

ROME TO BARCELONA

WITH SEPPO PALOKAS

A trip to Rome has been in my bucket list for a long time, so when we heard that Seppo Palokas had arranged a cruise/tour from Rome to Barcelona, we were among the first to sign up. Having been on several of Seppo's tours before, we knew the itinerary was well planned and that every detail would be well taken care of.

On October 24, travelers from the Lake Worth area met at Pointe Overlook for our ride to the Miami airport. When we arrived in Rome, we met the rest of our group who flew in from Toronto, New York and Chicago. Together, we boarded a tour bus that drove us around the city, giving us an overview of what was yet to come.

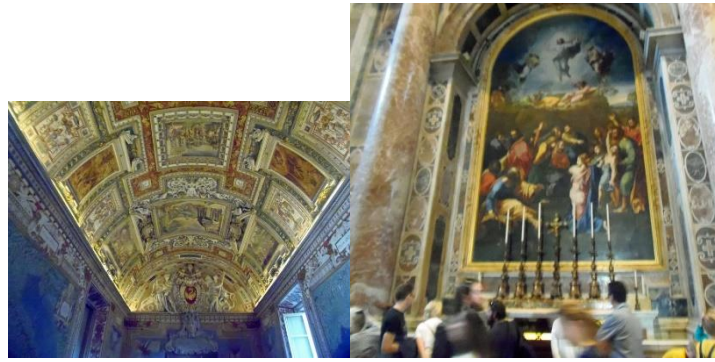
THE COLOSSEUM AND ROMAN FORUM



The next morning our group toured the famous Colosseum and Roman Forum. The Colosseum, an enormous amphitheater, was begun in 72 A.D. and completed in 80 A.D. It was amazing that this structure's remains still allow us to admire its ancient splendor. The Colosseum served many uses, such as The Circus Games, chariot racing, gladiator games, wild beast hunts, and public executions to name a few.

The Roman Forum is a rectangular plaza surrounded by the ruins of several important ancient government buildings at the center of the city of Rome. For centuries the Forum was the center of day-to-day life in Rome, the site of triumphal processions and elections; criminal trials, and gladiator matches. We were amazed that ruins of buildings such as the royal residence (8th century BC) and Temple of Vest (7th century BC) are still intact.

VATICAN CITY



Later that day, we boarded another bus to Vatican City, where we visited the Vatican Museum, Sistine Chapel and St. Peter's Basilica.

The Vatican Museums are Christian and art museums located within the city boundaries of the Vatican, founded by Pope Julius II in the early 16th century. They include some of the most renowned classical sculptures and most important masterpieces of Renaissance art in the world. We were especially impressed by the huge hand-woven tapestries that depicted various Christians and Biblical events.

Our next stop was the Sistine Chapel, with its amazing ceiling decorated by Michelangelo. The Sistine Chapel is in the Apostolic Palace, the official residence of the Pope in Vatican City. The fame of the Sistine Chapel ceiling and The Last Judgment were painted by Michelangelo between 1508 and 1512.

The Basilica of St. Peter, an Italian Renaissance church in Vatican City, is the largest church in the world. It was designed by Michelangelo and others, and is regarded as one of the holiest Catholic shrines.

The basilica is designed as a three-aisled Latin cross with a dome at the crossing, directly above the high altar, which covers the shrine of St. Peter the Apostle. Catholic tradition holds that the Basilica is the burial site of Saint Peter, one of Jesus's Apostles and the first Pope.

The interior of St. Peter's is filled with many masterpieces of Renaissance and Baroque art, among the most famous of which are Michelangelo's Pietà and Baldachin by Bernini over the main altar. The sheer size of the church, statues and painting are enough to take your breath away.

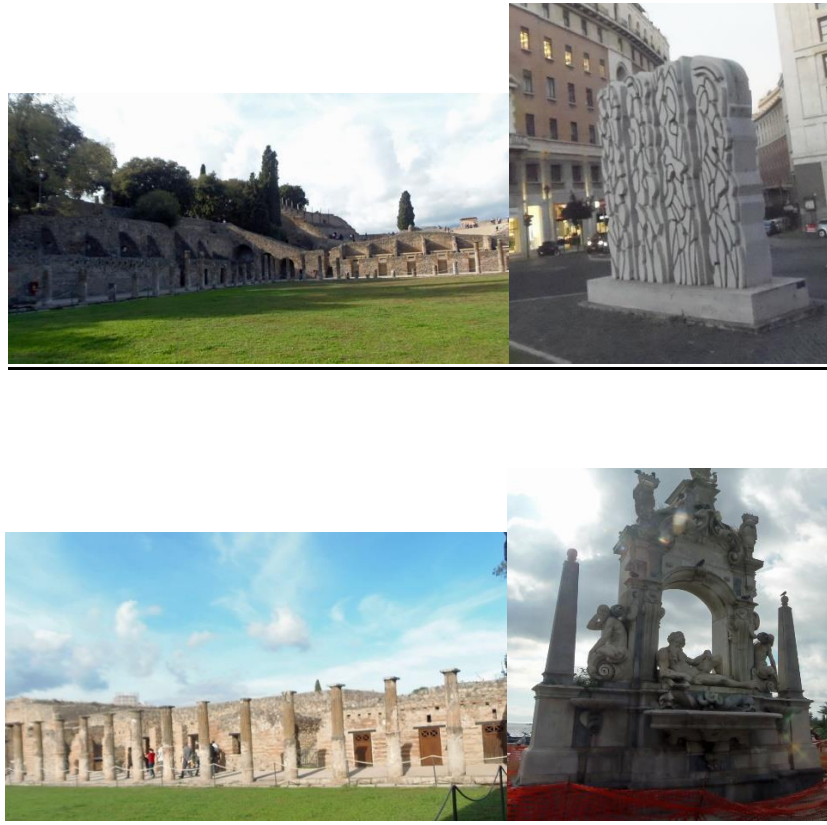
BATHS OF DIOCLETIAN

AND THE CHARTERHOUSE OF SANTA MARIA DEGLANGELI



We visited the Baths of Diocletian and the Charterhouse of Santa Maria Deglangeli near our hotel. The baths are the largest in the ancient Roman world, covering 32 acres, built between the late 1st century AD and the 3rd century AD. The garden displays numerous archaeological finds from that period. The central fountain is a large vase where greenery sprouts up. The area also includes several large inscribed funeral altars dedicated to senators, soldiers and some foreign figures. The altars are made from marble from areas of Rome between the 1st and 2nd centuries AD.

NAPLES AND POMPEII



The next morning, many in our group left on an all-day tour of Naples and Pompeii, while others rode local tour buses to visit other places of interest in Rome.

Naples (Napoli) is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Bronze Age Greek settlements were established in the Naples area in the second millennium B.C. Naples' historic city center is the largest in Europe, covering 4,200 acres and enclosing 27 centuries of history. The city tour included several historically significant sites, including the Palace of Caserta and the Roman ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Pompeii was an ancient Roman town near Naples, founded in the 8th century B.C. The first disaster to hit was a terrible earthquake in 62 A.D. Survivors rebuilt the city and were in the process of completing the restoration when a second disaster struck. Pompeii, along with Herculaneum and many villas in the surrounding area, was mostly destroyed and buried under 13 to 20 feet of volcanic ash and

pumice in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D. The eruption killed its inhabitants. The site was lost for about 1,500 years until its initial rediscovery in 1599 and broader rediscovery almost 150 years later in 1748. The objects that lay beneath the city have been preserved for more than a millennium because of the long lack of air and moisture. These artefacts provide a detailed insight into the life of a city before the volcano. During the excavation, plaster was used to fill in the voids in the ash layers that once held human bodies.

CRUISING ABOARD THE QUEEN VICTORIA

It was now time to say arrivederci to Rome and board the Queen Victoria, one of Cunard's finest ships, at the nearby Port of Civitavecchia. After boarding and checking our staterooms, we went straight to the buffet to start our seven days and nights of "pigging-out". The food, service and entertainment on the ship were outstanding. A highlight of life aboard ship was the formal night, which was also the "Roaring Twenties Night". Several of our group dressed up for the occasion, which you'll see in our pictures! Custom World Travel hosted a farewell party in a private room on the last evening aboard, which was an elegant and fun event. We enjoyed the most beautiful sunset and wondered if Seppo had arranged that, too.





Sunday was a day at sea, with plenty of activities onboard. A highlight was an interesting lecture by Keith Muras, an espionage and international affairs specialist. His topic "The KGB Remembered" was from firsthand information during Muras' tour of duty at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow during the 1980s.

LA SPEZIA (FLORENCE AND PISA)



Our first port was La Spezia, Italy at the head of the Gulf of La Spezia, where we had a wide choice of excursion tours to Florence and Pisa. We chose to visit Pisa, which was over an hour away. Along the way we saw what looked like snow-covered mountains, and were quickly corrected by our tour guide that that “snow” was actual marble and these were the marble quarries of Carrara.

The Leaning Tower of Pisa is a freestanding bell tower of the cathedral of the city of Pisa. The tower is situated behind the Pisa Cathedral. The tower's tilt began during construction in the 12th century, caused by an inadequate foundation on ground too soft on one side to properly support the structure's weight. The tilt increased in the decades before the structure was completed in the 14th century. It gradually increased until the structure was stabilized (and the tilt partially corrected) by efforts in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The tower stands 184 feet high.

In 1934, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini declared the crooked attraction a pockmark on his nation's reputation and allocated resources for straightening the building. Mussolini's men drilled hundreds of holes into the tower's foundation and pumped in tons of grout in a misguided effort to rectify its tilt. Instead, the heavy cement caused the base of the tower to sink deeper into the soil, resulting in an even more severe lean.

Construction on the Cathedral of Pisa began in 1063 with expenses paid using the spoils received fighting against the Muslims in Sicily. It includes various stylistic elements, such as classical, Byzantine, and Islamic, drawing upon the international presence of Pisan merchants at that time.

The Pisa Baptistery of St. John is a Roman Catholic building, with construction starting in 1152 to replace an older baptistery. The Baptistery is constructed of marble, as is common in Italian architecture.

While we were there, a churchwoman entered, stood at the altar in the center, and sang in a beautiful soprano voice. The acoustics in the building with its two domes caused an echo in an alto voice, truly amazing!

GENOA, ITALY



Our next stop was the Port of Genoa, a port city in northwest Italy, the birthplace of Christopher Columbus. We chose to use a taxi for a tour of the city. Our English-speaking driver drove us to several palaces and cathedrals, including the Palazzo Ducale, 13th century home of the Doges of Genoa and the Cathedral of Saint Lawrence, dedicated to Saint Lawrence. The cathedral was built between the 5th and 6th century AD.

Our driver then brought us to the Columbus Monument on Piazza Acquaverde. The statue of Columbus with long hair, dressed in a short Spanish tabard and a large open cloak had some very interesting details: his left hand rests on an anchor while his right is on the shoulder of a figure of America typified by a kneeling Indian maiden holding a cross in the right hand. At each of the four corners of the base, stands a smaller square pedestal, on each of which is a seated statue, representing Piety, Science, Constancy and Prudence.

Our final stop in Genoa was the Aquarium of Genoa which opened in 1992 as part of the Expo commemorating the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyage to the new world. The building, shaped like that of a ship going out to sea, has an incredible variety of fish, ranging from minnows to sharks, even a hands-on pool with stingrays who loved to be touched.

CORSICA, FRANCE



Our next day's stop was at Corsica, France, an island in the Mediterranean Sea and one of the 18 regions of France. It is located southeast of the French mainland and west of the Italian Peninsula, with the nearest land mass being the Italian Island of Sardinia to the immediate south. A single chain of mountains makes up two-thirds of the island.

Napoleon was born in 1769 in the Corsican capital of Ajaccio. His ancestral home, Maison Bonaparte, is today used as a museum.

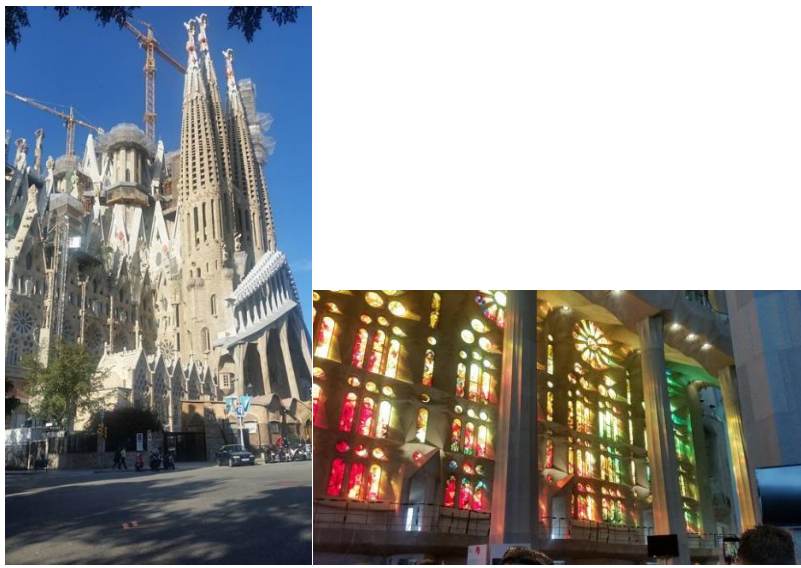
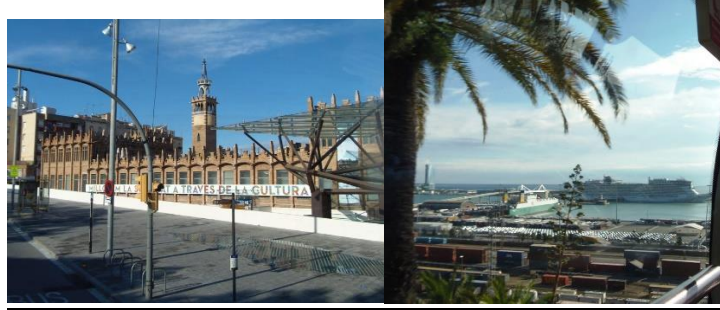
MARSEILLE, FRANCE



Our next day's stop was at the Port of Marseille, France, France's second largest city on the south coast. After a "Little Train" tour of the city, we continued up a narrow, winding road to the top of the city's highest natural point (489 feet). Consecrated on 5 June 1864, the Neo-Byzantine church was built on the foundations of an ancient fort at the basilica's current site.

The Basilica Notre-Dame del la Garde replaced a church of the same name that was built in 1214 and restored in the 15th century. It consists of a lower church or crypt in the Romanesque style, carved from the rock, and an upper church of Neo-Byzantine style decorated with mosaics.

BARCELONA



After a day at sea, we arrived in Barcelona, Spain where we boarded a tour bus that drove us around the city. The next morning, we boarded the hop-on/hop-off tour bus that brought us to dozens of interesting places, including the most visited Sagrada Familia Basilica. Only a few of our tour group had tickets to tour the interior of the building, but we all had the opportunity to view it from outside. It is a large unfinished Roman Catholic Church, designed by Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926). In 1882, construction of Sagrada Família began under architect Francisco Paula de Villar. In 1883, when Villar resigned, Gaudí took over as chief architect, transforming the project with his architectural and engineering style, combining Gothic and curvilinear Art Nouveau forms. Gaudí devoted the remainder of his life to the project, and at the time of his death at age 73 in 1926, less than a quarter of the project was complete.

Relying solely on private donations, Sagrada Familia's construction progressed slowly and was interrupted by the Spanish Civil War. Progress resumed in the 1950s and, with advancements in technologies, have enabled faster progress and construction passed the midpoint in 2010. However, some of the project's greatest challenges remain, including the construction of ten more spires, each symbolizing an important Biblical figure in the New Testament. It is anticipated that the building could be completed by 2026—the centennial of Gaudí's death.

Other points of interest in Barcelona we visited were: The Plaza Monumental de Barcelona, which was a bull fighting arena (until 2012 when bullfighting was outlawed in Barcelona), Gaudí's El Capricho and the Las Rambla pedestrian street. There were plenty of tapas and seafood restaurants. For our final evening in Barcelona, some attended a flamenco dinner while others enjoyed a lovely Argentine restaurant.

On November 6, we boarded an early morning flight back to Miami. When the shuttle bus left us at Pointe Overlook, there were plenty of hugs and exchanges of e-mail addresses and phone numbers. A huge thank to our tour leader, Seppo Palokas of Custom World Travel for another well-planned and exciting trip!