

Farewell to the Megalopolis

Pewstet, Tony. Pagan Holiday.
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Part 2: All Roads Lead to Rome

IMPERIAL ROME, as historians love to point out, was the New York of its day—a vast, gangling, bloated organism, teetering on the verge of complete logistical collapse, far and away the largest concentration of humanity the world had ever seen. With over one million inhabitants by the end of the first century A.D., it was triple the size of ancient Babylon, the former urban record holder, ten times the size of classical Athens, and immeasurably more spectacular than either had ever been. Living in this teeming city, the self-ordained Capital of the World, was hopelessly addictive. For the intrepid Roman tourists about to leave on their Grand Tours, a journey that would take them away for several years, the prospect of departure was often bittersweet.

For a sentimental farewell, citizens climbed the smooth carved steps of the Capitoline—the most sacred of the city's seven hills, crowned by the cavernous, golden-roofed Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus—to savor the breathtaking view for one last time. From this lofty aerie, Rome stretched to the horizon in every direction; its marble structures blanketed the countryside “like snow,” as Aelius Aristides evocatively put it in his oration of A.D. 140, all brilliantly sparkling in the Italian sun. The beautification program that had begun under Augustus was long complete (I FOUND ROME A CITY OF BRICK, the first emperor boasted on his tomb. I LEAVE IT TO YOU A CITY OF MARBLE). Now a viewer's eye would skip greedily across an intricate honeycomb of streets, identifying one architectural icon after another: the Circus Maximus, where audiences of 250,000 roared over the chariot races; the bronze-covered dome

of the Pantheon, temple to all the gods; the towering ellipse of the Colosseum. But the most astonishing thing was the city's sheer size: A survey in the fourth century, taken when Rome was actually slightly smaller than its second-century peak, counted 46,602 multistory tenement buildings; 1,790 palatial villas; 340 temples; 856 bathhouses; 6 Egyptian obelisks; 10 aqueducts; 4 gladiatorial schools; 28 libraries; 36 triumphal arches; 290 warehouses; 1,352 swimming pools—not to mention the dozen famous public latrines. The largest of these complexes, *Forica*, was as big as Notre-Dame Cathedral, its marble seats heated in winter and decorated with mosaics, silver fountains, and dolphin motifs.

Visitors who saw this pageant for the first time were struck dumb with awe: According to a Syrian named Callimachus, there were two types of people on earth—those who had seen Rome and those who had not. Heaven could show nothing fairer, raved the poet Claudian. It was the greatest man-made creation in the ancient world, referred to simply as *Urbs* (the city).

But as any departing Roman also knew, to truly appreciate this inspiring vista, it was wise to climb the Capitoline hill on a breezy day. Otherwise, a noisome brown haze would be hanging low over the city's streets, capable of dulling their majestic polish and sparkle. Charcoal smoke from household kitchens, bakers' ovens, blacksmiths' furnaces, funeral pyres, and clouds of dust kicked up by shuffling pedestrians all combined to create a preindustrial version of air pollution. And even at those lofty heights, a steady roar would be rising from the streets, invading the hallowed precincts of Jupiter, occasionally interrupting the priests' pagan liturgies, and threatening to overwhelm any delicate poetic musings on Rome's divine Destiny.

In fact, Romans descended from the hill with a twinge of trepidation. For beneath all of those glittering temples and golden monuments, the Eternal City was utter pandemonium.

The Romans' talent for urban planning was never expressed in their own city. Its maze of alleys, never more than ten feet wide, was less like a system of public thoroughfares than a diabolical obstacle course. By government decree, wheeled traffic had been banned during the daylight hours, so even patricians had to pick their way through the city by foot, their sandaled feet skidding along a nauseating bouillabaisse of Tiberine mud, rotting vegetables, broken bricks, pebbles, mule dung, and the occasional dead cat. In this claustrophobic labyrinth, every passageway was clogged by tradesmen—fish vendors, carpenters, wine merchants, booksellers, milkmaids, apothecaries, and butchers, whose hanging

sheeps' heads made the paving even more slippery with blood. Barbers went to work shaving men in the middle of the street; blinding clouds of smoke escaped from ovens; jugs of wine swung precariously above tavern doorways.

People made their way in cramped conga lines through these sunless alleys, gathering filth on the hemlines of their finest togas, their toes stomped by the heels of soldiers, and always enduring the thick-skinned brusqueness of fellow Romans as they jostled one another. "Where's your head—in the clouds?" bellowed an enraged citizen at the poet Horace when he accidentally stumbled. "One man digs an elbow into my side, another a hard pole," lamented the satirist Juvenal after a bruising stroll. "One bangs a beam, another a wine cask, against my skull." But the most serious dangers when traversing Rome came from above. The city was a vast, unsecured construction site. Wooden beams and loose tiles and bricks would regularly plunge into the crowded streets, braining the unlucky. A more common threat was to one's dignity, since an intermittent rain of slops from chamber pots poured down from tenement windows. The great lawyer Ulpian is said to have argued many court cases to redress such messy urban insults.

No wonder Romans had a love-hate relationship with their city. In those intense, exhausting streets, they were reminded every day that an overseas jaunt might not be such a bad thing.

SEANCE AT DAWN

Four o'clock in the morning, fresh from Pompeii, and I was realizing with satisfaction that modern Rome had refined at least one great ancient tradition: world-class noise.

All night, the steady stream of muffler-free Vespas along the Via del Colosseo had sounded like they were running across our bed; everything from the brain-piercing sirens of ambulances to the expectations of local *igaudiandi* were amplified by the narrow street below. And this was merely the overture: At dawn, a parade of Roman garbage trucks, street cleaners, and delivery vans began grinding down the lane, vibrating the hotel walls and triggering an operatic chorus of car alarms and howling dogs. Eventually the morning peak hour, with its permanent gridlock of drivers leaning on their horns, drowned everything else out in a shrill symphony. Lesley had managed to sleep through the entire acoustic extravaganza, but I was in danger of becoming a gibbering wreck.

So, in the pale morning light, I consulted my Latin volumes and exulted in ancient complaints about noise pollution.

"Insomnia is the main cause of death in Rome," wailed Juvenal in A.D. 100. "Show me the bedroom that lets you sleep!" The main culprit was traffic, even then. For the very reason that wheeled vehicles were banned during the day, Rome's cumbersome delivery carts were forced to do their rounds after dark. And since axle grease was rarely used in ancient times—olive oil and animal fat were prohibitively expensive—every lurch of the transports let out a piercing squeal that penetrated even the remotest apartment.

"The thunder of wagons in those narrow twisting streets," Juvenal groaned, "the oaths of the draymen caught in a jam, would shatter the sleep of a deaf man—or a lazy walrus."

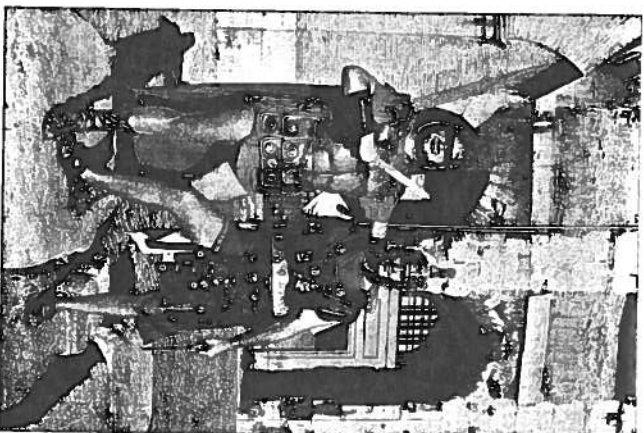
Hangovers were apparently hell in Imperial Rome. Vehicles might have been forced off the streets an hour before dawn, but they were immediately replaced by a rising crescendo of bakers hawking their bread, blacksmiths pounding their anvils, priests shrieking their morning rituals, shepherds bringing milk from the countryside, and shrill children chanting their alphabets.

"All Rome is at my bed head!" moaned the poet Martial, writhing on his mattress one morning after a wine-soaked night on the town.

In modern Rome, technology had merely raised the pitch a few hundred decibels. For Les, being able to sleep through noise was the only pleasant side effect of pregnancy so far. She finally rolled over and looked at my sunken, bloodshot eyes.

"This will get you in training for fatherhood," she chirped, and bounded out of bed.

A couple of cappuccinos later, we were happily immersed in the Queen of Cities, trying to imagine the world the first tourists left behind. Of course, ancient Rome was all around, in a manner of speaking. In front of the Colosseum, Italian actors were dressed in Roman centurion uniforms—antiques from the days when sword-and-sandal hits such as *Spartacus*, *Cleopatra*, and *Caligula* were shot in situ at the film studio Cinecittà. The new centurions posed for tourist photos, charged a small fortune, and casually groped the ladies whenever they had the chance. In the Forum Romanum, the summer sun ricocheted around the broken columns mercilessly, making you wonder how the ancients survived without sunglasses. Water was still pouring from first-century drinking fountains; little boys dashed among the statues waving plastic swords instead of toy guns. We staggered around the ruins like the wide-



Centurions pose for tourists in front of the Colosseum.

eyed provincials of ancient times: Around the corner was Trajan's Forum; up the hill, the emperors' palaces on the Palatine. There's the Pantheon! The Circus! Temple of Vesta!

"Rome in her greatness!" intoned the poet Propertius. "Stranger, look your fill!"

There was only one small problem with modern Rome, as far as I could tell: It was just too beautiful.

I caught myself taking photographs of *everything*. Rubble. Plazas. Doorways. Rooftops. All those timeworn facades oozing pinks and ochers and tangerines. Gelato stands. Fruit stalls. Shopwindows. Even the gutters appeared painterly, when the light was right. The layers of art history—Classical, Gothic, Baroque, Rococo, Neoclassical, and beyond—were all jostling for attention. Italian artists complain about being oppressed by the weight of so many styles, and you can see why. It's impossible to concentrate on any one epoch.

Modern Rome is simply a magnificent blur—a gorgeous smear.

The Urban Monster

Surrounded by all this fragmented beauty, the inhabitants take refuge in a charming uniformity. They take pride in their anarchist streak, their ungovernable chaos, but on a day-to-day basis they may be the world's most amiable conformists. The clothing boutiques are full of outrageous creations, but nobody actually wears them: In fact, modern Romans look like they've all been decked out from the same Benetton outfit. They zip back and forth on their Vespas, all exquisitely groomed as if they're rushing off for an interview with the pope; extended families in color-coordinated outfits arrange themselves at the outdoor cafés like medieval *tableaux vivants*. There are no tasteless notes in Rome, no failed experiments, no extravagant gestures, no reeling public drunks, and almost no foreign restaurants—Italian cuisine is pleasingly monolithic, with almost every menu offering subtle variations on the time-honored themes. A wild night out for Roman kids is sipping soft drinks in the Campo de' Fiori, or hanging out on the Spanish Steps playing Eagles' songs on the guitar. All of Romans' creativity goes into the art of living well.

As a result, there must be no more seductive place on earth to while away summer days, sipping wine and eating pasta in the outdoor cafés. But when you're trying to picture the explosive world of Ancient Rome, it all seems too . . . *controlled*.

What made Ancient Rome unique as a city—what defined it to its inhabitants and the world—was its exhilarating extremes, its giddy combination of grandeur and squalor. It was exuberant, energetic, confronting, cosmopolitan, a volatile cocktail of wealth, penury, lust, and degradation.

Modern Rome, by comparison, is like a soothing watercolor hanging in a dentist's waiting room.

At some point I had to admit that on an *imaginative* level, Ancient Rome had less in common with modern Rome than with the more overpowering, rough-edged, and crass metropolis we'd just left behind: New York.

IT HAD ALWAYS SEEMED to me a little unsavory, the pleasure that historians—usually European—appeared to derive from comparing Ancient Rome to New York. (As the French academic Jerome Carcopino fulminates in his magisterial opus, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*: "If Rome was as enormous for her day as New York is for ours; if Rome . . . was a colossal devouring town, which stupefied the stranger and the provincial as the American metropolis astonishes the Europe of today, she paid even more dearly for the dimensions which her dominating position had inflicted upon her.") But a couple of days away from Manhattan, the idea was becoming more fetching.

After all, Ancient Rome's 1.25 million inhabitants shared an undying conviction that they were living in the ultimate city, a universal capital upon whose activities "the eyes of Gods and Mortals were fixed." Its shocking extremes existed cheek by jowl: Beggars clustered around golden monuments; fabulous mansions "comparable to the mad schemes of kings" stood next to downright slums. In fact, most Roman citizens crowded on top of one another in high-rise tenements called *insulae* (islands), comprising a population density that would not be equaled until New York's Lower East Side in the nineteenth century. Rome was the first great city of immigrants, a melting pot of the Mediterranean where 90 percent of its inhabitants could trace their lineage back to a new arrival within the past three generations. All this produced a rough street democracy: Patricians and plebeians, millionaires and tradesmen rubbed shoulders every day.

The comparison is not as whimsical, or as anachronistic, as it might at first seem. Imperial Rome was, in many ways, the first modern city: Sir Peter Hall, for example, in his exhaustive study of urban history, introduces Ancient Rome five hundred pages late, at the beginning of the industrial age. (Ancient Rome, he notes, "served as a kind of rehearsal trailer for all the cities that would come much later.") As the world's first true megalopolis, Rome had to deal with problems that are today the grist of daily life—housing shortages, unemployment, waste management, garbage disposal. Romans devised the first traffic laws, building codes, fire brigades, and police forces. They organized massive international importation of food (133,000 tons of grain a year, carried by purpose-built fleets from Egypt); erected enormous aqueducts to bring water from hundreds of miles around; created public latrines and a magnificent system of underground sewers that some patriots insisted were engineering marvels on a par with the Pyramids.

Despite all this, Ancient Rome remained a logistical nightmare, an unwieldy juggernaut lurching from fiasco to fiasco, a city that objectively speaking was unworkable—just like home.

In fact, Imperial Rome and New York are matching bookends to the last two thousand years of Western urban history, the two behemoths that have defined our conception of what a city can be. On a metaphorical level, the cities are described by both contemporaries and historians in the same hyperbolic terms. All the familiar images of Heroic New York—that mythic metropolis, at the height of its power in the early to mid-twentieth century, when its pretensions to being the "world capital" had genuine weight—were first trotted out in Latin two thousand years ago about Rome. You can even take quotes about the pair and interchange them at will. H. G. Wells, when he saw New York in 1906, raved about "the unprecedented multitudinousness, the inhuman force of the thing." Classical observers felt the same mix of wonder and horror at Rome. To Juvenal—the dyspeptic satirist admired by Céline and George Orwell—it was simply "a monstrous city."

During my predawn reading sessions, I started keeping a notebook of the more striking parallels.

"Ever-rising rent is a subject of eternal lamentation in ancient literature," sums up Monsieur Carcopino. According to Juvenal, a year's rent for a "shabby, ill-lit attic" in Rome could buy a first-class villa in the country. In this savage real estate market, extortionate subleases were common, as were sub-subleases. "All low-income citizens should have marched out of Rome, in a body, years ago," Juvenal sniffs. These over-

priced Roman tenement houses, adds Carcopino, "suffered from the fragility of their construction, the scantiness of their furniture, insufficient light and heat, and an absence of sanitation." (*Egal! It's our apartment on Tenth Street!*) Many were six floors high, towering seventy feet above street level. Martial had to climb two hundred steps to his dismal garret; the tenement of Fellicula, next to the Pantheon, broke all building records and rose like a mini-skyscraper, becoming one of Rome's tourist attractions. Perhaps not surprisingly, Rome also spawned the first evil landlords: According to the German historian Ludwig Friedländer, writing in 1904, "the most urgent repairs were neglected; the agent propped up a tottering wall, or painted a huge rift over, and assured the occupants that they could sleep at their ease, all the time that their home was crumbling over their heads." Whole buildings did regularly collapse (a staple of New York's evening news—although today the tenants are usually saved). The sound of cracking plaster induced panic among Romans, driving dinner-party guests out into the street as if an earthquake were hitting.

The connections become even more compelling once the ancient moralists get going. Rome was constantly denounced for its decadence, luxury, wastefulness, and permissiveness. When the historian Tacitus describes the city as "a meeting place of all that is horrible and shameful," he sounds like a fundamentalist politician from Georgia denouncing New York's S&M bars—although, in a neat historical reversal, he is actually expressing his disgust at the new cult of Christianity, which was regarded by pagans as decadent and perverse.

And the list goes on.

Imperial Rome had an unshakable reputation for crime. Lurking among the delivery wagons after dark was a menacing cast of thieves, desperadoes, and prostitutes. The Subura, a district south of the Aventine hill, by the Tiber, was notoriously seedy, the South Bronx of the city, but danger was felt everywhere. Romans liked to terrify out-of-towners with exaggerated tales: "Only a fool accepts a dinner invitation without first making out his will," mourns Juvenal.

Blood sports? Any New York writer would be fascinated to learn that our word *editor* can be traced back to the Colosseum. The Latin *editor* was the head of a gladiatorial school, whose job it was to decide whether a wounded fighter should live or die. Lurking in the sidelines of the arena, the *editor* gave thumbs-up or -down on purely financial grounds—whether it was worth it to nurse the man back to health in the gladiatorial hospital, or to let him perish like a dog. (*Just like Manhattan*

publishing!) But the role was too popular to leave to a minor figure. The life-and-death power was later given to the emperor—who, to curry favor, deferred to the masses.

Lifestyle? Ancient Romans were obsessed by money and fashion; avarice and conspicuous consumption ruled all levels of society. "When has the purse of greed yawned wider?" asks Juvenal, wondering when Romans would open a temple to their real god, Cash. He continues: "In Rome we slavishly obey the latest fashion fad, spending beyond our means—and often on borrowed credit." Lucian derides one young victim: "Your only interests are resplendent clothes that drip luxury right down to your feet, and seeing that your hair is nicely cut."

Jerome Carcopino sums up the general opinion of the high-minded ancients on Rome when he rails against the city's "fever for riches, the mantle of luxury which cloaks her wretchedness, the prodigality of [the] spectacles . . . the mania of the intellectual gymnastics . . . and the frenzy of carnal indulgence in which [the inhabitants] stupefy themselves."

It was almost making me homesick.

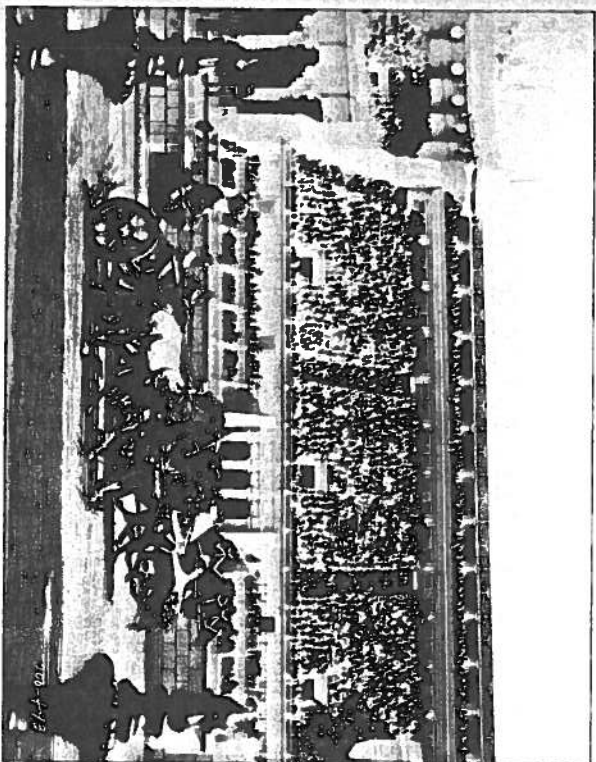
THE ACCIDENTAL TOURISTS

Here was another potential parallel: According to Pliny the Younger, Romans were forerunners of the proverbial New Yorkers who have never seen the Statue of Liberty. Pliny thought his fellow citizens would happily set off on a Grand Tour, traveling long distances to see the wonders of Greece, Asia, and Egypt, but were indifferent to the marvels of their own city. "We rush after what is remote and remain indifferent to what is nearby," he complains in a letter, deciding that this reflects the perversity of human nature. (Is it because "any desire loses its intensity if it can be easily satisfied," he muses, "or because we postpone visiting something we can see whenever we want, convinced that we will one day get around to it?")

But Pliny was exaggerating his case for rhetorical effect—just as the insular Manhattanite is no more than a stock figure of modern lore, a provocative half-truth.

The reality was quite the opposite. Romans were indefatigable sight-seers, lapping up the lures of their own city with as much enthusiasm as any bumpkin fresh from the Sabine Hills.

It could hardly be otherwise: Lacking the modern distractions of tele-



Chariot race in the Circus Maximus, from the 1926 silent film Ben-Hur.

vision, radio, and cinema, Romans found their stimulation in the streets. They lived outdoors from dawn until dusk, thronging the city's sumptuous forums, which were forerunners of modern Italian piazzas. Every new monument provoked genuine fascination; palace renovations were inspected, temples admired. On afternoon promenades, citizens explored the cul-de-sacs of history: They climbed the Palatine hill to inspect the humble straw hut of Romulus, Rome's founding father—the fact that the edifice had burned down and been rebuilt several times with Disney-esque polish over the centuries bothered nobody—then visited the Lupercal cave, where the babes Romulus and Remus had supposedly been suckled by a hypermaternal she-wolf. Romans could even admire the wooden crib the pair slept in after their rescue by the thoughtful herdsman Faustulus. Finally, there were the incessant games: Chariot races and gladiator shows were the *Cats and Les Miz* of the era. Crowds lined up the night before to compete for stadium seats, when one excited mob disturbed Caligula's sleep, he ordered them cudgelled into silence. Impromptu spectacles added to the entertainment. After the Great Fire

of A.D. 64, night races in Nero's imperial gardens were illuminated by human candles: Screaming Christian martyrs were rolled in resin, tied to stakes, then set ablaze (Nero quipped that it was the first time Christianity had shed light on anything).

Thrilling as all this might have been, it wasn't what made Imperial Rome such a stimulating place to live. Its inhabitants were the true spectacle. Street life in any ancient city was far more intense and interactive than any modern one could hope for. Ancient Rome took this principle to extremes: It was a giant stage, its citizens actors and observers of the drama.

There was no place on earth that could match its riotous diversity: The streets were thick with foreigners, an infinitely renewable supply of new arrivals from around the world, making people-watching a standard Roman entertainment. Ambitious young men and women—the sharpest legal minds, best-looking actors, most talented musicians—were lured to this city where professional competition was keeneest, the rewards highest, the price of failure greatest. To coin a phrase, if you could make it in Imperial Rome, you could make it anywhere. The most illustrious Roman writers harked from the provinces, as by the second century A.D. did most of the emperors. At the bottom of the social scale, foreign slaves were regularly freed by their masters. Many became fabulously wealthy. Rome bubbled over with rags-to-riches stories.

This fluid, cosmopolitan society gave Roman streets their celebrated energy. On a single afternoon in the Forum, you might encounter courtesans from Parthia, Dacian slaves carrying a Greek professor's books, the German guards of the emperor drilling near the palace, Ethiopian boxers and elephant trainers, and bearded Sarmatians (from modern-day Georgia), who drank horse blood. Outlandish costumes caught the eye: There were Oriental ambassadors in brilliant silks, tattooed barbarians from Britain, even men wearing trousers. Priests of the Egyptian goddess Isis conducted their processions, heads shaved, limbs swathed in white linen robes, jangling their wooden rattles and chanting. The daily pageant included palm readers, astrologers, and international performers—Andalusian dancing girls, flute players from Morocco, child acrobats from Rhodes. Juvenal records seeing a trained monkey riding a goat's back and waving a spear, as well as "snake-eaters" from central Italy. In the crowded forums, Greek actors declaimed their lines and professional storytellers begged for an audience: "Give me a copper coin," was the standard refrain, "and I'll tell you a golden story,"

Nevertheless, the world's most beautiful people also found their way to

Ovid in his *Art of Love* argues that, although many Romans traveled overseas in search of carnal adventure, the "hunting" was just as good at home, especially during festivals. "Why, youths and maidens come here from either sea," he gloats. "The mighty world is in our city. Who could not find in that crowd an object for his passion?" Gorgeous women were more numerous in Rome, Ovid notes, than fish in the sea or stars in the sky. As the prime pickup spots, Ovid recommends Pompey's theater, which had a shrine to Venus, and the Colosseum, where fashionable women gather "like bees on blossoms":

*They come to see, they come to be seen;
The place is fatal to chastity.*

Juvenal suggests hanging around any of Rome's temples at night. "Easy women haunt shrines," he reminds a friend in one satire. "You fucked them by the dozens there, and . . . more often than not, you had their husbands too."

Every moment in this tumultuous city provided a new social vignette—every hour in the Forum a new rumor or piece of gossip. No wonder Romans ceaselessly wandered around the streets with their eyes permanently agog. In the imperial capital, everything was bigger, brighter, brasher.

They were, in fact, natural-born tourists, whose skills were honed every day of their lives.

BLUEPRINT OF THE GODS

And here we were today, treating modern Rome in much the same way, like ancient travelers saying farewell to the city.

This belief only deepened when I discovered that our modest little hotel was built near the site of a first-century A.D. Roman boarding-house, excavated by Mussolini's archaeologists. I'd chosen it because it had the cheapest rooms in Rome—if not all of Italy. But our boisterous attic room, inexplicably, had a balcony. Across a few terra-cotta roofs, the Colosseum rose like a magnificently rotting cake.

"O Rome!" thapodized Martial. "Goddess of people and continents, whom nothing can equal or even approach!"

Up on the Capitoline hill, the Temple of Jupiter is today long gone, as is that famous view; thirty feet of debris have overlaid the ancient

are unrecognizable. That's why, instead of looking up at Rome's grand monuments, we gaze down into their graves. The Pantheon, for example, was built on a hill so that its burnished dome would be visible across the city. Today it's hidden at the bottom of an urban valley, surrounded by café tables.

To recapture that wondrous panorama of ancient Rome, you need to take the subway out to a decrepit Museum of Roman Civilization in the EUR—a suburb created for Fascist bureaucrats, whose brutalist landscapes were used to good effect by Bertolucci in *The Conformist*. Amid the museum's dust-filled reliquaries lies an extraordinary object: a three-dimensional model of Ancient Rome, sixty feet long by sixty feet wide, built in the 1930s by obsessive curators. The creation, which was based on awesome research, stretches beneath a viewing mezzanine like a vast crystal created in a laboratory. You can mentally run past its palaces, up and down the seven hills, across the bridges—speeding through its stone canyons like Luke Skywalker across the Death Star.

With a picture of that model firmly embedded in my mind—I'd studied it for two hours, treating it as a great 3-D blueprint—modern Rome

took on a new shape. Now, as we wandered the frenetic, fragmented city, I could picture the ancient roadways buried far beneath my feet. They were shimmering and slightly distorted like the ocean floor seen through a glass-bottomed boat.

And the imperial relics took on a fresh sheen. The Mausoleum of Augustus may today look like a vast eroded beehive surrounded by ragged office buildings, but I could envision it in its original glory, looming above a minimalist plaza laid out as a giant sundial with an Egyptian obelisk as the gnomon. The Field of Mars reemerged as a virtual theme park of Roman propaganda monuments, including the Colonnade of the Nations, which contained dozens of statues representing each of the Empire's conquered peoples. And finally, amongst the confusing debris of the Roman Forum, I found a broken stump, all that remains of the Golden Milestone. I could envision it again as a tall gleaming pillar (actually sheathed in bronze rather than gold), which marked the starting point of Rome's extraordinary highway system. It was here that the defunct tourist offices of the Empire set up shop. All the important provincial cities maintained representatives in the Forum—they were called *stationes municipiorum*—who behaved like the honorary consuls of the British Victorian era. Their main purpose was to assist their compatriots with trade or legal problems. But they would also, informally, give out advice about their homelands.

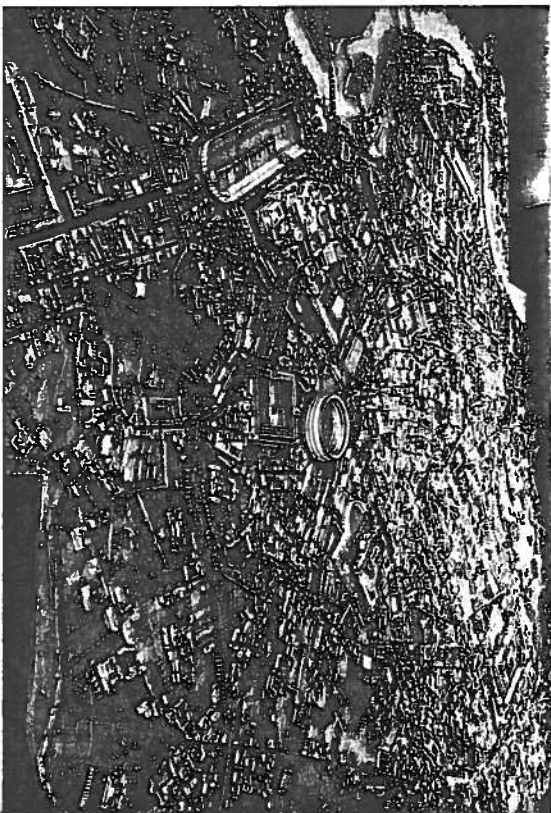
Restless Romans could while away afternoons chatting about the weather in Athens or shipping to Corinth. And plans might begin to take shape.

Sometime after the twelfth monument, I realized it was time for a minor correction in my approach to Rome.

We'd been spinning around the city in a frenzy, following an obsessive regime of ruin visiting, inscription reading, and statue gazing. Les had struggled gamely along at first, but eventually she began to drag her heels. She seemed increasingly suspicious that I was displaying the first signs of madness. Looking wistfully at all the Romans lounging in the sun, she said, "Why don't we just spend an afternoon in a café? Look at this place. How about a gelato?" But I was too distracted.

Now, after the fourth ancient site of the day, she sat down and refused to move. I'd pushed her too far—she was going on strike.

I glanced at our growing concern—three and a half months—and felt my usual vague disbelief. It occurred to me that she had her own private



Giant model of Ancient Rome in the Museum of Roman Civilization.

Vesuvius to consider. Every day she talked about some new sensation or emotion. I'd felt the little visitor squirm—even heard a heartbeat—but at some profound level I didn't believe anything had changed. Les was walking a little more slowly, wasn't drinking, and had gained some weight.

But at heart I suspected she'd just been eating too much tiramisu. At the start of our odyssey, we hadn't quite figured out how much she could and couldn't handle. Sudden waves of exhaustion rolled out of the blue; promenades came to unexpected halts. There were those hunger attacks, sending us scurrying for fresh food. Les had taken to carrying around a packet of dry biscuits, devouring them quietly in museum corners. And every step we took, there was a secret map in our minds of where the next bathroom lay . . .

It was a little difficult for me to adjust to all this, being, as I was, in a profound state of denial. Les had always been a good sport about our other so-called holidays. She'd barely complained when she'd gotten food poisoning in Sumatra, or nearly drowned on a yacht trip in the Coral Sea. It hadn't even bothered her too much when we'd gotten lost in a diamond miners' camp in Venezuela, or caught in that Argentine military rebellion, or chased by thugs in Belize City . . .

Here in Rome, I'd been bumbling along blithely, no major changes in outlook. We'd exchanged our backpacks for suitcases with little wheels attached—that was the biggest concession.

But now, on a sidewalk by the Tiber, I was beginning to see that Les's condition might make this trip a little different.

"Tone, it's not just me that's pregnant! You're pregnant too!"

I nodded sagely, not entirely sure what this meant.

We agreed to stage-manage our days a little more carefully. No more endless walks. Less-ambitious schedules. A few more taxis. Even some lounging about in cafés, Italian style, pondering the journey ahead.

It would be like traveling in slow motion. Not a bad thing, I supposed. It would force me to pause and absorb what I'd seen so far of Ancient Rome—and to grasp how almost everything in that whirlwind of a city had helped to advertise the Empire and its attractions.

On a day-to-day basis, Ancient Rome worked like a giant revolving door, luring the exotic from all over the world and subliminally planting the seeds of wanderlust in its inhabitants.

Every new religious cult found ready converts, every new delicacy an

eger buyer, every foreign novelty an audience. (As the author Apuleius admitted, "I have an almost morbid interest in anything queer or out of the way.") Rich Romans paid small fortunes for imported *miracula* (human curiosities). Hermaphrodites, cretins, and dwarves were purchased as conversation pieces; when they died, they were sometimes preserved in myrrh and honey, then put on permanent display in villas, like hunting trophies. Those with more eclectic tastes headed for the city's Monstrosity Market, a heartless Sotheby's of the Grotesque. There, one could bid for Pygmies from the Nile, giants from Scythia, "androgynous beings," an Indian with no arms, a "wild man" from Africa, or a two-foot-tall adolescent with a stentorian voice. Nero was once delivered a child with four heads, which he put on exhibit alongside the "Clutton from Alexandria"—who, to delight the audiences, would devour at one sitting a whole pig, a live hen, one hundred eggs, dozens of nails, broken glass, the twigs of a broom, and a bale of hay.

Fabulous animals aroused just as much interest. The first tiger seen in Europe was presented to Augustus by envoys from India and put on public display in a gilded cage; thousands of Romans filed past every day to admire the gorgeously striped beast as it prowled back and forth behind the bars, growling at its captors. Impromptu zoos were set up for giant tortoises, crocodiles, and rhinoceroses, as well as magical creatures—"animals with human limbs," a giant bird believed to be a phoenix, a sayr preserved in salt. In the reign of Claudius, an embalmed centaur—half man, half horse—arrived from Africa, while "monster skeletons" were regularly displayed in the arenas. Some were the fossilized remains of dinosaurs exposed by earthquakes, others the bones of whales that had strayed into the Mediterranean. Roman audiences gasped at the skin of a 120-foot-long snake and dead Gorgons—sheeplike animals whose gaze was lethal to man.

A whole new literary genre—paradoxography, or "books of wonders"—catered to this Roman passion for the extraordinary, listing oddities of botany, geography, zoology, and anthropology. It was complemented by a flurry of adventure travel books—"eyewitness accounts" of Scythian cannibals, one-eyed Africans, and islands inhabited by men whose feet pointed backward. In learned circles, erudite trivia fueled the art of conversation: Youngsters studied books on how to inject fascinating facts into party banter, while banquet hostesses, like the grand dames of Russian salons, would skillfully steer guests to debate specific matters. Recommended topics included: Where do new diseases come from? Why is A the first letter of the alphabet? In which hand was

Aphrodite wounded by Dionedes? Why did Homer call salt divine, but not oil? Why did Pythagoras ban the eating of fish? How does one ward off the evil eye?

These debates sometimes sank into pedantic rants that went on all night; there are reports of bored dinner guests hiding under their couches in a drunken stupor, or singing to themselves to drown out the drivel. But on the whole, Romans took them seriously, and the well-traveled found themselves at a great advantage. The guest who had personally spoken with the priests of the Nile, or seen famous art on display in Greece, had an authority that could hardly be questioned. As Dionysius Periegetes (Dionysius the Guide) says in his geographical poem: "As a result of [reading] this, you will be held in honor, and be highly regarded, as you relate particulars to someone unqualified." So much better for those who had actually gazed upon the sacred sites. Romans understood the importance of seeing wonders in situ, where they could enjoy the genius loci.

And who could spend an evening discussing the heroes of Troy or the rites of Egypt—who could sit by while lithe Asian acrobats performed, or, for that matter, who could taste imported dates, Greek olives, or rare Aegean wines—without yearning to feel the Mediterranean's warm breezes in their hair? No wonder so many decided to pack their bags. Or at least check the auspices.

Omens 101: How to Start a Journey

ON THE MORNING we were to leave for Naples, I awoke before dawn with a stab of anxiety.

The night before, in a narrow lane, a speeding Vespa had run over a pigeon; the decapitated body, wings flapping madly, had leaped onto my foot. Wincing, I'd washed off the blood, but I couldn't get the grisly image out of my head.

Now, while Lesley was still asleep, I took one last stroll around central Rome. The Forum was deserted, its broken columns soaking in a veil of mist. The traffic hum was strangely remote; the summer heat was gathering force, ready to pounce. I climbed the steps to the Capitoline hill and peered down at the ghostly ruins.

I wondered if this trip was entirely wise in our delicate condition. Were we testing the Fates?

It was a question the Romans, at least, would have understood.

Don't start a voyage on a Tuesday; Tuesdays are bad luck. Also October 5 and August 24—better to stay at home. Don't go anywhere at the end of a month; those are evil days to travel. Dream about owls, bears, or bulls? Cancel all travel plans, disaster is certain. Never sneeze as you enter a sailing vessel. No dancing en route! And definitely, definitely don't cut your fingernails in the open water. Unless you're caught in bad weather. Then by all means, trim both hair and nails; put the cuttings in a sack, and toss them overboard as offerings to Neptune. To whisk hair—and sometimes even's hair

Romans lived their lives trapped in a web of superstitions, at the mercy of their capricious gods, and the prospect of departing on a long journey always heightened this obsession. The Julian calendar was a terrifying minefield of unlucky days; the entrails of sacrificed animals regularly needed to be examined, dreams interpreted, and the natural world constantly scanned for omens.

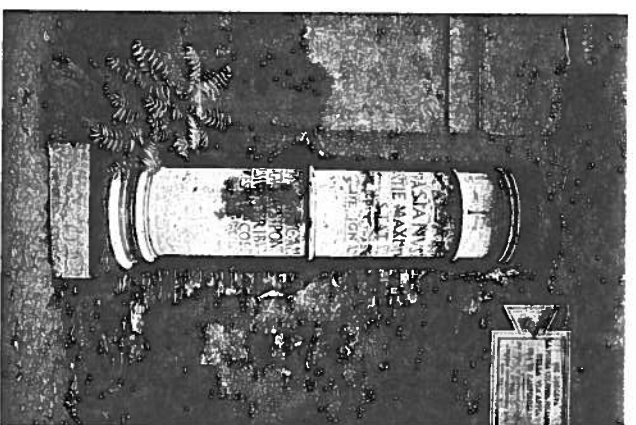
Some divine signals were fairly straightforward: A hailstorm on your day of departure was a clear message to cancel the journey. News of fish being found in plowed fields; bees clustering in a temple roof; the birth of a boy with two penises; a statue being hit by lightning; a river running with blood—all were poor omens. The emperor Nero canceled a major trip when his limbs began inexplicably to tremble in a temple. Other omens were more subtle: Augustus abandoned a voyage to Egypt when he accidentally tripped and tore his toga (then again, the first emperor was particularly sensitive to all divine messages; he also spent one day a year begging in the streets of Rome, because he'd been instructed to do so in a dream).

The trouble with omens was that a wide spectrum of events, including apparently minor ones, could be warnings from the gods, and the divine repercussions were often ambiguous. What, for example, did you make of a flock of birds passing overhead as you stepped out the door, or if you misplaced a favorite cloak on the morning of departure, or found a fly embedded in your breakfast bread? The interpretation of such events was a delicate art, requiring a soothsayer, a numerologist, a priest, or an astrologer—or all four. Maddeningly, good omens could even turn out to be tricks from the gods, luring hapless mortals on to disaster with false confidence.

As a result, the ancients lived from day to day in an agony of anticipation, trying to decipher every stray occurrence. An upcoming journey only raised the stakes.

Travel may have been safer than ever before, but one still had to worry about disease, shipwreck, earthquakes, horseback accidents, and all the myriad decrees of the Fates. The illustrious were far from immune. Rome's greatest poet, Virgil, caught fever on tour in Greece and died on his return to Italy; the tourist-emperor Hadrian lost his young lover swimming in the Nile, which broke his heart. And in A.D. 19, the beloved prince Germanicus himself fell sick and died on his return from Egypt, never to see Rome again.

If all ancient travelers felt a mixture of excitement and dread, Romans departing on the Grand Tour had their emotions pushed to neurotic extremes. The Appian Way made quite sure of that.



A milestone announces the start of the Appian Way.

It's easy to picture the giddy moment. At dawn, their iron-wheeled wagons slowly creaked through the Capena gate, were sprinkled with water from a leaking aqueduct above, and lurched onto the Queen of Highways. Rome's oldest artery, the Appian Way was also its most spectacular—"one of the sights of the world," according to the poet Propertius. Wide and smooth, its thousands of basalt polygons fitted together without cement, all under the shade of pine and cypress trees. It was always busy, and the traffic pleasingly entertaining—women driving chariots, rural peasants on foot, bejeweled horse riders. (Juvenal describes seeing a praetor trailed by five slaves on foot carrying cases of wine and a commode.) But there were few travelers who did not peer warily at the large shapes looming from the mist by the side of the road. Mausoleums and sarcophagi lurked on every side.

Perversely enough, the grand exit from Rome was also the Abode of the Dead.

Burials were not permitted within the city limits, so the Appian Way was lined with elaborate family vaults. All manner of *funeralia* was on

show: There were towering altars, faux-Egyptian pyramids, great circular vaults that contained the remains of whole dynasties, as well as shrines that doubled as rest shelters for travelers. In all, some three thousand tombs have been identified in the first eight miles beyond Rome's gates, turning the Aprian Way into a drive-through necropolis. What's more, most tombs bore philosophical inscriptions that would have provoked more thought than the advertising billboards of today.

Some were quite upbeat: READ, PASSING FRIEND, WHAT ROLE I ONCE PLAYED IN THIS WORLD . . . AND NOW THAT YOU HAVE READ, HAVE A PLEASANT JOURNEY. Others were bluntly hectoring: I ADVISE YOU TO ENJOY LIFE MORE THAN I DID! Another had a bas-relief of the buried man eating at a lavish table with his family and friends. WHAT GOOD IS IT FOR THE DEAD TO BE SEEN FEASTING? the inscription asked. THEY WOULD HAVE DONE BETTER TO HAVE LIVED THIS WAY. BEWARE OF DOCTORS! advised another. THEY WERE THE ONES WHO KILLED ME. The unsubtle display served to remind wayfarers that they, too, were mortal—as if Romans needed reminding.

Of course, the signs on the Aprian Way simply codified the mixed feelings that travelers have always felt embarking on a journey—hope, regret, fear, wonder, the desire to live life to the full, coupled with the fear of something going terribly wrong. It's the same delirious concoction of human possibilities that has made the journey itself such a useful metaphor for life. After all, Homer's *Odyssey*, one of Western civilization's oldest extant pieces of literature, is fundamentally a travel story.

Although I wasn't sure if our Grand Tour would reach the heights of epic, sitting there on the steps of the Capitoline did give me pause.

DICKERING WITH DEITIES

To their credit, Roman tourists did try to take matters into their own hands. As Aristides remarked: "It is customary for those traveling by land or sea to make resolutions." Romans took a bluntly legalistic attitude to the caprices of the gods.

It was basically: "Let's make a deal."

A departing traveler would make sure to visit a temple—of Mercury the traveler, the popular, wing-footed god of wayfarers; or *Rediculus*, god of the return journey; or in the East, Hercules, symbol of extraordinary courage and strength—and strike a private bargain for their safe journey. But the best place in Rome to do it was up on Capitoline hill, at the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. This was the real motive for

Roman tourists to climb those marble steps. Jupiter was not only the king of all the gods, he was the divine protector of strangers. And just for good measure, he was flanked in the temple by his wife, Juno, and the goddess Minerva, both patrons of Rome.

It was a moment of high drama, entering the splendid chamber whose ceiling and walls were covered in gold leaf, then gazing upon the statue of Jupiter presiding on a giant throne, with all of Rome before him. Travelers had to press through the crowds of suppliants who were arguing their cases out loud to the statue, and dodge busy sacrificians. Like all pagan images, the enormous figure was treated as if it were actually alive: Jupiter had his own priestly servants—some to tell him the hours of the day, others to anoint his hair with oil, and others to dress him in robes on state occasions when he was given official duties to fulfill.

Despite the pomp, the bargaining procedure was surprisingly bureaucratic. Temple priests would inscribe a *votum* (pledge) on a piece of papyrus, which said: "In return for a safe journey, I will perform [a certain act] when I reach my destination." Rich men swore to make expensive sacrifices or to donate money to the temple; the poor offered *terra-cotta* statues. The act could also be symbolic: The famous orator Aristides once promised to dedicate a speech to the gods in exchange for a trouble-free voyage across the Mediterranean. The handwritten contract would then be sealed and affixed by wax to the statue itself; by all accounts, Jupiter's muscular thighs were thick with these tiny shreds, creating an effect like a skin disorder.

One day, the traveler hoped, he or she would return to the temple and celebrate a successful transaction by inscribing another parchment, which read *Julius VSLM*—shorthand for *Julius Votum Soluit Libens Merito* (Julius has paid his vow with pleasure and merit). The priests would then store the scrap in the temple's vast archives for posterity. Every temple's floor was cluttered with the offerings of those who had fulfilled these sacred promises—everything from ears of corn to silver tripods and golden horns of plenty were piled in the hundreds.

If anything went wrong with these divine deals—assuming travelers made it back—the disgruntled worshippers would be within their rights to abuse the god, kicking the statue or worse.

As the sun pierced the mist on the Capitoline hill, I decided to make a small deal myself—with Juno, queen of Mount Olympus and the goddess of childbirth.

If we made it intact through Greece and Turkey—if we arrived safely at our destination on the desert frontier of Egypt—if Lesley didn't fall victim to Islamic kidnapers, Aegean ferry disasters, ague, or hepatitis—then I would, like Aristides, perform a "certain act."

Which was, like the ancient contracts, a secret to be kept until our return.

And so we headed south, to the land where ancient tourists went to ease themselves, voluptuously, into travel mode.

PART THREE

THE HEDONISM
COAST