

Florence is a sparkling city that doesn't seem to have changed 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.

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.

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. He said he was taking them to one of the best non-tourist, family cafés in the city. I sneaked away from my group and followed.

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, down a set of winding stairs and into a dimly-lighted cafe set with attractive tables.

The guide had sent the food order in advance, because immediately after the tourists were seated, waiters came marching in carrying steaming trays of food. I could almost smell the delicious minestrone. But the odor was different. It was won ton soup! In honor of the 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 this full-bellied companion just picked at the tasty local dishes.