



Travel Dispatches

from
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&
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Lucca

August 17-September 14, 2024

We depart from Bologna on another sweet train ride through the Italian countryside.

And soon we're waiting for the key at the doorstep of our modest rental apartment, on Via Santa Croce in Lucca, a small city located in a fertile plain between Firenze and Pisa. There's a nice little restaurant just beside our front door – and a welcoming little bar for tots of late-night grappa.



We're located right near the ancient **Porta San Gervasio**, which used to be part of the city's medieval stone wall defenses, but it's now well inside the city's edges. It's a huge and impressive old structure, but currently there's a large creature dangling under the arch, and holding several iPad kinds of things. A yellow sign explains that it's a work in paper called "Datamorphosis" by a Polish artist named Katarzyna Lyszkowska. It's a commentary on how social media transforms us (into strange animals?) and part of a major public art event called the Lucca Biennale Cartasia, with similar paper art pieces spread throughout the city. We'll see a lot of them during our stay in Lucca.



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There are many other forms of everyday 'street art' scattered about the city as well – including a rag called *Il Fulmicotone* (The Lightning Bolt), that bills itself as “*L’opposizione al Comune di Lucca.*” Their prolific sheets are plastered on walls around the city, and we’ll waste some of our time unsuccessfully trying to translate-decipher a copy of that rag in the local dialect.



But after a good long first day we're distracted by the call of a refreshing Lemon Spritz at a sidewalk bistro, along with dinner and a pitcher of the house wine. And street passersby are there to provide all the dinner entertainment we'll need.



Nothing could be better to end our first evening in sweet Lucca than a post-dinner search for a satisfying gelato. And then a return to our apartment, by the brightly lit Porta San Gervasio, with that massive paper creature dangling in the air.



For anyone looking to enjoy a very long walk, the Via Francigena goes right by our front door. It's a pilgrimage route that was established in 994 by Sigeric, the Archbishop of Canterbury on his long trek to Rome. The Archbishop's route took 97 stages – a journey of at least three months – from Canterbury, through France and the Alps of Switzerland, to Italy and Rome. And it passed through Lucca, one of the few sites mentioned by the Archbishop that still retains its original name.

The Via enters Lucca through the city's most northerly gate, the Porta Santa Maria, and then

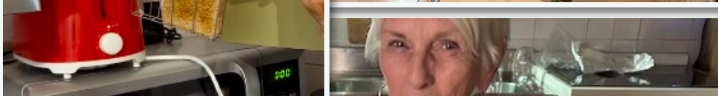
proceeds to the broad Piazza di San Michele. It goes from there down Via Santa Croce – just outside our front door – and then passes under the Porta San Gervasio, to leave through the Porta Elisa on the city's east side.

It's said that those who follow the Via Francigena can 'walk to know' and thus increase their cultural understanding. Sounds very Zen to me, and many who take on such an arduous trek appear to be seeking the same peace in their lives.



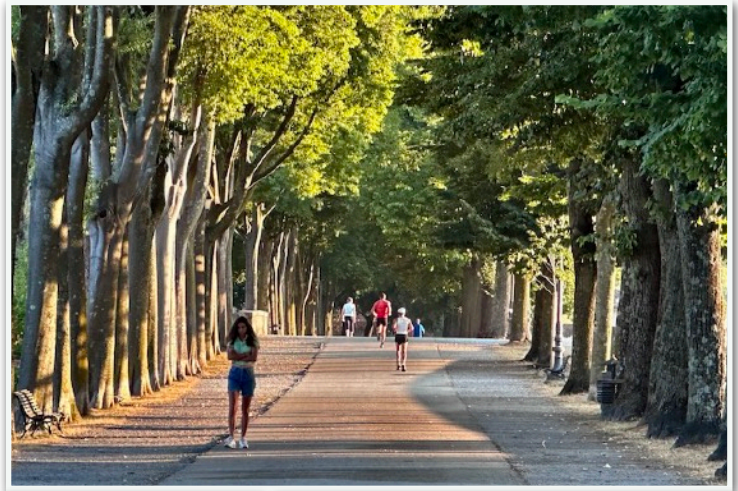
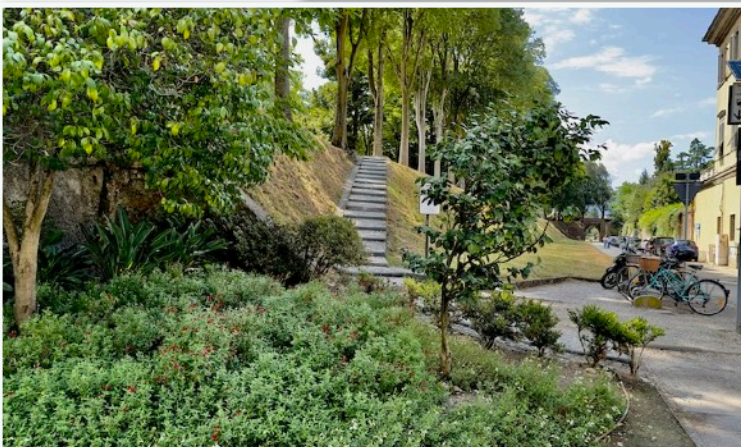
We'll be spending a month in a modest older apartment that used to belong to the mother of our host, Massimo. It's a nice simple place that's certainly comfortable enough for our needs, but we bought a bright red toaster to make our breakfast fare into something special. We also bought a good fan for the bedroom to move that warm summer air around so we could sleep better – and we installed it with our usual tangle of wiring.

And with that, we had all we really needed for our many simple meals 'at home.'





Just nestling into Lucca for a month is like taking a big step back over several centuries, and the massive city walls of Lucca enhance the illusion of excluding the messy modern world. At least for a while. And we're soon taking a peaceful morning stroll to the Porta Elisa (named for Napoleon's sister after he conquered Italy), to climb a pathway and walk



those forested walls with gorgeous views overlooking the old city contained within, and out to the countryside beyond. And the shield of the Compagnia Balestrieri suggests they're ready to defend the balusters with crossbows in hand.



Lucca's defensive walls have gone through several iterations over the past two millennia, beginning with the oldest Roman walls dating from the 2nd century BC. By the 12th century a series of medieval walls were built around a growing city and had largely replaced the old Roman walls. And then, over almost a 150 year period (1504-1648) during the Renaissance, the current massive walls were constructed to withstand the advent of cannon fire during attacks, and to enclose an even larger city. In addition, the land around the walls was cleared of small settlements to provide an open view to approaching enemy forces. Parallel lines of trees were planted upon the entire wall to serve as a wood reserve in times of siege.

The well-fortified city was never attacked by its enemies at Pisa, or the Medicis of Firenze, and by the 1820s the wall had outlived its military use. And that's when the city's new ruler, Maria Luisa de Borbón, Queen of Etruria and Lucca, converted it into a pedestrian promenade and public park.



Today, the entire massive wall (*Le Mura*) is still intact and Lucca is the second largest example of a fully walled Renaissance city, after Nicosia, Cyprus. The wall is more than 4 km long, 12 m high, and 20-25 yards (60-75ft) wide, with no cars allowed. There's a paved *passagiata* down the center for walkers, runners, & cyclists, with lines of trees along each side, 11 broad park-like *baluardi* at corners that once held cannons protecting the wall, and broad surrounding grasslands with a moat outside the wall. Thanks to the vision of Maria Luisa de Borbón it remains a beautiful place to enjoy a brisk morning walk, or to spend restful time on a park bench gazing across the Italian countryside.



So after a good morning walk along the wall, we'll stop at a cafe in the streets below for a bracing cup of dark rich coffee and a sweet treat. And we'll follow that with some daily food shopping at one of the well-supplied little shops nearby.



Here's an informative read, with pics, about the walls of Lucca:

<https://www.mykindofitaly.com/post/lucca-walls>

There are broadsheets posted around the city to advertise the many attractions we can look forward to during our month here in Lucca. There are similar events in many other towns in the region, but we'll find plenty to do right here to fully occupy our time. And there are frequent reminders that this is the birthplace of Giacomo Puccini.



Speaking of Puccini, a visit to his birthplace, at the Museo Casa Natale is on the docket. Popular operas were like the hit movies of their day, and Puccini was a rock star of his time.



His *La Bohème*, about a young girl living as a poor seamstress among struggling artists in the countercultural 'Bohemian' lifestyle of 1830s Paris, remains one of the most popular operas today. The Santa Fe Opera, for its current 2025 summer season, has reset the opera into 1920s Paris – a fervent period after the horrors of WWI, when the city's lively cafe society and salons hosted famous artists and writers (Picasso, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Stein, Matisse, Sartre) who could be found at those same tables discussing ideas over coffee and wine.



For true opera buffs, there's a nightly recital of various operatic pieces at 7pm in the Chiesa di San Giovanni. It's a treat to hear those notes bouncing around the high marble walls of this old church. Every night, the talented Diego Fiorini, dressed in his formal white jacket, is at the piano to accompany the artists in their presentations. And for those of us lacking fluency in multiple languages, they even sell a booklet with translations of all the works presented.



After the concert we'll find a quiet little open-air bistro nearby to top off the evening with good wine and delicious comestibles. And it's hard to imagine a finer end to the evening.

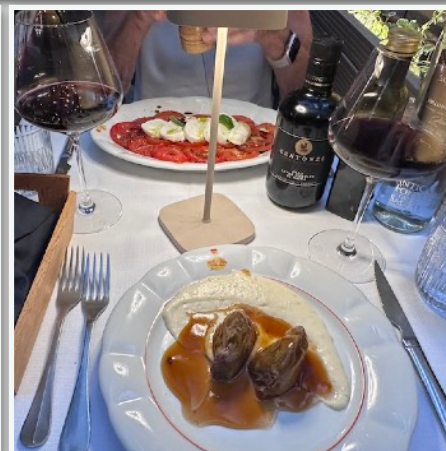


We spend our days wandering the endlessly intriguing narrow streets of this small city that's like its own museum. We stop on busy Via Fillungo for a simple lunch of *fagioli e pane* (beans and bread) with olive oil.

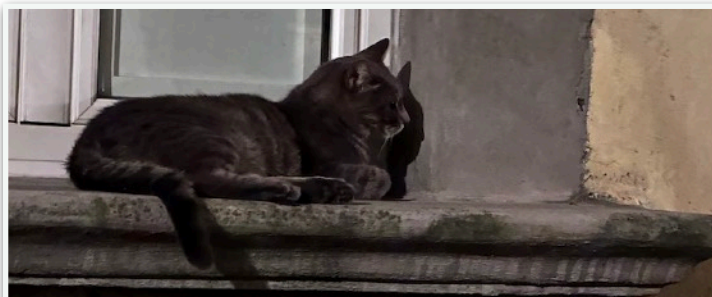
It's not a featured item on the menu, and we get an odd look or two. But it's a delicious midday treat as the crowds of August pass us by. (On the first day of September the streets of Lucca will get a lot less crowded as Euro-vacationers head back to work.)

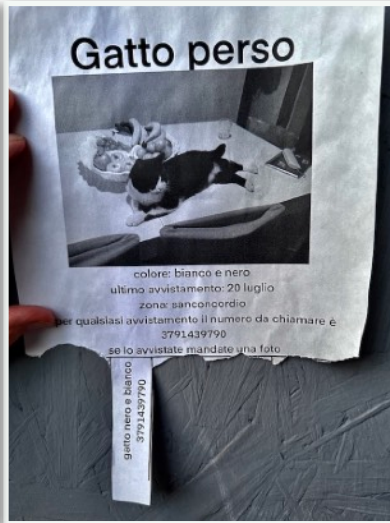


The old brick walls of Lucca still retain the history of every modification they've undergone over the centuries, beginning with an open arcade, and then to a small doorway, and now to a large window. Bicycles are a common means to transport goods in these narrow streets, and there's a preference for small cars that fit these small spaces. Colorful shops and clothing and art abound. And we find yet another nice little bistro to end the day.



People have their cats and dogs, even here in this ancient city, and with the same issues as anywhere else. Most of the signs need little translation.





During our daily wandering we often pass through the Piazza San Michele. It's a kind of center crossing for the city with horse-drawn carriages and protest signs. And it hosts pilgrims on the Via Francigena. Currently it's also the site of another large paper art construction that looks like, well I'm not sure. Your imagination can take it from there.



This evening we're on our way to the Piazza Cittadella, a small piazza – with a large bronze statue of Puccini – just down an adjacent narrow street from the San Michele church. It's jammed with chairs for the evening's free opera recital in the open air, and Diego Fiorini is there at the piano again, in his formal white jacket. And we'll enjoy a round of refreshing Aperol Spritz and a fine dinner during the concert at one of the adjacent cafes.



The Torre Guinigi dates from the 14th century and is one of the few towers left today in Lucca. Its distinctive crown of holm oaks makes it a ‘garden in the sky’ and sets it apart from most other towers anywhere in the world. And a well-lit nighttime view is an impressive landmark. It’s a long trek to the top and my failing right leg prevented me from

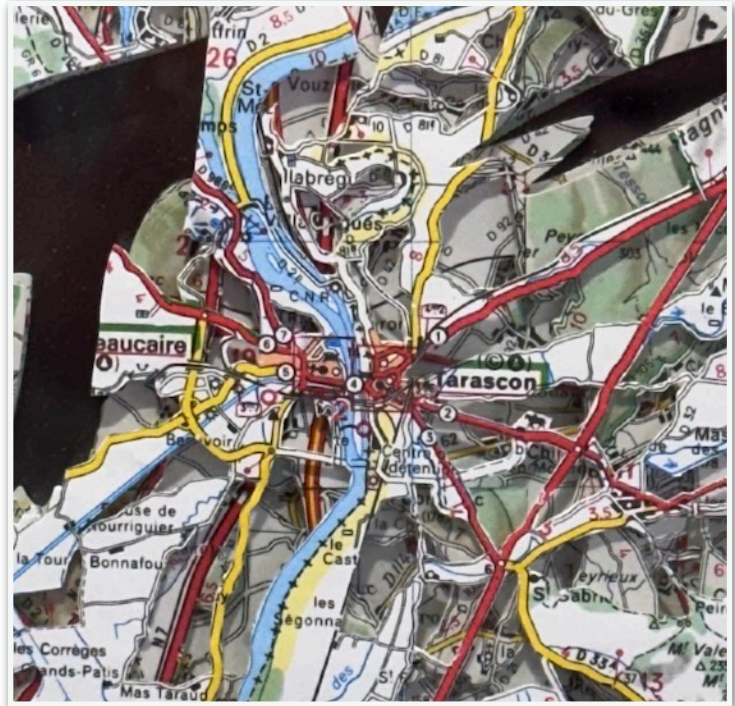
getting that famous full view over the city, yet there are still rewarding rooftop views from lower levels.

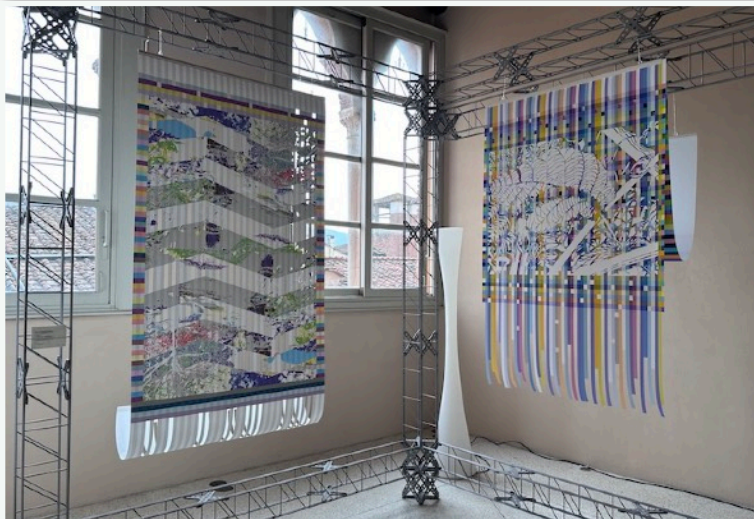


There’s an extensive exhibit of excellent art inside the tower’s lower floors, as a continuation of the paper festival on display throughout the city. A simple piece of paper can be transformed into a number of creative forms with only a fold or two, and paper crafts have come a long way over the years.



There’s a Michelin Map that’s transformed into a 3D art form, and I recognize the towns of Beaucaire and Tarascon facing each other across the Rhône. It’s where we spent a fine month a few years ago. Many other figures on display are so lifelike you might want to ask their permission for staring. And a whale has a tiny temple riding among the mountains on its broad back.





For non-opera lovers, there's the 20th annual Women's Jazz Fest – and it's at that church behind these formidable paper monsters. It was an open-courtyard evening full of good music from a talented group of ladies, with some backup guys.



And there's a big show by the bell tower for the *bambini*, the kids – complete with *Minnie e Topolino*.



The Summer continues into September with the Murabilia, a multi-day event held on the broad city walls and balusters, and featuring flowers, fresh produce, art, fine jewelry, and music in the open air.



We spend our remaining days enjoying more of the city, especially now that it's September and the summer crowds have gone. We pass by La Bottega di Anna & Leo, where the sign clearly states there's "NO PANINI, NO CARBONARA, NO HAMBURGER, NO PIZZA, NO BAR service." It's in caps, so you've been warned.

There's a very loud and colorful street demonstration in support of (I think!) a local fútbol team. But I backed into a nearby doorway, just in case.



So I get roped in to some shopping. But that's OK, as long as there's a place to sit. And Carolyn rarely pays retail for anything to wear, so it won't take long. Then Carolyn's eye is caught by another small shop where a woman is weaving. She ventures in and soon emerges with "the Scarf of Lucca." Imagine that!



We attend a tango music show one night, and the opera “Cavalleria Rusticana” (‘Rustic Chivalry’) at a theater named for Luigi Boccherini (1743-1805), yet another fine musician from Lucca. And as we wander further into the late night streets, we discover a place with pizza! This is not Naples, but a pizza and a very tall cold birra sure seems like a good idea.



The quiet and leafy back street Ristorante All Olivo was another memorable experience worthy of a special return visit. Just being there in a tiny open piazza among the plant life was a fine enhancement to the excellent food.

During the waning days of our Lucca stay we revisit a few of our favorite bistros, such as the Antica Osteria, with its soft side-lighting. And the small LED table lamps that we’re seeing often in Europe actually light the table without glaring in your eyes. We make a note to find some of those when we return home.





La Casa di Nonna Clara in the Piazza Bernardini was near our apartment, and a good choice for some of the best pasta around – made right there as you watch. And the Nonno who runs the place is usually reclined there to see that all is going well.



And we'll return to the wall once more for a fine farewell dinner while the evening paints the skies with color. The people of Lucca are out to enjoy an evening's exercise as we enjoy our quiet table of fine food and wine. I don't know what's on TV at the moment, but a lot of local folks seem to have voted for a more refreshing venue with their sneaker-clad feet.



There was so much more to do in Lucca, but it's finally time for us to depart this remarkable city, with all of its excellent small venues, its fine food and its unforgettable vistas over the countryside. We'll now make our way onward.



We start early and roll our bags to the train station just outside the Porta San Pietro, the St Peter gate, on the south side of Lucca. After a quick breakfast at the station we catch the local train to Villareggio, where we'll connect with the coastal route. Then we'll cruise north up the rugged Tuscan coast along the Ligurian Sea, and toward Ventimiglia, at the French border. From there we'll get ourselves inland to a sweet little town called Dolceacqua.



But that's another story. Please join us soon for that one! — *PRW*