



The colonnade at St Peter's

ROMAN HOLIDAY

It is one of the most famous, beloved capitals in the world, yet there is still plenty of hidden gems to discover in Rome. *Norah Casey* immerses herself in the light and the shade of the Eternal City.

If only Julia Roberts knew she didn't have to go anywhere else other than Rome to eat, pray and love. It's impossible not to feast in one of the world's gastronomic capitals, and with over 900 churches it's hard to escape prayer and as for love, it's difficult not to be captivated by its splendour and charms. Spending time in the world's greatest living museum, is quite simply, good for the soul. I fell in love with Rome many years ago and longed to return to revisit her long forgotten treasures, tranquil alleyways and magnificent art. Rome transports you to all those epochs she epitomises from ancient to renaissance to stunning baroque. And when your eyes and your soul are satiated and your feet ache from wandering her beautiful streets she tempts you to gorge on wonderful food and aromatic wines. A temptress that led popes astray will lure you into passions and pleasures without guilt or regret. And she is not without her tawdry side: beautiful walls made ugly by graffiti mar the beguiling beauty of many of her facades; hawkers selling flowers and cheap toys incessantly interrupting quiet Prosecco moments in her stunning piazzas, and the prices: you pay more for everything in Rome and more still if you want

to enjoy a view of her most precious treasures. But it's worth it. First I confess that I did something in Rome that I never did before – it's my guilty secret and it was great (I will reveal all shortly). Secondly I overcame a monumental fear of heights to visit the most breath-taking view of Rome – even with my heart hammering I was mesmerised. I also had dinner in the most romantic restaurants ever. My gift to you is that I will tell you where it is because you won't find it in the guidebooks. I will also admit to doing the touristy things – I love sight-seeing on open topped buses – so we hopped on board for real feel of the city in a couple of hours.

CAMPO DE' FIORI

Campo de' Fiori is by far the best people-watching space in Rome and every evening we finished with a night-cap watching the spectacle of various characters on the square. I had a particular fascination with the small drinking fountain at the north end which if it could write a book would tell great tales. Early evening saw kids splashing and mums chatting, thirsty dogs drank greedily as their owners filled up bottles, the *Polizia*

“A temptress that led popes astray will lure you into passions and pleasures without guilt or regret”

would arrive on occasion and take a leisurely drink while glaring at the squares more boisterous elements, then the taxi drivers would gather around this ancient water cooler talking loudly, an old man who had been begging for money earlier had his nightly and very thorough wash a bit later when it was quiet. It was the highlight of my night sitting at the same table with a final glass of wine watching the comings and goings of the fountain. There's a book in it yet.

EATING & DRINKING

I also went to the famous Harry's Bar – not content being ripped off by paying double the prices of everywhere else for a drink I came back a second time. But there is something about Harry's Bar that makes you feel part of the movie set that is Rome – maybe chasing the elusive *la dolce vita*.

And we ate. Lots of eating. Now I have spilled all the receipts out on the table I am embarrassed at all we ate. Such gluttony – I had to check the dates a few times to see did we really eat all that in the same day – especially as the hotel served a very fine breakfast. It was truffle



Girl playing accordion in Piazza Navona

TIPS

A few things to note...walking is a great way to see Rome but it can be exhausting if you don't build in breaks. Water is really expensive but there are plenty of fountains with clean drinking water around the city so bring a bottle and fill up throughout the day. Expect to pay more for drinks and food in the main piazzas but for me it's worth it for the view – where else can you gaze upon such masterpieces. Dress conservatively if you plan on visiting churches and especially when you are visiting the Vatican a couple in sleeveless T-shirts were turned away ahead of us in the queue.

season so as well as eating the usual four courses we also decided to try out each restaurant's version of spaghetti al tartufo – it appears on almost every bill. In any event if you go to Rome prepare to go up a dress size unless you are far more disciplined than I am!

And here is one final admission – a big one for me... I didn't shop once. There was just too many more pleasurable activities to be had – so that was one compensation for all the food receipts. Actually I bought rosary beads. And lots of them. Not sure why, but I got caught up in it all, I haven't used rosary beads since I was at the convent a million years ago.



The Forum

PLAN AHEAD

This time in Rome, I wanted to discover the lesser known marvels. My advice if you are planning a visit is to plan ahead. This is not a city of spontaneity so book tickets in advance, plan your days well and build in time for getting wonderfully lost in the unexpected delights of strolling aimlessly and stopping for coffee or something stronger. Allow time to linger over lunch and dinner and enjoy the simple pleasure of eating beautiful food at a slower pace – Roman-style.

When myself and my son Dara, faced with a visit to the Uffizi, perhaps the most tiring art gallery of all, we made a plan to see Michelangelo's Doni Tondo in Room 25, Raphael in 26, Leonardo da Vinci's Annunciation, in Room 15 and in Room 10 Botticelli's Birth of Venus. He never allowed me to stray from the plan and we were done in a couple of hours – both happy. Rome has to be tackled in the same way. You can't expect to see everything and you will end up frustrated at what you think you've missed if you don't make a plan to do a number of things and just do them well.

WHAT'S THERE TO LOVE?

Why is Rome so special? Let me give you some really good reasons and they are all free. The Piazzas, from the famous to the not so famous, are truly majestic. Created during the Renaissance and Baroque period there are seven huge ones – Piazza Navona, Piazza di Spagna, Campo de' Fiori, Piazza Venezia, Piazza Farnese, Piazza della Rotonda and Piazza della Minerva.

Rome is full of fountains from the small relatively insignificant ones to the grand Fontana di Trevi (Trevi Fountain). The city melds and blends art and architecture from its rich 2,500 year history – Classical, Medieval, Baroque and Neoclassical. We can thank the Roman popes for the very ornate fountains where the water is but a backdrop to elaborate scenes and sculpture to showcase their power and wealth, which was also invested in grand palaces and basilicas.

And the bridges over the River Tiber equally represent Rome through the ages from the classical Ponte dei Quattro Capi, (from the Isola Tiberina to the left bank) and the most beautiful of ancient bridges the Ponte Sant'Angelo, (135 AD) adorned with Bernini's ten statues of the angels in 1688. A visit at night is a must. Rome also boasts many ancient sites and one of the wonders of the world, the Colosseum, which is emblematic of the city itself. Visit the Colosseum at night for a less crowded tour of this magnificent amphitheatre.

Poolside at Gran Melia Roma



When in Rome... FIND THE PERFECT PLACE TO STAY

The place you choose to stay is all important in Rome and we discovered the best location of all – a perfect haven after long days sight-seeing. I am a big fan of the Gran Meliá Group although it's one of the largest hotel groups in the world they just manage to get it right – at least in the ones I have stayed in. The Gran Meliá Rome Villa Agrippina has a great hill-top location in the Gianicolo neighbourhood with beautiful views of the city. This is a contemporary five-star hotel which only opened in 2012 but the site is steeped in history. The Villa Agrippina was the residence of the Emperor Nero's mother in the first and second centuries AD and during the excavation archaeological remains were unearthed – many of which are on display in the hotel. It's a tranquil oasis after a day of jostling with the crowds in the Centro Storico yet it's walking distance from most major attractions with the Vatican just ten minutes away.

Better still as we were staying a week and the temperature in October was in the

mid-20s I was keen to find a hotel with a pool – a rarity in Rome and the best to be had was at the Gran Meliá which also has a chic outdoor lounge for pre-dinner cocktails and lazy book-reading days. But it ticks all the other boxes too. The art-inspired rooms make you feel like you truly are in one of the world's finest cities, the restaurant boasts a two Michelin star chef, the clean lines and décor is stylish and witty. The lobby boasts a bust of Agrippina and we lost an hour or two pouring over art books in the library. And the added extras, Nespresso coffee machines in every room, a personalised pillow menu, cascade showers, wonderful products by Clarins, free WiFi – essential if you have a teenager but also because we relied on travel apps hugely in Rome, saves on having to take all those heavy guide books and it meant we could read up on the day's itinerary over breakfast. It also has a great spa – well worth taking a morning off sightseeing to ease those aches and pains. The YHI Spa has an open-air vitality pool, sauna and steam rooms, as well as a gym.



Hotel Lobby

But the top award for the Gran Meliá Villa Agrippina goes to the service. The staff are helpful, polite, efficient and always smiling. The concierge sorted out all of our restaurant bookings, gave us great recommendations and delivered a note to our room each day confirming reservations and all essential details. The outside concierge team are helpful and knowledgeable and organise taxis, directions and advice. This is a hotel that works on many levels but the team are the real heroes in a city that often gets a bit jaded with the millions of tourists that flock there annually. I had read many reviews of the Gran Meliá before choosing it and again and again visitors commented on the service to the point where I felt it couldn't possibly be that good... but it was. It featured in *Condé Nast Traveller* Hot List in 2013 and won a Trip Adviser Award in 2014 – both well-deserved accolades. Go to the web site Melia.com for full details of rooms and rates.

HIDDEN TREASURES

Scala Santa (Holy Stairs) & Sancta Sanctorum

Now here's something you won't come across every day or find much mention in the guidebooks – a chance to earn nine years less in purgatory for every step you take up a staircase. There are 28 steps so that's quite a lot of years. But to earn this "indulgence" there are rules you must follow. The Scala Santa or Holy Staircase are believed to be the steps that Jesus walked up when he was facing judgment by Pontius Pilate. The staircase, it is claimed was disassembled by crusaders and brought by ship to Rome to be reassembled. They are now owned by the Vatican. But the Holy Stairs are not widely advertised and the place is difficult to find. More recently there was a further claim that a bloodstain from Jesus was discovered on the stairs. A fellow traveller had told me about it so with a bit of searching we found it. Firstly find the church San Giovanni in Laterano in Piazza San Giovanni (worth visiting for the partial remains of a Giotto fresco but also because to be granted this plenary indulgence you must go to confession and receive Holy Communion before you climb. When you leave the church directly opposite the Piazza are the Scala Santa. It's free to enter and open daily. But the sacred pilgrimage is not complete unless you ascend the stairs on your knees and say a prayer at each step – that's 28 prayers. Walking up them is not allowed. *Scala Santa (Holy Stairs) Piazza San Giovanni in Laterano, 00184 00 39 06 6988 6433; vatican.va*



Scala Santa

The Vittoriano



Vittoriano Monument

The Vittoriano is a gleaming white marble monument to Vittorio Emanuele II, the first king of a united Italy. The grandiose monument began life as a monument to a king who didn't much like Rome and the feeling was mutual. However feelings softened when in 1921 it became home to the Grave of the Unknown Soldier representing 650,000 Italians who lost their lives in World War 1. One of the best things we did in Rome was to go to the roof of the Vittoriano. I dread heights and dithered quite a while before venturing up the elevator to the roof. I was so glad I did – the 360 degree view was incredible. Head round to the right of the monument and up the steps (to the Ara Coeli church) and you'll see the signs for the elevator (€7 a ticket).

Farewell Julius Caesar

Close to the top of Dara's list was to see the place where Julius Caesar was killed. Years ago a group of archaeologists announced they had discovered the spot where he was assassinated. The site is now a cat sanctuary in Rome's Largo di Torre Argentina – an archaeological area that once housed the Curia of Pompey – a sort of meeting place in the Pompey Theatre. When Caesar arrived at the Theatre that day, 14 March, 44 BC, for a Senate session and entered the Curia he was stabbed 23 times by rival Senators, led by Cassius and Brutus. We didn't stay long due to the overwhelming smell and with not a sign to tell us of the significance we could only guess at where the Curia might be situated. Not how the mighty Caesar might have envisaged his commemoration.



Leisure Jake at Giardino del Lago at Villa Borghese

Villa Borghese (and my guilty secret)

The Borghese Gardens are Rome's largest and we ventured there for two afternoons and still didn't feel we had seen all they had to offer. They began as Cardinal Scipione Borghese's pleasure park (his art collection is in the Borghese Gallery). We spent hours gazing at the amazing sculptures and wandered the tree-lined paths – these are truly beautiful gardens and a wonderful respite from the throngs and heat of the Centro Storico. There is also a zoo, an ornamental lake and a replica of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre (visit Globetheatreroma.com). I am almost ashamed to admit this but we rented Segways (twice!) and I loved it – a great way to see the huge expanse of gardens and great fun. You can also rent bicycles if you want to appear less nerdy! There are various entrances – we entered via the Spanish Steps but there is another entrance at the Porte del Popolo by Piazza del Popolo. ■