

The

# Milano Messaggero

Wednesday, 3 October 2007

Day 10 of 11

Tuscany to Milan

## Italians built monument to themselves in marble

The tiny town of Torano sits just above Italy's west coast on the drive north from Tuscany and Pisa to Milan, where we caught our flight home Thursday morning.

It's not a tourist spot, and the local Communist Party headquarters building does not feel welcoming to American tourists, perhaps as much because of the baggage we carry in our minds about the red flags and hammer and sickle festooning their building as anything.

Certainly the guys gathering on the front portico to drink could be friendly enough. It's past quitting time in the Carrara mountains that tower over Torano and the other tiny towns where the world's most famous white marble is quarried.

Laundry hangs out of the windows as it probably did the day Michelangelo walked into town centuries ago and met the ancestors of these men to pick out the block of stone from which he would carve his *Pietà*, the statue of Mary holding the body of her dead son, which we saw last Saturday in St.



**The quarry town of Torona beneath a marble mountain**

Peter's Basilica in Vatican City.

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## Here's our full itinerary

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Sept 23	<b>24</b> Fly to Italy	<b>25</b> Arrive in Venice	<b>26</b> Vicenza Dedication of Margaret Williamson Memorial Garden	<b>27</b> Vicenza to Lake Como	<b>28</b> Lake Como	<b>29</b> Lake Como to Rome
<b>30</b> Rome	<b>Oct 1</b> Rome to Florence & Tuscany	<b>2</b> Tuscany	<b>3</b> <b>Tuscany to Milan</b>	<b>4</b> Fly to United States	5	6

### Rome's monumental rock

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Although faster, powered cutting tools are used today, the marble blocks were once cut with hand saws whose progress was measured in inches – OK, millimeters – a day.

In Italy, it seems, everything was built to last, which you can tell from the most ordinary farm barn – built of stone and probably solid enough to withstand a nuclear attack – to the grandest public buildings of its most historic cities.

Buildings like the Colosseum were long ago stripped of the marble facing that made them beautiful to be used in newer construction in the Vatican and elsewhere. Yet the commoner stone underneath still stands.

There are other civilizations that memorialized themselves in stone, such as Angkor Wat in Thailand, the Great Wall in China, the Pyramids in Egypt. But none had Italian marble to work with.

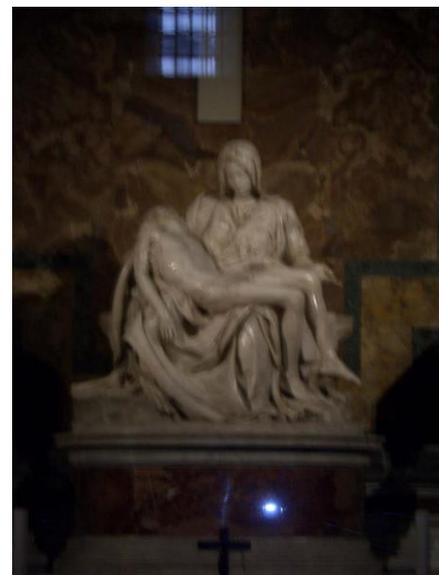
Even in the faded-elegance towns we visited, like Varenna and Bellagio, many interiors – especially bathrooms or floors – had been gutted and refaced with marble, Italy's surface of choice.

As we left Tuscany on Wednesday to drive north, we first stopped in Pisa, whose most famous structures were faced with dazzlingly white Carrara marble.

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Today we drove from Tuscany to Milan.



The *Pietà*

## Carrara's famous white rock: marble

Less than an hour up the coast, you enter the city of Massa, the center of the Carrara region, above which the mountains bear white scars of many quarries. Our line of traffic was waved over to the side of a highway so a giant, self-propelled platform that carries the huge stone blocks either to factories for carving or to the port for shipping could pass. It spread across three lanes.

This area is, and never was, the artistic region of Italy. From Pisa north to Genoa, where we turned inland toward Milan, the towns were small and non-descript. But they played an indispensable role in

making Italy the place it has been for centuries: a monument to itself.



Sawing marble into thin slabs

## I'll bet I could squeeze a car in there

Italy is the land of the stick shift, the tiny car, the tinier road, the pushy drivers and the lost and frightened American motorists.

But we learn. The proper Italian road maneuver – any maneuver – is in the face of an oncoming stampede of cars, trucks and, sometimes, geese. That's the way we did our U-turns. We lived to tell the tale.



**Your typical Italian driver sees this one-lane hairpin as a passing opportunity.**

You've got to be able to make decisions fast at intersections. Three sets of eyes looking for the right road are better than mine.

But even in a low-compression diesel car, there's nothing like the satisfying whiplash of downshifting into a reverse camber hairpin on the side of a cliff at 120.

Ahhh, Ferrari.



# Today's picture page



This was such a great idea for a picture that it was adopted by the rest of the world



Pisa's marble-clad duomo (cathedral) and its bell tower, mysteriously off-kilter



<<< The boys from the quarry kick back for some Marx and a brewski.



Vineyards, olive trees, castle on a hill – our neighborhood in Tuscany