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Opening extract from

From Ostia To Alexandria with Flavia Gemina

Written by

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If you are between eight and fourteen years old, you might know that I write a detective series for children set in first century Rome. The series is called *The Roman Mysteries* and it features four children who become friends and have adventures during the reign of the Emperor Titus (AD 79-81). Flavia Gemina is a highborn Roman girl, Jonathan ben Mordecai is her Jewish neighbour, Nubia her beautiful slave-girl, and Lupus is a tongueless mute whom they first find living wild in the graveyard outside their home town of Ostia, the port of Rome. Together the four solve mysteries centred around real historical events and people.

Some people think that because I write detective stories I am clever and observant. The reality could not be further from the truth. Because I'm a daydreamer, I forget people's names, can't remember faces, and often fail to notice huge differences in some of my closest friends: things like different hair colour, new glasses and drastic weight loss.

I also have a total block about cars. Except for E-type Jaguars and SmartCars, they all look the same to me. If

the police asked me for the description of a car that caused an accident, I would probably say, 'Um . . . it was silver?'

That's why I admire fictional detectives like Sherlock Holmes, Nancy Drew and Adrian Monk so much. They really see and remember the details. And that's why I created my own fictional detectives: to be clever.

Flavia Gemina is the sort of person I would like to be. Clever, observant and with a good eye for detail. Her friend Jonathan is literate in the most practical sense: he speaks several languages and knows at least three alphabets. Nubia is intuitive. She senses if something's wrong, even if she can't put her finger on exactly why. And Lupus is good at sneaking, spying, eavesdropping and generally making himself invisible. A good detective needs all these qualities. He or she needs to be observant, literate, intuitive and good at following people around.

Writers of historical fiction are like detectives. We have to recreate the scene of the crime, i.e. the past. Our clues are the ancient artefacts they used. Our witnesses are the writings of people who lived long ago, in my case: two thousand years. Over time, I've discovered a third way of reconstructing the past. By looking for it in different countries.

A famous first line from a book reads: 'The past is a foreign country . . .' I like to switch it around: 'A foreign country is the past . . .' Or it can be, if you know how to look.

In the countries that used to be part of the Roman Empire, some things haven't changed in two thousand years. Wild boar is still on the menu in Rome every year in February; starlings wheel at dusk in October; swifts

return in May and umbrella pines release clouds of yellow pollen in that same month, dusting the SmartCars on the Via Veneto. In the hot summer months, you can sit at a table in the cool shade of an ancient plane tree and eat olives, a taste as old as cold water.

Today's Pompeian farmer digs with the same hoe as his first century ancestor. And his wife uses the same medicinal herbs that Pliny the Elder recommended in his *Natural History*. Inhabitants of the Greek island of Kalymnos bring votive plaques showing the parts of the body they want healed to the sacred grotto of a saint, just as their ancestors once brought clay models of body parts to the healer-god Asklepios. And an afternoon in a Moroccan hammam is probably very similar to a few hours spent in the Baths of Titus two thousand years ago. If you know where to look – if you know *how* to look – the past is visible everywhere.

This is not like any other travel book you will ever find. It will not tell you about exchange rates or which airlines travel to the places mentioned. But it will tell you how to find traces of the past in the places my books are set: Italy, Greece and North Africa. Together we are going to be detectives – like Flavia, Jonathan, Nubia and Lupus – and we will try to solve the question of what it would really have been like to live in the Roman Empire in the first century AD. To do this we are going to have to be observant, literate, intuitive and good at eavesdropping.

I am going to give you assignments and tasks. You might have to try a new type of food, learn a new alphabet and carefully observe the people around you. Most of all, you will have to use your imagination. That's something I am good at. And I'll bet you are, too.

FLAVIA'S TEN TIPS FOR STAYING SAFE WHEN YOU TRAVEL

1. Memorise the name of the hospitium (hotel) where you are staying.

2. Carry a piece of papyrus (paper) with your name and the address of where you are staying.

3. Take a carrier pigeon (mobile phone) to keep in touch with your parents if you are separated.

4. Try out your carrier pigeon (mobile phone) when you first arrive in the new country.

5. Most guidebooks have a few pages about the customs of different countries. (e.g. the thumbs-up sign means 'great' in many countries but in other countries it is rude!) Study these before you go.

6. Be polite, but don't trust anyone you don't know, especially people who invite you to go with them on your own.

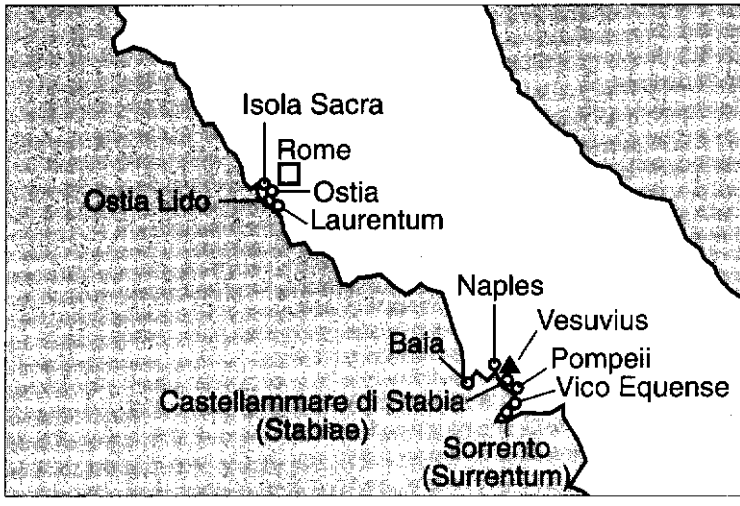
7. Be alert! Watch out for suspicious behaviour, especially people following you.

8. If beggars or stallholders pester you, just smile politely and say 'no thank you'.

9. Do not go out without telling your parent or tutor and make sure you get their permission.

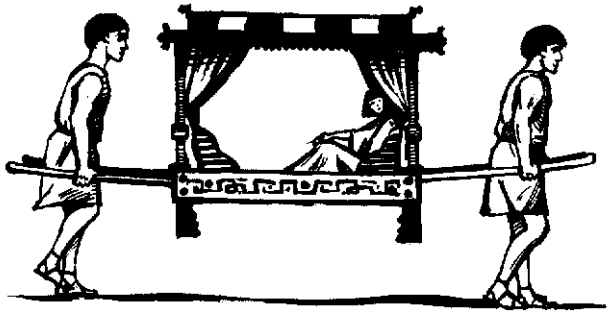
10. If you go out on your own, take a bodyguard or dog. (Or a parent or guardian.)

ITALY


Isola Sacra
Rome
Ostia Lido
Ostia
Laurentum
Naples
Vesuvius
Baia
Pompeii
Vico Equense
Castellammare di Stabia
(Stabiae)
Sorrento
(Surrentum)

ITALY

Most of the Roman Mysteries take place in Italy: Ostia, Rome and the Bay of Naples to be precise. I try to visit Italy at the time of year when each of my books is set, to get the feel of the place at different seasons. Sometimes I travel with my husband Richard, who does the maps in the books. Some times I travel on my own. The Roman Mysteries set in Italy are *The Thieves of Ostia (RM I), The Secrets of Vesuvius (RM II), The Pirates of Pompeii (RM III), The Assassins of Rome (RM IV), The Dolphins of Laurentum (RM V), The Twelve Tasks of Flavia Gemina (RM VI), The Enemies of Jupiter (RM VII), The Gladiators from Capua (RM VIII), The Sirens of Surrentum (XI), The Charioteer of Delphi (RM XII)* and *The Slave-girl from Jerusalem (RM XIII).*



MY FIRST RESEARCH TRIP TO OSTIA

THURSDAY 18 MAY 2000 – *London, England*
I am sitting in an Italian restaurant having my first lunch with my editor, Judith. One of my dreams has come true. She has agreed to publish six books in a series called the Roman Mysteries, all because of one manuscript: THE THIEVES OF OSTIA. *In fact, I am flying to Ostia that very evening for a one-day city break to Rome. Except I won't be going into Rome, I'll be staying near Rome's airport in order to visit Rome's ancient seaport. It will be my first visit to Ostia in over thirty years.*

I am a little dizzy from excitement (and from a glass of champagne) but a bitter espresso clears my head. I replace the tiny cup on the saucer, thank my new editor for a delicious lunch and tell her I must catch my flight. 'I hope you meet Flavia,' says Judith, as I turn to wave goodbye. 'What a strange thing to say,' I muse, walking out of the restaurant towards the underground.

FRIDAY 19 MAY 2000 – *Ostia Antica, Italy*
I am enjoying a very different lunch from yesterday's. I'm sitting in the ancient theatre of Ostia on a glorious spring day, sipping water and eating pistachio nuts. I've spent the morning wandering around the

site, soaking up the atmosphere while taking photos and making notes in a notebook. (Ever since I decided to become a writer I have been buying pocket-sized notebooks in different colours. This one just happens to be grape-coloured.)

Suddenly, I spy a group of Italian schoolgirls skipping rope on the stage. My eye is drawn to one of the girls: slightly fairer than the others and a bit of a tomboy. My editor's words come back to me: 'I hope you meet Flavia.' I put down my pistachio nuts and sit up straight. It's her. It's Flavia!

Dare I take a photo?

'Carpe diem,' I say to myself. 'Seize the day'. I take a deep breath and approach the girls, whose teachers are safely nearby. In very rudimentary Italian, I try to explain that I am writing a book about a Roman girl who lives here in Ostia. The girls swarm around me, chattering happily. Then I ask if I can take a photo. I get some group shots and one girl snaps me with the others. I also take a picture of 'Flavia' on her own. Her name is Francesca and she gives me a wonderful smile.



When I got back to London, I used the photo of Francesca as a model for a drawing of Flavia, and it became her mosaic portrait on the front cover of the books.

Ever since then I have tried to travel to the places I write about, in order to get the feel of the place and be inspired. In this book I am going to share excerpts from my notebooks. If you have read my books, you will immediately see when and where and how I get lots of my ideas.

TWELVE TASKS TO DO IN AND AROUND OSTIA (FROM EASY TO CHALLENGING):

1. Hug an umbrella pine.

2. Find the mosaic of four mules Pudes, Podagrosus, Potiscus and Barosus.

3. Find the elaborately curled wig of marble – made to fit on the bust of a Flavian lady – in the Ostia Museum.

4. Buy a black and white mosaic kit from the bookshop.

5. Have a photo of yourself taken in front of the ancient latrines.

6. Pretend you are a blindfolded donkey, and walk round and round a millstone in one of the bakeries.

7. Sketch the mosaic of the elephant with the inscription STAT SABRATENSIVM above it.

8. Find the synagogue and imagine the shoreline being where the road is now.

9. Locate the approximate site of Flavia's house (still unexcavated) and read a favourite passage of the Roman Mysteries.

10. Have Sunday lunch at *Allo Sbarco di Enea* – the cheesy but fun restaurant just outside the site – and have a photo of yourself taken with a waiter in a short tunic.

11. Find a mosaic of Ostia's lighthouse among the tombs of the Isola Sacra.

12. Find the crayfish mosaic in the so-called Villa of Pliny in Laurentum.

OSTIA LIDO

EXCERPTS FROM THE GRAPE-COLOURED NOTEBOOK:

FRIDAY 19 MAY 2000 – *Ostia Lido*

6.00am – five stray cats: two black three tortoiseshell by a kiosk … Full moon palest apricot – three fingers above the milky sea … Seagulls at one level, swifts at a higher … Little brown sparrow? White collar, dark head pecking in the soft sand … Offshore breeze doesn't smell salty

7.15am – set breakfast at the Hotel Ping Pong. Espresso, croissant, juice – a Beatles' song on the sound system …

9.00am – off to catch the bus to Ostia Antica …

6.00pm – (back at Ostia Lido) Incredibly stiff offshore breeze coming from the west. The breakers aren't very tall but they're very foamy and frothy. The water has so much sand in it that it looks brown … I can hear canvas flapping madly: awnings and umbrellas. Flags are cracking in the wind. How did ancient sailors manage? …

SATURDAY 20 MAY 2000 – *Ostia Lido*

7.00am – it's funny how on my second day here, everything is already familiar: the seafront, the feral cats by the kiosk, the buildings, the tiny espresso … even the same Beatles' song at breakfast …

· QUESTION ·

WHICH ROMAN MYSTERY BEGINS WITH THE FOUR FRIENDS ON THE BEACH OF OSTIA?

A WALKING TOUR OF OSTIA, THE ANCIENT PORT OF ROME

In the first century AD, Ostia was a bustling harbour town, with people from all over the Roman Empire: Greeks, Egyptians, Nubians, Syrians and Gauls. There would have been sailors, customs officers, garrisons of soldiers, merchants selling their wares, criminals on the run, and of course the storehouse owners and bakers to manage the grain. Ostia was the breadbasket of Rome. The harbour of Portus, a few miles north, is where the big grain ships from Egypt docked. Grain was stored in Ostia's many warehouses and then transported up to Rome by road or barge along the winding Tiber.

Today, Ostia is not as well preserved as Pompeii, but in its own way it's just as impressive. You can see traces of frescoes on the walls, half standing columns, marble thresholds, millstones from bakeries, and Ostia's distinctive black and white mosaics. Because Ostia is off the tourist track it can be extraordinarily peaceful. Get there early, or linger in the evening. Go in the spring or autumn and you can wander undisturbed around the remains of baths, temples, houses, shops, taverns, latrines and even the theatre without seeing more than a party of Italian schoolchildren in the distance.

The gates open at 9.30am and you should allow an hour to get there, if you are coming from Rome. Wear a sunhat and trainers, and dress in layers; the weather on the coast is changeable. Take the metro's Linea A to the stop called *Piramide*, then take the train destination *Laurentina*

the rest of the way. Make sure you get off at Ostia Antica (Ancient Ostia), the stop before Ostia Lido (Ostia Beach).

N.B. Just remember: don't come on Mondays. That's the one day of the week it's closed.

The first thing you notice about Ostia even before you buy your ticket at the kiosk and enter the site are the umbrella pines. Today, there are thousands of these beautiful trees in and around Ostia, making it one of the greenest suburbs of Rome. The umbrella pine – *pinus maritimus* – was a striking feature of the Italian coast even in Roman times. In a famous letter, Pliny the younger described the cloud of ash that emerged from Vesuvius as looking like an umbrella pine: a trunk-like column of smoke rising up and then flattening out at the top. Flavia, Jonathan and Nubia catch their first glimpse of Lupus when he is trapped up one of these Ostian pines by some wild dogs.

Romans were not allowed to bury their dead within the city so they placed graves along main roads right up to the town walls. The tombs are the first thing you'll

It was not a proper tomb because there was no body. Jonathan had died in the terrible fire in Rome a month before and his body was buried in a mass grave with hundreds of others.

Back home in Ostia, the port of Rome, Jonathan's father had paid a stonemason to inscribe Jonathan's name on the family tomb. But it was with other Jewish tombs on the Isola Sacra, almost three miles away.

Nubia and her friends wanted Jonathan's memorial to be closer.

That was why they had crept out one moonlit night take a disused marble block from beside Ostia's synagogue. The sun was rising by the time they eased the heavy stone off the borrowed handcart. (RM VIII, p 3)

see when you enter the site of Ostia. It is among the tombs that Flavia and her friends spy a suspected dog-killer. And it is here that they hold a memorial service for Jonathan, thinking he is dead.

In Flavia's time the Roman Gate would have been an impressive arch, faced with marble and flanked with statues of Victory and Minerva. Once you are 'inside' the town walls, you'll see a long stone water trough for the thirsty mules that pulled carts to and from Rome. Flavia once came here to hire a cart to Rome.

The Romans loved to spend an afternoon at the baths. There are at least a dozen different bath complexes in Ostia. The Cart Drivers' Baths are my favourite. This bath complex was exclusively for the muleteers who drove carts to and from Rome. Look for the delightful black-and-white mosaic of four mules with their names written beside them in Latin: Pudes (Modest), Podagrosus (Lame), Barosus (Dainty) and Potiscus (Tipsy).

> *The cart-drivers had their own tavern and stables just behind the trough, and their own baths complex across the road, but after they had bathed and filled their stomachs, this was where they waited for their next fare to Rome.* (RM IV, *p 45*)

In most Roman towns the main road was called the Decumanus Maximus. As at Pompeii, you can see the ruts made by a hundred thousand carts that carried grain and other goods to and from the port. Carry on up the Decumanus Maximus past the ancient shopping arcade towards the Baths of Neptune with their impressive mosaics of tritons and sea-nymphs. A

'Do you know what their names mean?' asked Flavia.
'She does now,' said Feles with a grin, and leaned against the cart. 'Show us how Barosus walks.'
Nubia handed Flavia the sun-hat and then minced along the road in dainty little steps. Flavia laughed.
'And this is the Podagrosus,' said Nubia, coming back along the hot road with a heavy, exaggerated limp. 'And the Potiscus.' She staggered the last few steps as if she were tipsy. (RM IV, *p 55*)

platform here gives a wonderful view of the whole site. Lupus runs down this road and almost knocks over a slave carrying a jar of urine to the fullers'.

Ostia's Theatre was one of the first buildings in Ostia to be excavated because its ruins were visible above ground. It would have seated two and a half thousand people in Flavia's day and has been heavily but accurately restored.

Located directly behind the theatre is The Forum of the Corporations. Built around a charming temple of Ceres, goddess of grain, this is where guilds or 'corporations' did business. Shaded by ancient umbrella pines, the delightful black-and-white mosaics illustrate the different offices. Ships and images of Ostia's famous lighthouse indicate ship owners or captains while baskets (modii) with their levelling rods are for grain-traders. My favourite mosaic is the elephant at the station of the beast importers from Sabratha. Flavia and her friends come here to interrogate a suspect.

Around the grassy precinct of the temple was a three-storey colonnade which housed Ostia's various corporations. Flavia's father had once told Lupus that 'corporation' meant a group of people. There were the shipbuilders and owners; the tanners, rope-makers and sailors; the measurers and importers of grain; and the importers of other useful products: olive oil, wine, honey, marble and exotic beasts. (RM VI, *p 60*)

The main business centre of ancient Ostia was The Forum. Here the dominating landmark is a lofty brick building on a stepped platform. This is the Capitoleum, the temple to the Capitoline triad – Jupiter, Juno and Minerva. It would have been faced with marble to cover the brick. It is in the shadow of this temple that the evil Venalicius sells the beautiful Nubia.

The Basilica housed law-courts and magistrates' offices. Ostia's junior magistrate works here. Marcus Artorius Bato often helps the four with their

Flavia had visited the offices on the first floor but she had never been on the vast ground floor of the basilica itself. Its lofty central nave was flanked by elegant columns of polished marble: pink veined with grey. The floor was made of highly polished marble, too: squares of inlaid apricot on creamy white. (RM XIII, *p 116*)

investigations. The basilica provides the location for an exciting courtroom scene in *RM XIII*, where the handsome young orator named Flaccus defends a mysterious and beautiful slave-girl who has been accused of triple homicide.

Opposite the Capitoleum are the remains of The Temple of Rome and Augustus. During the Saturnalia Flavia and Nubia find a clue in the face of the cult statue of Rome, personified as a beautiful Amazon.

> *In the Temple of Rome and Augustus, Rome was shown as a beautiful Amazon resting her foot on the world.* (RM VI, *p 137)*

While you're near the Forum, don't miss Ostia's most amusing landmark, the Roman toilets. Sitting right next to each other, with no dividing wall or doors, Romans would chat, gossip, extend and accept dinner invitations. The holes on top of the cool marble bench are for the obvious thing. The holes at the front are for the sponge-stick, ancient Roman toilet paper. Lupus has obviously never been here, or he'd know a sponge-stick is not for beating a drum.

Just past the Forum is a five-way crossroads. Crossroads were sacred places in Roman times and there was a temple where two lofty cypress trees stand today. Lupus makes some exciting discoveries here at the Shrine of the Crossroads one cold December dusk.

Near the museum (only open in the mornings) you can find a relatively well-preserved bakery. Grain was often converted to bread before it was transported,

hence the many bakeries in Ostia. Notice the distinctive hourglass mills. These would have been operated by blindfolded donkeys. You can still see the circular trace of their hoof prints worn into the herringbone pattern of the brick floor.

> *. . . a spacious room with two big millstones and one smaller one, all made of dark-grey stone. To Nubia the millstones looked like stout women with tightly belted waists. Around each one circled a blindfolded donkey. . . . 'The blindfold doesn't hurt,' said Porcius. 'It's to stop them getting dizzy. They go round and round all day. See how they're yoked to the beam?' He led Nubia to the smallest millstone. The others followed.*
>
> (The Code of Romulus, *p 12)*

Built in the middle of the first century AD, Ostia's Synagogue is one of the oldest in the world. It's at the edge of the site, near the perimeter fence. The modern highway is exactly where the ancient shoreline would have been. All that's left of the synagogue today are a few pillars and blocks of marble. In the summer, swifts swoop in the warm air and you can see butterflies fluttering among the columns and minuscule red spider mites on the inscribed marble floor. Jonathan and his friends seek refuge in the synagogue when they are being chased by slave-dealers.

Make your way through the long grasses towards the Laurentum Gate. This would have been a quiet residential area of Ostia with houses dating from the

time of Julius Caesar. You might find the Villa of Cartilia Poplicola, a young Roman widow who likes Flavia's father. Moving back towards the entrance of the site, parallel with the Decumanus Maximus, you'll find more storehouses, a fullers' (ancient laundry), and an underground Temple to Mithras.

What you won't find is Flavia's house. I made a conscious decision to have my characters live in an unexcavated part of the town. One day I hope they'll build a life-sized reconstruction, complete with Roman frescoes, fountains, mosaics, furniture and fittings. Until then, you can sit in the shade of an umbrella pine eating a snack and imagining that you are reclining in Flavia's triclinium.

If you haven't brought a snack, go to the modern cafeteria near the Museum. Here you can eat pasta or salad at a parasol-shaded table on a pleasant terrace only a stone's throw from the Tiber River. Nearby is the bookshop where you can buy guides to the ruins and souvenirs, such as a kit to make your own black-and-white mosaic of a dolphin.

Make sure you have a quick look in the Museum before it closes for the afternoon. There are a couple of fascinating portrait sculptures of boys and girls from Flavia's time.

After lunch, explore the site. Let your feet guide you. Lose yourself in Flavia's world. At the end of the day, investigate the medieval castle outside the ruins of Ostia, or take the train one stop to Ostia Lido and enjoy an ice cream at the beach.

OPTIONAL EXCURSIONS: LAURENTUM AND THE ISOLA SACRA

1. While you're in Ostia you might want to visit Pliny's villa at Laurentum (*RM II* and *RM V*). It's about four miles from the ruins of Ostia in the Castello Fusano nature reserve. The villa is marked by a modern brick arch. Look for black and white mosaics of sea-creatures. Even though this may not be Pliny's actual villa, a visit makes a pleasant day out. There are picnic benches, water fountains and lots of shady trees. There used to be an imperial elephant reserve here, and if you're lucky you might see a wild boar. Don't worry; they're very shy.

2. The Isola Sacra was one of Ostia's graveyards and has some of the best preserved Roman tombs in the world. There is a funeral here at the end of *RM XIII* and Jonathan comes here with Lupus at the beginning of *RM XIV*. Look out for the plaques in relief on some of the tombs: a midwife helping a woman give birth, a merchant ship, a donkey circling a millstone. The ancient site of Isola Sacra is a delightful place to wander and have a picnic, but check that it's open before you go.

DETECTIVE ASSIGNMENT I: FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF A NEW PLACE

What you will need: a pen or pencil and a pocket notebook. Every writer should carry a notebook for ideas, and every detective should carry a notebook for clues.

There is nothing like your first day in a new country. Everything is different. The smells, the sounds, the language, the air, the light, the birds, the animals, the cars, the street signs, the way the people dress and look, the whole flavour of the place.

For your first day, from the moment you get up, write down all that you observe. Write down what you have for breakfast. If you can, sit outside or by a window, and describe the people walking by: the people who live in this country. As you go through the day, write about the smells and sounds and tastes and all the things you see that strike you as funny or strange or different. Just for this first day, DO NOT TAKE PHOTOS. A camera makes you lazy. You point it at something interesting and think 'I can look at that more closely later when I get home.' But you never do. Later you can use a camera, but not this first day. (Unless you will not be coming back.)

You should write as much as you can on the first day because by the next day many things about this new place will *already seem familiar to you.*

ROME, THE ETERNAL CITY

Rome is an exciting but frustrating place. It is noisy, vibrant and crowded. But it is hard to see where the ancient Romans lived because Rome is still inhabited and people have built on top of the past. The famous Roman Forum is one of the most disappointing sites in the world. It is almost always crowded and in summer it's unbearably hot. At first glance it's just columns and rubble. Closer investigation doesn't make things much clearer. Several centuries of buildings piled on top of each other make it impossible to get a clear picture of what it would have been like. A few years ago I paid an expert guide to take me around and explain it. I still didn't understand it. Go there – so that you can say you have been – but there are better places in Rome to get a sense of what it was like two thousand years ago: the Colosseum, where there were beast-fights and gladiatorial combats; the Palatine Hill, where the Emperor lived; and the Tiber Island, which was a sanctuary devoted to the healing god Aesculapius.

A more unexpected place to find ancient Rome is the

medieval church of San Clemente, not far from the Colosseum. If you go inside, and follow the signs to the stairs leading down, you go back in time. You go down through the medieval period to the later Roman Empire. Finally you reach Nero's Rome. You can see how narrow some of the side streets were and you can even touch the brick walls.

TWELVE TASKS TO DO IN ROME (FROM EASY TO CHALLENGING):

1. Learn how to say 'hello', 'please', 'thank you' and 'toilets?' in Italian.

2. Find a first century Roman fountain, stop up the end with your thumb and see the jet of water arc out from the hole at the top! Drink some. It's safe!

3. Buy a replica Roman coin in the gift stall outside the Forum Romanum.

4. Find the round temple of Hercules in the Forum Boarium.

5. Have a therapeutic ice cream on the Tiber Island.

6. Go downstairs in the crypt of San Clemente and touch a wall from Nero's Rome.

7. Find the arch of Titus, built to commemorate the sack of Jerusalem in AD 70.

8. Look at the Roman numerals over the entrances to the Colosseum, find an example of '4' written IIII, not as IV (more common in later Roman times).

9 Sit in the large grassy space which was the Circus Maximus and see how many kissing couples you can count.

10. Find some tan and black ravens by the Tarpeian Rock, the cliff from which they threw traitors.

11. Sketch the Pyramid of Cestus, a giant Roman tomb outside the oldest city walls.

12. Take a tour of Nero's Golden House, the Domus Aurea.

The chariots weren't wooden chariots like the ones in the film *Ben-Hur*; those were ceremonial chariots, used for solemn processions. Racing chariots were probably

not much more than a wicker basket on wheels, designed to be as light and fast as possible. Imagine driving a basket on wheels behind four powerful stallions going at breakneck speed. You have the reins wrapped around your waist, to keep your hands free to use the whip or tweak a particular rein. But if you are thrown out of your chariot you will be pulled along the sandy racetrack. Charioteers were given a knife in their belt to cut themselves free of the reins if they were thrown out of the chariot. Imagine trying to cut through eight thick leather straps as you are dragged along the sandy track with horses thundering past on your right and left, their hooves only inches away!

Your tartufo should have arrived by now. As you savour the triple chocolate, remind yourself that chocolate was unknown to the Romans. Poor Romans. But they *did* have chariot races. And we don't. Which would you rather have: chocolate or chariot races?

Now look at some of the Roman men and women walking in the Piazza. Imagine them dressed in tunics and sandals. Imagine the women in stolas and pallas. You can easily see which Roman men would have been patricians or senators. And you can easily spot the rustic farmers and peasants. That beautiful female street-sweeper might have been a slave from Germania. And that muscular youth, showing off to his friends, was probably a gladiator. That man with the thinning hair and the wire-rimmed glasses was an orator, hoping to climb the ladder of honours to the important position of consul. And those street musicians were . . . street musicians!

ROME IN MID-SUMMER

EXCERPTS FROM THE LIME-COLOURED NOTEBOOK:

THURSDAY 12 JULY 2001 – *Rome*

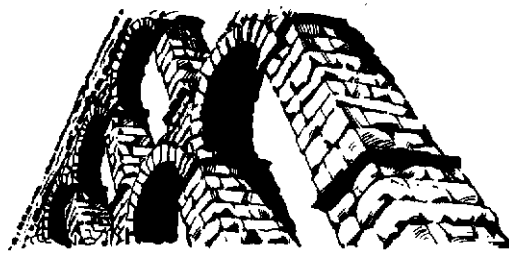
6.30am – awake after two maybe three hours of sleep ... This is the noisiest hotel room in the world. The sound is amplified by the cobbled streets and stone walls so that it seems LOUDER than if it were right outside. The trucks are as loud as trains, the scooters sound like mosquitoes the size of jet planes. At 4.30am this morning I heard a saucer reverberating as it wobbled on the pavement in ever-decreasing circles, and the sweep of the street cleaner's twig broom as if it was beside my ear. I tried using ear-plugs but the sound was still huge. 'All Rome is at my bed-head' wrote the ancient poet Martial. Now I know what he means!

7.00am – The first thing the man at the desk said was 'Your room was noisy? You want to move?' 'Yes.' 'Pack your things and we'll move you to a new room.'

1.35pm – Colosseum – Women, slaves and poor sat at the very top ... special children's section for boys about to make the transition to adulthood and take on the toga praetexta ... A man dressed as a legionary crossed the road, mobile phone in one hand, cigarette in the other ... postcard with the silhouette of a kitten against the Colosseum.

2.00pm – First century fountains! Our guide pointed out little pipes that come out of walls near aqueducts. The water pours out in a steady stream onto a drain in the street below. There is always a little round hole on top of the pipe. If you block the end of the pipe with your

thumb, the water arcs up out of the hole, like an ancient drinking fountain. Apparently it's safe to drink.
8.45pm – Da Giggetto Restaurant in Rome's Jewish Quarter ...famous fried artichoke here... They bring a platter of fish and you choose the one you want. I choose turbot; it's very flat!



· QUESTION ·

THE KITTEN POSTCARD GAVE ME AN IDEA FOR THE ASSASSINS OF ROME. WHO GIVES JONATHAN A KITTEN?

SEVEN USEFUL ITALIAN PHRASES

I. My name is . . .
Mi chiamo . . . (mee **kya**-mo)

II. What is your name?
Come ti chiami? (**ko**-may tee **kya**-mee)

III. Where is the . . .?
Dov'e il . . .? (doh-**veh** eel . . .?)

IV. I would like that one.
Vorrei questo. (vor-**ray** **kwes**-to)

V. I like Roman things.
Mi piacciono le cose romane (mee pee-ah-**chun**-o lay **co**-say ro-**mah**-nay)

VI. Good bye!
Arrivederci (ah-ree-veh-**dare**-chee)

VII. Help!
Aiuto! (eye-**yoo**-doh)