

ushered out by the security staff. We take the long stairway down to the plaza, and then head toward the entrance to St. Peter's Basilica. We see the two New York couples who were on the train with us.

It's fitting that Karen sees the "mother of all cathedrals" near the end of our tour. We join the crowds near the bullet-proof glass surrounding Michelangelo's "Pieta". The camera flash doesn't seem to help unless we are within 10 to 15 feet of our subject, but I snap away then hand the camera to Karen while readying the video camera. Unlike many cathedrals throughout Italy, there is no prohibition against photography inside St. Peter's. The lighting is better than most, but it is difficult for the camera to do justice to the magnificent works we find at every turn. St. Peter's crypt rests in the center, under the main cupola. A huge canopy supported by four posts 20 feet high covers it, perhaps signifying his final resting place.

We consider climbing the cupola, but our tired feet and empty stomachs overrule that decision. We make our way outside, taking our time to admire one of the grandest buildings in the world. The area surrounded by the colonnades was once a chariot race track in early Roman times. We walk down the boulevard to a cafeteria. Karen saves an outside table while I order Lasagna and a tall beer. When I return to the table, Karen realizes how hungry she is and digs in for a couple of bites before heading inside. She happily returns a few minutes later with Lasagna and a glass of Chianti. While the Lasagna has been great to mediocre during our trip, we rate today's meal a "10".

We stop at the BNL Bank near the Vatican en route to the metro to change \$300 at a great rate of 1.194 plus 3.77 € service charge. Patrons must pass through a security door, and cameras and backpacks are not allowed inside. We take the Metro back to Piazza Republica, stopping at the



Karen relaxes at Hostaria Al vero Amatriciano restaurant. Is that a picture of John Candy's relative?

local deli to pick up some cheese, bread, wine, and munchies. Back in the room, we enjoy a mini-feast while relaxing and watching MTV. It feels great to get the shoes and socks off!

We head out to the *Hosteria Romano* on Via Rasella for dinner about 7:30, only to find it crammed with patrons. We meet a group of American women in the entrance and compare notes. While everyone seems to be well served by the staff, they don't seem very interested in accommodating us (we should have made a reservation!) The place is a bustling, upscale diner. I recall a restaurant a few steps away, [Hostaria Al vero Amatriciano](#), that offered a reasonably priced menu and good choices with a quiet atmosphere. We decide to eat there. Karen enjoys some of the best lamb roast ever, while I order the buffalo steak. We can hear a TV blaring in the other room, where the grandparents are probably relaxing, but the hostess is very good and the food is great. We head home for a well-deserved rest.

Saturday, November 5th

We wake to another great breakfast, although it drizzled rain during the night and the sky is overcast. The old gent who sat reading his paper in the Roman sunshine on a neighboring rooftop yesterday morning is no where to be found.

We head off to the Metro and exit at the Coliseum stop. As we leave the station, the Coliseum is directly in front of us. It's still early, and the tour groups haven't arrived yet. There is no sign of any



The Coliseum, Rome.

tourist-harassing street gangs, likely due to the presence of a police van parked nearby. We check out the Arch of Constantine next to the Coliseum, built in the 3rd century A.D. to commemorate the legalization of Christianity.

In search of a restroom, we take a quick stroll through the Roman Forum, getting our first glimpse of the ancient wonders of Roman architecture. Following the guidebook, we find the restrooms. As I exit the single locked room, I come face to face with a Roman gladiator, who was waiting his turn. The guidebook warned of actors dressed in period costume who pose for pictures with unsuspecting tourists, then extort an exorbitant fee afterwards. Who is going to argue with a guy with a sword in his hand?

We take the street back to the Coliseum, passing large stone maps on a wall depicting the size of the Roman empire as it expanded between the 500 B.C. and 500 A.D.. We encounter an Italian man walking in our direction and ask directions to the Domus Aurea, Nero's golden house. Through sign language and his description, we find the Domus Aurea on a hill behind the Coliseum. At the crosswalk, cars roar past oblivious to the illuminated "WALK" sign. As with other things in this country, we've learned that the Italians expect you to be as assertive as they are. So I stick out my hand, make eye contact with the nearest driver, take a deep breath, and step off the curb. It's how the game is played.

We arrive at the entrance, at the far end of a two-story wall of ancient stone. Each armed with an audio guide, we head in down a long, dimly lit tunnel with a group led by a guide who speaks English and Italian. As we arrive at each stop on the tour, she gives a brief description of our surroundings, then we listen to the details using the audio guide. The ruins are in remarkably good



The interior of the Coliseum. Rome

shape, considering they were buried for hundreds of years and only recently excavated. The coloration of some frescoes on the walls is evident, while only outlines remain of other artwork. We

try to imagine it as it once was, a grand palace overlooking an artificial lake where the Coliseum now stands. In one octagonal room, we can see the remains of an elaborate fountain built into the wall. Several small rooms form a perimeter, and in the center a dome let in sunlight. Several of the many rooms have been closed off due to continuing excavation, but we see enough to appreciate how grand the palace must have been in its day.

As we near the Coliseum, we are approached by one of the many students selling group tours. A tour of the Coliseum and the Roman Forum is 36 E for the both of us, and it seems like a bargain. We are tagged with dots and sent off to join a group tour already in progress. Our guide is an Italian woman whose accented English is understandable. She points to a vertical line between black and white marble, explaining that cleaning years of road grime from the Coliseum is an “ongoing” project. Our group passes the long line of waiting tourists, and we are ushered through and into the interior. We pause between the inner and outer walls, where our guide explains the history of the Coliseum.

The emperor Domitian ushered in the games during his reign in the 1st century A.D. to demonstrate the power of Rome and unify his constituents. The number of people and wild animals killed in gladiatorial spectacles over the years is staggering. Although some gladiators were paid freed men, the majority were slaves or criminals. Occasionally slaves were offered the opportunity to win their freedom, but the odds were long (say, 5 combatants to 1 slave).



The ancient Roman Forum.

After the 20-minute lecture, we explore the Coliseum on our own. The honeycombed underbelly, which once included trap doors, elevators, winches and pulleys, is fully exposed. A very small portion is covered by a recently built floor at the far end. It is easy to imagine the place filled with cheering spectators, with Caesar on one side and the Vestal Virgins on the other, each sitting in their “VIP” boxes.

We rendezvous with our tour outside the Coliseum, and begin the short walk toward Palatine Hill. Our guide Claire, a student from England, describes the beginnings of Roman civilization over the roar of nearby traffic. As we hike up the hill, the impressive remains of palatial ruins rise up from the surrounding foliage. We pause at an overlook of a sunken arena, about the size of a football field. Claire describes how Roman nobility would party for days on end, with feasts lasting from morning to night. For entertainment, mini-chariot races would be held in the arena. The chariot drivers were children, and the chariots were pulled by farm animals.

We stop at a piece of marble on the ground. As Claire splashes water on its ancient surface, colors of green, ochre, and blue suddenly spring to life. She explains that contrary to popular belief, the Romans abhorred white marble. They much preferred their buildings and floors to be brilliantly painted. The holes we see in the palace walls once held studs that supported huge slabs of marble. We come to another overlook of a large square containing a latticework of channels that once held pools of water. To bring light into the interior of the palace, Roman engineers would build shafts running from the roof to the ground floor. The light would be reflected by the water and illuminate the dark rooms.

As we pause at the well-preserved remains of a marble column, Claire explains that the alternating pattern of eggs and scythes symbolize birth and death, and the perpetuation of the Roman empire.



The Arch of Constantine, founder of modern Christianity.

A large, gray, squarish, modern building nearby seems out of place amongst the brown stone and marble ruins. It seems Mussolini felt that having his headquarters on Palatine Hill might impart some of the ancient glory of Rome's emperors to his Fascist state.

We pass two buildings in a gardenlike setting built as aviaries by the Medici family in the early 1700's. Finally, we come to a railing atop Caligula's palace offering a panoramic view of the Roman Forum. Claire points out that it was no accident that the caesars built the palace with a view of the garden of the Vestal Virgins, where they bathed in the two large pools that still stand today. Any man who came anywhere near the entrance to the garden was immediately put to death, no questions asked.

As the tour disbands, we take a short break to feast on a lunch of bread, cheese, salami and wine. Refreshed, we find our way down the hill to the Arch of Titus at the entrance to the Forum. We gape in awe at the size of the Basilica of Constantine, large as a football field, which once housed the Roman hall of justice.

We enter the forum's main square and come to the Temple of Julius Caesar. It's small and crude and not much to look at, but the pyre marks the spot where he was cremated. At the far end of the forum is the Senate building. It is a large, rectangular building at least 6 stories high. The tiled floors still retain their colorful patterns of ochre, yellow, green.

We walk past the Temple of Saturn, with its immense columns. We come to a small hut that's fenced off but has no markings to indicate what it was. It looks as if it is still being excavated. What stories it could tell!



Marble floor in the Senate building in the Roman Forum. Romans preferred colors to white marble.

Karen discovers a secret bathroom near another excavation site, the Santa Maria Antiqua Project. A sign describes the work in progress, a restoration of the earliest known site of Christian worship in the Roman Forum.

We walk back up the slope past the Temple of Antoninus and Faustina to the main street, towards the subway station. It's twilight and the crowds are out in full force. I snap pictures of the four large tiled maps adorning the wall of the Basilica which depict the expansion of the Roman Empire over 1,000 years.

The subway car is crowded, but the ride is short – only two stops to the Piazza Republicca.

As we head out for dinner, a light rain begins to fall and we finally get to use our umbrellas. Another short subway ride takes us to the Spanish Steps. The rain is starting to fall harder now, but that doesn't stop the crowds from turning out for a Saturday night stroll. A short walk down a side street brings us to Ristorante Il Gabriello, another find from Rick Steves' guide book. The restaurant is in the basement, down a long, steep flight of stairs. The place is warm and bustling, and we are seated immediately. The pasta is very good, and as we leave we have a small-world encounter with Bob Barrett and his wife who chose the same restaurant (from the same guide book, no doubt).

We walk back to the subway station, only to find that the rail line back to Piazza Republicca has closed for the evening – for repairs. On a rainy Saturday night, their timing could have been better. We sense a conspiracy with the local taxi drivers, but like all conspiracy theories it is difficult to prove (especially in Italy). We hail a cab and pay the 10E fare back to our hotel.



View of the Alps near the French-Swiss border, socked in by low clouds.

We awake Sunday morning at 4am and are ready to depart by 4:45. The shuttle arrives with only one other couple as passengers. We drive through the wet, nearly deserted Roman streets – a perfect time to travel to the airport. Forty-five minutes later, our driver drops us off at the terminal. After wandering around for awhile, we find the check-in counter near the opposite end of the terminal. It is roped off and guarded, so we wait in line. At some undisclosed signal, the guards begin letting passengers through the barrier while checking passports. Our old friends, the New Yorkers, arrive shortly thereafter (we first met them on the train from Venice to Florence, then again on the Vatican tour).

The attendant at the British Airways check-in counter is not very friendly (slightly bitchy, in fact) and gives us some minor grief over the weight of our carry-on baggage. Apparently, some airlines weigh carry-ons and others don't. Later, when we board the plane, the carry-on luggage is not weighed or checked. As the plane takes off, we break through the low clouds into sunshine once more. Before long, the magnificent Alps appear in the distance, and are easily visible on a crystal-clear day.

As we approach London, we fly low over the Thames River and under the pall of gray clouds shrouding the city. We reclaim our luggage, then begin the long trek through Heathrow airport to the security checkpoint. After passing through security without incident, we locate the AA Admirals Club and check in at the front desk. The attendant checks on our flight to Chicago and issues our boarding passes. We enter the sprawling complex, finding reading and TV rooms, comfortable sofas, free snacks and drinks. I decide to sample the Jack Daniels, and relax with a USA Today newspaper, while Karen chats with a couple of Brits en route to a job in Indiana.

Finally, it's time to leave our comfortable oasis and board the plane for Chicago. We sit at the gate for awhile, then begin taxiing to the end of the runway. As the pilot announces that we are eighth in line for takeoff, I decide it's a good time for a nap and pull the blanket over my head to shut out the light. I'm shaken awake a few minutes later by Karen, who is speaking urgently about the fact that our plane had just been hit by a Turkish airliner. Apparently it clipped our wing and tail with its wing tip while moving parallel to us, causing us to feel a slight bump. The firetrucks, ambulances, and police vehicles swarm to the scene of the collision, but there is apparently no serious damage. Forty-five minutes later, we arrive back at the gate and are off-loaded to a waiting shuttle bus in the cold, drizzling rain. We queue up once again to pass through security, then it's back to the Admiral's Club to play the waiting game. It occurs to us that the one-day pass has been a wise investment. There is no offer of food or any other compensation, so we relax and wait. Four hours later, we board a replacement plane for Chicago and are served by an irritable crew.

Once in Chicago, we breeze through Customs and are handled pleasantly and efficiently by American Airlines personnel, who book us on the last flight to San Diego at 9:14pm. We check in for a brief stay at the Admiral's Club, and find that the drinks here are not free as they were in London. I place a call to Paul to learn that the Chargers eked out a win on the road against the New York Jets.

We board the plane for the final leg of our long journey, and sleep most of the way home. The Express Shuttle takes a long route home up I-805 then through Mira Mesa, and finally deposits us on our doorstep at 1:00 am – 28 hours after leaving our hotel in Rome.

It's good to be home!