

# FLORENCE DRAGON BOAT PINK MEETING 2016

AN EXTRACT FROM OUR BOOK HERE BE DRAGONS

By Susan Flynn

The Plurabelle Paddlers travelled to Florence for the Dragon Boat Pink Meeting in May 2016 to compete against eight Italian breast cancer teams. I had never travelled or competed abroad with the Plurabelles, so I was a little anxious prior to the trip, but it turned out to be one of the best holidays I ever had. Even thinking about it brings back very happy memories.

There was a lot of preparation before travelling to make this trip a success. As a team we had trained really hard, sometimes three times a week, prior to our departure. We were focused as a group and wanted to do our very best in the competition. Every crew member showed huge commitment to training and gave it their all.

On 19 May 21 Plurabelle Paddlers (plus Brian, our mascot) met at Departures in Dublin Airport. Bags and paddles had been checked in, so we were all relaxed, enjoying each other's company and looking forward to our big adventure. We flew to Pisa and travelled by bus to Florence central station, two minutes from our hotel. Hotel Desirée was very central, close to restaurants, shops, markets and tourist attractions. It was a perfect base and the hotel staff were very accommodating.

Each morning we met and had our team chats over breakfast, which kept us focused. But it wasn't all training and competing. There was some free time too to enjoy the city. Some went to museums, cathedrals and galleries. Others attended music recitals or visited the Botanical Gardens. Michelangelo's Square was a hit with everyone. It gave a panoramic view of Florence and was an ideal place to view the beautiful sunsets.

One of the highlights of our trip was an invitation to the oldest rowing club in Florence. Built in 1886, Società Canottieri Firenze survived two world wars. A secret door at street level led us to the Ponte Vecchio flower ceremony. It's a beautiful setting just below the Uffizi Gallery, with a view of the famous Ponte Vecchio bridge. There is a grass verge surrounded by vines where you can relax away from the hustle and bustle of the city. Paddling down the Arno river in the Florence sunshine and under the Ponte Vecchio was the experience of a lifetime. Margaret, who was helming, asked us to slow the boat so that we could soak up the atmosphere. We all knew how privileged we were to be paddling in such a magical setting.

Competition day arrived and we had an early breakfast and a group chat in the hotel. Our hosts were very welcoming and looked after us really well. Edna organised warm-ups and stretches before our race. As we lined up and numbered off there was total concentration. We had all familiarised ourselves with the Italian command to start the race. And what a start we got! We went like a bullet and won our heat comfortably. With our confidence and determination soaring, we headed into the final. Each crew member gave it 100 per cent and, as Sandra put it, we paddled like sharks! It was a huge achievement to win a gold medal as Brian waved the Irish flag.

We partied in style on our final night. Food and drinks were organised in a local restaurant, where we celebrated in our finery. Before the last group photo was taken our very own Mairéad Ní Nuadháin took us aside and gave us a masterclass in posing for the camera. 'Ladies,' she said, 'never look straight at the camera. Stand at an angle with feet slightly apart. Elongate your neck with tongue slightly touching your palate. Shoulders down and hands gently on hips . . . open your eyes and smile.' We took instruction well. The camera clicked and - yes - we all cut quite a dash! Mairéad was very proud of her new students. I felt privileged to be part of a great team, especially my roommates (Carmel and Anna), who were great company, full of fun and laughter and at the same time took the competition seriously. A great time was had by all.