

Rome: A Glimpse Into the Power and Glory

by Dave Marx, PassPorter Guidebook Co-Author

There's nothing else quite like the power and glory of Rome, a city where "awe" takes on a whole new meaning, whether looking skyward inside the dome of St. Peter's or deep into the earth at the Roman Forum. Pagan temples are converted to churches, palaces of all eras greet you at every turn, and a single snapshot can capture monuments from every age. Ancient columns and pediments are recycled for newer building facades, and the everyday grime of a thriving metropolis covers all but the recently restored sights. Rome is a city of landmarks, history, and faith.

In October 2006, I visited Rome while on our Mediterranean research scouting cruise. And being in full research mode, I made notes on my visit as it unfolded. (I have a Palm Tungsten T3 PDA and keyboard, so I can type my notes out virtually anywhere I go.) What follows is an account of my day in Rome, not written in hindsight, but instead written as I experienced it. I hope it offers you a unique and interesting perspective on the Eternal City of Rome. [Note: My first-hand report in this newsletter is an abbreviated version due to space issues -- you can view the entire report along with nearly 30 photos at the Mediterranean Scouting Cruise trip report page.]

All Mediterranean cruise itineraries lead to Rome. Or so it seems. Everyone onboard the ship this morning seems to be queuing for their "shorex" (shore excursions), all of which, due to the distance to Rome, will consume all or most of the day. (According to a shore excursions manager, 40% of passengers book a shore excursion in the typical Caribbean port, while 80% book excursions to Rome.) Spending the day onboard would be as relaxing and quiet as they come, but who's jaded enough to do that? Not me.

The morning promises yet another foul weather day. Brisk winds, overcast skies, and a few raindrops leave me less than optimistic about my photographic opportunities. Meanwhile, dockside in Civitavecchia is as drab and industrial as it comes. There's a small cruise terminal under construction, but for now it's just a parking lot, tents, and other temporary structures. In the drab, morning light you can catch glimpses of ancient, glorious fortifications from the Renaissance and before, befitting a port that was founded in 800 BC.

The drive to and from Civitavecchia is far more pleasant than the route

into Florence, perhaps for the same reason a drive into New York City is less uplifting than entry into Washington, D.C. Seats of government do not attract industry. For more than half the journey my tour bus hugs the coastline, following the route of the ancient Via Aurelia. This bears a striking resemblance to the drive along I-5 in California, where it traces the coastline on the way to San Diego. Not too shabby at all! The road gently veers left, and I'm quickly up into the rolling Apennine hills, past fields, small vineyards, olive groves, and power lines running from the generating stations on the coast. Crowning hilltops, the famous pines of Rome, with their broad, rounded crowns, look more like maples than Christmas trees. Bugged down in morning commuter traffic, the scene slowly changes from rural to the urban jumble that is Rome, where the blush of youth long ago gave way to the weariness of age. Forgive the grimy facades. What might Washington look like in another 2600 years?

Today's tour itinerary (I'm doing the "Imperial Rome" excursion) includes the Trevi Fountain, Piazza Venezia, the Victor Emmanuel Monument, Via Imperiale, the Roman Forum, the Coliseum, and St. Peter's Square and Basilica. Somewhere along the way, we'll have lunch.

The Trevi Fountain is my first stop of the day. Our bus winds through city streets while our tour guide points out some sights I'll be visiting later on. I disembark by a hillside park, trek several blocks through city streets, round a corner, and there is the fountain, at least as grand and glorious as any photo you've seen (and you've undoubtedly seen several). The neighborhood is encrusted with tourists but relatively few tourist traps (I don't think a Benetton shop counts). Perhaps the tours allocate too little time here for the tourist trade to truly flourish. Even so, there's a costumed "Roman Centurion" eager to pose for a fee, and an enterprising old fellow with a digital camera and a battered, battery-operated computer printer slung from a neck strap delivers your souvenir photos on the spot.

The Trevi Fountain's cascading waters, galloping marble horses and neo-classical building behind it are quite photogenic. If you take the time to listen to your tour guide (or any of the dozen or so others holding forth), you'll learn that this fountain is the end-point of the last of the fully-operating old Roman aqueducts. Thirsty? Off to the right-hand side of the pool you'll find a knot of fellow tourists in a grotto-like niche, where a heavy, constant stream of water spouts forth for the benefit of anyone thirsty enough to get his/her face drenched. It's fun and just a bit romantic, so join the fun!

From there it's back to the bus through different streets, past a variety of impressive residential buildings including an empty, private palazzo

at least six stories tall. It more closely resembles a New York City office building from the late 1800s, all stained stone and grimy picture windows. I pass through its courtyard, awed by fading, painted stonework that you wouldn't find anywhere in the New World.

My tour bus next deposits me on the edge of Piazza Venezia, a broad expanse dedicated to traffic and ringed by monumental architecture. I cross busy streets and walk past the huge, white marble Victor Emmanuel Memorial. Romans call it the "giant wedding cake," (with not a little derision). From the front, this monument to the founding of the modern Italian state seems to obliterate all that came before it. From the rear, viewed across the brown and grimy broken glories of ancient Rome, it's simply the white frosting on a much richer cake.

As I walk around it to the right, down Via Imperiale, my eyes are drawn into the vale that is the ancient Roman Forum. Across the road, like a succession of ancient urban renewal projects, stand the ruins of additional forums that were built as the empire outgrew the first. We had time to visit just one, the original, so down into the earth we went, crisscrossing worn stone roads, gaping as our guide described one legendary spot after another. Amidst it all, I stare in amazement at a huge set of bronze doors that have managed to stand intact for two millennia.

Want to read more? To learn about my visit to the Coliseum (it reminds me Michigan Stadium), my Roman lunch ("the pasta was al dente!"), and my experience at Vatican City (was it a coincidence that the sun came out when I arrived here?), go online to my full Rome trip report.

About The Author: Dave Marx is co-author of PassPorter's Field Guide to the Disney Cruise Line, PassPorter Walt Disney World, and PassPorter Disneyland Resort. He is also Publisher of PassPorter Travel Press, and in his spare time (yeah right) is Chairman of MouseFest.

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