

ROAMING AROUND



Sharon Feinstein glides through Rome and is hypnotised by the beauty of Venice

Arriving in Rome is surreal, gliding past the ancient world in a taxi, the great spectacle of the Colosseum looming down with echoes of sacrificial screams and lion roars. Today, Morgan Freeman is here for a remake of *Ben Hur*, with Daniel Craig down the road in Bond car chases. Ancient and modern, Rome is an incredible amalgam. Once the pulsing heart of the world with excessive riches and crammed nationalities, the Eternal City still sparkles and stirs the imagination. As Robert De Niro put it: "Italy has changed. But Rome is Rome." Even my daily run through the pine-scented Villa Borghese, the city's loveliest park, was past white marble sculptures, temples and fountains. And of course the well-dressed dogs in shiny puffa coats on Armani leads, with sexy men in sunglasses who all look like Rudolph Valentino.

My hotel, Regina Baglioni, is Rome's best, perfectly positioned on the Via Veneto, made famous in the heady days of Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. It exudes warmth and glamour. Director Maurizio D'Este was as welcoming to me as to esteemed regular, John Kerry, the week before.

The Baglioni is a family, the porter timed my runs, my extra hot cappuccino was never forgotten, and my glorious room with balcony overlooked a delicate skyline of churches and hills. Everywhere is walkable from the Baglioni, 10 minutes to the Spanish Steps, Via Condotti for shopping, even Hollywood's favourite restaurant, Taverna Flavia, where I sat facing signed photos of Audrey Hepburn and Elizabeth Taylor gushing about the food. Stylish Chinappi is round the corner, serving up a fish extravaganza, the freshness ensured by their own family boats.

You can't help being excited by Rome, but it's laced with a violent, often tragic past. The Jewish ghetto, built in the 16th century on the banks of the Tiber, is one such legacy. A small, ancient quarter, where Jews were shut in at night by iron gates, is now a main draw for visitors. Where once thousands of people contrived to live in two little squares and narrow cobbled alleyways, this is now a fashionable quarter, its small trattoria famous for fried Jewish style artichokes, *carciofi alla giudia*, and the Great Synagogue standing proudly next to the ruins of a 3rd century BC temple.

My favourite painter, Caravaggio, rose to fame in this epic city, painting some of his most exquisite work in the cramped chapel of Santa Maria del Popolo.

Rome is baroque, full of Bernini sculptures and fountains throughout its piazzas, so it seems as though water is spouting and bubbling everywhere. Taking the train north to Venice

in that rolling silent space between destinations, I had time to prepare for even more water, a city that rose out of the sea in 421, where water gurgles in the

shadows under bridges and down the dark calle. One of the glories of the world, Venice, indescribably splendid, is a secret place where nothing is as it seems.

Ernest Hemingway may have made the Gritti Hotel famous, but I'm vying to write my debut novel at the oldest hotel here, the lavish Luna Baglioni. I'd like my desk positioned in an airy room above their private canal and moored gondolas, splashed with morning sunlight, as I wake up to the bells of Campanile di San Marco.

I could compose storylines in the luxurious marble bath. It has all the hallmarks of the imaginative hotel, with an air of quiet mystery and an opulent breakfast room with ceilings frescoed by pupils of Tiepolo, and a creative Pugliese chef at the intimate Canova Restaurant, a manager and concierge steeped in knowledge of Venetian history.

It is a moon filled night as I make my way under the clock tower to Calle dei Specchieri, and the legendary Do Forni. Venice's glitterati eat here, in appreciation of owner Eligio Paties' personal touch. Men in suits serve up spectacular dishes based on secret recipes going back generations.

I went back the next night for more of the exotic lemony sea bass, and most delicate crêpes Suzette and chocolate soufflé imaginable, as Peruvian musicians serenaded us. In that gauzy golden sunlight unique to Venice, I walked all day, shopped, chattered in Italian, in a state of sheer exuberance at being in this exquisite place. I bought handmade quirky blue sunglasses from Micromega, where Elton shops, Merchant of Venice perfume in an elegant palazzo boutique near the opera house, Teatro La Fenice; and funky red basketweave boots at Empresa that all my friends covet.

I walked round the cramped rather sombre



Left: Rome's Jewish ghetto. Above: Do Forni's Maestro Eligio makes Sharon crêpes Suzette



ghetto, the first one ever, dank along the canal, with five small Venetian-style synagogues hidden inside ordinary looking buildings. Jews lie peacefully in a cemetery on the Lido, in sacred ground given to them by the Venetian Republic, but Christians buried on San Michele island only have a 12-year lease. Their bones are then dug up and flung onto 'bone island'.

A gondolier with dark sun-grizzled face rows me back inches from the listing decaying buildings, muffled footsteps on the bridges mingling with the heave of oars. You can see why death, disappearance and love so often collide in Venice in art, cinema and literature, a place of extremes, hypnotic and powerful.

You leave like a queen on the canal, the domes and ochre rooftops disappearing into the phosphorous sky. *Arrivederci* makes me so sad when leaving Italy. *Ci vediamo* (until we meet again) is a lot better to bear!

Sharon's contacts...

Regina Hotel Baglioni
www.baglionihotels.com/category/regina-hotel-baglioni-rome

Luna Hotel Baglioni Venice
www.baglionihotels.com/category/luna-hotel-baglioni-venice



Sharon surveys the view high above Rome's spectacular Piazza del Popolo