

The charm of the past in holy Rome

The Queen will have an audience with Pope Francis for the first time tomorrow when she visits Italy. Sarah Sands went ahead of the royals on her own tour of the Eternal City and the Vatican



Renaissance masterpiece: the grandeur of St Peter's Basilica is a highlight of any visit to the Vatican (Picture: Alamy)

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It's exhilarating to live in a city that feels like the future but we should never underestimate the charm of the past. If I had to leave London to live in another European city, it would be Rome. I am not sure how much work would get done or which laws would be obeyed, but can you imagine a daily commute that took

you down streets once tramped by the legions, alongside the ruins of markets laid out by Trajan, within touching distance of the Pantheon?

I had not been to Rome for a decade, but when I went back for a weekend only the traffic next to the Colosseum had changed (it's largely re-routed, so the old stones no longer look like they are sitting alongside the North Circular). Here's a forever-young antique with a breadth and grandeur that makes Florence seem poky, in a capital with a rough, hard edge beneath the beauty, using a language so lyrical that it is hard to believe people are simply ordering groceries; a city that celebrates an impossible male ideal in which even the children of Bernini and Michelangelo seem bulked up and ripped.

The Evening Standard Travel Offers: Rome - Ancient & Baroque

Having arrived on a pleasantly warm Friday lunchtime, our first task was to decide between a timetable of cultural history and an unplanned ramble through the streets and parks. Knowing my husband and I — mirroring the Queen and Prince Philip, who will also visit this week — were signed in for a tour of the Vatican the following day, I opted for simply wandering.

It was the right decision, given that our hotel, the Baglioni, sat at the foot of Via Veneto, the street with the starring role in Federico Fellini's *Dolce Vita*. The black-and-white celebrity photos outside the Café de Paris and Harry's Bar promised faded rather than present glory, so we walked on through the ancient city wall to stroll around the Borghese Gardens, where Roman courting couples outnumbered the tourists.



City of culture: Rome is full of ancient sites such as the Forum

The Baglioni is sufficiently far from the main tourist drag to feel local, yet near enough to be a tourist. The hotel has recently created a penthouse apartment, from which the views of Rome are supposed to be fabulous. Another couple had beaten us to it. Our room was grand but not fussy, with muted colours and a marble bathroom. We were hardly in it.

The trick in European cities is to walk, finding familiar landmarks and coming on new sights serendipitously and from unexpected angles. This way, even the Spanish Steps are a surprise. Better still, walk early, before the tourist buses are spewing out school parties, when the hawkers and cartoonists and the freelance guides are still having breakfast. Those early hours offer deserted pavements and a special quality to the light that turns Trajan's Column, the Colosseum and the Piazza Navona into new discoveries.

Of course, there are many ways of discovering and rediscovering Rome. On my first visit, too many years ago, I was heavily pregnant and developed a slight Madonna complex as a result of many pattings and blessings. So many of Rome's riches are inspired by the Roman Catholic Church that it is possible to come upon treasures in every other street, until each brilliant church façade threatens to blur into another. We might have planned better but we really didn't need to. On Saturday evening, one of the 20 tables outside the small family restaurant a couple of streets from our hotel suddenly became free. We sat under a large moon in a clear sky, admiring the diligence of the owner and her sons as they moved speedily from diner to diner, bringing us memorable spaghetti alle vongole and rocket salad. It had been the same story at lunch, when a tiny trattoria in a cobbled alley proved to be the kind of inexpensive, easy-going place it is impossible not to enjoy serving.



Roman delights: the comfort of a suite at the Baglioni

But there was one important plan, and it was well worth paying for. This was the premium tour of the Vatican, led by a top-rank guide at the head of a very small group. Initially we were sceptical, vaguely recalling a lightning tour of the Sistine Chapel with complaining children from 15 years before.

How different this was, as we were beckoned under ropes, far from the heaving masses, to walk through private rooms and stand quietly in the private chapel where the doomed Swiss Guards had carved their names before their slaughter in the Sacking of Rome, 1527. Their loyalty, and huge casualties, ensured they guarded the Vatican for ever more.

The public rooms are, of course, fabulous, with long galleries of maps and tapestries, wonderful statues and the recently renovated Raphael Rooms. But the real joy came as the rooms fell quiet, and the other tourist groups were ushered out. That is when we were led through to the Sistine Chapel, just a dozen of us, with the room to ourselves for 20 minutes: a private view worth many times the price.

That is the wonder of Rome. You do not know it like you think you do. It is still possible to turn the most famous landmarks in the world into your own.

DETAILS: ITALY

Abercrombie & Kent has three nights at the Regina Hotel Baglioni from £725pp B&B, including return flights and private transfers (includes one free night for travel between July 6 and September 6 2014).

Dark Rome, an official partner of the Vatican Museums, offers no wait, small group, exclusive access tours of the Vatican from £51pp, darkrome.com