

Scotland & Italy (Hiking the Dolomites): June 2017

Scotland and Italy, not a combination one normally thinks of but one we ended up doing. We had already signed up to do a Mountain Travel Sobek “Best of the Dolomites” hiking trip when we received an intriguing invitation from an old friend of Steve’s, Brad. To celebrate his 60th birthday, Brad was renting a Scottish Castle and he invited us to join him and his wife, Tina, as well as some other friends at the castle. How could we say no? So we figured out an itinerary for touring some of Scotland, meeting up with Brad & Tina at the castle, and then hightailing it over to the continent in time to meet up with our Dolomites hiking group ... and with the marvel of modern day travel (and some good luck) it all worked fantastically!

Note: Some of the photos included here are from others involved in our adventures so many thanks to them!

Scotland

Steve had spent some time in Scotland some 36 years prior during a trip to the UK. In fact, he met Brad at the end of that trip while standing in line for 6 ½ hours at Heathrow Airport trying to figure out how to get back to Boston after the airline they both were ticketed on had gone bankrupt. They eventually got rebooked on another airline into New York and there rented a car to drive back to the Boston area where they were both living at the time – they have been friends ever since! It was my first trip to Scotland, however, not having made it that far north in the UK in my prior time there. We hopscotched from Denver to Glasgow on Iceland Air via a stopover in Iceland. A long delay in Iceland meant an arrival nearly 3 hrs later than planned but fortunately an exceedingly patient driver was waiting to whisk us via private car over to Edinburgh (about an 1 ½ hr trip).

Edinburgh: After dumping our luggage (and grabbing a quick shower) at the Radisson Blu Hotel (located right on the *Royal Mile* in *Old Town*), we met up with Jon, a local archivist, writer, & tour guide, for a walking tour on a sunny but cool June Monday afternoon. The charming and hilly *Old Town* area is full of stone buildings from the 16th century and later and it maintains much of its medieval street plan. The *Royal Mile* is a succession of named streets that runs one “Scots Mile” (approx. 1.123 miles): anchored at the top of the hill by *Edinburgh Castle* and by *Holyrood Palace* at the bottom. Jon shared bits of Scottish history and culture as we walked partially down and then back up the cobblestone thoroughfare– it is the busiest tourist street in *Old Town* and is full of shops, pubs, monuments, old water wells, and government buildings. Running perpendicular all along the *Royal Mile* are narrow “Closes” or alleys – each “close” is named, many of them based on the purpose of the area (e.g., *Old Distillery Close*, *Advocate’s Close*, *Old Fishmarket Close*, and *Covenant Close*).



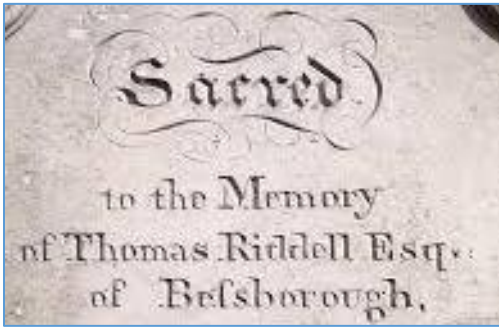
Old Town Edinburgh



The Royal Mile



Since the publication of the Harry Potter novels in 1997 and the subsequent (and long lasting) worldwide popularity of them, Edinburgh has gained a steady stream of tourists coming to pay homage to the “birthplace” of Harry Potter ... J.K. Rowling wrote the stories while in Edinburgh (and continues to live there) and many of the settings in the books are said to be inspired by streets and sights of the city. Jon took us past *The Elephant House* café where Rowling spent time writing the first few books. He also took us to visit *Greyfriars Kirk*, the graveyard behind the café to see some of the grave markers upon which lie names known to Harry Potter fans: McGonagall, Potter, Scrymgeours and more. A concrete pathway (put in to accommodate the large number of

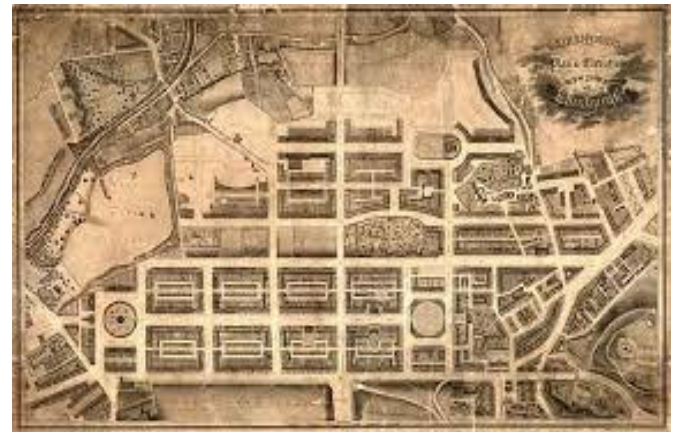


visitors that were destroying the grass) now leads to undoubtedly the graveyard’s most famous resident (with a minor change in spelling) ... “he who must not be named”! The colorful *Victoria Street* is said to be the inspiration for “Diagon Alley” in the books.



Victoria Street

Near the esplanade of Edinburgh Castle, we watched the construction of temporary tiered seating for 10,000 in preparation for the annual *The Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo* (a music extravaganza with performers from around the world held every August). We also watched dressed up folks arriving for an evening event at the castle – several of the men (including younger ones) were in kilts complete with the formal “Prince Charlie” jackets (with square silver button and tails).



New Town Plan

From the area of the castle we could look down upon the *New Town* area of Edinburgh. In response to overcrowding in what is now known as the *Old Town*, a design competition held in 1766. The winning design/plan by James Craig, often considered a masterpiece in city planning, resulted in various stages of construction between 1767 and around 1850. Together with *Old Town*, it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995. We learned from Jon that part of the *New Town* area came from draining a lake into which sewage from *Old Town* once flowed.

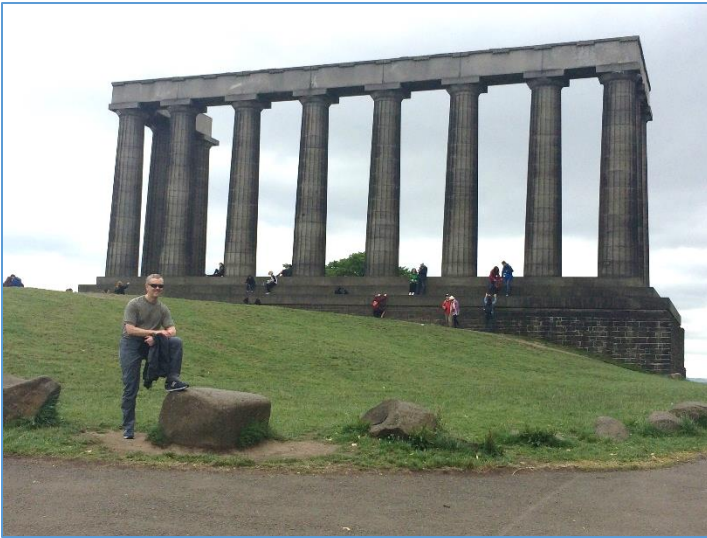
After sampling a wee bit of Scottish whiskey supplied by Jon (not a fan), we said our goodbyes. We enjoyed a casual dinner at a café around the corner from our hotel and then gratefully sought our bed chamber – the long day of travel and 7 hour time difference was making itself known.

Tuesday we spent the entire day walking the City of Edinburgh ...

- Down the *Royal Mile* to *Holyrood Palace* (the official residence of the British monarch in Scotland)
- North then west to *Regent Gardens* and up to the top of *Calton Hill* where several iconic monuments and buildings are located (including the National Monument, the Nelson Monument, the old Royal High School, the Robert Burns Monument, and the City Observatory).
- I managed to join Steve atop the base of the *National Monument* (another visitor assisted Steve in hoisting me up). Modeled after the Parthenon in Athens, it is intended to honor the Scottish soldiers and sailors who died fighting in

the Napoleonic Wars. Construction began in 1826 but due to lack of funds it was left unfinished in 1829 – we thought it a strange design choice to honor Scottish soldiers and sailors.

- We climbed the 143 steps to the top of the *Nelson Monument* (honoring Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson) and enjoyed a windy, but wonderful 360 view of the area. The wind coming off the *North Sea* was fairly brisk!



Steve in front of the Scottish National Monument



Atop the Nelson Monument on Calton Hill

- Back down the hill and then west in to *New Town* along *Princes Street* which retains much of its original neo-classical and Georgian period architecture.
- We strolled past the Victorian-style Balmoral Hotel (where J.K. Rowling finished writing the Harry Potter series -- the now named J.K. Rowling suite is available for rent at nearly £1,000 per night).
- We gawked at the towering and frankly ugly *Scott Monument* -- a brooding, 200-foot Gothic spire which opened in 1846 in honor of the prolific local novelist Walter Scott. It has been called "the largest monument to a writer in the world".
- At a park bench in the *East Princes St Gardens* we enjoyed people watching and the warm rays of sunshine while overlooking the *Royal Scottish Academy* and *National Gallery* buildings -- it was too nice a day to spend much time indoors so we didn't visit either place.
- A steep set of stairs and then sidewalks took us up the hill back into *Old Town* where a shared cheese plate with Scottish "oat cakes" (think crackers) and some diet cokes at a café revived us before we headed further uphill to the *Edinburgh Castle*.
- Being holders of a "Scotland Explorer Pass" (available online), we quickly bypassed the castle entrance line and picked up our audio sets for a self-guided tour. We arrived at *Edinburgh Castle* just in time for the daily firing of the "One o'clock Gun" which dates back to 1861 when it allowed ships in the Firth of Forth to accurately set their maritime clocks which they needed to navigate the world's oceans. After that loud "welcome," we enjoyed touring the castle and learning



Walter Scott Monument



Steve at Edinburgh Castle alongside traveling expresso stand



Playing princess in Edinburgh castle window

about its 1100 year-old history atop *Castle Rock* -- especially the amazing “Great Hall” with its original 1511 wooden ceiling, the unexpected officer’s dog cemetery.

- A cup of Scottish ice cream helped perk up our energy level in the mid-afternoon!
- Back along the *Royal Mile* we visited *St. Giles’ Cathedral* the principal place of worship of the Church of Scotland in Edinburgh. Its distinctive crown steeple is a prominent feature of the city skyline. The present church dates from the 14th century with extensive 19th century renovation. We especially appreciated its *Thistle Chapel*, built in 1911, with its exquisite carved and painted décor (the thistle is Scotland’s National Flower).



Carved stone thistle vault in Thistle Chapel, St. Giles’ Cathedral

*Harry Potter inspired human statue along the
Royal Mile – hanging in midair – magic!*

- A search for a tartan bowtie had us visiting shops along both *Victoria Street* and the *Royal Mile*. The beautiful kilts and associated trappings didn’t tempt Steve but it was fun to check them out.
- A casual dinner at the *Elephant House* coffee shop completed our day in Edinburgh and our over 8 miles of walking!

Royal Castle Tour (Balmoral Castle & Glamis Castle): A Land Rover, a kilted driver, and a couple of royal castles ... how much more Scottish can a day of touring be? Ken, a retired policeman, was our kilted driver/tour guide for the day. He picked us up 8am Wednesday morning and sped us north out of Edinburgh across the *Forth Road Bridge* which parallels the iconic 1890 *Forth Bridge* which carries rail traffic and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We missed by just a couple of months, being able to use the “new” Forth Bridge (scheduled to open at the end of August) – the sleek new *Queensferry Crossing* bridge will handle auto traffic while the old one will handle trucks and buses.

The queen’s 50,000 acre estate of *Balmoral* sits inside the boundaries of *Cairngorms National Park* (the largest national park in the British Isles). Our drive there from Edinburgh took about 2 ½ hrs and the time passed quickly as Ken entertained and educated us on a wide variety of topics related to Scottish history, “The Royals” (in the recent past he had provided transport for some of them, including “Wills”), the lands and scenery we were passing through, etc. We traveled over the “highest road in Scotland,” the *Cairnwell Pass* with a summit altitude of 2,199 ft. Located there is the *Glenshee Ski Center*, Scotland’s largest and oldest ski center – they were offering summer sightseeing chairlift rides when we passed by but the chilly and foggy conditions at the time didn’t seem to encourage many takers.



Glenshee Ski Center, Cairngorms National Park

With its treeless terrain and rounded “hills” it certainly had a different look from the ski resorts we’re used to back home in Colorado!

Once at *Balmoral* we did a self-guided audio tour – we saw the stable area exhibits, the vegetable and formal gardens and the castle’s ballroom – all other rooms are closed to the public as are “Her Majesty The Queen's private rooms.” Balmoral has been the Scottish home of the Royal Family since it was purchased for Queen Victoria by Prince Albert in 1852. The current castle was completed in 1856 as the original home was deemed inadequate for their needs. Among the many tidbits of information the audio tour passed along is that the estate’s roses have been bred to bloom at the time of the queen’s annual visit to the estate in August & September. So while we saw many rose bushes in the garden, they were not yet in bloom.



Balmoral Castle



In the cutting garden's greenhouse at Balmoral

Up next? Another royal castle: *Glamis Castle*, about 1 ½ hours south of Balmoral. Billed as “Scotland's Most Beautiful Castle,” *Glamis Castle*, pronounced “glaamz,” is the childhood home of Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon better known as “The Queen Mother”, aka Queen Elizabeth, wife of King George VI (i.e., mother of the current queen). It is the home of the Earl and Countess of Strathmore and Kinghorne (Simon Bowes-Lyon, the 19th Earl, is the current owner). It has been the home of the Lyon family since the 14th century, though the present building dates largely from the 17th century. We first viewed

a wonderful exhibition about the stunning coronation robes the Queen Mother and her two daughters (Elizabeth and Margaret) wore at the 1937 event ... many, many ermine contributed their furs to the robes! A guided tour of the castle showed off this extremely stately residence with its magnificent furnishings, ornate plasterwork ceilings, heraldic emblems, and lavish chimneypieces ... wow!



Glamis Castle: Beautiful Inside and Out



Throughout our day with Ken, we learned so much – I'll pass on just a few tidbits:

- “Bagging a Munro” means summiting one of the 282 Scottish mountains over 3,000 ft; named after Sir Hugh T Munro (1856 - 1919), the first man to survey and catalogue them ... very much akin to bagging a 14'er here in Colorado (summiting one of the 54 Colorado mountains over 14,000 ft)!
- A sign advertising a “Soft fruit” farm stand refers to small stoneless fruits with soft skins (e.g., strawberries and raspberries)
- The term “top drawer” comes from when one's best clothes were put in the top drawer of a chest of drawers so they would be farthest from the damp and rodents on the floor.
- In the spring, land owners will burn small areas of older heather to promote “new” growth which in turn attracts grouse and other animals – all to improve potential hunting results (grouse hunting is very popular in Scotland and thus can be a big money maker for Scottish land owners).
- Many of the rolling hills we saw were covered in forest plantations – hand-planted trees which are harvested once the trees mature, anywhere from 40 to 150 years. Once an area is harvested (clear-cut), it is left fallow for about 3 years and then it is prepped and replanted to start the cycle over again. Currently nearly 18% of Scotland is forested (either native or planted) – up from only about 4% in 1900. Ken told us it took about 4000 trees to build a large wooden ship back in the day.
- Wind turbines atop rolling hills were also a fairly common sight – a Jan. 9, 2017 newspaper article touted: “Scotland's wind turbines have generated more electricity than the country used for a record four days in a row.”

We were back at the hotel by about 6pm after a great day of touring. That evening we enjoyed a casual dinner at “Makars Gourmet Mash Bar Company” for some “healthy Scottish comfort food” ... Steve enjoyed their braised ox cheeks with classic mash (i.e., mashed potatoes) while I had the grilled smoked sausage with Scottish cheddar/chive mash -- a yummy sticky toffee pudding completed the meal! We strolled down into *New Town* after dinner to both aid in digestion but also to scope out the car rental place we'd be heading to in the morning.



Culzean Castle: Thursday morning, with bags in tow, we had a short walk down from the hotel to the car rental place near *Waverly Train Station* in *New Town*. With Steve behind the wheel and I as the designated navigator (well, the one plugging in our destination on Steve's phone and letting its navigation system guide us), we managed to extract ourselves from Edinburgh and head across Scotland to its south-western coastline – all while driving on the “other” side of the road with off-and-on rainy conditions. We arrived at our destination just in time for “elevenses” and enjoyed some fresh scones.



Culzean Castle

Culzean Castle (pronounced kul-LAYN), overlooks the *Firth of Clyde* (which encloses the largest and deepest coastal waters in the British Isles) on the Atlantic side of Scotland. Near the town of Ayr, the original castle was built in the 1500's but the current one was built in stages between 1777 and 1792 (the thicker the walls, the earlier the construction). It is the former home of the Marquess of Ailsa, the chief of Clan Kennedy, but since 1945 it has been owned by the National Trust for Scotland. We toured both the castle and its extensive

grounds. The main castle incorporates a large drum tower with a perfectly circular grand salon overlooking the sea with a gorgeous round carpet and beautiful decorative plaster ceiling. If you stand in the direct center of this room and speak you'll immediately hear your distorted voice (all others in the room will hear you clearly no matter where they are in the room). The armory includes a WWI plane propeller and an outrageous number of guns and swords (mostly purchased from the army in bulk as “obsolescent” weapons). The kitchen has a built in 9-pot “stewing” stove. The castle also features a grand oval staircase and a suite of well-appointed apartments. We got in about a 3 mile walk on the castle's grounds, including visits to the *Walled Garden* and *Camellia House*, before the skies opened up and it began to rain. After a spot of

lunch at the castle's "Home Farm Cafe" (courgette aka zucchini soup for me), we turned our trusty rental car (a diesel Hyundai) back towards Scotland's interior and had a very rainy drive to the town of *Stirling* (about 26 miles northeast of Glasgow).



Boat Carriage at Culzean Castle - take the carriage to the fishing pond and then launch the boat and fish!



Steve in front of the Camellia House at Culzean Castle



Victoria Square Guest House, Stirling

Old town *Stirling* is a charming medieval stone city built on a *Castle Hill*, atop which sits *Stirling Castle*, surrounded on three sides by steep cliffs. Friday morning we took a self-guided audio tour of the castle, which is one of the largest and most important castles in Scotland, both historically and architecturally. Most of the principal buildings of the castle date from the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. *Stirling Castle* was one of the most used of the many Scottish royal residences -- several Scottish Kings and Queens have been crowned at Stirling, including Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1542. We especially enjoyed learning about the reproduction/recreation of the *The Hunt of the Unicorn Tapestries*, a series of seven tapestries dating from between 1495 and 1505 (the originals belong to The Cloisters, part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City). Starting in January 2002, a team of 18 weavers from across the globe came together to reinterpret and create the "Hunt of the Unicorn" tapestries -- a project that was completed in 2015 (the decision was made to halve the number of

Stirling to Glencoe: After checking into our delightful 1880's built *Victoria Square Guest House*, we walked into Stirling's old town area to stretch our legs, check out things in the area (charming), and grab some dinner (Italian). We accomplished all 3 objectives before returning for a hot shower and a comfy bed.



Stirling Castle

knots per square inch and as a result an estimated 13 years of work were saved). The recreated tapestries now hang in the restored Queen's Presence Chamber in the Royal Palace at Stirling Castle.

Before leaving Stirling, we also toured *Argyll's Lodging* (Scotland's finest 17th-century townhouse), and *The Church of the Holy Rude* (founded in 1129 but the earliest part of the present church dates from the 15th century). There we tried to read the information guide on the church in the "Scots" language but failed miserably. Sometimes called "Lowland Scots" to distinguish it from Scottish Gaelic, the Celtic language which was historically restricted to most of the Highlands, the Hebrides and Galloway after the 1500s. The "Scots" language developed during the Middle English period (1150 – 1500) as a distinct entity. Today, there are approximately 1.5 million Scots speakers in Scotland and Northern Ireland. A couple of samples:

- Though his position in society wis ower laich for him tae hae the richt tae vote, Robert wis nanetheless passionate about ...
- He wis a bad day: a nor-wast gell an a sea goin a da green girse. Dey wir no hop o a boat winnin owersoonnd...



Part of one of the recreated Hunt for the Unicorn tapestries at Stirling Castle



Enjoying Stirling Castle!

We departed Stirling mid-afternoon with a final destination near *Glencoe* and *Loch Linnhe*. Along the way we stopped in the small town of *Callender* ("The Gateway to the Highlands") for both a bite to eat and a stop at the *Hamilton Toy Museum and Collectors Shop* – a wee place overflowing with toys upon toys in such spaces as the Soldier Room, the Car & Train Room, the Doll & Bear Room, the TV and Sci-fi Room, the Edwardian Nursery, and more – toy overload for sure!

Our drive into the scenic *Scottish Highlands* was accompanied by a fair amount of rain but we saw dense forested hillsides with yellow-green slopes above tree line. The Highlands are not only a very beautiful region but a very historic one, especially in relationship to the "Highland Clans of Scotland" and their often warring ways. For centuries, the presiding sovereign had no authority in the Highlands, and therefore, safe in their mountain fortresses, the clans escaped retribution. This kind of independence led to clan feuds and the consequences were often tragic. That evening we stayed at a B&B along the shore of *Loch Linnhe*, a sea "loch" -- loch is the Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Scots word for both a "lake"

and for a “sea inlet.” It is estimated there are over 31,460 fresh water lochs in Scotland. Misty conditions prevented us from getting great views of the undoubtedly scenic area.

A Full Day --Ben Nevis Area, Eilean Donan Castle, and Isle of Skye:

Climbing *Ben Nevis* (Scotland/UK’s highest peak at 4409 ft) was never on our trip agenda but I did want to see the area so Saturday morning we headed north along *Loch Linnhe* into the town of *Fort William* at the northeast end of the loch. Just a bit east of the town is the *Ben Nevis* visitor’s center (“ben” is Scottish and Irish for a mountain peak so many mountains in Scotland are called *Ben* ____). Being a summer weekend, the parking lot was stuffed with cars and we can only assume the mountain correspondingly stuffed with people attempting the 10 mile round trip described by the ranger-provided brochure as “relatively easy” to begin with “but becomes increasingly arduous and exposed.” The ranger we talked to said there were 50 mph winds atop Ben Nevis that morning – all we could see was very low and thick cloud cover. We asked the ranger for a suggestion of a nearby hike of about 3 miles round trip: she suggested *Steall Gorge and Waterfall* just down the road. We subsequently enjoyed a very pleasant hike (with only a little rain) up through the gorge and onto a plateau where the waterfall was.



Lowland–Highland divide



Along the Steall Gorge trail

After getting a bit of exercise, it was time for “elevenses” before we continued to drive north and then west towards the *Isle of Skye*. The scenic road wound its way along several fresh water lochs (e.g., *Loch Kochy*, *Loch Garry*, *Loch Lyne*, *Loch Loyne*, and *Loch Cluanie*) and various hills and mountains until it reaches *Loch Duich*, a sea loch. At its end, perched on a small tidal island, is *Eilean Donan Castle*, where three sea lochs meet, *Loch Duich*, *Loch Long* and *Loch Alsh* – quite a dramatic location.

We arrived at *Eilean Donan Castle* under very rainy skies and whipping winds (“eilean” is Gaelic for island). We battled the elements across the stone causeway which now connects the island to the mainland and enjoyed a tour of the richly decorated castle (extravagant bedrooms with thick curtains and four-poster beds, and kitchens decked out with pots, pans, and pretend feasts ready to go down to the elegant Banqueting Hall, where life-size portraits and tapestries line the

walls). The castle was founded in the 13th century, destroyed in 1719, and then reconstructed in the early 20th century -- the present buildings were completed in 1932. The fully furnished castle included lots of interesting furnishing and historical displays; a display of women's dresses included one made in the 1730's and which was worn (on occasion) up until the 1970's!



Eilean Donan Castle (left) as we saw it and (above) on a nicer day

We left the mainland via the *Skye Bridge* which allowed us to easily drive onto the *Isle of Skye* (Steve remembers

taking the car ferry across during the 1980's as the bridge did not open until 1995). It is the second-largest of Scotland's islands, a 50-mile-long patchwork of velvet moors, jagged mountains, sparkling lochs and towering sea cliffs (the *Isle of Lewis and Harris* in the Western Hebrides is the largest island in Scotland). Unfortunately the rain didn't cease as we headed north along the Isle's eastern shore so our views were somewhat limited. The plus side of all the rain were the many "ribbons of white" (water falls) cascading and snaking down from the hillsides with abandon. After a late bite of lunch in the village of Portree (meat pies from the bakery) we drove the loop around the *Trotternish* peninsula – it included the northern-most point we could drive to and there, out in the middle of not much stood a working red British Telecom phone box (so many of the phone boxes have now been turned into other things including ATM stations).



Iconic British Telecom Phone Boxes

At left: working phone box at Edinburgh Castle

At right: repurposed as a "Gnome Box" at the Waterfall Café on the east side of Loch Ness



The peninsula's road, A855, was basically a single track paved road with pullouts to facilitate "safe" passing of oncoming traffic which included large tourist and public transport buses. At one point we pulled over to take a short walk out to an unofficial lookout – we braved only light rain but **extremely** windy conditions through a muddy sheep pasture (i.e., had to dodge sheep droppings continuously). As the afternoon was drawing late and our hotel was near the southern most point of the isle we left the *Skye Museum of Island Life* to the tour bus crowd. From the northern apex of the peninsula we headed south to the town of *Uig*, a ferry port for the islands of *Harris* and *North Uist* and a source of much fun for Steve

trying possible pronunciations of the name in his best Scottish brogue! It was still raining and chilly when we arrived at the *Hotel Eilean Iarmain* so we quickly checked into our charming room and then hightailed it to its cozy pub for some nourishment and warmth. We fell asleep that night to the sound of lashing rain.

Into the Capital of the Highlands: Inverness and Loch Ness to Erchless Castle: Calmer skies greeted us Sunday morning as we enjoyed some Scotch pancakes (a bit thicker than American pancakes and sometimes called dropped scones) for breakfast and prepared to leave the Isle of Skye and return to the mainland. As we exited the isle we didn't stop off at the *Bright Water Visitor Center* but the sign for it reminded me of how much I enjoyed Gavin Maxwell's 1960 book "Ring of Bright Water" about his life in a remote house on *Eilean Bàin* where he kept several wild otters as pets (*Eilean Bàin* is a 6 acre island that supports the *Skye Bridge* between the mainland and the isle). The drive north/northeast into *Inverness* took about 3 ½ hours and was pretty and green – not much "civilization" in the area but lots of forest plantations at varying degrees of maturity.



Steve and our trusty diesel Hyundai at Hotel Eilean Iarmain, Isle of Skye

The city of *Inverness* straddles the *River Ness* as it empties into the *Moray Firth* (I learned that a "firth" is a narrow inlet of the sea; an estuary). It's the Scottish Highland's largest city (population about 57,000) and its cultural capital. It is also the UK's northernmost city and lies within the *Great Glen* -- a long and straight glen/narrow valley which runs 62 miles (100 km) from the edge of Moray Firth south to Fort William at the head of Loch Linnhe. We took a spin around the very congested area around *Inverness Castle* and decided that the city's allure wasn't calling, so instead we headed south along the eastern side of *Loch Ness*. With a length of 23 miles and depths up to nearly 800 feet, it is Scotland's largest loch by water volume. We lunched on "toasties" (toasted sandwiches) at the *Waterfall Café* in Foyers (the *Falls of Foyers* empty into *Loch Ness*) – while the efficiency of the senior-citizen staff left much to be desired, my brie and cranberry toastie was excellent.



At the southern end of *Loch Ness* is the small village of *Fort Augustus* which we found overrun with tourists like ourselves. There, we visited the 5 locks which are part the 60-mile long *Caledonian Canal* (22 miles of it are manmade, the other miles are all made up of various lochs). The canal, opened in 1822, connects the country's east coast at Inverness with its west coast near *Fort William* – all within the *Great Glen*. The 5 locks at *Fort Augustus* allow the canal to "step down" into *Loch Ness*. Note: *Caledonia* is a Roman name of Celtic origin for most of the area that has become Scotland.



Top lock in Fort Augustus with Loch Ness ahead & below



Boat traveling on the Caledonian Canal with all the essentials!

The friendly staff of the *Fort Augustus* visitor center kindly pointed us in the direction of a nearby forest park where we could stretch our legs and get in a 3 mile round trip hike along the *River Oich*, a short river that flows through the Great Glen and carries water from *Loch Oich* to *Loch Ness* and runs parallel to the *Caledonian Canal*.

As we headed back up the east side of *Loch Ness* we kept a sharp eye out for its famous but elusive resident “Nessie” – unfortunately we had no sightings of her. Not long after passing the loch-side ruins of *Urquhart Castle* which date from the 13th to the 16th centuries, we turned west away from the water and navigated to our home for the next couple of days, *Erchless Castle*, and to one of the key reasons we were in Scotland: to meet up with friends Brad & Tina to help Brad celebrate his recent 60th birthday.

In and Around Erchless Castle: Late Sunday afternoon we arrived at *Erchless Castle*, near the village of Struy. The original castle was built in the 13th century, remodeled in the early 17th century as an “L-plan” tower house and then underwent further alterations in the 19th century with the addition of a Baronial-style wing in 1895. We were thrilled to join Brad, Tina and 10 other friends of theirs for a couple of nights. After settling into our elegant castle bedchamber, we explored the castle’s many rooms and admired its stately furnishings and decor, the way the modern elements (plumbing, electrical wiring, etc.) were retrofitted into the place, and the grandeur of the place in general (thick stone walls,



Erchless Castle

heavy wooden doors, high ceilings, large rooms, etc.). That evening we gathered for a welcome dinner of lasagna, salad, and fresh berries-n-cream in the castle’s “formal” dining room (there was another large, but slightly less formal dining room) before retiring to the “drawing room” for lots of chatting and laughing.



Erchless Castle's elegant drawing room



Our bedchamber at Erchless Castle

After a breakfast of oatmeal and fresh berries, a group of us took a wee walk about the place despite some pesky light rain. The castle sits on 12,000 beautiful acres and is a working estate with cattle and sheep. Our stroll around the fenced pastures ended up being a 2.5 mile jaunt, including a stroll along the *Beaully River* which abuts part of the estate.

Monday afternoon I joined some of the ladies for “Tea” at the *Culloden House Hotel* in Inverness, an elegant and historic Georgian mansion built in the Palladian style dating from 1788, where we enjoyed a scrumptious offering of finger sandwiches, sweets, and tea!



In the kitchen at Erchless Castle

Back at the castle some competitive croquet was my game choice -- there was also a billiard table and other indoor games in the “Snooker Room” and the “Games Room.”

That evening, under clear and beautiful skies, the night’s festivities at the castle began with a private bagpipe concert by a former member of The Queen’s regiment. If that treat wasn’t enough, our extremely gracious and generous host & hostess had arranged for a private chef to prepare us a feast worthy of royalty! We can now say we have eaten “haggis” (a traditional Scottish dish made of the heart, liver, etc., of a sheep or calf, minced with suet and oatmeal, seasoned, and boiled in the stomach of the animal) – it had a marked liver

taste but not bad. Without a doubt, it was a night we will remember!



Enjoying tea at the Culloden House Hotel



Brad and Tina, our wonderful host & hostess at Erchless Castle



At Erchless Castle following bagpipe concert



The gentlemen in gingham at Erchless Castle



The ladies in gingham at Erchless Castle



A grand feast in the formal dining room at Erchless Castle

Roughly, our touring route in Scotland

Unfortunately, Tuesday morning bright and early (5:10am), we had to bid farewell to all things *Erchless Castle*, and get ourselves back to Edinburgh for an 11:25am flight. Fortunately, we encountered no difficulties on the 190 mile drive. Overall, we ended up driving about 850 miles around Scotland – given the price of fuel/gas there, we were thankful for the great mileage our rental Hyundai provided – about 50 mpg.



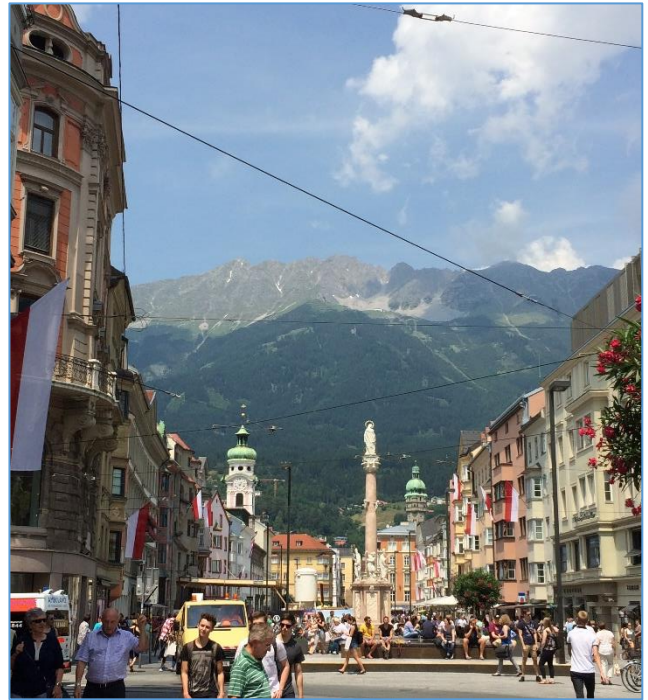
Our time in Scotland was a wonderful mix of historical castles & towns, Highland & seaside landscapes, friends (new & old), and memory making sights, sounds, and tastes.

Our short 1 ½ hour flight from Edinburgh to Heathrow (London) was followed by a 2 hour flight to Munich, Germany where we overnighted in the airport hotel. Wednesday morning we had some “luck” when we decided to catch an earlier train than originally we had scheduled for from the airport to Munich’s East Station. There, while we waited for our next train to take us to Innsbruck, Austria, we received a text message that our originally scheduled train was delayed and we’d likely not make our connection ... instead we boarded our connecting train just fine and had a pleasant 1 ½ hour trip south to the start of the next portion of the trip ...

Hiking the Best of the Dolomites

Innsbruck, Austria: Our Mountain Travel Sobek (MTS) trip, “The Best of the Dolomites,” was to start in Innsbruck, Austria. We arrived midday on Wednesday and thus had a little time to do a little exploring about its “Old Town” before meeting up with our group that evening. Innsbruck sits in the “Inn” valley surrounded by the majestic *Alps* (it hosted the Winter Olympics in 1964 and 1976). Its “Old Town” is a colorful mix of buildings from the gothic (12th – 16th century) and baroque (late 16th – 18th century) periods. On a very warm summer’s afternoon, we joined the throngs of tourists from around the world in the main pedestrian area to enjoy ...

- The sounds a free concert by the local Police Brass Band
- The wonderful architecture of the buildings, often with arch-fronted covered walkways
- A lunch of delicious sandwiches on fresh bread at a local bakery
- The overwhelming “glitz” at the Stravorski Crystal Museum & Shop
- Great people watching



Innsbruck, Austria

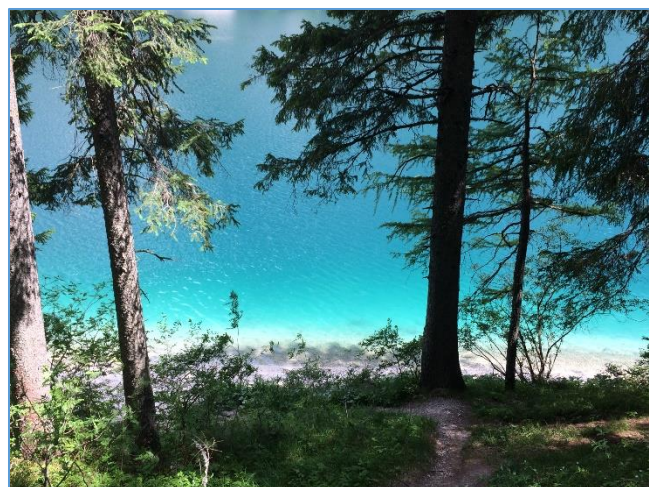
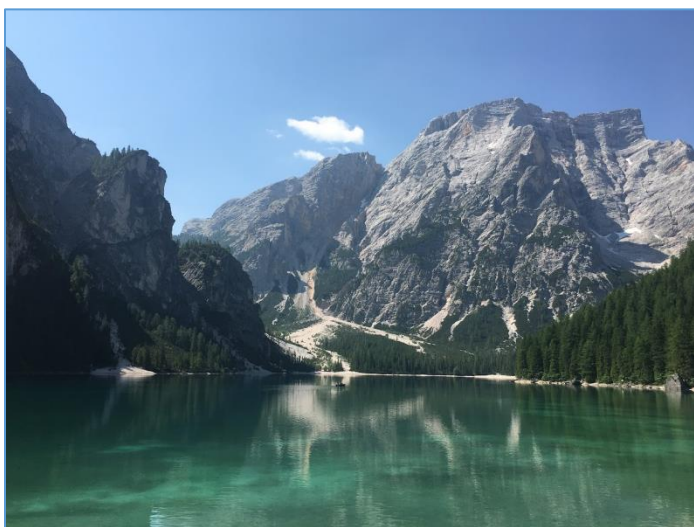
That evening we met up with the rest of our MTS group – 2 guides plus 12 guests (including us) for a total group of 14 – for an orientation and welcome dinner:

- Tommi: our lead certified mountain guide and experienced alpinist, a former professional trombonist, German but living in Austria with wife and new baby daughter
- Claudia: our assistant guide, an accomplished climber and mountaineer, German but living in Italy
- Linda & Brian: our friends from the Denver area and past MTS alum on trips with us to Iceland, Tour de Mont Blanc, and Slovenia; Linda is an MD and Brian works in finance (unfortunately they had had a miserable 52 hour trip over due to long delays from a damaged aircraft & the subsequent rebooking debacle; fortunately, they made it)
- Sophie: from Wash DC and with Bloomberg News, we originally met Sophie in 2015 on our MTS Tour de Mont Blanc trip
- Lindsay, from New Jersey and a writer with Major League Baseball, we also knew Lindsay from the 2015 MTS Tour de Mont Blanc trip
- Nora & Ash: from Texas, she an OB/GYN and he a businessman in the pet boarding business
- Patricia and Kate: from Wash DC, Pat a partner in a CPA firm and Kate an accomplished artist – needless to say, Pat and Steve bonded over various “accounting” jokes and quips
- Sandra and Mark: from Wash DC, Sandra an engineer and former FEMA employee now doing consulting and Mark, a personal trainer

South into the Dolomites – Pragser Wildsee (Lago di Braies):

The *Dolomites* are a mountain range in northeastern Italy, just below the south-western border of Austria – they form part of the “Southern Limestone Alps” (has 16 different ranges -- last year we hiked 2 of the ranges in Slovenia so the Dolomites was our 3rd). From Innsbruck, we had about a 1 ½ hour drive, passing through the Austrian/Italian border and continuing south (amazing road engineering through the mountains with gorge-crossing bridges and mountain boring tunnels). Along the road we saw several castles as the route has been in existence for thousands of years as a primary trade route. Our destination was *Pragser Wildsee*, in German, or *Lago di Braies* in Italian, considered one of the most beautiful lakes in the Alps ... and it certainly is gorgeous.





Pragser Wildsee/Lago de Braies – incredible shades of blue/green water



Partaking in the tradition of a taste of “schnapps” once the day’s high point has been reached - above Pragser Wildsee/Lago de Braies

We started our hike at the lake (elevation 4,901’), quickly entered the forest, and then eventually we made our way above tree line to an open meadow filled with wildflowers for a picnic lunch and to take in the view. A fairly steep trail returned us to the lake where some of the group enjoyed a cooling off in the lake while others such as ourselves instead enjoyed a cool beverage at the lakeside bar. With the area experiencing a warmer than usual early summer (temps in 70’s and even 80’s at lower altitudes), our 6 mile hike was a bit toasty but the warmer temperatures also meant an earlier than usual wildflower bloom, a consequence we were happy to endure!



Friends Linda & Brian above Lago de Braies

A short van ride deposited us in the town of Toblach where the *Romantik Hotel Santer* would be our home for the night. After our usual clean-up and laundry drill, we enjoyed a pre-dinner cocktail of an “Aperol Spritz” on the patio. Just days before In Scotland, I had been introduced to this drink by our Erchless Castle hostess Tina and had immediately become a fan of its very refreshing mixture of Aperol (an Italian appertif made from bitter orange, gentian, rhubarb, and cinchona, among other ingredients), Prosecco (or other sparkling wine), a splash of club soda/sparking water, and an orange slice as garnish ... they became our nightly go-to post hike/pre-dinner beverage. Before embarking on a waistband-busting multi-course dinner, our group gathered for the daily debriefing and briefing of the next day’s plans.





Our Toblach Hotel, Tyrolean-style architecture

The Dolomite area of Italy hasn't been "Italian" for very long ... originally part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the region was "given" to the Italians following WWI for their support of the Allies (and not the Germans). The area is now part of an autonomous province called "South Tyrol" where about 60% of the population speak German and only about 25% speak Italian (fortunately for us, a great many of them also speak some English). Thus, many of the region's landmarks are known by both German and Italian names and culturally the area is still more Tyrolean than Italian. The area's architecture certainly supports this with most buildings being Tyrolean in style: walls of local stone to withstand the deep snowfalls that can bury a house's ground floor during the winter; steeply pitched roofs to prevent the buildup of heavy snow loads; and broad eaves to shelter porches and balconies which were adorned with overflowing and colorful flower boxes for the summer.



In 2009, the Dolomites were designated a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) "World Heritage Site" and are described as such as "a mountain range in the northern Italian Alps, numbering 18 peaks which rise to above 3,000 metres and cover 141,903 ha. It features some of the most beautiful mountain landscapes anywhere, with vertical walls, sheer cliffs and a high density of narrow, deep and long valleys ... a diversity of spectacular landscapes of international significance for geomorphology marked by steeples, pinnacles and rock walls, the site also contains glacial landforms and karst systems. It is characterized by dynamic processes with frequent landslides, floods and avalanches. The property also features one of the best examples of the preservation of Mesozoic carbonate platform systems, with fossil records." In short, a "must see" place if you like mountains!

Hike to below the face of Tre Cime di Lavaredo/Drei Zinnen: Our Friday hike up to and around the *Tre Cime di Lavaredo* (aka the "three peaks") would give us our first real taste of the specialness of the Dolomites. We started our hike on the valley floor at 4,593' under slightly spitting gray skies but the weather cleared quickly. The trail initially gently sloped upward through the forest and meadows filled with wildflowers. After a few miles we started to climb more steeply upwards toward *Tre Cime* – the trail became a stairway at one point up through a rocky gorge.



Lead guide Tommi with Tri Cime in background



Trail up to Tre Cime



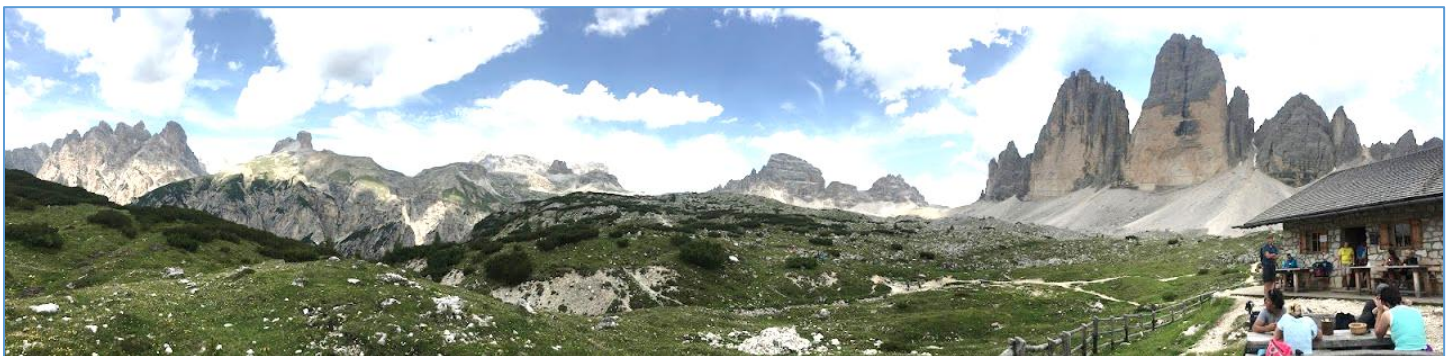
Wildflowers in bloom in the Dolomites



The *Tre Cime*'s three peaks are layered "dolostones" or "dolomite rock" which is a sedimentary carbonate rock that contains a high

percentage of the mineral dolomite (named after French naturalist and geologist Déodat Gratet de Dolomieu). The three peaks are in fact the intact remains of an ancient coral reef – the whole of the Dolomites area was once a tropical sea.

In a high meadow we encountered the meadow strewn with "rock graffiti" – various words or names were spelled out with the bountiful small rocks. At a mountain hut overlooking *Tre Cime* we enjoyed a lunch of delicious onion soup and a meat and cheese platter. We then continued hiking around the backside of the peaks where we discovered a huge parking lot – turns out most folks settle for coming in the much shorter and easier back way instead of the approximately 8 miles with over 3,100 vertical feet we did.



Our lunch hut near *Tre Cime*

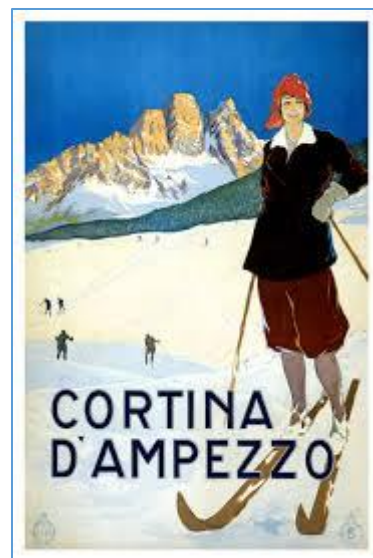
Near the parking lot, we came upon another unique art form: a garden of cairns, human-made piles of stones usually used to mark a trail but here, used to create a garden of small rock towers. After fortifying ourselves with a selection of cakes/sweets at the *Rifugio Auronzo*, a huge mountain hut run by the *Club Alpino Italiano* (Italian Alpine Club), we had a short transport to the town of *Cortina d'Ampezzo* -- better known to us Americans as just *Cortina*, site of the 1956 Winter Olympics. There, after settling into our hotel for a 2 night stay, we had time for some exploration of this charming alpine town which is best known for its winter appeal to skiers -- the ski area of *Cortina d'Ampezzo* comprises three mountain ranges connected by a free shuttle bus.



Cortina d'Ampezzo

Cinque Torri Circuit: Tommi, our lead guide, decided he needed to switch up our planned itinerary just a bit as the next day's weather wasn't looking so good with heavy rain forecast. So instead of exploring some

The town of *Cortina* was bustling with the usual summer tourists but also the nearly 1100 runners and their supporters who were in for the "2017 North Face Lavardo Ultra Trail" event. Its main race being a 120 km (approx 75 miles) trail run with elevation gains of over 5,800 m (19,000 ft) which would start at 11PM that Friday night and was time limited after 30 hours (i.e., 5AM Sunday morning). After a delicious but overabundant multicourse dinner (obviously there would be no weight loss on this trip despite the daily exercise), we bedded down for the night but were aware of the race-related buzz in town (some of the group watched the event's start).



Hotel Fanceschi, Cortina d'Ampezzo

of the trails around Cortina, we set out to explore the *Cinque Torri* area. After a short drive on some rather windy roads (those in the group who suffered from motion sickness were happy when it was over), we enjoyed a chairlift ride up to the *Rifugio Scaosttoli* at 7,398' where we started the day's hiking. First up, a visit to the open air WWI museum of Lagazuoi where we saw and learned about some of the Italian entrenchments built there during "The Great War" -- there was certainly nothing "great" about the conditions the soldiers manning these trenches/bunkers had to endure, especially in winter.



Outdoor WWI Museum Lagazuoi near Cinque Torri

The *Cinque Torri* or “Five Towers” is a popular rock climbing area and the outdoor museum is not far from their base. From the museum area we headed up the trail to *Rifugio Averau* at 7,916’ where our path crossed with runners on the North Face Lavardo Ultra Trail race. The ones we helped cheer on had been running for over 12 hours and were nearly at the 100 km out of 120 km mark. After marveling at their stamina and athleticism we continued hiking up to *Mt. Nuvolau* at 8,445’ where we partook in lunch on the deck of the *Rifugio Nuvolau* and basked in the outstanding 360 degree views in just wonderful weather.



Cinque Torri



Tommi, Steve, Linda & Brian on deck of Rifugio Nuvolau



Linda navigating some steep and rocky conditions

Hiking in the Dolomites means that one has access to literally hundreds of rifugios which translates to “mountain refuges.” They range from simple and rugged to those with more comfortable amenities; from shared bunk room facilities to those with private rooms. A key component to all that we visited was the delicious and plentiful food they offer guests – an especially critical element when you’re burning lots of calories!

After stuffing ourselves on grilled polenta and sausages, we hiked back down to *Rifugio Averau*, cheered on more racers as they continued their punishing endeavor, and then continued our downward hike into new territory – the trail took us across a wide patch of rocky scree (a mass of small loose stones) and then headed down steeply where some downclimbing was definitely involved (i.e., more than two points of contact were often involved – using both feet and hands). The trail then leveled out and opened up into meadows abloom with wildflowers. Surrounded by color we finished the approximately 5 mile hike at the very busy *Passo Falzarego* (Falzarego Pass) where our transport back to *Cortina* awaited.



Along colorful trail to Passo Falzarego

Back in Cortina, we made the short walk into the center of town where we hooped-n-hallowed at the incoming Ultra Trail racers as they crossed the finish line (these racers were doing so at about the 17½ hour mark). We later learned that the top 2 male finishers were Fabien Antolinos (FRA) at 12h 32' 34" and Seth Swanson (USA) at 12h 34' 41" while the top female was Caroline Chaverot (FRA) at 14:05:45. Throughout the rest of the day and into the wee hours of Sunday morning (in very rainy conditions), we saw and heard racers continuing to make their way to the finish line until the 5am cut-off -- from our hotel room Saturday night we could watch the runners make their way using their headlamps to light the way.



We celebrated our own feats of the day by scarfing down some tasty gelato and doing some window shopping. Other than reasonably priced food, everything in *Cortina* is fairly expensive. A nice centrally located 2 bed, 2 bath condo will run you 1.5 million Euros (roughly \$1.7 million) ... we only know this because Steve checked out real estate prices because he fell in love with the area as it is perfect for someone like him who loves to hike, trail run, mountain bike, ski, etc. ... needless to say, we won't be purchasing any property in *Cortina* anytime soon!

In & Around Rainy Cortina: It had started raining sometime Saturday night and it was pouring Sunday morning with lots of thunder and lightning – the thunder just kept rolling down the valley



in which *Cortina* sits. Tommi wisely decided hiking in such conditions wasn't a good choice so instead we took a driving and walking tour of some of the 1956 Olympic sites, most of which are in various states of decay. The concrete and wood ski jump had a length of 72m. The old concrete walled bobsled track is far removed from today's hi-tech refrigerated tracks. The skating center, an open area rink in 1956, has since been enclosed and remains a functional skating, hockey, and curling venue – many of the original wooden-trimmed

spectator stands have been incorporated into the current structure. At the nearby cultural “Musei Delle Regole D’Ampezzo” museum we saw a couple of bobsleds from the era, including one designed by Ferrari. At the next door “Rinaldo Zardini Palaeontological Museum” we saw an outstanding collection of area fossils collected by a local naturalist in the early to mid 20th century – primarily marine fossils such as “ammonites” and “megalodonts” which lived in the tropical sea which covered the Dolomites area (approximately 229 million years ago).

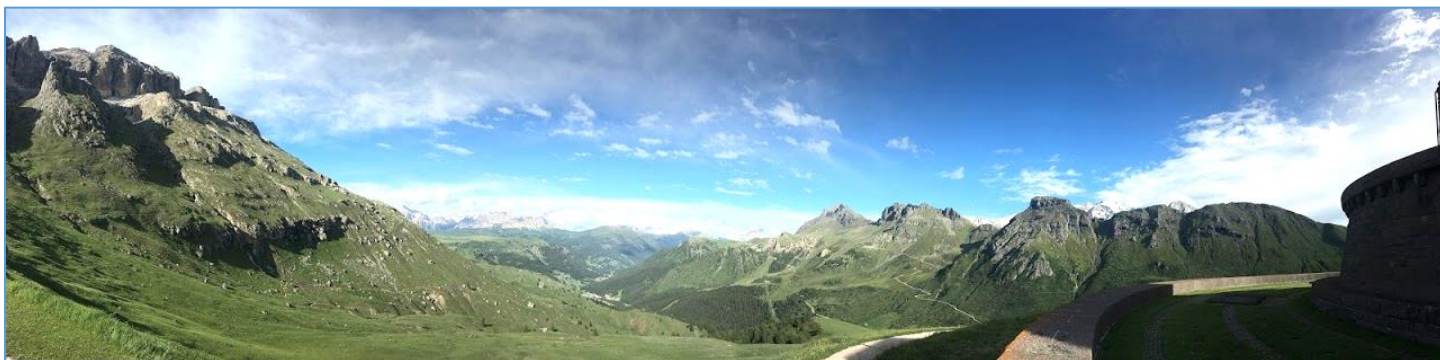
After enjoying a pizza lunch in town, we were pleased to see clearing skies and celebrated by taking an easy hike from town into the surrounding lower hillsides and lush forest. A quick post-hike shower felt great after the very humid conditions of the hike and then we piled into the vans to head out for our new home for the night: *Passo Pordoi*.

Scenes from our local Cortina hike – even this woodpile was adorned with vibrant flower boxes!



From *Cortina* the road to *Passo Pordoi* winds up and down through a series of beautiful alpine valleys and then, after reaching the town of *Arabba*, culminates with 33 hairpin turns over 9.2 km (5.7 miles) up to the pass. The road is not only popular with motorists of all types (cars, buses, and motorcycles) but also with cyclists – and with it being only a 2 lane road with little or no shoulders it was rather unnerving to watch the dance of the motorized and the non-motorized jockeying for positions both uphill and downhill -- several times we had a cyclist basically drafting off our back bumper on a downhill with multiple hairpin turns.

When we first reached *Passo Pordoi* (elevation 7,355) it was still bustling with day tourists but as the sun started to set and the evening air cooled the pass practically empties out and the passing traffic is reduced to an occasional vehicle. We stayed the night at “Hotel Savoia,” one of only a couple of accommodation options right on the pass. There we enjoyed some gorgeous views as well as a hearty dinner to fuel up for Monday’s hike.



View from near Passo Pordoi

Summiting Piz Boe: To start today's 7 mile hike we were given two options: take the cable car up from *Passo Pordoi* (9,678) OR skip the cable car and hike up instead to *Forcella Pordoi* (9,343') adding a challenging nearly 2,000' vertical gain over 1 mile to the day. Half the group elected to hike up: Steve and I were included in that group. We set off at 8AM and the group quickly became strung out ... the race horses of the group (Steve, Sophie, and Lindsay) bolted up the trail, Brian and I came next, followed by Kate and Claudia. Despite the trail's steepness and sections of very loose scree, Steve topped out after 51 minutes, Sophie and Lindsay arrived at about the hour mark, Brian followed 10 minutes later, I another 9 minutes after that and then Kate and Claudia a bit after that.

View looking down on Passo Pordoi from partway up "optional" hike



View looking up to top of switchback laden "optional" hike



Wildflowers blooming amongst the scree of the optional hike's trail



Sophie, Steve and Lindsay atop Forcella Pordoi



Celebrating the "optional" hike's conclusion with Steve and Brian

obviously made by much taller folks. The climb was quite popular with lots of fellow hikers on the trail – even two nuns in habits, long skirts, and tennis shoes.



Rocky climb up to summit of Piz Boe

Atop Piz Boe, 10,334'

First row: Lindsay, Pat, Sandra, Mark, Linda Sophie

2nd row: Nora, Ash me, Steve, Brian, Kate

Back row: Tommi, Claudia



Atop *Piz Boe* we refueled with some snacks and the incredible views, including of *Marmolada*, known as “Queen of the Dolomites” it is the area’s highest peak at 10,968’. Our hike continued, this time down a different but still quite rocky trail; sometimes having to downclimb using placed iron pieces/cables for assistance.

Trail down from Piz Boe with lunch hut visible below

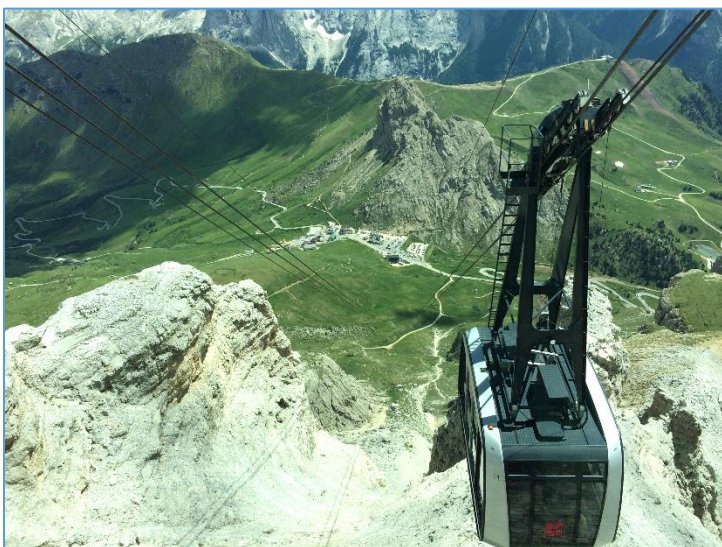


Atop Piz Boe with Mt. Marmolada in background, the highest peak in the Dolomites, 10,968’

After crossing a couple of small snow fields, we reached *Rifugio Boe*, 9,426’, where we enjoyed a plentiful lunch. We’re told that often in late June the area is still covered with considerable snow fields but not this year which made for very easy and dry hiking.



Hiking from Rifugio Boe to the Sass Pordoi tram station



The hike to the tram station atop *Sass Pordoi* at times felt like hiking on the moon – a vast gray-beige rocky landscape surrounded by endless sky. All but 2 of the group chose to take the tram down; Nora and Claudia hiked down (i.e., slide down) the optional trail some of us had hiked up in the morning. While used in the summer to ferry hikers and sightseers, the tram in winter is part of the transportation system of the “Val di Fassa” (Fassa Valley) which has 7 different but interconnected ski resorts – Tommi explained to us that you can ski entirely around the Piz Boe massive ... hmmm, something to consider. After enjoying the tram ride down to *Passo Pordoi*, some cake and a cold diet coke were just what the doctor ordered (friend Linda is a doctor afterall).

Via mini bus we then transported to the town of *Welschnhofen* where we stayed 2 nights at the “Hotel Engel Resort & Spa.” After settling in and doing the usual nightly laundry (we love those quick dry fabrics), the bartender named *Fabio* made up our nightly Aperol Spritz’s before our group gathered in the dining room for a 7 course “gala dinner.”

Traversing the Rosengarten Rotwand: The town of Welschnhofen sits at the base of the *Rosengarten Mountains* known for their pink shade due to the presence of dolomite mineral. Tuesday morning we walk from our hotel through town to a gondola which whisks us up to a plateau where we transfer to a chair lift which deposits us at the *Rifugio Fronza Alle Coronelle* at 7,667’ (all part of the Carezza ski area). We say a temporary “ciao” to Linda whose hip is bothering her and will meet us at our lunch hut via a less circuitous route than the one we have planned.

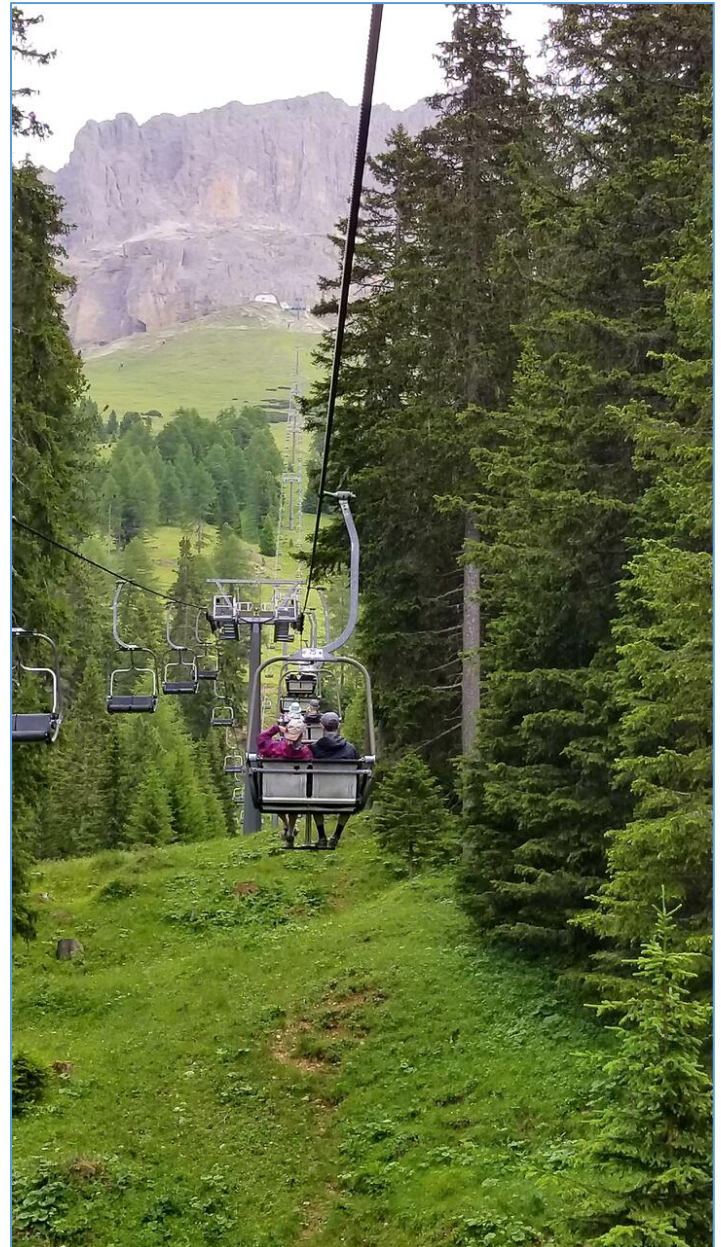


In mini bus to our hotel in Welschnhofen



Friendly fellow hiker greeting us at the Rifugio Fronza Alle Coronelle

From the rifugio we immediately start the relatively short but steep ascent to *Passo Coronelle* at 8,628’. The pre-placed iron hand/foot holds, cables, and log “steps” come in handy. As we ascend, unfortunately the clouds descend and begin to block the surely amazing views. Just as we crest the rocky notch which is the pass, a light drizzle starts but stops just after we’ve all donned our rain gear.

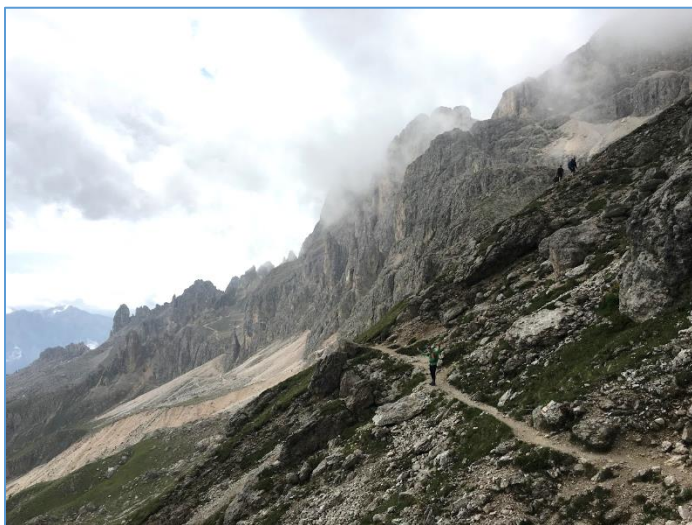


Steve & I on the chairlift up to Rifugio Fronza Alle Coronelle, 7,667’



Ascending to Passo Coronelle, 8,628'

The hike down from the pass while a bit less rocky is still fairly steep as we continue down and around the *Rosengarten Rotwand*, a 9,206' mountain that due to its steep south-west wall is a popular climbing spot. As we continue our traverse around, the trail becomes more and more washed out. The heavy rains we experienced Saturday night into Sunday in the Cortina area had



Trail around the backside of Rosengarten Rotwand



Sophie nearing Passo Coronelle with Eggental Valley in background



Descending from Passo Coronelle into the mist

obviously hit this area as well – Tommi said a friend of his had hiked this area 5 days ago and reported the trail was in excellent shape – not so anymore.

While getting ready to cross a small stream on a steep hillside, Kate lost her balance and took a terrifying feet first slide down the rocky slope. She was somehow able to pull up just short of several large boulders and fortunately escaped without serious injury though definitely bruised and battered. Claudia and Steve were subsequently able to “rescue” Kate’s iphone and hiking pole which she had lost during the downward slide in the treacherous rocks. With an increasingly washed out trail, our upward endeavors eventually involved hugging the cliff side and scrambling up very loose scree through which means – Tommi, Claudia, and Steve provided assists by providing firm pressure to one’s butt to help them better “stick” to the wall and make forward progress!



Making our own trail alongside a cliff base

Once we were all safely up that pass, we had to go down the other side where evidence of trail destruction by storm was apparent in several large piles of hail and lots more washed-out trail. Watching Tommi “jump” in the scree to pack it down on spots was quite the sight. At nearly 2PM we finally made it to the lunch spot where Linda had been calmly waiting for us for a couple of hours. A frankfurter and french fries definitely hit the spot -- even really healthy eater Lindsay celebrated the successful navigation of the difficult trails with an order of fries herself!



Windows in hut's wood pile so you don't miss the view!

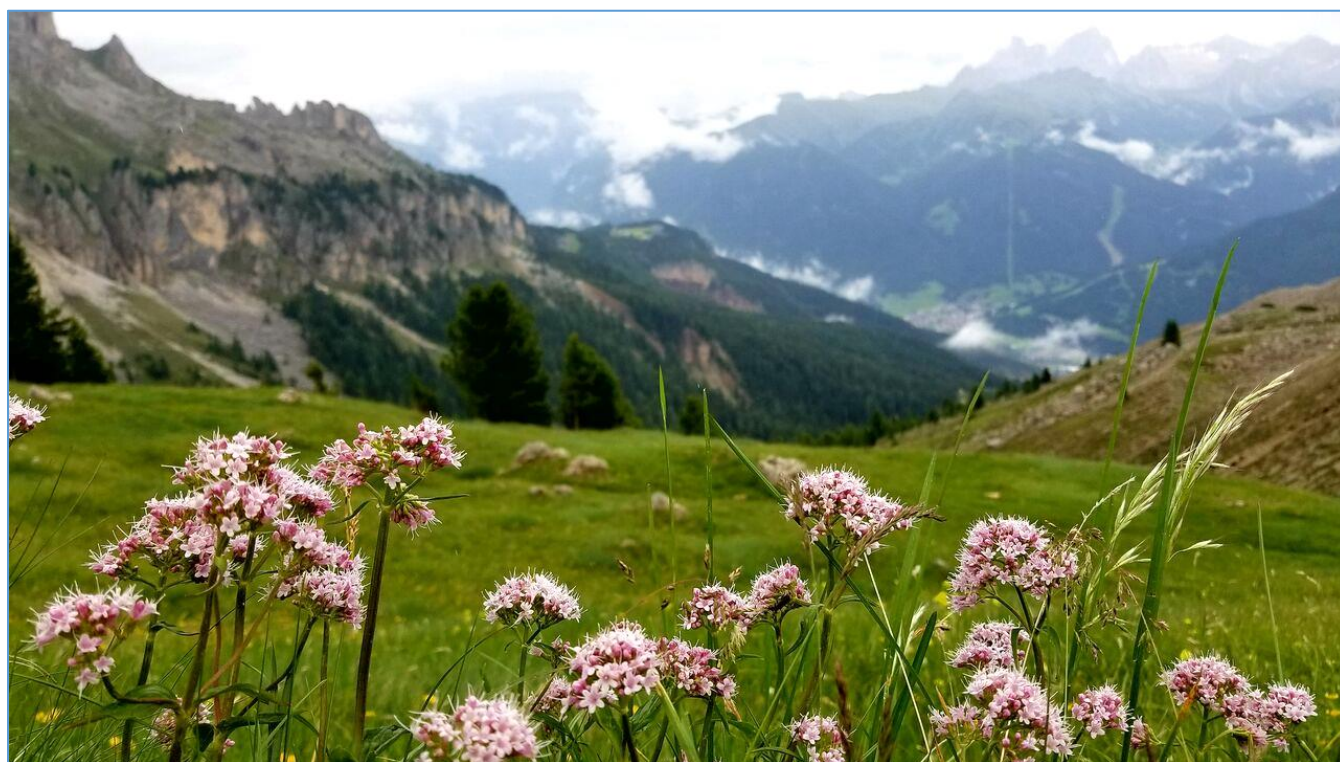
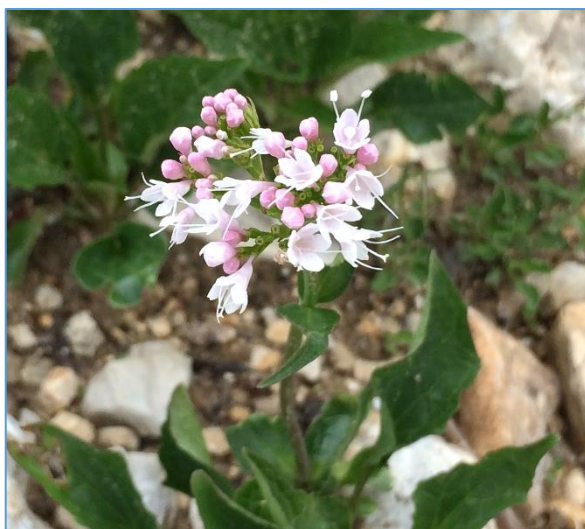


Our lunch hut: Refugio Roda de Vael, 7,490'

The post-lunch hike back to our starting point at *Rifugio Fronza Alle Coronelle* was a rolling trail, in good condition, that took us below the primary climbing area on *Rosengarten Rotwand* – Claudia said she had climbed there several times. Along the trail we finally spotted some *Eidelweiss* as well as lots of other wildflowers among the natural alpine rock gardens.



Edelweiss (left) and other mountain wildflowers in the Rosengarten Rotwand area



Once back at the rifugio we reversed the morning uphill transport: chairlift down, gondola down, followed by hike back to hotel. The 10 mile day was a wonderful conclusion to hiking in the Dolomites.

Visting “The Iceman” and Returning to Innsbruck: After a leisurely breakfast Wednesday morning (the hotel put on quite the spread, including a fruit & vegetable juicing bar), we departed to the city of *Bozano* via mini bus. *Bozano* is the capital of *South Tyrol* where approximately 75% of the population speaks Italian and the other 25% German. Once in town our first stop was the *South Tyrol Museum of Archeology*, home of the famous “Ozti the Iceman.” Discovered in 1991, Ozti is very well preserved for his age: over 5,300 years ... he is Europe's oldest known natural human mummy. After being in the deep freeze of an area glacier's ice and snow, his mummy (including his clothing and equipment) was revealed by the receding glacier and stumbled upon by a pair of hikers. Initially thought to perhaps be a soldier from the war era, his true age was fortunately discovered early in the recovery process so that his remains could be appropriately preserved. We viewed him where he now rests -- a special refrigerated unit which maintains a constant temperature and humidity and where he is misted with sterile water each day. Our guided tour of the museum revealed just a small amount of the information and knowledge learned from the study of Otzi, his clothing, and his accompanying equipment – all quite fascinating.



Representation of Otzi, the Iceman

We then strolled through the delightful main shopping area of *Bolzano* with its pedestrian streets lined with arched covered sidewalks to a local restaurant associated with a local winery. The hilly area around the city is full of vineyards. With our yummy lunch we had the opportunity to sample several of the local varietals – the white burgundy was especially tasty. Before continuing on our return travels to *Innsbruck*, we took the opportunity to do some last minute shopping and gelato eating!



Bozano's pedestrian shopping area



Outdoor market stall in Bozano

The road back to *Innsbruck* was lined with small villages, built wherever there is water and sun. It is a marvel of structural engineering with tunnels, bridges, and snow sheds through the mountainous terrain and it was filled with lorries (trucks) carrying goods of all types. Once back in *Innsbruck* we had just enough time to take a final stroll through its *Old Town* and along the banks of the river “Inn” before meeting up with the group for our farewell group dinner. Tommi and Claudia surprised us with goody bags filled with all sorts of chocolate bars – the group had previously been rather vocal about the lack of chocolate on the trip – a usual snack food while hiking. Given the warm weather we’d been having Tommi and Claudia had decided that carrying chocolate bars around for snacks hadn’t seemed like a good idea so they decided to send us off fully provisioned.

Return to Colorado: The group scattered Thursday morning with most returning home via various airports/airlines. Linda, Brian, Steve and I had arranged for a van to transport us from *Innsbruck* to the *Munich International Airport* where we boarded an “Iceland Air” flight to *Reykavik* where we switched planes and flew on to Denver. On the flights we all binge-watched Season 1 of a great Icelandic TV series called “Trapped.”

We all agreed that our trip to the Dolomites was an outstanding success and felt privileged to have spent so many days hiking through its beautiful landscapes and experiencing some of the area’s local culture!

