes directly down to Rome.

Friday, September 16.

This morning we headed to a local market in a little town close by called Colle di Val d'Elsa, or Hill by the Valley of the Elsa River. There were numerous vendors selling Italian products, but of course there was plenty of stuff from China as well. Our group bought quite a bit.

Then we returned for another lovely lunch and had a few hours off before we headed off for wine tasting to a winery which was somewhere in the middle of the mountains. We had to pay 5 Euros for the tasting, but it was very interesting and well worth it. We tasted one white and three reds, all of course local wines. Tuscany has thousands of grape trees growing through the area and the rows of little trees are always in a perfect line. Then off to Castellina in Chianti for our only night out to dinner. Went to Tre Porte restaurant and had a delicious meal which finished around 10 p.m.

Castellina was a very small village, but its main street was incredible with its old stone walls and occasional circular roofs, which were over 1,000 years old.

And that was it – back to Ebbio to pack up for our early departure tomorrow

As I finish this story, I realize that there are a lot of things that I have omitted to mention. Our day started off at 6:45 a.m. with a yoga class given by either Edwin or Louise. It was always quite a workout and a great way to start off the day. Many of our group were actually yoga teachers, and the stretches they could accomplish were amazing. Edwin taught us the Five Tibetan Traits and the classes were great.

Forgot to mention as well there is a big horse race every year in the main square in Siena. They have to put sand down on the cobblestone for this event. I have described our room at Ebbio already, but we recently found out that 300 years ago it was the summer kitchen of this estate. Swimming consisted of a very small pool of delightful cool water. It was a great way to refresh yourself after each day's activities. However, it was very small and a few strokes brought you to the end of the pool. Well, I licked that one by swimming in a circle. It was a little awkward, but allowed me to do strokes.

I will finish my story of our stay in Tuscany by mentioning a few comments of those running this trip. The owner of our farmhouse was a fellow called Franz, who was quite a character. He ran the place and led us to our various adventures. He was always busy doing something and was a wonderful host, as long as you did not ask him any questions. You all know what I mean, but he was really quite a guy. Edwin was also quite somebody and a great pleasure to be with. No request was ignored and at the end of the trip he carried all our baggage into the vans. Kathy was a great leader

and organizer and always a pleasure to be with. And of course Louise and Stacey were great additions to our stay as well.

I shall not go any further as to the people in our group, but I shall say that we developed a wonderful relationship during this week and it was actually sad to leave them all at the end of this amazing experience.

Ernie Shapiro (proofread by Beverly)

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