

Travel

Rome is an odd mixture of ancient wonders and modern life existing side by side in a comfortable embrace, writes **Devapriya Sanyal**

Treasures of the eternal city



The famous Colosseum in Rome.

In recent times, it's the photos and videos flooding social media that draws people to different cities across the world. But before all of this, cities charmed people slowly, mostly by making appearances in school curriculum, TV shows, and films. Growing up, Rome was one of the first cities that made me want to know more about a place, especially its history.

From reading about it in Shakespeare's play Julius Caesar in school to coming across modern day documentaries on it, Rome has lingered on my mind since childhood. My curiosity piqued while making plans to travel to Italy and I found myself spending five days in the eternal city.

Rome, the capital of Italy, is a bustling city spread across almost 1300 square kilometres. As a first-time visitor, the city surprised me by how different it is from the other Italian cities that I had visited along the way, and especially

Paris, which it is often twinned with. While Paris was cold, and rainy and the northern part of Italy was being lashed by rains as I left it, Rome was basking in all its sun-kissed glory.

Food comes first

Before starting my exploration of the city, I decided to eat some cannoli, the city's famous tube-shaped dessert. The outer shell is flaky and crisp and it is filled with a sweet filling, usually made with ricotta cheese.



The creamy cannoli filled with pistachio and ricotta cream.

Ordering coffee in Italy comes with a twist. Coffee is typically enjoyed while standing at a bar. However, if you prefer sitting and sipping, you have to pay a cover charge of three euros or more.

While eating in Rome, it is always a good idea to do some research about different cuisines. I ended up having Sicilian dishes in the heart of the city,

leaving the quintessential pizza and pasta (which come highly recommended) for another day. One way to ensure that you enjoy the favourites and go beyond a tourist map is by asking locals for suggestions about good restaurants and places to visit. You might end up surprising yourself with some unusual additions to your list.

Trastevere is worth a visit on a quiet evening if you want a good pizza or pasta for dinner. A bohemian air permeates the neighbourhood, which is rather infectious. Away from the noisier and bustling parts of Rome, it lets you watch life pass while sitting on one of the benches lining the many squares. Children play nearby as twinkling fairy lights come alive as the sun sets.

Must-see attractions

There were quite a few hop-on hop-off bus tours to help navigate the main attractions of the city but I chose to do my own excursions on the first day.

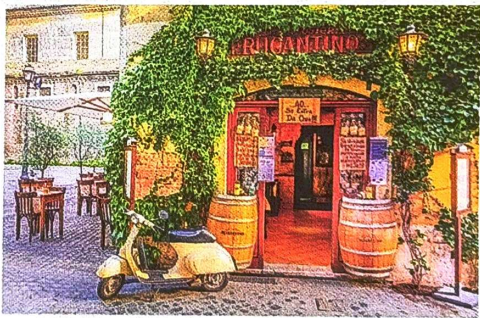
As most European cities are very walkable, I explored Rome on foot. By the end of the day, I had managed to squeeze in at least three attractions—the Baths of Caracalla, the Pantheon and Villa Borghese, each distinct from the other. While Rome is a huge city with three railway stations (Termini being the most important, largest, and centrally located one) the historical centre is quite small. It falls between the Tiber, the Villa Borghese, Termini railway station and the Forum Romanum.

The Colosseum was unmissable for me, not only because of the history it sits on but also because it is where Russell Crowe as Maximus fights to the death the antagonist Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) in Ridley Scott's film 'Gladiator'. Adjacent to the Colosseum are Palatine Hill and the Forum Romanum which are worth a visit. From witnessing the grandeur of the Roman empire, exploring the ruins of an ancient Roman villa, walking in the shade of a Roman garden to marvelling at a still working ancient fountain, there is much to take in.

If all this walking leaves you hungry and thirsty, head to the neighbourhood of Via Cavour which is about 30 minutes from the Colosseum, where you can enjoy a good meal at the bistro, Benso's. I had their famous seafood ri-



The Roman Forum, an archaeological wonder.



The picturesque Trastevere.

sotto along with a glass of mojito.

You can also visit Moses by Michelangelo, a famous sculpture housed in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli. It occupies space in an unassuming quiet neighbourhood. Near to the church, there is the Non-Catholic Cemetery in the Testaccio area where you can visit the graves of two celebrated English poets, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. For me, this was a kind of pilgrimage. Rome comes with scenic views and if you want to immerse yourself in a beautiful boulevard, make

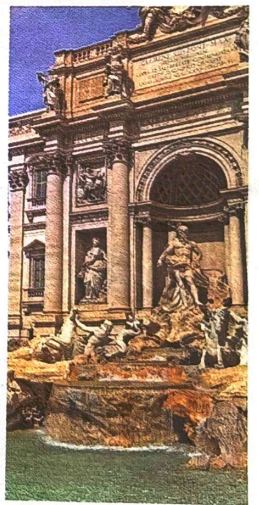
space in your itinerary for the Piazza Navona, which holds a good collection of shops. As you keep walking, a nondescript lane off it leads to one of the landmark fountains of Rome, the Trevi. I dropped a mandatory coin into it, took pictures and even had a gelato.

Although walking through the city made it possible to savour it, I also did one of the hop-on hop-off bus tours to see many more places in this iconic city. Would I come back to Rome? Yes, I would. It's one of those places which you cannot get enough of in one visit.

For history lovers

BEYOND THE POPULAR ARCHAEOLOGICAL DELIGHTS, THERE IS MUCH TO SEE IN ROME.

- 1 **Quartiere Coppedè:** A complex filled with palaces and small villas in the Trieste district. It is known for the essence of Art Nouveau and whimsical architecture.
- 2 **Ostia Antica:** Sitting a little outside Rome, this ancient ruins site was once a bustling port.
- 3 **Baths of Caracalla:** This was the second-largest bath complex in ancient Rome and is a must-visit for anyone interested in Roman architecture.
- 4 **Pyramid of Cestius:** Built between 18 and 12 BCE, this is Rome's only surviving pyramid from ancient times.
- 5 **Catacombs of Priscilla:** This ancient underground cemetery consists of a huge network of tunnels. It spreads across about 13 kilometres and contains around 40,000 burials.



One of the most famous fountains, the Trevi Fountain. PHOTO BY AUTHOR

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