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Traveling Titans

On a trek through Italy, alumni bring the best of their IWU experiences full circle.

Story by Nancy Steele Brokaw '71



The IWU group marveled at the Leaning Tower of Pisa and the reproduction of Michelangelo's David in the Piazza della Signora in Florence.

access to such trips and, in fact, it was Pat Wilson who first proposed the idea at Illinois Wesleyan because she and her husband, President Richard F. Wilson, had found it to be such a great experience during their tenure at the University of Illinois. The Wilsons accompanied an IWU alumni group on a trip to Russia in August, and found it equally rewarding.

“It’s another way for the University to connect with alumni and with each other,” Pat Wilson says.

For over 40 years, one of the richest experiences of Illinois Wesleyan students (including myself) has been the chance to travel abroad and — as a group — experience the eye-opening, occasionally life-changing, richness of another culture.

In 1970, as an Illinois Wesleyan sophomore, I traveled to Europe on a Short Term (later called January Term, then May Term) trip about Romanesque and Gothic Art, led by Professor of Religion Emeritus Jerry Stone. It’s my best memory from college.

Beginning this year, IWU is offering alumni an opportunity do it all over again. And for those who missed the travel abroad experience the first time around, here comes a second chance to fill in that educational hole.

Call it “May Term” for alumni.

“So many IWU students traveled as part of their college experience,” says Director of Alumni Relations Ann Harding, “and this gives them a chance to continue that as alums.”

Alumni of large universities have long had

When the Illinois Wesleyan brochure luring me to “Chianti in a Tuscan Villa” arrived, I was tempted. Why not let someone else figure out the best place to stay, how to get around, and where to eat? In short, why not let others do all the work so I could have all the fun?

I was after convenience. I’ve planned trips to Europe before and I know what’s involved. This time around, I wanted to skip the late night, neck-throbbing Google travel searches and the inevitable stomach lurch when I hit “Buy” on those expensive airline tickets.

The University carefully researched and then chose a professional tour company — AHI International — to partner with on the trips. IWU Associate Vice President for Major Gifts Steve Seibring ’81 says, “We interviewed nearly a dozen different schools about the companies they used for alumni travel programs. We discovered AHI was the most popular in terms of its educational component and as well as their general thoroughness. AHI is popular with Ivy League schools, Big Ten universities and small, private colleges. That’s why we chose them.”

The price was also right. IWU sought a middle-of-the-road travel company, one that offered solid quality somewhere between bargain rates and extravagance. Plus, there is definitely economy of scale when traveling with a group. All that worked for me. And it would be a relief not to be whipping out my Visa card five times a day or figuring out tips in Euros.

There was only one stumbling block for me. Surely I was too young. At 57, I’m merely on the cusp of middle age. My parents took tours, for heaven’s sake.

I called my daughter Katie ’02, a veteran of two European May Term trips. “Want to take an IWU alumni trip to Tuscany?” I asked. (Her dad, my husband Tom ’71, had declined, mumbling something about a fishing trip in Canada.) Katie mulled the proposition for something less than a millisecond. “Absolutely,” she replied. “Book it.”

Well, good, I figured. Katie’s 30 years younger than I am. Let her be the youngest person on the trip. (She wasn’t.)

We set out in June, part of a group of fourteen IWU alums and spouses on the program’s maiden excursion, a nine-day trip to Italy’s Tuscan region.



In addition to famous works like the David, the group saw beautiful, lesser-known art like this mosaic tympanum on the Duomo in Lucca.

There were 34 people on our trip, 14 connected to IWU and 20 others, almost all of whom were affiliated with Northwestern University. Our ages spanned high school to a gentleman in his 80s. I fell in the middle, age-wise, of the IWU alums.

Not that it mattered.

We had so much fun together that by the graduation ceremony (yep, we had one), we were bonded as tightly as a closing campfire “Kum Ba Yah.” And it was fun being combined with Northwestern alumni. Katie and I did our best to defend our Titan pride in nightly Scrabble matches against our new, good friends from “the purple school.”



Nancy and Katie Brokaw (left) and Sue Seibring (right) enjoy a delicious Italian lunch in Lucca.

The group sampled plenty of Tuscan food and wine during the trip.

architecture we learned about in our Humanities course [with Professor Doris Myers] in 1968.”

I hadn’t counted on the “fun of group learning” dimension of the trip. We had opportunities to attend a variety of lectures on subjects such as “The History of Tuscany,” “Renaissance Art,” and “A Contemporary View of Italy.” We were offered a cooking demonstration and a chance to meet with locals to discuss everything from how they keep their teenagers out of trouble to the larger implications of the European Union.

The trip had a lot of built-in flexibility. There were blocks of time in every day and in every city for us to venture out on our own. Katie and I chose to spend an entire day in Florence by ourselves, as did many others, using the helpful group bus to get us there and back.

The Illinois Wesleyan alumni came from across America: Georgia, California, Michigan, Ohio and Illinois. We worked at (or were retired from) a variety of careers: CEO, teacher, attorney, freelance writer and more. Yet somehow we all had similar sensibilities. Like a functional family with diverse interests, we had an awful lot of fun around the dinner table.

“Italy had been on my and Becky’s ‘to do’ list for years,” says Dave Myers ’66, “and when we saw an IWU connection, we jumped at it.”

Guy Gebhardt ’69 and his wife Paulette echo the sentiment. “The entire week was magnificent,” Guy says. “It was wonderful to share the experience with other alumni.”

Guy adds, “I finally saw the art and

I asked Jerry Stone, leader of my January Term trip of 37 years ago, if the morphing of that kind of student experience into something alumni could enjoy surprised him. It did not.

“Trips like that create a sort of pilgrimage community,” says Stone, who led eight more trips after the one I was on. “When you go in a group, there’s an interactive dynamic and the experience becomes even more complex. There’s something about a community sharing that opens up so many possibilities.”

It can’t be said better than that.

Every day on the trip held its own particular treasures. One day, our bus wound through the sun-warmed Elsa Valley and we marveled at the complex geometry of the rows of olive trees and vineyards draped over the hills. Later, we traveled to Castello di Monsanto in the heart of Chianti to tour the dusky wine cellars and taste the region’s distinctive wines.



We took a leaning Titans picture in Pisa. In Lucca, we lunched on ravioli and tiramisu under a tent. We were quietly awed by the magnificent duomos — and by a local, village chapel where a portrait of the Virgin Mary gazed out over handpicked flowers and burning candles.

From the window of their hotel, the tourists could see the gently rolling hills of Tuscany. “Every day on the trip held its own particular treasures,” Brokaw writes.

In Florence, we posed at the Ponte Vecchio, marveled that we thought we “knew” Michelangelo’s David but were dazzled nonetheless and bargained with the leather merchants for a great deal. In the seven-towered, medieval city of San Gimignano, we were all caught in a moment that erased centuries when the Sunday noontime ringing of the church bells clattered up and down the ancient stone streets.

At the end of a touring day, we slumped, foot-weary, into our bus seats. On the ride home we were lulled by the melodious voice of our tour guide Ines as she described, syllable by lovely, Italian-laced syllable, our four-course menu for the evening.

And that, arguably, was the best part of the day, the sharing and comparing, the food and the wine, the stories and the laughter.

What we had in common was Illinois Wesleyan. Two of us, Carol Kempen Sabourin ’75 and Denise Rose ’74, were roommates back in Ferguson. Seven of us were parents of Titans. We had a ready-made bond that cemented into friendship, toasted with all that local Chianti.



IWU alumni will travel to China in September 2008. For more information about the China trip and other upcoming alumni adventures, visit www.titanpride.org.

book on the area to replicating the container plantings of Tuscany to renting *Tea with Mussolini* to see San Gimignano and Florence again.”

Ann Harding anticipates lots of growth in the IWU alumni trips, including perhaps also offering shorter, stateside, weekend excursions. “This is a new activity for Illinois Wesleyan alums but it goes hand-in-hand with the basics of the education they received as students,” she says.

“When college days are fully past and gone,” goes the first line in the Illinois Wesleyan alma mater song. But here’s the good news: on a trip with your fellow alums, those college days are back, and better than ever.

Seibring and his wife Sue ’82 took us out for an all-Illinois Wesleyan gathering.

Judy Zawacke ’68 remembers it this way. “It was a beautiful, warm evening in the tiny village of Tavernelle, Italy,” she said. “We are all graduates, spouses, and family of IWU, gathered to sample local wine and share our personal stories. Despite our various ages and times, the love and appreciation for this institution is universal.”

Would I do it again? In a second.

So would IWU Associate Provost Roger Schnaitter and his wife Nancy Cosner ’73. They report, “Tuscany continues to resonate through our lives now that we are back in Illinois, from searching out a D. H. Lawrence