

IN THE MARKET

TRAVEL LITE

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

On and off the beaten path in Italy. *By Sarah Voon*

Italy is as beautiful as it is said to be, but there is far more to it than the Leaning Tower of Pisa and the Colosseum. A first-hand experience of Italy is far more inspirational than any picture or movie could ever be. Now I can understand why the country stirs great poets to wax lyrical about their experiences there.

ROME

Rome, or Roma to the locals, is fascinating. Its rich culture and history make it worthy of its title as “The Eternal City”. Visiting Vatican City during Easter is a unique experience and many choose to spend the holy week there as a pilgrimage of sorts. During this time, visitors have the option to be part of the Easter Mass and the holy procession through the Colosseum with the Pope. The Pope leads the procession around the Colosseum on Good Friday and makes an appearance from the iconic Saint Peter’s Basilica window on Easter Sunday. The downside of visiting Rome during this time is that it is very crowded and many shops are closed.

However, nothing can negate the extraordinary feeling of spending the holy week in the company of thousands of devout Christians and Catholics. Whether you embrace the religion or not, the energy in St Peter’s Square is charged with the spirit of celebration.

Priests roam the streets of Rome and Vatican City in their robes and don expressions of reverence at the sight of the Pope. Nuns bustle with excitement as they clutch their rosaries and chatter animatedly amongst themselves. Amid all this, peddlers try to push their mass-produced souvenirs to shutter-happy tourists

and locals alike.

I would suggest that visitors break away from seeing Rome through the lens of a camera and, instead, just soak in the whole atmosphere. There is something unquestionably inspiring about walking through the ruins, monuments and buildings of the great Roman civilisation. Take a moment to run your fingers along the jagged stones of the Colosseum and the cool marble of the columns in the Vatican museum. Envision history as it is being retold by a tour guide. The magic happens in the immersion.

Often, people choose not to join tours so they can explore a new place at their own time. However, the guides generally have years of experience under their belt and are able to recreate full historic scenes with their storytelling. It is also recommended to use a guide to bypass the queues at popular spots. The tours can last up to six hours, so comfortable walking shoes are essential. Do not bother with fancy footwear as the weather can be erratic in this part of the world during spring. That aside, this is a good time to visit Italy as it is off-peak season.

A good company to book tours with is Through Eternity. Its guides are well versed in the history of Rome and they often hold academic qualifications that enhance your touring experience. My visit to Vatican City gave me a deeper understanding of the significance of the works on display, thanks to my guide. Caterina, who holds a

Top right: The interior of the Colosseum; the cemetery that’s exclusively for non-Catholics in Rome, where John Keats was buried

Photos by Sarah Voon



Master's in Art History, explained the art works in an in-depth manner. She described the techniques used and the significance of the featured artists and their works. All Through Eternity guides who conduct English tours speak the language flawlessly.

The Sistine Chapel, the highlight of the tour, is far more spectacular when you are in the hall, taking it all in. It would be futile to attempt to describe its magnificence in words. I would have spent hours staring in awe at the frescoes, if not for the guards who ushered us out to make way for other visitors.

I found booking a tour particularly useful when it came to the Ancient Roman ruins. Without the guide, I would have been looking at random walls and columns that held no meaning for me. Giovanni, the Through Eternity guide for the ruins, was able to provide us with the history and significance of each building and how it was excavated. Giovanni is also an archaeologist and was involved in the excavation process. If you are a history fan, return on your own the next day to continue exploring the ruins as your guide cannot cover the whole area within the allocated time.

Another way to experience off-the-beaten-track Rome is to take a Vespa tour. For the best value, try Scooteroma, which has 14 staff members. Since it is a rather small company, the tours can be customised. A private tour for two is €250 (RM1,131). What you pay for is two Vespas and drivers and one tour guide, who may double as a driver. What is great about them is that they pick you up directly from your hotel and drop you off wherever you wish at the end of the tour. And, breakfast is included.

Our Scooteroma guide, Valerio, took us to many sites away from the popular paths. One of those was the Pyramid of Cestius, and a cemetery dedicated to non-Catholic foreigners in Rome. The cemetery is also where the English poet, John Keats, was buried. It is hauntingly



beautiful and turned out to be one of my favourite places of interest. Valerio said the uniqueness of the cemetery lies in how much life there is on the grounds. Tall, leafy trees are planted throughout and it is as much a landscaped garden as a burial ground.

The cemetery is just one interesting stop of the tour, which also covers sites such as the ruins of the ancient Roman baths and Gianicolo Hill, where you get panoramic views of Rome. Scooteroma is your best bet if you are looking for sites that are not overflowing with tourists. The Pantheon and Trevi Fountain are worth visiting, but they are also where the most pickpockets lurk.

To truly experience Rome, you should refrain from booking hotel rooms. Instead, surf Airbnb's website for the many options of staying with a local host. It is cheaper and will also make your experience in Italy a lot more personal. Although most Italians outside the hospitality and tourism



Top: The Marina Grande
Above: The view from the lighthouse

sector speak little or no English, the host should be able to suggest good food places and may even cook you a meal or two.

As Rome is also best explored on foot, Google Maps will turn out to be your best friend. This is where getting a working SIM card is essential. Although many mobile network providers are available throughout Italy, cards are pricey — €30 for a tourist SIM. If you sign up for FlexiRoam's Buzz SIM, you can start using your phone as soon as you step off the plane.

Anacapri instead. The grass is crawling with brightly coloured metre-long lizards that will cross your path more than once.

The main bus terminal in Anacapri is also where you can take the bus to Grotte Azzurre and Capri town. The chairlift is a two-minute walk from there. On our first day, we visited the gardens and explored both Capri and Anacapri. We planned our second day's programme such that we could walk to the lighthouse in the morning, take a bus to Anacapri and ride up to Monte Solaro, then come down for lunch, before making our way to Grotte Azzurre as it is bluest in the afternoon. We managed to cover everything in two days, but were unable to visit the blue caves due to rough sea conditions. Our only regret was not staying longer on the beautiful island.

FLORENCE

Our next stop was Florence, about a five-hour train ride from Naples. Although a Eurail pass for Italy is an option, go through your itinerary first. If you are not covering many places, buying individual tickets can save you a lot of money. The problem with queuing at a self-service ticket machine is that gypsies will come up and beg, distracting you long enough for a pickpocket to strike. It's best to ignore them or politely shake your head and walk away.

Florence is "home" to a lot more gypsies than I recall seeing in Rome. This is likely because it is the next best shopping centre in Italy, after Milan. Many well-dressed women carrying branded handbags flock to Florence to take the bus out to The Mall. The SITA bus station is a two-minute walk from Firenze Santa Maria Novella train station. Here, a bus takes you directly to The Mall for €10 return. Each way is 45 minutes. The strip mall is an outlet for high-end luxury brands such as Gucci, Prada, Salvatore Ferragamo, Pucci and Burberry. Many Chinese nationals and Japanese tourists frequent it, so much that retailers have taken to hiring salespeople who speak Mandarin and Japanese.

If you are not a fan of branded goods, Florence has street markets famed for their leather goods. Most of these stalls are run by Indian nationals who speak fluent Italian, English and various other languages, such as Spanish and French. The atmosphere here is much like a fish market, with the salesmen shouting above each other in a desperate attempt to get your attention. If you do decide to stop at their stalls, expect outrageous opening prices, especially if you look like you can afford it. Opening prices can vary from €30 to €70, but I was advised to pay from €22 to €55 for leather bags and €15 to €30 for wallets. Be wary of shopping near Ponte Vecchio — it is most certainly the mother of all tourist traps. Instead, head closer to the Mercato Centrale area for better offers. Wherever you go, be sure to haggle and ask for discounts.



CAPRI

The Isle of Capri is a 45-minute ferry ride from the Bay of Naples. A two-way ticket on the hydrofoil will set you back €40. But money should not hinder you from taking that ride, for what awaits at the end of it is paradise.

Capri, with a population of 12,000, is still small enough for the residents of each town to be familiar with each other. The three major areas are the Marina Grande, Capri town and Anacapri town. I chose to stay in Anacapri in a highly rated bed and breakfast — La Guardia B&B, operated by Umberto Galizia, who is well known on the island. Using his name will ensure you are well taken care of in a number of restaurants.

Staying with Umberto comes with many other perks: The gracious host will sit you down with a welcome drink of your choice while he runs through a recommended itinerary. Activities he suggests include visiting the Grotte Azzurre (the blue caves), taking the chairlift up Monte Solaro to the highest point of the island to enjoy breathtaking views, and exploring the gardens in Capri town. The B&B is also near the only *faro* (lighthouse) in Capri, which is accessible via a half-hour hike. Be sure to wear long pants as the hike takes you through a small hill covered in high grass. If you are afraid of lizards, take the bus from

Leather pouches found in the leather markets in Florence

If you are not a fan of branded goods, Florence has street markets famed for their leather goods.

Florence is also where the video game, *Assassin's Creed II*, is set. Due to its popularity, many tourists ask for a special tour during which the guide gets to tie in the game with the actual buildings. But few tour companies do this. After some research, I found only one company that does the tours legally and cross-checked it on TripAdvisor for reviews. Guided Tours of Florence and Lucca is run by Tatiana and Alessia. Both are licensed guides and host tours in English, Italian, French, Spanish and Portuguese.

The tours are as private as can be and the guide will customise the programme according to your preference. This can be considered an unconventional tour as *Assassin's Creed* is a great blend of history and fiction. My guide Tatiana walked me through some of the gameplay and answered all the questions I posed. She pointed out things which we would have otherwise missed, like holes in the walls shaped like small doors. These used to be little windows through which people could order wine. But they are now sealed over.

Florence is rich in diversity, architecture and history. It was here that I found the most varied foods. From English bars to Chinese restaurants to Turkish fare, the city has it all within one neighbourhood, should you want a break from Italian cuisine.

PERUGIA

Perugia is not commonly on the tourist's itinerary in Italy. This is a pity as the main town of Umbria has lots to offer. While the rest of Italy has progressed, Perugia seems to have integrated its medieval-like structures with modern times. Though much of Perugia is made up of small villages and natural landscapes, it is also host to many modern-day festivals. Annually, it hosts the Umbria Jazz Festival, the Euro-Chocolate Festival and the International Journalism Festival.



Above: Claudia's signature yellow Vespas — the only yellow Vespas found in the whole Umbrian region.

Many may think that there is little to do in the small town, but it is definitely a place to visit. The Umbrian countryside is untouched and pristine. A great way to explore the countryside is to rent a Vespa or an "Ape Calessino", which is pretty much a motorised trishaw. Only one company currently rents out Vespas and the Ape Calessino in the whole of Umbria — Umbria in Vespa. It is owned by German national Claudia Acquah, who has lived in Italy for over 20 years.

Claudia is an expert on the Umbrian region. On my first day in Perugia, I rode the Ape Calessino to Lake Trasimeno, about 40km from Perugia town. The lake itself is a spectacular natural site. Its colour changes frequently, to reflect that of the sky. During the three hours I spent around the lake, I watched it change from silver to blue, from blue to turquoise to sea-foam green, and finally, to a deep aquamarine. There is one fishing village left on the banks of the lake, where the fishermen have opened up a restaurant serving the freshest lake-water seafood.

On the way back to Perugia town, I passed by the Perugina Chocolate factory. Now owned by Nestlé, it still produces the finest chocolate in the land. Claudia says the locals are very proud of two things, their chocolate and the mini metro. The former, be it the Perugina brand or those crafted by artisanal chocolatiers, is considered the best in Italy. After tasting some of the famed Baci chocolate, I can understand why. It is smooth in texture and rich in taste. It is also freshly made. The Perugina Chocolate factory is open for tours on weekdays. Inside it, there is a chocolate museum.

Artisanal chocolate handmade by the locals is available in the heart of town itself. Opposite the only five-star hotel in town, the Hotel Brufani Palace, there is a set of escalators that takes you down to the Etruscan ruins. Once you enter the ruins, you will find yourself in a lively artisanal market. Vendors set up shop along its damp



and cold corridors, selling anything from Murano glass jewellery to handcrafted figurines, ceramic goods from Capri, artisanal chocolate, wine, meats and cheeses. These underground ruins can be quite a treat for the olfactory senses.


Some vendors are generous and will hand out samples of their products for you to try. You are not obliged to buy anything from them. However, you will most probably be tempted to purchase some of the artisanal chocolate after

The Ape Calessino that belongs to Claudia Acquah, owner of Umbria in Vespa.

a bite — its texture is smoother than that of the Perugia Baci. But be prepared to pay for them; prices are from €4.50 per 100g.

What is exclusive to this region is the pasta the Umbrians serve. Although the sauces are the same, they use a type of pasta aptly named umbricelli instead of the traditional spaghetti. Umbricelli is thicker and wider, and tastes a bit chewier too. This pasta is rarely found elsewhere in Italy.

Getting around Perugia is not difficult. The Perugians are proud of their mini metro system, which was implemented about six years ago. Each tiny carriage fits about 25 people and has only four seats. However, the carriages are very efficient as one would swing by every one to two minutes. There is also a comprehensive bus route, although the buses are much less frequent — they come once every 30 minutes to an hour.

Getting around on foot is always the best option in Perugia as there are many alleyways that lead to stunning panoramic views. The roads are made of stone, much like those in the rest of Italy. The whole town is built atop a hill, so it may not be easy for some to navigate the roads and sometimes steep inclines. However, I feel this is one town that many would not mind getting lost in. 

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