

## **A five day visit to the Eternal City ... ROME**

This five day visit to the Italian capital was Anne's birthday treat for me so I could fulfil a lifetime ambition to visit the Roman Forum and the Coliseum. One can read as much as you like about such places, and study entire albums of photographs, but there is nothing like a personal visit to properly appreciate the scale and size of a historical site, be it large or small.



**The Forum from the Capitoline Hill looking along the Sacred Way towards the Coliseum.  
The Palatine Hill to the right.**

The Forum was in fact much larger than I had imagined, and we spent much of our first day exploring it. In the days of Rome's greatness successive Emperors vied with one another to improve and expand the original area along the Sacred Way which leads from the Capitoline Hill towards the Coliseum. I was able to see for myself the monuments and structures I had previously only read about, and more importantly it was immediately possible to place them in context to one another and appreciate properly the location they occupied within the original city landscape. The administrative buildings, temples and triumphal arches may now be in ruin, but all stand on the spot where they have been for the past 2,000 years.



Anne and I tend to explore on foot as much as possible, finding our own way about with the aid of a good guide book. In this way you see more of the unusual and less well known aspects of the past away from the tourist hotspots, but there are occasions when joining a guided tour can pay dividends and the visit to the Coliseum was one of them. For a start we were ushered ahead of a queue literally hundreds deep awaiting entry and once inside our guide gave us an entertaining but factual introduction to the monument before leaving us to explore at our leisure. We therefore got the best of both worlds and away from the crowds in the vicinity of the entrance found plenty of interest including a fascinating exhibition on entertainment in the Roman world.



**Vatican City and St Peter's Basilica.**

With our two principal objectives achieved, the rest of our visit was ours to spend as we wished. One entire day we spent at the Vatican where we chose to manage without guides and which, despite the crowds and long queues, we enjoyed. To reach the Sistine Chapel the queue was over an hour long, but as it wound its way through the museum and some richly decorated Vatican apartments there was plenty of interest to see along the way. It was a nice touch here too that benches were provided at regular intervals so we were happy to take our time and enjoy the experience. Whilst exploring the catacombs beneath the basilica we were surprised to stumble across the tomb of the deposed King James II of England and his son 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' – I'd never realised that this is where they were buried.

One of my favourite places in Rome was the Palatine Hill which was accessed from the Forum and for which there was an additional charge. Perhaps for this reason it was relatively tranquil and un-crowded, an oasis of calm amongst the throngs of visitors. According to legend this was where Romulus founded the first city and at the time we were there archaeologists were uncovering traces of an Iron Age settlement from that period. Later it became the palace complex for the Roman Emperors, and latterly the site of a botanic garden. The hill therefore had an attractive park-like feel about it, and the wide views it offered over the hurly burly of the city and the forum were worth the small additional admission fee in themselves even without the extensive ruins of the former palace.



Anne and I really enjoyed the city and certainly plan to return one day. As we strolled round the city remains of ancient Rome popped up in all sort of unexpected places. It was almost, as she put it, as though the old city was *permitting* the present one to share its space. Away from the main streets and tourists traps we found cafes and restaurants where the food was excellent and the charges reasonable, and where the shops offered good quality products with price tags that didn't break the bank.

On the final morning whilst strolling round the Capitoline Hill we stumbled across something which we felt summed up Rome for us both. Sometime in the past, probably in the 1930s, an extensive clearance programme had taken place here, but fragments of the pine-ends of some buildings had been left clinging to the side of the sheer rocky face of the hill at one point.

There above us were the fragmentary remains of a humble chapel dedicated to St Rita from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Way below the present road level at the base of the cliff were the relics of a shop from the days when Rome was the centre of an Empire – a 1,500 year span of history in a single glance. The “Eternal City” indeed!



**The remains of the Chapel of St Rita.**