



From Rome To Naples: Where Emperors Ruled

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In the first of our two part series From Rome To Naples, Happy Ali writer Trevor Hughes shares his experience of the majestic city of Rome.

5.30 in the morning is the best time to arrive in Rome. In the soft early morning sunrise, it is possible to see the seven hills which, according to legend, the twins Romulus and Remus chose as the site for the eternal city, and as you come into land you can see stretching away, quiet and empty all the roads that lead to Rome.

Three hours later and all you will see is nose-to-tail traffic inching its way forwards, exhaust fumes tinting the Roman marble a delicate shade of black, but in the early hours, it is still possible to drive from the airport to the centre of Rome and savour the silence, the atmosphere and the grandeur of this oldest of ancient cities. At every street corner, you are reminded that this is a very old city indeed, with crumbling towers and walls and recent excavations sandwiched between ultra-smart stores selling outrageously expensive designer goods and small street cafes fronting onto glorious baroque and marble monuments: tributes to Emperors with names like Adrian (who gave England its version of the Great Wall), and Caligula, who in the few moments he could spare between rounding up and slaughtering anyone he thought disagreed with him looked around for someone who he thought would make a good consul, and finding nobody he could trust appointed his horse to the job.

It is hot. A pavement café and a cold beer but an enormous Roman wasp dives into my glass (I am reading my guidebook and don't see it), and then no doubt bolstered in confidence by a few swift mouthfuls of alcohol the wasp breast-strokes its way across the glass and stings me on the mouth.

Welcome to Rome.

Into a small café for a bite to eat. Italy is full of standing-only eateries, with narrow counters to lean on as you eat your pastries and drink your coffee. In this particular café the only other patrons are two of the most outrageously attractive women I have ever seen. I smile at them – a sort of “Hi, I’m a tourist and I just got here and isn’t it great,” sort of smile. They look at me as if I have just dived into their cappuccinos and stung them on the mouth.

Welcome to Rome.



Piazza Venezia

I am in Italy with a delegation of four Mainland Chinese. The ostensible reason for their visit is to inspect merchandise, but in fact they are on a paid holiday. We have to apply to the Italian authorities for entry visas, so need copies of their passports. When I see the copies my heart sinks. Their passport numbers are consecutive. This means that these are the first passports they have held – i.e. that they have never before been outside their native country and now they are on a cultural tour of Italy. This should be interesting.

At lunchtime, my guests arrive in the hotel dining room. They obviously know nothing about Italian food. I try to explain the attractions of *osso buco* and *ravioli*. All I get is four blank looks. Then inspiration strikes. 'Noodles' I say. 'The Italians do great noodles.' My guests are delighted and we all tuck into huge bowls of *Noodles Bolognese*. During the rest of the trip we wolf down *Noodles Alfredo*, *Noodles vongole*, *Noodles marinara* and so on.

On day two, with our guide, Marie-Therese we go to visit the Vatican, that country with which Mussolini managed to buy off the Roman Catholic church in return for their turning a blind eye to his rather less than Christian excesses. Marie-Therese is a small bird-like Roman lady who is quite obviously in love with her job which consists of showing incredulous tourists the wonders of classical Rome.

"How many times have you seen this?" I ask her as we stand in the long corridor which leads down to the Sistine Chapel. "Oh, I don't know, hundreds and hundreds."

"Don't you ever get tired of it?"

She waves a hand at the corridors, the works of art, the beautifully proportioned buildings. She looks at me reproachfully. "How can you tire of this? When I have no tourists to guide I come here by myself."

"Look," she says. We are in the hall of the tapestries. She points to Raphael's superb interpretation of the resurrection. "See the stone," she murmurs, and the angle at which it lies outside the tomb." We walk slowly past. "Now stop," she says, "turn around and look again."

In real life, the positions of objects change as we move. It is a simple matter of perspective, of objects viewed from different positions. Now in this simple two-dimensional woven tapestry, the stone, which previously lay at an angle to the tomb is now pointing directly at us. It is a stunning piece of artistry. How did he do that?

Marie-Therese points to the delicate, beautiful bas-reliefs which adorn the ceiling of the long corridor. But these are not bas-reliefs, they are paintings, flat against the surface in a dazzling piece of *trompe d'oeil*. My Chinese companions refuse to believe that these are paintings. "Look," says one, "You can see the shadow," and points to the raised profile of a young man who stares contemptuously down at us from the ceiling. But even the shadow has been subtly painted in to fall exactly where the light flows in from the high arched windows.

"How can you tire of such things?" asks Marie-Therese.

Now we are about to enter the Sistine Chapel, home of Michelangelo's most celebrated work, *The Judgement*, and the most famous ceiling on earth.

"Don't do as everyone else does and look up at the ceiling the moment you enter," says Marie-Therese.

"Why," I ask innocently, becoming quite the little art critic after ten minutes in the Vatican. "Is it a matter of perspective?"

"Partly," she replies, "but mainly because if you do you will fall over the step that leads onto the chapel floor."

As she speaks a fat American and his fat wife do exactly this. The guards turn around and glare furiously at me – it is not reverent to burst out laughing in this holy place.



Michelangelo was paid a pittance for the four years he spent lying on his back to complete the painting of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, labour from which he emerged partly crippled, and half-blind, a result of specks of paint falling continuously into his eyes. He never returned to Rome but in his celebrated *Judgement* he gained a small measure of revenge. The skin of St. Bartholomew, flayed alive for his beliefs, is shown on the left-hand side of this macabre and terrible work, but the face of the Saint is actually the face of Michelangelo, a not-so-subtle reminder that he has been well and truly skinned by Pope Julius, the Pope who may well have been the architect of the world's first industrial dispute; Michelangelo having gone on strike from September 1510 for four months until the Pope paid his wages.

During his four years of hard labour, Michelangelo was continually harried and harassed by one of the Papal monks. Why was it taking so long? Why were there so many naked bodies? Shouldn't the sky be a deeper

shade of blue etc etc etc. Those who are interested to know what this particular monk looked like can see his face faithfully depicted in the painting of the horned brute who whips and torments the damned in the nethermost regions of Hell.

We fight our way through eight thousand German tourists who seem to have been told that they have hired the Vatican exclusively for the morning and make our way to that monumental marvel, Michelangelo's Basilica of St. Peter.



Most tourist sights of the world are disappointing but some – a very few – monuments do not fail. The much-touted, much praised, much-photographed Taj Mahal is still an edifice of outstanding, wondrous beauty. The palace of Versailles is awe-inspiring; but for sheer magnificent grandeur, for exquisite proportions on a vast scale, for balance and harmony and for the beauty of its decoration the Basilica of St. Peter is one of the world's creations of genius.

This is Michelangelo at the very height of his powers. It is, to my mind rather tasteless to inlay brass strips into the floor to indicate the respective lengths of other magnificent churches and to compare them with St. Peter's but this is a carping criticism. St. Peter's is a towering monument to the Christian faith and it is impossible not to be moved by it.

It took 167 years to complete the Basilica and everything about it is breathtaking. The exquisite paintings, which on close inspection turn out to actually be mosaics: the statues on the roof, each 11 metres high. I think about the labour of hauling these monoliths to a height of several hundred feet using nothing but ropes and muscle power.

"How many people died in the building of this church?" I ask Marie-Therese.

She frowns. "We do not speak of these things, only of the time and the money spent," she replies sharply.

At some stage in the chaotic history of the parade of incredible characters who managed to have themselves installed as head of the Christian church, the Romans decided to strip the Popes of their private armies, and instead to fit them out with a neutral protection force. As usual, the most neutral people they could find were the Swiss, and so the Swiss guards, in incredible multi-coloured peacock-style dress, still parade symbolically through the Vatican, rather like the beefeaters in the Tower of London.

The same large, fat American woman is posing happily next to one of the guards as her husband lines up another of the holiday snaps with which, back at home in Wichita or Wyoming he can bore all his friends and neighbours to death. He clicks, the camera flashes, the husband waves his guidebook.

"It says here," he booms, in a voice which can be heard in New York, "that these here Swiss Guard uniforms were designed by Michelangelo."

I think of St Peter's, and the Sistine Chapel and pray that he is wrong.

My Chinese visitors stare at St Peters.

"Big," says one.

"Big," agrees another.

They look again.

"Very big," says the first one, and they all nod in agreement.

So to the Coliseum.





This magnificent edifice was destroyed not by the invading barbarians but by a mayor of Rome named Berberini who stripped it of its marble and used much of its stone to build himself a palace. My Chinese companions are utterly bewildered. Why is this piece of prime real estate in the very heart of Rome occupied by a beaten up old ruin?

"Look, it's all broken," says one.

"Why," says another, "there isn't even a roof on it. Just think how many blocks of flats you could build there."

They all shake their heads at the stupidity of the Italians. As far as they are concerned Berberini was simply a man ahead of his time.

In the evening we eat at an outrageously expensive Chinese restaurant in Via Veneto. Predictably the food is awful. Each dish looks and tastes exactly like the others. The meal drags on, and I am half asleep. In the entrance to the swanky Mandarin Restaurant, resting on an ornate inlaid Italian lacquered table there is a two-metre high fruit sculpture, pineapples, melons, apples, oranges, grapes etc., which has been carefully and artistically arranged, possibly the only feature of the restaurant in which anyone has taken any pride. As the meal ends one of my guests stands, strolls over to the fruit sculpture, selects a green shiny pear which is approximately four inches from the base and polishing it on his none-too-clean suit trousers returns to the table.

It is like an explosion. There is fruit everywhere. My guest contentedly munches his pear while the other three are searching among the rubble stuffing melons and pineapples down the front of their suits, oranges and cherries in their pockets. The waiters and managers are screaming at me in furious Italian. I can do nothing at all because I am curled up at the table in complete hysteria.

Welcome to Rome.



Rome is a city of young people. From seven in the evening until the early hours the streets are crowded with young Romans wandering around, talking, listening to folk singers on the Spanish Steps, stopping for a drink at the outdoor cafes, trying to pick up girls. There seems to be no one in Rome over the age of thirty, but all is revealed when we visit the 'Fantasia', a show described as a 'Roman Spectacle.'

A spectacle it is. The forty-five-year-old fat blowsy woman with the bottle-blond hair and the tight black sequined boxer shorts; the pensioner with the moustache who continually pretends to be falling over, drunk (at least, I assume he is pretending); the pretty girl singer who cannot sing a note; here is the answer to the question of 'where are all the old people of Rome?' They are here, on the stage, putting on a ghastly spectacle for four hundred Japanese car workers and us.

The next day we go to Tivoli to see the fountains. They are not working. Instead, we go to see the famous fountains at Trevi. They are closed. Obviously October is the Italian dry season. My Chinese companions

are tired and want to go to bed. Thank God for that.

Tomorrow we go to Napoli.