

ITALY TOUR 2005- SOUTHEND GIRLS' CHOIR

Day 1- Monday 25th July

At 5am a group of 25 tired and still half-asleep girls arrived at Southend High School for Girls. After an 'emotional and teary' farewell we set off for Dover. Some were sad to leave and others couldn't wait to escape their parents! The coach was pretty silent on the way, with most people catching up on lost sleep until we got to the first stop where we picked up seven girls from the Staines choir.

After the long journey we finally arrived at Dover. There were some signs of life on the coach as it was announced that there were shops on the ferry. By this time it was about 8.30am and we were already stocking up on chocolate and battery supplies. We had a nutritious breakfast of hot or iced- chocolate.

We arrived in Calais about 11.30am local time and prepared ourselves for another 8 hours on the coach. After 5 minutes boredom had already kicked in, and the girls demanded a video. It was an uneventful journey with countless videos and Uno sessions, but eventually we arrived in Strasbourg.

We checked in at our hostel at about 6pm and after an 'interesting' video on health and safety we dragged our suitcases up to the rooms and collapsed on our beds. After being cruelly woken up and dragged downstairs for an 'interesting' dinner we had the choice of staying in for the hostel disco (which consisted of a room with dim lights and weird French music) or going out for a short night walk around Strasbourg. Most of us opted to stay in and have an early night, and fell straight asleep after an 18 hour day.



Our messy room 5 minutes after arrival.

Day 2 – Tuesday 26th July

After an early start which no one wanted we walked into the centre of Strasbourg for a life saving shopping session. It was a fun day where we could do nothing but shop and sample the local delicacy (McDonald's). Later in the afternoon we went sightseeing on a tourist bus round the town and did yet more shopping.



After being easily amused by a children's carousel and a fountain which sprayed cool steam we met up with the rest of the group to trek back to the hostel and have dinner. After dinner we were called into the lounge room to have a short rehearsal. The rehearsal was definitely like nothing else we'd ever



endured before. The singing was fine, but the 'piano' consisted of about 12 working notes and even they were flat and clonking. The rest of the keys were stuck down or simply weren't there. It was certainly a different type of practice to what we were used to. Later we walked to the River Rhine and went on a night boat ride. After an enjoyable evening on the boat we had the choice of going to see the 'son et lumière' (sound and light) - the illuminations of the Strasbourg cathedral or returning to the hostel.

Day 3 – Wednesday 27th July

We had an early start for an intended early departure. The coach had other things in mind. We had an hour of sitting around in the hostel lobby whilst the drivers tried to fix the coach which refused to start. Eventually when we heard the engine start we all bundled on to the coach to start another endless 11 hour journey of videos and the life-saving game, Uno.



As we drove through Switzerland we took note of the amazing views that surrounded us, it was hot but we could still see the snow-capped mountains. We were warned of the temperature in Italy and were kindly reassured that if we didn't drown ourselves in fluids we would "go down like a ton of bricks"!

We eventually arrived at our posh hotel, either travel sick or sick of travelling. We were given a warm welcome by our friendly, sweet but slightly mad waiter Vincento. We had our 5-course dinner then stumbled up to our pleasant rooms and collapsed on our beds.

Day 4 – Thursday 28th July

We woke later today and after a well deserved lie-in we went for an infamous "Roger Ramble" around the local town and ended up walking up a steep hill carrying many heavy bottles of water. After our "refreshing" trek we managed to clamber our way up the hotel stairs to have a relaxing swim in the lovely, warm roof-top pool. After our swim we had a packed lunch on the hotel patio.



In the evening we prepared for our first performance in St Mark's English Church, Florence. Since the coach wasn't allowed near the church we had a long, hot walk through the city until we finally got to the church. After 5 minutes we started complaining that our stomachs were empty and realising there



was nowhere open nearby to eat, so the adults went out to get us pizza while we rehearsed. The concert went down well with the appreciative audience and we received a standing ovation. On the coach on the way back the sensible ones slept, while the others just couldn't be bothered. Most of us had trouble keeping our eyes open on the journey back and once again were very happy to see our beds after a long but enjoyable day.

Day 5 – Friday 29th July



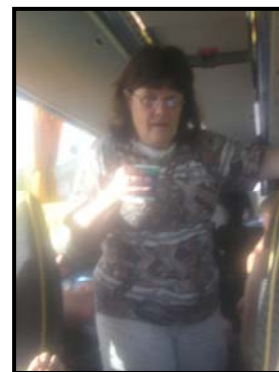
Day 5 had a late start as we got onto the coach and began our 2 hour journey to the walled town of Lucca, also known as the “elegant” spa town. We were pleased to find out another shopping session was in store. We had an enjoyable day doing what we do best and came back our purses lighter and with a few extra shopping bags. We also found out that shop

keepers dislike you using their toilets without purchasing something first! We travelled back for another two hours and had a well earned night swim after a hard days shopping.



Day 6 –Saturday 30th July

Today was the day every one was looking forward to- we were going to Pisa but we first had a very long coach journey to endure. By this stage we had found different ways to amuse ourselves on the coach. This included truth or dare and some of us found ourselves with breadsticks up our noses!!! (although, we weren't allowed to include photographs of these incidents in this diary!)



We arrived in Pisa and were surprised by the heat; it was by far the hottest day we had endured. The printed writing on the sleeves of CDs and DVDs and videos had completely melted, and we were starting to wonder whether it would be us next! We got off the coach just to find we had yet another form of transport to take us into Pisa centre. After a mere 5 minute “bendy” bus ride (which we all found amusing) we arrived near Pisa Cathedral and after a 10 minute walk we saw the leaning tower in all its splendour. Before we could go shopping again we had a short recital to do in Pisa Cathedral. The recital went really well considering that we only had

an organ to accompany us. After a few group photos with us all leaning sideways by the leaning tower we were finally allowed to wander around the little stalls and shops and have lunch (which was probably pizza again). We weren't able to go on the leaning tower but we wandered around and had a good look at the sights in Pisa. We were all surprised about how small the tower was! We met back at the bus stop and got the "bendy" bus back to the coach again.

We had another long journey back from Pisa and arrived back at the hotel pleased to see our dinner. We went for yet another evening swim and had a fairly early night.

Day 7 – Sunday 31st July

Another concert was due today as we travelled into Florence to sing at a mass in Florence Duomo.

We arrived in Florence in the late morning and had some time for yet more shopping (which incidentally no-one complained about) and some more time to buy ice-cream. We met up in the evening at the Duomo



and waited for mass to start. We sang at the quiet intervals in the service. It was an amazing experience to sing there- there was an eleven second echo! After pretending that we knew what the Italian in the service meant, we



bundled back on the coach, all very tired. We arrived back for dinner and went for a quick swim. We all had a fairly early night because we needed to be up early the next morning.



Day 8- Monday 1st August

We had the choice of what we wanted to do today. We were given the choice of going to Rome on the train or staying at the hotel for a relaxing day. The group going to Rome were up early. We got the coach to the station and caught the train to Rome. This was a very long journey, especially on a train of 40°C with no air-conditioning. The train was going extremely fast and we found it was the only train we'd ever come across that could also clean our ears out for us while travelling through tunnels!!! Anyway, we eventually arrived in Rome in the afternoon and caught the Metro to the centre of the city. Riding the Metro was an experience that none of us could ever forget; it was a lot faster than the Underground in London, it was also very bumpy and quite a few of us nearly fell on random strangers. After the interesting journey we arrived in the city centre. We had a really nice afternoon looking at the Vatican and visiting St Peter's Square and Cathedral. I don't think any of us will ever forget seeing Roger wear one of the girl's trousers as he wasn't allowed in wearing shorts. All in all it was a really brilliant day and each one of us enjoyed being proper tourists thoroughly. The other group spent a day having water fights, shopping and having a picnic. Each group was trying to make their day sound better than the other's, but we all knew that all of us had had a lot of fun.

Since it was our last night in Italy in our brilliant hotel all of us got a little bit hyped. We had a great evening messing about and swimming. We even got Hugo in the pool! After 4 of us consuming a dangerous amount of 434 breadsticks (equivalent to twice the height of the Arc de Triumph) in those six days at the hotel, we thought it was only best that we ate some more. I think we all agree that we were all having a fantastic time so far, but we were sad to leave the hotel that we were so attached to.



Day 9- Tuesday 2nd August

Today we left really early after a sad goodbye to Vincento and all the other staff that had made us feel so much at home. We set off for Dijon and this involved another very long 11 hour journey on the coach. By this time we had re-watched every video and DVD so we had a well deserved sleep to pass the time. Finally we arrived at our 'rather different' hostel. It was not nearly as nice as our hotel and it had definitely seen better days. But to us, that didn't matter. It was very welcoming and it was a bed for the night so we couldn't complain. After dinner we all retreated to our rooms for an early night.

Day 10- Wednesday 3rd August

Pleased to leave our hostel, we left for Paris! Everybody was looking forward to going there, but mainly because of Disneyland! It was quite a long journey, which involved more videos, DVDs, Uno and listening to Queen. The coach parked us just by the Eiffel Tower, next to the River Seine. Again, we split off into groups. It didn't look like the boat ride was very popular, so one group went up the Eiffel Tower, while the other wandered round and went up the Arc de Triumph. Some of us also went for a refreshing paddle (more like swim) in a massive fountain nearby, and had to quickly jump out when some French police walked past.



We arrived at our hostel in Poissy (on the outskirts of Paris). We had stayed at this hostel on our previous trip to Venice, so it was nice to be somewhere familiar. Our hostel was like a big, old house situated in a quiet country spot by a random river. Since this was our last night, we went pretty crazed and there were a lot of people running up and down the corridors as we had the hostel practically to ourselves. We had dinner early in the evening as we were having a short rehearsal afterwards for the concert in Disneyland the following day. We had a big day ahead of us but didn't settle down to sleep until early in the morning, not that we would get much sleep anyway in our rooms of nine.

Day 11- Thursday 4th August

Early start again today as we had the whole of Disneyland to get round. But there was a catch! We had to do a short concert first in the Fantasy Theatre Stage, but it was a fun concert so nobody



complained. There was a very big audience and some stayed through the whole concert, which is unusual considering they were in the middle of a theme park. We couldn't wait to get off the stage to run madly around Disneyland. We had a great time hurtling ourselves upside-down on various different



shopping spree in the form of Disney souvenirs. To pass the time in the queues a lot of us were singing and impressing the other tourists with our unaccompanied three part songs. After a brilliant last day we made our way back to the coach. Some of us were glad to sit down because we'd been on our feet for about 6 hours. We started off on our final journey back to England. It was a four hour journey to Calais; most people had a little sleep to make sure that they had enough energy to run around the ferry. We arrived in Calais and boarded the ferry in the evening. We passed the time on the ferry by playing in the Games Arcade, watching Queen on the jukebox and guess... of course..... MORE shopping! It was very quiet on the coach on the way back to Sunny Southend.

On Thursday 4th August, in the middle of the night, 283 hours, 3,500 miles, a thousand blisters and a lot of shopping later the same group of girls arrived back at Southend High School for Girls from where they started at. We were tired, happy but also sad to be home. As we got off the coach for the last time, the good old English rain came out to welcome us home. We had purses considerably lighter, a lot more bags than we started with, but a lot of fun memories. There was a lot of stuff that we'd never forget, and other incidents that we might rather. But overall, a fantastic trip!!! Now we look forward to the Florida tour next year- with the boys!!!

By Helen Wilkinson, Jenny Mullan, Rebecca Humphrey and Catherine Humphrey

