

Dispatches from Italy: Florence by bicycle

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By John Miller

“Crashing is part of cycling as crying is a part of love.” –Johan Museeuw

As I mentioned in a previous dispatch, I thoroughly enjoy cycling. Within my first five days here, I had rented a bicycle.

There are lots of shops and rental companies to choose from. The decision really depends on the type of bike and how long you want it. Almost every shop or company will have a classic Dutch bike (think swept back handlebars, a squishy seat and a basket) that you can use for the day or the week. Some of these companies offer pretty spiffy deals to students. If you're here for a while, like me, you'll probably have to buy a new bike from a shop. Don't worry, you won't have to fit it in your carry-on when your session is over; that same shop will buy it back from you. So, in a way, it is basically a rental.



As I mentioned before, I used Cicli Sergio Bianchi. They have a helpful, somewhat English-speaking staff and are conveniently located just north of il Duomo. I'm actually on my second bike from the shop; my first was way too small and ill-suited for my purposes. The staff kindly allowed me to pay the difference and switch to a mountain bike (which is much better suited to the hellish cobblestone streets that snake through this city). In total, I paid about €215 for the bike with a promise of getting €95 back in a month.



Traffic is ... interesting in Florence. There doesn't appear to be any rules regarding road conduct. No, it's really not that bad; it's more of an 'order through chaos' thing. In the three weeks I've been here, I've never seen any sort of accident (almost, but we'll get there later). When riding around you just have to be aware of one-way streets, lane-splitting mopeds and inattentive drivers— basically, nothing too different from riding stateside. The drivers are very good with cyclists; they're used to passing and driving behind on narrow streets. I have always felt very safe cycling in Florence. Loads of people do it, too; I've seen riders ranging from eight to eighty years old, both men and women.

If you've got a good set of legs and lungs, then you definitely want to venture outside the city limits. The most beautiful route is north of the city. If you're willing to brave traffic, then it offers very rewarding vistas as you climb a thousand vertical feet to the city of Fiesole and beyond.

As safe as cycling is here, you still need to be somewhat cautious. Last Saturday, I got hit by a car. It wasn't bad, just a little cut on my left shin and back of my left knee where my leg got pinched between two parts of my bike. The accident was completely my fault, too. I was riding down a street and a car was stopped, waiting for another to parallel park. So I stopped behind the car and waited. I guess I must have been too close and in the driver's

blind spot because when she lifted off the clutch she rolled back into me. When I was scrambling to get out of her way, the car hit my wheel and I got a little scraped up. Fortunately, my bike was fine and the woman did get out of her car to apologize...or something; she didn't speak any English.

The moral of my story is this: when in Florence, be sure to rent a bike, even if it's just for a day — but keep your head up and your eyes open!

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