

### U3A Italian Cities class – Trip to Florence and Siena.

On Tuesday 19 October 15 members of the Italian Cities group set off from Stansted to Pisa, arriving only a few minutes late, and then caught the train to Firenze, (Florence). It was a short walk from the station to the Hotel Giorgio, which proved to be an excellent base close to the centre of the city. We met 2 other members at the hotel, who had already travelled across from Britain by train. A few of us set out immediately exploring the city and the tourist stalls mainly selling leather goods, for which the city is famous. After an evening meal at a local restaurant most of us then went on an evening walk around the Duomo, which looked splendid in the evening light and a nearly full moon. This was our first taste of a few of the fantastic buildings with which we became more familiar as the trip progressed.

On the following day we toured the Duomo inside and out while Alan explained the architecture and methods of construction, particularly of Brunelleschi's dome. Inside we saw the amazing fresco by Vasari on the inside of the dome. Next was the Baptistry with its beautiful gold mosaic ceiling. We went to visit the church of Orsanmichelle, the main square of Piazza della Signoria, the Ponte Vecchio and the Pitti Palace. We finished our day in the beautiful Boboli gardens.

### A DAY IN SIENA

Our trip to Siena started with a scenic drive by coach on a beautiful sunny morning. The journey took us from the 'bowl' of Florence, on the river Arno, through picturesque vineyards and olive trees up to the hills of the walled city. On arrival Alan took us to the top Medici Fortress wall so we could have a skyline view of the old city with its impressive domes and towers. We walked through the steep, cobbled, medieval streets visiting the church dedicated to St Caterina, where the Saint's preserved head is displayed in a magnificent tabernacle. On our way to the beautiful Piazza del Campo, where the famous Palio horse race is held, we passed palazzos built by the great ruling families of Siena. Power struggles, battles, artistic rivalries, plagues, romantic legends were all brought alive by Alan's knowledgeable commentary. The jewel of Siena is the Cathedral – the glistening white, pink and green façade adorned with statues and mosaics is breathtaking and we were lucky to be able to see the, normally covered, marble floor decorations depicting events from the bible. The visit culminated with a dizzying climb up a narrow tower for a panoramic view of the city. Then back to Florence with the anticipation of a visit to the Uffizi Gallery the next day. A perfect end to such a day was an outing in the evening to dramatic performance of the opera La Boheme given by a small professional company in the intimate setting of the English Church of St Mark's in Florence, formerly the home of the Machiavelli family.

Our final full day was spent in the Uffizi Gallery.

On departure day we took the opportunity to visit the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Duomo and Baptistry in the Campo dei Miracoli in Pisa. A pleasant flight home concluded a wonderful trip.

Lynne Farrell, Lydia Stow and Sue Coulson, Italian Cities Course

