



The Sansovino Grand Lagoon Suite of the Luna Hotel Baglioni, Venice, looks out to the island of San Giorgio Maggiore with its church and bell tower. (Opposite) The Regina Baglioni is perfectly positioned for the exploration of Rome's famous ancient ruins but within 10 minutes you're in the city's most famous hang-outs

A Taste of Two Cities

There's no better way to experience two of the world's most-loved Italian cities than by foot... led by the cuisine and intrigue both past and present.

Words SHARON FEINSTEIN

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. On this day, Morgan Freeman is here for a remake of *Ben Hur*, with Daniel Craig down the road in Bond car chases. Rome is back in action.

You can't help being excited by this ancient city with its past often laced with violence and tragedy. The Jewish ghetto, built in the 16th century on the banks of the Tiber, is one such a legacy. A small quarter where Jews were shut in at night behind iron gates is now a draw card for visitors. Where once thousands of people contrived to live in two little squares and narrow cobbled alleyways, a fashionable quarter thrives. Its small trattoria are famous for fried Jewish-style artichokes, *carciofi alla giudia*, and the Great Synagogue stands proudly next to the ruins of a temple dating back to the third century BC.

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 on a daily run through the pine-scented Villa Borghese, the city's loveliest park, one passes white marble sculptures, temples and fountains and, of course, well-dressed dogs in shiny puffer coats on Armani leads, and sexy men in sunglasses who all look like Rudolph Valentino.

Regina Baglioni is arguably Rome's best hotel, perfectly positioned on the Via Veneto and made famous in the heady days of Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. The property exudes warmth and glamour, with a director, Maurizio D'Este, as welcoming to this writer as to esteemed regular John Kerry. The Baglioni is a family. The porter timed my runs, an extra-hot cappuccino order was never forgotten, the pasta was light, and I had a glorious room with a balcony overlooking a delicate skyline of churches and hills.

Everywhere is walkable from the Baglioni: 10 minutes to the Spanish Steps, or to the Via Condotti for shopping... Even Hollywood's favourite restaurant, Taverna Flavia, where patrons may sit facing signed photos of Hepburn and Taylor, is close. Around the corner,





Views from the penthouse master bedroom at the Regina Baglioni, Rome, extend to all the great sights of the city: the Vatican, the Sistine Chapel, the Colosseum, the Pantheon and the Altar of the Fatherland, which contains the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

stylish Chinappi serves a fish extravaganza, the freshness ensured by their family-owned boats. Caravaggio, who rose to fame in this epic city, painted 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, there is time to prepare for a city that rose out of the sea in 421, and where water gurgles in the shadows under bridges and down the dark *calle*.

Indescribably splendid, Venice is a secret place where nothing is as it seems.

Ernest Hemingway may have made The Gritti Palace famous, but as a writer I am vying to pen my debut novel at what is said to be the oldest hotel here, the lavish Luna Baglioni. I'd like my desk positioned in an airy room above its private canal, splashed with morning sunlight as I wake up to the bells of the Campanile di San Marco. I could compose story lines in the marble bath. It has all the hallmarks of the imaginative hotel – an air of quiet mystery, an opulent breakfast room with ceilings frescoed by pupils of Tiepolo, a creative Pugliese chef at the intimate Canova restaurant, and a manager and concierge steeped in 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's personal touch. Men in suits serve spectacular dishes based on secret recipes

passed down through generations. I am lured back the following night for more of the exotic lemony sea bass and the most delicate crêpes suzettes and chocolate soufflé imaginable, as Peruvian musicians serenaded patrons. In that gauzy golden sunlight unique to Venice, I walk all day, shop, chatter in Italian, all in a state of sheer exuberance at being here. I buy handmade quirky blue sunglasses from Micromega, where Elton shops (he once claimed to own a quarter of a million pairs – but Micromega's small family workshop only manages a modest 90). I buy Merchant of Venice perfume in an elegant palazzo boutique near the opera house, Teatro La Fenice, and funky red basket-weave boots at Empresa that all my friends covet on my return home.

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

You depart like a queen on the canal, the domes and ochre rooftops disappearing into the phosphorous sky. Even to think of saying goodbye makes me sad. *Ci vediamo* (until we meet again) is a lot better to bear. □

Sharon Feinstein stayed at Regina Baglioni, Rome, and at Luna Baglioni, Venice – visit baglionihotels.com for details. She dined at doforni.it and shopped at micromegaottica.com.