



# Three Coins in the Fountain

A slow seduction in the Eternal City of **Rome**

Words by **DELILAH KHOMO**  
Photos by **SOPHIA VAN DEN HOEK**

Great cities impress in seconds but seduce slowly. Rome is no different. As a romantic traveller who has always been drawn to historic places, nowhere compares to the Eternal City. Your imagination is drawn back centuries, whether strolling around the ivy-covered piazzas of the Regola district, observing the classical grandeur of the Spanish Steps or pinballing through the terracotta maze of Testaccio. Like most pilgrimages to the city, from knights in search of the Holy Grail to the great romantic poets Keats, Shelley and Byron or the young lovers in André Aciman's seminal summer read *Call Me by Your Name*, those who journey here do so to drink in its antiquity.

I too arrive with the itchy fervour of an acolyte, believing transcendence will be delivered by seeing the city's cultural wonders in person. The Ovid-inspired frescoes in Villa Farnesina. The nymphaeum at Villa Giulia. The Pantheon, that ancient edifice that seems to have been summoned by a time machine, its wizened stone even more powerful and majestic as I stand in the rain watching droplets collect in its holy centre. The Galleria Borghese, home to Antonio Canova's exquisite marble statue of a reclining Paolina Borghese Bonaparte, where I could stare at the dents in the mattress and her perfect feet for hours. And, of course, I join the endless crowds who gather at the Trevi Fountain for that most romantic of Roman rituals: throwing coins into the water and imagining that, like Anita Ekberg in *La Dolce Vita*, I too might be drenched in a monochrome spray of 1960s glamour.

Rome is layered with handed-down mythology. A big part of its magic is that you return to find it very much as you left it: a dreamy time capsule. Italy specialist Emily Fitzroy of Bellini Travel has seen even more interest in her clients visiting the perennially popular city, commenting, "In these turbulent times around the globe, there is something infinitely reassuring about enjoying *la vita tranquila* over a bowl of spaghetti al pomodoro and a glass of wine." She adds, "Lest we forget, Rome has had its own fair share of complicated politics and bad dictators, yet here she is nearly 3,000 years later, stronger than ever." The Roman holiday still offers endless cinematic moments and simple, sensual pleasures; the mantra "*mangia bene, ridi spesso, ama molto*" (eat well, laugh often, love much) striking a lasting chord.

It's in this spirit that I find myself picking through the narrow, medieval lanes of Trastevere one lunchtime, craning my neck at wooden-shuttered apartments, pastel-painted and dapple-lit, and trying to discern the trattoria *Da Enzo al 29*. Since 1952 this local, low-key family haunt has drawn a stylish crowd for hearty comfort food like pasta al sugo di coda (a type of osso-buco-style sauce) and fried artichokes. They take no bookings, so expect a lengthy wait – however the burrata alone is worth it, as are the courgette flowers stuffed with mozzarella and anchovies, the carbonara and, of course, the signature *cacio e pepe*'s perfectly slick strands of spaghetti. As the resident guitarist strikes up a version of Paolo Conte's *Via Con Me*, the whole restaurant sings along and a languorous magic takes over. It seems rude not to order another carafe of wine and draw out the ritual of an espresso. By the time I leave, the sun is setting.



Nothing quite prepares me for the San Lorenzo Holy Deer City Lodge, however, my home for the next few days. In a city not short on glamour, its urbane, sharp-suited owners (previously major power players in fashion labels including Escada and Brioni) do high-voltage elegance with aplomb. The totally glorious two-bedroom palazzo, filled with heavenly frescoes and antiques, is akin to stepping inside a Baroque artwork – the perfect marriage of romance, intimacy, beauty and luxury. Formerly the residence of Innocent X – Giovanni Battista Pamphilj, who served as pope from 1644 to 1655 – the palazzo adjoins the 17th-century Baroque church of Sant’Agnese in Agone, which the Pamphilj family intended as their private chapel. Two of the foremost Baroque architects of the time, Girolamo Rainaldi and Francesco Borromini, worked on the apartment, and its original frescoes are by Francesco Allegrini, Pietro da Cortona and Pietro Ronzoni. Aside from the theatrical, museum-like setting, you cannot better the palazzo’s address overlooking the iconic Piazza Navona and bordered by grand palaces, statues and fountains designed by the greatest creative geniuses of the day.

We climb the cobblestone spiral to reach the apartment, which was designed by Borromini to be large enough that the Pope could reach it on a white donkey without his feet touching the ground. On the second floor we come upon a collection of oversized art books, first editions, framed maps, onyx sculptures, contrasting jewel-coloured fabrics and futuristic Murano chandeliers. A compelling dialogue between past and present plays out. The owner Stefano stops us in the heart of the apartment, an immaculate kitchen filled with every mod con, where he cuts heavenly wisps of prosciutto San Daniele and Mortadella on his vintage meat slicer and talks passionately about the Italian artisans and suppliers he worked with on the project. These include a tiler who follows an ancient Etruscan technique, a specialist umbrella-carver from Salerno, a mattress-maker from Naples and a tiny parmesan farm in Zibello that only produces a minuscule amount of cheese. “This is the new renaissance of Rome,” Stefano explains. “It’s a place that pays homage to ancient techniques. You can’t rival them. The make, the quality – they are timeless.”

Holy Deer’s pièce de résistance is the Pope’s room, which served as the backdrop to Innocent X’s love affair with his rumoured mistress Donna Olympia. This gloriously atmospheric, high-ceilinged bedroom is the most ornate of all. I can’t actually bring myself to waste a minute asleep, armed instead with plenty of distractions from a mosaic plunge pool to a secret chocolate drawer to a collection of brilliant books on the mistresses of the Vatican. However all I really want to do is look up and stare at the heavenly fresco of Dido, Queen of Carthage, and her lover Aeneas. In the morning I draw back the curtains and stand on the balcony overlooking Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s Fountain of the Four Rivers, watching young couples buying roses and bubble blowers, moving as though in slow motion to fit the rhythm of a place that both remains relevant and the very definition of “out of this world”.



CHIESA DELLA SANTISSIMA TRINITÀ DEI PELLEGRINI



SAN LORENZO HOLY DEER CITY LODGE



GALLERIA BORGHESE





Floating on an aesthetic high, I seek out the swagged and gilded, draped and upholstered grandeur of the gallery of Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, a wing of one of Rome's most aristocratic palazzos – its hundreds of chandeliers sparkle like something out of a Visconti film and it boasts Titians, Tintoretto's and major works by Caravaggio. Afterwards I stroll to the market of Campo de' Fiori to buy some puntarelle (a bitter Italian winter leaf similar to chicory) before taking a quiet moment to pray underneath the Caravaggio in the Santa Maria del Popolo.

Rome's notoriety as the ultimate wine-drenched pleasure dome finds its latest incarnation at the recently opened Hotel De' Ricci. I move into this sleek eight-bedroom hotel off Via Giulia, which belongs to the same owner as that of the nearby institution of Pierluigi, the city's best-loved seafood restaurant since 1938 and the Scott's of Rome. Tables spill out over the cobblestones, vines drape themselves around the surrounding palazzi on the elegant Piazza de' Ricci and diners order vesper martinis alongside red mullet carpaccio, scallops with truffles, lobster fettucine and perfectly grilled langoustines. This oenophile's delight of a hotel comes with a 15,000-bottle wine cellar and all the staff are sommeliers. There is also a members' club on the ground floor, a winking throwback to 1960s Italy with its romantic murals and mid-century modern design by the tastemakers Andrea Ferolla and Daria Reina, owners of the painfully hip lifestyle emporium Chez Dédé.

I head out of the city into Palo Laziale, a fantasy hideaway on the coast of northwest Rome and the location of La Posta Vecchia. This 16th-century treasure trove of a villa is filled with classical ruins and exquisite Renaissance furniture once owned by J Paul Getty, who unearthed the ruins of a Roman seaside villa attributed to the Emperor Tiberius when he started digging to construct the swimming pool. Today the couture hotel continues to attract romantics with its Santa Maria Novella spa and 19 extraordinary historical bedrooms, including one room where you can sleep in a gilded Medici bed or experience amazing marble baths and roaring fireplaces. Everywhere you look there are rare works of art – Flemish tapestries, a Piranesi drawing in the study and a Roman museum of antiquities in the basement.



La Posta Vecchia has retained all the intimacy and panache of a private club thanks to its insanely elegant creative director, Marie-Louise Sciò. The hotel was her family home alongside the iconic Il Pellicano hotel in Tuscany, a sun-drenched dream immortalised by the legendary photographer Slim Aarons in the 1970s. Sciò, who trained as an architect before becoming the hotel's creative director, understands more than anyone that a good dose of tradition and history mixed with fantasy are vital. The rhythm of a more elegant era is conjured by the liveried waiters who waltz across its seaside terrace and lofty stone rooms. An invitation to Sciò's Maxi/Minimal Ball, which she co-hosts with London tastemaker Alex Eagle, is prized, especially by a nomadic new generation that appreciates the pure glamour of the place and fills their social media feeds with the sense of free-spirited excess that feels as decadent and fantastical as a scene from a Peter Greenway film.

"Some people don't consider heritage as being a good thing," Sciò tells me. "When people renovate hotels they tend to try and eliminate the past. I, on the contrary, think architecture is a container for amazing stories and that people should capitalise on that." As part of this alchemy I arrive at an informal supper, a spontaneous gathering that Sciò encourages. Rolling a cigarette, she takes a sip of wine and adds, "If you stay in the past you could become iconic in the wrong sense of the word. And if you are too contemporary or trendy you don't last. Our approach was to create a bridge between the past and the zeitgeist vision of the now."

You can't help but fall under the spell of this beguiling place. With its relaxed, intimate vibe and heady atmosphere the retreat, as languid and sultry as the clouds of incense that waft through every room with the signature scent of pomegranate noir and fig, offers a sensory overload where you feel like the world outside can wait. Putting jazz, the only kind of music that really works here, on the iPod dock and wrapping myself in an obscenely fluffy robe, I play Frank Sinatra's honeyed soundtrack to the film *Three Coins in the Fountain* and let the sepi classic wash over me.

“ *Three coins in the fountain  
Each one seeking happiness  
Thrown by three hopeful lovers  
Which one will the fountain bless?  
Three hearts in the fountain  
Each heart longing for its home  
There they lie in the fountain  
Somewhere in the heart of Rome.* ”

Regardless about wishing on a relationship, inevitably everyone who comes here loses their heart to the Eternal City. >>



LA POSTA VECCHIA



MARIE-LOUISE SCIÒ



MARKET OF CAMPO DE' FIORI



## STAY

**HOLY DEER SAN LORENZO CITY LODGE**

PIAZZA NAVONA  
[sanlorenzolodges.com](http://sanlorenzolodges.com)  
 Price on request

A two-bedroom palazzo and the former residence of a Pope – it doesn't get much more Baroquely brilliant than this extravagant lodging overlooking the famous Piazza Navona. A fantasy of frescoes and antique furnishings, it practically encourages flights of fancy and tempestuous love affairs.

**LA POSTA VECCHIA**

PALO LAZIALE, 00055 LADISPOLI  
[postavecchiahotel.com](http://postavecchiahotel.com)  
 Rooms from £420

The reimagined childhood home of creative director Marie-Louise Sciò, this elegant Etruscan escape on the coastline one hour outside of the city by car is a maximalist's dream of velvet headboards, chandeliers and tapestries that is well worth venturing beyond the established tourist trail for.

**HOTEL DE 'RICCI**

VIA DELLA BARCHETTA, 14  
[hoteldericci.com](http://hoteldericci.com)  
 Rooms from £315

For oenophiles this eight-bedroom hotel off Via Giulia has its own well-stocked wine cellar, a staff composed entirely of sommeliers and a ground-floor members' club in which to drink in the hedonistic atmosphere – hardly surprising when you consider that it belongs to the same owner as the beloved seafood restaurant Pierluigi.

**ALDROVANDI VILLA BORGHESE**

VIA ULISSE ALDROVANDI, 15  
[mythahotels.com/aldrovandivillaborghese](http://mythahotels.com/aldrovandivillaborghese)  
 Rooms from £222

This former convent is located in the heavenly Borghese Gardens and has been restored into a charming and discreet beauty of a hotel, where marble floors and shuttered windows add a whiff of old-world grandeur alongside contemporary comforts such as the Biologique Recherche spa. Bikes offer the perfect means of exploring the leafy neighbourhood, while the concierge can secure notoriously hard-to-get tickets to the Villa Borghese.

## EAT

**OSTERIA LA GENSOLA**

PIAZZA DELLA GENSOLA, 15  
[osterialagensola.it](http://osterialagensola.it)

This simple but elegant family-run restaurant in Trastevere focuses on seafood and fish dishes with a Sicilian-inspired menu that includes an excellent caponata, spaghetti con bottarga di tonno and Roman classics like rigatoni alla carbonara.

**EMMA PIZZERIA**

VIA DEL MONTE DELLA FARINA, 28/29  
[emmapizzeria.com](http://emmapizzeria.com)

With its extensive list of mozzarellas sourced from Campania and the lightest organic dough imaginable thanks to Pierluigi Roscioli's artistry, Emma's refined pizzas are perfect for a quick (or lingering) lunch. Book a table outside for more atmosphere and work through the impressive wine list.

**GELATERIA AL TEATRO**

VIA DEI CORONARI, 65/66  
[gelateriadelteatro.it](http://gelateriadelteatro.it)

Head to this charming ice-cream store a short stroll away from the Piazza Navona to indulge in seasonal and floral flavours including lavender and white peach, mint stracciatella and white chocolate and basil.



HOTEL DE 'RICCI

## SHOP

**EAU D'ITALIE**

VIA DELLA PENNA, 55  
[eauditalie.com](http://eauditalie.com)

This tiny shop is a trove of fabulous scents and soaps including the brand's signature classic, Magnolia Roma (inspired by the magnolia-lined avenues of Villa Borghese), and potions from its latest travel-inspired fragrance line, Altaia.

**CHEZ DEDE**

VIA DI MONSERRATO, 35  
[chezdede.com](http://chezdede.com)

A perfectly curated lifestyle store that sells Le Grand Sac tote bags inspired by glamorous destinations, a selection of vintage glassware, Astier de Villatte ceramics and Assouline tomes, including the owners Daria Reina and Andrea Ferolla's own book, Italian Chic, which was published last year.

**SCHOSTAL**

VIA DELLA FONTANELLA DI BORGHESE, 29  
[schostalroma.com](http://schostalroma.com)

Stock up on fashionable yet simple classic cotton shirts and the most perfect satin pyjamas, which you can emboss with your own initials, at this old-school Roman institution that has been outfitting customers since 1870.



CAFFÈ PERÙ

## DRINK

**SANT' EUSTACHIO IL CAFFÈ**

PIAZZA DI S. EUSTACHIO, 82  
[santeustachioilcaffe.it](http://santeustachioilcaffe.it)

This coffee spot is much-loved for its home-roast beans and pre-sugared secret ritual, which have earned it the title of the best café in Rome since 1938. Grab a table and take your time over an unparalleled cappuccino or macchiato.

**CAFFÈ PERÙ**

VIA DI MONSERRATO, 46

More than just a café, this is a Roman classic in its own right. Serving up great spritzes and negronis, this charmingly retro and unpretentious hangout is still the place to come, pull up a seat at one of its chequered tables and nonchalantly watch the world go by.

**LE JARDIN DE RUSSIE**

HOTEL DE RUSSIE, VIA DEL BABUINO, 9  
[roccofo rtehotels.com](http://roccofo rtehotels.com)

This iconic hotel is the kind of place you have to go once in your life just to imbibe the languid peace of the hotel's heavenly gardens and grottoes. Raise a glass at sunset with the signature Stravinskij spritz before enjoying a plate of the gratifying cacio e pepe ravioli.