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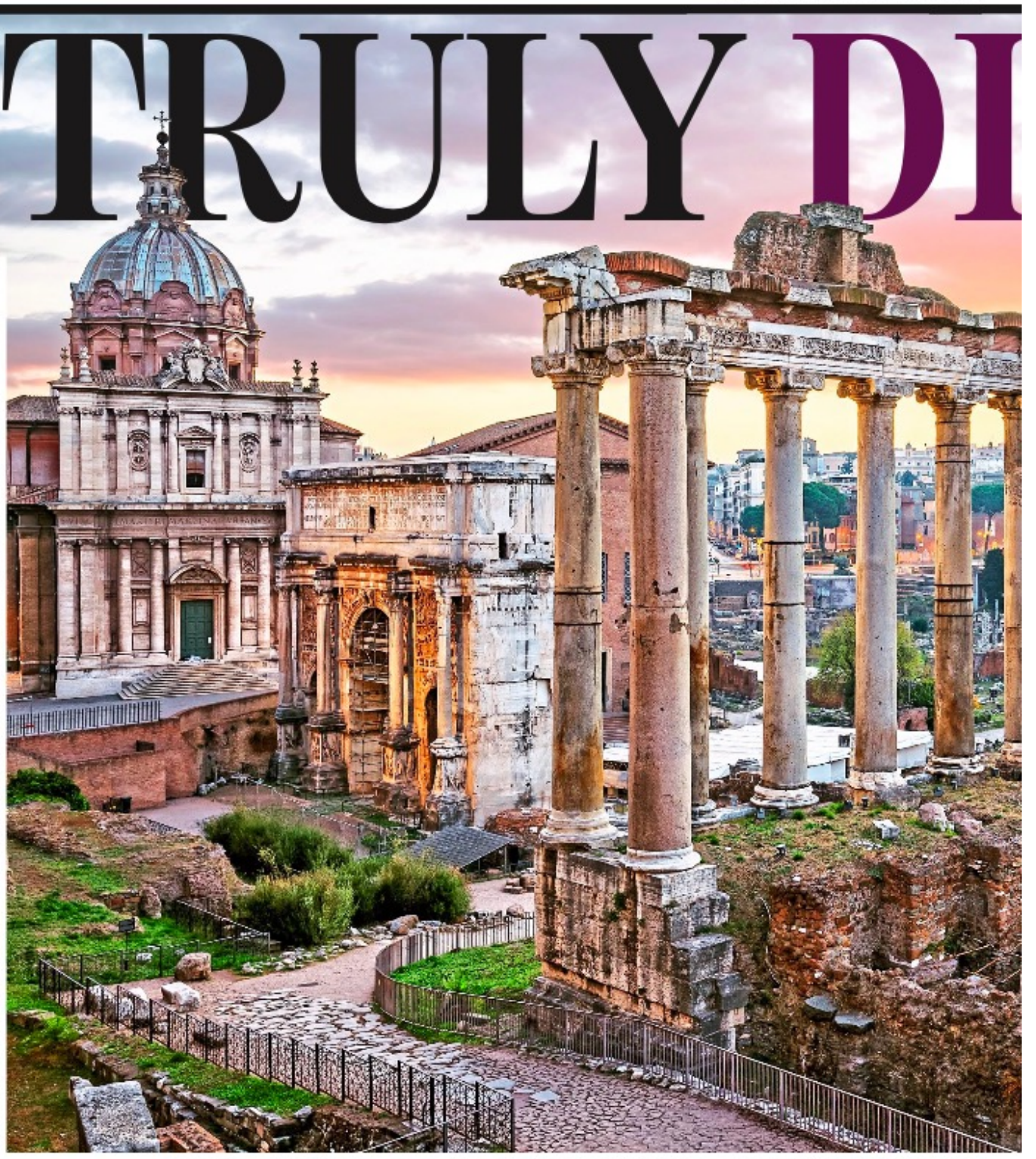

TURN your back on the Trevi Fountain, toss a coin over your left shoulder and make a wish. So custom has it and seven years later my guarantee of a return to Rome has happened.

For me Rome is somewhere, like Florence and Venice, to test and train yourself to look, look and look again at all the detail and refinery, to sharpen the eye and make discoveries. Indeed the splendour of the Eternal City makes me uplifted, being spiritually and visually enriched.

It's a city full of fountains, obelisks, columns and, further afield, aqueducts, of deep russet-coloured buildings and hilly climbs or narrow descents down cobbled streets with 'sampietrini' paving stones.

Crowds flock to the fountains: to Piazza Navona, the Spanish Steps and, of course, the Trevi Fountain. They're best seen at night when they're even more romantic, with their illuminated backdrops and without the distraction of other buildings.

What a visual feast awaited me across Rome with her architecture, sculpture and painting. Although in the galleries it's Caravaggio these days who draws the greatest number of artistic pilgrims, for me Borromini and Bernini carry the soul of Rome.

I stayed at Hotel Hassler, set above the Spanish Steps and made famous by the film Roman Holiday, starring Audrey Hepburn — who stayed here in the San Pietro Suite — and Gregory Peck. The white-hatted doorman summoned me in.

Beneath a gorgeous Murano chandelier, through distinctive stain glass windows, on veined marble and beside potted ferns was the lacquered mahogany concierge and reception: all reflecting the timeless class of a bygone era. As for the rooms, for the best views, choose one that's street-facing on the upper floors. Mine had the plushest of linens and the yellow marble and mosaic stretched to my bathroom.

Here I dined at Imàgo, the top floor restaurant with its Doric pillars and star-spangled ceiling and which comes with strict jacket-wearing formality. Try and book a corner table as it's all about the panoramic view over the city's monuments and cupolas.

Particularly delicious were the scallops, pumpkin flowers, almonds and sour cream. A 'stairway to heaven' was the hotel's fitting strapline.

The Borghese Gardens were the perfect start to my trip, awakened and refreshed amid the morning sun and air among the chirping birds in full song and glory. I walked along stunning pine avenues past statues of ancient philosophers, and joggers and workmen preparing for fashion week with hastily erected shiny silver marquees and green carpets. I savoured every moment of the Galleria Borghese, where Bernini's statues reign supreme.

Downhill I went through the Piazza del Popolo to La Terrazza Locarno restaurant *(hotellocarno.com/it)* which is located in the 'artist's district', where Piazza del Popolo meets the Via del Corso. It's a former favourite of Fellini, once a neighbour.

Set in a courtyard with 'kentia' palm fronds and birds twittering, it trades as a bar-cum-restaurant, and felt very homely, being part of a former house and now a hotel named after its original Swiss owners. Up above are two liberating roof gardens, one serving only champagne, the other with pomegranate and lemon trees.

Indoors is Bar Locarno, decorated in liberty and art nouveau style with original Tiffany lights and playing 1920s music. Here I had the most enjoyable and delicious lunch, consisting of aged beef tataki, soy and sake alongside a raw salmon roll with avocado, lettuce, secret sauce and tempura prawns. It's popular with locals, which is always a good sign.

Over the bridge, St Peter's has at every angle something on which to linger. I loved the imposing and impressive colonnade mounted with statues of devout saints as though in communion with each other on a higher level. St Peter's, as part of the Vatican, is a vast and humbling spectacle that reflects its commanding position at the epicentre of Catholicism. It's where so many Catholics come to connect, to rejoice and feel blessed.

Here I was drawn in particular to the amazing chart of the papal succession, going right back to St Peter himself. The façade has 12 bold Corinthian pillars, Michelangelo's La Pieta now safe from marauders within its glass case and the statue of St Peter worn down from humans kissing out of sheer reverence. It all felt impersonal among this vastness but by imagining a full congregation of many thousands I could sense what reverence would come from resonance.

A five-minute walk from St Peter's is Follie restaurant at Villa Agrippina Hotel *(melia.com)* which opened only last month, on the original site of the villa of Agrippina, wife of Emperor Claudius. Follie has a classic yet contemporary look with its parquet floor offset by white walls, dark wooden lattice screens and vibrant palm fronds.

Beneath the signature low-lit spidery chandeliers were a selection of artistic books, in keeping with the Gran Meliá hotel chain's brand, and, to round off the discreet and erudite vibe, the sound of bossa nova music. It's only open at night, when my tasting menu was an option beside the standard menu.

The pairing wines were selected to accompany both my marinated egg with lapsang souchong tea, roasted hazelnuts and potato purée — my favourite course — and my smoked lamb with raspberries and oyster emulsion. 'Not ordinary fine dining,' stated the menu — a claim that was more than justified.

I awoke to the sound of the city's church bells tolling charmingly out of sync and note. Churches are an invitation to perceive the divine and the Baroque facades are beckoning and arresting in their extravagance.

The thread of Bernini's sensitivity and grace leads across the city from the altar in St Peter's to the folds in the skin of the Rape of Lucretia in the Galleria Borghese to the even more touching Saint Teresa in Ecstasy in Santa Maria Vittoria — there are an amazing number of

BY **ADAM JACOT**

Majestic: Clockwise from main: The Forum in Rome; the Trevi Fountain; the rooftop at the Hotel Hassler; and pasta at the Hotel Eden restaurant

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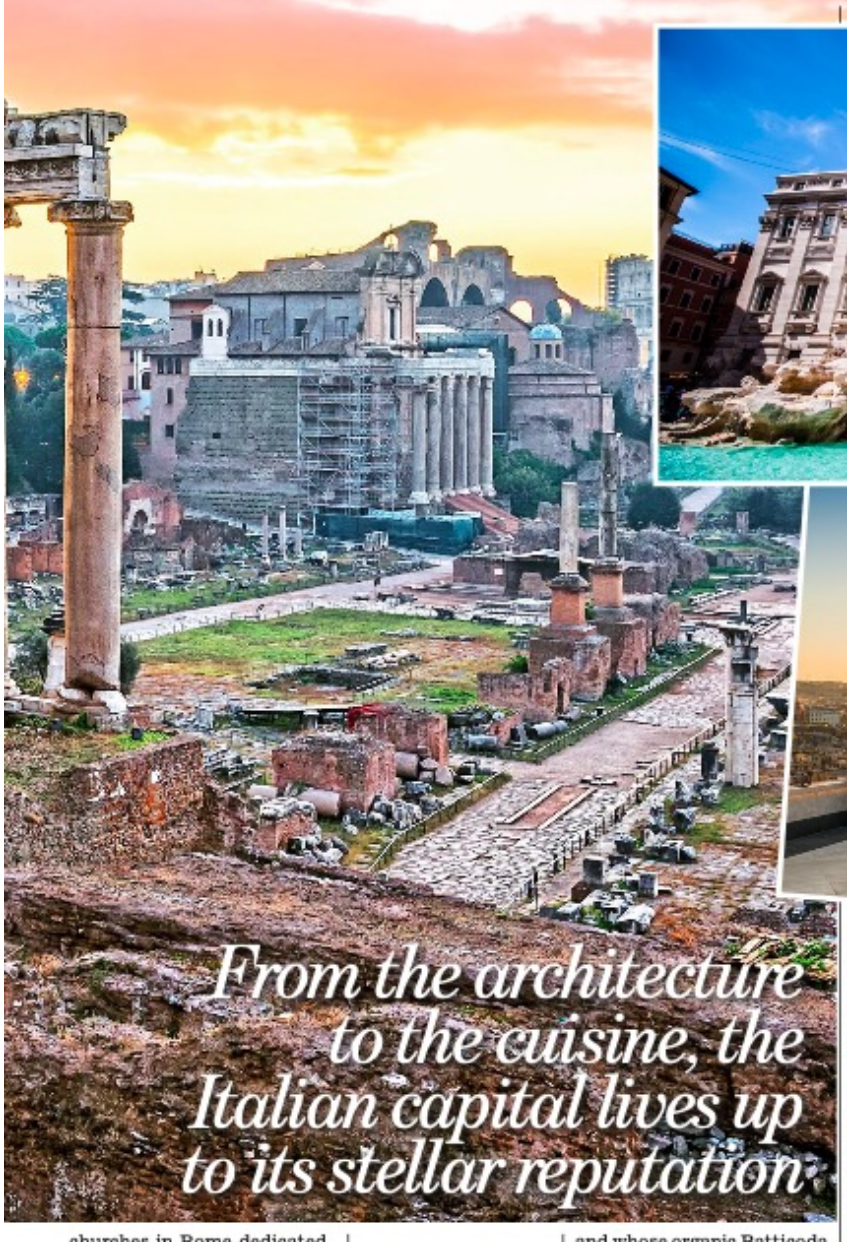
VINE CITY



From the architecture to the cuisine, the Italian capital lives up to its stellar reputation

churches in Rome dedicated to Santa Maria. What a stunning image the last one is of utter surrender, showing the saint in an almost erotic swoon before an angel beneath golden rays of celestial light.

Across the road from the Quirinal Palace is the former king's courtier's villa. So discreet and intimate is the Villa Spalletti Trivelli *(villaspalletti.it)* that I failed to spot the old-fashioned doorbell.

Here I had lunch in the garden under one of the two gazebos separated by the spongiest of grass and smoothest of clipped box shrubs, beside lemon trees and scented jasmine and fenced in by a tall, ancient laurel hedge. You have to book to eat here and to sense the private home and traditional lifestyle of an aristocratic family who own Pomario, its Umbria vineyard and whose organic Batticoda wine paired well with their classical Roman dishes that I could typically have enjoyed at home — 'saltimbocca' (slices of veal, ham and sage) and 'bresaola olio e limone' (dried beef with olive oil and lemon). Fabulously yesteryear.

I loved the fact that Romans are forever clearly on show as they play out their daily dramas. Exuberant, bold and egoistic — immaculately-dressed policemen delivering instructions or garrulous shopkeepers with their arms raised high in exaggerated gesticulation.

There's always a wonderful interplay and juxtaposition of nuns, ice cream shops, children kicking a football against a church wall and vespas zooming past restaurant tables spilling out on to streets.

Just off the bottom of Via del Corso is Le Terrazze, the rooftop restaurant of Singer Palace Hotel *(singerpalace hotel.com)*. Surrounded by elegance and luxury, I looked down upon rooftops, monuments and churches. Pre-prandial sofas presaged the restaurant proper.

Upstairs, meanwhile, is Jim's Bar, with its open-air terrace with a lemon tree. Le Terrazze's neutral décor was super confident as I sat on my green corded chair under my umbrella tent and its heater, among a youngish crowd of couples keen for their treat. I loved my vegetable gazpacho, my small tonnarelli Cacio e Pepe (thick spaghetti) and my turbot and spinach.

For your time in Rome I can offer three tips. Taxis don't tend to stop and even the taxi stations aren't quite where they state. Instead they incur their call-out charge and the one-way streets allow for a detour. They also disconcertingly consult Google even for well-known sites and streets.

There is no 'skip the line' at St Peter's, though there is for the Vatican Museum which, sadly, is an unholy scrum as cramped and crowded pilgrims suffer disrespectful elbowing and noise within the Sistine Chapel.

By going into so many churches I ended up witnessing a funeral, where the widow greeted and was hugged by her congregation, as well as a wedding involving the bride climbing 124 steps up the holy staircase ('scala santa') to Santa Maria in Aracoeli. At least she wasn't on her knees, which legend has it you have to climb reciting the 'de profundis' to receive a 'miracle' from the Madonna and usually performed by spinsters looking for a husband. Thankfully no need in her case.

I came for lunch at Ristorante Roof Garden of the Hotel Forum *(ristoranteroofgarden forum.it)*. Beneath the American Bar and beside the campanile of a former convent, it's perched proudly over the Roman ruins of the Forum and the rear of Vittoriano.

It's one long spacious gallery punctuated with ancient lanterns and where the Italian waiters were so immaculate with their bow ties and coloured jackets denoting their hierarchy and so attentive with their placement of cutlery and use of the table crumber. My shrimp cocktail followed by tenderloin with green pepper sauce was delicious after a morning of sight-seeing. A perfect restorative indulgence.

As for the Ancient Roman Empire, I was drawn inevitably to its Forum, Colosseum and Pantheon. The many modelled reconstructions of Rome set on her famous seven hills helped me sense all that power and majesty.

I even walked along the Via Appia Antica. It's the old, dead-straight road leaving the city. Every cobble evoked the vital historical conduit via Ostia, the port, to her empire overseas as the walk led me soon into countryside and many miles beyond.

I moved to continue my stay at Hotel Eden. Set between the Borghese Gardens and Via Veneto on a quiet, leafy, hilly street in one of Rome's most exclusive areas and with an art deco canopy above the doors, Hotel Eden shares the same hotel chain with London's The Dorchester and Los Angeles's Hotel Bel-Air and the Beverley Hills Hotel.

Inside, above a wide marble floor and beneath stunning golden coffers on the ceiling and beside gorgeous golden candelabra, was the old-fashioned concierge with wooden pigeonholes and a carved marble reception. Beside my unbelievably comfortable bed were the freshest of flowers, the thickest of green and gold curtains, all reflected in the metallic mirrored wardrobes.

Here I dined at Il Giardino. My salad of baby spinach, avocado, walnuts and tofu was followed by beef ribs with green beans and roast potatoes, and tiramisu, paired with Sodale Cotarella red, Vintage Tunina white and Cannellino pudding wine locally from Lazio (Villa Simone winery 2016).

Outside and beside an espalier on its pink wall of jasmine and olive trees, I looked out over the gardens and cypress trees of the Villa Medici playground adjoining the Borghese Gardens to witness a shooting star over the fully exposed frontage of St Peter's. A divine intervention for a divine evening.

The fifth floor staircase to the restaurant is studded with black and white photographs of the hotel's celebrity guests, including Bergman, Hemingway, Fellini, Pope Francis, Hoffmann, Mandela, Thatcher, Brando, McCartney, the two President Bushes, Pavarotti, Nicholson, Madonna, Connery and DiCaprio. Some roll call for some hotel.

On the final evening I went back to throw another coin into the Trevi fountain to encourage my return to the Caput Mundi (the Capital of the World). I presume to go back whenever... but soon.

TRAVEL FACTS

Ryanair *(ryanair.com)* and Aer Lingus *(aerlingus.com)* fly from several Irish airports to Rome, from €40 return. Rooms at Hotel Hassler *(hotelhasslerroma.com)* start from €572 per night on B&B basis. Rooms at Hotel Eden *(dorchestercollection.com)* start from €640.

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