

It's 25 years since Andy and I visited Rome. I have to admit I didn't really like Rome last time. It was hot, grey, dusty and we were a bit cultured out by the time we arrived. We were looking forward to giving Rome another chance, and the heat wasn't going to be an issue with highs of around 3 degrees. The locals were all shivering but we are used to these temperatures now.

Our apartment is in a great location, just off the main shopping street and a few hundred metres from the Pantheon, Trevi Fountain and Spanish Steps. There was time for a visit to the Pantheon, before we headed to the Colosseum to collect our tour tickets. There were a limited number of tickets available each day to tour the underground area of the Colosseum as well as visit the top tiers not accessible on a normal ticket. I had been checking for months when the tickets would be released, as these things are somewhat unpredictable in Italy. Although tickets are sometimes released 3 months in advance, tickets for our dates had finally been released on Dec 20th. I was hoping everything would be ok with the tickets and it would be worth the effort.



Pantheon



Andy and Anna took the scenic route to the Colosseum and Matt and I went directly there to sort the tickets. Even the direct route was an amazing walk, passing endless Roman ruins

and impressive landmarks. The closer we got to the Colosseum, the more we got harassed by street vendors and ticket touts. There were official people there pointing you in the right direction, but it was really hard to tell the difference between the official staff and the rest. After surviving a walk through the main entrance area, we were directed around back to the guided tour collection point. It was quiet and calm by comparison, although there were still a few persistent sellers of Colosseum prisms and African bracelets.



Enroute to the Colosseum



The process to collect the tickets was far from straightforward, but we finally had the tickets and stickers we needed. We reunited with the others and found a nice relaxing restaurant for a pasta lunch before our tour. We had a very enthusiastic archaeologist as our guide. Her English was extremely good, although it took a little while to get used to her accent. The first part of the tour was at ground level. We were on the opposite half of the arena to the standard ticket holders, so it was calm and uncrowded.



Quiet side of the Colosseum

Then we headed underground and learnt a lot about how the Colosseum operated. Some of the workings like lifts and access ramps have been recreated, making it easier to imagine how it all worked.



Underground Colosseum

The last part of our tour took us up to the highest part of the Colosseum, the fourth and fifth tiers. This was definitely the highlight, with hardly anyone up there and fantastic views all across Rome. The tour was fantastic value and totally worth it for the access to the extra areas and the knowledge of our guide. Our tickets also covered admission to the Forum and Palestine Hill, but we decided to leave them until tomorrow so we would have more time.



Way up high

Instead we caught the metro across the city to check out the Vatican and St Peters Square. We had already decided to give the Vatican Museums and Sistine Chapel a miss, but thought we would visit St Peters if the line wasn't too long. That was wishful thinking as the line snaked right around St Peters Square. This is the last weekend of the Italian holiday break and half of Italy seemed to be at the Vatican. The vast majority of tourists are locals, which is quite different to other places we have been. After a quick wander around the Vatican area, we caught the metro back across town and treated ourselves to a late afternoon gelato.



St Peters Square



St Peter's Basilica



Check out that dark chocolate

For dinner tonight, we headed to the Spanish Steps area. We branched out from pizza and pasta, enjoying roast lamb and saltimbocca. Our waiter was very entertaining and the food was pretty decent for a tourist area. We finished a brilliant day with a walk up the Spanish Steps. It was strange being there with so few people around, my memory was of hardly being able to walk up the steps they were so crowded. There were plenty of rose sellers though and they were pretty aggressive. Anna and I had to have hands in our pockets and keep on walking to avoid ending up with unwanted roses.



Spanish Steps