Escape to a Mediterranean winter

20/12/2009 Winter holidays in Belgium

The winter celebrations are a prolonged affair in Belgium. They start in earnest on the eve of December 5th when Santa and his black slave bring presents to the good little children and abduct the bad ones, putting them in a sack, beating them and taking them off to Spain. Then there are the winter markets, which run until the start of January. Christmas is still on December 25th, but this time Santa is from the North Pole, not Spain. Finally January 6th is Three Kings Day.

Actually the thing about Santa and his black slave is quite complicated. Originally Saint Nicholas day (December 6th) was celebrated by Sinterklass (St Nicolaas), dressed as a Bishop, conquering a devil (Zwarte Piet) and forcing him to help him for a day. As the patron saint of children (and pawnbrokers), Sinterklass would put presents in the shoes of good children and would indeed abduct and beat the bad children, taking them back to his native Spain.

Later on, when it became less acceptable for Saints to beat children, Zwarte Piet took on the punisher role, and evolved from a black devil to a black slave from the Spanish Moors or Africans. Nowdays the whole myth has been considerably improved, with Zwarte Piet being more mischievous than mean-spirited, and variously described as an ex-slave freed by Sinterklass and now working as his (unpaid) servant, or just as a regular servant made black from chimney soot. Sinterklass is really a small children's thing, being largely ignored by families with young kids.

Christmas Day is quite different. For one it is a whole family affair, fairly close to the large get together and feasting in Anglo cultures. Small children never used to get gifts on Christmas (they got theirs on Sinterklass), but now it seems that most children get presents on both.

Belgium also appears to have reimported the modified Sinterklass created in America from the Dutch original. Quite confusingly to little children, Sinterklass and Santa Claus are kind of the same but also kind of different. Sinterklass wears the traditional bishop's outfit while Santa Claus wears the Anglo Santa suit, but both are in red and white with the large white beard (a legacy of the most effective publicity campaign ever by Coke). Sinterklass comes from Spain while Santa Claus comes from the North Pole, but both deliver presents to children down the chimney. Different families resolve this conflicts in different ways - for some they are two distinct people (convergent evolution?), for others they are the same individual playing different roles, for still more one is the real deal while the other is fake (I'd love to hear a parent trying to explain that Sinterklass is real, but that guy dressed up as Santa is just a gimmick and Christmas presents are from the family).

Finally the end of the winter holidays on the 6th of January presents a split between the Walloons and Flemish. The Walloons call the day *Galette des Rois* and celebrate it by baking a porcelain figurine of baby jesus into a cake. The person who gets the king in their slice becomes "king" for a day. The Flemish, by contrast, call it *Drie Koningen*, and children on this day go around in groups of three singing songs and collecting sweets.

Despite the fascinating winter festivals of Belgium, right now we are packing to fly south for the

winter. The geese know what they are doing, it is *cold*. -10 degrees yesterday. The snow storm today was fantastic, but I hope the tarmac is clear for tomorrow...

22/12/2009 Impressions of Milan and Genova

Italy you had me fooled with your slick PR machine. After making it out of Brussels against the odds I expected to land in a sun-drenched country of quaint little villages, our escape from the harsh winter. I certainly didn't expect a layer of snow and a long train trip through the seemingly endless run-down post-industrial suburbs of Milan. Who knew that Milan is an urban sprawl of 7.4 million people?

It took us most of the day to get to Genova, and one of the striking things about the train trip is just how similar the landscape and climate is to Flanders – the Po Plain is very flat and lies at the cross-roads of major trade routes. How much history is actually geography? Could it really be coincidence that these two regions grew to be the richest regions of Europe in the Middle Ages based on a trade and textiles industry?

Finally to Genova. It is funny how a town smaller than Adelaide was once a powerful republic, for 300 years from 1100 CE, with one of the largest navies in the world and ownership over the region, Corsica, Sardinia and the Tyrrhenian Sea, with colonies in the Middle East, Greece, Sicily and Northern Africa. We were in Genova to see the Via Garibaldi, a UNESCO World Heritage listed street lined with decadent palaces during the peak of Genova's wealth in the 16th century as an important centre of the Spanish Empire. Wandering around the old city last night and this morning the best pleasure was in looking through the windows of the palaces and up at the ceilings, decorated by famous painters such as Rubens and Van Dyck. Actually many run-down slums also appeared to have peeling and faded masterpieces slowly rotting from the ceiling – Genova collapsed as a rich society in the mid 17th century with the plague wiping out half the population and a major attack by the French decimating the city, never again to regain its glory.

Our favourite, however, was the beautiful Cattedrale di San Lorenzo, built in an interesting Romanesque-Renaissance style with twirling white and gray columns and two very sad lions guarding the front.

23/12/2009 The architecture of Barcelona

Our day in Barcelona was the tale of three buildings, Casa Batlló, Sagrada Família and Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau.

Casa Batlló is a beautiful townhouse remodeled in 1904 by Antoni Gaudí. Gaudí's work is said to be in the Art Nouveau style, but this piece of architecture is unique even among a class of architecture known for its individualism. From the outside the building is stunning, it looks like it has been assembled from the skeletons of whales, with vertebrates making up the columns, ribs forming and arches and jaws bones the balconies. There are no hard lines and the fluidity makes even the delicate and intricate buildings next door seem harsh and clumsy.

Inside and the building continues the organic theme, but in a calming soothing manner. The floor, roof and walls flow into each other, mottled with a fish scale pattern, and luminescent tortoise shells bring in natural light. Even the doors and windows flow seamlessly into each other, the wooden frames warmly polished to almost glow organically and bubbles of light trapped within the glass sending ripples over the whirlpool roof. The most wonderful thing about the architecture is that it is not a pompous display of ability, rather every aspect is integrated into making the house liveable. The mushroom fireplace includes seats to sit inside and feel the warmth. The organic wooden panelling has fish-like gills built in to allow ventilation, the fluid design preserves warmth in winter and allows cooling in summer, and natural light is filtered from the central courtyard into even the smallest room in the house.

The attention to detail was simply suburb. Looking back from behind the house I thought it was a crime that such ugly buildings had been slammed up against this gem – only afterwards did I realise that the neighbouring buildings had beautiful frontages and the architects involved just followed standard procedure in ignoring the other aspects of their building. The loft had been used only by the neighbours for washing and Gaudí could easily have left the stagnant heat-filled design intact. Instead he recreated even this level for purpose, creating a cool dry level that breathed and using vaulted ribs to turn a drying room into a masterpiece.

Our second building, Sagrada Família is another, more famous, piece of work by Antoni Gaudí. It is the unfinished cathedral of Barcelona, started by Gaudí in 1883. This piece of work ended up consuming Gaudí, by the end of his life he had given up all other projects and even lived in the completed crypt of the Church. By the time of his death, 43 years after starting the project, a lack of funds had nearly driven the project to a halt, and even now with the building continuing according to his plans, it is not slated for completion until 2026, the 100th anniversary of his death. It is perhaps unfair to judge an unfinished piece of work, but I did not find Sagrada Família to be a beautiful piece of architecture. Unique, certainly, more like a sandcastle melted by sprays of water in the wind than a piece of hewn rock. But something about the style just didn't work in a Church – perhaps the master of adapting the building to fit the purpose struggled when designing a building with no purpose? Or maybe the problem is the age. The modern wings and spires worked quite well, the fresh cut of stone synergizing with the "sandcastle" feel, while the oldest portions (those built by Gaudí himself) created a discontinuity between the soot blackened age of the stone and the freshness of the carving. Gaudí once said "Gothic art is imperfect… gothic works produce maximum emotion when they are mutilated, covered with ivy and illuminated by the moon". Perhaps then Gothic style is better for a building which will be mutilated, darkened and obscured with age, while Gaudí's living breathing style is better suited to a house that will be lived in and loved.

More enjoyable than the outside of Sagrada Família was the inside. Here was a chance to see a sight granted only to a few. The inside of a cathedral not as a static piece, brooding with the age of centuries; but instead as the worksite of skilled craftmen, creating a monument that will live far beyond them. There was scaffolding, heavy equipment, piles of stone, vending machines and workmen busy working on a single block of stone to be integrated into the whole. It demolishes the illusion of the cathedral being built by the Church or King, cathedrals are built by *people*. The inspiring branching columns are painstakingly pieced together by unassuming disheveled men

wearing hard-hats and tool belts, people who will be forgotten the minute they walk out, while those who simply gave money will have their names carved into the stone forever.

In the crypt below the Cathedral lies a museum with the models of Gaudí's vision for Sagrada Família. One of his major innovations was the invention of an inverted model. Rather than build up a model and calculate forces and tensions, Gaudí modeled the Cathedral upside down, using cords and small weights. Each cord bent according to gravity, creating the most balanced and weight resistant structure possible, with the angle of arches and the position of columns falling out naturally. Gaudí then took photos of the inverted model from multiple aspects and reproduced the structure as a model.

Finally, we visited the Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau (Catalan for Hospital of the Holy Cross and Saint Paul). The hospital was built between 1901 and 1930 and functioned as a hospital until June 2009. Very different from the works of Gaudí, the building was designed by Lluis Domenech i Montaner, with a much more traditional approach to aesthetics, full of religious symbolism and sharp detail. It is amazing to stand at the entrance of Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau and look down the long boulevard to see Sagrada Família standing. How many cities in the world have two world heritage-listed pieces of architecture, built by different architects in different styles, facing one another down a single avenue?

25/12/2009 Roman ruins and marble mosques in Morocco

We entered Africa via the port of Casablanca and fumbled our way onto a train to Rabat. On the line between the biggest city in Morocco and the capital of Morocco there were a few slums, with obvious poverty, but mostly just run-down apartment blocks with the roof covered by satellite dishes. The coastal area is surprisingly green and fertile, with tropical humidity rather than windswept wastelands, the thin strip of arable land that made the Maghreb a centre of civilisation.

Lydia used her blossoming French to get us to Chellah, an ancient ruin on the edge of Rabat. The site was used by the Phoenicians, Carthaginians and Romans from around 300 BCE with an important town of Sala Colonia being situated there. It was later abandoned, and used only as a necropolis by the Almohad dynasty. The site gained a revival in the 14th century, when the Merinid Sultans built mosques, madrassas, botanic gardens and tombs there, but it was abandoned again within 200 years. We had a wonderful guide, able to talk to us about every aspect of the site, from the Roman ruins to the Moorish walls,

from Islamic art on the tombs to the functioning of a madrassa, from the plants in the now-wild gardens to the nesting storks covering the site (as an aside I asked him why there were so many storks, he said that this is common in Roman ruins, as the Romans tend to have picked sites near the river and leave behind large columns perfect for nesting, a clever explanation which so neatly recalled my experience of the single column remaining at Ephesus being topped by a nesting stork). A very insightful and intellectual meander across more than a thousand years of history.

After Chellah we entered Rabat proper to see the site of Hassan Tower. This brown block rises up from an empty square, an incomplete minaret from an incomplete mosque. The mosque was started in 1195 with the intent to be the world's largest, but a change in dynasty left the site empty save for the minaret built to half the intended height and 200 transplanted Roman columns to form the pillars of the mosque. An interesting quirk is that the tower was built with wide ramps to allow a horseman

to ride to the top to issue the call to prayer. Today a small mosque has been built on the other side of the site, standing without a minaret as it is not done to have two minarets competing with one another.

We caught the train back to Casablanca and walked down to Hassan II Mosque. The mosque was of course built for religious purposes, but as partially for the purpose of tourism, since Casablanca, despite having a name that rings with exotic appeal, has surprisingly little to attract tourists. The complex is enormous, the third largest mosque in the world (after Mecca and Medina) with room for 25,000, the tallest minaret (at 210 metres) and a courtyard able to fit another 80,000 people. The mosque sits out over the Atlantic Ocean, with a glass floor so that supplicants can see the ocean while praying. Construction took 13 years (1980-1993) with 2,500 construction workers and 10,000 artists, costing $800 million. The mosque is strikingly beautiful, with rich marble and elaborate detail in carvings and mosaics. Lydia and I spent hours there people watching. There were plenty of tourists, most Islamic, and more there for prayer. A heavily robed woman and her leather-jacket clad husband taking turns in posing in front of the doors. Young boys shuffling in play fights, young girls jumping in puddles. A teenage girl wearing a headscarf with her young man intimately hanging off her. Bored looking families trudging out the doors after prayer. A teenage guy sitting in a corner reading a book. A gaggle of girls, dressed to impress, talking to each other excitedly. Boys awkwardly watching the girls. Stern-eyed matriarchs guiding young children in the right direction. Men and women hanging around the exits after leaving, waiting to catch up with friends. I wish Islamophobes had the chance to watch the same scene with an open mind, to see that Muslims and Christians are no wiser or weirder than the other, just pretty much the same people going through the same motions the way they were taught to as children.

26/12/2009 High winds in the Straight of Gibraltar

High winds in the Straight of Gibraltar have forced us to bypass the Rock, so we will instead be spending two days in Malaga. I had rather being looking forward to visiting Gibraltar, particularly because it is home to the last monkeys in Europe, the Gibraltar Barbary Macaques. The locals insist on calling them Barbary Apes, despite them clearly being monkeys. The macaques were placed under the care of the British Army in 1915, who obviously didn't do too good a job as the population declined to just seven monkeys by 1942. Winston Churchill, worried about the popular myth that the British will hold Gibraltar as long as the Barbary Macaques exit, told the military to get their act together. An officer was appointed to supervise their welfare, grant a food allowance, name each new monkey and to take sick monkeys to the Royal Naval Hospital. Sir Winston, despite his gifts as an orator, would not be approved as a Red Book keeper, boosting the population by importing new Macaques from Morocco and Algeria, and destroying forever the ability to determine whether the Gibraltar Macaques were a Moorish import from Africa or a remanent of the primordial European population. Now the Gibraltar Ornithological and Natural History Society looks after each monkey, supplementing their food, tattooing and microchipping each individual and managing the fertility of the troupes, and numbers have expanded to 230 animals in five troupes.

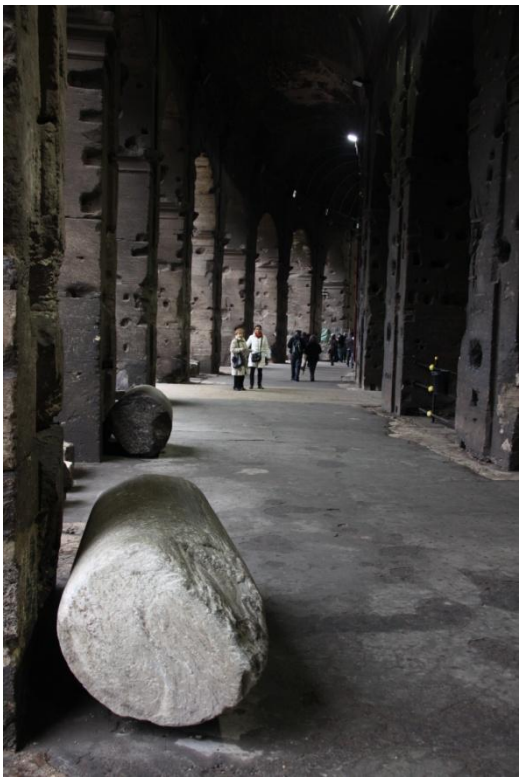
27/12/2009 The Lights of Malaga

Last night we walked through the streets of Malaga, first silent and heavy with rain, then (after a long Spanish dinner) vibrant and full of lights and people. We watched the bells of Cathedral y Museo toll, saw the tree of lights at the Plaza de le Constitution, and ate ice-cream beneath the twinkling strings of Marques de Larios and Alameda Principle.

This morning we explored the old fortifications of Malaga, which is where it shows best its history as an important Islamic city for over 700 years. Gibralfaro castle, overlooking the city, is the oldest part of the complex, dating back to the 8th century. The Alcazaba, the fort at the base of the hill connected to the castle above, was largely built during the 11th century, but both were heavily renovated during the 14th century. Throughout you can see the Moorish influences, the wall crenulations and design clearly in common with that at Chellah in Morocco, and the intricate carvings and decorations in the abstract Islamic style.

We are so lucky to be able to end a day sitting in a hot tub under the warm sun, gazing out over the Mediterranean Sea and celebrating our lives together.

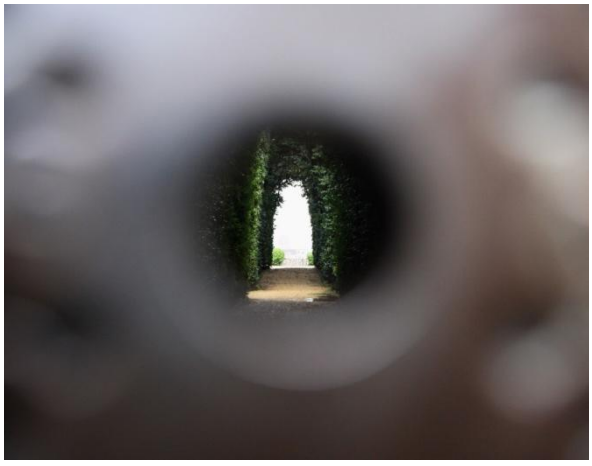
29/12/2009 Three sovereign entities



The Colosseum must be one of the most famous structures of ancient Rome. Amphitheatrum Flavium was constructed between 70 and 100 CE on an unprecedented scale. The Colosseum is 189 metres long, 156m wide, 48m high and has an area of 24,000 m^2. To enable the seating of the 50,000 spectators the events regularly attracted there were 80 entrances and passageways called vomitoria (the Latin word for rapid discharge, only later to come to mean rapid discharges of the more organic variety). The Colosseum was used for entertainment of the bloody variety for nearly 500 years (event organisers had slaves pumping perfume into the air to cover the stench of block. The Romans certainly built it to last, because even after the building was abandoned it held up, being used as an apartment block in the medieval period, with arcades being rented for housing and workshops. In 1200 the building was bought by the Frangipanis and fortified as a castle. An earthquake in 1349 caused major damage, followed by the theft of stones to rebuild the city after the quake. At the start of the modern period the Catholic Church took over the site and trialled several uses – firstly as a wool factory to provide employment for Rome's prostitutes (1590), then for bullfighting (1671), then it was declared a site of Christian martyrdom (1769) despite there being no historical evidence for the claim made by Pope Benedict XIV at the time that Christians were ever put to death at the site.

I found the Colosseum to be one of those sites, like the Great Pyramids, that felt overly familiar when I saw it. I think for me that when the attraction of a site is the historical importance and grand superstructure, it is all too easy to see little new when visiting, while it is sites with unexpected or hidden details that need personal exploration to appreciate.

Everyone knows that Rome contains a state within a state, the independent Vatican City within the Italian capital. Less well known, however, is that Rome is actually the capital of *three* independent sovereign entities, Italy, the Vatican City and the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes, and of Malta. The Knights Hospitaller were founded in 1050 as a hospital to provide care for the poor and sick pilgrims during the Crusades. When Jerusalem was conquered in 1099, the Knights became a chartered Catholic Military Order. The Knights operated first from Jerusalem, then when that was lost in

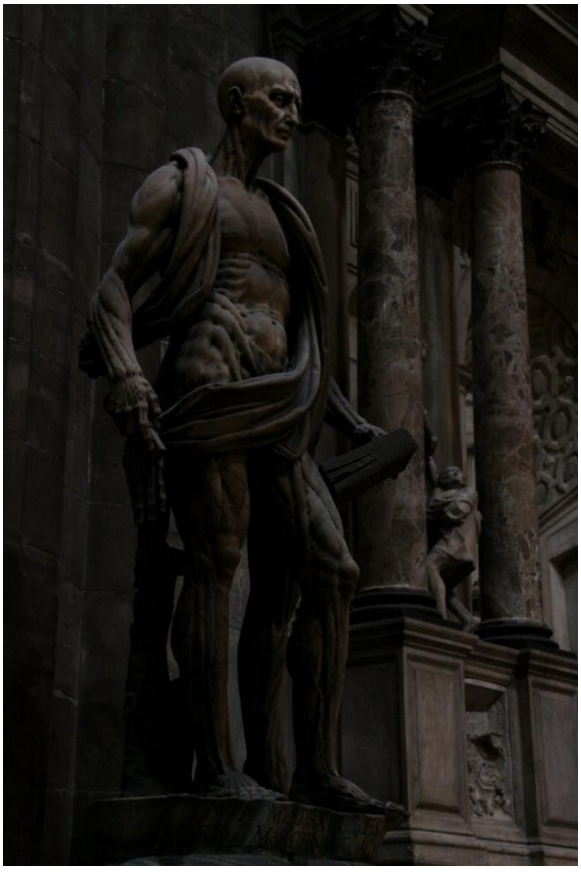


1310 they moved to Rhodes. After being ejected from Rhodes in 1523 they operated from Malta, ruling the island until 1798 when they were kicked out by Napoleon.

Losing three successive capitals may seem like the end of sovereignty, but the Knights of Malta now claim to be a sovereign entity without a state. They have been granted two extra territorial properties in Rome, the Palazzo Malta (where the Grand Master resides) and the Villa Malta (where the Grand Priory is based), and have been based within Rome for the last 200 years. The Knights of Malta are recognised by 103 countries and have permanent observer status at the United Nations. They even issue their own internationally recognised stamps, licence plates, passports and currency (the scudi). Today their main jobs appear to be medical relief in war and humanitarian relief, being official backchannel contacts between countries that do not formally have relations but need to discuss issues, and dressing up like they are still medieval monks. We visited the Villa Malta, which essentially consists of a marble facade and locked doors, as visitors are never allowed on to the compound. The closest you can come is to peer through the key hole, which provides a remarkably good view down a tree lined avenue looking over the Churches of Rome. Intriguingly, a jeep with six men in camouflage gear and serious assault weapons were parked outside the compound. Malta – watch out, the Knights may be preparing a come-back.

The final sovereign entity we visited was the Vatican City. The Vatican City is the world's smallest country, only 0.44km^2 with 800 residents. While a church has stood on the site since 326 CE, the country itself is quite young. The Vatican City was only established as a state by the Lateran Treaty of 1929, following a 68 year standoff between the Kingdom of Italy and the Pope after the vast Papal territories were included within the new Italian State. The Vatican City is also Europe's only remaining theocracy, the only country in Europe where women do not have a vote and one of three European countries with an absolute ruler (the other two being Liechtenstein and Monaco). Our visit to the Vatican was limited to just St Peter's square and St Peter's Basilica.

St Peter's Basilica is the largest Christian church in the world, able to hold 60,000 people. Interestingly it is not the chief Papal Basilica – that is St John's – but it is the most frequently used, due to its size and proximity to the Papal residence. It was built from 1506-1626 and is 220 metres long, 150 metres wide and 148 metres high, around the same size and capacity as the Colosseum built 1500 years earlier (and the building of it cannibalised 2,522 cartloads of stone from the Colosseum). Another interesting intersection with history – the selling of indulgences in Germany to raise money to build the basilica was a major spur for Martin Luther and the Reformation. One of the high points of the Basilica is meant to be the dome by Michelangelo, who was a major designer of the Church (albeit an unwilling one forced to take on the job in his 70s). Oddly, even though one of the conditions of Michelangelo taking on the job is that the Church would follow through with his plans intact, after his death they radically changed his plans, doubling the length of the nave and building a clunky facade, so that you can barely see the architecture of the Church Michelangelo designed. Inside the Basilica is very richly and tastefully decorated (except for a huge tacky plastic nativity scene added for the season), with a good use of marble and light.



31/12/2009 Two-faced Mary and the Last Supper

Milan was only a hair away from being the capital of Italy - it is the biggest city in Italy by population and wealth and was made the capital of the Kingdom of Italy by Napoleon in 1796. It even served as the capital of the Roman Empire for over 100 years, from 293 to 402 CE.

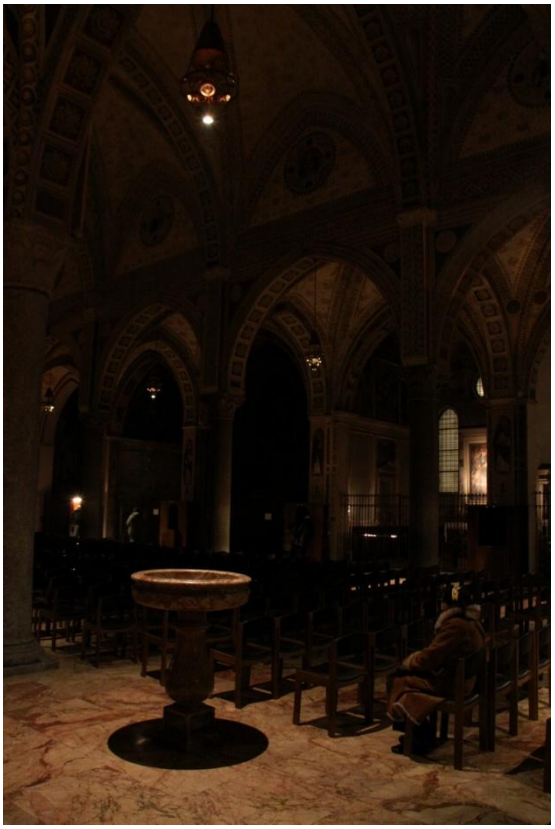
We explored just a taste of the culture residing in Milan from this long period of wealth and power. The Milano Cathedral, as the third largest Christian Church in the world, took over 500 years to build, starting in 1386. It is a beautiful Gothic Church, built of warm pale marble and so covered with pinnacles the roof looks like a veil of lace. Inside it is all a Gothic Church should be - dark, brooding and melancholic, with gruesome statues like that of Bartholomew by Marco D'Agrate, with an anatomically precise martyr draped in his own skin.

Outside the Church the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II is a rich domed arcade, built between 1865 and 1877, housing all the leading fashion houses of Milan and

one of only two seven-star hotels in the world, amusingly just across from McDonalds.

In the Pinacoteca del Castello Sforzesco we visited the *Rondanini Pieta* by Michelangelo. It is a fascinating statue as it was left unfinished by Michelangelo due to his death. Some parts are perfected and polished while others are only the crudest sketch. The most fascinating part is how much Michelangelo changed his design as he was sculpting, if you look from the side Mary clearly has two faces, the original in profile and mostly carved off, and a new rough hewn face looking forward. Very interesting to know that even Michelangelo was unhappy with his work at times.

In Santa Maria delle Grazie we saw *The Last Supper*. *The Last Supper* was painted by Leonardo da Vinci between 1495 and 1498 on the back wall of the dining hall at Santa Maria delle Grazie. The painting today has been through so much that it is probably stretching the truth to call it the original - the painting was already labelled "ruined" in 1556 and a doorway was cut through the painting in 1652. In 1726 the painting was redone and even the restoration was in ruins by 1768 thanks to poor preservation decisions. The painting was restored again in 1770, but in 1796 the building was occupied by French troops and used as an armory and later a prison, being badly damaged by soldiers throwing stones and scratching off the paint. The next major damage occurred in 1821 by a preservation expert, who tried to remove the fresco from the wall, before finding out it was not a fresco at all, requiring patching up with glue and stucco. Adding further insult to injury, the room was struck by a bomb in World War II. So perhaps it is more accurate to call the painting a work by Pinin Brambilla Barcilon, the last person to actually put paint on the wall in the major restoration that was only finished in 1999. The oil painting copies of the original by Leonardo's assistant are probably much truer to the original than the actual original by now. Regardless there is clearly enough detail to see that the Apostle John is really a pregnant Mary Magdalene and that a numerical sequence of finger positions translated onto a bible reading warns of the Illuminati getting control of antimatter. Actually it really is clearly a masterpiece, even from its ruined and repaired state.



An oddity in Santa Maria delle Grazie - in the Church there are coin-fed metres to light up the dome and displays in the crypts. Really really tacky. I mean, why not just a donation box? Is the Church housing *The Last Supper* really only one step away from a coin-operated animatronic Jesus? Someone really needs to have a word to the Catholic Church about keeping up good taste.

Finally, walking back along the Via Dante we were walking past a street full of helpful young men who were selling exceptionally cheap original designer handbags, laid out on the ground. By some strange coincidence when a whistle sounded suddenly everyone of the designer handbag vendors remembered that they had left the oven on, and in remarkably short time swept up their legitimate merchandise and ran off.

1/1/2010 European citizenship

It is striking just how crude and unsophisticated the view of Europe is from the outside (and perhaps, until recently, from the inside?). When I learnt about Europe in school it was all so simple. In Italy they spoke Italian, in France they spoke French. Italians eat pasta, French eat baguettes. The stereotypes are useful to teach children an indication of the diversity of cultures between states, but unfortunately our learning stagnates at this point and we progress no further than this infantile understanding.

Perhaps now more than ever, with the EU dissolving the importance of national borders, we can see that Europe in a very real way is still a continent of city states. In Genova the native language is Genoese, a dialect of Ligurian, not Italian. Linguistically and culturally the city is historically closer to Monaco than other parts of Italy. In Milan Milanese is still spoken, a dialect of Lombard. Barcelona is as Catalan as it is Spanish, Malaga is Andalusian as well as Spanish. Federal authority

in France, Spain and Italy has certainly left a mark, there is now an imprint of Parisian culture extending to the borders of France, with regional languages of definitive secondary importance. But this in no way corresponds to the homogeneity found within younger countries such as Australia or the USA, where the previous rich patchwork quilt of cultures was simply obliterated.

I am seeing Europe more and more as a continent of regions rather than countries. Groups of regions share central structures and languages of mobility, and a number of large cities (London, Paris, Brussels, Rome etc) have become continental cities. But beneath the national veneer lies deep regional roots, and the current borders are too fresh to have fully obscured the commonalities in region that can cross national boundaries.

It is a wonderful consequence of the European Union that these regional differences are starting to blossom again. With the fall of borders and the rise of high speed travel, a common currency and education programs like Erasmus, national identity is less important than ever. At the same time, the commonalities between regions in different countries can be appreciated. This highlights the idiocy of "national character conversations" that politicians like Sarkozy and Berlusconi are trying to start in a bid to cultivate and feed off latent racism and xenophobia. Yes, there are cultural habits that are stereotypically French or Italian, but it is anti-cultural behaviour to try to define these cultural habits as national habits. The diversity of culture within European countries is larger than the diversity of culture between European countries. And there are pan-European cultural characteristics, such as the importance placed on living well.

A European country is not a homogeneous block. It is a patchwork of ancient and modern cultures in small regional pockets, with dynamic swirling cities linked by high-speed corridors. Most importantly of all, any citizen of a European country is free to adopt or dismiss any strands of their cultural heritage at any level, local, regional, national or continental, by their own free choice. A resident of Barcelona can chose to learn Spanish but live as a cultural Catalan, can adopt European humanism over local Catholicism but learn to cook as a quintessential Barcelonan. They are no more or less a citizen of Barcelona, Spain and Europe than an individual that makes opposite choices, and every European should protest strongly against politicians who want to dictate that the majority cultural choice is the only valid cultural choice. How dare any person claim to speak on behalf of the cultural values of their entire nation, how dare they draw up values into a litmus test which you accept or leave. Modern Europe does not operate by coercion, it operates by allowing people to choose their values and culture for themselves – and long may the xenophobes fail to change this.