

From Solomeo (Umbria) to the Senate

Detailed planning for our 2017 two-month trip around northern Italy was well advanced when I read a fascinating article about a high-quality clothing manufacture in *The Economist* magazine '1843': "The philosopher king. Brunello Cucinelli takes as much care over his workers as his clothes. Luke Leitch visits a model factory in the heart of Umbria." So I said, "why don't we visit Solomeo? it's near Perugia".

It was quite simple to incorporate tiny Solomeo into our itinerary and we booked Airbnb farm-type accommodation on the outskirts of the village for a week. But arriving there wasn't so simple as our GPS destination terminated in bramble bushes on the edge of an olive grove. After a phone call to our host, we were met outside the church and easily arrived at our destination.

The following day we returned to the church, wandered around the town square and narrow streets, and visited Cucinelli's showroom. We were full of admiration for the beautifully designed and tailored luxurious cashmere - unfortunately well beyond our price range. Every detail of the showroom is impeccably designed and executed. The attention to quality and detail continues throughout the village including a wonderful concert hall and library donated by Cucinelli. Around 3,000 people in the surrounding area work for the company, which has established specialised training schools there. The company has 106 "retail stores around the world located in the most exclusive shopping streets." My memory of Cucinelli's background is that his earlier interest in studying engineering dissipated, and he turned to an interest in philosophy while contemplating in bars.

Around dusk when we were back at our unit there was a heavy rainstorm. On hearing a noise outside I opened the door to find that a lady was showing her friends to their accommodation next door. It turned out that she, Nadia, had been mayor of the commune (collection of five villages) for ten years. Nadia suggested we join her for breakfast in the village the next morning: "Meet in the village square". By coincidence, whom should we see walking through the village but Mr Cuccinelli (in jeans and blue suede shoes) who was in town for the weekend and we had the pleasure of being introduced to him. Over coffee, former mayor Nadia, mentioned that she was now a senator in Rome. Would we like to visit the senate when it was sitting, Tuesday to Thursday? Naturally we said "yes".

Not intending to spend very long in Rome itself, we had booked an Airbnb in an annexe to a house above the edge of Lake Bracciano, half an hour's drive from a commuter rail station with a metro link to the centre. Senator Nadia had mentioned that I would need a jacket and tie to enter the senate, something that is not my custom to include in holiday attire. We mentioned our invitation to the senate to our hostess who said, "no problems, my fiancé will lend you a jacket and tie". It was of impeccable Italian design and fitted me perfectly.

On the appointed day we were met outside the senate building by Senator Nadia's minder who smoothed our way through all the security arrangements: cameras to be left at security, mobile phones could be taken in, but definitely no pictures, and no talking. The session or "debate" sounded even more animated than in our parliament although, as we

know, an ordinary Italian conversation can sound like a heated debate. The Speaker had a difficult or even impossible job. The visitor group was allowed over an hour in the chamber before being shepherded out. Our minder asked Alison and I to wait in an ante chamber, saying the Senator will be with you shortly. Senator Nadia then took us into the members' bar where we had a coffee. However, she kept an eye to the TV screen on the wall to ensure that she would be back in the chamber for the vote, which was particularly important as she is a senator for a minority party.

It was a wonderful experience for us foreigners to be allowed into the Senate of Caesar's undoing.