

Judy Norris

I'm probably not the best person to be writing about my experience of the trip to see the Shroud as I managed to miss the first day in Turin by arriving at Stansted with my husband's passport... No more flights to Turin that day, so I had to phone my husband (en route back home to Eastbourne) and ask him to come back and pick me up. I managed to rebook a flight the next morning, which cost just the £100 – thank you, Ryanair – and went home, wishing the ground would open up and swallow me. We then repeated the whole process the following morning – up at 1.30, drive to Stansted, etc etc – with my own passport this time. Thank God for my kind and long-suffering husband.

I managed to negotiate my way to the Hotel, despite not speaking any Italian, to find a note from Tony, our guide, asking me to phone him. I duly did so, and he and the group seemed delighted to hear that I had made it. I had missed an evening meal the night before, a coach tour of Turin on the Monday morning, and – worst of all – a 2 hour talk with Mark Guscini on the Sunday evening which the others assured me had been absolutely fascinating. Mark spoke to us again before supper on Monday evening and I shamelessly manoeuvred myself to the chair next to him in the restaurant so that I could make up for missing the previous night's talk. It was wonderful to discuss the Shroud with such an expert – and such a lovely person.

Tuesday was The Day. We arrived at the Cathedral in the morning (in the rain) to find huge numbers of people in a snaking queue across the gardens. (Two million visitors in 6 weeks, according to Reggie.) The organisation was incredibly efficient – we moved slowly but inexorably towards the building and, as we entered, the walls displayed images of the Crucifixion – many of which I had never seen before – and sacred music played. Round and round, up ramps, round corners – and then suddenly there it was, a real heart-stopping moment. Once I had recovered, my first impression was how very fragile the Shroud looked. I had always imagined the linen to be pretty substantial, but it looked almost like a photograph of the Shroud rather than the real thing. Reggie told me afterwards that the linen is, in fact, very delicate, but that the weave is very strong which has helped it to survive for so many years.

It was back-lit, and displayed within a sort of theatre proscenium arch arrangement with crimson curtains, making it look a lot smaller than I had anticipated, but Mark had already told us about this the evening before. I had decided not to try to photograph it, so I had 3 minutes in which to take it in and appreciate it. Awesome. Do I believe it is the burial cloth of Christ? I had a few doubts before, especially after the carbon-dating result, but, having talked to Mark and the rest of the group, and having seen it for myself, I am wholly convinced that it is. Somebody used a lovely phrase to describe the Shroud – 'God's love letter to mankind.' Nobody will ever prove conclusively that it is the cloth that wrapped Him, but can anybody prove that it isn't?

My heartfelt thanks to Tony, who was unfailingly friendly and efficient, to Reggie, for organising the trip so well, and last but not least to the lovely Mark who made sense of so much. My thanks also to the other members of the group who were so warm and welcoming, despite my Major Senior Moment. It was, truly, the trip of a lifetime and exceeded all my expectations in every way.