Roseann Parks, associate director of alumni relations, loves to travel—especially with Cal Poly alumni, parents and friends. That’s one reason she started the alumni travel program in partnership with Cal Poly Continuing Education and University Outreach.

An even more important reason, she says, was to provide educationally and culturally enriching experiences to those seeking the kind of adventure and knowledge available only through international travel. The trips offer educational seminars, special excursions and “meet-the-people” exchanges, giving travelers more than a mere glimpse into a region’s history and the locals’ way of life. Participants also have some time to explore on their own.

Three tours to Tuscany, Italy, were completed in 2004. Trips to France and Russia are planned for 2005. Parks recently returned from eight days in Tuscany and offers this personal account:

Day 1: Instant bonding—that’s how it feels to travel with Cal Poly alumni, parents and friends on Cal Poly’s first trip to Tuscany in August. Most of us are departing from San Francisco, and we recognize each other by the bright gold Cal Poly luggage tags attached to our bags. The group includes Cal Poly parents, a Cal Poly alum and her mother, friends of Cal Poly, and graduates of varying ages.

Days 2-3: Nothing could be more magical than strolling through the heart of Cortona, a city put on the map by Frances Mayes’ book, Under the Tuscan Sun. Montalcino, famous for its local red wines, brunello di Montalcino, is our first stop for wine tasting. Each evening, we return to our hotel, have dinner at a local restaurant, then roam the streets, taking in the local scene, bursting with activity any time of day. We are fortunate to be here during two local festivals: the Bistecca Festival, serving the beef from the local chianina cattle, and the Tuscan Sun Festival, featuring musicians from around the world.

Day 4: The hill town of Montepulciano could not be more picturesque. At the foot
of the hill, we drive through the viale della Rimembranze (Avenue of Remembrance) and visit Tempio di S Biagio. We are dropped off at the Piazza Grande – the highest part of town – to wander the curvy streets and explore the 13th century Palazzo Comunale and the Duomo with Taddeo di Bartolo’s altarpiece of the Assumption.

Day 5: Perugia – home of Italian chocolate – is our next stop. We visit the medieval caves, Fontana Maggiore and Palazzo die Priori under the direction of a local tour guide. We have lunch in Assisi, one of Italy's most important religious sites. Our guided tour is interspersed with free time to visit St. Mary’s of the Angels, the Church of San Rufino (the patron saint of Assisi), and the stunning St. Francis Basilica.

Day 6: We are fortunate to visit Siena the morning of Il Palio. The streets are lined with the flags of the 17 ‘contrade,’ or neighborhoods, and we witness the pride of the districts as people march through the streets in preparation for the evening’s horse race. We watch the Piazza del Campo being readied to host the event and over 50,000 spectators. We even buy neighborhood flags so we can root for our chosen neighborhood as we watch the Palio from our hotel.

Day 7: Our visit to Florence is magical. We stop at the Duomo, which towers over the city, and the Church of Santa Croce, housing the tombs of Michelangelo and Galileo, as well as a memorial to Dante. After a tour and lunch at a local restaurant, we have free time to explore the Pitti Palace, Palazzo Vecchio and Baptistery with the brass doors fit to be the ‘Gates of Paradise.’ Many of us also visit the Galleria dell’Accademia to see Michelangelo’s ‘David.’

Day 8: After an educational seminar on present-day Italy, followed by a cooking demonstration, we are able to relax, revisit old sites, or travel to new towns.

Next up: Provence, France, in the spring, and a cruise between Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia, in the fall of 2005. In Provence, travelers will visit Aix-en-Provence, including excursions to three UNESCO- (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) designated World Heritage Sites.

During the cruise between Moscow and St. Petersburg, a private charter will serve as a ‘floating hotel,’ taking participants along the Neva, Svir and Volga rivers, as well as Lake Ladoga and Lake Onega. Ports-of-call include Kizhi Island, Goritsy, Yaroslavl and Uglick, and tours are scheduled to the Kremlin, Red Square, the Hermitage Museum and the Moscow Circus.

For more information and registration details, go to the Alumni Relations Web site at www.alumni.calpoly.edu, or e-mail your name, address and telephone number to Parks at rparks@calpoly.edu for a brochure.