

# The Tangential Traveler

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Wednesday, April 08, 2009

Chapter 1 – Whirlwind meets whirlwind.

Well, I've finally found a traveling partner who can keep up with me. The question is can I keep up with her! Ellen is an old friend from college, and she is on a mission every day. No sooner had we landed than she unfolded her trusty list of must-sees and as soon as we'd dropped off our stuff and picked up our keys, we were off, despite the fact that American Airlines had provided us with the most uncomfortable seats (and most inedible food) known to mankind.

Like me, Ellen has a thirst for seeing a lot, for forced marches to as many sights, both popular and more rarified, as possible. But I am an improviser at heart. I make a list of 'must see' stuff, then a list of 'like to see' stuff, then break out the map and try to casually plot my days based on the proximity of things, leaving ample time to people-watch, and to get off, sometimes way off, the beaten track. Ellen cross-tabulates things based on what days they're open, and perhaps other arcana like thematic connections etc. She's an art history teacher, and her methods may be too abstruse for a guy like me. I do 30% research, 70% following my nose, and she's about the opposite and probably finds my system (or rather, marked lack thereof) to be just as bemusing as I find hers. But I will probably stick to her itineraries for most of the trip because I enjoy her company, because I want to see what she wants to see, at least in large measure, and because I've got my own learned tour guide to Rome, whose views on art and architecture have already enriched my trip. And besides, she lets me throw in a few things here and there, like the Teatro Mercello, in the next installment. The only down side is I have less time for writing, because she's even more than a whirlwind than I am. I get home with very sore feet, an indecently sweaty shirt, and not too much energy to write. People-watching in a café, computer on my table, dinner at hand, alone, lends itself much more to long missives, but I will try my best.

So, we'd had virtually no sleep at all, were gritty and sore of back and neck, but we were off on Ellen's first day itinerary.. As we wandered the neighborhood looking for the nearest bridge over the Tiber from Trastevere, where we're staying, to get to the center of Rome and the Pantheon, which Ellen has wanted to see for over 30 years, we stumbled onto little streets where people relaxed in the warm sun (Spring is already a little more established here than in NY), and we also landed in a market square, which had one of these amazing 'fractal' cauliflowers that I've heard about but never seen.



Isn't that amazing?

There were also fruits and veggies of all types, and enormous arrays of spices, most squeezed into conical shapes in their plastic bags:





We got to the front, which is a traditional colonnaded Roman pediment. I looked up at the ceiling and the juxtaposition of the fancy Corinthian columns and the rough timber roof above them was striking:



The interior of the Pantheon is perfectly circular, and the only light comes from a large hole in the center of the roof, the Oculus, which has no glass. Rain that falls into the structure is drained away by vents in the floor that were installed in the flooring when the building was constructed and still function perfectly today. Ellen and I want to come back when it's raining and photograph it again, especially if we're lucky enough for it to be raining with the sun shining simultaneously.

I'd love to take credit for the remarkable lighting we found this first visit, perhaps tell you we waited for hours to get these shots, but the truth is that it was just dumb luck, perfect timing, but randomly so.

As we entered, a gauzy, suffused light rained down on us:

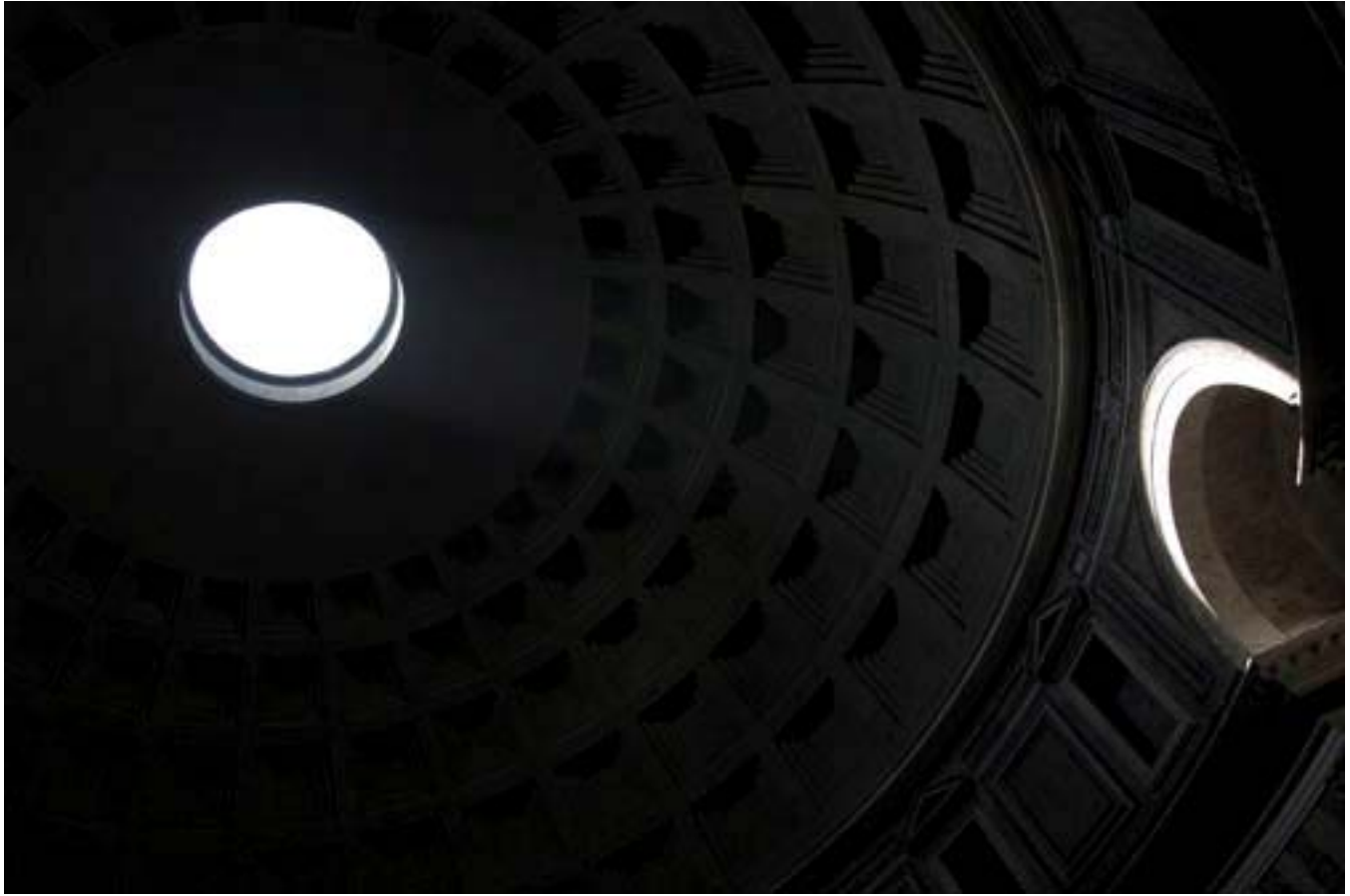


Then, when I got inside, I looked back at the entrance. The curved lintel above the doorway was almost perfectly limned by the light, and you can see the entirety of the Oculus' circular imprint farther down like a man-made sun, on the doorway:



Then I looked up. You can see the lovely coffered ceiling. The coffers, the inset squares, lighten the weight of the dome, which was created via a strikingly modern method: a single layer of concrete laid onto a masonry frame and allowed to cure, whereupon the masonry was removed.

But looking up, I got the most beautiful shot. It reminds me of some sort of celestial event, like an eclipse, a perfect planetary alignment. I'm sure the ancients wanted this incredibly simple structure to be awe-inspiring, to imply heaven, the sun, the moon, and it still does. Here is the light from the oculus perfectly outlining the lintel and the main entrance:



Unfortunately, the ground level has been dolled up in typical Roman style (they loved bright colors) and then dolled up some more after the conversion of the structure to a Christian church:





Personally, I really prefer the stark, monochromatic upper walls and ceiling.

Ellen's life-long dream fulfilled (I felt much the same way on seeing the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, which I'd wanted to see since I was eight), we wandered out and about.

We ran into Trajan's Column, which, in a continuously winding relief, shows his two victorious campaigns against the Dacians. It now has a statue of St. Peter at its apex. Unbeknownst to me when I saw it, it's also hollow, with a spiral staircase that leads to a viewing platform, which has long been closed to the public.



Detail of the relief:



We then wandered into the Piazza Navona, which is a long narrow plaza that still retains the shape of the ancient chariot-racing oval it once contained. It has three fountains, though one was hidden by fencing while under reconstruction.

Here's one, with happy pigeons (which, incidentally, look, act, and sound the same, the world over):



Further along the plaza, there is a long obelisk of Egyptian origin, sort of like Central Parks own Egyptian piece, Cleopatra's Needle. But unlike every obelisk I have ever seen anywhere, the base upon which it was laid, designed by Bernini, is open, arched not in one, but in two directions, with very fanciful stone carvings that appear to have little to do with the obelisk, but are so daring and organic-looking in contrast to the clean lines of the obelisk, you really don't care. Like so much art in Rome, it's a study in contrasts:





We then ran into ‘Argentina’ a large, lovely ruin, I’m not sure of what, possibly baths, smack in the middle of town like so many others:



Then it was back across the Tiber, but first, we walked down along the quays that line it, very much like those that line the Seine in Paris:



These don't appear to be used as much as the Parisian walkways, possibly because the Tiber floods more readily and regularly than the Seine. Evidence of this can be readily seen in the trees that line the shore, which are much battered, and also littered, even in their high branches, with plastic detritus that has been swept into them by the floodwaters, and left entangled:







The day was drawing to a close, but we had one more stop, St. Cecilia, back in our own neighborhood. Cecilia, the patron saint of music, was martyred here. Years later she was briefly disinterred. She'd been buried in a crypt, apparently lain on the stone with only a gown and a scarf or veil over her head. The sculptor Maderno made a very touching, life-like statue of her remains, which had miraculously survived intact after her burial. It is a lovely statue, prefiguring more modern work in its uncompromising realism. It's the centerpiece of this church.



It even appears to show the line between her head and body (St. Cecilia was beheaded when she was martyred, after an unsuccessful attempt to scald her to death).

The church also has some lovely old mosaics:



Then it was off toward home, after a very long, very satisfying first day, but first a stop in our local square, that of the church of Saint Maria in Trastevere, for some dinner (excellent panini and serviceable red wine), and then the walk up the little streets (Trastevere reminds me of Greenwich Village a bit, with its winding streets and little shops and restaurants):





More later, hopefully with more inspired writing. Right now, I'm too tuckered out.

Enjoy.

Pass it on, if you know someone who might like it.