

An American Visits Rome

Bill Moses

It is *deja vu* all over again! After my experience visiting (and writing about) the site in Lyon for the 2000 NSS/MIC, I'm now in the airplane coming home from Rome after participating in the site visit of the Hotel Ergife, where the 2004 NSS/MIC will be held. A number of people felt that my comments about the Lyon trip were useful for their own journeys, so I decided to share my experiences with you once again. Don't worry, I'm keeping my day job though!

First, my background. I have done a bit more foreign travel since the site visit to Lyon, and so would now upgrade my foreign travel competence level to "medium." The closest I come to speaking Italian is my high school Spanish, which probably confused the people who listened to me, and of course menus from my native New Jersey. I work at LBNL and so followed DOE travel rules. Italy is three months away from converting to Euros, but all the prices that I paid were in Lire, so I'm going to give prices in Lire. At this time 1 US dollar was approximately equal to either 2,000 Lire or 1 Euro.

Having learned from Lyon, I bought my plane ticket more than 28 days before the flight and included a Saturday night stay over in an attempt to get a good price. However, it cost about \$1000 because it was "on-season" — if the site visit had been held after October 15 (as the conference will be) the ticket would have been cheaper. My ticket was from United and I flew on a United plane from San Francisco to Frankfurt, then on a Lufthansa plane (that had both Lufthansa and United flight numbers) to Rome. Changing planes in Frankfurt was a breeze, despite the fact that my German is many times worse than my Italian (I guess there aren't many good German restaurants in San Francisco). The signs in the airport are excellent and all the staff were both polite and excellent English speakers. The only unusual thing is that I flew just a few weeks after the attack on the World Trade Center and so I arrived at the airport a bit more than two hours before my flight in order to have *plenty* of time to go through security. Lines were longer, especially in Germany where they took airport security very seriously.

Overall the flight to the airport in Rome (which usually is called Fumicino, but occasionally gets called Leonardo di Vinci) was long and boring. Customs and passport control was very fast — it usually takes me a lot longer to go through a grocery store checkout line. The airport is outside of Rome on the southwest side and the hotel is on the western border of Rome, so I decided to take a taxi to the hotel, which took about 25 minutes. I made the mistake of using somebody who walked up to me and asked me if I needed a cab — he charged me 80,000 Lire while the normal meter price (which you get when you take one of the white or yellow cabs at the airport cab stand) is about 55,000 Lire Monday through Saturday and 65,000 Lire on Sunday. However, I was gratified to hear that some of the more experienced site visitors did the same thing but paid 100,000 Lire! For the more budget minded, there is a direct train (the Leonardo) from Fumicino to the Termini train station which is in downtown Rome (this costs 17,000 Lire, and you buy tickets at a ticket counter that is near the train), and from there you can take the Metro (*i.e.* subway) to get near to the hotel (more on this later).

The Hotel Ergife is unlike virtually all other European conference locations in that the hotel is large (about 1000 rooms) and the conference space is part of the hotel. This was a significant attraction for Alberto del Guerra (the General Chair for 2004) and the rest of the selection committee, as it should make the logistics for attendees similar to those for an American conference (*i.e.* easy). At \$120 / night (including a continental breakfast), it is definitely one of the less expensive hotels in Rome, and the quality is similar to a "no frills" hotel such as a Best Western. The room (and bed) are small by North American standards, but it was clean and has the sort of room amenities that you expect (although no exercise room, business center, etc.). My biggest complaint was that while staff at the front desk / concierge were very polite, helpful, and fluent in English, they were understaffed. You should definitely leave a bit of extra time for check-out (or anything involving the front desk, for that matter)!

With any luck, you won't be spending *all* of your time at the hotel, and I would strongly advise spending a few extra days in Rome. The best way to get to downtown Rome is the Metro — the **Cornelia** station (the second to last stop on the Red or A line) is the closest Metro stop to

the hotel (about a 15 minute walk, and the conference is considering providing a continuous loop shuttle bus). Once on the Metro, all of Rome is at your disposal. The closest attraction is the Vatican / San Pietro (Saint Peter's Cathedral), which is about a 10 minute ride and the furthest attraction (by Metro) is the Coliseum / Forum, which is about a 30 minute ride including a transfer at Termini station (the only transfer point to line B on the Metro system). A single ride ticket costs 1,500 Lire and is good for 75 minutes of any combination of Metro / bus travel. An unlimited one day pass costs a whopping 6,000 Lire. The strangest thing about the system is that the best place to buy Metro tickets is at tobacconist shops, but such shops seem to be outside every Metro station so that system works pretty well. There often (but not always) are automated vending machines in the stations — they are easy to use and have instructions in English, but also have the usual insistence on coins or newly minted paper currency, neither of which I ever seem to possess. Validation of the tickets also takes some getting used to. The first time you use a single ride ticket on the Metro or a bus, you insert it into a machine that prints the time on it. Thereafter you show it to the bus driver (if you both feel like it) or the person in the glass booth near the Metro turnstiles. Don't try to buy a ticket from the person in the glass booth unless you want to get a lecture in Italian! You stick the day passes into a validation machine (a slightly different one than for the one-ride passes) *every* time you use them. You have to stick them in with the proper orientation, which is impossible to determine from anything on either the ticket or the machine, but it is obvious when you do it right.

The bus system is also extremely good. Most of the bus stops have *very* clear signs showing which bus lines stop there and what all the subsequent stops (in order) are for that line. They usually provide a more direct route than the Metro — the Metro system makes a big “X” while the busses blanket the entire city. The only drawback is that the busses can get stuck in the Rome traffic, so I tended to stick with the Metro. Speaking of the traffic in Rome, I strongly discourage renting a car unless you have a death wish. Thrill seekers will enjoy taxi rides in congested areas.

How should I conclude? I think that the first European NSS/MIC in Lyon was a fantastic success from both a scientific and a cultural standpoint. Rome will be an excellent follow-on, and we will definitely fix the unfortunate hotel room shortage that plagued us in Lyon! While Rome will have a lot of similarities to both the “typical” North American NSS/MIC and the Lyon conference, it will also have its own unique aspects. As with Lyon, you shouldn't let potential travel difficulties or a language barrier prevent you from coming to enjoy the city and the conference. Getting there and back, getting around, and communicating with people are all pretty easy. And once there, there is just *so* much to take in, from scientific, historical, cultural, and gastronomical perspectives, that it cannot fail to be worth the effort!