

## What We Can Learn from San Marino



by Ir. Chin Mee Poon

**THE** Republic of San Marino is a land-locked country near the east coast of Italy about 140km south of Venice. With a territory of just 61 square kilometres centred on an outcrop known as Monte Titano and a population of about 30,000, it is one of the smallest countries in the world.

My wife and I visited this tiny country at the end of August 2011 during our 40-day tour of Italy. From Rimini on the east coast of Italy, we boarded a bus for San Marino and got there in just 45 minutes. The bus dropped us off at a carpark at the foot of a cliff. A lift transported us from there to a high-level road on the cliff. We followed the winding road uphill and found a hotel to put up for the night.

The old city of San Marino is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Strolling leisurely between rows of souvenir shops, we went higher and higher until we eventually reached Rocca della Guaita, an old castle perched on a ridge of the outcrop. There were two other castles nearby, each sitting on a ridge. I paid €3 for a combined ticket to visit two of the castles. The third castle was privately owned and was therefore out of bounds to tourists. From the top of the castles, I enjoyed spectacular views of San Marino and the surrounding territories of Italy.

We also visited the Basilica of San Marino and Palazzo Pubblico – the Government Building. The Basilica was a pale shadow of the many lavishly decorated Roman Catholic churches we had visited in Italy, and the Government Building was also not impressive at all. However, we were lucky to be at the Government Building at the right time to witness a simple changing-of-the-guards ceremony in front of the building.

The head of the uniformed guards was even kind enough to allow us into the building without an admission ticket that would have cost us €4.50 each. We could move freely within the 3-storey building. The Hall of the Grand and General Council on the second floor was where the San Marino parliament convened. The little time I spent there was enough to arouse my profound interest in the government system of San Marino.

According to tradition, San Marino was founded by a stonemason called Marinus of Rab in 301AD, when he moved to Monte Titano to escape persecution for his Christian faith by the Roman emperor. The constitution of San Marino, enacted in 1600, is the world's oldest constitution still in effect. San Marino is also the oldest surviving sovereign state and constitutional republic in the world.

The Legislature of San Marino is a single-house council of 60 members known as the Grand and General Council. The council members are elected every five years with a proportional representation of all nine administrative districts of the country. Citizens who are 18 years and above are eligible to vote.



Besides general legislation, the Grand and General Council approves the budget and elects the Captains Regent, the State Congress (comprising 10 secretaries with executive power), the Council of Twelve (which forms the Judiciary during the tenure of the Grand and General Council), the Advising Commissions, and the Government Unions. The Grand and General Council is divided into five Advising Commissions, each consisting of 15 councillors who examine, propose and discuss the implementation of new laws that are on their way to being presented on the floor of the council.

Every six months, the Grand and General Council elects two Captains Regent to be the Heads of State. The Captains are chosen from opposing parties so that there is a balance of power. They serve a six-month term and cannot be re-elected until after a lapse of three years. Once the term is over, citizens have three days in which to file complaints about the Captains' activities. Judicial proceedings can be initiated against the ex-Head(s) of State if warranted.

I believe San Marino can teach our country one or two things about good governance. ■