## ROME to TORINO

This week's road trip is going to take us from Rome to Torino (or Turin as the rest of the world knows it). We travel up through **Tuscany** then onto the 'bit off the map' location of **Piedmont** in Italy's north west.

Everyone knows about the Tuscan Sun region of Italy but Piedmont is a little less known. The area specialises in hazelnuts and chocolate, two of my favourite food groups, as well as the most wonderful, smooth red wines.

Here is our week's driving itinerary. Be game, hire a beep mobile and hit the road. Italy is a joy to drive around, even the dead end roads and the places that google sends you that don't really exist. There is so much more to discover when you travel your own path.

For us, the only way to fly is with **Singapore Airlines**, the best in the sky. The flight from Singapore has us arriving bright and early on a Sunday. Our trip begins late March.

We have a ritual of always have a champagne in the departure lounge ….. as everyone knows, it's *always* wine time somewhere in the world! Time for take off!

**SUNDAY – DAY 1**

We have a Fiat Ypsilon rental - nice little car and a bit tight with all our luggage loaded. We always like small cars in Europe, to fit the small streets and even smaller parking spaces. All gleeful offers of "we have an upgrade for you" are met with a very pleasant but firm "no thank you!"

Set off northwards on the road to **San Gimignano** (road to Sienna/Florence). It's a pleasant drive of a few hours. We always take longer than recommended and enjoy a roadside stop along the way. The coffee at these places is worth the stop as are the food offerings.

In San Gimignano, our hotel is the **Antico Pozzo,** beautifully located in the main street. You can park out front to unload but then the car needs to be parked in one of the many stations available outside the Old Town. Easy to get to.

The Old Town is lovely. There are so many cheese shops featuring the local pecorino cheese which comes in so many varieties. Salami is also popular as is wild boar. On a Sunday afternoon the place buzzes and all the shops are open… such a variety too!

Dinner time and we stay local. Close to our hotel, down a back street is the charming **Peruca** – set in its own 'cave' with a wine storage down another level. Everything we wanted on our first night in San Gim/Italy/Europe!

We start with mushroom soup with truffles. Divine but sooooo rich. I've never had a creamier soup. I follow with risotto with pancetta, zucchini flowers and truffle and it is outstanding. Dave has pasta with wild boar, also excellent. We share a cheese platter which has truffle honey accompanying. A glass of local red is the perfect accompaniment.

**MONDAY – DAY 2**

Walking around Italian villages in the first light is one of life's great joys. We venture out at 6:30 for a walk around town, while it's quiet. And it was. We absorb the views to the hills and find a fabulous lookout. We can see forever. It's a nice time to be out, exploring the town.

Breakfast at the **Antico Pozzo** is great - cheese, meats, tomatoes, bread, jams, honey and a fantastic fruit salad. Never having been a 'cereal' person I love Italian breakfasts…. full of local produce.

San Gim is perfectly located for a bit of a hilltop town tour. The local roads are picture perfect and there is little traffic this time of year.

**Certaldo** is a charming hilltop town that is absolutely deserted. Welcome to Tuscany on a Monday in the shoulder season. The area is superb for driving and it is easy to drift around the hills for a few hours - the landscape and the towns are divine.

Back to San Gim and what else to do on a lazy afternoon but head to the piazza to have a sit and a red wine in the sun. We order and tomato and mozzarella salad and Chianti. The salad is huge with a large lump of mozzarella. Melt in your mouth mozzarella... divine and much better than the tomatoes… strange as Italian tomatoes are usually 100% reliable.

The wine..... well. I take a sip and describe it as "earthy." On closer inspection that's because there is a paddock of dirt floating around in our glasses. Guess they didn't notice that when they poured it! We point it out to the waiter and he scoops up our glasses and replaces them with new ones. Doesn't taste any better but we don't have to navigate our way around the flotsam.

Tonight we take the hotels recommendation as we are seeking a good, local pizza (as opposed to a tourist pizza).

It's an easy walk to **Il Trovatore,** which is only a few minutes away and just outside the Old Town wall. There is lovely classical music playing, it's a local restaurant and the ambiance is "Monday night in San Gim." We share a Quattro Stagione (4 Seasons). Hit's the mark perfectly. Our Chianti is way better than the lunch time offering.

Monday nights in San Gim can be quiet.

**TUESDAY – DAY 3**

We are all done in San Gim and hit the road for Alba. Our stay in San Gim has been fabulous - a great choice for day trips to Florence, Siena, Pisa and perfectly located to enjoy Tuscany. Today's trip is 433km. As we get close to Alba all views are framed by the snow-capped alps in the background.

We are staying at the **Hotel Langhe**, on the outskirts of Alba. We have a choice of rooms and choose a long room with a lovely verandah at the end. We have sweeping views to the hills and surrounding vineyards. There is a lounge and workspace and a very roomy bathroom. Everything we need.

Another thing to love about the **Hotel Langhe** is the glass of fabulous local Nebbiolo wine on arrival. The owner is really welcoming and gives us lots of info on the area and the wine making history of the region.

We take our host's recommendation for dinner and head to **Osteria Dell' Arco**, in the town centre. It's an enjoyable 15min walk into town. The restaurant is beautifully laid out and the walls are covered in wine. I start with a local favourite that is a small ravioli - it is so delicate and melt in your mouth. Divine. Dave has gnocchi with spinach and bacon.

To follow we both have the slow cooked veal, washed down with a local red. Sensational!.

It is cold out - 4 degrees. A brisk walk home is required.

**WEDNESDAY – DAY 4**

How well do you sleep when it's cool outside and there is not a noise to be heard!

Breakfast at the **Hotel Langhe** is an absolute treat. The best fruit salad (again, they do it well in Italy) and, best of all, Nocciola Yoghurt..... it's like hazelnut heaven. Rye bread, cold meats and cheese. Lovely.

As well as being surrounded on three sides by the Alps, Piemonte is the home of slow cooking and white truffles. Alba is the perfect base for exploring the area, which is covered in vineyards - it is most unusual to see any land without vines.

First stop is **Grinzane Cavour** and the big attraction here is the Castle, a superb example of Medieval architecture. The central tower as built in the XI century and the main building in the XV. Now, it is a Regional Cellar and wine shop. Perched on the top of the hill, there are views forever.

Onto **Barolo** where **Wi Mu**, the wine museum, has been recommended. It is fabulous .... so creative and informative. Never has a museum been so much fun! Looks like vineyards have been around for a while.

We drive from hilltop town to hilltop town - many of them are closed up and our search for a trattoria in the sun proves futile. We get to **Bra**, which is a busy, bustling town and sit for a while, to watch the world go by. The perfect Italian past time.

Tonight we've chosen **La Piola** in town. The restaurant is empty bar one table when we arrive but slowly fills up with locals as the night wears on. The menu isn't huge but the choice is good. We share a mixed entree - tuna salad, pumpkin, steak tartare and carpaccio along with a plate of mixed salami. The food is good, apart from a 'white salami' which is fat. Nothing can make it taste good (acquired taste).

We have a bottle of **Manuel Marinacci Barbaresco** and it is superb. The waitress is very friendly and helpful. We both have pork shoulder with cream potatoes and artichokes. Possibly the best pork I've ever had! The meal is absolutely divine. We knock back dessert and our waitress brings us some hazelnut chocolate - it is flaky and fragile and out of this world! She brings us more. And a red wine digestive. What a night! Brilliant restaurant.

What a wonderful day is has been, exploring the hilltop towns of Piedmonte.

**THURSDAY – DAY 5**

We head off in a different direction today – it doesn't matter which way you go, it's all just fabulous! The scenery is gorgeous. Not far out of town we climb up a switchback road and the views are forever. We go onto to **Borgomale** and turn left, heading north. The stunning views continue.

At San **Stefano Belbo** we take a left and head west. We get to **Neive**, a delightful hilltop town (of course). The town shows sign of life and feels like one of those "very trendy in the high season" places. We come upon **Cucina Con Enoteca Degusto** ,.. a gorgeous looking place with beautiful views out the back window. Perfecto.

The hosts are a young couple and the place is well supported by locals. I have plin, pasta with a chicken filling in a chicken broth. Divine! Dave has pasta with a tomato and anchovy sauce. Also perfecto. A glass of local red completes the meal. Once again, we have hit the jackpot. The restaurants aren't exxy but the food is outstanding. It is Italy after all.

This is not an accident with the tomato sauce but an artfully created, exceptionally good, pasta dish!

A drive further on takes us to **Barbarasco**, very pretty town and with a bit of life. That's far enough for one day's journey and it's back to Alba we go.

Our evening meal tonight is disappointing so it's "no names, no pack drill" and we will put it down to experience. The service is "you're not Italian so you're not in the restaurant," the food is ordinary but the wine and cheese platter leads to redemption. Great way to end the night, which would have been vastly improved with better food and less pretention.

**FRIDAY – DAY 6**

Dave is big on research and has picked out the **Tanaro Valley Crest** loop and off we go. Blue skies again, Italy is excelling.

The drive takes us through **Rodello** and onto **Cissone** - small but absolutely stunning, with beautiful stone buildings.

We venture along, taking in extraordinary views and experiencing many switch back roads. The drive is magnificent. Our path takes us to Bossolasco – Niella Belbo – Feisoglio – Cravanzana, Borgomale and back to Alba. A superb day that will stay with us forever.

Tonight's dinner is one we've been looking forward to at **Agriturismo Cascina Abate**. Our host tells us it's 10mins - we have realised that everything is '10 min' whether it be 10 or 20 or otherwise.

It's a "challenging" drive as it's dark, the streets are very badly lit, it is a busy time of night on the roads and we are headed out of town. We make it though and from the moment we arrive we know it's going to be a special night.

The dining room is very old world with a magnificent chandelier and interesting art works. It's not a large area and has a wonderful, intimate feel to it. There is no menu - you sit and you are served. Our lovely waitress asks if we would like wine and, when questioned, suggests red is the most suitable. We choose a Nebbiolo as we've enjoyed them to date and she says she has the perfect bottle for us.

Here in Piedmont everything is local - the food, the wine, the cheese and they don't 'blend' ie everything is from the region. It is brilliant and really showcases the best of everything from this local area.

The feast begins:

- Cold meats
- Beef Tartare (minced)
- Chicken salad
- Pumpkin & Leek flan with Fontina cheese sauce
- Asparagus Risotto (the asparagus are to die for!)
- Pasta with Ragu (such light pasta)
- Slow cooked pork (26hrs) with veges
- Coffee Panacotta

One of the best meals you would have anywhere and everything is perfect – the setting, the service, the wine and the bill!  Our bill comes to €90 - the most exceptional and best value degustation experience we've had.

**SATURDAY – DAY 7**

We walk into town as it's market day. It's an easy walk on yet another blue sky day. Cool and crisp.

The main alleyway in town is loaded with stalls - clothes, jewellery, the usual suspects. Our host informed us of where to find the produce so we head there. There are some fabulous stands - cheese and meats are popular as are nocciola.

We grab some nuts, goats cheese and a very robust blue. We are taking the train to France on Monday and this will be our sustenance!

It's is another glorious day and the sun is beaming down. Cold to start but it heats up quickly

We pack for our trip to Torino tomorrow. Alba is the most wonderful spot and the Hotel Langhe perfect in every way. Our host tells us if we have any troubles in Torino just call him …... information, restaurant recommendations, anything at all. This is real Italian hospitality.

The drive into Torina is easy and we arrive right at the front door of the **Palace Hotel Turin.** We are again warmly greeted by Giulian and we were made to feel very welcome. The foyer is lavish with a beautiful bar area to the side. Our room is spacious with a lovely, roomy bathroom.

We walk around the city in the bright sunshine. The city is large and quite busy. All the high end shops and usual suspects appear. We find a sunny spot in the piazza and settle in for a bit of people watching.

We walk up to the Roman quarter, along another lovely, bustling boulevard. It is full of life and many people are out on a Saturday afternoon. Tonight is a "stay in and read a book" night.

**SUNDAY – DAY 8**

Breakfast at the Palace Hotel superb and in a lovely dining room. The first thing that greets us as we enter is plates of chocolate. For breakfast?!

We walk to **Al Bicerin**, the cafe famous for the drink of the same name. The streets are quiet this early on a Sunday. We come upon a local market with cheese, salamis, fresh produce.

There is a queue at **Caffe Al Bicerin**. The cafe is small and quaint and packed. Bicerin is chocolate in the bottom of a glass, coffee on top and unsweetened cream on top. We are instructed that it is better to not stir, just drink. We do as instructed and it's just a little bit delicious. €6.50 - not a bargain but an experience well worth the effort.

**Galleria Umberto** is a park with some ruins and is a nice place to sit in the sun…. and do nothing.

We find the **John the Baptist Church** a short distance away and venture in. The church is beautiful and the use of marble extensive. It is also where the shroud of Turin is housed and the display is very informative. There and many naves with information on banners. Behind the altar, we see people looking down into the church through huge windows…. this looks interesting!

We ask a lady at the desk how we get up there and she directs us to the Plaza Reale and we go in - €12pp. The Palazzo is stunning and the artworks remarkable. The Palazzo is really enjoyable and extends into an art museum.

We wander through an underground museum of excavated artefacts and we are just about done. We walk out into the gardens which are bathed in sunshine. There are people around, sitting in chairs, simply enjoying the day - it is glorious and we take a seat and take it in.

We sit for a while and contemplate our next move. Our genial hotel man recommended a walk down the Via Po which runs down to the river.

The **Via Po** is a lot more local than other streets and there are many temporary bookstands along the footpath. We see an order of ocky come out of a restaurant and it looks fantastic. A quick confab and we decide it's time for a snack and a wine. We take a footpath seat at **Restaurant Mare Misti** for a quick Grilled Octopus and vino rosso. The ocky is fabulous - soooo tender and grilled to perfection. The green salad is also excellent.

Closer to the river the street is filled with outdoor cafes overflowing with people enjoying the sunshine. The shops are shut today so even though there are people out, it isn't crowded.... just pleasantly buzzing.

We walk along the river until we get to the park. There are people everywhere enjoying the sunshine and performing lots of gymnastic activities.

By the time we get back to the hotel is nearly 6pm. It has been the most wonderful day and Torino is a great city..... one that we will most likely return to.

The hotel has booked dinner for us at **Pastificio Defilippis** which is only a few blocks away. We are upstairs with one other guest but the place fills up very quickly. Our waiter is fabulous... friendly, welcoming, humourous.

I have Tagliatelle Verde with vegetables and Dave orders spaghetti and meatballs. The tagliatelle is so good.... so much taste in the tagliatelle itself. Dave's meatballs are also excellent. Our waiter tells us they bottle their own wine and water. This seems to be the go here, where the restaurants own all their products.

We have discussed a Tiramisu for dessert and our waiter also suggests it as they have the "best tiramisu in the world." We tell him the we've already had the best tiramisu in the world and it was in Florence 20 years ago. He is confident his is better. And it is! Just divine, so soft and light with subtle coffee and chocolate taste. We tell him "you win."

We finish with a Limoncello which is also made in house. Again, excellent.

One of the most pleasant evenings we've had. The waiter, the quality of food, the ambiance all made it an exceptional evening.

We muse over the fact that our time in Italy has been too short. Way too short. Torino in particular is a gorgeous city and one we would come back to in a heartbeat (that particular list is getting longer, the more travelling we do!)

**Highlight of the night**: Roger has won his 101st tournament at the Miami Masters beating Isner 6-1 6-4. Very timely as we head off to Switzerland tomorrow. Apart from travel, we are also tennis tragics. One of us is also a Roger tragic…. Dave is much more balanced. Stay tuned for our journey to Annecy and onto Switzerland.