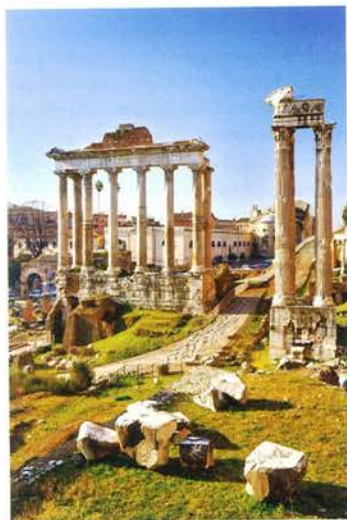


THE ETERNAL CITY

If all roads lead there, yours, by proxy, will too. How, then, to make the most of Italy's capital city? RICHARD BROWN embarks on a pilgrimage to find out



ROME: the threshold of the Apostles, the capital of the world, the city of the soul. Also home to the Altare della Patria: an eruption of white marble and Corinthian columns that stretches for 135 metres along the ground and up 80 metres into the air. Gleaming in an early morning sun, against a cloudless blue sky, the statue-adorned, fountain-ornamented megalith was enough to stop this first-time visitor in his tracks. The scale, the splendour, the story. This is what I had come to see; this was what Rome was all about. Except, apparently, it wasn't.

"Only completed in 1925, this monument is considered an absolute failure," explained our guide. "Nicknamed 'the wedding cake' or 'typewriter', it is highly-conspicuous and overly-elaborate, monstrous and vulgar, an affront to the aesthetics of Rome." Ah. I see. Best put my camera away then.

So, where was the good stuff? Well, everywhere else you looked apparently.

It seems you can't walk around Rome for more than a minute without stumbling across something that makes Canterbury Cathedral look relatively current. 1,800-year-old mosaic floors here, obelisks that pre-date Christ there. Such is the extent of this city-sized museum that I didn't realise the significance of half the things I wandered past on my first afternoon, until I was reading a tourist-friendly map a few hours later.

Rule Number One: when in Rome, it pays to employ a tour guide.

Having enlightened us on the failings of the least favourite memorial in Rome, ours was more than happy to act as history teacher; even arriving equipped with a pocket-sized handbook that helpfully (for the unimaginatively-minded) laid reconstructed images of how ancient Rome once looked, over pictures of the ruins that remain today. It was a book that came into its own once we had moved from the 20th-century typewriter to the sprawling ruin of architectural fragments and intermittent archaeological excavations that make up the Roman Forum, the oldest part of the

The Altare della Patria, or 'typewriter'



Left and Below: Regina Hotel Baglioni



city and a great place to introduce yourself to one of the birthplaces of Western civilisation.

After viewing what remained of the Basilica Maxentius (the last and largest of the Roman basilicas) and an education into the plight of the Vestal Virgins, we moved from one cluster of mind-boggling remains to another: the Coliseum, where, we were pleased to learn, our guide acted as a one-way ticket to the front of the queue (infuriating, no doubt, for the lesser mortals who had been standing in a line that in high-season can snake on for hours).

You've seen the arena brought to life most vividly in *Gladiator*, but until you set foot in the world's largest amphitheatre – the survivor of fire, earthquakes and stone-robbers – you don't realise just how easy it is to imagine how life would have been there two millennia ago.

Rule Number Two: when in Rome, choose your hotel carefully. Depending on your reasons for visiting, this will mean different things to different people. Let's just say, to get me where I'm going with this, that you've come to experience the

opulence of Rome at the turn of the 19th century in surroundings that befit the glamour of that period. You have? Then good. The Regina Hotel Baglioni has a room waiting for you.

Found on the famous Via Veneto, the backdrop of Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, the one-time home of Queen Margherita of Savoy now boasts a period-feature façade and an Art-Deco interior straight out of Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby*.

Esteemed as one of the most important historical buildings in Rome – which, in a city whose centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is saying something – the Baglioni is a lesson in refined luxury, a mash up of marble, chandeliers and statues, with rooms that mix dark woods and homely colours with heavy curtains and rich fabrics.

If it wasn't for the architectural wonders waiting beyond the hotel's windows, you could easily spend a weekend between the Baglioni's spa and wellness area and its Brunello lounge and restaurant (where the food is superb, by the way). With numerous landmarks just minutes away,

however, chances are that the likes of the Trevi Fountain, Spanish Steps and Piazza Barberini will be enough to encourage you to leave your room.

Rule Number Three: when in Rome, the early bird catches the worm. In the EU's third most-visited city, it pays to find ways of avoiding the crowds. Rising early to embark on a 'breakfast banquet and museum tour' of the Vatican (available through darkrome.com) is one way of doing so. Arrive at 6.50am and in groups of no more than 10, you'll enjoy an extravagant spread (maple syrup pancakes included) before exploring the city's limits (your personal tour guide in tow) ahead of anyone else. Whether you are religious or not, the Vatican truly is a sublime, otherworldly place, and your experience of its treasures will only be enhanced by watching the city come to life in an ethereal, early-morning light.

So, Rome: the city of echoes; the city of illusions; the city of yearning (to borrow the words of a better writer than I). Yearning seems the appropriate term. I've been aching to get back from the moment I left. Not to see that monstrous 'typewriter', mind. Nope, who'd be impressed by that? ☹

Double rooms at Regina Hotel Baglioni are available through Citalia (0843 770 4443, www.citalia.com).

The leading Italian specialist is offering a saving of up to £480 per couple on a three night five-star break to Rome. The holiday starts from £679 per person and includes a free night, return flights from London Gatwick with Easyjet and three nights B&B accommodation at the five-star Hotel Regina Baglioni in a Deluxe Double Room. Price based on departures after 22 July 2013.