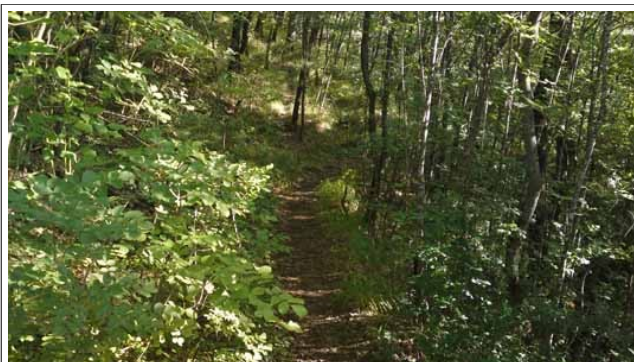


Date: 16/08/2010 Place: Stia Kms walked:680 Kms Left: Oodles!

Well if the last postcard was a dissertation on taking the wrong path, this one is in praise of the way marking on the Camino de San Francesco from Valfabbrica to La Verna!

I had copies of what looked like good maps of the route from Assisi to La Verna from an Italian detailed route guide, Di Qui Passo Francesco by Angela Seracchioli. Despite my monumental mistake on the Assisi to Valfabbrica section, I decided to try and follow the way marked route on the basis that if I went wrong I would abandon the attempt and continue by road. Apart from one very short section, the way marking was absolutely excellent. Believe me, if there is an opportunity to go wrong, I will find it! There were only 2 occasions when the choice of route at a junction was not obvious. On the first occasion, I went up the gravel road for about 50m and finding no marking, returned and took the other and found a confirmation waymark within a very short distance. On the second occasion the road petered out after about 30m!

It was a true joy to walk apart from a couple of worryingly steep bits. One instance was so steep, (I'm sure over 60 degrees) that I could hardly get up it – there were no foot or hand holds, just plain earth. If it had been wet I think it would have been completely impassible. I would have had to have waited there until a scout group appeared to rescue me! (and I did meet one later that day). The other very dicey place was just a couple of days before I reached La Verna where again it was very steep, this time going down, with no path, just following waymarks on trees, and the trees were too widely spaced to give handholds. Again, had it been wet I don't like to think what the outcome would have been.



Route thru woods



Over the hills, across the valley and up the other side!

However apart from those it was beautiful – demanding but beautiful. Mostly it was off road, on gravel roads or through woods, but of course this part of Italy is very hilly so you were going up to 800 – 1000m then down to 400m, walking along the valley floor then up the other side. You pass through some beautiful towns such as Gubbio, Citta di Castello and Citerna.



Roman ampitheatre at Gubbio



Paved street in Pietralunga, typical of the towns in the area



Medieval walkway in Citerna



Pause for prayer in Parish Church of Citerna

The last day's walk, into La Verna was wonderful. I had camped wild the night before, on a very wide verge on the actual the camino which was a pleasant gravel road at that point. During the night I was visited by what I can only assume from the snorts and grunting were wild boar! They decided I was of no interest and moved on. Next morning to my relief the tent was not wet and I was on my way just as the sun came up over the nearby peaks. This was the highest ascent of the Assisi to La Verna journey. It went up to nearly 1200m. (Nothing compared to Mt Terminillo at 1800m!) Up and up it went. And just when it levels out a bit and you think you're at the top, up it goes again. At long last I reached the highest point. I wondered when I would start meeting pilgrims from La Verna. By now, this being August, I had met quite a few pilgrims over the days. Quite soon my question was answered.

A group of about 6 approached, and there was a young lad whose face seemed familiar. Next thing I heard shouts of "Ann, Ann" and a figure came running along the path and threw her arms around me, hugging me so tightly I nearly overbalanced and fell over! It was Sara, one of the young Italian group I had met in 2008 when walking from London to Assisi. Giulia, her brother Vittorio and Sara were walking from La Verna to Rieti. In 2008 I had been joined at Siena by a friend of mine, Joe, and we had met them at Radiocofani. We had become very friendly with them and this meeting was a real bolt out of the blue! If I had left Rome when I originally planned, I would have missed them. I felt sure this was why my departure had been delayed!

We exchanged news and I told them about a pilgrim refuge that was not in the guidebook, and warned them about the place where the way marking was not so good. We said our fond farewells

and parted. The rest of the walk that day was lovely. Going down a slope something made me look up and there in front of me was Mt La Verna. It was like seeing the dome of St Peter's from afar for the first time. I felt a tiny bit sad that this was my last day on the Camino de San Francesco - I had got used to walking off road. I walked slowly down the last kilometre to the Sanctuary car park where I changed into a top that covered my shoulders and long trousers. Then I entered the Sanctuary. Sadly the sense of peace and stillness I had expected was marred by some of the visitors!

Fortunately I was able to stay in the pilgrim accommodation actually at the Sanctuary and next morning could walk around before the tourists arrived. The only other people were also there to pray and be still. It was lovely. Assisi is a thriving, busy town so I expected the Basilica there to be bustling with people, but I had expected La Verna to be different. St Francis loved it for its remoteness. In the quietness of the morning I could feel a sense of him in the rocks of Sasso Spicco where he prayed, and the iron bed where he slept. I set out that morning much later than I intended but I have learned on this journey not to try and stick to a timetable if an inner voice is telling me to slow down and be in the moment.



Mt La Verna thru the trees



Sasso Spicco

Happy to Meet, Sorry to Part (an album by the Irish group, Horslips!)



Happy meetings, Sara and Vitorio stand either side of me, Giulia on far right



Sad partings, Simona and Pat on either side of me with 3 of the 'English' contingent

After La Verna I detoured off the path to Jerusalem by heading west to Florence. I was very fortunate in that with Pat Gaffney's help I was able to stay at the Pax Christi Peace House just outside Florence. I had of course wanted to walk there but I had one minor problem. I had a road map that got me within the Florence environment, and another very detailed one that showed me the exact location of the Pax Christi house. But the roads on the detailed map were not on my road

map, and I did not know how to get from one to the other. "Oh what an opportunity to get really lost!" I hear you all think!

Anyway I arrived at the town which was the last point of reference on my road map and phoned Carmine who runs the Peace House. I rather hoped he would give me instructions as to how to get to the Peace House and indeed he did. He told me to take a bus. I had only walked about 10kms so far because I had had to walk a massive 37kms the previous day (another story!) so I wasn't ready to give up and take a bus. I studied the 2 maps carefully and set off in what I hoped was the right direction. Very soon after I came to a junction and stopped to study the map again. Just then a car stopped beside me and the lady in the passenger seat asked me where I was going. They had stopped because they had seen I was consulting a map and needed help. It was so kind of them. She confirmed I was en route to a village on my detailed map. Yippee! Although she did warn me it was a steep climb – no problem to someone who has walked there from Rome (I didn't tell her that!).

After consulting two more Guardian Angels who confirmed I was still on the right route, and a few more descents and ascents I arrived at a T junction at the top of a hill. I took out the map just to make sure the left turning was the correct one when a car pulled up. The driver rolled down the passenger window and said "I am Carmine, welcome!" I just couldn't believe it (do I sound like Victor Meldrew)! A second later and he would have rounded the corner and I would have missed him. He said 'Casa per la Pace' was just 200m down the road and don't go right at the Church and I would recognise it. I started to feel a bit confused which must have been reflected in my face because he told me to get into the car and then drove me to the Peace House. However I was just over the moon that I had actually got there without unintentional detours round the Italian countryside (that was to come later though!).

He was actually on his way to pick up a couple of Italians who were joining the Youth Work Camp for the week. He dropped me off asking if I would like something to drink. "A cold beer" I replied. I had been promising myself one that day (I might point out here that I have been quite abstemious this pilgrimage. I always used to have a cold beer about midday - it's good for the feet I would tell myself - but this time I have not been. Nor having wine in the evening other than very occasionally). Alas he did not have beer but did have wine. Simona who could speak excellent English came out and Carmine explained who I was etc and then went off leaving her to deal with me. She gave me lovely cold wine and then presented me with a tray of ice cold watermelon. You know the expression "scoffing cakes" of which greedy children are accused? That was what I did to the watermelon. It had been hot, I had walked about 15kms 'up hill and down dale' so to speak and I couldn't stop scoffing the watermelon. I kept having to apologise to Simona saying "I don't normally eat like this, honestly"!

Later that evening Pat herself arrived with 4 young people from England who were participating in the Work Camp. Like meeting Sara en route to La Verna, if things had gone to MY plans I would have been and gone before she ever arrived. But because of all the various delays I had had, I ended up arriving on the same day as her. It was just so wonderful to see her.

So I had intended to stay 3 nights and indeed I did get dressed and packed to leave. But in reality I was not ready and with the intervention of Simona I stayed another 2 nights. I visited Florence twice but didn't manage to get to the Cathedral. Nor did I manage to get my second 'anti-tic' jab. But these things happen. But thanks to Simona I did get a problem related to internet access sorted out. And I got all my clothes and towel washed, and trousers repaired, long overdue emails answered and some website testing done. And of course I met wonderful, kind generous people.

Each day after breakfast we gathered in the garden for a prayer session. At one of these Pat had invited me to tell the young people why I was doing this pilgrimage. At some point I will do a Postcard about it. But the result of my explanation was that on the day I left, one of the Italian girls came up to me and said she really understood why and was very happy that I was doing it and asked me to pray for her. That was a huge affirmation for me and I am very grateful to her for it.

And then came the day when I knew I had to go. Ironically things conspired against me and tried to prevent me from leaving, including a rather heavy rainstorm! But I did leave and the weather turned and I had a pleasant sunny afternoon walk, ironically retracing my steps and because I had left so late, ended up camping wild in the same place as I had when walking to the Peace House. The stay at the Peace House had enabled me to examine my onward route and I discovered that my original plans took me along a rather busy road so I re-planned it which meant I went back the way I came as far as Pratovecchio (and indeed the kindness I met there on my original journey thru is yet another story) and then head north to Stia and Santa Sofia and onwards to Ravenna.

And just one more 'story' I wanted to share with you – this is turning into a letter rather than a postcard!

On my way to La Verna, only a couple of days away, I ran into yet another Guardian Angel in the form of a young Austrian girl who told me about a place further on which was a shelter but had no electricity or water. She was not sure of the details but thought it was still open. I asked her if there was any water between here and there and she said no. I had just passed a water tap so went back with her to show her where it was and to replenish my own supplies. I warned her about a section of the route that was not well way marked, and we parted.

My walk carried on upwards, and on and on up. At last I reached the place she had been talking about which was a bit over 1000m in altitude. It was a refuge run by the Italian equivalent of the Forestry Commission and was free and open. It had a room with a fireplace and long table with benches, a bedroom and 2 non-working loos. Some people had lit a wood fire and it was still burning. It was lovely and warm, a perfect gift for me who was expecting to camp wild that night. I set up my bed in the 'living room' near the fire and settled at the table to write my diary.

The refuge was in a National Park area, accessible by car and very soon a group of Italians arrived. They had come out for a day trip into the park and were curious about the refuge building, perhaps thinking it might be somewhere that sold refreshments. They walked in, inspecting the place and 'passed the time of day with me' and then left. Then another group arrived and the same thing happened but this time I had the opportunity to say I was walking to Jerusalem. "Are you allowed to stay here?" one of the women asked. "I hope so" I replied and took her outside and pointed out the notice which said "Accesso Libero". She nodded in understanding.

A short time went by and I heard footsteps. "Ah" I thought to myself "another group of Italians curious about the refuge" and I started to prepare myself for the questions. But no. It was one of the men from the last group. He came in carrying 2 huge lumps of wood - boughs of trees, they were not branches! And the look on his face. It was a mixture of pride and pleasure at being able to do this unasked for favour! It must have been a real effort to carry that wood. He knew it could get quite cold so high up, and what a difference it would make if the fire stayed in all night. There have been many times when people have helped like that on my journey but the look on that man's face I will never forget. Alas I didn't even get his name, nor the opportunity to tell him I will pray for him. His kind action meant I had warmth and a fire all night long. It was so comforting to see the

flames flickering as the sun went down and darkness fell.



The refuge living room



The warmth and comfort of a real log fire

So that's it. My next major places are Venice and onwards to Trieste. I don't know yet when I'll get to Venice as I am only planning about 10 days at a time. My guess is about beginning of September. I've studied the maps and it looks like the countryside will soon change significantly and also I am heading for the east coast so that will be quite a change from the mountains.

Take care and God Bless

Ann