



# TO ROME WITH LOVE

ROMANCE ISN'T IN ROME'S OBVIOUS ATTRACTIONS;  
IT'S EVERYWHERE ELSE – JUST ASK THE LOCALS.

BY IVY GRACIE

Romance is Roman – just look at the word. Exploding with art, architecture, history and sensuality, the Eternal City offers an orgy for the senses and a feast for the soul. And no one relishes it more than the Romans themselves.

Their history (and probably their DNA) is infused with a passion for beauty and an appetite for romance – the kind that elevates the soul from the everyday to the extraordinary. And they find it everywhere – whether it's in a revered masterpiece or rustic mosaic; a four-course feast or simple slice of crusty bruschetta. There's a reason they say, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." If you follow that advice, you'll become a Roman (at least while you're there). And when you're a Roman, romance is sure to follow.

I've been to Rome several times, but never found romance there – not even with my husband. That's probably because we were too busy pinballing back and forth between all the tourist attractions friends suggested we see. But hold the telefono – our friends are American. What does an American really know about Rome? More importantly, what does an American really know about romance? After all, it's not *Americance*...

During my last trip to Rome I ignored the Americans; instead, I listened to two longtime locals. Paolo Meschini, a former engineer, and Antonio Rinaldini, an art history expert and former architect, are the principals of Roam Around Rome, a boutique tour guide firm specializing in all things Roman. They know their city and its secrets. They understand Rome's art, archeology and architecture. They know where its unexpected treasures are hidden, and they love to show them off.

Paolo and Antonio showed me places I would have overlooked or completely missed and taught me that the romance in Rome isn't limited to long-lined, big-name tourist destinations – it's around every corner. And thanks to my new Roman friends, I fell in love with a Rome I'd only flirted with before – a city overflowing with more beauty and artistry than just its obvious attractions; a culture that relishes every bite and savors every sip; and an historical hotbed that, despite its ancient origins, still has a few surprises up its sleeve.

## GREAT WALKS & WORKS – GRATIS

The big museums like the Vatican are filled with astounding art. But they can be overcrowded and overwhelming. Romans know there are masterpieces throughout the city and many are free.

Would you ever think you could walk on a Michelangelo? You can – at

**Piazza del Campidoglio** at the Musei Capitolini (Capitoline Museums). Designed by the artist in 1538, the piazza is bordered by two palaces that house the museums and a palace that's home to Rome's city council.

You'll find Gian Lorenzo Bernini's artistry in Fontana del Tritone (Triton Fountain) in **Piazza Barberini**, and in the Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi (Fountain of the Four Rivers) at **Piazza Navona**. Bernini's father, Pietro, is the artist behind Fontana della Barcaccia (Fountain of the Old Boat), which anchors the **Spanish Steps**.

On the west side of the Tiber River, the **Basilica di Santa Maria in Trastevere**, a church dating back to the 340s, is home to a number of late 13th-century mosaics by Pietro Cavallini and a 15th-century octagonal ceiling painting by Domenichino.

You can satisfy your more base instincts with a wander along **Via Veneto**, home to some of the city's toniest shops, hotels and restaurants. But keep strolling north and you'll discover one of Rome's greatest treasures – **Villa Borghese**, a 226-acre public park once owned by the aristocratic Borghese family. A spacious in-town escape, this landscape garden features various buildings, museums and attractions to explore.

## ROMANCING THE STONE

On the grounds of Villa Borghese is **Galleria Borghese**, a palazzo-turned-art-gallery offering an array of sculptures and paintings in a setting that's as seductive as the art itself. Galleria Borghese features the works of Bernini, Canova, Caravaggio, Raphael and Titian, but there's no need to overload here – spend some quality time with just four sculptures\* and you'll become an instant art lover.

No matter what gallery or museum you visit, focus on quality rather than quantity. A guide can narrow down what can often be an overwhelming array of masterworks. Antonio carefully selected a handful of important works, took the time to share their stories and invited us to examine them from every angle. Every member of our tour group came away with a better understanding and deeper appreciation for each piece and artist we studied.

## LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

Rome is lousy with ruins; too many to excavate. The city doesn't have enough money or time to restore all the treasures that lie beneath its surface. So, even if **il Colosseo** (the Coliseum) and **Forum Romanum** (the Roman Forum) are overrun with out-of-towners, there are other noteworthy destinations that merit a visit.

Fontana di Trevi (Trevi Fountain)



Azienda Agricola Pompili  
Filippo Pompili Ferrari Photograph



Just a few blocks from the Coliseum, the **Basilica di San Clemente** (Basilica of St. Clement) is a mind-boggling three-for-one attraction that offers a literal descent into history. The journey begins at ground level in the present basilica, built just before 1100 in the Middle Ages. From there a stairway leads down into a 4th-century basilica. Then, even more steps drop down into to a 2nd-century pagan temple and a 1st-century home believed to have belonged to a Roman nobleman. Nicknamed ‘The Lasagna Church’ for its many layers, this often overlooked site is not to be missed.

If you’re craving a more modern subterranean experience, the **Domus Romane di Palazzo Valentini** should fit the bill. A two-hour tour through these remains offers a glimpse into the lives of ancient imperial Roman families with an updated twist – mosaics, wall decorations and other remains have been enhanced by virtual reconstructions, graphics and videos to create a virtual tour of ancient Rome.

Just like art, archeology can be complicated. To gain a better understanding and appreciation of the ruins, enlist the expertise of a guide. A well-versed professional can help untangle complicated stories and bloodlines, and make the expansive history of each site more manageable and meaningful.

## FEEDING THE FIRES

Eating is one of the most effective ways to go local. Food is a portal to the language and culture, and offers the chance for real interaction with the locals. Try to order in Italian, and don’t worry about making mistakes. Most servers will be amused and enamored with you, and you’ll probably learn something in the process. And don’t worry about carbs, fat or calories (you’ll walk them all off, anyway). Food choices in the Eternal City might seem, well, endless. But here are a few options that offer their own romantic appeal...

Most tourists would walk right past the door leading to **Caffè Capitolino**, an unassuming café located on the top floor of the **Musei Capitolini**. And even though it serves some of the most delicious snacks, salads, pizza and panini in Rome, its most impressive offering isn’t found on a plate; it’s through the door that leads outside to **Caffarelli Terrace**. There, you’ll be greeted by expansive, unobstructed, sigh-inducing views of the city. Offering both creative cuisine and a one-of-a-kind view with next to no crowds, this place is a true hidden treasure.

**Harry’s Bar** on Via Veneto is a longtime tourist attraction, but it’s worth a mention. Oozing with old school appeal – the kind you’ll find at the Oak Bar at the Plaza in New York or Chicago’s RL – Harry’s is the perfect spot to nestle in, nurse a champagne cocktail or single malt scotch, and savor some serious posing, people-watching and piano jazz. The food is fantastic, and the service is extraordinary. There are other Harry’s Bars – like the birthplace of the Bellini cocktail in Venice – but this one was made famous in Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*. Be careful – a few cocktails and you just might end up in the Trevi Fountain!

**Trattoria Lo Scopettaro**, located in the Testaccio neighborhood along the Tiber River, went to the top of my list of most memorable restaurants in Rome. A brick-walled, white-linen ristorante, it’s been serving up rustic Roman classics for over 50 years. We nibbled on bruschetta, chewy pasta maltagliati con fagiolo (kidney bean soup with pasta), savory carciofi alla Romana (braised artichokes stuffed with oil, lemon, garlic, parsley and mint) and perfectly al dente mezzette maniche (a rigatoni-like pasta with chicory and pecorino cheese). Between the sustenance and surroundings, we were completely sated.

## JUST BETWEEN US

*(Three Secrets You Should Know)*

Who would think to look for a winery in Rome? But just an hour north of the city center is **Gelso della Valchetta**, an award-winning vineyard

and winery. Owned by married couple Marco and Mapi Gelso Della Valchetta, it’s set on a gently undulating slope next to a riverlet in the heart of the Parco di Veio nature and archeological park. The 13-acre expanse once set the scene for battles between the Romans and the Etruscans for control of the Tiber River; now it’s home to undisturbed Etruscan ruins, and the Caldani family.

Wandering the peaceful grounds is the perfect way to decompress from Rome’s frenetic bustle, and sampling the Caldani’s wines might make it difficult to leave – not because you’re a little tipsy, but because you feel completely at home. Mapi prepared a tableful of fritattas, onion and mushroom pies, cheeses, olives and crusty breads in her Italian country kitchen, turning the wine tasting into what felt more like a dinner party with friends than a simple swish-and-spit. And each dish perfectly complemented the smooth, round Merlot-Cabernet blend and surprisingly crisp Chardonnay we sampled. Two rooms are available for overnight guests and include an evening cooking and dining with the family, and tasting their wines. For a quick, easy and utterly relaxing countryside getaway, this might just be the best-kept secret in Rome.

And you can skip the three-hour drive to visit Tuscan olive groves – **Azienda Agricola Pompili** is an olive farm and frantoio (oil mill) 45 minutes northeast of Rome. There, the Pompili family has produced delicate-yet-earthly organic olive oils for over 100 years. After a late fall harvest, the olives are taken to the family’s press in Palombara Sabina, a nearby hillside town. Stop in at the right time and you’ll see freshly pressed olive oil gushing into large containers; if you’re lucky, you’ll get a piece of crusty bread drenched with the mellow, fruity liquid. Crunchy, chewy, green and gratifying, there’s nothing like olive oil fresh from the press. Take this delightful half-day trip and you’re sure to come away with a greater appreciation for such a seemingly simple staple.

Aside from olive oil, there are a number of staples in the Roman diet. Pasta is one; meat is another. Take an evening cooking class at **Città del Gusto** (a culinary institute offering professional and amateur training) at the **Gambero Rosso** (a food-based multimedia corporation known for various monthly publications and its own Italian version of The Food Channel), and you’ll be a Roman chef by the time you’re done.

Chef Luca Ogliotti of **Lo’steria Ponte Milvio**, a chic eatery in Rome, led my class through three Roman favorites – spaghetti alla carbonara (spaghetti with bacon, egg and cheese), cacio e pepe (a rustic, Roman version of Fettuccine Alfredo), and veal saltimbocca (veal dredged in butter and flour, and sautéed with prosciutto). Each dish was fairly simple to prepare and contained a few secrets only the Romans know. Now after taking this class, I can be a Roman whenever the mood hits – I’ve got the recipes.

## MAKING IT LAST

Romance is everywhere in Rome – all you have to do is follow the locals. Walk the streets, duck into churches and circumvent the crowds whenever you can. Unearth the out-of-the-way spots; seek out the best-kept secrets. And as for those must-do destinations, if they’re too crowded, don’t worry – they’ll be there when you return (and you will return).

Relax, slow down, get to know Rome and let it into your heart. Speak Italian; savor the flavors. Learn a little; live a little. Take a few pictures; make a lot of memories. When you do as the Romans do, you’re sure to find romance. And it will be yours long after you’ve said, “Arrivederci, Roma!” ■

*\*Editor’s Note: Ms. Gracie’s tour was arranged by Promoroma, a special agency of the Chamber of Commerce of Rome. Read more about her trip at [www.tcwmag.com/web-exclusives](http://www.tcwmag.com/web-exclusives).*



Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi  
(Fountain of the Four Rivers)



Gelso della  
Valchetta Winery