

1/22/12

It seems that the best way to get from the Vespucci airport in Florence is to take a taxi. This particular ride was a very new experience for me. Everything you've heard about Italian drivers is true.

I had done a little bit of research before getting on the plane, but all I really knew was that the downtown area was near the Duomo. It was on every website and guide book I could find before I came out here, so of course I asked the taxi driver to drop me off near this place. Duomo just means dome in Italian so it doesn't sound terribly special. However, this Duomo was at one point the largest in the world. The actual name is the Basilica of Saint Mary of the Flower. It's the landmark cathedral in Florence.

After a short but hectic trip, the driver dropped me off at the large plaza in front of the cathedral. The entire drive had been beautiful, but walking through this plaza was like being transported to the Renaissance. It still retains every bit of beauty from when it was built and has aged better than most of the wine in the surrounding hills.

I walked through the small plaza and made my way down Via dei Calzaioli. I can't pronounce it but I'm pretty positive this street was the main road. Despite it being just after 9am on a weekday, shops were open with tons of people in and around them. I've dreamed about my first time in Italy and this was pretty close. It was just missing one thing.

I took a glance further down the street and on the left side I could see a neon sign poking out of an alley. It looked like what I thought it was, but I couldn't be sure until I got closer. As I neared I could see the word Gelato in the name and that was all that matter. "Anello Gelato" was a little shop with the best ice cream selection I've ever seen. I sampled flavors until the guy behind the counter started glaring and I decided on 2 scoops of Nocciola, whatever that was. It was similar to a little peanut butter ice cream with little bits of nuts and chocolate in it. But somehow gelato has a texture that is no where near the same as ice cream. It is so much smoother. As far as the texture goes, it was a fusion between the Italian Water Ice of Philadelphia and packaged ice cream back home.

I wondered out of the shop in bliss. My only worry was how I was going to go broke if I bought a gelato every day. And what would happen to my stomach. As I walked around the ancient streets and stumbled into piazza after piazza, I was rapidly remembering my Spanish. It sounds strange but it helped grasp the Italian. I had lessons for 7 years in school. I'm required to take an Italian course while I'm here, but I think I will do very well with Italian given some time. My only issue is occasionally I end up speaking Spataliano. It's like Spanglish but with Spanish and Italian instead. Hopefully everyone will understand what I'm saying.

It was hard to focus as I walked. I was a little overwhelmed but I sat down and took some time to think. I didn't have to run off and see all the things I want to see in one day. I don't even have to do it in a week. I have a lot of time to enjoy this place and I'm going advantage of that. Liam was not going to be arriving

for another 2 hours, so I sat and sketched anything and everything I wanted to. I scribbled down buildings and people and everything in between.

I was so consumed in observation and drawing, I completely lost track of time. I had to meet Liam at the hostel we're staying in 5 minutes and I had no idea where to go. Luckily I grabbed a map earlier this morning. I couldn't use my phone for directions because my phone is ancient and I decided to just have it turned off for the semester. I'll probably buy a cheap phone here that you can load minutes onto.

I glanced at the map and found the hostel I was looking for and I started walking toward it. It didn't take long. I could see it down the street. As I approached the address, Liam walked out of the Hostel onto the street. He looked rather funny with his flushed face and a huge cross-country back pack all held up by his long skinny legs. Before I had a chance to say anything, he spotted me.

"They won't let me check in without you here." said Liam.

"Nice to see you too!"

"Hey man," he forced himself to say as he awkwardly shook my hand. "Can we go inside so I can put this down?"

"Sure." I replied as I walked ahead of him through the doors.

My name was the one with the reservation and so I guess they needed me present with proof of ID to check in. Makes sense. It only took a minute before we had the keys to our room in hand. We were on the second floor so we just climbed up the steps and our room was at the top of the stairs. As soon as we got into the room, Liam threw his bag down on his bed.

"Finally." he said "Could that woman take any longer?"

"How long were you waiting before I got here?" I asked.

"Five minutes"

"Man, that sucks." I said sarcastically. Liam rolled his eyes and looked around room avoiding eye contact. He looked like he was about to start blaming me for his exhaustion when I tried to cheer him up.

"Dude, we're in Florence! Stop looking at the room and look outside. You're here and you don't have to carry your ridiculously massive bag anymore, so it's all good."

Liam grinned for the first time since we met up with each other. From that point on, we were in adventure mode. We explored much of the downtown area and Liam knew a few cool spots that we could check out. He also remembered several good restaurants. Liam certainly knows food. I hate using this word, but I would call him a foodie. He is obsessed with what to eat. Every food choice is a very big deal for Liam.

I don't usually mind, but the place he chose was more expensive than I realized. I love good food, but I'm on a budget. I have limited funds to make it through the semester. I really need to find a job. I figured I'd just get something small this time around and I'd be able to cook my own dinner all the time once we had our apartment.

Once I got past my financial issue, I actually enjoyed the dinner. Liam is an interesting guy. I always find it fascinating how we get along. He's from Burlington, Vermont, a town notorious for being one of the safest and happiest cities in the United States. I, on the other hand, am from Camden, NJ, which has ranked on the top 10 most dangerous cities list for the last 15 years.

After dinner, we wandered around until we found this club called BeeBop. It seemed like a pretty laid back environment. They had a drink special called "pinta doppio." It was a very large glass and definitely larger than a standard pint. We sat in a small booth as we drank and talked. As we order our second round we noticed a band was setting up.

"She's cute." said Liam as he nodded in the direction of the stage.

I turned my head around to look over my shoulder and I saw a tall blonde girl, probably around the same age as us. Her confidence could be read in the way she walked up to the microphone and spoke, "Io sono chiamato California e sto andando a giocare una nuova canzone per tutti voi stasera."

"I think she's from California," I guessed. I could also already tell that blondes were pretty rare in Florence, probably most of Italy, so it gave me more reason to guess that she was American. Even when a guy is in a relationship he can still admit when a girl is attractive, but I'd rather avoid any interaction if I can. I like making friends, but attractive female friends could be dangerous.

She started singing and her voice was as beautiful as her face. Liam couldn't stop starrng. I thought of Emily. I had only been away from her for a day and a half, but I already missed her. The city was already so much fun and I wished she could be a part of it. I couldn't help but think about the semester we were about to spend apart. My mind had completely forgotten about the striking songstress when applause brought me back to the present. I notice Liam's gaze had turned into a prowl.

"You should talk to her after her set" I said as she started singing her next song.

"You think?" he asked.

"Sure. You should say something to her in Italian."

"I don't know."

"What've got to lose?"

"Nothing. I guess."

"You should go for it." I insisted. Liam was on the fence but ultimately he swayed to the side of talking to her. He practiced his Italian at the table with me and it sounded good enough. But I had no idea what he

was saying. He had taken a few years of Italian back at Syracuse, but I had no formal training at all. Her song ended to applause again and she started packing up her stuff.

“Now’s your chance, Romeo” I said. Liam hit me on the arm as he walked up to the side of the stage. It wasn’t much of a stage, more of a platform really. I watch from the booth as Liam leaned toward the girl. She was quickly gathering her things and moving about the stage. From what I could see Liam spoke to her. I couldn’t hear him but in the middle of his sentence she hopped off the stage, guitar in hand, and walked out the side door. Liam was frozen. She had just ignored him. The musicians on stage laughed a little at him until one spoke. I could just make out what he said by reading his lips.

“She does *not* speak Italian.”

Liam looked crushed and walked back to the booth. I laughed and he looked pissed.

“So another round it is, huh?” I said.

Liam nodded and after two more drink specials we had forgotten about the girl and how to get home. We left the club and wandered around hoping to find some landmarks we recognized.

After a long stumbly walk through downtown and perhaps a stop at a gelateria on the way, we arrived back at our hostel. I vaguely remember climbing those tight and windy steps. However, I distinctly recall my last thought of the night as I collapsed on the bed. Instead of the give a more springy American bed might have, hitting this bed felt like hitting solid ground. I questioned if I had actually missed the bed entirely as I drifted to sleep.