

When in Rome ...

by Max Millard

There's an old saying: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” But what **do** the Romans do? In April 2024 my wife Salve and I spent 12 days there, chasing down the answer to that question with our friends Pattie Pritchett and her son Tommy. We chose to go just after Easter, when the wave of tourists traditionally abates.

The first thing we learned was that the Romans are the politest, most accommodating people you're likely to meet. I probably asked strangers for help at least 50 times – for everything from finding the Trevi Fountain.



Trevi Fountain

to navigating the metro. But in every single case, the person stopped what they were doing and tried to help.

The metro ticket machine has instructions in Italian only, and involves putting in the exact amount of coins, then figuring out which train to take. You get a cardboard ticket like this



metro ticket

As you see, it's rechargeable. But only within 48 hours, and then you have to buy another rechargeable ticket.

While struggling with the machine, I muttered to Salve, “This is hard.” The Italian couple behind us said, “It's hard for us too.”

I discovered that the best strategy for finding any specific place in Rome is to go to the general area, then start asking people. The three most important words in Italian are: “per favore, dov'è ... ?” which means, “please, where is ...?” The person you're asking will point in a certain direction. So you go there, then ask someone else. Very gradually, you get closer and closer to your destination until you're there. It's a low-tech, human GPS.

We first stayed in a nice hotel with Pattie and her son Tommy. Here we are at the Vatican Museum.



Left to right: Max, Salve, Tommy, Pattie

After Pattie and Tommy returned home, Salve and I moved to cheaper lodgings. Right across the street was a restaurant with a young waiter named Mateo, who hung out on the sidewalk smoking cigarettes when business was slow. He spoke very little English, but made up for it with charm. Getting acquainted with an exuberant Italian waiter is really an unfair contest. After our first meal, whenever Mateo saw us on the street, he went up to Salve and gave her a kiss on both cheeks.

We ate there several times because the food was typical Roman cooking – meaning it was excellent. It's hard to find a bad meal in Rome. Even the humblest places make everything from scratch using the best local ingredients, and charge about half what you'd pay in San Francisco.

Across from Mateo's was a pizzeria, where the cashier was somewhat of a comedian. When someone would ask him to open a bottle, he'd take a knife and thrust it violently upward, and the cap would bounce off the ceiling and clatter on the floor. The glass counter was so clean that it was almost invisible. When someone ordered a pizza to go, he'd pass it directly toward them, and their hands would hit against the glass. I asked where he was born and he said, "In a hospital."

He turned out to be from Damascus, Syria. And that brings up my next observation about Rome: It's a city of immigrants. Can anyone guess which country contributes the most immigrants?



It's Romania, that light green country underneath Ukraine. One hundred sixty thousand Romanians live in Rome, out of a population of 4 million, Their language is very similar to Italian, making it easy for them to find employment. The mass migration to Italy began in 1999 and accelerated in 2002, when Romanians got the right to move there without a visa. In 2007 Romania joined the European Union, leading to further immigration.

The second largest group of foreign nationals in Rome is Filipinos, with 40,000 immigrants and their children. Salve met many of them, including a girl who was born in Rome but spoke perfect Tagalog. They typically worked as maids, housekeepers and cashiers. Several of them mentioned that it's easier for Filipinos to immigrate to Italy than to the U.S.

The unit of currency in Italy is the euro. The official exchange rate is one euro for one dollar and seven cents U.S. So, you can go into any bank, put a dollar bill and seven pennies on the counter and get a euro, right? Not quite.

Unfortunately, big corporations have squeezed out the small private money changers so that they can charge huge fees. I went to at least six money changers, and asked how many euros I could get for \$100 cash. The official exchange rate is 92 euros. But most of them offered – are you ready for this? – 70 euros. They usually had just a single employee sitting in a glass booth, and probably making minimum wage. Some of the corporations are American-owned. So our billionaires are going over there to suck maximum profits out of unsuspecting tourists.

I learned later that the best way to change money is to go to your local bank before leaving the U.S., and request a certain amount of euros. You'll need to tell them a few days in advance. Then, whether you change \$100 or \$10,000, the bank will give you the full exchange rate for a one-time fee of \$5.

Fortunately, you can use a major credit card from the U.S. for most purchases, and the fee is very small.

The next thing to know about Rome is that almost everything is covered with ugly graffiti. Nothing in California compares to it. The Italians invented graffiti, but they never elevated it above kindergarten scribble scabble.



graffiti on street

Here's a Roman mailbox.



To escape the city, we made a day trip to the pope's summer residence at Castel Gondolfo, a small town on a mountain lake outside Rome. Here's Salve knocking on his door.



Anybody home?

Here she is after meeting with Pope Francis – or his picture, at least.



And here's the scenic view from the pope's train station.



graffiti at Castel Gondolfo

Rome is called the Eternal City because so much of it remains standing after 2000 years. My favorite building is the Colosseum, which opened in AD 80, and entertained up to 80,000 Romans at a time for more than 400 years.



inside of Colosseum

Some days it offered a triple feature – animals fighting animals in the morning, animals against gladiators at midday, and gladiators fighting each other in the afternoon. I asked our guide if it ever had non-violent events. He shook his head and said no, it was considered family entertainment, and everyone brought their kids.

The stairs in the top section of the Colosseum were sharp and narrow, so that people would have walk down slowly. The lower level had wide stairs, so that people there could leave quickly. That way, the stadium could be emptied in 40 minutes.

The Romans bought tickets printed on clay tablets. All the entrances were marked with Roman numerals, so that people could easily find their section, row and seat.



gate number LII

The Colosseum's seat layout and its oval shape have been copied ever since, including by the Oakland Coliseum.



Roman Colosseum

Fortunately, Rome's most important monuments and historical sites are graffiti-free, and guarded by soldiers in camouflage, carrying automatic weapons. They call it the anti-terrorist security patrol.



security patrol on duty

The commonest crime in Rome is pickpocketing. Everyone walks around with their fanny pack or backpack in front of them to avoid theft. When riding the crowded metro, I stood next to a big, muscular guy who looked like a professional wrestler. I saw him remove his wallet from his back pocket and cram it into his front pocket for protection. And I thought, if **he's** afraid of being robbed, I'd better be careful. But nothing bad happened. The trip was like Murphy's Law in reverse: everything that could go wrong, didn't.

Rome has no car break-ins and practically no homeless people. During my stay I saw maybe 10 of them. Here's one of them taking an afternoon nap.



If he gets hungry, at least he can pick oranges from the trees that grow downtown.



orange trees in Rome

As the clock ticked down on our Roman holiday, I couldn't help thinking of the countless tourists from all over the world, thronging the streets, thrilled by the city's attractions. And when we returned to San Francisco, taking an Uber back home through the Tenderloin late at night, I gazed at whole blocks of tents, and dark huddled masses of drug addicts looking like a scene out of “Night of the Living Dead.”

And I thought to myself, “What can we do to change this and bring our tourists back?” Maybe Rome has the answer.