



## Lecce to Parco Leonardo

“What’s happening?” It was my opening gambit to the young woman across the aisle. We had sat facing the rear of the train for two hours, without saying a word; she, heavily engrossed with her laptop, me buried in a book, appropriately titled *Around the World on 80 Trains*. Suddenly we were forward facing, making me wonder if we were heading back to Lecce.



“It’s OK. Don’t worry,” She replied in perfect English. “We’re still on our way to Roma.”



From there on there was hardly a lull in conversation. When a couple turned up with seats reserved at her table, I invited her to join me at mine. It was one of those *Paul Theroux-type moments*, where engaging travellers appear from the woodwork, to converse intimately on vital topics. On this occasion it was true.

We left Lecce - the *Firenze of the South*, and central town on the heel of Italy’s boot – at 11 a.m.; arrival in Rome, five o’clock. I’d been in Puglia four weeks; Julia, my *Trenitalia* companion, had

lived there twenty years and is on her way back to university; Environmental Economics her study area, a discipline close to my own. Thus, much scope for talk.

Then came the hitch. A PA announcement - Italian of course - appeared to alert Julia, and everyone around. She interpreted for me: our train would be delayed due to derailment near Termini, Rome's central station. Fine, a slightly later delay might mean missing the peak hour rush; no hardship there. But no, the problem grew, causing a serious logjam into one of the busiest stations in the world; the short delay turned into a five-hour disaster! Finally arriving at 10 p.m., we jumped down to the platform, waving a quick bye-bye.

For those who know Termini, it's a daunting place at the best of times, but in the dark of night and unfamiliar with the systems, while faced with notices everywhere saying *Beware of Pickpockets*, it can be a scary place. This time I was lucky. Remembering enough from a previous visit 15 or 20 years before, I was able to purchase a ticket from a machine (watching my bags and my back carefully while doing so), then managed to board a late train to Fiumicino Airport. A budget hotel waited for me at Parco Leonardo, nearby.

It's fair to say that Parco Leonardo in Rome is nothing like Lecce in Puglia. And it was when I crossed the railway tracks from my hotel the next day, to kill time in the Parco Leonardo mall (prior to my flight that evening); that the opposite extreme



to Lecce became patently obvious. I could liken it to *Schipol with Shops* (with reference to Amsterdam's sprawling air terminal); only bigger and with every commodity in creation on show. As I wandered the inert, air-conditioned streets, of this low-ceilinged shopping extravaganza, I began to think I was marooned in a high temple to the market economy!

I sat outside, in a purpose-built, brightly coloured seating area, designed I could only suppose for smokers. *“Perhaps this is the real Italy, not centuries-old Lecce,” I thought.* Then I wandered back over the lines, where a shuttle was waiting to take me to the airport.

“Ready to go?” asked the driver.

“Yes,” I rattled back. “Please take me away from here.”

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