



With a couple of days in hand, where better to round off a Mediterranean cruise vacation than in the Eternal City? VERNE MAREE fuelled up on espresso and this capital's signature pasta carbonara before tackling some of the world's most awesome sites.

Roman *Holiday*



Getting Around

We were delighted with the location of our hotel, Leon's Place, a convenient five minutes' walk from two Metropolitana (metro) stations: Repubblica on the red line and Castro Pretorio on the blue line; they're the only two lines, so you've got the city pretty much covered. At the first kiosk we saw, we invested in the €30 **RomaPass** that gives tourists unlimited transport on all buses, metros and trams, entry to the first two sights and more.

But here I must be candid. In life, you reach a point where you have more money than energy. When that happens, you take a cab (€7 to €20) instead of braving the crowded metro or wasting nervous energy on trying to get to grips with the bus system in a foreign city. It will save your feet from those picturesque but cruel cobblestones; it might even save your marriage.

Sightseeing Hits

It was only mid-June, but Rome was in the grip of an early heat wave. Armed with a concierge's map marked with encouraging ballpoint-pen scribbles – Fountain of Trevi, Spanish Steps – we donned hats and set off on foot.

Vaguely heading for the River Tiber, we passed the residence of the Italian head of state on Quirinal Hill, one of the Seven Hills of Rome, where we admired *The Horse Tamers*, a very large heroic fourth-century sculpture featuring an unheroically small fig leaf.

After we'd hurled our one-euro coins over the heads of the crowds into the **Trevi Fountain**, someone told us we should have thrown them over our shoulders to get the desired outcome: our return to Rome someday. Too late.

Next up was the spectacularly showy **Victor Emmanuel Monument** in Piazza Venezia: weirdly, it seems you can't go anywhere in Rome without passing this monstrosity. Far lovelier was the ancient, open-air **Theatre of Marcellus** (completed in 13 BC), and then we reached the blessed shade of the riverbank.

Also within alleged walking distance of the hotel are the **Spanish Steps**, and we had to believe that the steps were indeed there, somewhere under the jolly mass of visitors committing the moment to digital memory. To have the place to yourself, we hear, you need to arrive between 2am and 6am; and like most of the world, we're not quite that keen.



Previous page:
The Trevi Fountain

From top:
Victor Emmanuel Monument;
The Horse Tamers Monument



This is a good **shopping** area. Apart from the dozens of high-end outlets – Bulgari, Ferragamo, Chanel et al – in the three famous shopping streets that run from the Piazza di Spagna to Via del Corso, we found several more affordable Italian labels such as **Pinko** and **Abitart**, and a number of mid-range fashion stores along Via del Corso itself.

Shopping is always exhausting, especially for men, so it was back to the hotel for a ten-minute kip. After a casual but restorative lunch of tuna salad and roast chicken from a nearby corner caffè, it's an easy walk to the Piazza della Repubblica. From there, the red line got us to the 16th-century **St Peter's**

Basilica by 3pm. The queues were still long; we were too late for a **Vatican tour**. Though the audio-guides to St Peter's had already been put away by indifferent attendants, the place was still open for a couple of hours.

Built on the site of a much earlier basilica where the remains of St Peter himself are said to have been interred after he was martyred by Nero, this is the cathedral of all cathedrals. Its gob-smackingly vast and breathtakingly ornate interior is not to be missed.

Ancient Rome...

...is a must, especially for first-time visitors. Guidebooks and the internet are full of

recommendations on what to do if one day – or two, or three – is all you have. Travel author Rick Steves suggests a morning's "Caesar's shuffle" through the Colosseum, the Forum, Capitol Hill and the Pantheon; a quick lunch and then the Vatican City and St Peter's Basilica, followed by dinner at Campo de Fiori and dessert at Piazza Navona. Either this would kill my husband, or he would kill me.

As it was, having started off at the **Colosseum**, he was the picture of misery when I dragged him in the searing heat up, up through the ruined villas of **Palatine Hill** and along to the **Forum**. Long forgotten was the sharp joy of skipping the queues for the

Clockwise from top left: View up to Spanish Steps; River Tiber; Arch of Constantine; St Peter's Basilica

Next page: The Colosseum

Colosseum by simple dint of flashing our RomaPasses.

So he was really not in the mood to see the **Pantheon**, but a taxi got us there almost before he registered what was afoot. Entrance is free, and a €5 audio guide – yes, it does rain in through that hole in the ceiling – kept us lingering in its cool and utterly glorious interior. Built as a temple to all the gods, it was rebuilt by Emperor Hadrian around AD 126 and has been a Catholic church since the 7th century.

Speaking of guides, a small guidebook to Rome is indispensable; either that, or reams of stuff copied off the internet, as long as you remember to print them out at the office before you leave. But it has to be the right book: unlike the previous Frommer's guides I've had, their Rome one was disappointing.

I should have waited for the fantastic selection at the **Anglo American Bookshop** on Via Della Vite, near the Spanish Steps. That's where I found my copy of *A Day in the Life of Ancient Rome* by Alberto Angela, a must for anyone who is at all interested in history. Written in cinematographic style, it takes you through a single 24-hour period in the year AD 115, bringing to life the whole gamut of **Roman life**. From the way the Baths, the Forum and the Colosseum operated to how and where the people lived: housing, religious and cultural practice, social hierarchy, slavery, diet, sexual practices and so on, it's riveting stuff.

Sightseeing Misses

It goes without saying that two days are not long enough to see a city, especially one as rich and varied as Rome. It's twice as good as trying to do it in just one day, though, and it would have paid to have done our homework a bit better than we did: we should have made the necessary prior bookings for **Villa Borghese**, which was close to our hotel, and pre-booked a guided tour of the **Vatican**.

We should also have taken more careful note of opening times: two churches we'd hoped to pop into during a stroll around the picturesque **Trastevere** neighbourhood were closed for siesta.





Pizzas and More

In hot weather like this, I'm happy to subsist mainly on cappuccino, draught beer and gelato. But don't embarrass yourself (as we did) at **Bar St Eustachio**, around the corner from the Pantheon, by ordering your coffee inside and then taking it to an outside table; the price is different depending where you drink it.

Pizza-lovers will love Rome. Don't be deterred by an Irish pub sign over a doorway; the one we flopped into for lunch served icy Italian draught, divine *foccaccia* and *parmigiana di*

melanzane - nary a mention on the menu of barmbrack or black pudding.

Near the Spanish Steps, we people-watched for two hours at Toto (since 1922) over a meal of pasta, salad and some excellent Chianti Classico.

After a long day's sightseeing, you don't want to have to venture far for good food. Our hotel concierge gave us a number of recommendations, all more or less around the corner. We had a superb seafood meal at **Chinappi**, where, if you're as lucky as I was, they may give you a bottle of their own brand of nutty olive oil to take home with you.

From top:
Trastevere wall;
Piazza Navona; Hostaria
Romanesca in Campo de Fiori



Where to Stay

Three good-looking Romans swiftly check us in while we take in the lofty opulence of the **Leon's Place** hotel lobby. Located in a historic 19th-century mansion, it's all neo-classical brown and cream Carrara marble floors, neo-Baroque chandeliers and high-backed, black-upholstered horsehair chaises. Farther down, clusters of curl-up-on-me chairs and sofas lead to a trendy bar covered with silver mosaic and presided over by a friendly barman.

Spiral down the staircase to find the **breakfast room**, which serves a jolly good buffet. Roy's a bacon and eggs man, but I'm quick to breakfast as the Romans do – on a sweet apple-stuffed pastry and a creamy cappuccino. So

decadent. And who cares if the absence of protein means I'm hungry again before lunchtime? Another excellent coffee (or two) from any of Rome's thousands of vendors will pacify the appetite and stoke up energy for sightseeing. This is a holiday, remember!

Leon's Place is one of three striking boutique hotels in the Italian hotelphilosophy.com group, all with a strong design ethos; but is the only one that's part of the prestigious **Design Hotels network**. These hotels are chosen for their individualistic appeal: they're generally smaller establishments with distinctive architecture, and often located in historically important buildings. (Two summers ago, we stayed at the wonderful Elite Plaza Hotel in Gothenburg, Sweden, built in the 1880s for the Svea Fire & Life Insurance Company.)

Our spacious **Classic room** (Deluxe rooms and Junior Suites are available, too) is stylish in dove-grey and white with black accents and subtle lighting, continuing the mood set by the foyer; the big bathroom sports the same warm brown marble. An absence of

shelves or drawers to unpack our vast suitcases into – after our cruise we're laden with lady-frocks and gentleman-suits – is soon rectified by the wheeling-in of a mobile garment rack. Regrettably, we have to position it in front of a splendid wall mirror whose obvious purpose is to reflect any action that might take place in the large bed.

Roy perks up at the sight of a big flat-screen TV, but his masterly overview of 17 channels reveals not a word of English; even Sky TV has gone totally Italiano. Who knew that *Midsomer Murder's* Inspector Barnaby would be so fluent in this most romantic of languages?

After our week at sea, where internet access has been expensive and sometimes slow, it's a relief to have free, easy access to high-speed Wi-Fi. This is important for the Italian corporate clients who are the hotel's bread-and-butter; it also has two catered convention rooms for 120 and 50 guests respectively. A small fitness centre with sauna helps those corporate types to keep the flab at bay.

Leisure travellers are from the UK, Europe and Russia, and I made friends with an Aussie mother and child in the lift. However, this is not designed to be a family hotel; for one thing, it has no twin-bed rooms.





Getting There:

Our four-hour train from Venice deposited us in Rome's Termini Station, a five-minute taxi-ride from our hotel. We flew home on the Singapore Airline daytime flight, which means you can both finish your book and watch three movies. 📺

RECOMMENDATIONS

Leon's Place Hotel
leonsplace.net

Design Hotels
designhotels.com

Chinappi
chinappi.it

A Day in the Life of Ancient Rome, by Alberto Angela
amazon.com

RomaPass
romapass.it