



Travel Dispatches

from

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We enjoy one last breakfast in Torbole on the hotel veranda looking out at those same little dinghies we see every morning resting on their moorings in the harbor. It's very hard to get tired of that view, and we're just lucky to be here. But we set ourselves a ridiculous Euro-itinerary and it's time to move onward.



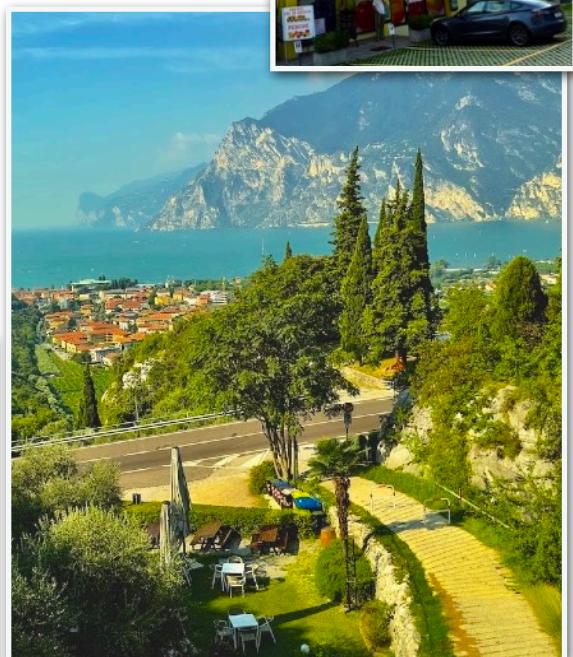
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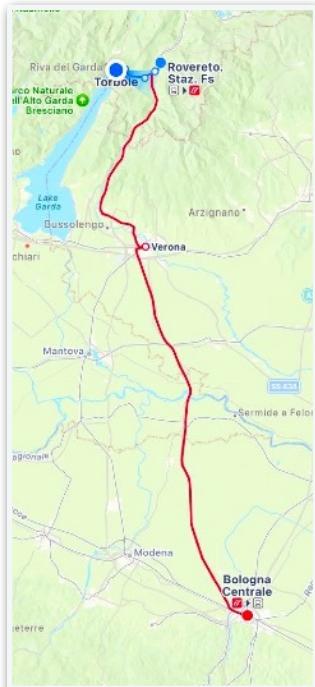
The Rovereto bus takes us up the valley for a last look back at pretty Lago Garda, Italy's largest lake. Soon we're over the crest of a hill, and into the high farmlands with their fertile soils made rich from ancient glacial deposits. It's a warm

day in August and the abundant agricultural wealth here in Northern Italy is palpable. It's a peek behind the curtain, reassuring us that we'll find simple and wonderful culinary delights throughout this engaging country.



Someone once said, "I only do fantasy. If you want reality, ride the bus." It's a snarky comment, yet it's hard to imagine a fantasy that could outdo the wonderful reality of what I'm experiencing today – on a bus through the back roads of Northern Italy.

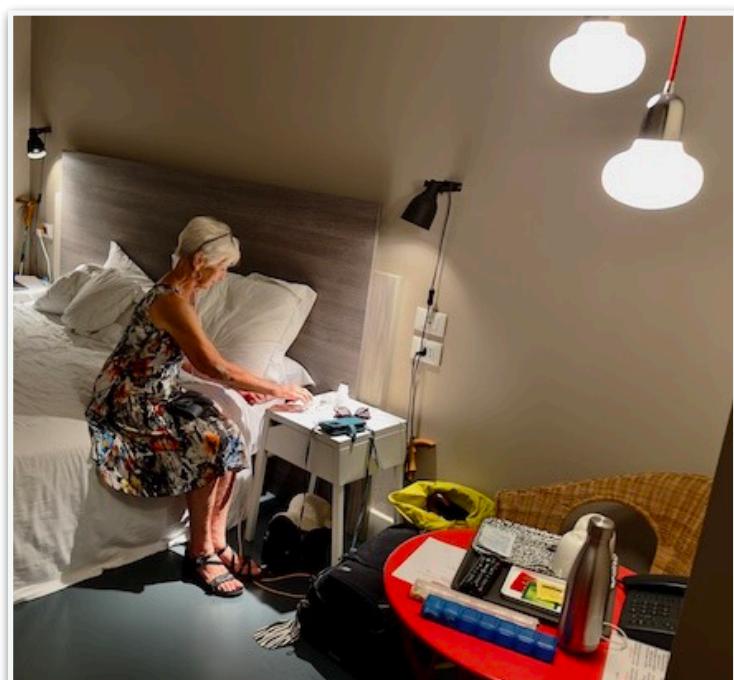
At the Rovereto station we get tickets for the Bologna Centrale station, and relax over cold lemon sodas. We wash up in the *igieni*, and then roll our well-traveled bags to the platform. It's another good train trip back through Verona, and then through more of the farmlands that produce the food we came here to enjoy. Just imagine all the fine polenta that comes from these cornfields. Some nearby students are intent on solving a puzzle, while their cat looks completely bored, as cats usually can.



Soon we're passing a bank of long train sheds as we pull into Bologna's busy station. And then we're waiting outside for a taxi, where everybody is checking their phones.



We arrive at Almarossa to stash our bags, and then we're back outside for a look around. After a good long wander through this city that's known for its narrow streets and arcaded sidewalks, we find a quiet alleyway with a really nice little bistro – one that specializes in excellent Bulgarian food! We have fond memories of great food in the *mehanas* of rural Bulgaria where they really know how to treat vegetables right, and A Balūs is a good choice.



In the morning we're looking for a quiet bistro and a good cup of coffee in this vast student area. What we find are protest signs demanding that Adidas pay their workers a decent wage. And a wall of large inspiring placards reading, "Non Sono Nata Per Essere Regionevole" ("I wasn't born to be regional"), and "Avevo Altre Ambizioni, Sognavo Altre Giustizie, Altre Harmonie" ("I had other ambitions, I dreamed of other Justices, other Harmonies").

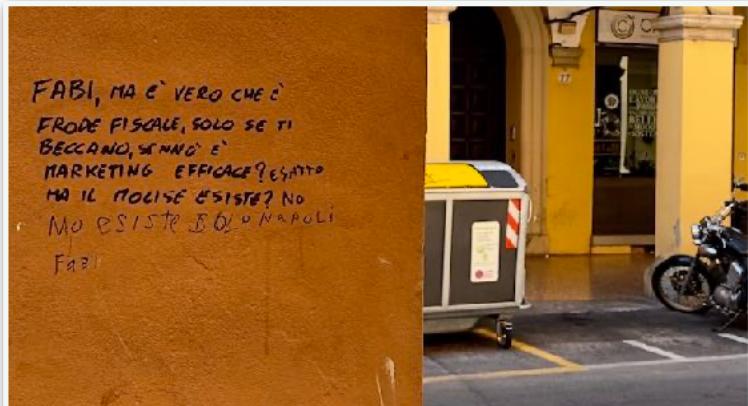


We explore the arcades and scattered institutes of the ancient University of Bologna. The historic integration of city and university is similar to Cambridge, where a good pub or coffee shop was usually at hand. There are tree-lined avenues and ancient remnants of the city gates. And we find coffee and breakfast snacks at a friendly little place called Caffe Mexico!



The city opens to us here in the university area, where freedom of speech is what walls were built for. It's clearly a vibrant community that engages in the debates of the day, in a variety of

languages. We do our best to translate a few of these wall prophets, yet our pocket devices often fail with these slangy variations on the language.

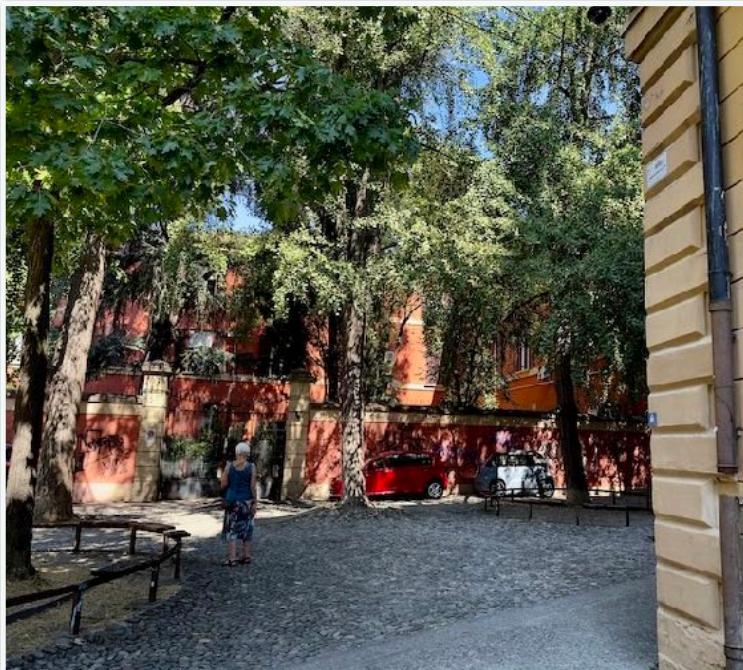


The opera house sports a fine array of artful posters, but we're here between events. Yet I'm sure we'd like to enjoy an evening of opera, concert, or dance during the season.

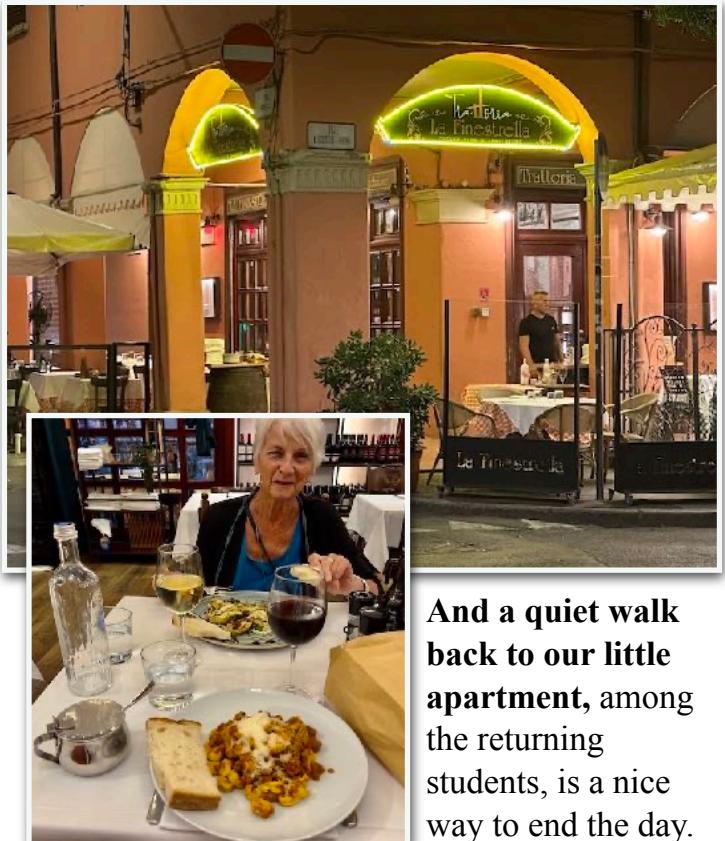




The old section of central Bologna is a maze of piazzas, giardini, ancient structures in danger of collapse, and enough poster art to engage us for the day.



As the day folds into evening, we welcome yet another hearty dinner – of fine Italian food! – to keep us well-provisioned.



And a quiet walk back to our little apartment, among the returning students, is a nice way to end the day.



Morning again brings the need for coffee, and we're heading to a place in the park named Frida nel Parco. It's a combo coffee shop, evening music venue, and bar. We can imagine hanging out later at this place for some good sounds and a tot of joy on the rocks. Early dog walkers pause here with their furry friends, and one eyes Carolyn, hopeful that a



morsel might tumble to the ground. But many people don't appreciate strangers feeding their pets, so we don't. Check out Frida nel Parco:

<https://restaurantguru.it/Frida-nel-Parco-Bologna>

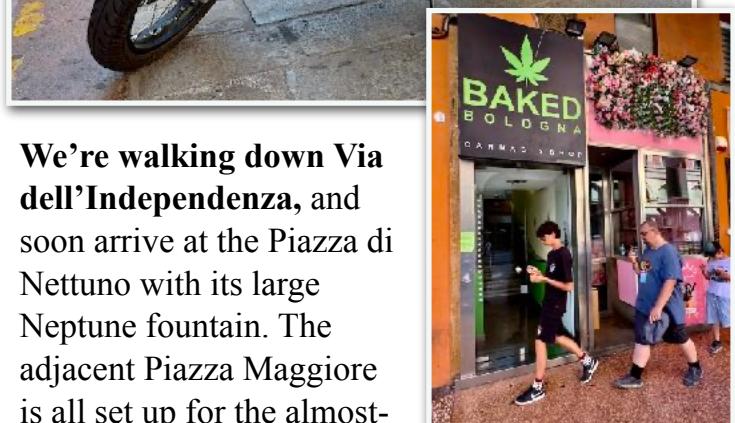
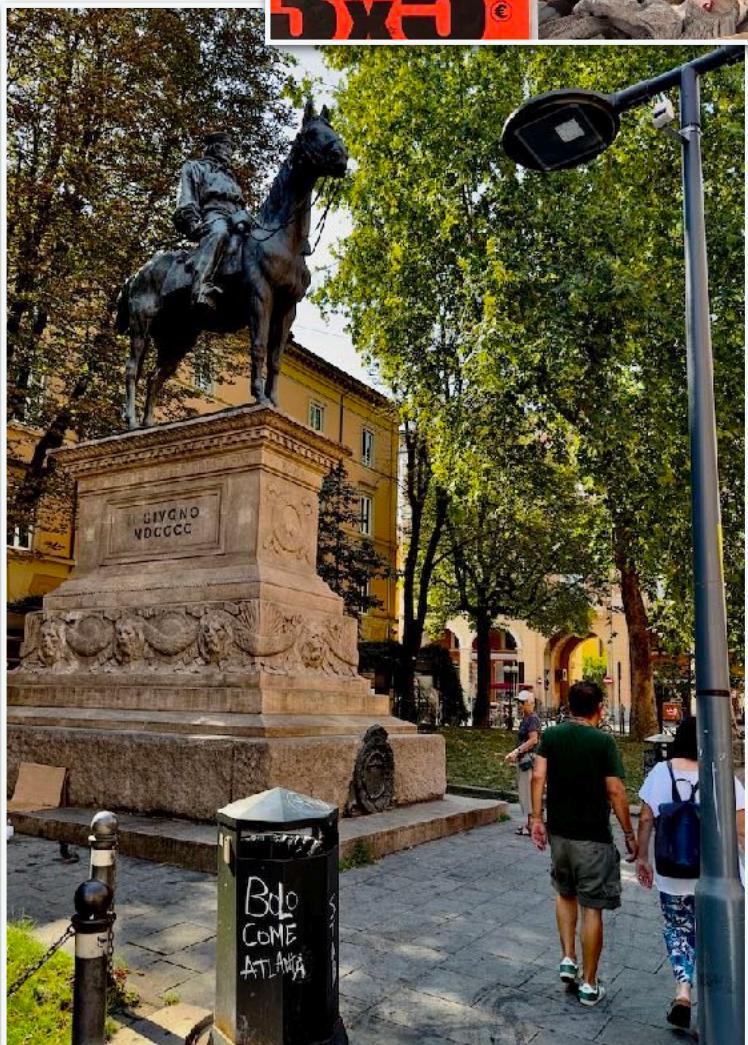


We relax over our coffee and a good snack, and then we're ready for a quiet walk in the Parco della Montagnola, to join the other morning walkers and runners who enjoy this shady spot. There's an overlook onto an old staircase and more of the historic ruins that Bologna retains from her ancient past. There are some beautiful old mansions with private views into the park. And there's one with a gorgeous terrace for enjoying a quiet morning coffee amid the rustle of leaves, or a semi-private evening with friends.



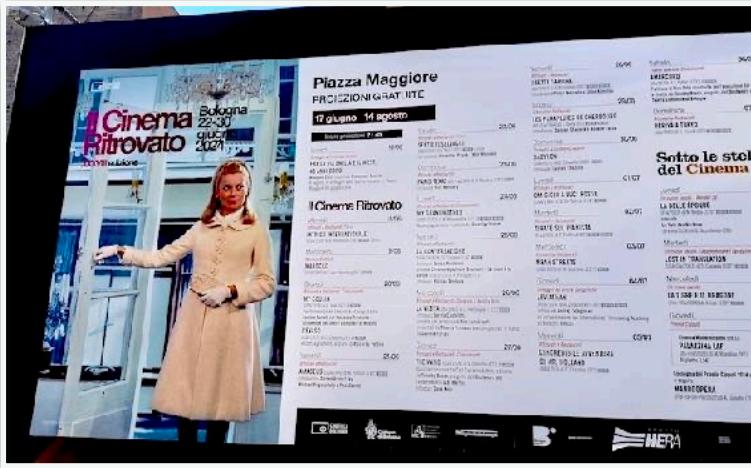


We leave the park to cross broad Via Irnerio into a vast morning mercato – where the low prices get Carolyn's attention! – then we're onward again, past an imposing stature of Garibaldi on a horse, and other assorted amusements.



We're walking down Via dell'Indipendenza, and soon arrive at the Piazza di Nettuno with its large Neptune fountain. The adjacent Piazza Maggiore is all set up for the almost-nightly free film festival that runs through the Summer months. The poster, with a still from *Les Parapluies de*





Cherbourg (1964), features gorgeous Catherine Deneuve. I recall that romantic musical, all in French (which I hardly understood), and without any spoken words. It was screened here back in June, so we missed that one. Yet these ancient streets have much to offer.



We escape the rising heat of a late Summer morning by dodging past an enticing Prosecco sign and down a narrow shady colonnaded street that will take us to – well, we actually have no idea. But it looks interesting.



We even find an Apple Store, and play around with our reflections for a few minutes, both inside and outside the window, before ducking inside for some cool air. We kill a bit of time to enjoy the street views. And to pretend we'll be buying something.



Noontime approaches as hunger draws us back into the heat and onward to a fine little bistro named La Prosciutteria, dating from 1925. The place is a riot of colors and mementos, and in short order we're both head-first into a big beautiful sandwich and a couple of refreshing sodas.



We make our way onward into a warren of streets leading back toward the university area (we hope), where the profusion of semi-interesting graffiti indicates there may be students afoot. Someone has a grudge against umbrellas, and another wants to Free Assange.



And whoever Victor is, he seems to have stolen someone's favored trench coat, and we'll encounter these accusations against the hapless Victor often during our visit. There are also numerous artistic works to attract the eye. There's a message beside a lady balancing a pigeon on her toe. The message may not be related to the picture, but it translates as, "Waiting for Godot." Or maybe not.



The setting sun, and a bit of artwork, remind us we may be hungry, and we soon encounter a fine little sidewalk Trattoria. They even deliver the house wine in a wicker-basket bottle, like back in my no-money college days – although this wine is better than what I recall from those simple days of yore. (We like good red wine but we're not connoisseurs, so we order the house wine with the idea they're unlikely to serve us swill. And it's cheaper.)



After dinner we wander off into the night and pass a weed vending machine, with numerous varieties for the discerning doper. (Are there 'discerning dopers?') We were amused – but not tempted – because we have no idea what concoctions they're selling these days. None of them sound like that simple 'ditch weed' we had back in the 60s, the stuff that just got us a little high and we laughed a lot. Those were the days.



On another fine day we're fascinated by more 'street art' gracing walls in the University area. Some of it is artful and well-done, some is humorous, some is challenging, some is even thought-provoking. And the knuckle-headed worst of it deserves no mention.

Graffiti is an ancient human trait. Many examples have been unearthed by archaeologists – most notably in the ruins of Pompeii, where some of the crudest of them would fit in well with those of today. So I guess we're just stuck with this 'art form' and maybe we should even celebrate the best of it.





Soon we're at the Piazza di Porta Ravegnana

where roads from gates in the old ring wall intersect at an ancient center of the city. This is the home of *Le Due Torri*, Bologna's two famous leaning towers. They were built between 1109 and 1119 – Dante even mentioned them in his *Divina Commedia* – and one of them could actually crumble at any moment. The Asinelli tower, the taller of the two, is 97.2 meters (319 ft) tall, is 134 ft taller than the famous Leaning Tower of Pisa, and has a tilt of 2.2m (8ft). The shorter and fatter Garisenda Tower comes in at 48m (157 ft). It's half

as tall as the Asinelli, yet has a 3.2m (10.5ft) tilt off vertical. Recently the city built a steel wall structure around both of them to contain the damage from when the Garisenda Tower collapses and tons of debris explode across the piazza. Both towers are gigantic and remarkably un-pretty, and although they've been given traditional names, nobody actually knows who built them or why.



The Leaning Tower in Pisa is a delicate campanile, a bell tower, to complement the equally beautiful Cathedral and Baptistry that grace Pisa's Piazza del Miracoli. But the leaning towers of Bologna seem to have been built in competition to see which ruling family was strongest. Or more foolish. Over the centuries they've been used as watchtowers to fend off both foreign invaders and internal revolts. And now at least one of them is a danger to the public.



So we wander warily around the steel bulwarks and hope we're not in the line of flying debris if our modest footsteps happen to be the faint vibrations that trigger the imminent collapse. Other passersby are watching carefully for any warning of a mass exit from the area. And we're all hoping the steel walls are strong enough to contain the damage. It's an odd centerpiece for this ancient city, and a bizarre attraction for those who, throughout history, were fascinated by the crazy tilt of the Garisenda Tower.

In *The Inferno* (published in 1321), Virgil begins to guide Dante's descent into the Ninth Circle of Hell when he encounters the doomed giant Antaeus, who he compares to Bologna's Garisenda tower. (Inf.31.136-141):



See the tiny figures.

"Just as the Garisenda seems when seen beneath the leaning side, when clouds run past and it hangs down as if about to crash, so did Antaeus seem to me as I watched him bend over me—a moment when I'd have preferred to take some other road."

We back carefully away from the impending doom of the Garisenda Tower and decide "to take some other road." There's much more to experience on the old streets of Bologna as we leave the tilting towers behind us and take to the back streets once again.



A stone placard high on a wall reminds us that this is the home town of Ottorino Respighi. Among his many orchestral works, he wrote the playful *Fountains of Rome*, and the majestic *Pines of Rome*, with its powerful climax honoring those towering trees that line the Appian Way and witnessed so many of the grandest Roman processions.



Here's a fine and soaring rendition by Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1InqHiPETFU>

But it's time for us to leave Bologna. We've had a good 5 days here as we wander past places that now seem familiar. There's an old wall with dirty shoe prints left by many people who leaned back here while waited for the bus. There are the tourists, the shops, the stores, a 'lost kitty' flier, a pretty red scooter with a Snoopy decal, and a curious hand-shaped map of the old Jewish Quarter.

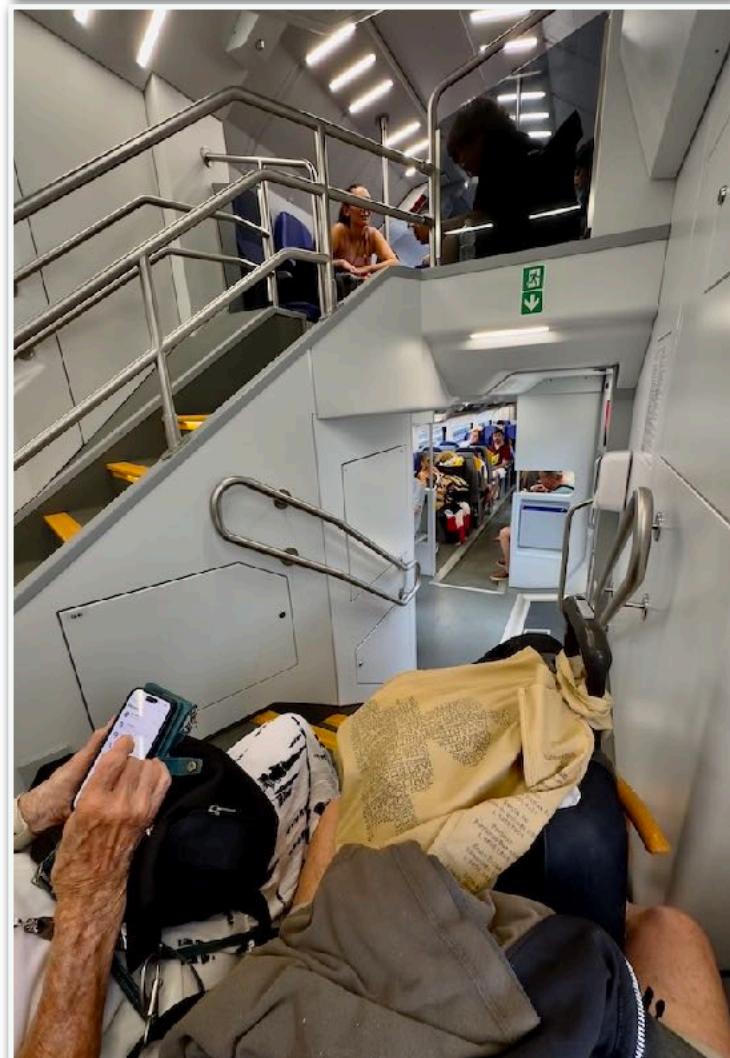


It's getting late and we'll celebrate our departure at A Balūs, that fine Bulgarian place where we enjoyed our first dinner in Bologna.





And in the morning, we roll our well-traveled bags back to Bologna Centrale to buy tickets for Lucca on a double-decker train. Lucca is not far away, but it's not on a main line, so we'll make transfers at Firenze and at Pisa.



Our overall plan was to spend a full month somewhere on this trip, and we chose the small city of Lucca. So join us for that next segment of the journey, and for long morning walks on the broad tree-lined walls that still completely surround the old city of Lucca – birthplace of Puccini! — PRW