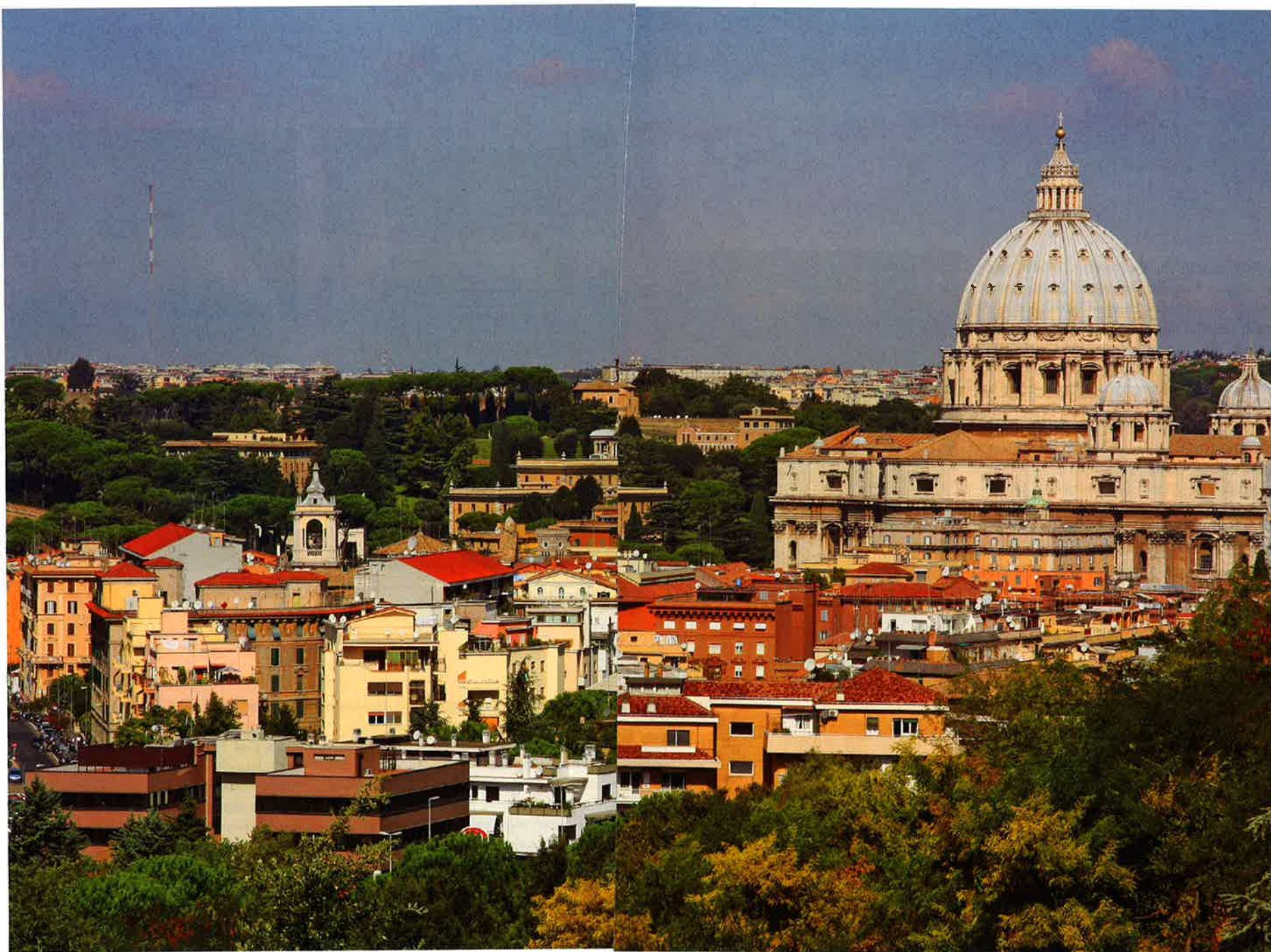


Roman Holiday

Everyone has visited the Eternal City, even if only in fantasy. But those discovering the living and breathing Rome of today will find it is even more beguiling than the city they imagined

A lone man sits before the Trevi Fountain with his paper, an empty espresso cup on the cool stone by his side, the rush of water almost a roar in the early quiet of the morning. The sky is already turning an almost impossible shade of blue and sunlight slants across Rome's crowded roofs, sliding noiselessly along the three narrow cobbled streets that lead to Trevi Square, until the light catches Neptune's cold marble face, bathing it in sudden warmth. From his chariot shell in the centre of the magnificent fountain, he's seen a lot over the years, including hordes of tourists thronging the square day and night, throwing around 3,000 Euros (HK\$34,454) a day into the water at his feet in the hopes of returning to the Eternal City. But now, at dawn, the scene is peaceful and timeless; the ideal place from which to start your Roman holiday.

Rome was certainly not built in a day, and strolling through the city is a journey back in time. It was one of the few major European cities to escape World War II relatively unscathed, and although thoroughly modern and cosmopolitan, central Rome remains essentially Renaissance and Baroque in character with a good dose of antiquity thrown in. The sheer quantity of ornate buildings, impressive statues and prancing horses that decorate the fountains are a constant reminder of the thousands of years of history crystallised in the city.



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The historic centre, or Centro Storico, is small enough to explore on foot, although not in Bruno Magli stilettos—rent a Vespa if you want to view the city with a little Roman élan—and is listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. It contains over 200 palazzi, or palaces of one type or another, 900 churches, eight of Rome's major parks, the residence of the Italian president, the Houses of Parliament and many of Rome's most famous monuments including the Trevi Fountain, the Colosseum, and the Pantheon.

But the Centro Storico is not just an historic theme park. Aside from its architectural highlights, the area is also the living, pulsing heart of the city. It boasts thousands of workshops, trendy bars and fabulous restaurants and is home to a multitude of animated Romans who laugh with, and sometimes, at, the tourists, smile seemingly constantly and gesticulate wildly throughout every conversation. Here the stereotype of Italians as the most passionate of people seems to come alive.

Getting around the city without speaking Italian is not a problem. In fact, if you are a *non parlo Italiano* soul, you have the benefit of truly appreciating the musicality of the language around you, rather than trying to concentrate on its meaning. However, a *buon giorno* in the morning/afternoon and *buona sera* in the evening go a long way and will ensure your enquiry encounters more than just a shrug. While Italians are friendly, they can also be nonchalantly dismissive and Roman waiters in particular have a

reputation for being rather disdainful, when they're not flirting that is. As the *LUXE Guide* puts it, "You could expire before being served". But, that said, the quality of Italy's legendary cuisine almost always makes up for any lack in serving finesse. So, after an early start at the Trevi Fountain, a stop for breakfast at a people-watching café should be next on your agenda.

No matter how Rome's streets twist and turn they always finally open onto a piazza grand or quaint, like the imaginary lines on



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- No trip to Rome would be complete without a visit to the Vatican, but beware of the queues
- Savour the view from Portrait Suites, the Ferragamo family-owned hotel
- Dawn is the best time to appreciate the beauty of the world famous Trevi Fountain

an astronomer's chart drawn between stars to form constellations in the sky.

Usually located near an important building, or six, piazzas are inevitably gathering places, with outdoor cafes and restaurants ready to meet your needs, whether for a quick pick-me-up, or a lingering meal for two. Italians typically start their days with a sweet *cornetto*, an Italian croissant, and a stiff espresso that is strong enough to blast your eyes wide open. A cappuccino is the other option, but whatever you do, don't order one after midday or you risk being branded seriously *déclassé*. Served all over the world, you haven't tasted the real deal before you've sat in a piazza in Rome, sipping one of these milk-laced caffeine hits and soaking up the waking world around you.

An amble westward from the Trevi Fountain will take you down the Via delle Muratte, and this enchanting lane is lined with traditional trattorias, jam-packed at night with red and white checked tables and an amiable crowd. It's quiet in the morning but at night it is thronged with stalls and the performances of 'human statues'. With a map and some luck, you'll reach Piazza di San Lorenzo in Lucina, where you can order a *caffè corto robusto*, a strong single espresso, at the charming 'Ciampini', and mingle with Rome's glitterati. There are also busier options just around the corner where you'll find the Piazza delle Rotonda with its graceful central fountain and the chatter of cafes. For breakfast with a 2,000-year-old companion who's seen it all but doesn't tell, you can't beat this spot.

In the Piazza della Rotonda, standing beneath the massive dome of the Pantheon with sunlight spilling through the hole in the top, you cannot help but marvel at the skill which created something so awe-inspiring, that has withstood centuries of change without losing any of its brilliance.

The Colosseum, to the southeast through the spectacular Michelangelo-designed Piazza Campidoglio and the remains of the ancient Roman Forum, is equally breathtaking, although its ruined state brings home its great age with even more impact. If you listen carefully as you

wander round the Colosseum's walls, you can almost hear the cheering of bloodthirsty crowds, the roars of enraged beasts and the harsh cries of fighting gladiators echoing within. Yet a *passeggiata*, or evening stroll, through the subtly lit Forum reveals a more romantic view of the great structure, glowing from within.

Sightseeing is thirsty work and by midday you'll deserve a drink and a fine meal before spending an afternoon at the magnificent Castel Sant'Angelo, or the glorious St Peter's Square, or perhaps the Catacombs of Santa Priscilla, or even... but enough monuments, how about a little Italian style instead. The Romans have been practising the indulgent art of pamperage since the days of the caesars, and Wonderfool, an Alice Band free, men-only grooming spa, or Aqua Madre, a traditional Hellenic-Roman Hammam, are the perfect places to continue this relaxing tradition.



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“Piazzas are inevitably gathering places, with outdoor cafes and restaurants”

4 Venture down some of the quieter streets around the Pantheon for a true sampling of the unspoiled delights of old Rome

5 A splash of colour in the Via del Corso

6 Twilight on the balcony of one of the luxurious rooms at Portrait Suites

Whatever your afternoon plans you are going to need lunch so find yourself an *enoteca*, literally wine library, or wine bar—The 'Cul de Sac' on Piazza Pasquino is one of the hippest—and sample some of Italy's finest wines with a selection of antipasti. Or perhaps a carbo-loading session of delectable hand-made pasta is more in order if you are considering the Vatican's inevitable queues.

For chic dining with the city's *più elegante*, head for the Piazza del Popolo and Rome's most famous eatery, 'Dal Bolognese'. Just make sure you leave room for dinner—Italian style.

The streets around the Pantheon and the ineffably grand Piazza Navona in the centre of old Rome are crammed with fantastic bars and *enoteche*, but get away from the tourist hotspots and you can find some genuine dining gems. Between Piazza Navona and the River Tiber you'll find narrow alleyways overhung with blooming

window boxes, scooters parked nose-to-nose with Fiats and the restaurants of your dreams. Do yourself a favour, put ivy-clad romancer 'Il Bacaro' up there with the Sistine Chapel on your 'to do' list and make a dinner booking now.

You will not want to miss the pickings at Campo dei Fiori either. This is Rome's colourful daily food market, open 7am–1pm, and over the river is the bohemian neighbourhood of Trastevere which is possibly the most laidback area for evening dining in Rome. Even the ubiquitous graffiti somehow adds to the area's charm and arty vibe, and the chances are you will end up party to a wedding at the Santa Maria Church, one of the oldest in Rome.

Watching the sun set over the city is also a pleasure not to be missed, and the view from the top of the Spanish Steps in Rome's glitzy shopping district will take your breath away. Bar hop from there to the Aleph Hotel's lofty '7th Heaven', to five-star, pool-



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pleaser 'Philosophy' at the Exedra Hotel, and to Hotel Raphael's roof-top darling, Terrace Bar, and the view will leave you completely breathless. Or take a pine-scented stroll from Trastevere up to the Piazzale Garibaldi to enjoy the 360 degree views of the city bathed in the glow of day's last light and build up a good appetite—because it is time for dinner.

Whether you're dining at a boisterous pizzeria like 'Da Baffetto', make sure you get there early to avoid the queue, or a roof-top showstopper such as Grand Hotel De La Minerve's La Cesta, whet your appetite with a glass of Prosecco and prepare to dine Roman style. To do it right, start with *antipasti*, followed by pasta or risotto as *primi*, then a meat or fish course as *secondi*. Enjoy *contorni* (vegetables and salads) on the side and *dolci* to round things off. Time is not of the essence when it comes to dining in Rome, with food and wine that you cannot help falling in love with, music that is more amorous than *l'amore* itself, and everything around you redolent of the centuries that have come before. And dinner is only the beginning.

Rome's nightlife is still as Bacchanalian as any in Ancient Rome with venues like Hulala

and La Maison home from home till the early hours for Rome's 'beautiful people' and the international jet set. And although the beds at 'Supperclub' are said to be comfortable, you'll probably want to end the night in yours—especially if you are staying in one of Rome's finest boutique hotels like the Dante-esque Aleph Hotel, or for sheer exclusivity and consummate style, you can't beat the Ferragamo family-owned Portrait Suites.

Wherever you are staying, so much of a holiday in Rome is about absorbing its atmosphere, interacting with its people and savouring its cuisine. While certain sights can't be missed, enjoy a Roman afternoon just contemplating life over a bowl of icy gelato in some quiet corner, or shopping for a pair of leather gloves with Italy's fashionable finest.

A few days will never be enough to truly appreciate this city, for Rome is vibrant and real, with crazy traffic and its fair share of every city's hassles, but so much of it is picture perfect that at times you feel like you've stumbled onto the set of a movie.

As the Italians say, "*Roma — non basta una vita!*" One life is not enough. ■

"Whet your appetite with a glass of prosecco and prepare to dine Roman style"

Text: Laura Miller Photos: Laura Miller/APP

7-8 No visitor can fail to appreciate the speciality food shops or the early morning market at the Campo dei Fiori

9 The view from Philosophy at the Exedra Hotel

Writer's Picks

BUON APPETITO:

First thing: Ciampini
Sparkling people and a postcard setting
Piazza San Lorenzo in Lucina, 29, Centro
Tel: +39 06 687 6606

Romancer: Il Bacaro
Stunning food and a love affair atmosphere—book well ahead
Via delgi Spagnoli, 27, near the Pantheon
Tel: +39 06 687 2554

Enoteca: Cul De Sac
Popular with the local celebs—you can't go wrong
Piazza Pasquino, 73, near Piazza Navona
Tel: +39 06 6880 1094

Pizzeria: Da Baffetto
Dinner only. Go early for an outdoor table
Via del Governo Vecchio, 11, near Piazza Navona
Tel: +39 06 686 1617

Seafood: Ristorante Monserrato
Well away from the tourist trail
Via di Monserrato, 96, near Campo dei Fiori
Tel: +39 06 6880 4095 / 687 3386

Al fresco lunch: Santa Lucia
A tree-shaded gem
Largo Febo, 12, near Piazza Navona
Tel: +39 06 6880 2427

AFTERNOON PICK-ME-UP:

Canova Tadolini
Museum-like café filled with paintings and sculptures
Via del Babuino, 150, near the Spanish Steps
Tel: +39 06 3211 0702

Bar: Roscioli
One of the oldest wine bars in town with a selection of 200 wines
Via dei Giubbonari, 21, near Campo dei Fiori
Tel: +39 06 6875 287

Cheap and Cheerful: Augusto
Even locals queue at this authentic spot
Piazza de' Renzi, 15, Trastevere
Tel: +39 06 580 3798

TOP BARS/RESTAURANTS FOR SUNSET VIEWS:

Terrace Bar
Perched above the heart of things
Hotel Raphael, Largo Febo, 2, near Piazza Navona
Tel: +39 06 682 831

Philosophy
Boasts a pool around which the beautiful people mingle
Exedra Hotel, Piazza della Repubblica, 47
Tel: +39 06 489 381

7th Heaven
Views worth dying for
Aleph Hotel, Via San Basilio, 15, Barberini
Tel: +39 06 422 901

La Cesta
Starlight, starbright—the stars are out every night at this classy joint
Grand Hotel de la Minerve, Piazza della Minerva, near the Pantheon
Tel: +39 06 695 201

CLUBS:

Supperclub
Offers beds—ideal for newlyweds. Go late
Via de' Nari, 14, near the Pantheon
Tel: +39 06 6880 7207

La Maison
Hosts international models and the jet set
Vicolo dei Granari, 3, Largo Argentina
Tel: +39 06 683 3312

Hulala
Trendy retro cool—think old movies and famous faces
Via dei Conciatori, 7, Testaccio
Tel: +39 06 5730 0429

HOTELS:

Portrait Suites
A Ferragamo family-owned townhouse hotel
Via Bocca di Leone, 23
Tel: +39 055 2726 4000

Aleph Hotel
A Dante-inspired red-themed hotspot
Via San Basilio, 15, Barberini
Tel: +39 06 422 901

SCOOTER RENTAL

www.trenoescooter.191.it
Piazza dei Cinquecento, near the Central Station
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