

## Judy Olmer's Trip to Rome

This was my fifth or sixth visit to Rome, though not for many years now. I don't know that I saw much that was "brand new," but I saw several places that had undergone wonderful archeological or conservation work since I wandered around with my guidebook on my first visit in 1977, and I did it with an excellent guide and a congenial group from around the US. For all we read about their problems, things looked pretty wonderful. The Romans and the Italian government, with, I assume, lots of contributions from the EU and philanthropists from elsewhere, have invested in these world treasures.

And yes, it did take my mind mostly off our horrendous election!

It was a one-week trip with Smithsonian Journeys (unusual) focused only on Rome. And there were only 11 of us, with a Smithsonian manager and a first-rate local guide, very strong on art and archeology. So much work had been done on the Coliseum since 1977, and the Sistine Chapel ceiling had been restored (or cleaned) and looked very different. The Borghese Gallery is now run completely differently and more professionally (I assume) than it was in the 80's, when I attempted to visit it. And we toured an excavation beneath the main altar at St. Peter's which was designed to figure out if the bones of St. Peter were indeed where they were supposed to be and an examination of portions of an extensive cemetery from that early AD period, all of which is now under the Vatican. Fascinating stuff!

(Judy reported that she didn't have quite as much trouble with jet lag as she had previously said [see 'Travel and the Aging Bod', below, which I was very glad to hear. Ed.]).

The following itinerary came from the description in 'Smithsonian Journeys':

We visited the **Colosseum**, begun by Emperor Vespasian in A.D. 70 and completed ten years later during the reign of his son, Titus as a venue for gladiatorial games and other events. Included was a private guided tour of the underground areas—the "backstage" of the Colosseum—and the third tier, with spectacular views of the arena and beyond. That afternoon we met with an archaeologist for a tour inside the **Roman Forum**—once the teeming heart of Rome and the epicenter of ancient Roman life and government.

The next day we enjoyed a guided visit to the **Villa Farnesina**, a suburban Renaissance palace built in the early 16th century for the wealthy Siennese banker Agostino Chigi. It was replete with frescos by a variety of artists, including well-known works by Raphael. Then we enjoyed a guided sightseeing visit to the 17th-century **Galleria Doria Pamphili**, with a fine collection of paintings and sculpture including works by Caravaggio and Velasquez.

We visited the world's smallest country, **Vatican City**, where we toured the **museum**, including **the Sistine Chapel** with its world-famous works by Michelangelo. We went to **St. Peter's Basilica** and went down under St. Peter's to the **Vatican excavations** with its partially excavated Roman Necropolis—a dark city of house-like mausoleums arranged along narrow, dimly-lit streets, and adorned with frescoes, inscriptions, and stucco decorations. It is also known to be the home of the tomb of St. Peter, recognized by the Vatican as the first pope.

The next day we visited the beautiful **Borghese Gallery** and had a guided tour of its impressive collection of paintings, sculpture, and antiquities, including numerous pieces by Bernini and Caravaggio, as well as works by Titian, Raphael, Rubens, and many others.

On our last day, we had a guided visit to **Palazzo del Quirinale**, the official residence of the President of the Italian Republic. Located on the highest of Rome's seven hills, it was begun in 1583 as a summer residence for Pope Gregory XIII and is one of the largest palaces in the world. In the late 19th century, it became the official residence of the new Kings of Italy.

