

**Alligator**

# Climbing dome more than just inexpensive high

By Artie Zimmet  
DATELINE: Italy

The first thing I noticed about Florence was the hectic traffic crowding the small streets, but the second thing that stuck out about Florence was neither modern nor small.

As my taxi rushed headlong through the small streets, the buildings suddenly gave way to a plaza where all I could see out my window was a huge wall, intricately decorated with green and white marble that stretched almost as far as I could see in all directions.

What I was looking at was the most recognizable landmark in Florence: the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, or the Duomo as tourists call it because of its most striking feature - its imposing dome that rises above all Florence.

The Duomo is Florence's version of the Empire State Building or the Statue of Liberty, just a couple hundred years older. At 296 feet, the dome is not by any means one of the tallest structures in the world, but it still impresses.

Anyone with enough stamina can climb to the top of the dome and enjoy a great view of the city and surrounding mountains in the distance. So when one of my classes took a field trip to explore the Duomo one Thursday morning, I decided I would conquer it.

My teacher let the class loose to discover on our own any part of the plaza we wanted. I headed straight for the entrance to the dome and paid the 8,000 lire (about \$5) for the chance to climb the 463 twisting and tilted stairs that wind up and around the dome's innards.

I headed into a hole in the wall and up the cramped staircase at the same pace I climb the stairs at CSE. The staircase was more like a crawl-space and was enclosed completely with small light bulbs showing the way.

I continued upward, only to get dizzy climbing a tightly spiraling staircase that I began to think would never end. It finally did, and it spat me out onto a small balcony at the base of the dome on the inside of the church.

I knew I was close when the dome began to curve toward its pinnacle, and I found myself walking a little tilted to one side. I was then rewarded with the view that I had heard so much about. Walking around the outside of the dome, I could see the Arno River, the cathedrals of Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella and the Piazza Signoria, where Michelangelo's "David" stood until a copy was made.

At noon, all the bell towers in the city began calling out to each other, and I chuckled at the unsuspecting people running for cover in the nearest tower. As the last calls rang out from far away, the sound of the city crept back up from the streets, and I decided it was time to go. Since I've been here, I've had an urge to leave early and take the slow road to wherever I'm going.

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