

Rome

Andrew Sanger

In most big cities, pigeons are a common sight, scrabbling for scraps around the crowded streets and squares. Not in Rome. There, huge seagulls rule the roost, swooping and screaming ceaselessly, masters of the Roman sky. A type of herring gull, they're white beneath and grey above, an eerie spectacle after dark, angel-like against the floodlit night. They eat pigeons for breakfast. Notoriously, they made mincemeat of two pretty white doves which the pope had just released as a symbol of peace. Assertive, noisy and handsome, they make as good a symbol as any of this proud city.

Rome is like a marvellous interactive history lesson, with excellent coffee served in the break. Restless, creative, stylish – this is *the* city of past, present and future. Its great teeming avenues and tiny cobbled alleys alike offer this season's fashions, fantastical Baroque architecture, Classical monuments and outdoor café tables. Sit down to a cappuccino and *cornetto*, or pizza and a glass of wine, or an idle *aperitivo*, and enjoy the scene. No wonder Rome's rather vainglorious soubriquet, *Urbs Aeterna*, Eternal City, is still used today.

The leitmotif of ancient Rome is everywhere apparent: resolve, strength, indomitable power. Remnants of its former might are as impressive as you ever imagined. A few survive almost unharmed. The Pantheon, for example, best preserved of the antiquities, has a quiet, spherical interior and columns fronting onto a lovely square lined with restaurants. It was turned into a church during the Roman era and has been one ever since. Rome is like that.

The Vatican, its magnificent dome the greatest landmark in Rome, its museum packed with Roman art, is the real inheritor of Rome's rule. That visible continuity creates a dizzying sense of understanding. Ancient



Inside the Colosseum

Rome became Christian, so became the heart of medieval Europe, its Renaissance gave birth to modern Europe, and so to the Treaty of Rome.

After a coffee in Piazza Venezia, the immense central square dominated by a stunningly flamboyant memorial to Italy's first king, Vittorio Emanuele II, we join the throng heading to the Capitol, the Colosseum and the Forum. These sights are the heart of the Classical city and top of the sightseeing list. There's no need to rush things; the entry ticket for the Forum is valid for two days. The Capitol's Musei Capitolini displays the finest Roman sculpture, the Forum resembles a park crammed with evocative ruins, while the awesome Colosseum conveys the brutality of ancient Rome.



Carvings on the Arch of Titus

Educational panels around the Colosseum walkways explain how the vast oval arena was built and what it was used for. We learn that it was a place of quite ingenious cruelty and unimaginable terror, where naked men would be confronted by hungry lions in front of thousands of spectators. Between slaughters, jugglers and clowns amused the crowd.

Of all the things we discover about this weird, perverse place, the most galling is that it was paid for from "the spoils of the Jewish campaign." In other words, from crushing Judea and destroying the Temple. A short walk from the Colosseum stands the Arch of Titus, raised to celebrate Rome's victory over the Jews. Magnificent stone carvings in excellent condition adorn the monument. Those on the interior walls of the archway depict Jews taken into slavery and centurions carrying the Menorah aloft in triumph.

The obvious next stop is the synagogue, or *scole*, a majestic square-domed building next to the rushing river Tiber. The interior is spacious and elaborate, the walls and ceiling covered with frescos and designs. The crowded Shabbat service proved quite a puzzle to this inexpert visitor, with inexplicable coming and going on the bimah, utterly unfamiliar melodies, and the chazan's curious drawn-out chant-like elision of sounds that made the Hebrew unrecognisable. This fascinating minhag is neither Sephardi nor Ashkenazi, but Italki, and dates back to Temple times, when many Jews already lived here as traders or as slaves.

The synagogue marks one edge of the old Ghetto, an atmospheric neighbourhood, still Jewish, right beside the ruins of the ancient city. Its cool, cobbled lanes are edged by tempting little eateries. Don't assume they are all kosher; some are, some aren't. Some offer a full Friday night dinner, for a set price paid in advance before Shabbat comes in. There's a café-like branch of Israeli chain Yotvata, and a useful pair of restaurants both called Ba'Ghetto – one meaty, one milky – and a score of others. The great local speciality is Carciofi alla Giudia, deep-fried "Jewish-style Artichokes", oily and succulent.

The gulls are not leaving, and Rome is still here. All the same - Jewish-style dining a stone's throw from the ruins of the Colosseum? Tuck in to a delicious irony. The tables are packed with locals and tourists, many from Israel.

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