

## **BUONGIORNO AOSTA, ITALY 2006**

### **Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> July**

Day 1 – I think the worst thing about holidays is the preparation – all the manic, pernickety, necessary and unnecessary preparation that continues until you're at last sitting in the car/train/plane/whatever, remembering what you've forgotten. Anyway, the day started early for us all – Mum won the early race by being up at 02:45! Alan and I were next at 03:40, Daniel and Paula at 04:35 and Rachel at the slightly more civilised time of 05:10.

The journey to Bristol airport for the Cornish contingent (Alan, Mum and me) was uneventful, probably due to the lack of traffic at that time of the morning and we arrived at the allotted Purple Parking place at about 07:00. The Welsh contingent (Daniel, Paula and Rachel) turned up about 10 minutes later and we were soon being transported in a minibus to the airport.

Checking in went quite smoothly, with just one humorous moment (except possibly to Alan) when he was asked to take off the belt he was wearing, as it had set off the metal detector alarm. He was then frisked, as he was obviously such a suspicious character, although I'm not sure if he heard our comments about how his recent grade 1 haircut must have had something to do with it..

I found Bristol airport to be neither too large and frightening, nor too small and frightening – in fact, I was surprised at how unfrightened I felt. Sadly, this didn't last very long and as I sat beside Rachel in the plane when it took off, all the old fears returned. Rachel did her therapeutic best by talking with me and it really did help. I could hear Alan and Mum talking in the seats behind us for a while, but all was quiet from the rear until we sighted the breathtakingly beautiful Alps and gradually began to descend.

Terra firma at Milan Malpensa airport was accomplished and we all had our passports checked by a young Italian man who looked as if he really couldn't care. At that moment, though, I really couldn't care either – I think the worst thing about holidays is the travelling, especially by air!

The heat was immediately noticeable, but it was completely bearable. I liked the heat, I liked being in Italy, I liked the people in the airport, I liked our two rented cars, I liked shopping for lunch in the airport shop, I liked the prawn sandwich I ended up with (eaten standing up in the airport car park because we were ravenously hungry) but most of all – yes, most of all, I liked the fact that I'd survived my eleventh flight.

It had previously been decided that Daniel would drive one car (a blue Passat) with Alan navigating and Mum as passenger, while Paula followed in the other car (a grey Renault Scenic) with Rachel and me as passengers. Thus, the drive from Milan to Aosta began. The Renault seemed fond of stalling and didn't always want to go in gear, but at least it had air-conditioning. The temperature crept up to 30° Centigrade, but the 2½-hour drive didn't seem horrendously long – although I wasn't the one driving and could hardly keep my eyes open near the end, even to see the beautiful mountains that had appeared, at first in the distance and then much closer.

We arrived at Aosta (Valle d'Aosta) and began to drive up the mountain to Charvensod. I'd love to know how to pronounce that name the Italian way! We went up and up and up and up and up and then found we'd missed the turning, so had to go down and down and down. The S-bends made this very difficult, but if I'd had my sunhat on, I would have taken it off to Paula, who managed the manoeuvres very well indeed.

Alan finally located the place we'd rented, which was a relief. It was an old farmhouse entitled *Le Reverier Dessus*, although it looked like a typical Italian mountain chalet to me. The man who looks after the place in the absence of the owners had a rather challenging conversation with Alan, as Alan doesn't speak Italian or French and the man didn't speak English. Fortunately, Rachel was able to help with French and we soon unloaded our baggage from the cars and looked around our accommodation for the next two weeks.



**The bendy road amid the mountains** (photo by Alan Santillo)

The sleeping arrangements were not exactly ideal, but we tried to make the best of the situation. In the main living area on the ground floor, Mum had a bedroom to herself, while Daniel and Paula slept in the kitchen/dining room/lounge. On the basement floor, Alan and I slept in a rather dank bedroom, which led directly off the main room. This main room, with no windows, housed a sofa bed and a very large wooden table with many chairs. Rachel slept on the sofa bed, but so that Alan and I could have access to the small bathroom (with no bath), the sofa bed was largely under the table.

Alan, Daniel and Rachel went to find a supermarket, while the rest of us unpacked, swatted flies and settled in. The view from the balcony was great, with white clouds hugging some of the mountain peaks and dark grey clouds hanging threateningly over others. As a dedicated cloud watcher, I knew I was going to enjoy this aspect of the holiday.

On returning from *Gros Cidac* supermarket, Daniel and Paula cooked pasta and sauce with cheese, which was followed by an alternative for a late birthday cake for Rachel, since we hadn't been able to help celebrate her birthday this year.

Dishes were washed and dried and then we sat around the table with wine, playing a very loud and hilarious game of Extreme Uno. This had nothing to do with the wine. Nothing at all.

At around 22:00, we all went out on the balcony to gaze at the twinkling lights of the valley below, while the rain cascaded down outside. The noise of the cicadas, which had been noticeable as soon as we'd arrived, was as loud as ever. I rather liked the sound, but I'm not sure that Rachel (not one of the world's best insect appreciators) agreed.

Mum was the first to say goodnight and the rest of us followed about half an hour later. I think the worst thing about holidays is sleeping in strange beds in strange rooms, with strange bedcovers and strange pillows.

### **Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> July**

Day 2 – I think the worst thing about holidays is not being able to get up when you wake up and wander around in a state of dangerous undress on your way to make tea to take back to bed, so you don't traumatise members of your party who are sleeping in the communal kitchen area (in this case, Daniel and Paula).

However, we all seemed to greet the day in reasonably good humour, having familiar yet strangely labelled cereal for breakfast at slightly different times. Once we were all finally ready, we drove down the S-bends in the two cars to investigate Aosta.

The weather was cloudy but very warm. After a spot of bother trying to find the entrance of a car park and after accosting to no avail a non-English-speaking Italian man, Alan settled in a semi-legal-looking parking space and Daniel followed suit (though in a different space, of course).

We set out on foot along some old looking streets and after Alan accosted a thankfully-English-speaking Italian woman, we managed to locate the main tourist information office, which was situated in the town square/piazza. This proved fruitful and we sat outside a caffè for a pleasant half-hour, with drinks and some leaflets and maps to peruse. There were quite a lot of people out enjoying the pleasant heat of a leisurely Sunday morning, by strolling along the streets, window shopping, chatting with friends and acquaintances, or sitting outside eating/drinking places.

Although there is apparently a strong Gothic influence in the Valle d'Aosta, we couldn't help noticing that there were many Roman remains and so we went for a closer look at some. There seemed to be so many, mostly in the north-east of the town, near the cathedral. Sadly, the vertical section of the most impressive amphitheatre was protected by scaffolding and thus gave a tantalising impression of what once must have been a majestic structure.

I do understand the need to protect a building of this importance and had to console myself with the fact that I'd seen it at all, while contenting myself with looking at a photo gallery of what it was like before the scaffolding. As Aosta is more or less a bi-lingual region, the writing describing the photos was in Italian and French. Rachel and I were able to translate quite a bit of the French, but it's been a long time since my schooldays...



**Impressive Roman remains**

We walked back to the centre, beginning to feel the effects of the rising temperature. Underneath one of the massive Roman arches, now merely the remains of what once must have been a most impressive city gate, a local artist seemed to be painting a picture of sideways trees. It felt completely in character for modern street life such as this to carry on amidst buildings of great antiquity.



**An artist paints sideways trees beneath massive arches**

There were many Roman buildings, including towers and city walls. A guided tour would have been fascinating, but it was now hot with no cloud cover. I took a last lingering look at the wonderful sight of the mountains in the distance towering over the Roman streets and towers, before we walked back to the cars.

Daniel, Paula and Mum returned to *Le Reverier*, while Alan, Rachel and I went to the supermarket. We discovered that *Gros Cidac* was shut and after a fairly strenuous effort on Alan's part, plus a couple of accostings of local people for directions, we found a second one – but that was also shut. Undeterred, Alan was sure there was a supermarket near the airport in Aosta. Fortunately, he was right and it (*Carrefour*) was open.

It was big and not too crowded, but none of us particularly enjoyed the experience of shopping in an Italian supermarket, mainly because we didn't speak Italian. We managed to succeed, however, even in the fruit section where everyone is required to put on plastic gloves before handling any fruit and then weighing the fruit by pressing the appropriate buttons. I think the worst thing about holidays is not knowing the local geography, systems, or language!

We drove very tiredly back to *Le Reverier* and ate a late lunch of bread rolls with assorted fillings. After this beneficial top-up of energy, everyone except Mum opted to go for a short local walk, to locate a waterfall. The walk was shorter than we thought, but it felt undeniably good to be out and I still had a sense of happy wonder that I was on Italian soil, breathing Italian air and looking at inspiring Italian views.

At the top of the only part of the waterfall that we could reach, Daniel and Paula decided to descend, by precariously scrambling around on rocks for photographic purposes. Thankfully, Alan was more sedate and simply walked out onto a big rock to take his photos. Rachel and I took the opportunity to stand and stare, although Rachel was standing and scratching a little, due to a large itchy bite from an insect of unknown origin.



**Daniel and Paula rather a long way down**

We all started to walk back, but Alan and Daniel decided to head up another track that went steeply uphill. Rachel, Paula and I continued back to *Le Reverier*, noticing some wild strawberries on the way, but we were too conservation-aware to eat them. I particularly enjoyed seeing some wild flowers *en passant* and would have loved to investigate further.



**View over the valley** (photo by Alan Santillo)

Once back at the old farmhouse, we followed our own pursuits. Mum read her book, while Rachel, Paula and I found that fly swatting and watching a huge grasshopper on the balcony rail passed the time satisfyingly. Alan and Daniel returned about 45 minutes later, with tales of having eaten a load of quite delicious wild strawberries further up the mountain.

Daniel and Paula later prepared some fish that was of unknown origin, due to a lapse of communication at the *Carrefour* fish counter. Guesses were shark or swordfish? Whatever it was, it was pink and very pleasant.

I sat out on the balcony for a while on my own and watched an eagle as it soared effortlessly above the distant mountains. It was then joined by another eagle ... and then another. I was entranced at the three of them, seemingly playing with the air currents, as free as ... well, birds.

We then had a rather complicated discussion about what was on the agenda for the rest of our family holiday, as in where, when, how and with whom. It was rather complicated because of people's different likes/dislikes and aspirations. I think the worst thing about (group) holidays is trying to please everyone, knowing that you're never going to succeed!

### **Monday 10<sup>th</sup> July**

Day 3 – a sunny day 3. We had arranged to converge in the communal kitchen area at 08:00, but as the three of us in the dungeon area below didn't regain consciousness until just gone 08:00 ... well, it didn't actually matter in the slightest, as we were all ready to go at 09:30 as planned.

I had my first drive in the blue Passat with Daniel and Mum, down to the railway station underground car park in Aosta, to ascertain train times to Turin. It was interesting enough just to ascertain how to get into the underground car park, to be honest. Alan drove in first, up to the barrier. He seemed to take a little time pressing a button on the console before eventually taking the ticket that appeared as the barrier lifted, before driving into the car park.

Daniel approached the barrier and pressed a likely looking button, only to be greeted by the sound of a disembodied Italian male voice ... speaking in Italian, no less. Daniel quick-thinkingly said, "Parlo Inglese?" The disembodied Italian voice then made an indistinguishable sound and the barrier went up. It would appear that the button for Information had been pressed, rather than the button for just an entry ticket. Oops!

Having survived this unusual car park entry, Mum, Paula and I waited in the Passat while Alan, Daniel and Rachel went to ask about train times to Turin. They returned half an hour later, with tales of non-comprehension at the train station, followed by just-about-comprehension at the library (where they'd had to go to buy a map of Turin), followed thankfully by total comprehension at the tourist information office.

We then set out for Gran Paradiso National Park, the road passing by lots of often very large chalets sprouting up randomly from the valley floor and up the incline of the mountains. There were quite a few pretty chalets, but a surprising number of rather run-down ones. In fact, there were chalets in all states of repair, from those being built, to those that were nothing but ruined shells.

As we climbed upwards, we began to pass through tunnels, some of which had the far side open, giving a clear view of the ravines and gorges below. Mostly though, we were on open roads that gave views of the sheer drops beneath. It had gradually become a little cooler, but it was midday when we arrived at Cogne, so we slapped on the sunscreen lotion regardless.



**A partly open-sided tunnel**

When Alan and I strode purposefully to the nearby toilet, I annoyed myself (and probably Alan as well) by suddenly becoming ridiculously British and uptight. Upon seeing it was used by both males and females, I found myself walking out, unable to face the unaccustomed situation. The origin of some behaviour is very peculiar. However, I do think the worst thing about holidays is having to use strange public toilets, particularly unisex ones.

We walked around looking in some shop windows, but only went inside one shop to buy lunch, which we ate outside underneath a sunshade. There was a lovely backdrop of a snowy mountain top in the distance, as we drank coffee/Coke and consumed our panini (the singular of panini being panino). It was a very leisurely lunch, partly due to another lapse of Anglo-Italian communication, whereby Alan had to re-order two missing panini.



**View of glaciers from Cogne, Gran Paradiso** (photo by Alan Santillo)

Afterwards, we drove on to Valnontey, where Alan and Daniel went for a walk in a steeply upward direction, while the rest of us walked up a gentle incline for a stroll around the mountain alpine garden (Alpine Garden Paradisia). Valnontey had been chosen as the site for this garden because of its nearness to the tourist area of Cogne, its spectacular landscape and its altitude of 1700 metres, which allows both mountain and alpine species to grow.

I was particularly interested in the alpine flowers, as these pretty and diverse little plants lend themselves to the hotter, drier English summers that are supposedly going to become the norm with global warming. It was obvious that the Alpine Garden Paradisia is a natural place for scientific research, with its reproductions of different environments needed for various types of plants, lichens and insects.

I was also interested in the various rocks, but was hampered by the notice boards being only in Italian. I reminded myself that not many notice boards in the UK were also written in Italian and Paula made a respectable attempt at translation. However, as we walked away from the garden, I had the sense that we had missed so much of its essence.

It had been decidedly hot on our meander around the garden and I'd been surprised to see two women working with the plants in the heat of the day, with much of their skin exposed. We were not quite so exposed, but the insects were still interested in our skin, so Rachel resorted to some insect repellent. Unfortunately, this meant she also repelled the butterflies she wanted to land on her in the butterfly area ... sometimes you just can't win!

We carefully retraced our steps downwards, past cows complete with cowbells. At first, this seemed a very prettily alpine-like sound, but after a while, it became ever so slightly irritating. We eventually reached the level of the river below, where the water wasn't at all murky, but appeared rather chalky looking. Daniel, who had very much enjoyed geography at school, explained later that this was because of silt from the glaciers above.

We'd arranged to meet Alan and Daniel at 16:00, so passed the time at a caffè, where the fearless Paula marched straight in and asked for drinks. Trying to follow her example, Mum and I tentatively asked for an ice cream (gelato) each. We thought we'd conveyed that Mum wanted a yogurt one and I wanted a frutti di bosco (forest fruits) one, but when they arrived as we sat at a table outside, we both had a mix of the two flavours. It didn't matter, as they were delicious and definitely hit the spot. Due to the heat and quick melting time, mine also hit a spot or five on my trousers and Paula's borrowed hat which I had in my lap.

Still short of 16:00, we decided to stroll alongside the pretty greeny-greyish milky river. I was intrigued by the amount of mica in the stones along the pathway, plus the number of green stones, so I have to confess that a handful were relocated to Cornwall. Very small stones. Just the size of gravel really. Italy won't miss them. Besides, they'll be well looked after.

Alan and Daniel turned up a little early and a little sweaty, so decided to indulge in a refreshing gelato each, before we all headed back along the road with its tunnels and sheer drops and then up, up, up again to *Le Reverier*.



**Suits you, sir!**

As we were still rather full from the generous lunchtime panini, we decided to make do with various bits and pieces for tea. Alan and Paula had gone to the supermarket and returned with the biggest watermelon any of us had ever seen. We had great fun taking photos of it, cutting it, eating it and (instigated by Daniel) spitting out the pips over the balcony to see how far they reached.

We then all played one game of Extreme Uno. Alan went to bed, tired after his walk, but the rest of us had another game, trying hard not to scrape the chairs on the floor, so as not to wake Alan in the bedroom cavern below. We failed.

### **Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> July**

Day 4 – and a relatively early start, as Alan, Rachel, Mum and I were going to Turin (Torino) on the train, while Daniel and Paula were going to Pila at the top of the mountain on which *Le Reverier* nestles halfway up.

Daniel kindly dropped us off at the railway station in Aosta at 09:20 and Alan successfully bought us tickets – to the right destination on the right train for the right number of people. Fabulous! He even remembered, thanks to Rachel's experiences of European travel, to validate the ticket in a little yellow machine.

We went to the platform and the train was already there. All the trains seemed to bear the name *Trenitalia* – obviously no train privatisation in Italy. After a few minutes sitting on a platform bench, we decided to board the train, so as to have a good seat. We needn't have worried, as the carriage was near empty.



**Waiting for our *Trenitalia***

The train left a minute early and the journey was smooth, air-conditioned and with a polite Italian man telling us over the intercom at which stations we were about to arrive. A ticket inspector dutifully inspected our tickets and all was well. The scenery was first of all very picturesque, with the usual large chalets in various states of repair and terraces of vines growing up the mountainside, but all too quickly the mountains abruptly stopped and we were headed into drier, flatter, hotter country.

The journey took over two hours, with two Torino stops before our destination at the terminus of Torino Porto Nuova. Thanks to Rachel's sandwich making skills, we were able to eat our lunch while still on the train, before disembarking onto Torino soil – and whoosh! A blast of extremely hot air immediately engulfed us and remained throughout our stay at Torino, in various degrees of intensity.

We first visited the station toilets for the sum of 70c, but it was worth the money because they were so clean. Our next objective was to find the tour bus around the city, which entailed a long walk up an open arcade, past shops, caffès and bars. It also entailed Alan going into a shop to ask for directions, as the bus stop didn't seem to be where the map said. Luckily, the man spoke English.

However, the tour bus wasn't due for 40 minutes, so we thought we'd stop for a drink. Mum had already ensconced herself on a seat in the bus stop shelter, so Alan went on a walkabout, returning with iced lemon sorbet drinks known as granite di limone – but not the rock variety. They were a refreshing life-saver. We sat and watched the ordinary buses go by and the well-dressed people of Torino getting on and off the buses. I hadn't realised that Torino is famous for fashion and was quite glad I was wearing my turquoise cropped trousers.

The bus arrived on time, but we were the only passengers. The woman asked where we were from, so Alan replied from England. She asked which part of England, so Alan told her Cornwall. She then said, "That's not part of England?" Maybe we should have said we were from the south-west of England!



**"We are from Cornwall ... which is in England!"**

The tour began and she spoke only in English, but her shift ended at 13:45 and another guide took over. This one spoke rapidly in Italian, French and English. The sights I remember are: a statue of the first king of Italy; the Statue of the Four Seasons "with much esoteric and Masonic symbolism" (I would have loved to have leapt off the bus to investigate); the steps which the Mini drove down in *The Italian Job* original film; and a statue of the Holy Grail (where she said people had looked for clues, but hadn't found any).

The bus returned to the pick-up point and we then walked along the stifling streets to the Egyptian Museum, which is apparently second only to the one in Cairo – a fact that had been pointed out on the tour.

It was incredible! Many, many relics created an exciting atmosphere of ancient, heady intrigue, including mummies, scarab amulets, reconstructed pieces of architecture, sarcophagi, hieroglyphs and huge statues of Egyptian gods and goddesses. We only had time to have a brief tantalising look, as it would have taken two or three days to see it all properly. Mum didn't seem all that impressed, but took advantage of some well-placed seats.

Tearing ourselves away with great difficulty from such wonderfully tangible evidence of that enigmatic and totally fascinating ancient culture, we retraced our steps back to the railway station in the now oppressive heat. Alan quickly bought us all ice creams, his Italian language skills clearly improving daily. We even managed to validate our tickets and find the right platform and the right train back to Aosta with no problems.

Probably due to the time of day, this time it was far more crowded and far hotter. There was graffiti scratched on the window and sadly no polite Italian man telling us station names. I missed him. We didn't stop at quite as many stations, but were still about 12 minutes late.

In order to avoid a rush getting off the train, we were the first ones standing at the train door, ready to be released. Unfortunately, the door opening system was unknown to us and although Rachel managed to open the sliding doors and step off the train, followed closely by Alan, the doors then closed with me stuck firmly in the middle of them.

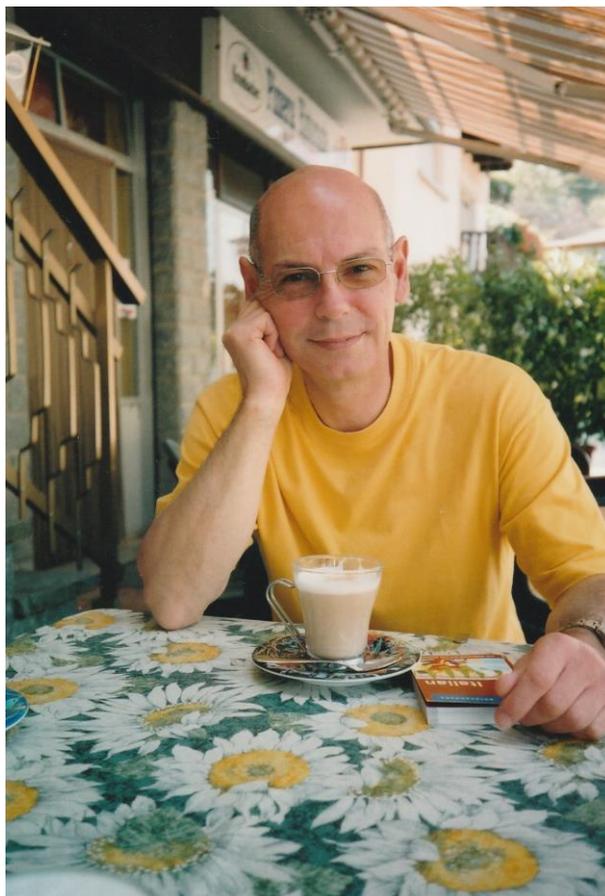
It was a strange moment, stuck in an Italian train, with Italian people behind me, offering no help whatsoever. Alan rushed to the door and pulled it open again, with no real ill-effects. Retrospectively, we should have waited and let the Italian people open the doors first. I think the worst thing about holidays is lack of knowledge of public travel systems.

Daniel obligingly met us at the station and drove us on the now familiar road up, up, up to *Le Reverier*. We all washed the grime of the day away, while Daniel and Paula cooked tea of baked potato and tuna mayo. They seemed to have taken the role of *chefs de vacances*, which was very much appreciated. After playing a game of Extreme Uno as usual, we practically fell into bed.

### **Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> July**

Day 5 – on which Rachel opted to stay behind for a chill-out day, while Daniel and Paula arranged with Alan and me that they would go on ahead of us for a walk, before rendezvousing with us a couple of hours later at a place in the Valle d'Ayas, to be confirmed by text message.

In due course, Alan, Mum and I drove along the road parallel to the first two stops of the route the train had taken the day before. It was interesting to see from the road a castle on a hill that we'd previously seen from the train. Alan fortuitously decided to stop at a likely looking place for "tre caffè latte", which was served in colourful cups at a table outside.



**Caffè latte – fantastico!**

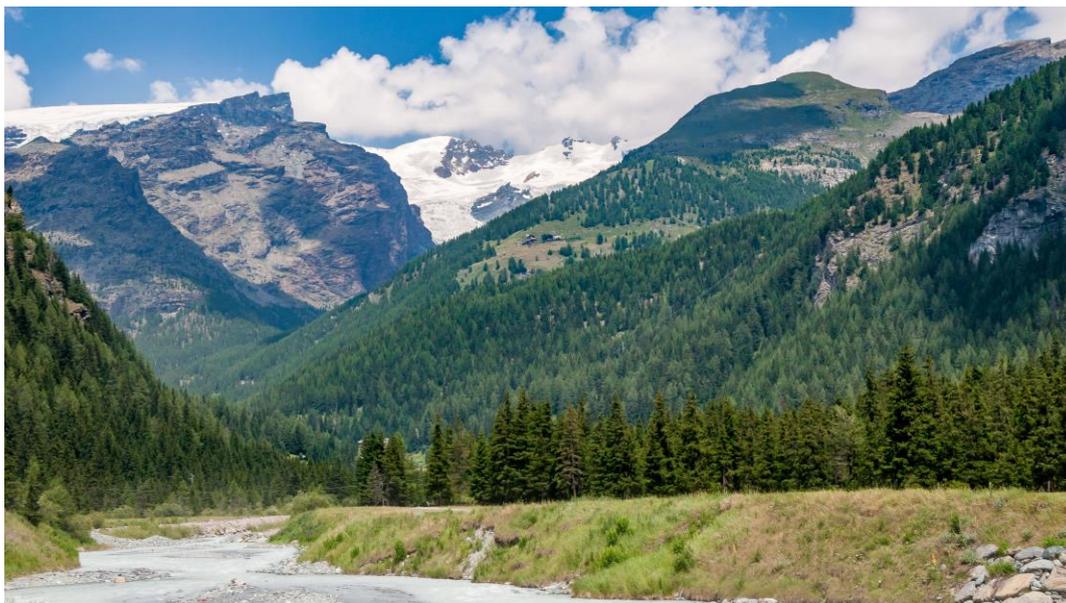
We then continued along the valley road to Verrès, but after that, the road curved upwards on the usual bendy mountain roads. Alan stopped the car at one point, so we could take a photo of an intriguing castle on a hill.

As we continued in an ever-upwards direction, however, it gradually became apparent to us how much Mum hated the mountain roads. In the end, she disclosed that she'd been suffering from vertigo and was afraid she'd have a heart attack because of her high blood pressure.

We were taken aback, as she hadn't mentioned this before, but it seemed that our only option was to turn back and descend to valley level. Unfortunately, it was very difficult either to park or turn around and there was the added complication of having arranged to meet up with Daniel and Paula.

We tried to stop at one likely looking place, but couldn't see anywhere to park the car. We were therefore about to carry on when Daniel sent a text message to say that he and Paula were at Champoluc, which wasn't very far from where we were. We managed to find each other easily enough and went to sit by a river to eat our packed lunch.

It was rather a disconsolate lunch for Alan and me, although we took a couple of photos of the lovely snowy mountain peak in the distance. We naturally had to explain the situation to Daniel and Paula and it was reluctantly decided that Daniel and Paula should go off on their own (a chair lift was visible from where we were) while we headed back with Mum.



**Champoluc, Valle d'Ayas** (photo by Alan Santillo)

We went to search for some postcards and a toilet, but were unsuccessful on both counts, so simply returned to *Le Reverier*. There were quite a few castles and Roman ruins en route, begging for later exploration.

It had been 35°C in Aosta valley and had cooled only slightly as we'd climbed higher. After a very necessary cool drink, Alan and I went to *Gros Cidac* for more supplies. I was idly perusing the cold meat selection, as you do, when a woman who obviously worked in the delicatessen thrust a piece of ham under my nose and started to talk rapidly in Italian. I surmised that she was tempting me with a special offer of a really great piece of ham, but I just smiled enigmatically. She took away her piece of ham and that was the end of the non-transaction.

On returning to *Le Rev*, it was time for mountain watch with a glass of rosé wine, although no eagles were in sight. Alan skinned and boned the fish he'd bought at *Gros Cidac*, so it was ready when Daniel and Paula returned later to work their magic with diced fish, vegetables and fruit juice.

There was thunder rumbling away in the distance, but it didn't come towards us and we finished the evening in our usual style, with a game of Extreme Uno.

### **Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> July**

Day 6 – it was another slightly late start to the day, which seemed hazy but still very warm. I was personally taken aback (but pleased) at the materialisation of a mug of tea, courtesy of Alan, while I was still washing and dressing in the cavern. It's good when your partner can still surprise you!

Daniel and Paula left before 09:00 for a day's walk, while the rest of us finished breakfast. Although the holiday toast situation was dire, having no grill or toaster, we made do with croissants, a variety of cereal and toast in a packet.

We were finally ready to leave at sometime past 10:00 and drove down, down, down to Aosta, parking in the underground railway station car park. It felt much more comfortable now we were familiar with the procedure.

The weather was mutedly hot as we walked to the piazza and bought postcards, then went to the same caffè for Alan's linguistic triumph: "Tre caffè latte e uno cappuccino, per favore." Of course, we were incapable of any grammatical finesse, but it was all progress and Alan was happy with himself.

We wandered along to the cathedral, where Alan and Mum ventured inside and where Alan was apparently reprimanded for stepping too close to the altar. Meanwhile, Rachel and I went for a walk along the streets, browsing and locating a good-looking ristorante that would possibly fulfil Paula's wish to have a pizza in Italy. We then sat on a wooden bench in the piazza to wait for Alan and Mum, who appeared at 20 minutes past the allotted time...



**Torre di Pailleron, Aosta** (photo by Alan Santillo)

Having neglected to ask for stamps when buying postcards, we went into an Italian post office. It looked like it had been updated with modern technology that not only confused us, but also the local people. We sussed from a ticket dispenser that a numbered ticket should be taken, but it took a little while and a spot of wild guessing which *sort* of ticket, as there were several options.

In the end, Alan picked a ticket from an option with likely looking words and a picture of an envelope, then sat down to await his turn at the relevant window ... and sat ... and sat ... and sat. His number was P132. We sat loyally beside him as P126 was dealt with. Then, inexplicably, the woman serving at the 'P' window shut off her digital number display and sat back to count stamps and money.

The 12 or so local people waiting with us seemed as frustrated as we were and one or two went to enquire at another window that was still open, but to no avail. Alan bravely went to ask another employee and was told to wait. The woman continued to count the stamps and money.

A young Italian man with a parcel came and sat down next to Alan. The woman counted. The Italian man discerned that Alan was English, so presumably his exhortations of "What the hell is going on? What in the name of \*\*\*\* am I supposed to do?" had given him away.

The woman counted. The young Italian man politely asked Alan what postal service he wanted. When Alan showed him the postcards, the man went to another counter to enquire, thinking that Alan could just get stamps there, but he was wrong, we definitely had to wait along with everybody else.

The woman counted. The man continued a very pleasant conversation with Alan about parcels and the madness of the new system, in very good English with a rather endearing accent. I was endeared, anyway!

Suddenly, the woman at the 'P' window decided to switch on her digital display again and business was resumed – thankfully at great speed, so that Alan was soon attended to, luckily with no problems. The young Italian man called out a cheery “Goodbye!” and we were on our bemused way back to the car.

We drove the now familiar bendy road up, up, up to *Le Rev* and had a pleasant little lunch of various items, including watermelon. Mum then opted to stay behind, while Alan, Rachel and I went out firstly to purchase some diesel for the Renault Scenic and then to embark on an afternoon’s adventure.

The diesel was duly purchased. Alan’s linguistic/communication skills reached dizzy new heights when he asked for air for the tyres and the woman understood right away! Our plan for the afternoon was to drive to a ruined castle and a lake. OK, so it was Rachel’s plan, but it was a very good plan and she wasn’t to know about the police, the sudden summer storm and the burning rubber smell from the car as we tried not to plunge backwards down the mountain...

The drive started quite calmly and we enjoyed the Italian scenery as much as ever. We did notice an unusual number of police bikes and wondered vaguely if anything was amiss, but were entranced by the landscape. A little further on, we spotted a prettily-painted church on one side of the road and a brilliantly Gothic castle abandoned on the top of a heavily wooded mountainside on the other side of the road. We naturally stopped to take photos – we’d actually been hoping to walk up to the castle, but that was unfortunately impossible.



**The prettily-painted church**

Alan disappeared amongst some very tall grass in pursuit of the perfect photo. I could smell quite a pungent aroma from some nearby plants, but Rachel wasn't keen on the smell. A large lorry then pulled in behind us and a sinister looking man jumped down from his driving seat and started to walk in our direction.

Well, maybe he wasn't so sinister and maybe he *was* just walking towards the back of his lorry to see about something ... but the Gothic castle, the strange-smelling plants, the police presence and the sudden aloneness of two women on an Italian mountainside (where *was* Alan?) must have alarmed Rachel and me simultaneously, because we both instinctively scuttled back to the car, got in and shut the doors without speaking.

Alan sauntered back a short while later in a photographic world of his own and we continued our drive. The road we took up the mountain was surprisingly narrow and very winding. We'd almost decided we'd made a wrong turn, when we became aware of several police bikes on the road. A little further on, Alan turned the car around in somewhere that was either the driveway of somebody's house, or a path down to a tiny village and the police bikes followed us. To our relief, when we drove on, they didn't.

We carried on then until we came to a clearing that gave a good vantage point looking down over the mountainside. There was obviously something unusual happening, as there were several vehicles parked there with doors open and people standing around. One van looked like it belonged to a camera crew and there were more *polizia*.

I was ever so slightly frustrated, as it would have been a great place to take a photo or two, but Alan was as usual completely free of such inhibitions. He jumped out of the car with his camera and strolled enthusiastically across to the vantage point. Behind us where a smaller road branched off, there were two policemen standing, complete with guns.

After Alan was satisfied with the photos he'd taken, Rachel and I watched apprehensively from the safety of the car as he approached the two policemen and had a conversation with them. He then walked back to the car quite calmly and said they had blocked that road, so we had to continue on the unblocked one. We deliberated whether or not to carry on to the lake, as the weather was beginning to look decidedly ominous. Having travelled this far, though, we thought it would be a shame not to continue.

The roads were still very winding, although some were wide enough to have tunnels built into the side of the mountain. We entered one tunnel in complete dryness, but emerged into rain. We knew we were quite close to the lake, so still carried on, but the rain had started to empty itself down and I saw a flash of lightning somewhere near the mountain top. What felt disconcerting was that we were the only vehicle still going upwards, while we passed rather a lot of vehicles on their way down.

There was obviously going to be no imminent let-up in the weather and the rain had quickly begun to cascade down the road. After a dodgy moment when a car coming down made it very difficult for our car to pass and more or less forced Alan to reverse, Alan made the decision to turn back.

I'm not quite sure how it came about, but we'd reached a reservoir and as Alan began to turn the car around in the narrow road with a sheer drop behind us, the car seemed to rebel against the manoeuvring. Alan struggled mightily with the car and the car struggled mightily with the awful conditions. The smell of burning rubber pervaded the air and I remember I said, "Something's not right."

Rachel said later that what flashed through her mind was not wanting to die in a car plunging backwards down a mountain. Luckily for me, I'd glanced behind and seen a low brick wall, so knew it wasn't quite as bad as it appeared to Rachel. It was bad enough, though – bad enough for me to call upon our guardian angels. However, our time obviously wasn't up, as Alan won the battle with the car and we drove back down the mountain, adrenaline gradually subsiding.

The drive back after that was uneventful, except that we saw four *polizia* vans heading in the direction we'd come from. Despite our relief to be driving safely away, it was frustrating knowing we'd never find out what had happened.

We had some more baked potatoes with various other items for tea and then, for a change from Extreme Uno, watched a video together – *Under the Tuscan Sun* – a pleasant romantic comedy after a very strange day. I think the worst thing about holidays is being caught out by sudden rainstorms in dodgy hire cars on dangerous mountain roads!

### **Friday 14<sup>th</sup> July**

Day 7 – the day of the planned trip to Lake Como (Lago di Como) for Alan, Rachel, Mum and me, requested especially by Mum. We arose at 07:00 and were ready to leave *Le Rev* at just gone 08:00. The temperature started as a pleasant 20°C, but it soon crept up steadily as we drove down, down, down the mountain and then along the valley road.

I was in the front passenger seat, supposedly navigating. It is very doubtful whether I actually helped in this capacity, as Rachel is much more road alert and road aware than I am and Alan seemed to know where he was going anyway.

It was tedious for the passengers and arduous for Alan as the time slipped past. I was intrigued that we started in mountainous country, drove through flat country and then entered mountainous country again when we approached the outskirts of Como by about 10:30. Como was far larger than any of us had anticipated and driving through its centre was like driving through an inner city, packed with housing, shops and graffiti. It didn't endear the place to me at all.

It was therefore a relief to catch sight of the lake eventually, but it seemed so congested there that Rachel suggested we carry on to Bellagio, where the lake splits into two and where it would almost certainly be quieter. Unfortunately, the drive there was up some narrow roads and Italian traffic appears to be blissfully unaware of its own narrow roads.

At one point, a lorry came trundling down towards us with no intention of stopping and this shook Alan so much that he stopped at the next possible parking place to get out of the car to calm down. It happened to be a good vantage point for overlooking part of the lake, with terracotta-roofed houses dotted at various random intervals up the side of the mountain.

It became obvious that Bellagio was further away than we thought, so the decision was made to return to the centre of Como and take pot luck. We managed to find a central car park, underground and pleasantly cool. As we walked along the street, our feet seemingly taking us towards the nearest eating place, Como didn't seem quite as hot to me as Turin had been.



**Picturesque Lago di Como** (photo by Alan Santillo)

We managed to find a spare table among the many arranged outside the caffè, all with brightly coloured tablecloths underneath a large sunshade. A man was playing an accordion and the atmosphere was metropolitan and bright – dulled only by the rather brusque waiter who didn't give us enough time to decipher the menu, seemed in a great rush and didn't smile once. However, more by good fortune than anything else, we ended up with panini, a small pizza for Mum and some refreshing granite di limone.

Whilst in mid-lunch, the accordion player suddenly appeared at our table. He was obviously asking for money, so Alan bemusedly gave him some change, at which the accordion player said politely, "Grazie e buon appetito!" I think the worst thing about holidays is not knowing the local customs.

However, I noticed afterwards that people at several of the other tables were refusing him money, so I was actually glad that Alan had given him some. While the rest of us finished our food, Alan nipped across the road to the boat ticket office, to check out times of trips around the lake. There was one at 12:40 and then 13:30, so we went for the earlier one. This was almost not achieved, due to our elusive waiter, but Alan managed to track him down in time.

The tickets were bought and we stepped outside into the now very hot sun, waiting to board the boat. There was one already alongside with its passengers disembarking. It was a modern double-decker sleek little number, so we were happily anticipating a pleasant trip around the lake. However, this boat left and another single-decker much older model chugged into its place. It ended up being filled with people, but Alan, Rachel and I managed to find a place outside at the back, so we could take photos. Mum opted to sit inside, in the shade.

The boat started and we headed further out into the lake. The surrounding scenery was very pretty, with houses and the odd church clinging onto the hillside. There were several stopping points around the lake, but every time the boat stopped and started, it made the most hideous grinding noise, which seemed to emanate from right underneath my seat. In fact, my wooden seat appeared to become very hot every time this happened. What with that and the sun beating down, I can't say it was the most serene of boat trips.



**Rachel joins me on the hot seat** (photo by Alan Santillo)

It was still very interesting, though, watching the handful of people getting on and off at each stop, listening to the Italian conversations all around us and surreptitiously looking at the surprising number of mosquito bites on the arms of several people. Apparently, mosquitoes are plentiful around the lake.

The boat trip experience ended after an hour or so and we set out to look for postcards for Mum. We'd originally had the impression that Lago di Como would be a touristy place with lots to buy and see, but maybe we weren't at the centre.

However, we did find a few shops and after Mum bought her postcards, we stopped in the shade of a usefully placed tree to consume cold items – a gelato each for Mum, Alan and me and a Coke for Rachel. It was noisy, with lots of people and a big colourful outdoor television screen with accompanying Italian speech and music blaring out.

We strolled along the lakeside for a while, sat gazing at the scenery for a while and took photos for a while, before deciding it was probably time to walk back to the car. The heat was amazingly ... hot. The underground car park was a cool relief and it suddenly occurred to me that maybe there are a lot of underground car parks in Italy for that very reason.

The drive back was uneventful, hot and tiring and Alan was obviously exhausted, so it was with great relief that we returned safely to *Le Rev*. Daniel and Paula were cooking beef for their tea and very kindly extended it to include Rachel and Mum, whereas Alan and I were happy to consume edible oddities.

During the evening, the gathering clouds over the mountains were gazed at before, during and after a game of Extreme Uno. Thunder was heard and cameras were taken out. Music was heard drifting up from the valley below – a blues festival, according to the leaflet Rachel had been handed in Aosta the day before. The thunder and music seemed to impart an atmospheric end to the day, as Alan, Rachel and I eventually descended to the bowels of the cavern below.

### **Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> July**

Day 8 – and not surprisingly, the three of us in the cavern didn't regain consciousness until 09:30. Daniel and Paula had already departed for another walk at Gran Paradiso, so the rest of us stayed at *Le Rev* for a leisurely morning. Mum took to the balcony with her puzzle book, while I took to the bathroom with the hand washing. Such are the practicalities of life.

After a small lunch, Alan, Rachel and I had to go to the supermarket for more supplies. It seemed hotter and more uncomfortable than previously, but we bought what we hoped would be interesting food for everyone.

I went out on the balcony after we'd returned and was just standing there gazing at the mountains, when a green missile launched itself from the roof and landed on my left one! I didn't scream, but plucked gingerly at my chest, persuading a very large grasshopper to transfer itself to the balcony rail.



**Ah – Grasshopper!**

Alan took photos as it paraded up and down the rail, while Rachel and I prepared potato salad and tuna mayo. Daniel and Paula sent a text to say they'd be back late, but they fortuitously (or otherwise) made it in time to taste the tuna mayo.

After the dishes had been washed, Alan, Rachel, Daniel and I went for a short walk up to the waterfall again. It was quite humid and as we began to stroll back, droplets of warm rain started to fall. Back on the balcony at *Le Rev*, the thunderclouds were evident over the mountain that seemed always to attract the most clouds and there was intermittent thunder and lightning around throughout the evening, some of it coming from the top of the mountain above.



**A stormy evening** (photo by Alan Santillo)

On descending to the cavern, it was discovered that the floor was appreciably damp and the three of us sleeping there spent some time moving our suitcases off the floor, in order for them to dry out on other higher places, such as the large table down there. It had seemed to be rather an inauspicious day and as we finally settled down for the night, thunder could still be heard, rolling around menacingly in the distance.

### **Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> July**

Day 9 – and the mistiest morning mountain view to date. We had another non-rushing start to the day and eventually all drove down, down, down to Aosta in the two cars. It was warm, quite quickly veering to hot, so after meandering along to the piazza, we sat at the usual caffè and enjoyed a morning drink. The piazza seemed unusually busy and noisy, with an excitable man speaking into a microphone in rapid Italian.

As Daniel was on a mission to photograph Aostan streets for possible articles for various Italian magazines, we split into two groups, to reconvene later for lunch. Daniel, Paula and Rachel went for a faster walkabout, while Alan, Mum and I went for a rather more sedate walkabout, as befitted our elevated ages.

We in the slower group first of all visited a beautiful 450-year-old tree (a tilia or broad-leaved lime) and took advantage of some seating underneath the shelter of its leaves. We then went to look at some Roman church remains, complete with tombs and other structures that were conveniently below ground level and hence significantly cooler.

After that, we visited some cloisters that were clearly very old and had some extremely interesting carvings on the pillars. A few of the figures had heads seemingly rubbed/taken off and the head of one figure was completely missing. There was a fascinating picture/fresco on one of the ancient walls that looked rather Eastern, like a mixed-up Christian/Hindu rather dark-looking Madonna with 14 stars around her head and holding a black baby Jesus. I found I was really missing some good, decent information.

Unfortunately, no photos were allowed and all the time we were there, a woman guarded the place with an eagle eye, so Alan couldn't even sneak a quick non-flash photo. I think the worst thing about holidays is being told you can't take photos of some of the most interesting things in the entire vicinity. He walked away disappointedly, as we slowly headed back to the piazza in the heat, where a brass band had now joined the microphone man, who was welcoming in runners who had apparently run the Aosta Skyrace.



**The 450-year-old tilia** (photo by Alan Santillo)

The faster walkabout group turned up and we all walked to a pizzeria they'd spotted earlier, which had seemed clean and not too full, with tables outside and English on the menu. By the time we arrived, though, it was fairly crowded, so we went inside to look for a table.

I don't know what had happened to the English menu, but the waitress tried very hard to explain what the Italian meant on the completely Italian menu – communication was definitely interesting with her smattering of English and our newly learned mini-smattering of Italian.

We discovered that there was no granite di limone for Mum; Alan ended up with his third choice of pizza; Mum ended up with a folded calzone and not the ordinary open pizza she'd wanted; and Daniel and Paula discovered that buffalo wasn't the succulent meat they'd imagined, but was cheese ... but it was cool. OK, to be honest, it was really hot, as there seemed to be no air-conditioning, but we managed very well and the mood was upbeat.

Going outside again felt warm in a different way to the warmth inside, but all we felt fit for was to return to the cars and drive up, up, up to *Le Rev*.

Later and so as not to waste the afternoon, Alan, Rachel, Daniel, Paula and I wondered about going to the top of 'our' mountain. Mum insisted that she was happy to stay behind, so Daniel drove us up around the bendy mountain roads he now loved, to the ski resort of Pila. He seemed to be driving quite quickly! Once there, we all took the chairlift to the top, with Alan and Paula in one chair and Daniel, Rachel and me behind them in another chair.

It was an unusual experience swinging around above the trees, with just one scary moment when we were stopped at the dodgiest point and swung to and fro a little less than gently. Daniel may have uttered a few profanities... However, we reached the top and managed to jump off the chairs with no mishap. There was a shortish walk in an upwards direction to a lake – the lake was just a green lake, but the alpine flowers were delightful. The view wasn't bad, either!



**Four stand around at the top**

We decided not to walk further up for several reasons, such as the big lunch we'd recently had and Rachel's flip flops – sturdy and well-soled flip flops, but perhaps not ideal for mountain walks. We were therefore content to enjoy where we were for a while, before turning around and retracing our steps.

The worst bit of the chairlift back was the sudden launch over a drop with a safety net below. It had been beautifully cool at the top of the mountain, but the air gradually became hotter as we descended. Having managed not to drop anything (since Rachel had been afraid of dropping a flip flop onto the head of an innocent walker/biker below), we walked to a nearby bar and sat outside with a welcome drink of expensive ice-cold Coke.

Once we'd journeyed back down, down, down to *Le Rev*, we did our own things – mainly puzzles and Daniel looking on his laptop computer at the photos he and Alan had taken. Rachel and I partook of mountain watch with a glass of rosé wine (very civilised, but no eagles again) and at around 19:45, we ate bits and pieces. Food, to be precise. The mountain remained misty and we ended the day pleasantly and raucously as usual with Extreme Uno.

### **Monday 17<sup>th</sup> July**

Day 10 – another misty morning. Daniel, Paula and Rachel left *Le Rev* at about 09:00 for an exciting day trip to Zermatt in Switzerland, while Alan, Mum and I departed at 10:30, with the temperature comfortable at 20°C. Our main objective was a leisurely drive along the valley road to Sarre, Aymavilles, Villeneuve and Arvier, while looking out for an interesting castle to visit.

It proved harder than we thought. They were either closed or too high/far to walk to with Mum and one was actually a natural history museum. However, it was a pleasant enough drive and we stopped once along the way to take photos.



**St Pierre Castle** (photo by Alan Santillo)

With hours of the day left, we headed to Aosta again, where Alan parked the car in the underground station car park like an old timer. We walked to the piazza, much quieter than the day before, stopping at a different caffè for lunch. It was pleasant sitting outside under an awning in the warm air of some midday shade.



**Midday in Aosta**

We strolled along afterwards, noticing how different sights can be seen on each visit, as Aosta is such a vibrant place. Although described as not very touristy, there are a few souvenir-type shops and I never felt like a stranger out of place. The artist installed under the Roman arch had been painting a picture of sunflowers, but was nowhere in sight when we went to have a closer look.

We happily acted like the tourists we were, looking in a few shop windows, buying souvenir bottles of local liqueur and taking more photos. To round off the visit, we enjoyed a gelato each. Alan and I had a medium-sized dish (*media capetto*) each of delicious raspberry (me) and grape (Alan) ice cream, while Mum had a small cornet (*piccola corno*) of pistachio ice cream. I can truthfully say this ice cream was the best I've tasted, liberally laced with real raspberries.

We returned to the car and drove up, up, up to *Le Rev*, with the mid-afternoon temperature at 31°C. It was very relaxing sitting out on the balcony for the rest of the afternoon, reading and watching the clouds gather over the mountains (but no eagles again). We had another bits and pieces tea, on the balcony for Alan and me, like having a picnic with an amazing view.

Daniel, Paula and Rachel returned complete with some Swiss chocolate at around 19:00, after a really enjoyable day at Zermatt, where they'd successfully viewed the Matterhorn amid other adventures. After they'd eaten and after the usual viewing of Daniel's latest photos on his laptop, we talked about the day just past and the day to come. Then, being hooked on *Extreme Uno*, we naturally had to have a game before going to bed.

### **Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> July**

Day 11 – the visit to Monte Bianco/Mont Blanc for Alan, Rachel and me. There had been heavy rain and thunder during the night, but the morning was clear, apart from the usual mistiness over the mountains.

The temperature as we set off at just gone 09:00 to drive down to the valley was 15°C. It was more or less a straight road to Monte Bianco, although Rachel and I are of the opinion that Italian road signs are not always explicit. They often seem to point you in the right direction, but then fail to keep up the guidance, so that you doubt you're on the right road. Then, when you manage to arrive, you're unsure of where you can park the car.

However, the car parking today was free, so I shouldn't complain. Also, the drive there had revealed striking and rather wonderful views of Monte Bianco as it appeared in the distance, gradually becoming closer and closer. Also, thanks to Italian road signs, we managed not to drive into the Mont Blanc tunnel and end up in France, so I'm definitely not complaining.

Alan parked the car overlooking a mountain river with its glacial green-grey milky looking water rushing over a rocky river bed and we walked up a hill to the cable car station of La Palud to Punta Helbronner, with Monte Bianco looming imposingly above us. A few tourist shops were in evidence, but we headed straight to the cable car ticket window and joy of joys, the ticket seller replied in the affirmative to Alan's "Parla Inglese?" He even seemed pleased to speak English, as has been the case with several English-speaking Italians.

We only had to wait a few minutes before our turn came for the cable car. I have to say I was a little surprised at how many people crammed on (about 15) and the windows were unfortunately rather scratched so that the view was disappointingly not as clear as it could have been, but it was still possible to look out and see the world gradually becoming smaller and smaller and the mountain gradually becoming bigger and bigger.

We passed over lots of tree tops and the terrain below became noticeably more mountainous. We reached the first station, but decided to get on the next cable car and go straight to the top. This time I confess to being a little uncomfortable, as underneath us the bare mountain rock and snow started to appear and the patches of snow became larger the higher up we travelled. We also passed through patches of cloud ... very atmospheric ... very pretty ... very high up!



**Very spectacular – very high up**

When we arrived at the next station, the temperature had dropped appreciably. We saw there was still a little way left to go to the very top, so jumped on (not literally) the smaller cable car that held about eight people. We were soon there and headed out to the glacier viewing gallery. The air was exhilarating and my feet, bare within my trusty Merrell sandals, weren't cold at all.

There were so many spectacular views of the snowy peaks, with clouds below us clinging to the mountainside. A number of small figures could be seen below, walking across the glacier. They were keeping to the marked pathways ... but I couldn't help wondering marked how and by whom? Some small aircraft flew over the mountain, presumably on a sightseeing trip.

We saw the cable car we could have taken further if we'd wanted, which travelled across the mountain to Chamonix, in France. That would have been quite a trip, but we were contented with where we were. Some rather scruffy-looking black birds were prowling around on the mountain, seeming interested in people, as if people had fed them in the past.



**From the viewing gallery, Punta Helbronner**

Having taken a month's supply of photos in about 20 minutes and beginning to feel cold, we went to peruse the crystal exhibition on this level. There were some unusual crystal formations on display, as well as photos of how the rocks and crystals had been collected, from where and by whom, but the writing understandably was in Italian and French.

Having more or less had our fill of snowy peaks and crystals, we decided to start our descent. First of all came the short trip in the small cable car, followed by the longer trip in the larger cable car. This time we stayed at this level and Alan almost immediately espied a shop which had a few crystals on display. Rachel quickly settled on a piece she wanted to buy and after a huge amount of deliberation, so did Alan and I.

After this, we entered the Saussurea alpine/botanical garden, where many delicately pretty alpine flowers were arranged in groups from different areas of the world. They looked incredibly beautiful against the breathtaking scenery of the mountains. I felt as if I could be in heaven, or at least another world where it was peaceful, the air was clean and a sense of harmony prevailed.

Rachel had unfortunately discovered that her sunglasses were broken as we'd stepped out into the very bright sun, but she squintingly joined Alan and me as we walked among the flowers and didn't complain when we took our time.

It was around midday and definitely hot, although not quite as hot as the walk around the alpine garden at Gran Paradiso had been in the afternoon on our third day. As we'd observed there, some gardeners were out working in the heat of the full sun, but they must have been wearing some sun protection.



**Breathtakingly beautiful**

After a short but lovely meander, we made the final descent in the cable car to La Palud. I'd found it interesting to eavesdrop on all the Italian conversations in the cable car journeys and heard some French, German and English too.

We walked around looking inside a few shops at La Palud, but they mostly contained the usual touristy souvenirs with not a single rock, mineral or crystal in sight – I think the worst thing about holidays is seeing the same sort of tourist trash in just about every souvenir shop you come across.

We therefore returned down the hill to the car park and stood in the meagre shade of the car's open boot, beside a nearby rushing torrent, while we hungrily ate the sandwiches that Rachel had made early that morning.

It was then time for the journey back, but this time with no awesome view of Monte Bianco, since it was behind us. The temperature had crept up and by the time we reached Aosta. We stopped there for Rachel to buy a souvenir bottle of liqueur and for Alan and me to indulge in another gelato from the same place as the day before. The air felt incredibly hot and somewhat stifling.

Thus, a while later and with our Aostan mission accomplished, we returned up, up, up to *Le Rev*, where Daniel, Paula and Mum were playing Scrabble. The rest of the afternoon was then spent in the usual individual pursuits of reading, writing, playing cards, doing puzzles and mountain watch on the balcony.

An interesting expletive was heard from Paula as she came out onto the balcony, only to be dive-bombed by a mad, massive grasshopper. This, of course, led to a photo-shoot of the insect variety by Alan and Daniel, as the grasshopper strutted brazenly along the balcony rail.

For our evening meal, Paula and Daniel kindly cooked fish that they'd purchased from the supermarket that day, along with rice and fruit, which is a simple but pleasing recipe. I was aware that they were having to accommodate Alan and me as non-meat eaters and was very grateful.

After washing the dishes, I went outside on the balcony to cool down with a glass of sangria (an intrinsically holiday drink) and discovered it was raining with lovely big drops of warm summer rain that felt strange, but refreshing and delightful. On returning inside, the rest of the evening was spent ... guess what ... playing Extreme Uno.

### **Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> July**

Day 12 – it was another bright, sunny start, with gentle haziness around the mountains. We awoke in the dank cavern and gradually wended our way upstairs. Daniel and Paula departed for another walk at Gran Paradiso, while the rest of us deliberated our choices for the day. To be honest, we were finding it quite limiting having to stay in the valley because of Mum. In the end, we decided on a drive along the valley road to Verrès, to see what was there.

By the time we left at almost 11:00, it was 25°C and promising to be another hot day. Thankfully, the air-conditioning in the car always worked well, as it would have been a far less pleasant experience without it.

The drive was uneventful, but the sights whilst driving along were so varied. We frequently passed terraces of vines up the sides of the mountain; apple trees; a lot of building work and road work in progress; the usual shops and dilapidated and derelict houses that seemed as if they could tell such a story. I think the worst thing about holidays is glimpsing so much of what you know you'll never see or understand properly.

We stopped for a drink at the same place we'd stopped along this road previously. As it was almost midday, though, the inside of the caffè was full of people eating lunch. Undeterred, we sat at a table outside for our "tre cappuccini e uno Coke". Alan was riding high on his success with ordering drinks in Italian caffès. The cappuccini were served in colourful Chinese patterned cups, although no cappuccino I'd so far been served in Italy had come with chocolate sprinkled on top (and this was no exception).

We then continued the remaining short journey to Verrès, situated at the entrance to the Ayas Valley. We'd read that it had a castle and a church, even though it was described as a village. Our first impressions were that it seemed small but perfectly formed, although thankfully there was a large enough car park. However, the writing in Italian on the ticket dispenser led Alan to go and ask advice from a handy policewoman, who happened to be sitting peacefully in a nearby *polizia* car.

She seemed very friendly – maybe she was glad of something to do – and she even got out of her car to go and show Alan that it was cheaper to park in the underground section if we were staying for any length of time, as the top section was only for very short stays.

Having parked the car underground, where it was still very warm down below, we walked through the small but interesting town. It had rather an olde worlde feel to it, but this may have been partly due to the fact that it was just on siesta time and lots of shops were closed. Rachel and I noticed some *My Little Pony* items and pretty little girls' shoes in one of the shop windows – it seemed a strange but oddly charming selection.

There was a church (which Alan and Mum went in) and an Irish pub (which none of us went in). It was reasonably cool in the streets and there was quite a strong breeze as we walked over a bridge. Alan and I took some photos, fascinated as always by the backdrop of the mountain peaks tantalisingly revealing themselves in between the rooftops. I suspect the people who live with the mountains ever-present are accustomed to the sight, but for us it was a fresh wonder every time we saw them.

Near the car park, there was a pretty war memorial. I've noticed a number of them, well-kept with fresh flowers in many of the towns we've passed. Sadly, the UK seems not nearly as faithful for the upkeep of memorials. There are also shrines in the oddest places along the roadside, 99% of them extremely difficult to stop and photograph while travelling.



**The war memorial at Verrès**

We drove back to *Le Rev* and had a small late lunch, before Alan, Rachel and I set out again for a walk in Gran Paradiso. The drive was stunning amid the mountains with their sudden immense drops, the heavily wooded areas, the bare peaks above the tree line and the odd waterfall cascading gently to the valley floor. No doubt when it was winter, the volume of water would be far less gentle.

Having arrived at Cogne, we set out for our walk. Although there was quite a breeze, it was still hot and there were lots of people out enjoying the afternoon. We passed by a children's play area and a caffè and then walked along the river and up. I didn't realise quite how high we'd walked until I saw later how the altitude had compressed my water bottle.

Rachel was slightly bothered about the number of flies and I found it a bit on the hot side for walking uphill, but most of the time we were in the shade of trees, with the sound of the green-grey milky torrent rushing by beside/below us. We even caught sight of a wild mountain deer, but it only came out on the path for a few minutes to sniff the air, before escaping back to the safety of the trees.

We turned back when we saw we were heading into the small village of Valnontey, where we'd stopped on our first Gran Paradiso visit. A man had fallen down on the pathway, but he was with other people and stood up, probably feeling a little foolish, as we passed by. The ground underfoot was definitely easy to slip on, because it was downhill, but we all had good soles (not to mention good souls – I had to say that!)



**The rushing torrent** (photo by Alan Santillo)

We re-entered Cogne at nearly 18:00, decidedly hot and dusty, so stopped for refreshment. We found a small caffè selling exactly what we wanted – granite di limone for Rachel, granite di menta for Alan and “uno coppetta di gelato fragoli” (strawberry ice cream) for me. The Italian was coming along nicely.

On the hour's drive back to *Le Rev*, there were big alterations in progress on the road and as we stopped at traffic lights, we read that this particular building project had been started in August 2004 and was due to finish in December 2004. Perhaps a major problem had occurred? There's something awesome about seeing Italian men working on the side of a mountain with huge machinery and piles of enormous boulders amid partially constructed tunnels. However, I do wonder what effect all this has on the mountains themselves.

Coincidentally, as we turned up from Aosta to drive up to *Le Rev*, we found ourselves behind a big truck filled with the most enormous boulders. There was no way of overtaking, so we just had to take it extremely slowly while this truck chugged up and around the S-bends (obviously on its way up the mountain to Pila), hoping that the load was securely fastened.

On arrival back at *Le Rev* just before 19:00, Daniel, Paula and Mum were having tea. Rachel and I enjoyed mountain watch on the balcony with a glass of rosé. There weren't many clouds on the mountain tops and still no elusive eagles.

We went back inside for another bits and pieces tea, then played Extreme Uno until 22:00, when it was time to descend to the cavern below.

### **Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> July**

Day 13 – the day of Daniel and Alan's long planned man-walk in Gran Paradiso, overlooking the Valnontey valley. Seeing Alan had fairly recently undergone a hernia operation, I was a little concerned about how he'd cope, but I was consoled by the knowledge that he was in good hands with Daniel.

They left at just before 09:00 on a beautifully clear morning, while the rest of us decided to go for a drive to Arvier, which is described in the Rough Guide as "one of the region's most appealing villages" at the mouth of the valley.

Paula drove us along the valley road, with only one slight detour up the foot of a mountain. However, when we arrived at Arvier, we couldn't find anywhere to park. Although that was disappointing, we hadn't exactly had the impression of a most appealing village anyway.

We decided we might as well return to Villeneuve instead, which we'd passed through whilst driving and which had looked interesting, if not necessarily appealing. It seemed to be rather a popular place, as the car park was full, but Paula managed to find a metered parking space and we walked to a nearby small caffè for a mid-morning drink.

Paula strode fearlessly into the caffè, while I followed somewhat cautiously. In response to our request for caffè latte, the woman inside explained in English that "the Italian way" would be for this to be served in a very small cup, whereas if we had a cappuccino, this would be served in a normal-sized cup. This information was a little confusing seeing we hadn't come across this "Italian way" to date, but we readily agreed.

We sat outside and watched the activities in the small but busy street. Mum and I were brought our cappuccini and were surprised by the appearance of some powdered chocolate to sprinkle on top – it was probably a concession to the mad English people who didn't know the proper way to drink coffee! Paula and Rachel had a Coke each, which they said was really good.

After this welcome interlude, we ambled around the cobbled roads of Villeneuve, where the traffic seemed to zoom through the town at a precarious speed. Of particular note was an attractive church with paintings on the front and an interesting large sundial on the front of a house, written completely in French.



**The attractive church front, Villeneuve**

Apart from that, there didn't seem to be much to see, unless you count another Italian Spar shop. We headed back on the straighter road, stopping for a few items at *Gros Cidac*, otherwise known as *Gross Griddick*, according to Alan's misnomer, which sounds like a magical supermarket in Harry Potter world.

We had a simple lunch and relaxed afterwards in the usual pursuits. After a desultory game of Scrabble, Rachel, Paula and I walked to the waterfall just up from *Le Rev*. It was still very hot. This time we saw a wild raspberry, probably the first one I've ever seen growing naturally. A minute or two after our return, Alan and Daniel also returned, both looking somewhat exhausted.

The usual evening pursuits ensued, as we ate and looked at the day's photos on Daniel's laptop, along with descriptions of how amazing their walk up the mountain had been. I found myself envying them and considering Alan had not long recovered from a hernia operation, he had done incredibly well.

Finally, we played what turned out to be a bizarre game of Extreme Uno. The card ejecting mechanism seized up and according to the leaflet, needed to be cleaned with alcohol. Daniel resourcefully followed the instructions by applying wine with his sock, but then we decided the cards themselves were sticky from our sweaty hands. We improvised with a clean pack of ordinary playing cards, which added a lot more time, a lot more confusion and a lot more fun.

It felt a little sad to know that the following day was our last full one, but such is life and we felt we'd done well, considering Mum's limitations. And so to bed!

### **Friday 21<sup>st</sup> July**

Day 14 – our last full day! It was a lovely sunny morning, so Alan and I had breakfast on the balcony, overlooking the distant hazy mountains. I would so love to be able to do that every morning.

Everyone had already packed and tidied so that we could have the rest of the day free. I think the worst thing about holidays is having to re-pack the clothes you eventually realise you needn't have packed in the first place. It seemed significantly hot and when we left for our 'last day special lunch' at around midday, we could tell it *was* especially hot.

In Aosta, the two cars were parked for the last time in the underground railway car park. We then walked for the final time through the hot and steamy Aostan streets to the centre, where we stopped at the ristorante that Rachel and I had first spotted the previous week.

A friendly waiter greeted us, quickly ascertained that we were English and led us straight away through the house to the garden at the back, where there were tables and chairs underneath the shelter of a lovely spreading tree.



**Hotel de Ville, Aosta** (photo by Alan Santillo)

We perused the menu ... which was challenging, as it was all in Italian, but the waiter came and explained what was on offer in English, so we were able to order with confidence. The fish dishes seemed to be a speciality, so Alan and Rachel chose fish, while Daniel, Paula and I chose pizza and Mum an omelette.

There was then slight confusion when we tried to order granite di limone to drink whilst waiting for our food. The waiter said, "You want them now?" and looked at us as if we were mad English people. It turned out that in this ristorante they were classed as desserts, so we ordered Coke and iced tea instead.

When the food arrived, the meticulously arranged sauces on the two fish dishes revealed it as rather an upmarket ristorante and I wished I'd chosen fish. It was very enjoyable indeed sitting there in the pleasantly warm air of the garden amid the gentle hubbub of Italian conversation.

We saw a small lizard walking along the top of the wall, sunning itself and maybe intrigued by the aroma of the food – it obviously enjoyed being in the garden too. The verdict of the meal was overwhelmingly positive. Rachel was particularly impressed with her aniseed salmon, which did smell and look great.

We were unfortunately too full for dessert, so left the ristorante and walked back to the cars. It seemed hotter still as we drove up, up, up to *Le Rev*. After a short rest, Daniel drove Alan, Rachel and me to *Carrefour*, as we all wanted to buy some last-minute food and wine to take home. The temperature had reached 37°C this time, as we drove back for the last time up, up, up to *Le Rev*.

The evening was spent in our usual pursuits. I felt particularly sad knowing it was my last mountain watch with a glass of wine, watching the ever-changing cloud formations over the mountain peaks. I was also oddly sad that the eagles had never come back – odd because I have a bird phobia. They had looked so majestic and free as they soared and swooped effortlessly at such a height.

We finished the evening together with our usual mad game of Extreme Uno, madder than usual because we still had to improvise with an ordinary card deck. It was then goodnight for the last time, as Alan, Rachel and I descended to the cavern in the warm evening air, with the lights of Aosta twinkling below and the cicadas singing as madly as ever.

### **Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> July**

Day 15 – but not a real day 15, as it was travelling home day. Daniel (who has obviously inherited his father's tendency to be early) had stated that we needed to leave by 07:00. Well, we may have left a bit later than that, but it was still early, considering our flight wasn't until 12:30. I think the worst thing about holidays is not knowing exactly what time to leave.

It felt quite strange driving down, down, down for the last time, knowing we would now never have the chance to stop at the tiny village of Charvensod, or have another cappuccino in the piazza at Aosta, or have a ride up or down the mountain in one of the cable cars we had seen dangling above us every time we drove up and down the road to *Le Rev*.

Daniel drove the blue Passat with Alan and Mum as passengers and Paula drove the grey Renault Scenic with Rachel and me as passengers. I didn't find the drive to Milan as enjoyable as the drive from Milan had been on our first day. The traffic on the motorway seemed threatening ... but that was probably because fear of flying had already taken hold.

We arrived at Milan Malpensa airport in very good time. I tried to keep myself occupied by accompanying Paula to look for a luggage trolley, but the inevitable dreaded waiting in an airport feeling overcame me when that task had been completed and I sat down again feeling very tense. It wasn't helped at all by the fact that we had arrived early and our flight was delayed.

As it happened, we ended up incarcerated in our plane on the runway for almost two hours, waiting for the opportunity to take off, as our plane had missed its time slot. Also, there was a party of Italian schoolchildren on our flight. I have absolutely nothing against Italian schoolchildren, but they were understandably excited and bored by waiting and rather noisy. Still, it gave me something to take my mind off the inner turmoil ... as if!

The flight was smooth and just one hour and 45 minutes later, we were on English terra firma again. There had been a lot of cloud on our approach to Bristol airport, but the air was pleasantly warm. The UK had apparently experienced heat wave temperatures while we'd been away. We collected our suitcases and cars and said our goodbyes to the Welsh contingent and ... how is it possible to be so glad to be home, but to miss those mountains so much?

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I have so many different memories of this first visit to Italy – the vineyards stepped up the foot of the mountainside; the imaginative roundabouts in the towns with their colourful flowers, well-placed rocks and arty centre-pieces; a father singing to his child in the streets of Aosta; two old women seeing to their garden, one holding the bottom of a ladder for the other one to precariously reach the high plants up the wall; the water sprinklers spraying water wildly, even when it was raining; the chairlift stopped for siesta in the heat of midday; the cicadas and the other insects; the ancient Roman remains amongst the modern buildings; and mostly the mountains, ever-present, awesome and beautiful. I can understand why Italian people love their country with a passion and the thought of never seeing Italy again is suddenly a strange little empty thought. Maybe I should try hypnotherapy for my fear of flying?

And learn to speak Italian...