

The Conference Chronicles

When In Rome...

by

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In the Beginning

I was just completing the closing activities as the General Chairman of the 2001 NSS/MIC/SNPS/RTSD conference in San Diego when I was asked if I would be willing to assume the duties of Treasurer for the 2004 conference. I remember agreeing, thinking that it wouldn't require anything on my part for at least two years (an nice break and time to recover) and it would be interesting to attempt an understanding of European finances. In what seemed to take only fraction of a microsecond, Alberto Del Guerra (2004 General Chairman) accepted my nomination and set up the first committee meeting. So, my first assumption proved false and I started to pack.

Patience, patience, patience . . .

I have been quite fortunate in that my job has provided many opportunities to visit Europe. I have had the distinct pleasure to experience many countries and cultures and meet new friends. Each time I've traveled to Europe, I return more appreciative of the simple details in every day life that are typically taken for granted. Each trip has never failed to provide a certain amount of special surprises that require a good helping of patience. In this new post-September 11th world, what was once simply a tiresome process of enduring ridiculously disorganized airport procedures has been transformed into an intense process of scrutiny, suspicion, and endlessly long lines. Personally, I've never felt threatened by the 2 cm file on a nail clipper, though maybe I'm just another member of the naïve public, unaware of the real dangers that threaten us all.

In any event, the anticipation of seeing Rome again was enough to get me through the minor irritations of airport security. Now, this business of seeing Rome was a somewhat optimistic view on my part. What I thought was a rational and very conservative decision of making the trip as short as possible was entirely stupid. I arranged to leave on a Thursday morning and return on the following Sunday morning. This very efficient schedule left essentially no time outside of the committee meeting at the hotel for leisure activities. Not to mention the serious jet-lag issues, which indeed had an appreciable effect on my attention span.

The trip to Rome was unusually uneventful. With the exception of the occasional, amazingly long security lines that remind one of amusement parks, most events occurred right on schedule. The one thing that never escapes my notice is the seemingly dysfunctional US Customs Service. Getting in or out of the US has always been a confusing process that appears to lack all logic and reason. I have yet to determine the value of collecting all baggage, checked or not, and essentially re-

checking in again as though I had just arrived at the airport. I suppose this is for my safety and security, but I can't shake the feeling of unreasonable and unsupportable activity engaged for the sole purpose of job security.

When I did arrive in Rome, I scrupulously followed Alberto's advice and took a taxi using the sanctioned taxis at the taxi stand just outside the terminal. There were indeed people walking around the terminal trying to snag unsuspecting folks into some sort of taxi black market, which apparently charges about twice the fare and doesn't provide a receipt. I would like to echo the sentiments of Bill Moses concerning taxis in Rome – these are truly high intensity events. The taxi driver I was fortunate to obtain proceeded at nothing less than mach 5 (slower speeds apparently require the driver immediately whip out the local newspaper and study the sports section). In addition, it appears to be illegal (or at least poor form) to follow at a distance greater than 5 cm. The lines on the road appear to be only a suggestion and signaling is an act of war, presumably akin to warning the enemy. Boston drivers will feel right at home.

Arriving at the hotel a bit shaken (my seat belt was broken), I proceeded to the reception counter. I approached what appeared to be a receptionist and attempted to check in. This caused a bit of trouble because I did not know the name of the "company" that arranged my room reservation. A short discussion resulted in the arrival of the convention and sales manager and resolution of everything. Aside from this short delay, the hotel reception personnel were very nice, spoke a variety of languages (fluent English, thankfully), though were clearly understaffed. This was an issue fully acknowledged by the hotel that they are working to remedy. To this end, the hotel is finishing a new lobby area that will greatly increase the flow and efficiency. We were shown the new construction, just off the existing lobby area, which appears about 70% complete and should be a major improvement.

Sleep deprivation

In all of my trips to Europe, the hardest thing to overcome has been the time shift. From California, this would be 9 time zones, totaling about 22-25 hours of airplanes and airports. I have tried just about every method suggested and found that, essentially, nothing works. The first few days require massive amounts of caffeinated substances for support. This is the only circumstance when I've actually almost fallen asleep, on my feet, while talking to someone (yes, I was doing the talking – it's embarrassing). So, with a meeting taking place in a few hours, I was afraid to sleep in the event I dropped into a coma from which I couldn't wake. I walked around the area near the hotel, but aside from a few small shops and restaurants, nothing exciting was happening. I didn't feel strong enough to brave the Metro just yet, so I relented and went back to the Hotel to try for a limited recuperative nap. Fortunately, my paranoia of oversleeping helped to wake me in time for the meeting, not to mention the 2 alarms and a wake-up call.

Dinner with friends

The dining facilities at the hotel appeared to be adequate for the number of people that typically attend our conference. In addition to the main restaurant, there's also a sandwich and coffee bar, a moderately sized buffet restaurant, and located near the pool, an outside bar that serves mixed drinks as well as snacks (beer selections are limited to only a few choices).

I eventually dragged myself to the patio bar area where we were to meet. When everyone was introduced and accounted for, we proceeded to the hotel restaurant, which turned out to be a pleasant surprise. The staff was attentive and efficient, and the menu had a fairly diverse offering accompanied by an excellent wine list. One thing that I always tend to forget when dining in Europe is the differences in food preparation and presentation. For example, shrimp or prawns are typically prepared in their natural, physiologically correct condition (head, feet, antennae, etc.) requiring additional skill to eat. Clearly I've been conditioned to expect the sanitized, beheaded and de-shelled version typically served in California cuisine.

Real sleep and the climate control

When dinner ended, we all retreated to our respective rooms for some rest before the next days' organizational meetings. This is the moment I've been waiting for, anticipating a reasonable night's sleep and return to a somewhat functional state.

We were exceptionally fortunate to be in Rome during a particularly warm, spring-like period. One might think this was a very good thing, and for outside activities one would be correct. On the other hand, since it was still winter with normal temperatures still pretty cool, the hotel had not enabled the air conditioning system (according to hotel representatives). The result was a fairly temperate (hot and stuffy) room environment unless the windows and balcony door were open. Be assured, the air conditioning system certainly works – I have the distinct memory of the system in my room being turned on around 3:30am, cooling the room and making a good amount of noise for about an hour, and then turning off again.

Speaking of noise, the hotel is located a bit off the main thoroughfare and therefore enjoys a quieter environment, insulated from most traffic noise. Additionally, I did not notice any unusual disturbances from adjoining rooms or the hallway.

First contact

The next morning we began our preliminary conference organization meeting after a typical European style continental breakfast (complimentary for hotel guests). We spent a great deal of time touring the convention space and meeting rooms, currently being used for an exceptionally large exhibition concerning medically oriented beauty aids (implants, liposuction, etc.). I was simply amazed at the array of invasive procedures one could bring to bear on fighting the aging process (certainly a topic for another time).

The sales staff was very accommodating and arranged access to all of the facilities. Much of the hotel was engaged in the medical conference and had an estimated 1200 participants. I would guess that a large portion was exhibitors and their entourage, since about half of the large space was vacant. Even so, all activities seemed to be organized and flowing well. The hotel certainly had the required space to be able to house our conference activities and participants in a manor similar to a typical US location.

The overall convention space seemed to be a linear, rambling set of adjoining large and small meeting rooms with a fair amount of smaller offices interspersed. While there were several access points, most of the rooms were reached through a main corridor that wound its way through the convention center. At times, this corridor actually traverses part of a room. To walk the extent of the convention space would take a few minutes, as the main rooms are strung out along the main corridor. The

Reception area modernization project will be adding yet another access point to the convention spaces.

There are a multitude of room sizes and shapes and the conference activities should easily fit. We made several attempts at an initial layout and came to a few possible solutions. It's always interesting to go through this process and realize that there is no perfect conference location. Each hotel or convention center has its particular issues that require compromise.

We had lunch in the main restaurant and were served a special meal that essentially covered much of the offerings the hotel would provide during the conference. I was again impressed with the quality of the food and was assured that the same quality would be realized in the mass production atmosphere of the conference. I think I'll reserve judgment, but if they even come close, I believe that the attendees will be quite satisfied.

Sudden realization

After a riveting afternoon and evening of conference organizing, we adjourned the meeting. We then walked (rapidly) to the metro station to go to a restaurant in downtown Rome. It almost took longer to get from the station to the train than to walk from the hotel to the station. Apparently the tunnels had to be excavated fairly deep to avoid ancient Roman ruins, so you must endure quite a few escalators taking you far down into the bowels of the earth before boarding a train.

We exited the metro at a station adjacent to the Spanish Steps, a large cut stone stairway connecting two main arteries completed in 1725. We proceeded to walk through the streets and alleys, through plazas and past incredible structures, fountains, and sculptures to enjoy a fabulous dinner at a restaurant named "Restaurant Carbonara." The restaurant is located in the Piazza Campo dè Fiori, another incredible place to visit.

It was during this walk and dining experience that made me realize the ridiculousness of visiting Rome for only a few hours. There is so much to do and see that you will want to spend as much time as possible in this beautiful place. I would encourage anyone who decides to attend the conference to bring his or her family and stay as long as possible to experience this amazing city.