

Florence Travel Story, July 18-24, 2009

Florence is an amazing city of the arts. Started by Julius Caesar over two millennia ago, it became the “Athens of the Middle Ages” and the Center of the Italian Renaissance. The home of many famous artists including Michelangelo, it became a city of 70 museums with a population of less than 400,000. On any summer day with a flood of tourists, the population triples in size.

Our excuse to go to the city that holds more important art than any other city in the world came from the annual meetings of the International Society for the Quality of Life Studies (ISQOLS), for which I applied to give two papers on the work I have been doing on social well-being in rich countries. Nancy returned as usual on Monday, which gave us a half day to deal with jet lag and a day for sightseeing.

The conference was hosted by the UNICEF Research Center devoted to research on child well-being and suffering around the world. It so happens that the Center is housed in the same building as Europe’s first orphanage called the Hospital of Innocents, which is English for Spedale degli Innocenti etc.).



Above and to the left are pictures of the building in which our conference was held. It was built 550 years ago and still has not been retro-fitted for air conditioning. It is a famous building on a famous square called Plaza della S. Annunziata. The orphanage has been replaced by a baby clinic and a museum with ancient paintings. On the left is a picture of colorful Nancy walking in the inner courtyard of the Innocenti Conference Center.

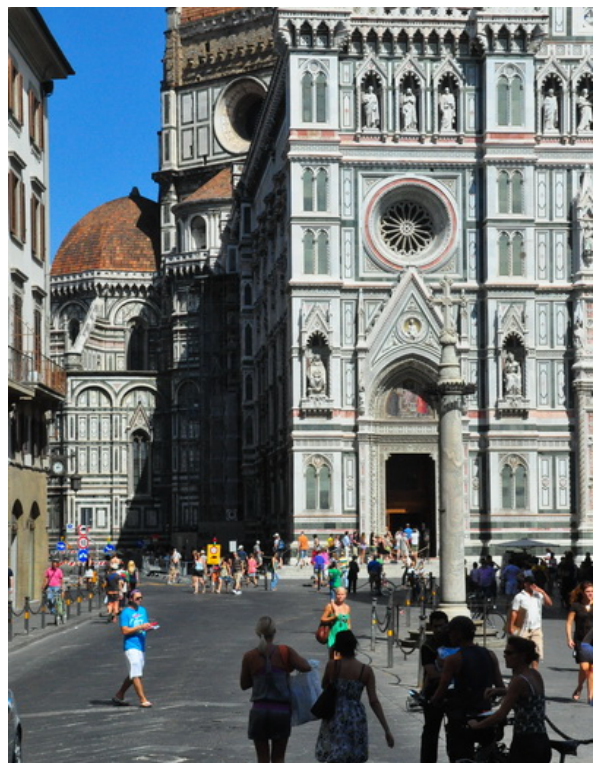
Here is a photo of a painting that was on the wall of one of the meeting rooms. I especially liked it because it appears to be a king holding an iPhone. His cloak suggests the middle Ages but his iPhone places him in the Renaissance period.



The famous venue of our conference was only a block from the Gallery dell' Accademia, a place where every tourist seems to feel compelled to go because of its nude statue of David carved out of a block of marble by Michelangelo at the age of 29. I don't know how he knew that David was nude when he went up against the giant Goliath, but it was sure a good thing he knew, because he became a legend after that. Now the museum is so popular that the line to get in can be 1-2 blocks long. Tourists are not allowed to take photos inside, but below is a rule-breaking photo I found on the web. The photo reveals some of the relaxed strength and confidence that Michelangelo carved into the block of white marble.



Just 2 or 3 blocks from the Gallery stands the Duomo, which means cathedral in Italian. It is not just any old cathedral. (See below.)



Imagine a church that holds 20,000 people and your first image won't look like this ornate creation. Begun in the 13th Century, it is considered the greatest engineering feat of the Renaissance and the fourth largest church in the world. It remains the tallest structure in Florence as you can see by the panorama of Florence on the next page. Next to it is the bell tower, built with the cathedral. It takes over 400 steps to reach the top.

In this panorama of the City, you can see the huge dome of Duomo in the distance. It is the tallest building in the city.



Just a few blocks south of the Duomo is the world famous Uffizi Gallery, Italy's most visited museum. (See photo below.) In fact, it is so popular that tourist guides advise buying tickets 5 years in advance, during the summer as you can see by the picture.



People don't visit the Uffizi because of the building. They come in hoards because of the fame of its nearly 2,000 paintings. You may know of Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" where she is coming out of a giant sea shell, or the "Doni Tondo" by Michelangelo. Definitely visiting the [Uffizi web site](#) is more cost effective.



Squeezed between the Cathedral and Uffizi are three tall towers, all within a 2 square block area. What is amazing that none of them are church spires. All were embellishments of public buildings built in the middle ages. You can see the two towers on the right.

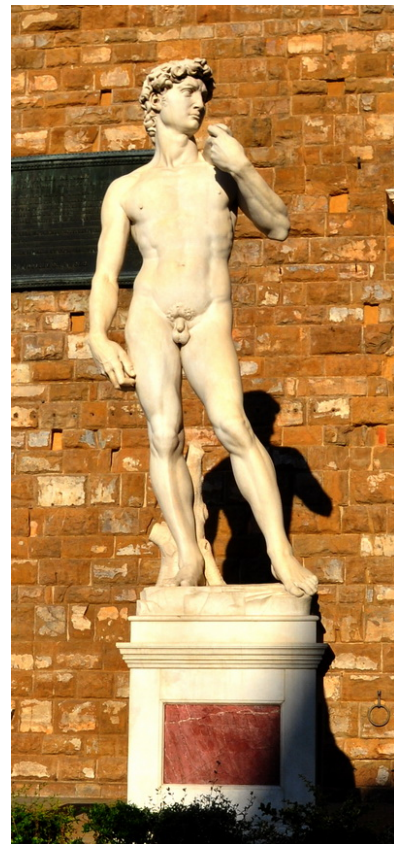
The rightmost tower is the Bargello Museum. Formerly a prison, court house, and residence of the "chief of police" in the last 500 years, this square building is now a museum showing master pieces of various arts. I remember it by its tower, which is box shaped like the building underneath it.

Palazzo Vecchio once was the town hall of Florence. (See photo on the right.) While a few offices remain, like most buildings in central Florence, it is an eclectic museum. What makes it stand out is its tremendous size, and the fact that it sits on a crowded public square a mere stone's throw from the famous Uffizi Gallery and the outdoor sculpture gallery. Loggia dei Lanzi, which sits on the edge of Piazza della Signoria square, is the outdoor gallery.



A lot of tourists know the Palazzo Vecchio as the big building behind the outdoor replica of Michelangelo's David. As tourists are not allowed to take photos of the original David, they stand around posing with this outdoor version. I watched visitors taking souvenir photos while a friend held up a magazine to cover the middle part of David's body. Perhaps they were from Lake Woebegone where the naked David would be too embarrassing to look at.

Another edifice not far away is the Basilica of Santa Croce, a Franciscan gothic church. Built at the same time as the Duomo, it was very large, and apparently its justification was its architectural style. Not only is the inside beautiful, but the outside was decorated with white, green, and pink striped marble. Santa Croce is the burial place of some of the most illustrious Italians, such as Michelangelo, Galileo, Machiavelli, Rossini, and Marconi.





The Arno River on the left cuts through Florence creating the northern and southern sectors of the city. The places described so far are in the Northern sector, which also includes the city centers of both the old city and the new. Probably 90% of Florence's museums and art galleries reside north of the River.

The Ponte Vecchio (Old Bridge), which you can see below, is the principal pedestrian link between the north and south sections of the city. (See photo below.) Its most striking feature is the many shops were built on its edges, and held up by stilts. Although the original bridge was constructed by the Etruscans (BC), the current bridge was rebuilt in the 14th century. It is the only bridge in the city to have survived World War II intact.



This photo was snapped on the bridge to show the shop entrances. The woman in blue reveals that, not only do the Italians dress well, but they also semi-undress well. Like the French, almost all of the Italians remain slender despite their good cooking. I asked Italians about that and got the answer that Italians like to look good, and that means slender. But they also are quite health conscious and that gives them another reason to watch their weight. It is not surprising that Italy has very few McDonalds or their equivalent.

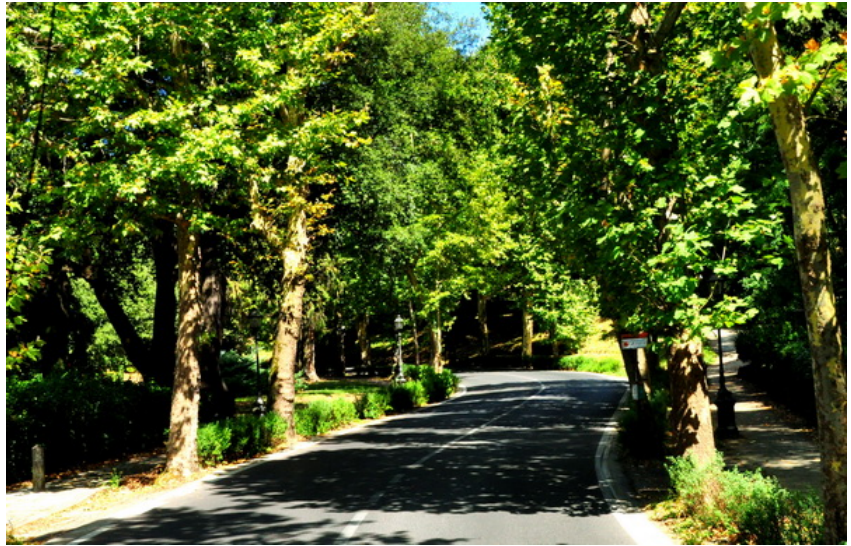


The Palazzo Pitti is a huge building with flags is a huge Renaissance palace situated just south of the famous Ponte Vecchio Bridge. It was used as a power base by Napoleon, and later served as the principal royal palace of Italy.

Here is a photo that depicts the crowds of tourists in the streets. Bicycles are scarce but motor scooters are very popular with the local people. The streets at rush hour are packed, but at least 99% of the cars are tiny.



The name Florence in Italian is Firenze. Only a couple of miles from the city center, up in the low-lying mountains is the luxurious hilltop town of Fiesole. The town existed 500 years before Christ but now it consists primarily of summer estates linked by tree-covered, winding roads



This remarkable view must be partly responsible for Florence's reputation as artistic in city planning as well as a "Mecca" for lovers of art galleries.

Tourist buses wind around the hills and most of them stop at a large scenic overlook area called Piazzale Michelangelo (on the right), because in the middle of the parking lot, overlooking the city of Florence is a giant reproduction of Michelangelo's David.





The Florence experience was more intense than most European cities because in the central city almost every building is really, really old. And every other building is a museum or old church. In the USA a house built 50 years ago is historic and might qualify for the National Register of historic places. In Florence most buildings are 10 times that old and some were even built one or two thousand years ago. Historic preservation is a way of

life for everyone. In the above photo, a sculpture of a woman is distinguished by the huge load she is balancing on her head. The load seems to have human qualities to it. What caught my attention is not so much the statue as the fact that it stood in the middle of the center of the roundabout in the city center with the old city wall in the background.

Florence, like many Italian and French cities, has a lot of roundabouts. Some are tiny with lanes for only one car at a time, while other roundabouts huge allowing 2 or 3 lanes of traffic.



Because a huge roundabout has been proposed for the main intersection near our home, we have a special interest in them. The roundabout pictured on the right was in a suburb near our hotel. As you can see it is huge, which is the kind

proposed for our road, which would also require demolishing two houses. From observing roundabout driving, I concluded that they work better for countries like Italy where driving is very aggressive. When drivers hesitate, then it causes potential pileups behind them. Roundabouts work well when drivers navigate quickly through them. Here in Minnesota, it takes a year or two for drivers to adjust to them. During the first year, the number of accidents can be pretty high. In the long run the trend is for reduced accidents.

Returning to our venue, Florence was a real "trip" because, for the most part, we went back 500 years in time to when many buildings were filled with art but lacked the conveniences of toilets, running water, and electricity. Florence provided a very broad cultural experience. Even the panhandlers sat on the sidewalk and played classical music on their violins. True the motor scooters and cars whizzed down the road, but the when the Italians wandered through a museum or sat in an outdoor restaurant, they moved slowly, enjoying the pleasure of the moment.