

NOT MUCH GOOD CAN BE SAID ABOUT Benito Mussolini, except that he made the trains in Italy run on time. On this Sunday afternoon we were counting on the former Italian dictator's legacy as we began a journey that, over the course of the day, would take us on trains heading in different directions and back again. From the Tuscan town of Montecatini Terme we would take a train to Florence; there we were to cross the street to a nearby McDonald's where a car would be waiting to take us into the hills for a visit to Villa Mangicane, an upscale getaway where the main building was built by Niccolò Machiavelli. To me, a guy who grew up watching Louisiana politics, Machiavelli is the person who wrote the Gospel. Raised in the rugged world of 16th century Florentine political infighting, Machiavelli's *The Prince* gave a hardball

perspective to governing and preached that the ends, in most cases, justified the means. The philosopher would have fit well with Huey Long and the crowd.

Later we would take a train that would rumble from Florence past Montecatini to the seaside town of Viareggio. Here too there was a New Orleans connection – though more contemporary. It was to Viareggio, home of the famous *Carnevale Di Viareggio* to which, in the 1950s, the Captain of the Rex organization sent a young float builder named Blaine Kern to study float design. The big papier mâché heads with moving hands seen in New Orleans parades, such as on Rex's jester float, reflect the Villa Reggione influence.

First stop though, was Mangiacane, where the main building, a villa, has been converted into a small luxury resort. There were the expected resort amenities: a spa, a restaurant with the option for poolside dining and stylishly decorated rooms. But there were also vineyards, where grapes that are converted into Chianti, the regional wine, are grown, and there are orchards, where olives, used to make the heart-healthy oil that is critical to Italian cooking, grow. (Both were experienced over lunch. This being Chianti country there are several variations of the red wine including the stellar *Chianti Classico*.) But the real showstopper was from the gallery of the main building facing east. There in the distance, especially on a clear day – and many days in Tuscany are clear – can be seen the jagged skyline of Florence. In the center is the unmistakable dome of the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore, which in Machiavelli's time was already nearly two centuries old. One could imagine Machiavelli standing on that deck, peering into the distance and feeling insulated from the turmoil of the city. This was the sort of place that would move a philosopher to philosophizing.

Florence's train station was busy by mid-afternoon as passengers departed for the countryside. This train was more modern than the one we had ridden in the morning. Its accessories included a digital clock at the front of each coach as though to rub in how punctual the train was at reaching its destinations.

Viareggio was not what I had imagined it to be. I had envisioned a quaint Italian village, sort of like the place where Geppetto made Pinocchio; instead it's a busy seaside resort. By the time we got there it was late afternoon and the station platforms were filled with beachgoers, mostly kids, heading home.

We, on the other hand, headed toward the beach. The walk was

A TUSCAN ADVENTURE

One villa, one beach, three trains



BY ERROL LABORDE



about 10 blocks through the old part of town that architecturally looks a lot like the French Quarter, with a similar mix of cafes and gift shops. I wasn't prepared for the waterfront, which I had envisioned to be a small Italian beach with grainy sand and a few ice cream vendors along the road. Instead it was more like Miami's South Beach. Hundreds of people strolled along the main boulevard, while others were in lounge chairs on the sand as the sun began its descent into the Mediterranean Sea. There was the expected bustle of restaurants and shops plus one peculiar statue – that of a clown wearing checkered pants, his arms outspread as though grasping for the world. He is known as Burlamacco and he's the symbol of the Viareggio Carnival. From his beachfront perch Burlamacco can see the parades as they roll along the boulevard.

Viareggio's Carnival began in 1873. (That is the year after Rex was founded in New Orleans. Several other urban Carnivals were founded, i.e. Memphis, or enhanced, i.e. Mobile, around that same time, so clearly Carnivals were an 1870s tool for economic development.) Was Viareggio influenced by New Orleans? It could be, but we don't know for sure. Clearly though, New Orleans was influenced by Viareggio once Kern arrived there, and that influence is still seen in every parade made within his float building empire.

We took an early evening train back to Montecatini. This was our third train trip of the day and each would start and arrive precisely on the moment as scheduled. If only Mussolini hadn't gotten so enamored with Hitler, he might be remembered as a great leader. For all their faults, fascists at least believed in efficiency.

We had a walk of about a mile or so from the Montecatini train station to the hotel, much of it was along the Avenue Giuseppe Verdi. The composer occasionally visited the town to experience its thermal baths. He too had an influence on our Mardi Gras, especially at the Carnival balls where many kings and queens had made their entrances and exits to the stirring grand march from his opera, *Aida*.

During the course of the day we had visited a villa in the hills and a town on the beach. Now we were making our own grand march. There was no orchestration, but at the café where we stopped for pizza the sound of Chianti being poured in a glass was all the music we needed.

Information: www.mangiacane.com;

www.world66.com/europe/italy/tuscany/viareggio

