

The Tangential Traveler

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Friday, April 10, 2009

Chapter 2 – Redoubts and Swank

Day two, and Ellen's pre-made itinerary again spares me any need to think of what to do. She has given me the best of both worlds: a touring itinerary, but instead of the usual cursory tour, she's created one of great breadth and depth. She, like I, thinks that 13 days in Rome is not enough. She, like I, cannot comprehend the two-day-per-city tours that so many take. In fact, I discussed with her the Japanese tourists I'd seen in Istanbul who would jump from place to place, staying only long enough to document that they'd been there (pix with Famous Object in background, often with 'peace sign'). She went me one better (actually, worse). When she worked at the Metropolitan Museum, before she became a professor, she'd see busloads of Japanese tourists descend on the front stairs of the Met (which was often already closed for the day), and take similar pix on the steps, *without even looking at the art!* Here we are, *in front of* the museum, which is full of GREAT STUFF, but which we didn't bother to enter! This 'checklist' approach to tourism saddens me, as it appears soulless, and is obviously more about some form of status or bragging rights, than with a true appreciation of the world and all the wonders in it.

OK, enough grumbling and opining in my misanthropic way.

So, day two started with St. Peters.

On the way. A nice tree-lined street along the river:



We got to the Vatican too late – huge lines stretching all over the place, and slimy, unctuous operators who can get you in a lot faster if you give 'em extra Euros... maybe. Ahh, a small fault in Ellen's plan perhaps? It's only a few days to Good Friday and Easter – mayhem in other words, for all the pilgrims. Perhaps next week (and early!) would be better? So Ellen and I

switch gears and tromp over to Castel St. Angelo, the nearby fortress on the banks of the Tiber. It's actually connected to the Vatican by what I thought was an aqueduct, but is really just a private emergency escape exit for the Pope. Popes used it once or twice to escape to the much more defensible fort when sieges were laid against Vatican City.

How defensible? How about a large 'snowflake' fortress structure of crenellated walls, and inside it, a 'mountain' with a fort at the top! Yep, I can't imagine attacking this thing. This is within the crenellated walls, looking up at the fortress proper (which would be doubtless be full of people hurling flaming oil down on you)..



Upstairs, in the fort proper, a look through a window at the Archangel Michael, with some pretty esoteric (and ineffectual-but-cool looking wings):



Michael proper:



The fort has some bitchin' views. This first is of that thing I thought was an aqueduct – the pope's escape hatch from St. Peters – there in the background, snaking to the fort:



Down the Tiber – still with that amazing, almost verdigris coloring:



Another statue of Archangel Michael, this time sheathing his sword. This, apparently, was a sign from the Pope, who commissioned this sculpture that the Plague was receding (i.e. God's divine wrath was abating):



A milk and cheese truck, showing the founders of Rome, the babies Romulus and Remus, suckling at the breast of the wolf that raised them. It says 'Latte Sano' – Healthy Milk – presumably not quite as fresh as what the two boys are getting. This image, or derivations thereof, is all over Rome.



Ellen, during a particularly good meal in the midst of another busy day.



Yep, those are real artichokes...



Rome is full of wisteria, which I love to look at. The cloying smell, I can do without:



Who knew that the spirit of Georgia O’Keeffe resided in the ancient Romans? Actually, if you go to Bryant Park in New York City, and find the bathrooms near the northeast corner of the park, you’ll find some motifs that are strikingly similar to these – though they may be in cast concrete instead of carved in stone.



The ruins approaching the Teatro Marcello, which was like a smaller Coliseum (which is not so named for its size, but because there was a colossal statue there at one time).





The Teatro Marcello itself. Note that they built offices or apartments on top of it! So much of Rome's past is merely subsumed into its present. That's what happens when you grow up cheek-by-jowl with old stuff. Generations of Romans have denuded old sites of marble and sculpture to decorate new palazzos, and the process continues.



I love how eroded it looks.



We stumbled onto a really sweet little fountain, a bunch of guys helping a bunch of turtles up into the basin I don't know how such a whimsical fountain ever got conceptualized, funded, and executed, but I'm glad.



A close-up of a helping hand. You can't quite see it from here, but the turtle's head is extended, his legs are stretched, he's giving it his absolute all.



Right down the street, a church, looking for all the world like the building equivalent of a flensed whale, with the skin stripped off and the skeleton sticking out. I suspect it's probably the skeleton of a Roman temple, again subsumed into the church, because one does not normally embed columns in brick walls.



And some archetypal Roman trees:



Then a trip up Rome's oldest paved road to the ancient Basilica of Saint Sabina. The church was OK, but the road was grand:



Flowers growing on the walls:



The view at the top of the hill, in the public park next to Saint Sabina. Note the orange trees. It's early spring in NYC, but here there's fruit (and new blossoms too) on the trees (though none within reach – people pick 'em), and also palm trees. Rome has a much gentler climate than New York.



There's much to write about, from the Roman sense of style (many women here have the beautiful-but-not-nice (hard, glossy and sleek) look I find so often in the Garment district (and in Paris) – a sort of unapproachable, vaguely bitchy quality – lots of sneers – but you see them in the ancient Roman statues of both men and women too. The men of the present seem much gentler, actually, but are notorious mama's boys, I've heard. The families, husbands, wives, kids, seem by and large very happy, very good to each other. The only really nasty family scene I've seen has been an apoplectic American woman pitching a fit at the Castel St. Angelo, and playing the Ugly American to the hilt while her husband quailed in the corner.

Many simply gorgeous women stream by, mostly in leather, long boots, scarves, and a lot of purple, which appears to be the color this year. The men have immaculate suits, flashy scarves, and oversized 70's style aviator sunglasses. You'll see them, dapper as hell, steam by in their Alpha Romeo and Fiat convertibles, as well as on scooters. Both men and women have found ways to look positively regal perched on dinky scooters, putt-putting around. Yesterday we saw a very regal young woman with polka-dot stockings astride her trusty scooter, perched erect on it like she was a dressage contestant on a Lipizzaner stallion. These people have poise, and polish – but the sleekness, the shiny-ness of that polish can range from pretty hot, to a little artificial to heavily affected, to downright silly. It's all a bit surreal.

Equally surreal is the mish-mosh of art, the rubble piles of parts of ancient plaques, columns, inscriptions and what have you., the clashing worlds of the Roman Empire (and their Greek antecedents), Gothic, Baroque, Rococo etc. It's a noisy jangle of various cultures and eras, all crushed together in a very, very small town. You can easily walk across Rome proper in a day (and back!) – it's much smaller than, say, Paris. Yet it is so dense – of people, style and affectation, history, mind-boggling and frenetic traffic, that it's kind of an over-caffeinated fantasy of Western Cultural Evolution – some weird impresario's inter-galactic laser-light show of Western history, past, present and future.

Yet it is also human-scaled. Quiet churches, places of amazing peace and respite, built centuries before internal combustion was invented, can still blot out the traffic and hubbub, even when situated on the busiest avenue or boulevard. Good food is everywhere (no one in this town overcooks their pasta, thank god! It's all freshly-cooked, 'al dente' (literally 'with teeth' or chewy), rather than the soggy, reheated mess we so often get at home. And everywhere I see men embracing each other with real warmth, young couples, and families where no one seems

harried, where the adults wait patiently for their young children to take a picture or drink a soda, where everyone seems tolerant and respectful of their offspring. I've seen no shouting or corporal punishment among Roman mothers and fathers – it just seems a gentler culture.

And, to top all of this off, Rome has the twin tensions of a strident and very powerful Catholicism coupled to a very sexual, sensual aesthetic. Although the Catholic rites are certainly the most sensual, in their own way, of the Christian ones I've been exposed to, they are also pretty down on sex, sexiness etc. Yet the young women (and older women) seem both overtly sexy, and comfortable with that overtness. The whole place is much sexier than New York – the emphasis on style, the mode of dress, the looks one gets when eyes lock – large unsaid conversations. It's like a hidden pulse, under the surface, either undermining the fervent religiosity I've also seen here, or perhaps just existing on another plane entirely – a sacred world and a profane one, the spirit and the flesh, conspiring in a covert war, or perhaps just living an innate contradiction, day by day, breath by breath.

I don't know if I could live here. It seems more civilized than America in some ways – more time off, more emphasis on the joys of palate, eye, touch, sense in general. But of course, there's also Berlusconi, who's a lot like Bush, but much more corrupt. And there's that pesky, moralistic, intrusive church – seemingly much more wed into the fabric of daily Roman life than in New York (more, perhaps, like Salt Lake City or Wichita in that respect).

An odd place of underscored cognitive dissonances.

Enough rambling. See you all soon.