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TIME OUT

When in Rome...

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The ruins of Palatine Hill leave one gasping at the grandeur of the Roman Civilization.

Photos: Hema Narayanan



Grandeur of the past: The pillars of the library

If History fascinates you and the ruins of a place make you go wistful, then the Palatine Hill in Rome is a must-see. The Palatine Hill is one of the seven hills of Rome, which still has the remains of some of the first settlements dating back to the 10th century B.C. Only the ruins of its former grandeur remain today, and you really need to be an archaeologist to decipher what you see. Yet, after you witness the vast and elegant layout of the intricately-built structures, you would not regret not knowing archaeology. Simply because by then the sight would have touched your senses and left enchanting marks on you about the true grandeur of Roman civilisation.

You need a healthy imagination to turn what are now dusty chunks of pediments, crumbling arches, wiped-out palaces and a few shakily re-erected columns. into structures — the way they looked in vestervears.

These speak volumes about the glory of Ancient Rome.

When thou art at Rome, do as they do at Rome. Roman warriors are who we decided to be like and hence covered the place on feet; without the Roman sandals, of course. "Rome-by-walk" gives one candid glimpses, usually hidden, of the place. You should plan to pack a picnic lunch to eat on the Hill, as there are no eateries for miles, inside the Palatine area.

The ruling elite

Our walk through the overwhelming ruins began with a facts-based commentary from the tour guide. It is said that Palatine Hill is where Rome began as a tiny village. Emperors and aristocrats of ancient Rome have lived here since the first century B.C. According Roman mythology, Romulus and Remus, the traditional founders of Rome, were raised by the she-wolf on the hill. They were also the twin sons of the God of Wars. The hill grew to be the preferred quarter for the ruling elite. And soon, the hill was gobbled up by the imperial palaces of the Roman emperors. Even today, the aura of the power this place must have professed can be felt.

What stood in front us, as we moved amidst the ruins, took us by utter admiration. It was hard to believe our eyes when we saw the "oldest column" dating back to the second century BC. Being discovered in a recent excavation, this architectural wonder stood with elegance, displaying labyrinthine carvings. It seemed as if this column was undeterred by the flow of Time. Many recent excavations have unravelled such marvels and shown that people have lived there since 1,000 BC.

Breathless after walking five to six hours through the Hill, we felt we had not seen to our heart's content. Maybe it was due to the systematic intimacy we developed with the ruins. We absorbed so much, but it seemed so less!

The Roman Forum

Slung between the Capitoline and Palatine Hill lies the Roman Forum, which was the heart and soul of the city life during those days. Being the glorious cradle of the Roman republic, it became the epicentre of the ancient world. The area around the Forum was home to many markets, a hive of social activity and botanical gardens. Famous in days of yore for being the first botanical gardens in Europe, its current state of being dug up and carted away can make you disconsolate. In spite of that, as you enter from the Forum, you feel as if you have entered a beautiful horticultural theatre filled with grand and multi-tiered layers of ornamental plants or orchards.



A street-side Italian café

We walked on to see some standing ranks of columns here and there that marked the sites of once-important temples and buildings. Their names wouldn't mean much if you aren't an ancient history buff. A structure which merits a mention is the remains of the handsome Roman library. Though the pillars are badly damaged, it stood at such an angle and accuracy that it wouldn't fall fully for years to come. And my guess is that, it may take centuries for them to crumble to dust.

Up above the Hill

Most visitors don't climb the Hill. Even if the past does not interest you, the panoramic view you can get from up there, of the Imperial forums, Capitoline Hill and Colosseum, is worth the climb. The view can make for a romantic, scenic escape from the crowds. You can wander across the floors and peer down the gated-off passageways that were once the homes of the rich and the famous.

Time is nature's way of keeping everything from happening at once. It brings in order to chaos, along with structure, meaning and continuity to life. From its evolution to its destruction, the passage of Time in the Hill has spanned centuries. And today, the Palatine ruins are a testimony to the above fact and the Roman's engineering workmanship in building such structures of art.



The remains of a royal place.

Though history is everywhere, Rome is not a city that lives in the past. Italian cafes are quaint and are around most corners. Not wanting to miss out on an aromatic sip of hot cappuccino, we stepped out to a nearby cafe, even as scooters zipped down medieval cobblestone streets. We noticed the classical architecture used for each building — each one was akin to a masterpiece. As Augustus Caesar had said, “I found Rome brick, I left it marble”. Shades and shadows of what Caesar said are visible till date.

Rome is the city of echoes, the city of illusions, and the city of yearning. Someone once said it would take a lifetime to see Rome in its entirety; I’d wager 100 lifetimes wouldn’t be enough. It was time for us to leave the Palatine Hill. Yet, we did not forget to toss a coin into the famous “Trevi Fountain” on our way back, since legend has it that if you do, you are guaranteed to return someday.

Fact file

Getting there: Flights available to Rome from most parts of the world. International flights arrive into the Leonardo da Vinci airport in Rome, also known as Fiumicino.

Once you have reached Rome, these are your options for transport:

By Train: Fast rail link (direct non-stop train service) is available at half-hour durations, from the airport to the main train station, Roma Termini. Alternatively, the Metropolitan FM1 train service available at 15 minute durations from the airport takes you to Roma Tiburtina train station.

By Taxi: Take the yellow or white licensed taxis and not any other, available on the terminal forecourt.

Best Time to travel: April to June; Mid September to October — temperatures are mild and the crowds are less. Avoid the month of August, as it is hot, crowded and the entire country goes on vacation.

Places to stay: Consider Hotel Columbia, Via del Viminale 15 (newest, comfortable property), La Residenza, Via Emilia 22-24 (good price on a homey, spacious guest room), or Hotel delle Muse, Via Tommaso Salvini 18 (one of Rome’s best bargain hotels and rated three star).

Getting Around Rome: Walking is the best way to explore Rome, as you come across many sites of interest. Alternatively, you can take the subway, The Metropolitana, or Metro: the fastest means of transportation, available from 5.30 a.m. to 11.30 p.m. Tickets are available from tabacchi (tobacco shops, with a sign of white T), newsstands, and vending machines at all stations.

Or you can take the bus or tram: operated by an organisation known as ATAC, you can ride most parts of Rome. You can hop on and off buses and trams, using the same ticket. Tickets are available at tabacchi or bus terminals.