

ROMAN HOLIDAY

Local art historian (and film buff) **Nicky Bird** takes a break in the Eternal City and shares memories and travel tips



I WAS SITTING IN THE LEANDER CLUB watching our rowers powering through the water when a fellow member said – ‘You know, Rome is much like Henley.’ Really? How? ‘A river runs through it.’ I suggested this was all we had in common. Henley lacks a Colosseum and you will search in vain for a nice big Baroque fountain like the **Trevi** to splash in, *à la* Anita Ekberg in *La Dolce Vita*.

But prompted by his moronic comment, I thought a Roman jaunt in November might actually be just the ticket. So off I went to Heathrow with family, including 2-year-old granddaughter, to enjoy precisely those things in the Eternal City that are missing in Henley. I was armed with a letter from the *Henley Standard* vouching for my journalistic credentials. Amazingly, it didn’t always work. A papal guard had never *heard* of Henley’s premier paper!

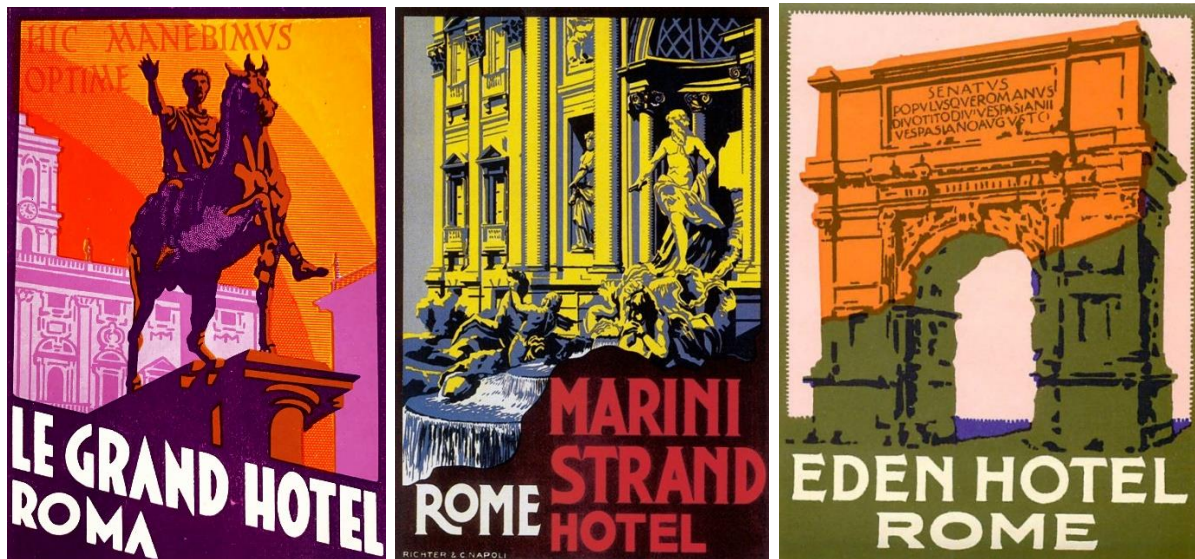
Getting there



When journalists travel abroad you will note at the end a sly acknowledgement that the hack was ‘the guest of British Airways and the Splendido Hotel’. Which means they didn’t pay for anything and are effectively bribed to write nonsense. I did not accept such largesse so can honestly state that British Airways got me to Rome and back in one piece but there the pleasure ended – due to interminable delays, on the tarmac and in the baggage hall. However, all travel nowadays is ghastly: Heathrow is on our doorstep, and the BA flights in steerage are cheap so you might as well fortify yourself with something sparkling and bear it. By the way, your EHIC card is valid until the expiry date. And you won’t need to show Covid stuff.

Rome’s **Fiumicino Airport** is a breeze (what a contrast to the chaos of Terminal 5 at home). Best advice is to pre-order a taxi to wait for you, especially if you need a child seat, and you aren’t alone. Try emailing cars@travelonline.org for a minivan that will cost €70 for the 40-minute ride. Reliable; and the drivers are mostly nice ladies (on the way back the ‘official’ rate is €48 - agree with a cab at a rank beforehand). There is a bus service from the airport (€6) but it’s slow. Fastest option is the train, the *Leonardo Express*, which takes you to **Termini station** in 32 minutes (where it connects with both metro lines - the metro is fine but you will miss the sights!). The train runs every 15 minutes and costs €17.90. By the way, taxis in Rome aren’t cheap - an average journey in the centre costs around €10. They like a tip but don’t expect it. Knowledge of football aids conversation. Rome’s *Seria A* teams are Lazio and Roma, they divide the city in two, and share the **Stadio Olimpico**. ‘Won’t that make it rather crowded?’ asked my missus. No, *idiot*a, I replied politely, they play on alternate weekends. E-bikes are everywhere in Rome, just left on pavements. Do not for a second think of driving a car in Rome. And, by the way, don’t shop. Except in old specialist shops like **L’Antica Cartotecnica** (*Piazza dei Caprettari, 61* - near the **Pantheon**) devoted to the art of writing, where you’ll be seduced by notebooks bound in vintage papers, the perfect travel journal.

Places to stay



Where to stay? I once stayed at the Grand Hotel (now the **Grand Hotel Plaza**) when it was part of the great CIGA chain of Italian luxury hotels; their service even extended to meeting us with a car by the plane! And whooshing us away. No idea how we scooted past customs. I had dropped my duty-free booze on the tarmac. The whisky and bits of glass were still slopping about in the plastic carrier bag when I arrived at the hotel; unblinkingly, the concierge decanted it into a carafe. The **Grand** - an ode to the Belle Époque - is still grand with fabulous views from the Limoni Terrace (over **St Peter's** and the **Spanish Steps**) and a fine location on the central (if noisy) *Via del Corso*... but it's punitively expensive, and rather tired. However, sneak in and look at the great lion staircase, used by Fellini (the Grand was his favourite hotel) in his film *8½*, and by Bogdanovich in *Daisy Miller*.

I love terraces. When in Rome do as the Romans do, and stare. From terraces and cafes. You can ogle the passers-by on the *Via Veneto*, but its glory is past, the heyday of Mastroianni in *La Dolce Vita*, of Papparazzo – the vile tabloid snapper who gave his name to a breed – are gone; today the thoroughfare that winds upwards to the **Villa Borghese** gardens (200 acres!) is polluted by pretentious hotels and eateries and overpriced shops, the haunt of mugs.

Other hotels have fantastic views – like the old **Forum** (www.hotelforum.com - by the **Roman Forum** and the **Colosseum**) beloved of Jackie Kennedy and Liz Taylor– and are cheaper. The **Forum** has a panoramic rooftop restaurant and an even loftier bar. Try for a corner bedroom.

I was in Rome before Covid and stayed at the **Circolo della Caccia** (the Hunt Club) which is a posh old club, where the staff swan about in turquoise

pantaloons, dressed like jockeys. The tradition is that guests join the aristocratic gents at their table. My Italian was stretched by trying to translate 'Boris Johnson has a zipper problem'. The club is on the *piano nobile* of the 17C **Palazzo Borghese**, down from the **Spanish Steps**. Do try and con your way in for a decko, say you're a member of Boodles (a 'reciprocal' club).

Once a monastery, the **Martis Palace Hotel** is just off **Piazza Navona**, the site of the ancient Stadium of Domitian, an arena for games and where – when the Piazza was flooded – mock naval battles would be staged, outDisneying Disney. It may be a bit boutiquey for some tastes but it's a palazzo boasting another rooftop bar with views of the **Pantheon's** dome – which is still, after 2000 years, the world's largest unreinforced concrete dome. Inside what was originally a temple is **Raphael's tomb**. Vasari, his biographer, said he died of too much sex.

Piazza Navona

In the centre of the **Piazza Navona** stands Bernini's magnificent *Fountain of the Four Rivers* of 1651; at the southern end is della Porta's *Fountain of the Moor* but the original sculptures were long ago removed to the **Borghese Gallery** (what you see are copies), including Bernini's statue of a *Moor with a Dolphin*. Bernini had originally shown Pope Innocent X a model of a Triton struggling with a fish atop a large shell. The Pope said: 'I like it. Except the Triton. And the shell. And the fish.' So Bernini went back to the drawing board for something of 'greater nobility'. During the war, the **Piazza Navona** was briefly a camp for American soldiers. They admired the fountains and 'liberated' the fingers from the sculptures as souvenirs.

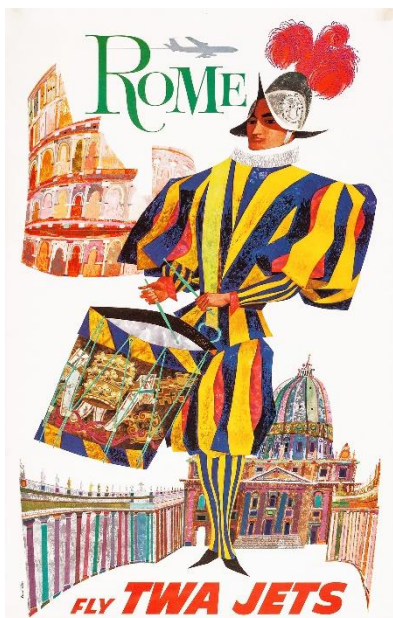
Vandalism

It's just as well the originals are gone because in 2011 a lunatic with a hammer vandalised them; he then went on to attack the **Trevi Fountain**. In 1972, another disturbed chap called Laszlo Toth, who thought he was Christ, smashed Michelangelo's *Pietà* in **St. Peter's** (not, incidentally, Rome's cathedral, that is another basilica, **St. John Lateran**); the statue was going to be left unrestored but wisdom prevailed and the restoration is invisible. Hundreds of fragments from Toth's mad moment were picked up by appalled onlookers and returned... one was posted back from Ohio by a shamefaced souvenir hunter. The pity is that the *Pietà* is now behind bullet-proof glass and too distant to appreciate its refinement of handling. But it's still awe inspiring. One block of marble, two life-size figures intertwined, an impossibly youthful Madonna and her dead Son – yet in a pose that seems utterly natural such is

Michelangelo's genius. I first saw the *Pietà* – via a moving walkway - at the New York World's Fair of 1964, where it was the star of the Italian Pavilion. It wouldn't happen nowadays. For a recent Leonardo exhibition at London's National Gallery, the organiser asked a Louvre curator if he could possibly borrow the *Mona Lisa*. 'Non, the Japanese wouldn't allow it, it is why they come to Paris.'

Don't leave **Piazza Navona** before admiring the originality of Borromini's dramatic concave façade to the mid-17C church of *S. Agnese in Agone*. He was a troubled genius who eventually killed himself. Nor should you miss his extraordinary helicoidal staircase in **Palazzo Barberini** (*Via delle Quattro Fontane, 13*; open 8.30-19.00, closed Mon).

St. Peter's and the Sistine Chapel



Entry is free to **St. Peter's** (opens 7.00 am, closes 18.30 in winter, 19.00 in summer; closed Wed morning). However, you must go through security, even if, like me, you have a press card; but if you're not pregnant or disabled or Phillip Schofield you can't avoid the queues. Best to go on a Tuesday or Thursday, before 9 am, or 40 minutes before closing. You can reach the dome and its great vista via the lift (€10). *Conducted* tours to the **Vatican Museums** (including the **Sistine Chapel**) and **St. Peter's** DO allow you to jump the queue but they are expensive - and do you really want to pay to hear a bossyboots bang on? Here is a better idea. Avoid the ghastly crowds in the **Sistine Chapel** by booking an 8 am visit - www.headout.com/sistine-chapel-tickets-c-2984. It is, thank God, guideless. It costs €27 (usual entry is €17) but is money well spent.

You'll have lots of time to ogle the Vatican's riches on the way, and to spend time with Raphael's frescoes... the Chapel itself doesn't open until about 8.40. When there, at last, you'll be almost alone. When I was in the Chapel in 2018, having chosen a bad hour, I sat with hordes eating Chinese takeaways, which added little to Michelangelo. His ceiling (1508-12), and his later

Last Judgement (1536-41) on the altar wall, will astound. The cleaning of the ceiling has brought out its vibrance; but definition was lost because restorers removed some dark patches which weren't dirt, but shadow or modelling which the artist had deliberately added onto the dried fresco.

Papal Audiences are on Wednesdays in Bernini's piazza just in front of the Basilica's steps. It takes about two hours for the Pope to walk round the various sections. You need to be in place by 8.45 am. For tickets and details see - www.vatican.va/various/prefettura/index_en.html.

In winter, Audiences move to **Hall Pope Paul VI** on the left as you face the church. On Sundays at noon **Papal Blessings** take place, usually lasting 20 minutes. In 1968, I attended such a Blessing in the company of Caitlin Thomas, the widow of Dylan Thomas. She was overcome. Not by religious fervour but by drink.

Seven Hills

Rome has **Seven Hills**, as any fule kno. See at least two: the **Capitoline Hill** by the overblown **Victor Emmanuel II Monument**. The **Campidoglio**, as it is known, is a majestic urban design by Michelangelo. The equestrian statue of **Marcus Aurelius** in the centre is a replica of the original Roman bronze in the adjacent museum. Atop the highest hill, the **Quirinal**, a short steep walk up from **St. Peter's**, is the President's palace (once the home of popes and kings). The changing of the guard ceremony takes place here daily at 3. A band plays, some Verdi perhaps. It is all a bit Ruritanian, sloppier than ours, but fun. The **Piazza del Quirinale** boasts a Bernini church, massive statues and a fantastic view. It is one of Europe's greatest spaces.

Views

You will also relish the views from the **Pincio Terrace** (climb the stairs from **Piazza del Popolo** or walk through **Villa Borghese** following the signs. Sundown is perfect – it faces west). And from the **Gianicolo Hill**, behind **Trastevere**, where a cannon fires at noon and has done for nearly 200 years. It's truly panoramic, and takes in the *centro storico*. Access via steep stairways (to avoid the road).

Trastevere

Trastevere is over the Tiber (literally 'beyond the Tiber'), a place to spend days wandering its cobbled alleys and squares. Once the Jewish quarter, it developed a separate culture although some grand Romans had villas here, notably Julius Caesar. It's home to several American private colleges; students

frequent the often cramped bars and pizza places. The jewels are its churches, particularly ***Santa Maria in Trastevere***, ***Santa Cecilia in Trastevere*** - both very early with fabulous mosaics - and ***San Pietro in Montorio***, which includes in its courtyard the important ***Tempietto***, a circular colonnaded tomb built by Bramante, around 1500. It is a masterpiece of harmony and marks the traditional spot of St. Peter's martyrdom. **Trastevere** is where Sergio Leone, the director of spaghetti westerns, grew up. He went to the same school as Ennio Morricone, who composed his film music. Incidentally, there was a good reason why so many old Hollywood films feature Rome at their core. Money. After the war, the Italian government froze profits from US films (and offered nice subsidies) so Hollywood could only use these foreign assets by making films via the great Roman studio Cinecittà (founded by Mussolini in 1937). They started by making romantic dramas and comedies, like *Roman Holiday* in 1953, which shot Audrey Hepburn (and of course Rome) to fame, and *Three Coins in the Fountain* (1954) which made a star of the Latin smoothiechops Rossano Brazzi. Sophia Loren went on to international stardom after appearing in 1951 as a nubile slave in the dreary sword-and-sandal saga, *Quo Vadis*.

Roman Holiday



Roman Holiday – the Spanish Steps, the Colosseum

The final scene of *Roman Holiday*, when the beautiful Princess Ann (Hepburn, who won an Oscar) is in her embassy, was filmed in the Great Hall (or *Sala Grande Galleria*) at the magnificent **Palazzo Colonna**. A 3-minute walk from **Trajan's Column** at *Via della Pilotta, 17*. It's been in the Colonna family for 20 generations. How these Roman families preserved their *palazzi*, paintings and fortunes through revolution, war, Mussolini and socialism is a tribute to lax inheritance laws and creative accounting. **Palazzo Colonna** is open to the

public on Saturdays from 9.30-13.15 (last entry). The older, magnificently decorated wing, known as the **Princess Isabelle Apartment**, is included in a €25 tour (unescorted). Princess Isabelle was, in Republican Italy after the war, a sort of surrogate queen. She entertained the Queen Mum here.

Roman Holiday nearly didn't get made because the Italian Ministry of Tourism thought it 'degraded' the natives. But when made, it's a Cook's tour of Rome. Starting at the **Spanish Steps** (so called because of the Spanish embassy at their base, below the *Trinità dei Monti* church at the top), on to the marble mask of **The Mouth of Truth** (*Piazza della Bocca della Verità*) - which will bite off the hand of any liar who puts their hand in its mouth... thence, to Hadrian's **Castel Sant'Angelo** on the river, originally a mausoleum (and where Tosca leapt to her death), the **Trevi Fountain**, where 3000 coins are thrown for luck every day (varying according to the economy), the 19C **Palazzo Brancaccio** (*Viale del Monte Oppio, 7*), now a wedding venue, the location of Hepburn's fancy bedroom and on...



Sala Grande Galleria, Palazzo Colonna

Private palazzi

Another family, like the Colonnas, who've preserved their inheritance are the Pamphili who own the grandiose **Palazzo Dorio Pamphili** at *via del Corso, 305* (not to be confused with the **Palazzo Pamphili**, the Brazilian Embassy). **Palazzo Dorio Pamphili** has 1000 rooms, more than Buckingham Palace, and 650 paintings, including works by Caravaggio and Raphael - plus the great Velázquez portrait of **Innocent X**, made famous by Francis Bacon's series of screaming popes. How Velázquez managed to satisfy his client while depicting

him as a picture of corruption and deceit is a mystery – and triumph. There was a recent inheritance squabble over the Pamphili millions (the paintings are in trust and can't be touched; nor, by papal diktat, can the estate be divided). The case centred on the present Prince Jonathan, who was adopted, having had surrogate children with his gay partner. His sister, Princess Gesine (also adopted), challenged the legal status of their right to inherit. She has given birth to four children with her husband. The court found in Jonathan's favour. Awkwardly, Gesine lives in an apartment in the palazzo. Jonathan's Ferrari was parked downstairs when I visited, a bonkers car to have in Rome's frenetic streets.

If you have time, there are three other private *palazzi* you might visit. All magnificent. The largely 18C **Palazzo Patrizi** (Piazza di San Luigi de' Francesi, 37) has private tours (info@palazzopatrizi.it - www.palazzopatrizi.it) and the Marchesa Elisabetta Patrizi hosts cooking classes. The **Casino dell'Aurora** is part of the **Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi**, a hunting lodge, and an elegant example of early Roman Baroque. The main attraction is the fabulous and famous **L'Aurora** fresco by Guido Reni (www.casinoaurorapallavicini.it - open first day of every month, exc. Jan, from 10-12; 15.00-17.00. *Via XXIV Maggio*, 43).

The 18C **Villa Albani Torlonia** (Via Salaria, 92) is, as owner Prince Torlonia says, 'a vast architectural complex, one of the finest expressions of the antiquarian taste for which Rome became the privileged destination of the Grand Tour.' It has the largest collection of Roman artefacts outside the Vatican, and paintings by Perugino and Tintoretto. Silvio Berlusconi wanted to buy it, but Prince Torlonia told him to sod off. For a visit – nfo@fondazionetorlonia.org.

Palazzo Farnese is now the French Embassy: this Renaissance jewel can only be visited via a (mercifully) short guided tour (€12.00) - www.visite-palazzofarnese.it/prodotto/visita-guidata-palazzo-farnese. Tours in English are indicated. A century after Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling, Annibale Carracci painted an equally influential fresco, *The Loves of the Gods*, a muscular celebration of dance and joy, of colour and light. The façade on the cobbled **Piazza Farnese**, by the river, makes this 'the most imposing Italian palace of the 16C' (Banister Fletcher). Michelangelo completed the top storey – with its dramatic deep cornice. The *palazzo* is the scene of Tosca's confrontation with the evil Scarpia. Walk across the ancient footbridge, **Ponte Sisto**, and over the other side of the Tiber, in **Trastevere**, is the **Villa Farnesina**, acquired by the same papal family (open Mon-Sat 9.00-14.00), famous for Raphael's

fresco, *Triumph of Galatea*. And Peruzzi's *trompe-l'œil* frescoes of a columned loggia with a city and countryside beyond, everything illusory.

Illusion

I love the trickery of illusion. If you share this passion see Gaulli's magnificent Baroque ceiling in the late 16C **Chiesa del Gesù**, the Jesuit mother church (*Via degli Astalli, 16*; open 7.30-12.30; 16.00-19.30 – avoid Sundays). Even more spectacular, is Pozzo's ceiling in **Sant'Ignazio** (*Via del Caravita, 8a*; open 7.30-19.00 – again, avoid Sundays) which shows St Ignatius wafted into paradise, past painted columns and arches, all *trompe-l'œil*. For the best view, stand on the small yellow spot on the nave floor and look up – or look in the mirror placed there. The architecture soars. The church is a few minutes from the **Pantheon** and **Dorio Pamphili**. For an illusion of perspective, see Borromini's trickery at **Palazzo Spada** (*Piazza Capo di Ferro 13*; open 8.30-19.30, closed Tues), a magnificent colonnade whose diminishing rows of columns and rising floor level trick you into thinking its four times as long as it is. And he compounds the effect by placing a seemingly life-size statue of Mars at the end, which is actually only 60cm high.

Villa Borghese



Bernini's virtuoso *Rape of Proserpina* (detail of Pluto's hand)

The now state-owned **Borghese Gallery** (closed Mon, otherwise open 9-19.00), housed in a 17C villa, is another place to see early. It's in the northeast corner of the lovely **Villa Borghese** park, landscaped in the English manner. The villa's niches were once adorned by hundreds of Roman busts but they were all nicked by Napoleon. His plunder is in the Louvre.

The **Borghese's** 20 rooms contain some of the greatest High Renaissance masterpieces – Raphael and Titian but above all Caravaggio and Bernini. On the ground floor is Bernini's *Rape of Proserpina*, finished when he was just 23. Marvel at the detail of Pluto's filthy paws imbedded in poor Proserpina's thigh. Marvel too at the sculptor's *David*, all Baroque drama and dynamism, so different from Michelangelo's introspection. Bernini is *entertainment*. Two reminders about the collection. Firstly, there is nowhere to sit down. I asked a guard - why no seats? 'Because people might sit on them.' Eh? I presume he meant they'd look untidy. Secondly, Roman villas were built without a grand staircase; stairs are tucked away, almost hidden. The first time I visited I missed the great pictures upstairs. Don't. You must book tickets in advance. www.galleriaborghese.beniculturali.it/en/visita/info-biglietti.

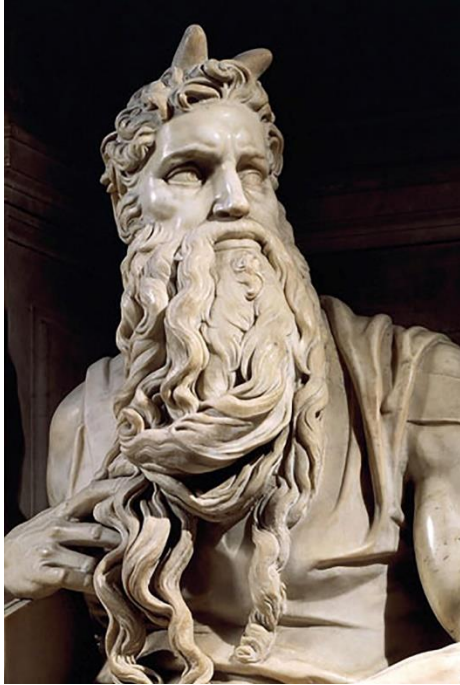
The best way to see the **Borghese gardens** is to hire an electric bike – Bici Pincio, *Via di Campo Marzio*. 2-person: €12 per hour; 4-person €20. Not cheap but worth it. You can also pedal to the beautifully restored zoo (*Viale del Giardino Zoologico*), just 200 yards from the Gallery.

Caravaggio

After the **Borghese**, wander down to the early 19C **Piazza del Popolo**, named after the poplars which Valadier, the architect, used in his semi-circular design (a bit like Bernini's for **St. Peter's Square**). There is an Egyptian obelisk in the middle. The piazza was the old entrance to the city, and needed to impress. Magnificent Baroque twin churches lie astride the northern entrance. But most important are the two Caravaggios, in a small chapel, in **Santa Maria del Popolo** on the other side (Bramante and Bernini both had a hand in the church). The *Conversion of St. Paul* and *The Crucifixion of St. Peter* are extraordinary compositions. Art historians refer to their 'tenebrism', to 'chiaroscuro', but do not be bamboozled, it just means heavily contrasted light and shade (art historians also refer pretentiously to painting '*en plein air*' which just means 'outside'). What stunned (and appalled) the artist's contemporaries was Caravaggio's use of ordinary people to represent the saints. And that his focus was on the rump: the rump of St. Paul's horse and that of the peasant lifting St. Peter's cross. You will need €1 to work the light to see these pictures. A euro well spent. Caravaggio was the bad boy of Renaissance art, a

violent yob who fled from Rome in 1606 after killing a well-connected pimp in a brawl. He was sentenced to beheading which explains the obsession with severed heads in his painting.

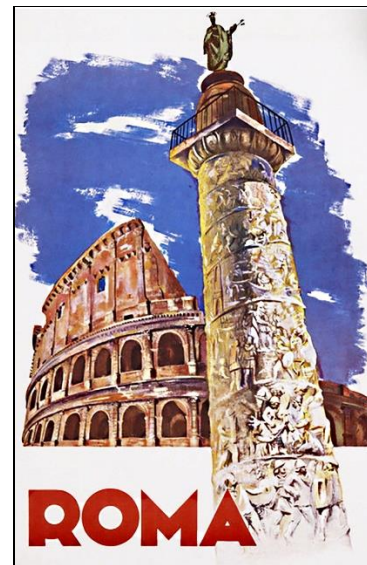
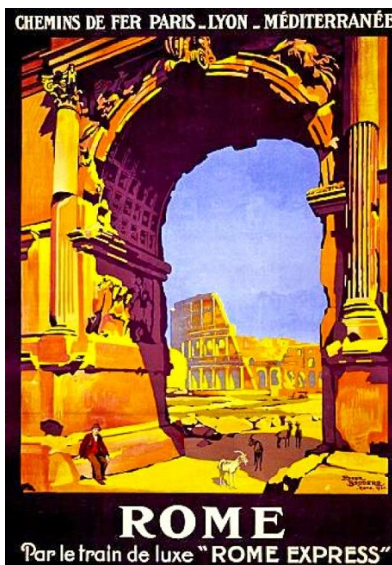
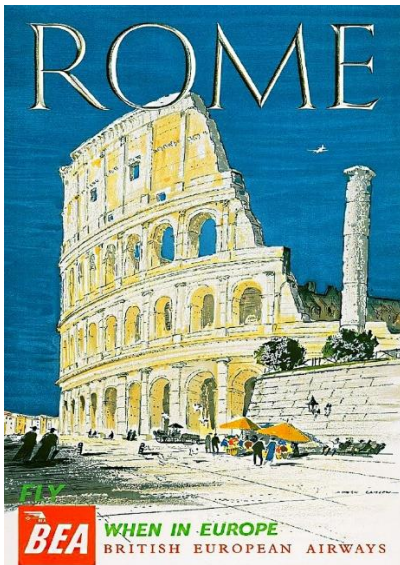
Michelangelo



You will need another euro to see Michelangelo's *Moses*, with his 'mighty beard' (Freud), in **San Pietro in Vincoli** (*Piazza di San Pietro in Vincoli*, above the **Colosseum**). The name refers to the 'vincoli', chains (in a reliquary under the main altar), used in St. Peter's Roman prison. Relics were big business in olden times. Without them no pilgrims; thus no income. The horns on *Moses*' head are the result of a biblical mistranslation. *Moses* is the only part of the tomb of Pope Julius II wholly by the great sculptor, a tomb originally conceived for over 40 statues, but which was endlessly interrupted, not least by Julius himself (actually buried in **St. Peter's** basilica) insisting

that Michelangelo paint the Sistine ceiling. 'But I am a sculptor!' protested the artist. 'Here's half a million,' said the Pope. 'OK,' said the sculptor. Incidentally, the painting prompted a Renaissance jest. Julius, fed up with the slowness of the work would shout up to Michelangelo on the scaffolding – 'When will you be finished?!' 'When I am done!' came the reply. Ho ho.

Ancient Rome



The Colosseum – seen through the Arch of Constantine, and with Trajan's Column

Stroll down to the **Colosseum** (finished 80 AD), the largest amphitheatre ever built. It is partly destroyed - by earthquakes but also by locals pinching the stones for their own houses. The entrance is on the south side, on *Via dei Fori Imperiali*. It is open from 9 am to one hour before sunset. Pre-book tickets here - www.coopculture.it/en/products/ticket-colosseum-roman-forum-palatine_24h. The ticket will also get you into the **Roman Forum, Palatine** and **Imperial Forum**. You can pay extra for an 'archaeologist guide', but it's a risk. They can drone on. And be historically unreliable. I heard one say that 'Nero was a hero of the working class and so was hated by the aristocracy who murdered him.' A novel view.

Some good eating



If the *Via Veneto* is to be avoided, the area to its east, just below the **Borghese gardens**, is a good, quiet, convenient place to stay (and eat), away from the more polluted centre. I stayed at the **Rose Garden Palace Hotel** (*via Boncampagni, 19* - www.rosegardenpalaceroma.com), which has a nice indoor pool, perfect for the grandchild, and an efficient chap who runs it called Filippo Guzzardi. Off season he will lower prices. There are two very good family restaurants nearby. The panelled, elegant **Girarrosto Fiorentino** (*via Sicilia, 46* - www.girarrostofiorentino.it) isn't cheap but it's a local institution, deservedly so (Meryl Streep dines here). It looks formal but they welcome toddlers and provide highchairs. A minute away is the cheaper **Ristorante Cesarina** (*Via Piemonte, 109* - www.ristorantecesarinaroma.it), also traditional, attentive and child friendly (as are most Roman restaurants, this isn't Paris). They speak English but try your Italian, it is appreciated. Mine is accompanied by authentic arm movements. You don't need to tip by the way.

Bernini

Five minutes down the hill you will find one of Rome's Baroque glories. In the **Cornaro Chapel** of **Santa Maria della Vittoria** is Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, which was finished in 1652 (open 9–12, 15.30-18.00). It's a stunning theatrical *tour de force*, depicting the moment when the Spanish saint (and Carmelite nun) was pierced with a golden spear by an angel, and transfixed by religious ecstasy. It fell foul of prudery, her ecstasy appearing close to sexual abandon. Bring the usual euro for the light.

Be street savvy

One thing not shown in *Roman Holiday* is petty crime. Keep your money and passport safe, it is *not* secure in a rucksack on your back, the expert thief can slit it open in a trice. But beware, also, the stranger who claims to have been robbed, asks for help, and either accepts your largesse, or picks your pocket. By the Colosseum two ladies approached me with a sob story, but they weren't quite upset enough and a rat was smelt. The most creative ruse is The Stripper. A pretty lady is seen arguing in the street with a shopkeeper, who accuses her of shoplifting clothes. She is so upset that she starts stripping, slowly, to prove her innocence. Once she's down to her underwear, the shopkeeper apologises and she vamooses. Suddenly all the men in the crowd find out that their wallets have vamoosed too, thanks to a team of pickpockets. I'm sorry to say I have never lost money this way.

Nicky Bird's TOP 12 Roman sights



You probably won't have much time for sightseeing so best visit ESSENTIAL ROME. This is my shortlist:

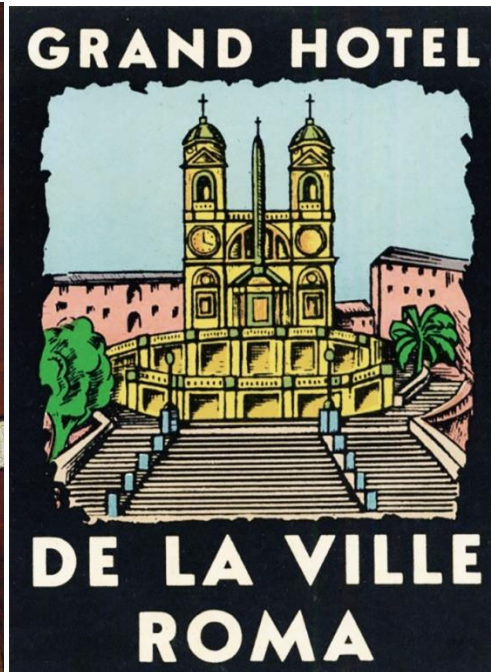
SISTINE CHAPEL ST PETER'S BASILICA (and the view from the dome) **COLOSSEUM & FORUM PANTHEON PIAZZA NAVONA** (and Bernini fountains) **BORGHESE GALLERY PALAZZO DORIO PAMPHILI SANTA MARIA DELLA VITTORIA** (for Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*) **SAN PIETRO IN VINCOLI** (for Michelangelo's *Moses*) **TREVI FOUNTAIN SANTA MARIA DEL POPOLO** (for Caravaggio) **CAMPIDOGLIO** (or the Piazza del Quirinale for the view)



Nicky Bird at the *Colosseum*, guarding his wallet; at *Palazzo Pamphili*. And being mugged by two ladies by the *Colosseum*



Innocent X by Velázquez



Spanish Steps