

Dispatches from Italy: The Athens of the Middle Ages

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By John Miller

“Sometimes I feel like my only friend is the City I live in...” – Red Hot Chili Peppers

This city is known by many names: Florence if you’re an English speaker, Firenze if you’re Italian or maybe by one of her ancient names, Fiorenza or Florentia. Either way we’re all talking about the same city. And what a city she is!



She is beautiful— but anyone with access to Google Images can tell you that. But only someone who has stayed in the city for a while can tell you about her quirks (writer’s disclaimer: he’s only been in the city for a handful of weeks and only “knows” the historical center).

1. It’s safe and super easy to navigate— granted, I am a young man, so the situation could be different for a young woman. I’ve walked around alone, late at night and early in the morning. Never once did I feel threatened. However, some precautions should be taken; my roommate, Mark, saw someone switch shopping bags with a woman when she set them down and looked away. And one student had her phone stolen while dancing at a club. Finding your way around is easy if you keep the two major landmarks in mind: the Duomo and the Arno. If you keep walking in one direction eventually you’re sure to run into one of them.
2. Everyone speaks English— don’t worry if you come here and can’t speak a word of Italian besides *Ciao* and *Grazie*. I didn’t and still can’t! People here speak enough English for you to complete a transaction or get directions. That means waiters, bartenders, police and passersby all can help you in a pinch. Yes, it would be nice to be able to communicate with the locals, but it’s not entirely necessary. If for some reason you

find yourself in a predicament, just holler and an English speaker will come because you're guaranteed to be standing within 10 feet of another American at any given time. Seriously, there are more of us than there are actual Italians.

3. You'll get real sick real fast of people trying to sell you selfie sticks— they're everywhere! On every street corner and at every major tourist attraction, which means all of the historical center.
4. Occasionally, there's a meningitis outbreak— no worries, apparently this happens every few months. Today, June 11, every LdM student received an email telling them...well, I'll let you read it. When my roommates saw the email, they freaked out— not only because they may have been at those clubs on those nights, but because they were out on the street promoting them to other students on those same nights. But they feel confident they're not infected, so they turned down the offered antibiotics. (If they suddenly drop dead, you can be sure you'll read about it in a future Dispatch, so keep checking the *Buzz*



for updates on my trip.)

5. The weather is wonderful in June — about 90 degrees and humid with a scorching sun. Every day (although as I'm writing this, the skies have opened up and I can hear the rain trying to burst through the overhead window).

In my time here I've come across some truly exceptional shops and restaurants. The first one that comes to mind is All'antico Vinaio. It's a little sandwich shop/deli hidden on a small street behind the Palazzo Vecchio. For €5 you can get a grand sandwich. I have no idea what was on it, but it was delicious. I'll definitely be going back there before I leave, maybe even tonight for dinner. If you decide to go, then be sure to arrive with plenty of time because the line spills out the door and down the street...much to the annoyance of the taxi drivers, moped riders and cyclists.

Sandwich from All'Antico

In the U.S., I ride my bike (read bicycle not motorcycle — my parents aren't that lenient) a fair amount; I average about 100 miles a week in the summer. Obviously, I couldn't go a month without riding, so I rented a bike within the first few days. I went to a couple different shops but ended up renting from Cicli Sergio Bianchi. They were very helpful, even allowing me to switch out bikes after the first one I rented didn't live up to my expectations. Keep reading the *Buzz* for a Dispatch devoted entirely to cycling Florence.

Cicli Sergio Bianchi

For some reason, I didn't think I needed to pack a book and when I got here, I realized my mistake. I found an

English bookshop online, the Paperback Exchange, and tried it out. I can safely recommend it to any English speaker. The staff is helpful (and English speaking), the selection is endless and the prices are low. They even buy the books back when you're finished.

The Paperback Exchange

Florence is a wonderful city. None of the vistas look real and practically everyone is a tourist, kind of like Disney World. If Firenze isn't on your travel bucket list, it should be!

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