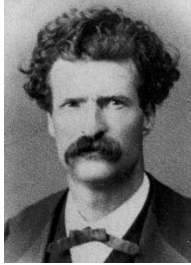


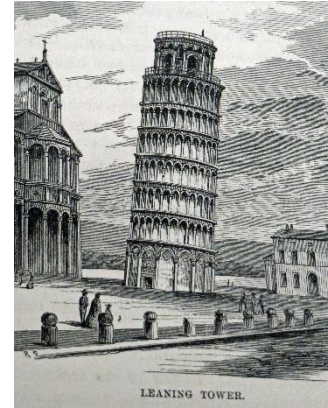
## WORLD'S STRANGEST STRUCTURE

A phenomenon, a fantasy, a surreal reality.



Mark Twain called it “the strangest structure the world has any knowledge of”.

A teacher at my high school went to Italy in the summer of 1968, before my freshman year, and bought the Leaning Tower of Pisa. At least that’s what I was told.



He had the last name of a Fortune 500 company which, as the teller suggested, made him a fabulously rich heir. And the story fit him – quirky, eccentric. (As an English teacher, I remember him warring against use of the word “very”.)

Who told me this? Some upperclassman trying to pull the wool over my eyes? Did I believe it?

Let’s say I had my doubts but “very” much wanted to believe it. Buying the Leaning Tower of Pisa sounded so amazing to a wide-eyed teenager who’d never been anywhere, a pretty spectacular purchase!

It certainly moved the Leaning Tower to the top of my already lengthening list of travel “must sees”.



Now, finally, I’ve been. I’ve seen the lean!

Arriving on foot from the train station, you turn a corner and it’s suddenly there.

A most beautiful structure, delicate and detailed, like the top of an elaborate wedding cake. I can understand why many (including Mussolini) have thought of straightening it altogether; the lean kind of spoils it.

It’s actually shocking to see. Walk around. Take in the perspective from every angle. Watch the tourists trying to pose the perfect shot of seeming to hold it up.



You’ll have the oddest feeling, like looking at yourself in a funhouse mirror.

I climbed to the top even after seeing how far it leans and despite a wave of concern that my weight would finally tip it over.

Mark Twain had the same concern when he climbed:

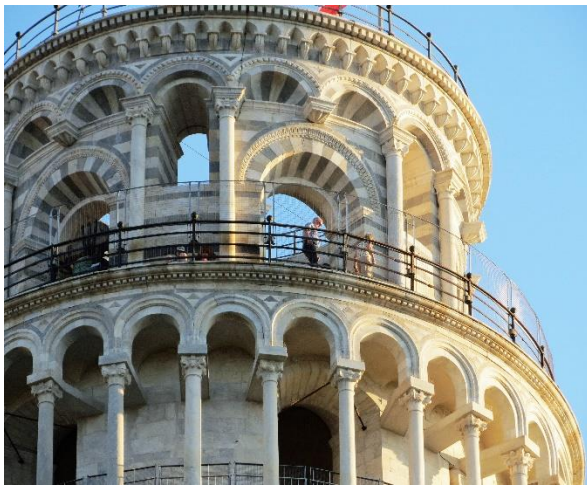
You handle yourself very carefully all the time, under the silly impression that if it is *not* falling, your trifling weight will start it unless you are particular not to “bear down” on it.

*The Innocents Abroad*, Chapter 24

Ask a thousand people who’ve climbed, and I’ll bet they all had the same concern. As Twain said, it’s a “silly” thought but unavoidable.

We travel the world with a vague sense of standing in the footprints of those who’ve been there before us. Uniquely here, you’ll also share a thought, one that so many have had since before Columbus discovered America (and maybe even Columbus himself).

Think about it.

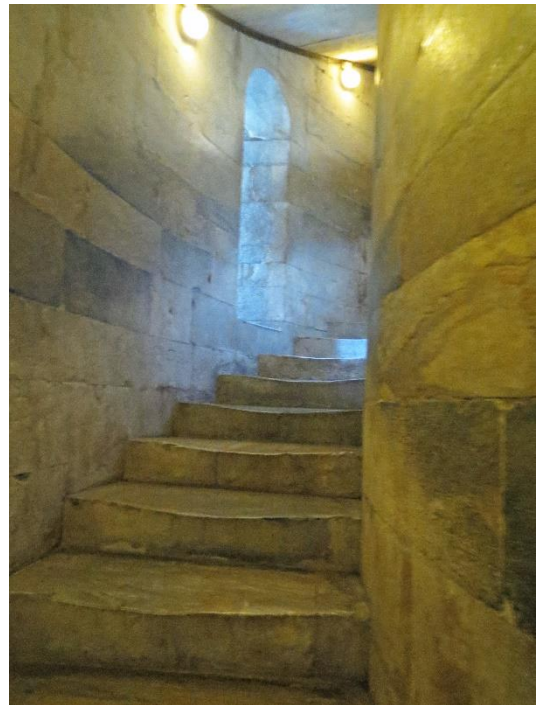


On top it’s a world apart.

There’s no elevator – you just have to climb. But it’s not a hard climb.

I didn’t sense the higher and lower side of the tower as I climbed the interior spiral staircase. The steps are so worn that you’re always shifting up and down. Curiously, it’s unclear as to how many stairs there actually are – over 250 but less than 300. I’ve seen different estimates in a variety of sources. This uncertainty only adds to the tower’s magical charm.

Air and light come through the door sized openings on the floor landings.





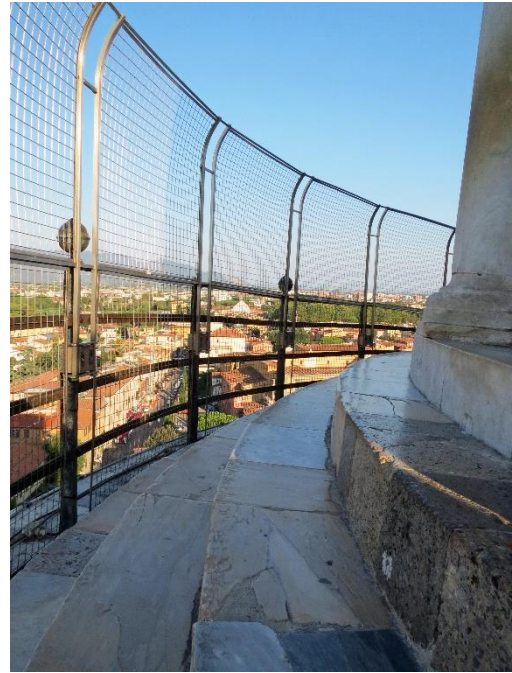
While access is blocked for your safety, looking out, you'll wish your feet could wander there.

Stop anyway. Catch your breath and savor the view from each elevation. The average climbing time is ten minutes, but don't rush. You're climbing the stairs in the over 700-year-old Leaning Tower of Pisa after all.

Emerging at the top, a high and substantial mesh fence surrounding the upper deck is in your face. You're inside it but at the edge and can't help seeing that it's a long way down. Be assured, there's no risk of falling.

It's a tight fit but make the circle taking in all 360 degrees of the view.

Pisa on one side and mountains in the distance on the other.



You'll notice the slanting surface, but I guess I'm surprised at how little I felt the slant.

A continuous staircase surrounds the cupola of this bell tower.

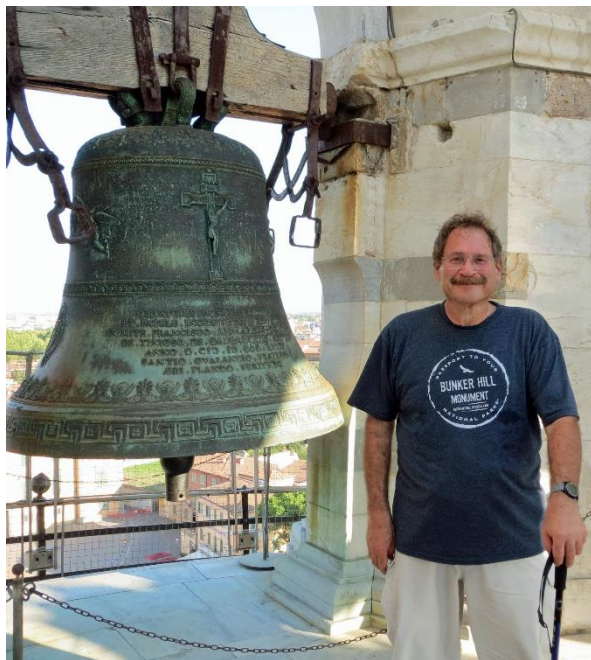
Going up these last steps, you move away from the edge. And on top, at the center of the tower, there's little lean.



The walls and roof are open to the air – you've reached the sky.



Good place to have your picture taken.



Next, choose your favorite spot on the cupola stairs and sit down. Most importantly, stay as long as it takes - as long as it takes – to appreciate that you're actually sitting on top of the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Perhaps you have a "happy place" to retreat in your mind when you need it. My new one is on top of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. A place I can go back to anytime. For the price of a tour, a pretty spectacular purchase!

Steve Glovsky can be contacted at [TravelsWithTwain.com](http://TravelsWithTwain.com).