

## TRAVEL



**ICONIC:** Chris and Justine Tyerman at the Trevi Fountain late one night. Completed in 1762, its sheer size is astounding let alone its beauty.



**AROMATIC:** the myriad of herbs and spices at the Campo de' Fiori market.



**AL FRESCO:** Campo de' Fiori by night where hundreds dine outside and watch life go by.



**MARTYRED:** A statue of philosopher Giordano Bruno, who was burned alive during the Roman Inquisition, presides over Campo de' Fiori.



**HIDDEN:** We glimpsed beautiful private courtyards and gardens in the backstreets behind heavy doors, gates and high walls.

# Roaming

*Justine Tyerman keeps a promise made nearly three decades ago to make a pilgrimage to The Eternal City.*

Twenty-eight years ago, a Roman we met in Florence pleaded with us to visit his city. With tears in his eyes, he implored: "You must go to Roma, you must visit The Eternal City!"

On that occasion, running low on time and funds we did not, but just last month Chris and I kept our promise to him.

Five days at the tail-end of four weeks in Croatia and Italy cannot do justice to such a city . . . but then nor could a lifetime.

Still, it was long enough to become enthralled by the history and architecture, to fall under the spell of the Roman people with their easy charm and enviable style, and inspire a deep longing to return . . . sealed, of course, by the traditional tossing of a coin into the Trevi Fountain.

Keen for an authentically-Italian experience, we shunned the tourist hotel scene in favour of an apartment. As we nervously booked our accommodation online from Gisborne, little did we know we would find ourselves in an exquisite area in central Rome, seldom frequented by tourists, yet close to all the must-see places.

Our spacious, fully-equipped apartment was in Via dei Banchi Vecchi, a winding cobbled backstreet crammed with tiny shops and studios dating back centuries. Artists, sculptors, jewellers, antique and bookshops in shoe-box-sized premises are sandwiched between pizzerias, cafés and warmly-lit wine shops where walls are lined with bottles from marble floors to vaulted ceilings.

Nearby, the bustling Campo de' Fiori markets dating back to 1869, sprawl across the wide restaurant-rimmed piazza, six days a week from 4am.

Our landlord, the gorgeous Giuseppe, said this much-cherished traditional fruit, vegetable and fish market had been tainted by tacky tourist stalls but to the foreign eye, the square is an intriguing mix of the authentic old and the fake nouveau.

The dazzling array of fresh fruit, vegetables, herbs, spices, meat, fish, flowers and plants,

all beautifully displayed, add a delicious riot of smells and colour to the piazza while the trinket and souvenir stalls offer some irresistible bargains.

We bought long skinny green beans, spicy Italian sausages and shiny new potatoes to cook in our lovely kitchen as a respite from a month of pizza and pasta, along with strangely-shaped but impossibly-sweet peaches, huge olives and cheeses, wines and oils of every description. We lingered longingly over the sea of aromatic herbs and spices, pondering whether to gamble our luck with NZ Customs and take a few bags home for future Italian dinner parties.

The flower-sellers keep their gorgeous blooms refreshed in an ancient fountain, la Terrina ("the soupbowl") that once watered cattle. The fountain also provides a popular romantic meeting place for young people after dusk when the piazza's cafés and restaurants overflow with diners.

On the fringes of the marketplace are nervous young men from Senegal and the Ivory Coast selling "Gucci" sunglasses and "Prada" bags, ever watchful for the carabinieri who round them up on a regular basis. Their wares are displayed on portable boards or sheets for a speedy getaway.

There is street theatre in abundance — dancers, magicians, acrobats, human statues and artists. We marvel at their amazing talents.

A huge bronze statue of the philosopher Giordano Bruno, which presides over the piazza, is a reminder of what dark function the lively Campo de' Fiori once served. The most famous victim of the Roman Inquisition, Bruno was burned alive for heresy in 1603, on the exact site where he now stands. Many so-called heretics were executed in this square over several hundred years.

We explored all corners of the ancient part of the city (more like a large village) on foot using quiet, shaded backstreets and parks as our passageways rather than main thoroughfares where the heat, traffic and crowds are formidable. This enabled us to glimpse the lifestyles of those who live there — Romans

emerging from private courtyards with beautiful fountains, gardens and sculptures, enclosed by heavy doors and high walls.

The surprise and excitement of discovering for yourself such treasures as the cool, green Borghese Gardens is another delight. Emerging from an alleyway, rounding a corner, climbing a hill or crossing a bridge to find an iconic landmark suddenly and unexpectedly in your sights is a rare and personal treat.

I love the casual way the Romans live with their history and antiquities . . . like life in a vast museum. Active archaeological sites, of which there are hundreds, are well-protected but elsewhere, life goes on in and around ruins thousands of years old. Traffic roars endlessly round the Colosseum while in the shade of its iconic towering pillars, street vendors sell souvenirs and "gladiators" fleece tourists who are gullible enough to pose with them for photos; Roman Catholics attend mass at ancient Christian churches built upon pagan temples which were in turn constructed over Etruscan dwellings dating back hundreds of years before Christ; and contemporary buildings incorporate the odd ancient Roman column into their walls. It's all normal to the Romans where any building less than two hundred years old is considered "modern".

There is a downside to Rome at this time of the year but it is not the notorious pick-pockets and ingenious scammers you are warned of in the tourist books — rather it is the crowds and the heat, even this early in the summer.

Rome's world-famed tourist meccas are indeed breathtaking but it is sometimes difficult to summon the reverence such places demand when sharing the experience with thousands of philistines!

We struck a throng of several hundred American students performing their college chant beside the spectacular Trevi Fountain very late one evening on our second attempt to have a quiet moment at the world-famous fountain. The cacophony was such that the ever-present armed carabinieri blew their whistles, looked stern and moved them on . . . several times.

Similar crowds swarmed over the Spanish Steps, Pantheon and St Peter's Square even

“ I hope the legend of the Trevi Fountain is true ”