

## Reflections on my Teaching Abroad in Rome Italy Dr. Don Ludwig, June 11, 2023



My Roman landlord, of the AirBnB apartment I rented, hates me. The first week I was there, I accidentally dropped the keys down the elevator shaft. The landlord then rushed over from his home somewhere else in the city, and gave me his second pair of keys and told me to be careful. I vowed to never mishandle them again. But then, three weeks later, I locked the keys inside the apartment. Unfortunately, the landlord still had not retrieved the first set of keys from the bottom of the elevator shaft, so he came to the apartment and taught me how to break in by taking the trim off the door and using any hard object to shimmy behind the door locks and push them over. I was learning to become a criminal in Italy — I think I know how the mafia got its start.

Fortunately, I never needed to use this new-found “breaking an entry” knowledge during the rest of my stay. All was good — that is until the day I left the apartment. I managed to check off “almost” all of the boxes to vacate the place and was feeling good about myself. When I got to the airport, through security, waiting to board the plane, I reached down into my pocket, and there were the damn apartment keys. You can imagine the words that came out of my mouth! I ended up FedExing them the next day from London. My Roman landlord hates me — and I am quite sure will never rent to me again.

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There are so many things I could say about my two and a half months teaching in Rome. It was an amazing experience on so many levels. As I shared in the Thursday news blast, I'd classify my time in Rome as 80% AWESOME and 20% CRAZY. I made some great life-long Italian friends, ate great food (albeit mostly pizza and pasta on a daily basis), and marveled at an array of geological and historical wonders. I also squinted incredulously at the corrupted politics, the near death experiences while riding in a taxi, and the bureaucracy's strange mixture of apathy and petty fascism. There is so much I could say. Let me simply share a few of the many take-aways from this experience.

Romans are welcoming and sociable. There is a sense, when dealing with people in Rome, that we're all sailing on the same leaky boat, even if we're busy shouting at each other. Rome's colorful and engaging people are reflected in its extroverted culture. Extravagant hand gestures and loud banter make it easy to form an empathetic bond with the people you encounter in everyday life. You'll get frustrated at people, perhaps even angry — I witnessed this many times — but you'll never quite feel as "alone" as you do in America.

Romans are both proud and critical of their rich history. This is one of the many cultural contrasts that make the culture so fascinating to me. If you are the type of person that finds comfort in a sober, orderly existence, then perhaps Rome isn't the place for you. Conversely, if you thrive off a modicum of drama and a touch of chaos — at all times, Rome is a never ending source of psychological energy. In Rome, there's always something to shout about, empathize with, criticize, and generally get worked up over. And if this sounds like fun to you, you'll fit right in.

The whole city of Rome and most of Italy for that matter is an open air museum. Mystery and surprise lurk around every street corner and in every building and on every cobblestone street. One thing I love about Italy is that there is no separation between the populace and its architectural history. You can walk around and literally touch the ruins. Perhaps my most favorite experience involved a day trip to Pompeii, just outside of Naples, and touring the ancient ruins of an entire city that had been covered in ash for 1500 years. As a sociologist, I was reminded that societies have not changed all that much in the last 2000 years.

Rome is also the perfect springboard to explore the rest of Italy and other parts of Europe. I was able to fly to Barcelona, Amsterdam, Paris and London for weekend getaways. Everywhere is 2-2.5 hours away and costs about 250 euro roundtrip to fly to.

My favorite weekend was Barcelona, probably because I had never been there before — I loved its gothic culture which was in direct contrast to the antiquity of Rome.

I am already missing the European way of life. I will never forget strolling down the Tiber river on a daily basis, towards the imposing presence of Castel Sant'Angelo, and experiencing a sense of awe each and every time. But mostly, I will never forget the people, and the relationships I made. I will never forget the people at St. Andrew's Scottish Presbyterian Church who made me feel at home and yes, served Italian wine at coffee hour. I will never forget my amazing students, the incredible staff at AIFS and the sense of wonder and feeling of being connected to the past, present and future, in a way that just does not happen in America. They say all roads lead to Rome. I now know what that means — both physically and metaphorically.

I may never be able to rent the same apartment ever again, but I will most certainly be back to Rome. Thank you Southminster for providing me space for this once in a lifetime experience — for your support of me both personally and professionally.

E' Finito!