

Rome city break- November 2011

I'm ashamed to say that until two weeks ago, I'd never even been to Italy, let alone Rome. I knew that a trip was going from U3AC, but didn't quite get around to doing anything about it, so when I read in the Bulletin that Alan Winfield was looking to fill a place vacated by someone who had withdrawn, I was on the phone to him straightaway.

For all those of you who've doubtless been many times before, I apologise in advance for waxing lyrical, but as a first-timer, please indulge me! There was art everywhere: I turned a corner and I was in a piazza with water splashing from not just one, but three, Bernini fountains; I went into outwardly austere churches with incredible Baroque interiors decorated with Raphael frescos and altar triptychs by Caravaggio and Rubens; I walked on priceless multicoloured mosaic and marble floors through the Vatican, staring goggle-eyed at the dazzling stucco ceilings, all the while surrounded by ancient Greek and Roman sculpture; and then I came into a courtyard with the legendary statues of the Apollo Belvedere and the Laocöon! And the Sistine Chapel was the most beautiful interior I've ever been in - I spent about 45 minutes sitting around the edge or walking about the middle just trying to take in the amazing detail of all the figures. It wasn't just Michelangelo's ceiling and Last Judgement - I hadn't realised that the rest of the walls are covered in frescos by Botticelli, Piranesi, etc., and the whole place just blew me away. I loved the ancient Roman remains, too, and I was immediately taken back to my sixth-form days when my Latin mistress would get out her dusty slides and treat us to pictures of the Colosseum and the Forum with all the temples, which I recognised!

Alan was an excellent guide, giving us all interesting and useful information about where we were and what we were seeing, and I can well understand why his U3AC courses are always oversubscribed. His detailed knowledge of the city meant that he was able to take us via interesting shortcuts on our perambulations so that we didn't waste valuable time, but he always managed to build in that essential morning and afternoon coffee break!



Our hotel was clean and comfortable, and the hotel staff were very friendly and accommodating. We ate at excellent local restaurants, and I can still taste the freshly-caught sea bream that was cooked on the bone and then filleted at my table. We were extremely lucky with the weather, enjoying glorious sunshine all the time we were there with splendid views from the top of the dome of St. Peter's; and the air was crystal-clear, giving me pin-sharp photos to upload on to my computer when I got home.

Normally, I tend to do things independently and holiday on my own, but it was lovely to share this experience with others of the party and

make new friends. I was also quite proud of my attempts to use Italian, which until then had been confined to musical and culinary terms, but I got myself a good dictionary and phrasebook and had a go.

There was obviously far too much to see in only a short time, but they were three very well-planned, albeit highly-charged, days, and probably enough for a first go. It was excellent as a taster, and, although I didn't throw my coin in the Fontana di Trevi, I'll certainly go back, to revisit works of art I fell in love with, and to find those I missed. (And I don't want my new dictionary to sit on a shelf gathering dust!)

Alan has certainly whetted my appetite for all things Italian (Berlusconi apart), and even if I don't manage to get on to one of his courses next year, I shall be signing up for his trip to Venice in 2012!

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