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THE GRAND SPECTACLE AT

THE COLOSSEUM

In AD 72, the emperor Vespasian ordered a vast amphitheatre to be built in Rome as a venue for mock battles, staged animal hunts and fights between trained gladiators. Called the Colosseum, the enormous oval building, 49 metres (160 ft) high and 188 metres (616 ft) across, was built of stone, brick and concrete, and many of its surfaces were faced with marble. The Colosseum could hold as many as 50,000 spectators on its stepped rows of seats, but everyone had a good view of the arena – the sand-covered floor on which the entertainment was staged and where gladiators fought to the death.

The entire Colosseum could be evacuated in about three minutes.

An entry token was exchanged for a seat. Seats were allocated according to status.

Seating areas had inscriptions indicating who the seats were for, so no one sat in the wrong place.

Sail-cloth awnings protected spectators from the fierce Mediterranean sun.



The Colosseum today
Today the amphitheatre is a ruin. Much of the outer wall survives, including one part that still rises to its full height, revealing the holes where the poles were fitted to support the sail-cloth awnings.



Working the awnings
A huge canopy was stretched over the Colosseum to shade spectators from the sun. It was made up of numerous awnings that were probably supported by a network of ropes held up on poles around the top of the building. Winches on the ground were used to unfurl the awnings like gigantic sails.

Sailors from the Roman navy operated the awnings by turning huge winches on the ground.



Bust of Emperor Vespasian

Ways into the Colosseum
There were 78 entrance arches around the ground floor of the Colosseum. Of these, 76 were for the public, one was for the Roman magistrates and one, elaborately decorated with paintings and statues, was reserved for the emperor.

THE OPENING GAMES

BY AD 80, THE COLOSSEUM was nearly finished and a new emperor, Titus, was on the throne. Titus wanted to celebrate Rome's vast new amphitheatre by staging a grand opening with one of the biggest games ever held in the city. Even though the building was not quite finished, this huge event took place on a lavish scale. The games went on for 100 days, with hundreds of gladiators and around 9,000 animals taking part. The spectacles included full-scale battles and wild animal hunts, as well as many single combats between gladiators. Titus even had special coins made to commemorate the occasion.



TITUS'S COINS *The coins minted by Titus in AD 80 had a portrait of the emperor on one side and a picture of the Colosseum on the other. The rows of arches and even the spectators' heads can be seen.*





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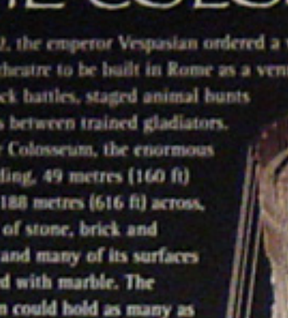
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GETTING THE BEST VIEW

Lower seats were made of marble and reserved for wealthy Romans.

Upper seats were made of wood, to reduce the weight on the structure below.

Sail-cloth awnings protected spectators from the fierce Mediterranean sun.



Working the awnings
A huge canopy was stretched over the Colosseum to shade spectators from the sun. It was made up of numerous awnings that were probably supported by a network of ropes held up on poles around the top of the building. Winches on the ground were used to unfurl the awnings like gigantic sails.

Sailors from the Roman navy operated the awnings by turning huge winches on the ground.

Different groups of people sat in different parts of the Colosseum. Important people such as senators sat at the lowest level, where the emperor also had his private box. Members of the lowest social class, the slaves, sat towards the top, while the seats at the very top were for women. The slaves and poorer people were especially eager to be present – not just because they were excited by the gladiator fights, but also because the emperor's men threw into the crowd cakes, fruit, nuts and tokens that could be exchanged for prizes.



The Colosseum today
Today the amphitheatre is a ruin. Much of the outer wall survives, including one part that still rises to its full height, revealing the holes where the poles were fitted to support the sail-cloth awnings.



Stairs and passages
Under the seats were many different staircases, ramps and passageways. Each stairway went to a specific seating area, and each social class had its own route through the entrance passages and stairs. This meant that the senators and citizens, who sat on the lower rows, did not have to mix with the slaves, who sat near the top, as they made their way to their seats.

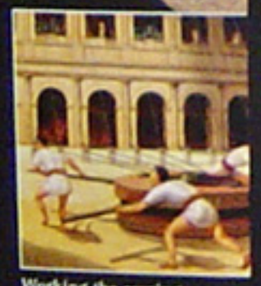


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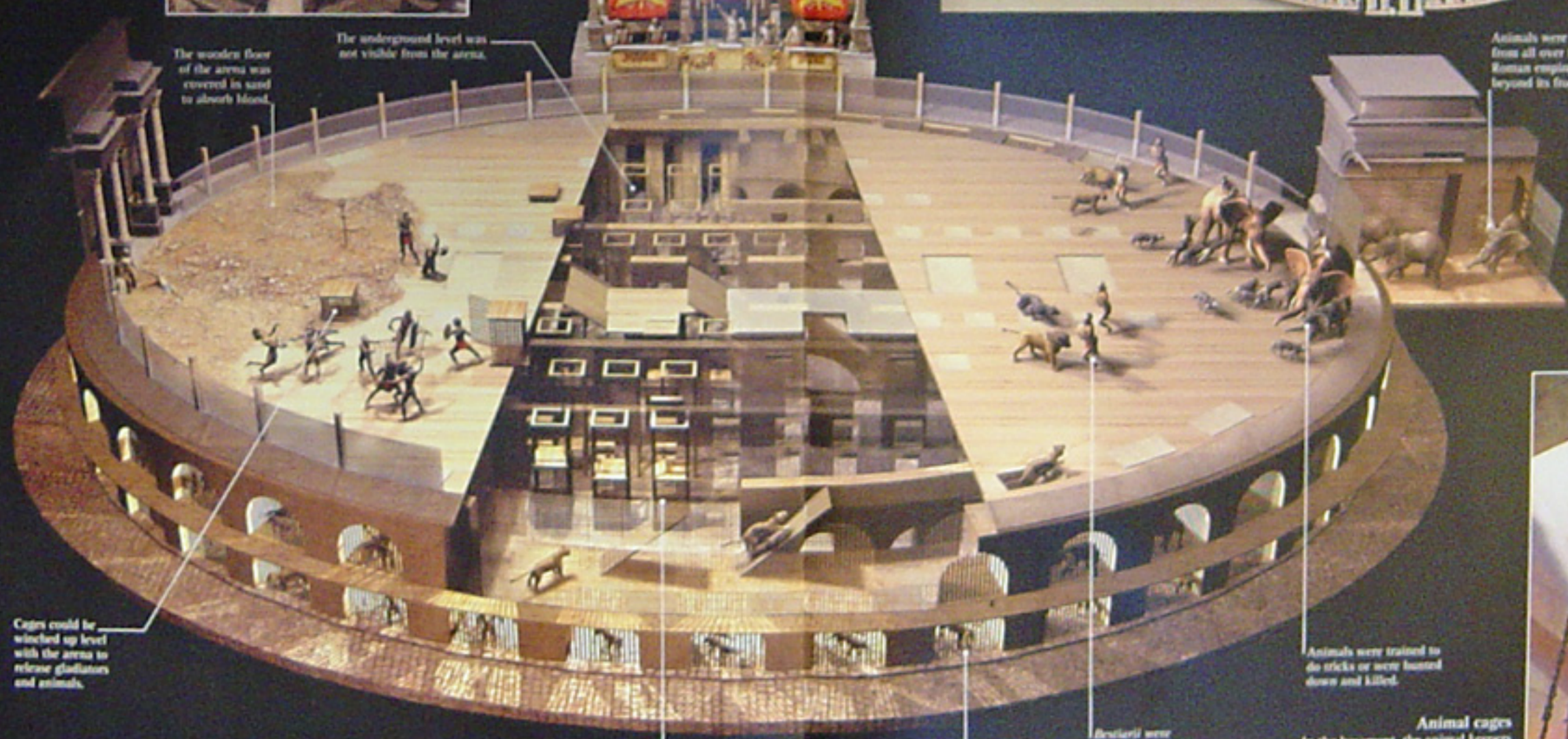


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DRAMATIC ENTRANCES

Beneath the arena
The arena floor, which was made of wood, was removed long ago, so that today the passages beneath are exposed to view. The spaces on either side of the central passage were where the lift shafts were located.





Before the entertainment in the arena began, both the fighters (who might try and escape) and the dangerous beasts (such as lions that took part in the games) had to be kept securely locked up. Under the arena there was a maze of walls and passages giving access to cages for both gladiators and wild animals. One of the passages led to a tunnel that connected the Colosseum directly to the nearby gladiator training school.

SEA BATTLES

THE COLOSSEUM first opened to the public before the corridors and rooms under the arena were built. During the opening games, the central area of the amphitheatre was flooded with water from a nearby lake, and a mock sea battle was held.

MOCK NAVAL BATTLE *This 18th-century engraving is an artist's interpretation of a sea battle at the Colosseum.*





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Animal cages
In the basement, the animal keepers herded the creatures into lifts. Slaves then hauled on ropes that raised the lifts to the arena. Then they pulled more ropes to open the lift door and the animals went through a trapdoor into the arena. Tigers from Asia were among the most exotic creatures featured in the games.