



A Fall Trip to Europe

ARTICLE BY RANDY HOMES | PHOTOS BY DIANE HOMES

Janis, Todd, Diane and Randy with their Fiats. Randy's was the white one!

Usually, when someone writes a story about a month-long trip to Europe, it is a litany of museums and famous sites visited. While my wife Diane and I did some of that, this article is mostly about the adventures encountered when you overly rely on GPS. We began with a five-night stay in London and from there took the train to Paris where we spent four nights. At that point, we rented a car and within two minutes on the Paris streets we were caught up in a giant motorcade in the pouring rain. Although I thought driving amongst all of the police motorcycles would be a safe way to exit the town, both Diane and the officers, in terms even a non-Parisian could understand, instructed me to pull over until they had all passed. Shucks. We continued out of town without incident and spent the next two nights in Beaune, the heart of Burgundy, and another two nights in Annecy, on the shores of Lake Annecy, a frequent backdrop for the

Tour de France and former home of our daughter and son-in-law. A beautiful area.

But before moving on, I should describe our first GPS "incident." For those of you who have been on a drive where I was the lead, you know that Diane is an excellent navigator. Funnily enough, we do not use Scenic. That's because when it was first utilized by the club on a Walla Walla Wine Tour, at the third decision point Scenic told us to turn right whereas the instructions and our scouting trip a week earlier told us to turn left. At that point, we unplugged Scenic and never used it again. Since I am focused on the road when driving, Diane takes the lead in getting us wherever.

We did not stay in the city of Annecy but in the small village of Talloires located a few miles south on the eastern shore of the lake. Talloires hugs the lake shore at the bottom of a fairly steep hillside. As we approached the town from the hillside above, Diane

typed in the name of our hotel which was supposed to be somewhere near the bottom of the town beside the lake. Diane's phone disagreed and told us to turn into a private driveway at the top of the hill. Since this was obviously wrong, we continued down the hill on the main road that skirts the city. Unfortunately, the turn that was the obvious entrance into town was closed for a local art market. Continuing down the main road we came to only one other road that led into town. However, this road was marked "one way", and entering it was the wrong direction. I didn't let that stop me as I'd noticed a small sign indicating that parking was up that road. Apparently, Diane did not see the sign and, despite my assurances, was most uncomfortable driving the wrong way on a single-lane, one-way street. She was quite vocal in requesting that we turn around.

Not knowing what to do, we did the obvious thing of going back to where the navigation told us to turn and called the hotel. Whoever answered the phone was inexperienced in dealing with highly agitated English-speaking tourists and merely kept repeating that we needed to drive down the hill. Diane and I simultaneously lost our hearing because normal speech levels were no longer adequate for communication. It was then I devised the brilliant plan of suggesting Diane get out of the car and walk down to the village while I would drive to the bottom of the hill, park the car on the other side of town, and try to reach the hotel by walking up the one-way street. Forty-five minutes later I found a policeman who spoke English and told me it was ok to drive

the wrong way for today. Then by some miracle, I bumped into Diane as she'd finally made her way down the hill. She marched on, found the hotel, and called me with directions. I only stopped twice at the wrong hotels but finally made it. On the plus side, our hotel was quite lovely and extremely relaxing.

Fortunately, two days in the area let us recover our sense of adventure. Not a moment too soon, I might add. Early the next afternoon, after a short stop in picturesque Chamonix, France, we headed for our overnight stop in Camogli, Italy. Diane chose once again to let Google provide the instructions through her iPhone. Those of you of a certain age who like to enjoy the scenery without wearing your reading glasses will be happy to know that our Peugeot 3008 hybrid electric was equipped with Apple CarPlay.

With our destination logged in, we set out immediately to our northeast in what I thought was the opposite direction of our road to Italy through the Mont Blanc tunnel. Thinking that the navigation was taking us on a shortcut, we hesitantly continued on the narrow two-lane road. We weren't overly worried because the forecasted arrival time matched what we expected. As we continued our way up a valley, the traffic began to dwindle and we encountered fewer and fewer cars. But,

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as the saying goes: in for a penny, in for a pound. We soon reached an unexpected stop, the Swiss border! Weren't we supposed to be going south? We didn't even notify Verizon or the car rental company we would be in Switzerland.

Shortly after the border, we started down a true Swiss mountain pass road. Steep cliff on the passenger side and a road never wider than two lanes with just one lane on some of the tighter turns. (Did I mention that Diane hates heights?) After summiting and a few switchbacks, we saw the city of Martigny, Switzerland below us. We later figured out that we had just passed over the Col de la Forclaz, which as you may have guessed is nowhere near the typical route to Italy from Chamonix.

As we descended to Martigny, we were comforted in knowing that there was a city large enough to have a major road going directly to Italy. We were momentarily grateful that we did not have to drive through Martigny and deal with its traffic because almost as soon as we reached the city, the navigation sent us on a one-lane road up a hill in what we only imagined was yet another short-cut to the tollway. (Apparently, Diane and I are hopelessly optimistic.) In reality, it was the start of an even less seldom traveled road up the Col Des Planches.

As you can see from the map (above) , the

navigation took us past the main road south and instead literally sent us to the middle of nowhere. This road was one lane wide throughout its entirety. Believe it or not, at one point we were instructed to turn onto a gravel road that was hardly wide enough for our car with a 2,000-foot drop off the passenger side. We opted to stay on the "main" route and let the program recalculate. As it turned out, for those cars that can negotiate it, this gravel road shortens the route by about a half mile but I cannot imagine ever driving it fast enough to save time. Eventually, we reached the Col and began our descent with what seemed to be 100 switchbacks but was really only about 15.

Once we reached the bottom of the Col, we passed through the town of Sembrancher, Switzerland,



and started driving on a real road with two marked lanes headed towards Great St Bernard Pass, the third-highest road pass in Switzerland. A friend told me 40 years ago how spectacular this pass was and I was excited to finally drive it. Unfortunately, Diane had reached her limit of adventure for the day. After a short marital discussion, we agreed to take the Great St Bernard Tunnel instead. While driving an SUV on those roads was fun, we sure wish we had our 997 that day. As you've no doubt guessed, Diane's GPS app was programmed to avoid tolls. It did its job well.

Despite passing through Genoa during the evening rush, we reached our evening stop in Camogli in time for dinner. Incidentally, Diane discovered this beautiful city on the Ligurian Sea and her research revealed that it is known as a vacation spot for Italians and is not particularly touristy. Great! Our first stop in Italy and we were eager to use the Italian we acquired as senior auditors the previous school year at Portland State. Looking for a restaurant that was recommended to us at our hotel, I confidently approached three young local ladies and said "Mi scusi, dov'è il ristorante Cucu?" Quickly transitioning from Italian one responded in perfect English "It's about 200 feet down the street on your right." Thus ended our Italian aspirations. Although warned about tourist areas being English conversant, unlike my first experience in Italy 35 years previously when no one, even the Romans, seemed to understand English, I had hoped that a non-touristy town such as Camogli would be different. Hopes dashed, we learned later that Camogli is becoming a wonderful option for avoiding the crowds of Cinque Terre and nearly as picturesque. Even our next-door neighbors on their last trip to Italy stayed in our same hotel.

The next morning, after procuring the best focaccia in the world (based on the advice of a retired Italian gentleman who spent his career working for 3M), we set off for Florence. Having learned our lesson, we set off with Google Maps programmed to allow us to use pay tolls so that we could drive on the autostrada. This time it worked perfectly . . . except for getting us to



Randy at Limbo and Purgatory.

our hotel in the ZTL. The ZTL or Zona a Traffico Limitato is exactly what it sounds like. Without a permit, you are not allowed to drive in the ZTL. Fortunately, hotel guests are allowed a three-hour window to get in and park off street, provided their hotel notifies the appropriate authorities. Not a problem, right? Well, the GPS was not much help once we crossed the Arno River and were a few blocks from our destination near Tornabuoni Plaza. First of all, the navigation simply stopped when we were still a quarter mile away. "Arrived? No, we haven't!" Second, the road we needed was closed to traffic once you crossed the bridge. Third, in this area of town, almost all streets are one-way with no grid system or well-posted signage. Trying to read the map on Apple CarPlay was difficult. Yet, after driving further and further away from our hotel and with extra animated marital conversation while stopped in the middle of a plaza (we'd finally



Todd and Janis Hess
in their Fiat 500.

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gone native), we figured out how to get near the back of the hotel. However, this was a dead end with no access to the building. Trapped in this dead end, we backed up a few feet to the nearest intersection and discovered we were simultaneously in Limbo and Purgatory. The intersecting street names are Via del Limbo and Via del Purgatorio. How appropriate.

Fortunately for us the only individual in Florence who does not speak English was able to direct us to the front of the hotel: “Dritto, sinistra e sinistra” – straight, left, and left. Well yes, but where exactly? We can only see highly fashionable stores: Omega, Valentino, Ferragamo, Mont Blanc, Pucci, Burberry, and Tiffany. Not only that but I’m blocking the path of a horse-drawn carriage. Once again, pedestrian Diane to the rescue! With the help of a couple of locals, she found the small, unprepossessing entrance to our hotel hidden among all those shops I had no intention of ever letting Diane enter. (Those of you who know Diane well, will recognize the absurdity of the last half

of the previous sentence.)

Ah, time to relax. But wait, we have to turn in the rental car – and our three-hour ZTL clock is ticking down. Fortunately, the return office was close to the nearby train station. Since it was so close, I foolishly thought I could return the car on my own. While I reached the train station with minimal difficulty, I could not find the entrance to the rental return parking structure. My instructions were to go into the parking lot underneath the Ambassador Hotel. It was only after driving around the same block four times that I finally saw the hotel’s name, not anywhere near street level, but on the side of the building, but six stories up. *Mi piace molto guidare in Italia!* Honest.

That evening we met up with friends and fellow club members Todd and Janis Hess. They had just flown in from home after a short layover in Amsterdam. So, what better activity to do when you are jet lagged than an auto tour the next morning in a Fiat 500? Our cars were of the 500F vintage circa 1965. Noticeably weak in the horsepower department (under 20?), we did almost reach 50 mph on a long, slightly downhill stretch. Our two cars were slightly different in that Todd thought he needed an extra gear between first and second and mine needed one between second and third. Still, these cars were fun and very handy for negotiating the very narrow streets of the old villages we visited and for parking wherever a postage stamp size spot was available. Despite our many stops along the way, none of us ever found a graceful way to exit these cars.

After five nights in Florence, the four

of us took up residence for four nights in a hotel just outside Cortona in Tuscany. Cortona was the setting for *Under the Tuscan Sun*, both the book and movie. We followed that with a four-night stay in an ancient Italian village that was converted into a resort by Salvatore Ferragamo. Fortunately, we were not allowed to drive our second rental car inside the resort. In fact, the only cars inside the resort were about the same size as a Fiat 500 and were nicked and dented by the staff hitting the walls in the narrowest sections.

We did day trips throughout Tuscany seeing many of the older villages and towns along with an array of fromageries (cheesemakers) and wineries. (I now kind of know the differences between Brunello, Chianti, and Vino di Nobile di Montepulciano wine, but please don't quiz me.) Todd and Janis have made multiple trips to Tuscany and know the region well. Not surprisingly, Todd was eager to ride up front and navigate. (I'm sure the description of our earlier trips had no influence whatsoever.) Nevertheless, we did manage a few times to get onto some very questionable dirt and gravel roads. One, in particular, led to a fromagerie owned by a Sardinian family whose son conducted a tasting just for us even though they were closed because their ewes were all nursing and not milked for cheese.

Speaking of wine and cheese, I was very impressed with all of our meals. I purposely tried lasagna whenever I could and ordered it on four occasions. Each one looked and tasted completely different from the others but all four were so much better than any lasagna I ever had in the US. I also had three pizzas and told Diane that the next time she wants to go out for pizza, we will be going by way of the airport. For that, we will not need GPS. ■



(Above) Lunch after the Fiat 500 Tour.

(Below) Todd, Janis, Diane and Randy at the Tenuta La Potazzinne Winery, in Montalcino.

