



Rome is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, of course, but it's often overcrowded and commercialized. We couldn't even visit the Vatican, the Forum or the Colosseum without being overwhelmed by busloads of tourists, religious groups, street vendors, creepy would-be guides, urchin pickpockets and phony costumed characters.

Venice is still unique when viewed quickly, but once one goes strolling along the narrow streets or drifts by the canals, there's the pervasive feel and smell that the city has degenerated into a glorified sewer. The famed flocks of pigeons in San Marco Square look great in photos, but in reality are dirty pests that flock and poop all over people to scarf up the birdseed that sells for a two bucks per a tiny paper cup's worth.

However, Florence is a sparkling city that doesn't seem to have changed much in the past 400 years, and strives to be the cleanest in Italy. As we gazed at the famed statue of the Biblical hero David, we wouldn't have been too surprised to see Michelangelo come by to take a few extra chisel strokes to it. On our visits, we always check out the other glorious landmarks: Bartolomeo Ammanati's Fountain of Neptune in the Piazza della Signoria, the Ponte Vecchio over the Arno River, the Medici Family Chapel, Santa Croce, the Uffizi Gallery and countless

other delightful sights.

My fondest memories don't only include all the wonderful history of Florence. There was one humorous experience I still treasure. We met with our tour group in front of the Duomo, a magnificent 14th Century church. It was long past noon, and I was getting hungry for some of Florence's famed Italian food. While listening to a boring lecturer, I noticed a group of Chinese tourists following an English-speaking guide. I could hear him telling them he was taking them to one of the best non-tourist restaurants in the city, so I sneaked away from my group and followed them.

Their guide was taking a long route, pointing out various famous buildings and piazzas, but I persisted. Finally, he said they were near the restaurant. With visions of ravioli and linguine dancing in my head, I followed down one narrow street and up the other. Finally, the guide stopped at a small door with the word ristorante on it. I went with the others through a dark entrance, down a set of winding stairs and into a dimly-lighted cafe set with attractive tables. So far, so good.

I realized the guide had sent the food order in advance, because immediately after the tourists had been seated, waiters came marching in carrying steaming trays of food. I could almost smell the first course, delicious minestrone. But the smell was different. It was wor won ton soup! Then, the revelation! In honor of the Chinese visitors, the Florentine restaurant had prepared a complete and authentic Chinese dinner!

After the initial shock, I didn't really mind. I love Chinese food, and the Italian chefs did a magnificent job of preparing it as well as any upscale Beijing chef could. I figured ... what the heck ... and dug in with my newfound friends. Later, after I sneaked back to join my tourist group, we were taken to a nice Italian restaurant. Although the food was excellent, the other tourists wondered why their full-bellied companion just picked at the tasty local dishes.