

Heading for the Sun.....April, 2014.

For me, nothing beats the atmosphere and colours of Venice and we never miss an opportunity to stop by and stroll. This year I found myself sitting (as one does) in the gilded Royal Box of the “Teatro la Fenice”- one of the world’s most renowned and ornate opera houses, gilded with 3.5 kilo of gold leaf and named for the Phoenix, as it was rebuilt twice from the ashes of two devastating fires (using one million man-hours for the last!). It is indescribably ornate (sadly no photos allowed) and was designed in 1789 with access from the water so the glitterati of Venice could alight from their gondolas and enjoy not only the opera but also walz away the night in the grand ballroom.



Ca Rezanno- one of the aristocratic mansions of the Grand Canal houses a museum of 18C Venice, with amazing pastel ceiling frescoes of mythical figures plus an elegant art gallery on the top floor housing two Donatello’s. While I spent a dreamy day imagining the past, the atmosphere on the streets was one of excitement and gaiety as history continued to be made with the creation of two new saints- Pope John Paul and Pope John 23rd. Here, amid the crowds of happy Italian tourists, it seemed not a distant and irrelevant event but a real cause for wonder and celebration and something that touched a lot of people’s lives. And as always it was the small details around every corner in architecture, fine Italian design, food and art that caught the eye. Back to Mestre and supper at the “Hostel of the Black Wolf.”.





And just as we had reached the sun, on through the lagoons of Venice , to San Marino, the weather broke.

Perched high on a mountain-top, San Marino, the world’s oldest surviving republic and 5th smallest state, is famed for its string of castles and stunning views across the rolling hills. We ascended the hairpin roads in thick fog and descended the day after in the same. Couldn’t see a hand in front of your face. But we did see the beautiful parliament building (2 prime ministers who together govern for 6 months), and enjoyed a very good dinner at the state’s oldest hostelry and (as sole customers on a deserted night of lashing rain!) were entertained by the owner who told us many stories of the area’s tumultuous history. It is the oldest surviving Italian micro-state, a reminder of the time when Europe was made up of tiny political units, often extending no further than a cannon could fire from the city walls. A lilliput land of just 63 sq. km. and 31,000 inhabitants. A huge amount of duty free shopping complexes lie just outside the city walls and inside a puzzling number of stores specializing in replica weapons(?) stand next to the pretty souvenir shops! It was founded by a stone mason from Dalmatia in 301 AD, fought over continuously for centuries, was given more land and castles by Pope Pius in 1433, was recognized by Napoleon, occupied 3 times and bombed by the British in 1944. Interestingly, during WWII, San Marino provided a refuge for over 100,000 refugees (many Jewish) from the Battle of Rimini, who were hidden in the railway tunnels, an enormous effort given that the population at that time was only 15,000. Our host recounted that as Mussolini himself was from a nearby village and was very fond of San Marino, he knew but turned a blind eye to the goings on.

Many of the locals were celebrating their university graduation that day with crowds of friends and families, singing “dottore, dottore”, wearing olive wreaths and sometimes silly clothes! We may not have seen the views but the atmosphere was great!

And so from Ancona to Igoumenitsa and finally Aktio Marina to Havana! Like much of Europe, the weather was erratic, changeable, unseasonably cool, even cold at times and wet! One repair after another, nothing serious, but irritating. Every time we thought we could leave, something held us up. We cleared out lockers, polished and cleaned and finally left for the inland lake behind Prevesa where we had never been and one of Greece’s largest wildlife reserves. Two peaceful days in Vonitsa, a sleepy little backwater town, few tourists, lovely scenery, pine-clad hills and calm waters.





And then the fridge broke down, (for the umpteenth time), the dinghy sprung a leak, the windvane packed up, the bilge pump was useless so we admitted defeat and headed for Corfu and help! But we'll be back later....



Dolphins off the starboard bow.



