BUONGIORNO A0STA, ITALY 2006

Saturday 8th July

Day 1 – I think the worst thing about holidays is the preparation – all the manic, pernickety, necessary and unnecessary preparation that continues until you're at last sitting in the car/train/plane/whatever, remembering what you've forgotten. Anyway, the day started early for us all – Mum won the early race by being up at 02.45! Alan and I were next at 03.40, Daniel and Paula at 04.35 and Rachel at 05.10.

The journey to Bristol airport for the Cornish contingent (Alan, Mum and me) was uneventful, probably due to the lack of traffic at that time of the morning and we arrived at the allotted Purple Parking place at about 07.00. The Welsh contingent (Daniel, Paula and Rachel) turned up about 10 minutes later and we were soon being transported in a minibus to the airport.

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

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

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

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

It had previously been decided that Daniel would drive one car (a blue Passat) with Alan navigating and Mum as passenger, while Paula followed in the other car (a grey Renault Scenic) with Rachel and me as passengers. Thus, the drive from Milan to Aosta began. The Renault seemed fond of stalling and didn't always want to go in gear, but at least it had air conditioning! The temperature crept up to 30C, but the 2.5 hour drive didn't seem horrendously long – although I wasn't the one driving and could hardly keep my eyes open near the end, even to see the beautiful mountains that had appeared, at first in the distance and then much closer.

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

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

The bendy road amid the mountains

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

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

On returning from *Gros Cidac* supermarket, Daniel and Paula cooked pasta and sauce with cheese, which was followed by an alternative for a late birthday cake for Rachel (as we couldn't see her to help celebrate her birthday this year). Dishes were washed and dried and then we sat around the table with wine, playing a very loud and hilarious game of Extreme Uno. This had nothing to do with the wine. Oh no.

At around 22.00, we all went out on the balcony to gaze at the twinkling lights of the valley below, while the rain cascaded down outside. The noise of the cicadas, which had been noticeable as soon as we'd arrived, was as loud as ever. I rather liked the sound, but I'm not sure that Rachel (not one of the world's best insect appreciators) agreed.

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

Sunday 9th July

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

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

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

We set out on foot along some old looking streets and after Alan accosted a thankfully-English-speaking Italian woman, we managed to locate the main tourist information office, which was situated in the town square/piazza. This proved fruitful and we then sat outside a café (or rather caffè) for a pleasant half hour, with drinks and some leaflets and maps to peruse. There

were quite a lot of people out enjoying the pleasant heat of a leisurely Sunday morning by strolling along the streets, window shopping, chatting with friends and acquaintances, or sitting outside eating/drinking places.

Although there is apparently a strong Gothic influence in the Valle d'Aosta, we couldn't help noticing that there were many Roman remains and so we went for a closer look at some. There seemed to be so many, mostly in the north-east of the town, near the cathedral. Sadly, the vertical section of the most impressive amphitheatre was protected by scaffolding and thus gave a tantalising impression of what once must have been a majestic structure. I do understand the need to protect a building of this importance and had to console myself with the fact that I'd seen it at all (and content myself with looking at a photo gallery of what it was like before the scaffolding). As Aosta is more or less a bi-lingual region, the writing describing the photos was in Italian and French. Rachel and I were able to translate quite a bit of the French, but it's been a long time since my schooldays!

Remains of the Roman theatre

Underneath one of the Roman arches (the remains of a once impressive city gate) a local artist seemed to be painting a picture of some sideways trees – it seemed completely in character for modern street life such as this to carry on amidst buildings of great antiquity. There were lots of other Roman buildings, noticeably towers, city walls and many old buildings and parts of buildings. It would have been absolutely fascinating to have an in-depth guided tour (in English, if there had been one!) but it was becoming very hot, as the cloud cover had disappeared. So, I took a last lingering look at the wonderful sight of the mountains visible in the distance towering over the Roman streets and towers, before we walked back to the cars.

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

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

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

At the top of the only part of the waterfall we could reach, Daniel and Paula did some rather precarious scrambling around on rocks for photographic purposes, while Alan was thankfully more sedate and just walked out onto a big rock to take photos. Rachel and I took the

opportunity to stand and stare, although Rachel was standing and scratching a little, as she had a large bite on her back from an unknown insect.

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

View over the valley

Once back, we just followed our own pursuits – fly swatting and watching a huge grasshopper on the balcony rail passed the time satisfyingly. Alan and Daniel returned 45 minutes later with tales of having eaten a load of wild strawberries further up the mountain!

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

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

We then had a rather complex discussion about who wanted to do what, where, when, how and with whom. It was complex due to people's different likes/dislikes. I think the worst thing about (group) holidays is trying to please everyone, knowing you're never going to succeed!

Monday 10th July

Day 3 – a sunny day 3! We had arranged to converge in the communal kitchen area at 08.00, but as the three of us in the dungeon area below didn't regain consciousness until 08.00 … well, it didn't actually matter in the slightest, as we were all ready to go at 09.30 as planned.

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

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

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

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

We began to climb upwards, passing through tunnels (some with open sides, giving a clear view of the ravines and gorges below) but mostly we were on open roads, giving views of the sheer drops below. It had gradually become just a little cooler, but it was midday when we arrived at Cogne, so we slapped on the sunscreen lotion regardless.

When Alan and I walked to the nearby toilet, I annoyed myself (and Alan) by suddenly becoming ridiculously English and uptight and walking out when I saw it was used by both males and females. The origin of some behaviour is very odd. Mind you, I do think the worst thing about holidays is having to use strange public toilets!

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

View of glaciers from Cogne, Gran Paradiso

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

I was particularly interested in the alpine flowers, as these pretty and diverse little plants lend themselves to the hotter, drier English summers that are supposedly going to become the norm. It was obvious that the Alpine Garden Paradisia is also a good place for scientific research, with its reproductions of different environments for various types of plants, lichens and insects. I was also interested in the rocks, but was hampered by the notice boards being only in Italian. Paula did quite well at a translation attempt, but as we walked away from the garden, I had the sense that we had missed so much of its essence.

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

We retraced our steps downwards, past cows complete with cowbells (a very prettily alpine-like sound, but possibly a little irritating after a while). We reached the level of the river below, where the river wasn't murky at all, but rather chalky looking. Daniel had explained earlier that this was because of silt from the glaciers above.

We had arranged to meet Alan and Daniel at 16.00, so decided to pass the time at a caffè, where the fearless Paula marched straight in and asked for drinks and where Mum and I tentatively asked for an ice cream (gelato) each. We thought we'd conveyed that Mum wanted a yogurt one and I wanted a frutti di bosco (forest fruits) one, but when they arrived as we sat at a table outside, both Mum and I had a mix of the two flavours – but very delicious they were too and definitely hit the spot. Due to the heat and the quick melting time, mine also hit a spot or five on my trousers and Paula's borrowed hat which I had in my lap – oops!

Still short of 16.00, we decided to stroll alongside the pretty greeny greyish milky river. I was intrigued by the amount of mica in the stones along the pathway, plus the number of green stones and confess here and now to relocating a few to Cornwall. Very small stones. Just the size of gravel really. Italy won't miss them. Besides, they'll be well looked after!

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

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

Suits you, sir!

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

Tuesday 11th July

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

Daniel dropped us off at the railway station in Aosta at 09.20 and Alan successfully bought us tickets – to the right destination on the right train for the right number of people. Well done Alan! He even remembered (thanks to Rachel's experiences of European travel) to validate the ticket in a little yellow machine.

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

The train left a minute early and the journey was smooth, air conditioned and with a polite Italian man telling us over the intercom at which stations we were about to arrive. A ticket inspector dutifully inspected our tickets and all was well.

The scenery was first of all very scenic, with the usual large chalets in various states of repair and terraces of vines growing up the mountainside, but all too soon the mountains abruptly stopped and we were into drier, flatter, hotter country. The journey itself took over two hours and there were two Torino stops before our destination at the terminus of Torino Porto Nueva.

Thanks to Rachel's sandwich making skills, we were able to eat our lunch while still on the train, before disembarking onto Torino soil – and whoosh! A blast of disturbingly hot air engulfed us and stayed with us all throughout our stay at Torino, in various degrees of intensity.

We first of all visited the beautifully kept station toilets, where we had to pay 70c, but well worth the money – so clean! Our next objective was to find the tour bus around the city, which entailed a long walk up an open arcade, past lots of shops, caffès and bars. It also entailed Alan going into one of these shops to ask for directions, as the bus stop didn't seem to be where the map said. Luckily, the man spoke English and directed us to the bus stop.

However, the tour bus wasn't due for 40 minutes and I for one was steaming hot, so thought it was a good idea to stop for a drink. As Mum had already ensconced herself on a seat in the bus stop shelter, Alan went walkabout and returned with iced lemon sorbet drinks (known as granite di limone – but not the rock variety). They were a most refreshing life saver.

We sat and watched the ordinary buses go by and the well dressed people of Torino getting on and off the buses. I hadn't realised that Torino is famous for fashion and was quite glad I was wearing my turquoise cropped trousers...

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

"We are from Cornwall … which is in England!"

The tour began and she spoke only in English – however, her shift ended at 13.45 and another tour guide took over. This one delivered her spiel very rapidly in Italian, French and English. The sights I particularly remember are: a statue of the first king of Italy; streets of haute couture; the Statue of the Four Seasons "with much esoteric and Masonic symbolism" (I would have loved to have leapt off the bus to investigate fully); the steps which the Mini drove down in *The Italian Job* original film; and a statue of the Holy Grail (where she said people had looked for clues, but hadn't found any!)

The bus returned us to our pick-up point and we then walked along the stifling streets to the Egyptian Museum (apparently second only to the one in Cairo) which had been pointed out on the tour. It was wonderful! Many, many relics helped to create an atmosphere of ancient, heady intrigue, including mummies, scarab amulets, reconstructed pieces of architecture,

sarcophagi, hieroglyphs and huge statues of Egyptian gods and goddesses. We only had time to have a brief tantalising look, as it would have taken two or three days to see it all properly.

Tearing ourselves away with great difficulty from such wonderful tangible evidence of that enigmatic and totally fascinating ancient culture, we retraced our steps back to the railway station in the oppressive heat. Alan quickly bought ice creams (his Italian language skills improving daily) and managed to validate our tickets before we found the right platform and the right train back to Aosta.

This time it was far more crowded and far hotter, with graffiti scratched on the window and no polite Italian man telling us station names. We didn't stop at quite so many stations, but were still about 12 minutes late.

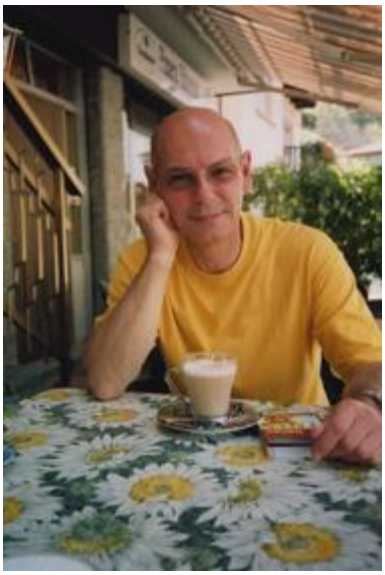
In order to avoid a rush getting off the train, we were the first ones standing at the train door. Unfortunately the door opening system was unknown to us and although Rachel managed to open the sliding doors and step off the train, followed closely by Alan, the doors then closed with me stuck firmly in the middle of them. It was a strange moment, stuck in an Italian train, with Italian people behind me, offering no help whatsoever! Alan rushed to the door and pulled it open again, with no real ill effects – retrospectively, we should have waited and let the Italian people open the doors first. I think the worst thing about holidays is lack of knowledge of public travel systems!

Daniel met us at the station and drove us up, up, up to *Le Reverier*. We all washed while Daniel and Paula cooked tea of baked potato and tuna mayo – they seemed quite willingly to take the role of our *chefs de vacances* – very much appreciated, thank you! After that, we passed the evening with another game of Extreme Uno, before falling into bed.

Wednesday 12th July

Day 5 – a later start to day 5! Rachel opted to stay behind for a chill-out day, while Daniel and Paula arranged with us to go on ahead for a walk before rendezvousing with us later, somewhere in the Valle d'Ayas, at a place to be confirmed by text message.

We drove along the road on the first two stops of the route the train had taken the day before. It was interesting to see from the road a castle on a hill that we had previously seen from the train. Again, some chalets along the roadside were very pretty, while others were dilapidated and some even derelict. Alan stopped at a likely looking place for "tre caffè latte", which was served in colourful cups at a table outside.



Caffè latte – fantastico!

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

but as we continued upwards, it gradually became apparent to us how much Mum hated the mountain roads.

Unfortunately, it was difficult to either park or turn around and there was the added complication of meeting up with Daniel and Paula. We tried to stop at one place, but couldn't find anywhere to park, so were about to carry on when Daniel sent a text message to say he and Paula were at Champoluc, where we were! We managed to find each other and went to sit by a river to eat our packed lunch.

Champoluc, Valle d'Ayas

Alan and I took a couple of photos of the lovely snowy mountain peak in the distance. It was decided that Daniel and Paula should go off on their own (a chair lift was visible from where we were) while we headed back with Mum. We went to look for postcards and a toilet, but were unsuccessful on both counts, so just returned to *Le Reverier*. There were quite a few castles and Roman ruins en route, begging for later exploration.

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

By the time we returned to *Le Rev*, it was time for mountain watch with a nice glass of rosé wine, although no eagles were in sight. Alan took on the task of skinning and boning the fish he'd bought at *Gros Cidac*, so that it was ready when Daniel and Paula returned a little later and did their magic with diced fish, vegetables and the special ingredient of fruit juice.

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

Thursday 13th July

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

Daniel and Paula departed before 09.00 for a day's walk, while the rest of us finished breakfast – a choice of croissants, a small variety of cereal, plus some toast in a packet (although the holiday toast situation was dire, having bread but no grill or toaster).

We were finally ready to leave at sometime past 10.00 and drove down, down, down to Aosta, parking in the underground railway station car park (being now familiar with the procedure).

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

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

Torre di Pailleron, Aosta

Having neglected to ask for stamps when we'd bought the postcards, our next move was to experience an Italian post office – and what an experience! It looked like it had been recently updated to a state of modern technology that not only confused us, but the local people as well. We sussed from a ticket dispenser that a ticket with a number on should be taken, but it took a little while and a spot of wild guessing which *sort* of ticket, as there were several options.

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

The 12 or so local people waiting with us seemed as frustrated as we were and one or two went to enquire at another window that was still open, but to no avail. Alan went to ask someone and was told just to wait. The woman continued to count the stamps and money. A young Italian man with a parcel came and sat down next to Alan. The woman counted. The Italian man discerned that Alan was English – possibly his exhortations of "What the hell is going on? What in the name of **** am I supposed to do?" gave him away.

The woman counted. The young Italian man asked Alan what he wanted. When Alan showed him the postcards, the man went to another counter to enquire, thinking that Alan could just get stamps there, but he was wrong, we definitely had to wait along with everybody else. The woman counted. The man continued a very pleasant conversation about parcels and the madness of the new system, in very good English with a rather endearing accent … well, I was endeared, anyway!

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

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

The diesel was duly purchased. Alan's linguistic/communication skills reached dizzy new heights when he asked for air for the tyres and the woman understood! Our plan for the afternoon was to drive to a ruined castle and a lake. OK, so it was Rachel's plan, but it was a

very good plan and she wasn't to know about the police, the sudden summer storm and the burning rubber smell from the car as we tried not to plunge backwards down the mountain...

The drive started quite calmly and we enjoyed the Italian scenery. We did notice an unusual number of police bikes and wondered vaguely if anything was amiss. A little further on, we saw a prettily painted church on one side of the road and a brilliantly Gothic castle abandoned on the top of a heavily wooded mountainside on the other side of the road.

The prettily painted church

We naturally stopped to take photos – we'd actually been hoping to walk up to this castle, but that was unfortunately impossible. Alan disappeared amongst some very tall grass in pursuit of the perfect photo. I could smell quite a pungent aroma from some nearby plants, but Rachel wasn't keen on the smell. A large lorry then pulled in behind us and a sinister looking man jumped down from his driving seat and started to walk in our direction.

Well, maybe he wasn't so sinister and maybe he *was* just walking to the back of his lorry to see to something … but the Gothic castle, the strange smelling plants, the police presence and the sudden aloneness of two women on an Italian mountainside (where *was* Alan?) must have alarmed Rachel and me, because we both instinctively scuttled back to the car, got in and shut the doors!

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

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

I was a little frustrated, as it was a good place to take a photo. Alan, completely unabashed, though, jumped out of the car with his camera and strolled across to the vantage point. Behind us where a smaller road branched off, there were two policemen standing, complete with guns.

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

The roads were still very winding, but some were wide enough to have tunnels built into the side of the mountain. We entered one tunnel in complete dryness, but emerged into rain. We knew we were quite close to the lake, so still carried on, but the rain started to empty itself

down and I saw a flash of lightning somewhere near the mountain top. What felt disconcerting was that we were the only vehicle still going upwards, while we passed rather a lot of vehicles on their way down!

There was obviously going to be no imminent let-up in the weather and the rain was cascading down the road. After a dodgy moment when a car coming down made it very difficult for our car to pass and more or less forced Alan to reverse, Alan made the decision to turn back. I'm not quite sure how it came about, but we had reached a reservoir and as Alan started to turn the car around in the narrow road with a sheer drop behind us, the car seemed to rebel against the manoeuvring. Alan struggled mightily with the car and the car struggled mightily with the awful conditions. The smell of burning rubber pervaded my nostrils and I remember saying, "Something's not right."

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

The drive back after that was uneventful, except that we saw four *polizia* vans heading in the direction we'd come from – it was frustrating knowing we'd never find out what had happened.

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

Friday 14th July

Day 7 – the day of the planned trip to Lake Como (Lago di Como) for Alan, Rachel, Mum and me. We arose at 07.00 and were ready to leave at just gone 08.00. The temperature was a pleasant 20C, but it soon crept up steadily as we drove down, down, down the mountain and then along the valley road.

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

It was tedious for the passengers and arduous for Alan as the time slipped past. I was intrigued that we started in mountainous country, drove through flat country and then entered mountainous country again when we approached the outskirts of Como by about 10.30. Como was a far larger place than I think any of us had anticipated and driving through what appeared to be its town centre was like driving through an inner city, packed with housing, shops and graffiti. I have to confess that it didn't endear the place to me at all.

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

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

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

Picturesque Lago di Como

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

Whilst in mid-lunch, the accordion player suddenly appeared at our table. He was obviously asking for money, so Alan bemusedly gave him some change, at which the accordion player said, "Grazie e buon appetito!" I think the worst thing about holidays is not knowing the local customs! However, I noticed afterwards that people at several other tables refused him money, so I was actually rather glad that Alan had given him some.

While the rest of us finished our food, Alan nipped across the road to the boat ticket office opposite, to check out times of trips around the lake. There was one at 12.40 and then 13.30, so we decided to go for the earlier one. This was almost not achieved, due to the elusiveness of our waiter, but Alan went in search of him and managed to track him down in time.

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

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

Rachel joins me on the hot seat

It was very interesting, though, watching the handful of people getting on and off at each stop, listening to the Italian conversations all around us and surreptitiously looking at the mosquito

bites on the arms of several people – apparently, mosquitoes are plentiful around the lake.

After about an hour, the boat trip came to an end and we set out to look for postcards – we'd had the impression that Lago di Como would be a touristy place with lots to buy and lots to see, but maybe we weren't at the shopping centre! However, we did locate a few shops just across the road and after Mum bought her postcards, we stopped in the shade of a very usefully placed tree to consume cold items – a gelato each for Mum, Alan and me and a Coke for Rachel. It seemed rather noisy, with lots of people and a big colourful outdoor television screen with accompanying Italian speech and music blaring out.

We strolled along the lakeside for a while, sat for a while and took photos for a while, before walking back to the car. The heat was amazingly … hot. The underground car park was a cool relief and it suddenly occurred to me that maybe there are a lot of underground car parks in Italy for this very reason!

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

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

Saturday 15th July

Day 8 – and surprisingly the three of us in the cavern didn't regain consciousness until 09.30. Daniel and Paula had already left for another walk at Gran Paradiso, so the rest of us just had a leisurely morning. Mum took to the balcony with her puzzle book, while I took to the bathroom with the hand washing!

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

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

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

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

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

A stormy evening

Sunday 16th July

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

As Daniel was on a mission to photograph Aosta for possible articles for various Italian magazines, we split into two groups, to reconvene later for lunch. Daniel, Paula and Rachel went for a faster walkabout, while Alan, Mum and I went for a slower walkabout.

We in the slower group first of all visited a lovely 450 year old tree – a tilia or broad leaved lime – and then some Roman church remains, complete with tombs and other structures that were conveniently below ground level and hence cooler. We then visited some cloisters that were very old and had some extremely interesting carvings on the pillars (some of the figures with their heads seemingly rubbed/taken off and one figure completely missing).

There was a fascinating picture/fresco on one of the ancient walls that looked rather Eastern, like a mixed up Christian/Hindu rather dark looking Madonna with 14 stars around her head and holding a black baby Jesus. Unfortunately, no photos were allowed and all the time we were there, a woman guarded the place with an eagle eye, so Alan couldn't even sneak a quick non-flash photo. I think the worst thing about holidays is being told you can't take photos of some of the most interesting things in the entire vicinity! He walked away disappointedly, as we headed back to the piazza, where a brass band had now joined the microphone man (who was welcoming in runners who had apparently run the Aosta Skyrace).

At least we were able to photograph the tilia!

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

I don't know what had happened to the English menu, but the waitress tried very hard to explain what the Italian meant on the completely Italian menu – communication was definitely interesting with her smattering of English and our mini-smattering of Italian. We discovered that there was no granite di limone for Mum; Alan ended up with his third choice of pizza; Mum ended up with a folded calzone and not the ordinary open pizza she'd wanted; and Daniel and Paula discovered that buffalo wasn't the succulent meat they'd imagined, but was cheese ... but it was cool. OK, to be honest, it was really hot, as there seemed to be no air conditioning, but we managed just fine!

Going outside again felt warm in a different way to the warmth inside, but we just returned to the cars and drove up, up, up to *Le Rev*.

So as not to waste the afternoon, Alan, Rachel, Daniel, Paula and I decided to go to the top of 'our' mountain. Daniel drove us up around the bendy mountain roads he now loved, to the ski resort of Pila, where we all took the chair lift to the top – Alan and Paula in one chair and Daniel, Rachel and me behind them in another chair. It was rather a good and unusual experience swinging around above the trees, with just one scary moment when we were stopped at the dodgiest point and swung to and fro a little less than gently. However, we reached the top and managed to jump off the chairs with no mishap. There was a shortish walk in an upwards direction to a lake – the lake was just a green lake, but the alpine flowers were delightful. The view wasn't bad, either!

Four stand around at the top

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

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

Once we had journeyed back down, down, down to *Le Rev*, we did our own things – mainly puzzles and Daniel looking on his laptop computer at the photos he and Alan had taken. Rachel and I partook of mountain watch with a glass of rosé wine (very civilised, but no eagles again) and at around 19.45, we ate bits and pieces. The mountain remained misty and we ended the day pleasantly and raucously as usual with Extreme Uno.

Monday 17th July

Day 10 – another misty morning. Daniel, Paula and Rachel left at about 09.00 for Zermatt, Switzerland, while Alan, Mum and I left at 10.30 (temperature 20C) for a drive along the valley road to Sarre, Aymavilles, Villeneuve and Arvier, looking for a castle to visit.

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

St Pierre Castle

With hours of the day still left, we headed to Aosta again, where Alan parked the car in the underground station car park like an old timer – no reflection intended on his age! We walked to the piazza (a much quieter piazza than yesterday) and stopped at a different caffè for lunch. It was very pleasant sitting outside under an awning in the warm air of some midday shade.

Afterwards, we just strolled along – it seems that different sights can be noticed on every visit, as Aosta is such a busy, vibrant place. Although it's correctly described as not very touristy, there are a few souvenir-type shops there and I never once felt like a stranger out of place. The artist installed under the Roman arch had been painting a picture of some sunflowers. We went to have a closer look, but the artist himself was nowhere in sight and there were no prices on any of his paintings. It appears that Italians (in Valle d'Aosta at least) are much more trusting than English people.

Roman Arch, Aosta

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

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

Daniel, Paula and Rachel returned complete with some Swiss chocolate at around 19.00, after a really enjoyable day at Zermatt, where they'd successfully viewed the Matterhorn amid other adventures. After they had eaten and after the usual viewing of Daniel's photos on his laptop, we talked about the day just past and the day to come. Then, being hooked on Extreme Uno, we naturally had to have a game before going to bed!

Tuesday 18th July

Day 11 – the visit to Monte Bianco/Mont Blanc for Alan, Rachel and me. There had been heavy

rain and thunder during the night, but the morning was clear – apart from the usual mistiness over the mountains, that is.

The temperature as we set off at just gone 09.00 to drive down to the valley was 15C. It was more or less a straight road to Monte Bianco, although Rachel and I are of the opinion that Italian road signs are not always explicit. They often seem to point you in the right direction, but then fail to keep up the guidance, so that you doubt you're on the right road. Then, when you arrive, you're unsure of where you can park the car. However, the car parking today was free, so I shouldn't complain. Also, the drive there had revealed striking and rather wonderful views of Monte Bianco as it appeared in the distance, gradually becoming closer and closer. Also, thanks to Italian road signs, we managed not to drive into the Mont Blanc tunnel and end up in France, so I'm definitely not complaining!

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

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

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

Very pretty – very high up!

When we arrived at the next station, the temperature had dropped appreciably. We saw there was still a little way left to go to the very top, so jumped on (not literally) the smaller cable car that held about 8 people. We were soon there and headed out to the glacier viewing gallery. The air was exhilarating and my feet, bare within my trusty Merrell sandals, weren't cold at all.

There were lots of spectacular views of snowy peaks, with clouds below us clinging to the mountainside. A number of small figures could be seen below, walking across the glacier

(though keeping to the marked pathways … but marked how and by whom?) Some small aircraft flew over the mountain, obviously on a sightseeing trip.

We saw the cable car we could have taken further, if we had wanted, which travelled across the mountain to Chamonix, in France. That would have been quite a trip! We also saw some rather scruffy black birds on the mountain, which seemed interested in people, as if people had fed them in the past.

From the viewing gallery, Punta Helbronner

Having taken a month's supply of photos in about 20 minutes, we went to look at the crystal exhibition that was at this level. There were quite a number of unusual crystal formations on display, plus interesting combinations of different rocks – fascinating. There were also photos of how these rocks and crystals had been collected, from where and by whom, but the writing was unfortunately in just Italian and French.

Having had our fill of snowy peaks and crystals, we started our descent. First of all came the short trip in the small cable car, followed by the longer trip in the larger cable car. We then stayed at this level and Alan almost immediately espied a shop which had a few crystals on display. Rachel settled on a likely looking piece to buy and after a great deal of deliberation, so did Alan and I!

After this excitement, Rachel unfortunately discovered that her sunglasses had broken and it was very bright out in the sun. However, she squintingly joined Alan and me as we entered and walked around the delightful Saussurea alpine/botanical garden, where there were many alpine flowers grouped from different areas of the world and looking incredibly pretty against the breathtaking scenery of the mountains. As it was around midday, it was definitely hot, though not quite as hot as the walk around the alpine garden at Gran Paradiso had been. As we'd observed there, we noticed some gardeners working in the heat of the day – Italians don't seem to be particularly sun/skin aware?

Breathtakingly beautiful (Alan excepted!)

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

Kay Santillo, 2006.

We walked around looking inside a few shops at La Palud, but they mostly contained the usual touristy souvenirs with not a single rock, mineral or crystal in sight – I think the worst thing about holidays is seeing the same sort of tourist trash in just about every souvenir shop you come across! So, we returned down the hill to the car park and stood in the meagre shade of the car's open boot, beside a nearby rushing torrent, to gratefully eat the sandwiches that Rachel had made early that morning.

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

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

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

For our evening meal, Paula and Daniel cooked fish that they'd purchased from the supermarket that day, along with rice and fruit, which is a simple but pleasing recipe. After washing the dishes, I went outside on the balcony to cool down with a glass of sangria (an intrinsically holiday drink) and discovered it was raining with lovely big drops of warm summer rain that felt strange, but delightful. The rest of the evening was spent … guess what … playing Extreme Uno!

Wednesday 19th July

Day 12 – another bright, sunny start, with gentle haziness around the mountains. We awoke in the dank cavern and gradually wended our way upstairs. Daniel and Paula departed for another walk at Gran Paradiso. The rest of us deliberated our choices for the day and decided on a drive along the valley road to Verrès, to see what was there.

It was 25C at 11.00, which seemed to promise a hot day (although the air conditioning in the car always worked well). The drive was uneventful, but the sights whilst driving along are so varied – terraces of vines up the sides of the mountain, apple trees, lots of building work and road work in progress, the usual shops and dilapidated and derelict houses that seem as if they could tell such a story. I think the worst thing about holidays is glimpsing so much of what you know you'll never see or understand properly!

We stopped for a drink at the same place we'd stopped along this road previously. This time, being later at about midday, the inside of the caffè was full of people eating lunch, but we sat at a table outside for our "tre cappuccini e uno Coke". The cappuccini were served in colourful Chinese patterned cups, although no cappuccino I'd so far been served in Italy had come with chocolate sprinkled on top (and this was no exception).

We then continued the remaining short journey to Verrès, which seemed small but perfectly formed. There was a big enough car park, but the writing in Italian on the ticket dispenser led Alan to go and talk with a policewoman, who was sitting peacefully in a nearby *polizia* car. She seemed very friendly and even got out of her car to go and show Alan that it was cheaper to park in the underground section if we were staying for any length of time, as the top section was only for very short stays.

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

There was a church (which Alan and Mum went in) and an Irish pub (which none of us went in). It was reasonably cool in the streets and there was quite a strong breeze as we walked over a bridge. Alan and I took some photos, fascinated as always by the backdrop of the mountain peaks tantalisingly revealing themselves in between the rooftops.

Near the car park, there was a pretty war memorial – I've noticed a number of them, well-kept with fresh flowers in many of the towns we've passed. There are also shrines in the oddest places along the roadside, 99% of them very difficult to stop and photograph while travelling.

The pretty war memorial at Verrès

We drove back to *Le Rev* and had a small late lunch, before Alan, Rachel and I set out again for a walk in Gran Paradiso. The drive was quite stunning amid the mountains with their sudden immense drops, the heavily wooded areas, the bare peaks above the tree line and the odd waterfall cascading (gently, being high summer) down to the valley floor.

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

The rushing torrent

Rachel was a bit bothered about the number of flies and I found it a little bit on the hot side for walking uphill, but most of the walk was under the shade of trees, with the sound of the

green-grey milky torrent rushing by beside/below us. We even caught sight of a wild mountain deer, but it only came out on the path for a few minutes to sniff the air, before escaping back to the safety of the trees.

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

We re-entered Cogne and because it was approaching 18.00 and we were hot and dusty, we stopped for refreshment. The Spar shop failed to yield, but we found a small caffè selling what we were looking for – granite di limone for Rachel, granite di menta for Alan and "uno coppetta di gelato fragoli" (strawberry ice cream) for me. The Italian was coming along nicely!

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

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

On arrival back at *Le Rev* just before 19.00, Daniel, Paula and Mum were just having tea. Rachel and I enjoyed mountain watch on the balcony with a glass of rosé. There weren't many clouds on the mountain tops … and still no sign of the elusive eagles!

We went back inside for another bits and pieces tea, then played Extreme Uno until 22.00 and time to descend to the cavern below.

Thursday 20th July

Day 13 – the day of Daniel and Alan's 'man-walk' in Gran Paradiso, overlooking the Valnontey valley. They left at just before 09.00 on a clear morning. The rest of us converged upstairs and eventually decided to go for a drive to Arvier, described in the Rough Guide as "one of the region's most appealing villages" at the mouth of the valley.

Paula drove us along the valley road (with only a slight detour up the foot of a mountain) but when we reached Arvier, we couldn't find anywhere to park and we hadn't exactly had the impression of a most appealing village anyway. I think the worst thing about holidays is not knowing if you're actually missing something fantastic! However, we decided to return to Villeneuve, which we'd passed through on our way and which had looked interesting, if not necessarily appealing.

It seemed to be a popular place, as the car park was full, but Paula found a metered parking space and we walked to a nearby small caffè for a mid morning drink. Paula strode fearlessly into the caffè, while I followed somewhat cautiously. In response to our request for caffè latte, the woman inside explained in English that "the Italian way" would be for this to be served in a very small cup, whereas if we had a cappuccino, this would be served in a normal sized cup. This information was a little confusing seeing we had not come across this "Italian way" to date, but we agreed.

So, we sat outside and watched the activities in the small but busy street. Mum and I were brought our cappuccini and were surprised by the appearance of some powdered chocolate to sprinkle on top! Paula and Rachel had a Coke each, which they said was really good.

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

The pretty painted church front, Villeneuve

Apart from that, there didn't seem to be much to look at (unless you count another Italian Spar shop) so we headed back on the straighter road. We had to stop for a few bits and pieces at *Gros Cidac* - or *Gross Griddick*, according to Alan's delightful misnomer, which sounds like a magical supermarket in Harry Potter world.

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

The usual evening ensued - that is, eating, looking at the day's photos on Daniel's laptop and then a most bizarre game of Extreme Uno. The card ejecting mechanism had decided to seize up and according to the instructions, needed to be cleaned with some alcohol. Daniel resourcefully followed these instructions by applying wine with his sock, but then we decided the cards themselves were sticky (from our sweaty hands) and so we improvised with a clean pack of ordinary playing cards, which added a lot more time, a lot more confusion and a lot more fun!

Friday 21st July

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

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

In Aosta, the two cars were parked for the last time in the underground railway car park. We then all walked for the last time through the very hot Aostan streets to the centre, where we stopped at the ristorante that Rachel and I had first spotted the previous week. A friendly waiter greeted us, quickly ascertained that we were English and led us through the house to the garden at the back, where there were lots of tables and chairs underneath the shelter of a lovely spreading tree.

Hotel de Ville, Aosta

We sat and perused the menu for a while … which was challenging, as it was all in Italian. The waiter came along and explained what was on offer in rather good English, so that we all were able to order with confidence. The fish dishes seemed to be a speciality – Alan and Rachel chose fish, while Daniel, Paula and I chose pizza and Mum chose an omelette. There was then a slight confusion when we tried to order granite di limone to drink while we were waiting for our food. The waiter said, "You want them now?" and looked at us as if we were mad English people! It turned out that in this ristorante they were classed as desserts, so we ordered Coke and iced tea instead.

When the food arrived, the meticulously arranged sauces on the two fish dishes gave it away as rather an upmarket ristorante. It was very enjoyable sitting there in the warm air of the garden amid the gentle hubbub of Italian conversation. We saw a small lizard type creature walking along the top of the wall, sunning itself and maybe intrigued by the aroma of the food – it obviously enjoyed being in the garden too. The verdict of the meal was definitely positive. Rachel was particularly impressed with her aniseed salmon, which did smell and look great!

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

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

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

Saturday 22nd July

Day 15 – but not a real day 15, as it was travelling day. Daniel (who has obviously inherited his father's tendency to be early) had stated that we needed to leave by 07.00. Well, we kind of left a bit later than that, but it was still early, considering our flight wasn't until 12.30. I think the worst thing about holidays is not knowing exactly what time to leave!

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

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

We arrived at Milan Malpensa airport in very good time. I tried to keep myself occupied by going with Paula to look for a luggage trolley, but the inevitable dreaded waiting in an airport feeling overcame me – not helped at all by the fact that we were early and our flight was delayed.

As it happened, we ended up incarcerated in our plane on the runway for almost two hours, waiting for the opportunity to take off, as our plane had missed its time slot. Also, there was a party of Italian schoolchildren on our flight – not that I have anything against Italian schoolchildren, but they were understandably excited and bored by waiting and rather noisy. Still, it gave me something to take my mind off the inner turmoil … hmm, as if!

The flight was smooth and just 1 hour 45 minutes later we were on English terra firma again. There had been a lot of cloud as we approached Bristol airport, but the air was pleasantly warm (though cooler than the heat wave temperatures England had experienced while we'd been away!) We collected our suitcases and our cars and said our goodbyes to the Welsh contingent and … how is it possible to be so glad to be home, but to miss those mountains so much?

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

Maybe I should try hypnotherapy for my fear of flying?

And learn to speak Italian…

Arrivederci Aosta!

Photos by Alan/Kay Santillo.

Kay Santillo, 2006.