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# A Moving Experience: Comparing apples to mele



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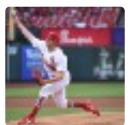
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Notifications



by C.Flisi

It doesn't make sense to compare life "in the US" with life "in Italy." You have to compare apples to apples — Gala versus Gala or Fuji versus Fuji. A fair comparison means you need to



be specific about WHERE in the States and WHERE in Italy. In some ways it's less of a cultural shock to move from Manhattan, USA, to Milan, Italy, than it is to move from Manhattan to McCall, Idaho (pop. 2,900). Conversely, a Milanese might find it easier to adapt to Manhattan than relocating to Monteroduni, Molise (pop. 2,200).

Of course, a move from anywhere in the States to Italy involves a language difference, a change from dollars to euro (though lately they are the same), a switch to the metric system, superior health care, better public transportation, narrower streets, smaller cars, fewer Apple stores, a general lack of air conditioning (and less heating this winter, thanks to Putin). But culturally there are enough similarities to facilitate adaptation.

The same is true moving in the other direction. When I relocated from a suburb of Milan to a suburb of

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Washington, D.C., I wondered vaguely about the changes in information, access, cultural exploration, and costs. These were not a top priority, not right away, because there were so many major agonies and obstacles to face in the first terrible months of relocation.

But then I started to wonder about the other stuff because the warp and woof of life is made of THOSE and not of Code Red crises. Much of what made life good in Italy was my access to Milan, the commercial, cultural, media, and business center of the country. I lived in the suburbs but went to Milan weekly, and sometimes daily. My home was literally two minutes from the underground train station that took me directly into center city in 27 minutes, and there were four trains an hour. If I had to drive, the entrance to the autostrada was about two miles from our home. It was a brutal drive during rush-hour traffic but easy-peasy the rest of the day.

Malpensa Airport was in the opposite direction; leaving from the same train station, I could be there in eight minutes. Driving took 15 minutes without toll roads or traffic.

But now I was in America, where the car is king and public transportation is a low priority. I was not too far from Washington, D.C., the capitol of the United States. But it is farther from my current address than Milan had been from my previous one — about 23 miles as opposed to 24 kilometers. The roads are wider and there are more of them, but rush hour traffic in and out of DC is just as bad as Milan's traffic had been. I drove into the city a few times but decided that didn't make sense for daytime visits; the risk of traffic jams at the beginning and end of the day was high, and the cost of parking was prohibitive.

So I decided to try the DC metro system, a below-and-above ground transportation system that began

operation in 1976. The DC Metrorail has an elevated station in the town where I live, and it is 1.5 miles away — walkable during daylight hours.

Currently ours is the last stop on the Metro's silver line, but eventually that line will reach out another five minutes to Dulles Airport and beyond. Surprising similarities between DC's metro system and Milan's: they developed around the same time. DC's Metro was started in 1969 and currently has 91 stations. Milan's Metro became functional in 1964 and currently has 106 stations.

But there are also differences: DC's network sprawls 117 miles while Milan's extends 60 miles. Pricing is not comparable. Italy's public transportation is relatively low-cost compared to its counterparts in Europe, so you pay one price for one trip regardless of distance. In DC you need a smart card to ride, and what you pay depends on what day and time you travel, how far you travel, and how old you are.

Once I had sorted out the intricacies of the Metrocard and the train schedule, I was ready for my next attempt at social integration. Many opportunities in Italy had come to me as a member of the Stampa Estera Alta Italia in Milan (Foreign Press Club of North Italy) so I applied for membership to the National Press Club of Washington, D.C.

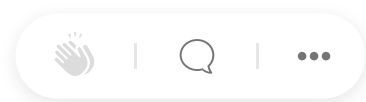
These two organizations both have international members but conduct their business in the respective local language. Both have facilities in the heart of their downtowns. Both offer collegiality and concrete benefits to their members. But the Stampa Estera has about 110 members, a management of volunteer elected officers plus one paid secretary, and a location that changed — for the better — five times in the years I have been a member. It can host one event at a time in its public meeting room, accommodating maybe 60 people. A tiny kitchen tries to cope with the food needs of those members who

pay extra for desk space in the facility. Events with food have to be catered from outside.

The National Press Club is the oldest and largest organization of its kind in the world, with 3,000 members and two floors of a building close to the White House — the only private office building in the US with its own zip code. It has its own multimedia production studio, library, lounge, gym, shower rooms, bars, two restaurants (only one open at present), catering facilities headed by a chef of national renown, and 10 event spaces of varying sizes with a maximum capacity of 1,500 people. The club is governed by five elected officers and a 10-member board of governors, plus a paid staff of more than 100, including professional management. The NPC hosts over 2,000 events each year, some for its members and some for outside groups that pay to take advantage of the club's media-friendly facilities.

The Stampa Estera is a club, the NPC is an enterprise. The pros and cons of each encapsulate the differences between my life in Italy and my life now. One is human-dimensioned, sometimes improvised, not always efficient but intermittently endearing. The other is imposing and all-encompassing, very expensive yet not always efficient either. Direct comparisons aren't easy, and I still haven't decided which is the definitive apple of my eye.

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