

Our time in Italy had gone much too quickly, and it was already Sunday, March 14th, the second to last day of our journey. On the agenda was Roma, via the USO trip for which we'd made reservations before we left for Milano. A USO trip (*Rome of the Caesars*.) had seemed like a good way to see the sights in a short period of time, and transportation was arranged, so it was easy as well. We woke early after just a few hours of sleep in order to catch the bus at 6:00 a.m. Katy's knee was killing her, so she had to make the sad decision not to join us so close to the end of our visit. The hike the previous day had taken its toll on her knee, and more walking was simply out of the question. We left her to do her laundry and the other things she'd neglected while we were around, and headed out the main gate of the base to join the crowd of people waiting for the tour. We had been told that if the group was small, we'd be taken in vans, but if there were more than 25 people, it would be a bus. The group was quite large, and a bus pulled up to the curb to take us to Roma. We signed in and boarded the bus.

Soon after we got on the road, our Italian tour leader, oddly named Roy, introduced himself and explained that because of the large group and the bus, we would not be able to stop at all of the locations on the itinerary, but would simply drive past them. We were quite disappointed, having spent a week wandering cities on our own and feeling sorry for the people on the tour buses. There was little we could do, however, so we settled in and tried to get some rest on the three-hour drive to the capital city. The woman sitting in front of us, however, started complaining to her companion about the new itinerary, and summoned Roy back to her seat to assault him with a deluge of complaints about how it was not the tour she'd signed up for. Poor Roy, who had nothing to do with the situation, and could do nothing about it, tried to explain that fact to her, but she continued her rant. After he had gone back to the front of the bus (to hide from her, no doubt,) she spent the next hour bitching and complaining about how this was not the trip she'd signed up for, and if she'd known she would have just driven her own car, and on and on until we wanted to shove something in her mouth. The ugly American strikes again.

Three hours later, we arrived in Roma and pulled up to a tour bus stop near the Coloseo. There we were greeted by our guide, Giorgio, who many of the people in our party infuriatingly insisted on calling "George." We took a short walk to a balustrade overlooking the amphitheatre, where Giorgio proceeded to give us a twenty minute lecture on the history of the building, none of which I could hear. I wandered around the outskirts of the group, snapping photos and trying to avoid the peddlers - hawking scarves that displayed the Coliseum and read "Roma" - who had stealthily descended upon us as soon as they smelled fresh prey. With the group absorbed in Giorgio's lecture and paying them no mind, and probably after a warning glance or two from Roy, the peddlers moved on, for the moment. The first part of the lecture over, we moved down to the entrance, directly in front of a souvenir and guidebook stand, where Giorgio spoke for another fifteen minutes, managing before he was finished to promote one of the guidebooks being sold directly behind him. On the periphery, the vultures hovered, smelling naïve tourist blood. When the talk was finally over, we were told that we would finally get to go inside (provided we each paid the €8 entry fee.) We handed over our money, and one of the guides went off to buy our tickets. While we waited, the peddlers descended, selling scarves, hideously ugly jewelry, and anything else they thought they could foist off on some clueless soul. In all of our prior adventures in the various cities, we'd been on our own. When we saw a tour group coming, we headed in the opposite direction. When we saw a crowd, we waited for it to disperse before we ventured to that site. Now, we were the crowd, and even worse, our guides led us directly into all the other crowds, and called us back when we wandered off even the slightest bit. I was already hating the whole tour idea, and it had only just begun.



Standing around were numerous men dressed as gladiators, posing for pictures for a coin or two. I laughed it off as more touristy schlock, but when I noticed that Leah really wanted a silly photo of herself with a gladiator, I encouraged her to do it. After all, she posed for a photo with the rainbow-striped "Pride Bear" in New York City a few years ago; how silly could a gladiator be in comparison? With enough encouragement, Leah approached the nearest costumed character, and posed for as many photos as Sue and I could quickly shoot. It was a good thing we were snapping like crazy, since when she handed him 50 cents, he informed her that it cost €2. A coin



or two still, I suppose, but those were mighty big coins. Soon, Giorgio returned with the tickets, and our guides told us that we had 30 minutes to spend inside the Coliseum. I was appalled. We'd spent over an hour since we got off the bus, but – after spending another €8 on top of the €55 we'd already spent for the trip – we were given only a half hour to explore inside. Despite the limited time, the concern of various members of the group was whether or not they would have time afterwards to buy things from the vendors. On top of that, after all of the time we'd spent waiting around, I desperately needed to use the bathroom, which would



cut into our time that much more. We followed Giorgio in through the group ticket gate, and to my dismay, we were yet again herded together, this time into an elevator and up to the second story, where he proceeded to talk even more. We decided that enough was enough, and dashed off to see what we could see in thirty minutes. On a beautiful late Sunday morning, the place was swarming with people. We wandered around, trying to see the structure and get a sense of how it once looked, but the crowds were everywhere, and our time was soon up. We returned to the rendezvous point in time to watch one of the

tour members actually buy some ugly jewelry from a peddler, apparently not having the ability to send him on his way. She naively thought that buying something would make him go away, but as soon as they saw that they'd found a victim, they were all over her, laying items on her arms and trying to make her take more. She escaped only when the guides rounded us all up to return to the bus.

From there, we drove around Roma, literally driving past many of the major sights, stopping only if there happened to be a red light at the nearest intersection. I gazed mournfully out the window, truly understanding all of those sad-looking people I saw on the tour buses. We took photos where we could, out the dirty windows of the bus, as we drove by yet another wonder of antiquity. We drove by the Mouth of Truth, and briefly looked at the people sticking their hand in the mouth of the lion to test the legend. We peered at the exterior of the Baths of Caracalla, and gazed at the Temple of the Vestal Virgins and the Circus Maximus from afar. Spinning around a rotary, we tried to snap pictures of the Pyramid of Caius Cestius.

When we finally stopped on a random street corner, I was ready to run from the bus screaming, nowhere in particular, but away from the group. Roy had handed out maps of the city for us to use on our free time, but insisted that we stay with the group until free time was officially declared. We decided otherwise, but needing to go in that direction anyway, we followed the group several blocks to the Trevi Fountain, where we encountered a rather mind-boggling crowd. The fountain is quite impressive, but the crowds seemed to me entirely out of proportion to the scene, especially given the astounding number of treasures in the city. We shot a few pictures, and then headed off in search of lunch and our own adventure. We had just over three hours, and I was certain that we could use it far more productively than the time we'd spent that morning. First, however, we badly needed lunch. We were on the beaten path, so our lunch was mediocre but palatable, which was really all that we needed. The published itinerary for the trip suggested, "Other sites that may be viewed with only a 10 minute walk include the Roman Pantheon, the Piazza Navona and the romantic Spanish Steps." I had other plans, and they did not include spending the entire afternoon within a "10 minute walk" of the Trevi Fountain.



Map in hand, we made a beeline for the ancient Roman Forum, and along the way got to see a few of the sights we'd only gazed at through the bus window an hour earlier. We walked through Piazza Venezia, passing by the mammoth King Vittorio Emanuele II Monument and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on the Capitoline Hill. From there, we descended into the ruins of the ancient city, and spent much of our time walking through the ruins of the great temples and government buildings, the mammoth arches and pillars, all closely surrounded by the Roma of later years, with churches that sprang forth from the temples, and the structures of a more modern age. At the far end of the Forum stood the Coliseum; we'd been that close in the morning, only to get into the bus to tour the city trapped behind glass. When Leah and Sue tired, I left them to rest for a few minutes, as I ran around shooting photos and trying to cram as much of the ancient city as I could into one very brief afternoon. When we'd seen the full extent of the



forum, and not wanting to spend any more money to enter the Palatine Hill area (given the limited time we had,) we headed back in the direction of our meeting point, by way of the Pantheon, after a stop for gelato. (I



tried the traditional crema. It's good to be able to say I've tried it, but it was far from my favorite.) The Roman Pantheon is a marvel, a relic of the Roman Empire remarkably solid two thousand years later, in part due to its conversion into a Christian monument, and eventually a national one, hosting the tombs of Kings Vittorio Emanuele II and Umberto I. After two millennia, the 71 foot diameter dome still stands, a true testament to the engineering skills of the past civilizations. Leah took photos

of the incredible ceiling, lying on the floor to do so. I took photos of Leah lying on the floor. By then, it was truly time to get going, so we headed back to the meeting point, again passing many of the sights we'd seen only through the bus windows earlier in the day. By the time we clambered onto the bus for the ride back to Napoli, we were exhausted. I stretched out on the unoccupied long bench seat at the back of the bus and went to sleep.



Though we'd been issued "No Escort" passes for the US bases when we first arrived, we weren't quite certain whether or not this would allow us back onto a base unescorted, or if it merely meant that we could be unescorted while on base. As a result, we planned for Katy to meet us at the main gate when the bus returned from Roma. The schedule stated that this would happen at 5:30, but it also said that we were to leave Roma at 3:00. It was a three-hour trip with a stop (a fact which was not on the schedule), so some obvious arithmetic illustrates a bit of a problem. Katy dutifully walked all the way out to the main gate at the appointed time, and then had to sit there for half an hour waiting for the bus to arrive. When we re-entered, we noticed that the two individuals in front of us had the same passes as we did, and no escort in sight. So Katy - who was trying not to stress her knee any more than necessary - had walked, waited and walked again, for no good reason. We apologized and then told her all about the trip, particularly the part about it not being worth it. We encouraged her to take the train when she ventured up to Roma, and see the city for herself. Having taken the train would have been faster, cheaper, and infinitely more satisfying, since we could have stayed longer, and seen what we wanted to see, when we wanted to see it. But I suppose that no trip would be complete without a few touron moments, so we added this one to the list and chalked it up as an experience.