



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

## Under a Tuscan Roof

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**M**y husband Rod and I celebrated our tenth anniversary in June by spending 10 days in Pisa, Italy, with my husband's cousins, Nadia and Amadeo. Pisa

is a charming town, often overlooked by tourists except those who come to see the "Torre Pendiente," the Leaning Tower. It is home to the University of Pisa, one of the oldest universities in Europe. Established in 1343, it was there that in the 16th Century Galileo developed the law of the pendulum, measured the weights of different forms of matter, and overturned Aristotle's law by demonstrating that objects of various weights fell from the Leaning Tower at the same pace. We stayed with our cousins in their 1920s villa, right next to the university, from which they both graduated.

The spirit of inquiry and learning still pervades Pisa, with students and professors walking and bicycling about the colorful narrow streets lined with ancient buildings. History is alive there, as in a church in the Piazza Dei Cavalieri that commemorates the Pisa knights who fought in the Crusades almost a thousand years ago. It is filled with captured battle flags and other talismans they brought back from the Middle East. In the spirit of continued scientific evolution, our cousins, both medical doctors, started practicing internal medicine and neonatology, moved into dental surgery, and now incorporate Ayurvedic and homeopathic medicine into their practice.

Our cousins love family, food, animals and opera, not necessarily in that order. They have three dogs, and a giant white duck named Gina roamed their garden until she died a little while ago. Instead of watching TV, on a Sunday afternoon they watch a DVD of *La Boheme*, commenting on the plot and shedding tears at the conclusion. Lunch is still a family affair, where both professionals, a brother, an elderly father, a grad student son and his girlfriend may all convene for a hot meal at home, followed by the traditional hour of rest before all return to their occupations for the rest of the day.

Tuscany today strikes the visitor as both prosperous and intelligent in its economic development. Most products available in its stores are produced in Italy and usually in Tuscany. Wine, cheese, breads, fruit, vegetables, meats and grains are all delicious, mostly organic, and locally sourced. After all, Tuscany is the origin of the Slow Food movement. Old buildings are preserved but often turned

to new uses with modern infrastructure, and everything is clean and meticulously maintained.

Transportation is efficient in Northern Italy, as throughout Europe, with Frecciarossa high-speed trains whisking us the 150 miles from Milan to Florence in two hours. This casts a dim light on the continuing difficulties for the United States in getting our high speed rail system going, since having this modern transportation system has become an index of prosperity and economic development in the rest of the world.

Yet the problem of unemployment of younger people is ever-present in Italy, as it is throughout Europe. Almost 30 percent of those aged 15 to 24 in Italy are unemployed, the highest point in a steadily climbing rate over the past decade. Pensions of older generations and an aging population place a burden on the economy and leave those newly seeking employment out in the cold. Graffiti on the walls of Pisa University reads, "F\*\*k Austerity!" – perhaps reflecting the frustration at the lack of economic promise for those graduating. Our relatives roll their eyes at the perpetually deficit-ridden national budgets.

But everyone we met seems to be coping. Rather than being a stigma, young people often live at home with their parents until they marry, avoiding the expense of setting up households of their own. Our cousins obviously relish their 29 year old son Antonio being at home while he finishes his architecture degree, and his girlfriend of a decade, Francesca, who studies engineering alongside Antonio, is always part of family life and meals. They shuttle between his family and hers, study together at the dining room table, and there is no expectation that they will set up a separate household or even marry until their careers are well launched.

It's always fun to exchange cross-cultural observations with our relatives. One evening we were all watching CNN in English, which was reporting on the follies of Rep. Anthony Weiner, the former U.S. congressman who resigned over his "sexting" on the Internet. Our cousins and their son looked at us quizzically – *what was this all about?* We explained in our broken mixture of Italian and English, and saw the light dawn in their eyes. "Ah," Antonio said, "Bunga Bunga!" This has become the shorthand in Italy for politicians' sex scandals, used by the Italian newspapers to describe Prime Minister Berlusconi's dalliances with underage girls and other ladies.

Bunga Bunga. Some things are the same the world over! Ω

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