

Chapter VI - Florence and Mugello

It takes forever to get packed up in Rome. The confines of the small room hinder things. Fortunately the drive to Florence isn't long, 285 kilometers or about 3 hours. We get there in the early evening and find the hotel. This time Dee checks out the room *before* anything is unpacked. The room is fine so we unload. The hotel is two blocks from *Piazza di San Marco* just north of the Old City. The hotel concierge recommends a restaurant in the piazza so we try it. It's small but has good food and an interesting menu. It is full of local residents, not tourists. We end up being the last people to leave but they are very patient.

1. David and the Galleria dell' Accademia

We spend our first full day in Florence, Saturday, doing laundry. Not very interesting but necessary. With that chore taken care of we walk over to the *Galleria dell' Accademia* in the late afternoon. The Galleria is where Michelangelo's sculpture *David* is housed; it is only four blocks from the hotel. The gallery has a number of unfinished marble sculptures by Michelangelo that are interesting -- it's neat to see the figures starting to emerge from the stone. The statue of David needs no introduction; it may be the most famous sculpture in the world, and rightfully so. It is standing near the edge of a large room but far enough from the wall to allow viewers to walk completely around it. This 500-year-old statue was originally outdoors in the *Piazza della Signoria* but was moved indoors to keep it from being corroded by modern-day smog. You can see a little bit of erosion in the feet but most of it is in good shape. The details of the musculature and veins are remarkable, especially in the hands. There is a group of people drawing sketches of David's head and his curly hair. Art students, most likely.



We sneak in one long-range [photo](#) as we leave.

The galleria has other things besides the sculptures. There is a Museum of Musical Instruments off to one side, and some Renaissance paintings. There's also a number of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs on display -- a temporary exhibit. It's sort of ironic because photographs are forbidden within the galleria.

That evening Dee's son Russ and his wife Crystal appear. They are fresh from visiting San Marino, a tiny sovereign state near Rimini, close to Italy's Adriatic coast. We are all going to the Italian GP for motorcycles at Mugello tomorrow.

2. The Italian Grand Prix

We have been warned about the MotoGP race at Mugello. Folks are concerned about Paul's safety. We've been told that it's a virtual mob scene at the end, especially if local favorite Valentino Rossi wins. He has won the last seven times so a near riot is likely.

Russ and Crystal are with us as additional help if things get out of hand. It turns out we needn't have worried. The track has constructed a special viewing platform for the disabled. It's ramped with a flat section in front for wheelchair users, and some raised seats in the back for their companions. It's next to the central grandstand, just past the finish line and directly opposite the podium.

Dee pulls a fast one on Paul. When she and Russ doff their jackets a special surprise appears. She had T-shirts made with Paul's 1977 racing photo! Paul was amused and pleased. Russ' shirt just has the photo while Dee's shirt has additional text: "My Trophy Husband." There's only one and only Dee gets to wear it.



Dee and Russ flank Paul while wearing their [special T-shirts](#).



The [viewing platform](#). The finish line is just to the right. This was the weather during the 250cc race.



250cc race [top three](#). We are directly across the track from the podium.

There are three races today; 125cc, 250cc, and MotoGP. The weather is threatening but the 125cc race is dry. It starts to rain just before the 250cc event and it is declared a Wet Race. The bikes are already out on the grid so mechanics are running from the pits with wheels that have rain tires fitted, swapping wheels out on the track. Everyone gets the correct wet setup and the race gets under way. It rains for the entire race. It's a thriller; with two racers contesting first place right up until the last moment! First and second places are won by Italians and the crowd is pleased.



They're off! [The start](#) of the MotoGP race.

The rain stops as the MotoGP bikes are wheeled out. The track is still wet and everyone is starting with rain tires. They have a soft sticky compound and treads and work well when the track is wet; however, the sun has come out and the track is drying. Under changing conditions the rules allow the riders to ride into their pit and swap motorcycles, as long as the replacement bike has different tires than the first. So you can change from a wet set up to a dry set up, or vice versa. It makes for interesting strategy. As the track dries the rain tires overheat, become shredded and lose their grip. At some point the dry tires, which are un-treaded slicks, become faster than the rain tires. The question is when is the best time to pit and switch bikes? The slicks will not grip at all if the track is wet so if you change too early you will either crash or be slower than with the rain tires. If you wait too long your rain tires get destroyed on the dry track and you have to slow down just when riders who have switched to the dry setup will be getting faster.

With the changing conditions and riders pitting to swap bikes at different times many different riders have a turn in the lead; in fact every brand leads at least once. The top three positions aren't decided until the end, when third and fourth place are only one bike length apart at the finish line!



[Casey Stoner](#) into the Ducati pits to swap bikes

The winner of the Italian Grand Prix isn't Italian, but he is riding an Italian motorcycle. The local favorite Valentino Rossi finishes in third – the end of a string of seven victories, but still a podium position. Fourth and fifth places are also Italian riders, so the crowd is pretty happy, as seen in the following photo sequence.

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Left to right: after the race exuberant fans [rush the track](#); a [fan climbs over the fence](#) to get near his idol on the podium; [joyful demonstrations](#) erupt during the podium ceremony.

So this is what they warned us about – it is pure *chaos*!

Watching a MotoGP race live is an exceptional experience. When you watch races on TV you usually see the straights through a long-distance lens. This has the effect of shortening the distances, so when Valentino Rossi or Casey Stoner is going over 200 mph it looks like, well, an almost reasonable speed to be traveling. It's different when you see it from trackside. Very different. It's hard to move your head fast enough follow the bike and rider – if you blink you will miss one:

"Hey, what happened to Edwards?"

"He was there, right behind Lorenzo, same as last lap."

"Oh. I must have blinked."



We watch the action on a [JumboTron](#) and also *hear* and see the motorcycles charging down the straight!

The speed is just astounding. The noise adds to the impact. The Doppler Effect is very strong: Waaaaaahhhhhooooooooow! We've seen these bikes at Laguna Seca but that doesn't happen there. They go fast at Laguna – they get up to around 170 mph – but there's a big difference between accelerating to 170 just before slamming on the brakes and running over 200mph for half a kilometer or more. Good God!

It takes about three hours to get out of the race track parking lot!

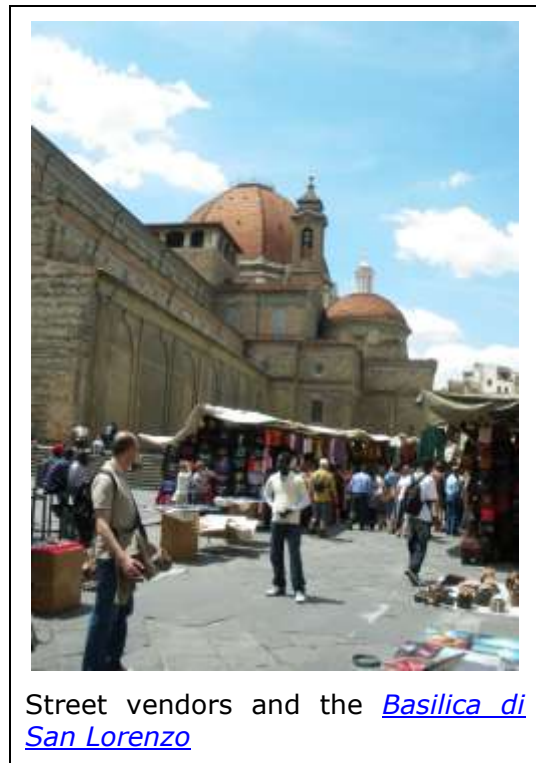
3. Florence, the Old City

On our return to Florence from Mugello, we treat Russ and Crystal to dinner at a small restaurant near the hotel. Toward the end of the evening we heard the staff sing "Happy Birthday" to one of the cooks. It's the same tune even if it is in Italian! The few of us left in the restaurant all applaud. She comes over to our table with a glass of beer and clinks it against our wine glasses. Happy birthday!

After the exhausting adventure to Mugello we desperately need some down time and so stay close the hotel and the local stores of the *Piazza di San Marco*. Russ and Crystal come by in the evening and, after eating the most exotic take-out pizza we've ever had, the four of us commandeer the hotel lobby big screen TV, wire it to a laptop, and watch a download of the Eurosport broadcast of the MotoGP.

Refreshed from our day off, we decide to just let things happen and stroll south toward the old city. Like the other places we've been there's interesting architecture at every corner. We come across a piazza next to the *Basilica di San Lorenzo* where there are dozens of street vendor tents set up. Today is an Italian national holiday so it's like a Saturday. We take some time here to shop. Dee buys some nice Italian leather sandals, then we relax at a nearby gelato shop, enjoying waffle cones heaped with you-know-what.

We continue our stroll and in a couple more blocks we are at the city's main cathedral, built from 1296 to 1436. There are three structures here, the *Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore* (the Duomo), the *Campanile di Giotto*, and the *Battistero di San Giovanni* (the Baptistry). All are finished with matching white, green and pink marble.



Street vendors and the [Basilica di San Lorenzo](#)

The Baptistry has three remarkable doors, maybe 18 feet tall with bas-relief panels depicting scenes from the bible or from the lives of saints.

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The [Campanile](#) is just right of the Duomo



The [baptistry](#) showing the gold door and the upper floors.



The baptistry's [bronze door](#)



A [detail of the gold door](#) showing the 3-dimensional aspect of the panels.



One [panel of the bronze door](#) depicting Jesus walking on water.

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The main attraction here is the Duomo; another huge cathedral. The exterior is decorated with ornate statuary (“angels in the architecture” as Paul Simon puts it). The front entrance is up some steps but there is an accessible side entry and we go in. There are beautiful things inside as well – stained glass, paintings, tapestries, and a complex marble mosaic floor.



The front of the [Duomo](#).



Detail of the [front door](#).



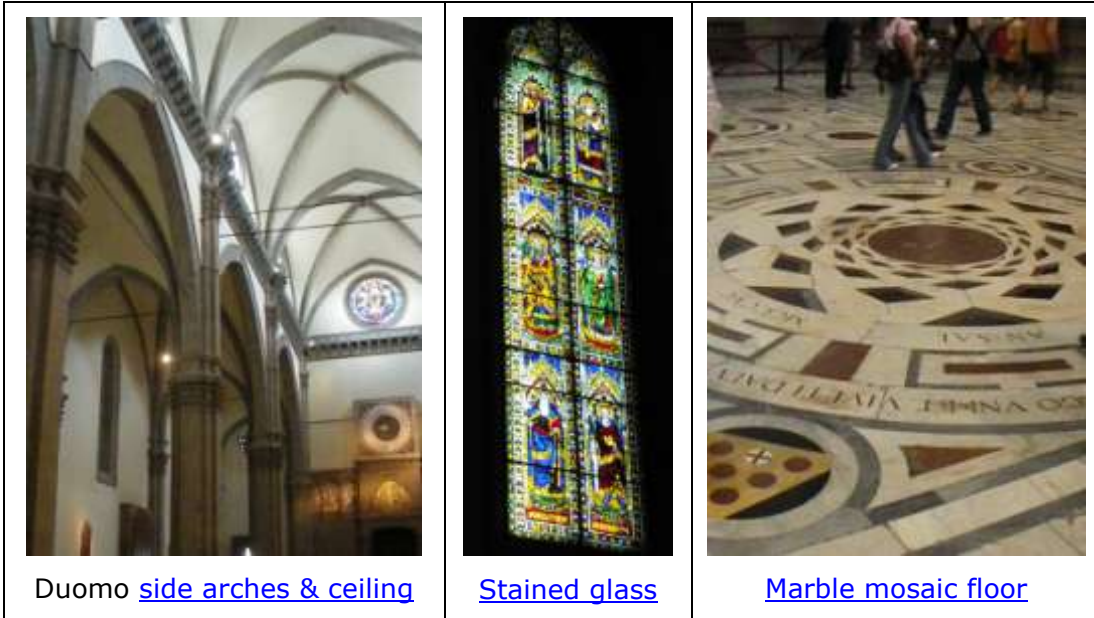
The [side of the Duomo](#). Note the 3 colors of marble.



Above the front door you see a few of the [row of saints](#). These statues are life-size.



A [side shot](#) showing the main dome and one of the smaller domes of the transept.



We continue walking towards the river and enter the *Piazza della Signoria*. This has been the political center of Florence for decades, while the *Piazza del Duomo* has been the city's religious center. The statue of David was originally here in *Signoria*; there's a plaster replica in the place where the original marble one once stood. There is a covered open area, the *Loggia dei Lanzi*, with several more sculptures on the south side of the piazza. There are lots of sculptures here, all outside for people to

appreciate. At the south-east of the piazza is the *Palazzo Vecchio* (Old Palace). This crenellated building was started in the 1300s and is still in use; it's now a combination of museum and Florence's town hall.

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Here are photos of some of the sculptures in the *Piazza della Signoria*. The one on the left is Giambologna's [Rape of the Sabines](#), then Bandinelli's [Hercules and Cacus](#), the bronze sculpture is [Perseus with the Head of Medusa](#) by Cellini, and then Giambologna's [Hercules and the Centaur Nessus](#). There are many other sculptures in the piazza.



Walk past the Old Palace about a block and there's the Uffizi Gallery, home to what may be the best collection of Renaissance paintings in the world. It has works by Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Botticelli, Raphael, Titian, Rembrandt and a bunch of other artists we've never heard of. You need at least a half day to do the Uffizi and we don't have that much time, so regretfully we have to miss it this trip.

We continue past the Uffizi and come to the Arno River two blocks east of the *Ponte Vecchio* (Old Bridge). We go to the bridge and walk across. Both sides of the bridge have shops with what looks like apartments above them. Most of the shops are selling gold jewelry. On the other side of the bridge we wander into a restaurant. It's early by Italian standards and we get a table on a balcony right on the riverfront. It's a beautiful evening -- we are sitting across the river from the Uffizi and we can see the tower of the old palace beyond that. To the left is the Old Bridge. To the right we have a view up river with the green Tuscan hills in the distance. Across the river is a small park along the north bank. As we eat the sun sets and the changing light keeps giving the scene a different glow. It's magical.



The [Palazzo Vecchio](#)

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The [Old Bridge](#) across the Arno River



Our [riverside dinner table](#). Not bad, eh?



The [view across the Arno](#) from our table



The [view upriver](#) (east) into the Tuscan hills



The [Ponte Vecchio](#) near sunset



[Upriver from the Ponte Vecchio](#) at sundown.

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After our leisurely dinner we walk back across the *Ponte Vecchio*, stopping to take a picture looking west. The river water is as smooth as glass. We continue to our hotel under the lights of the city. The narrow cobblestone streets are full of people enjoying the evening and vendors trying for late sales. The route is nearly level, just slightly uphill as we walk away from the river. When Dee's ankle starts to hurt Paul takes her cane and she uses the wheelchair as if it were a walker. It's a cool symbiotic relationship – Dee gets to take some weight off her feet and Paul gets a push.



The [view downriver](#) just after sunset.



[Night street scene](#) in the Old City

When we get back to the hotel we begin packing to leave. It's time to go home.