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SUMMER IN EUROPE

Rome at Night



Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

The Colosseum in Rome.

By IAN FISHER
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Correction Appended

ROME after dark was once a perilous place, according to the satirist Juvenal, the dangers ranging from robbers to cutthroats to flying chamber pots.

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A Walking Tour of Rome at Night

“There’s death in every open window as you pass along at night,” he wrote some 1,800 years ago. “You may well be deemed a fool, improvident of sudden accident, if you go out to dinner without having made your will.”

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Dinner is perfectly safe these days, with street crime low and sewage securely underground. Night now does not really darken Rome so much as illuminate the many parts that matter, a real-life chiaroscuro of the city where [Caravaggio](#) lived and painted. With the daytime heat cut in summer, diners at Da Giggetto in the Jewish Ghetto can ponder both their artichokes and the boney, floodlit columns of the Octavian Gate, which stood there a century and a half before Christ was born. Not far away, the Colosseum — where Enlightenment-age tourists wandered at night with notions of Rome maybe even more romantic

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Rome Illuminated



Map
Rome, Italy

than ours — rises with singular heft, each stone arch glowing in the night.

Rome at night is, in short, a city lit like a theater, and, especially in the warmer months, should be enjoyed like one. In fact, Georgina Masson, who wrote the 1965 classic “Companion Guide to Rome,” recommended the night as the time Rome should first be seen. The first of her book’s walking tours starts where Rome began, the Capitoline Hill — where Michelangelo designed a piazza, she said, like a “stage set” — overlooking the nubby ruins of the Forum. “Seen by day it requires something of the knowledge of the [archaeologist](#) and the imagination of a poet,” she wrote. “But at night ... it is not nearly so difficult to picture the stately ranks of colonnaded temples crowned with the gilded statues and the basilicas rearing their great hulk against the night sky.”

It’s hardly a new thought (it is literally one of the oldest), but in my nearly four years here as the bureau chief of The New York Times, I have found that there is no better place than Capitoline Hill to see, in one dramatic sweep, so much of Rome’s history — especially, as Ms. Masson advises, if one starts at sunset.

A superb walk through time might start on the far side of the hill, on Via dei Fori Imperiali. To the south, the Colosseum glows. Up Via di San Pietro in Carcere is Michelangelo’s Piazza del Campidoglio, with a replica of the equestrian statue of the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius (the original is in the Capitoline Museum) unlit

but no less heroic at night, a lone horseman in the center of the city, as has often been noted, at the center of the world. If the Forum is antiquity, the egg-shaped piazza and three palaces are among the finest of Renaissance buildings, stripped of detail at night, revealing more their harmony and, if you are that sort, romance.

A walk down Michelangelo’s steps leads to more of this mix of ages: across the street stands the mini-Colosseum of the Theater of Marcellus, and to the right, the ruins of the Octavian Gate. Here, as elsewhere in Rome, the approach to lighting seems much like [Italy](#)’s approach to food: there is so much to work with that it seems pointless to dress things up; the light accents, simply, what is already there. But here, also, the dark side of the city’s history intrudes, as it often does: this is where in 1943, some 2,000 Jews, who had lived in Rome since antiquity, were rounded up and sent to death camps.

Beyond the ruins, on Via del Portico d’Ottavia, the Jewish Ghetto still thrives, with many of the shops buzzing into the evening hours, and nearby is the tiny Piazza Mattei, where four bronze boys play in the Fountain of the Turtles. Stop, at Largo Argentina, where the columns of the Republican Victory Temples, more than 2,000 years old, jut into the night sky (though it is harder then to see the scores of unwanted cats given sanctuary there). It is a good place to end this mini-nocturnal tour of Rome’s history because it was there — not at the Forum — where Julius Caesar was killed, on March 15, 44 B.C, as evening approached (according to some accounts).

History, though, is not the only reason to walk at night. As residents well know, Rome, which evolved not on a triumphal scale, but on a very human one, is simply a lovely place to stroll. Romans are out in numbers to enjoy the summer nights, so visitors can feel assured they are doing generally as the Romans do.

One place to experience this local life is at Piazza del Popolo, once Rome’s northern gate. Every night, but especially on warm weekends, crowds of Italians stroll and shop, with

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A fresco in Trastevere. [More Photos](#)



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their teenagers working hard to be cool as they wander about the piazza. Our family has gone there often, allowing ourselves to be pulled into the human wave that drifts south on Via del Corso.

The obvious destination from there is Piazza di Spagna, which is full of people day and night. For all the over-the-top adjectives about the piazza and its famous steps — which attracted Goethe, Joyce, Byron, Shelley and Keats, who died there in 1821 at No. 26, now a museum — it is worth noting a contrary view. In December 1872, [Henry James](#) arrived on his second visit to Rome and, despite being ill, decided on an evening stroll. He did not care much for Piazza di Spagna.

“It was all silent and deserted, and the great flight of steps looked surprisingly small,” he wrote. “Everything seemed meager, dusky, provincial. Could Rome, after all, be such an entertaining place?”

But James has been overruled, with the crowds these days voting with their feet. Unlike many parts of the city, notable for their views, Piazza di Spagna is largely its own enclosed universe, which feels even more insular at night, with a vertical exit signaled by the illuminated Fountain of the Barcaccia, a fanciful fishy barge, up the Spanish Steps to a glowing obelisk in front of the double towers of the church of the Trinità dei Monti.

For a more literal sense of the Roman night as theater, or really cinema, go south to the Trevi Fountain. This is one place given over pretty much to tourists at all hours, in truly unwieldy numbers, but it cannot be missed as [art](#), spectacle and cultural icon. In front of your eyes Oceanus stands gleaming mightily as he tames the waters, a metaphor for the great feat of the aqueducts that brought water to the city. But inside many minds, no doubt, runs the famous night scene in Fellini’s “Dolce Vita” of Anita Ekberg and [Marcello Mastroianni](#) stepping into the fountain. A dip, though, even if you look as great as they did, will land you in trouble, no matter how hot it is.

And it does get hot, reaching 90 degrees or more in July and August. Many Romans flee to the beach, but the city’s government has taken care that those who stay behind, native or not, enjoy the hours when it is more comfortable to wander, with outdoor plays, movies, concerts and restaurants. In whatever season — and it rarely gets too cold — there is much to do at night, with perhaps the most spectacular activity being the most costly.

For 250 euros (about \$400 at \$1.60 to the euro) a person, tourists can visit the [Vatican Museum](#) in small groups led by personal guides after hours. Galleries packed to a slow shuffle by day are, at night, emptied like drawing rooms of dreams. The Sistine Chapel is shared by as few as a dozen others, and no one yells if you take a picture.

“It’s overwhelming,” said Angela Desmond from [Washington](#), on a tour with Italy With Us ([www.italywithus.com](#)). “You have it all to yourself.”

Somehow the world’s most famous chapel plays its part in defining the contrasts of Rome that are sharpest at night: the ceiling is Creation, and so newborn light and hope; the Last Judgment on the wall, torment and death. When you step back outside, nighttime Rome conjures images of [Leonardo da Vinci](#) smuggling cadavers of executed prisoners for illicit dissections that informed some of the loveliest paintings ever.

If these metaphors are too high-flown — and the price for a private tour too steep — a free stroll around St. Peter’s Square is altogether different on a summer night. By day, the piazza is hot and clogged with long lines for the free look at St. Peter’s Basilica. By night, the cobblestones of Via della Conciliazione, stretching to Bernini’s colonnade and Michelangelo’s dome and the obelisk dragged to Rome by the emperor Caligula, are all quiet, empty, luminous. You can even check if [Pope Benedict XVI](#) is awake by looking for lights from his bedroom in the two top right windows facing the square in the Apostolic Palace, and contemplate what a shame it is that the Vatican has abandoned its most dramatic nighttime spectacle: for years on Easter, the complex was lighted with thousands of small paper lanterns, to apparently spectacular effect.

“The gathering shades of night rendered the illumination every moment more brilliant,”

an account from Easter 1818 reads. “The whole of this immense church — its columns, capitals, cornices and pediments ... all were designed in lines of fire.”

The setting may not be as showy, but a nighttime visit to the Janiculum Hill is no less magical. It is the most spectacular view of Rome — an organic and unimaginably wide panorama from the bright marble of the Vittoriano monument at Piazza Venezia to the dome of the Pantheon to the big bronze angel watching over Castel Sant’Angelo.

Though many restaurants and shops close in the summer, especially in August, the city makes up for it by opening many famous sites for concerts, movies and the like. Among the best is Castel Sant’Angelo, the stout half-barrel near the Tiber, built as the Emperor Hadrian’s tomb, then in the Middle Ages transformed into a castle conveniently close to St. Peter’s (via a hidden passageway in the Vatican walls) when troubled popes needed refuge. It normally closes in early evening, but in the summer, it is opened for concerts, readings and late-night dining. A temporary beach, with actual sand, is laid down next door. The view from the top including a terrace designed by Michelangelo, is stunning, with the Vatican’s dome on one side, all of Rome’s center on the other and the river below.

The main summer festival unfolds on Tiber Island. Every evening between June and September, the island — the only one on the river inside central Rome, where plague victims and criminals were once condemned — sprouts with restaurants, bars and markets for clothes, books and handicrafts. The temperature, and nighttime view up to Rome from the river basin, can be enjoyed via beer, hookah or a simple stroll. The island is also the site of the city’s summer film festival. The screen is outdoors, and viewers sit in plastic chairs rather than camped out on blankets.

For English-speaking visitors, an amusing summer diversion is a performance of the Miracle Players, a theater troupe that since 1999 has put on weekly tongue-in-cheek historical plays with the ruins of the Forum their stage. Last summer they presented “Caesar — more than just a salad,” a brisk 40-minute romp of the emperor’s life, peppered with 100 quotes from ancient sources but inspired more by Monty Python.

During the performance, I found my eyes drifting to the wider stage: the Forum at sunset. The play unfolds next to the Mamertine Prison, the site where by tradition St. Peter was held before his crucifixion (though there are historical doubts), and next to the grand arch of the emperor Septimus Severus. The view stretches from there, in shifting shades of rose and yellow as the sun goes down, across the Forum to the Colosseum.

If you tire of avoiding eye contact with summer street musicians performing “O Sole Mio” — and you will — the city also puts on regular concerts. The best is the summer jazz festival at Villa Celimontana, running now for over a decade in a gorgeous Renaissance palace, in the shadows of the Colosseum and the Baths of Caracalla. Though the event attracts many international artists, last year featured many Italians, such as the singer and composer Maria Pia De Vito and the drummer Roberto Gatto.

If, at last, the summer heat becomes too much and the desire strikes to escape the city, there really is no choice other than a trip to the nearby Alban Hills, to the town of Frascati, just 15 miles southeast of Rome’s center.

The routine is well established by Romans seeking a few cooler hours in the hills where emperors did the same. First, go to Piazza del Mercato. From the scores of little shops and stands buy sliced porchetta, which is the great local grilled pig, cheese, bread, olives, artichokes and whatever else looks good. Walk to one of the many cantine nearby that sell chilly Frascati wine. Sit down with your food at rickety outdoor tables and order a liter or so of wine. Then enjoy, as you think whatever romantic thoughts you might, the diamonds of lovely light that illuminate distant, nighttime Rome.

LIGHTS ON

From June through early September, the city of Rome organizes concerts, movies, plays and other events. This year’s schedule has not yet been set, but when it is, it can be found at www.estateromana.comune.roma.it. Click on the British flag for English.

For dining, [music](#) and other events around the city, pick up a copy of the weekly guide Romad'è (1.50 euros, or \$2.40 at \$1.60 to the euro) at newsstands or online at www.romace.it/site/englishsection.php.

For travelers blessed to be without a budget, the most splendid hotel in Rome is the **Grand Hotel de la Minerve** (Piazza della Minerva, 69; 39-06-695-201; www.grandhoteldelaminerve.com), next to the Pantheon. Apart from the rooms (doubles start at 470 euros) and service, which are first rate, the rooftop bar is, if pricey, unparalleled.

The **Hotel Ponte Sisto** is not cheap either (385 euros for a double), but it often offers more affordable Internet rates (Via dei Pettinari, 64; 39-06-686-310; www.hotelpontesisto.com). The location is superb: right next to the Ponte Sisto, which crosses the Tiber into Trastevere, and within a short walk to Campo de' Fiori, Piazza Farnese and Piazza Navona.

For eating, **Pierluigi** (Piazza de' Ricci, 144; 39-06-686-1302; www.pierluigi.it) is well visited by both Romans and tourists, and for good reason. In summer, tables are out on Piazza de' Ricci on Via Monserrato, in the charmingly cramped medieval zone just north of the Tiber. The specialty is seafood; try the pressed octopus starter.

Less well known, but excellent in a city where restaurants are known more for adherence to tradition than innovation, is **Bir & Fud** (Via Benedetta, 23; 39-06-556-1677; www.birefud.it), in Trastevere. It is basically a high-end pizzeria, combining the best ingredients unusually and deliciously. The real star, though, is the beer, housemade and perfect for hot summer nights.

IAN FISHER, chief of The Times's Rome bureau since 2004, is returning to New York to become a deputy foreign editor.

Correction: May 4, 2008

An article on April 20 about Rome at night misidentified the figure from mythology represented in the centerpiece sculpture of the Trevi Fountain. It is Oceanus, the Titan who the ancient Greeks believed ruled the watery elements — not Neptune, the Roman god of the sea. (The error has appeared for years in travel guides about Rome, is found extensively in Internet references, and has infiltrated at least five other articles in The Times since 1981.)

And a map accompanying the article gave an incorrect location for the Forum. It is along the Via dei Fori Imperiali just west of the Colosseum, not southwest. A corrected map can be found at nytimes.com/travel.

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