

GOING PLACES

JOHN COONEY

PHOTO: DREAMSTIME.COM



WHEN IN ROME ○○○



It's hard to know where to start with Rome. This dusty old city, founded centuries before Christ, was once the hub of history, the cornerstone of the Roman Empire, the centre of Christendom. I mean, this is where a she-wolf raised Romulus and Remus, and vestal virgins guarded sacred fires ... where Brutus back-stabbed Julius Caesar, and lions and gladiators died ... where Popes were elected, and basilicas got built, and Da Vinci came up with his secret code (if you believe Dan Brown). And, today, daring to write just a few pathetic paragraphs, I feel intimidated ...

Which is precisely how the city itself made me feel, after our early-morning drive from the cruise-ship terminal at Civitavecchia. Rome is truly staggering, an irresistible clash of non-stop noise and surging traffic, silent green parks and looming statues, bell-towers and steeples and tombs and



domes and fountains. Tired old Fiats driven by young Italians rush headlong past the ancient ruins that lie here, there and everywhere. And the history ... the layer-upon-layer of mind-bending history ... seems to reach out and grab you somehow!

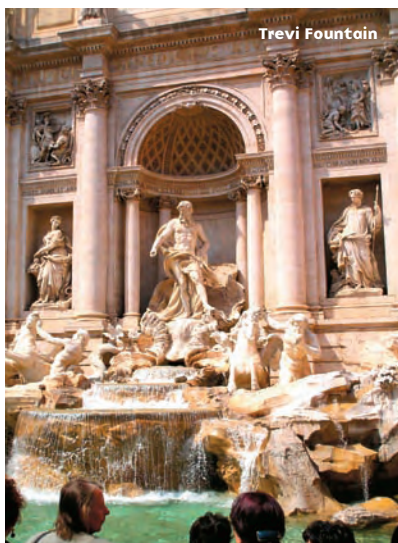
Hoping to beat the midday crowds, we drove up the Piazza Navona to the Colosseum, squatting massive, unmoved and spooky in the baking sun. This enormous arena, with its 80 entrances and maze of under-floor passages, is now a mere shadow of its former self. But, with a little imagination, you can still picture it in its heyday, with 55,000 screaming Romans buying for blood and guts.

The screaming has stopped, of course, the seats are gone, and the magnificent marble façade was stripped by vandals a millennium ago. But the ghosts remain. And as I focussed my camera on that

colossal Colosseum skeleton, I swear I could hear them still ...

On the Palatine and the adjacent Roman forum, where Marc Antony, Tiberius, Caligula and Nero all made history, we spied some more ancient archways and columns, rocks and walls, half-hidden by scaffolding and overgrown with weeds. Then it was across to the Circus Maximus (a few dotted ruins of what, in the 4th century AD, was a horseshoe-shaped racetrack with seating for 385,000) – and the Pantheon (a beautifully-preserved temple to the multiple gods of Ancient Rome).

We followed the sound of music through some narrow, cobbled streets to a tiny crowded square where buskers like playing the accordion and hoods like picking pockets. We elbowed our way to the front, and my wife took her worst-ever photo – of me tossing coins into that Very Famous Pool.



St Peter's



The Pantheon

Hard to believe, but this little piazza with its stunning baroque sculptures was largely unknown before *'Three Coins in the Fountain'* (the 1954 film) caused a tourist stampede. But don't let the queues put you off – the Trevi Fountain is, I kid you not, a sight for sore eyes

Rome wasn't built in a day, and we clearly weren't going to see it all in one. But before pressing on to our next must-see, we sat in a shady courtyard and partook of an authentic Italian lunch: fresh pasta, beef stracotto, tiramisu (a to-die-for dessert), and wine a-la-go-go.

In the afternoon, we shifted our focus from Ancient Rome to Papal Rome, taking in one of the peak achievements of European culture: the lavish St Peter's Basilica. I'm not big on old churches, I must confess, but this famous cathedral is staggering in its scale ...

overwhelming in its marble, mosaic and gold ... and a stunning testament to man's artistic genius and love of things eternal.

St Peter's has received countless face-lifts since the original basilica was commissioned in 320 AD by Emperor



Michangelo's Pietà



St Peter's Basilica

Constantine. But pilgrims still arrive in their hordes to stand beneath the vast dome, marvel at the Vatican's treasures, and receive the Pope's blessing.

It wasn't Wednesday, so we didn't spot the Pope. But we did linger longer than I expected in St Peter's nave, with its ornate decorations and priceless art ... and we did eyeball the Pietà, Michelangelo's exquisite statue of Mary with the crucified body of Jesus.

Moving? Yeah, to my surprise, it was. But when in Rome, do what the Romans do ... and a man's allowed to be moved!

It had been a demanding, rewarding, unforgettable day. And I thought I might sleep on the coach as we headed back to our ship. But no such luck. It's hard to sleep when your mind's doing overtime and the Eternal City's still going full throttle all around you ...

PHOTO: ANDRE NANTTEL (DREAMSTIME.COM) >



are you a
fun-loving
MIDLIFER
who's keen to
TRAVEL?

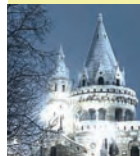
Once or twice each year, Grapevine's John & Robyn Cooney sneak away with a bunch of like-minded friends on **MIDLIFE MADNESS ADVENTURES** to places like those described in this article.

If you want to join them
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email roger.glynan@lionworld.co.nz
or visit www.johncooney.co.nz



Mediterranean Cruise
Sept 2009 ... 26 days

Nice	Portofino
San Gimignano	Rome
Sorrento	Venice
Dubrovnik	Greek Isles
Ephesus	Istanbul



Danube & Rhine Cruise
Luxury River Boat
May 2010 ... 21 days

Amsterdam	Cologne
Nuremberg	St Petersburg
Tallinn	Vienna
Bratislava	Budapest



Mekong River Cruise
Vietnam & Cambodia
Nov 2010 ... 18 days

Hanoi	Hoi An
Saigon	Mekong Delta
Phnom Penh	Kampong Cham
Siem Reap	Angkor Wat



African Wildlife Safari
Kenya & Tanzania
plus Dubai stopover
July 2011 ... 19 days

luxury lodges & open-top 4WDs

Masai Mara	Serengeti
Ngorongoro	Amboseli

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ANY DAY ABOVE GROUND IS A GOOD DAY.