



**Your on the
Water Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Cruising the Northern Mediterranean
Rome**

Cruising the Northern Med Report Seven: Rome

August 11-18, 2023

Today, August 11, we arrived in the port city of Civitavecchia, which is an hour’s drive south to Rome. As mentioned in the first report, and shown in Figure 7-1, our plan was to stay in Rome for a week, take a train to Venice, stay for three days, return to Rome for two days, and then head home to Idaho.

I enlisted a travel agency to handle the Italy stay. I gave the agency a few guidelines about hotels and travel. For the hotels, I expressed that we did not want to stay in modern-designed and furnished places. Old hotel accommodations in old buildings were the agency’s marching orders. For Rome, the agency filled the bill beautifully.

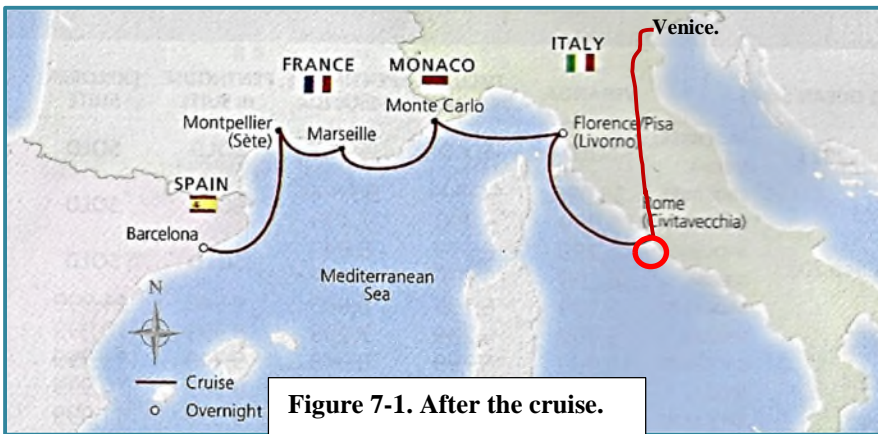


Figure 7-1. After the cruise.

The agency forwarded the names of the hotels it had reserved for us. I check their websites. It appeared they met our expectations and budget.

We were to spend eight nights in Rome at the Regina Baglioni Hotel. The hotel dates back about 130 years and has a rich and fascinating history,

explained in a post script at the back of this report.

Our travel agency worked with a European counterpart, which led us to believe we would have a five-star hotel room to stay after our visits to Rome’s historical sites. Figure 7-2 shows two photos of what were advertised as typical rooms.

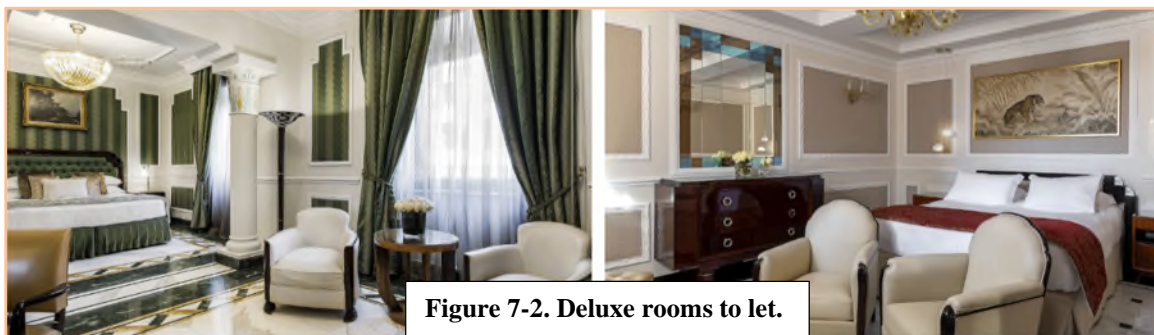


Figure 7-2. Deluxe rooms to let.

Upon arriving at the hotel, we were shown to our room. It was larger than a breadbox, but smaller than a Motel 8 discount room. It had one chair, a spartan, non-padded, armless desk chair with uneven legs. It almost rocked when Holly sat in it. No other chairs. No sofa. If Holly and I wished to visit, read, whatever, we would have to sit on the bed. Read? The bedside lamps appeared to be for midnight snuggles, diffused glows only.

We complained that this room was not acceptable. Here is their response, paraphrased: “Oh? This room and others like it are very popular with personnel from the US Embassy [across from the hotel]. They come in, stay overnight, and always give us fine reviews.”

We were not staying overnight. We were staying for over a week, and in an advertised five-star hotel, no less. They moved us...the story to be continued shortly.

Catholics and Baptists

As a child of ten years of age, thanks to my mother’s insistence, I was dipped into the holy waters of salvation at the First Baptist Church in my hometown in New Mexico. I had no clue about the process of being saved from sin, but I had become in a few seconds, in today’s terms, an evangelical Baptist, also called a Southern Baptist.

In this tiny community, which was reflective of nearby West Texas culture, there were no Catholic churches. Nonetheless, the Sunday school “preacher” made it a habit of regaling against Catholics and their churches, an assemblage that did not even exist in the town. Like being saved, I had no clue about the animosity that had existed for hundreds of years between many Protestants and Catholics.

During this time in Europe, I read about the places we were visiting. I also had with me a book about an era in northeastern New Mexico and the Texas panhandle when the migrating whites vanquished the Mexicans and then the natives (“Indians” as identified in the book.)¹ I was (am) planning a trip to the region to research the whites’ wars against the Comanche tribe.

I was struck as to how frequently the Catholic Mexicans and the Protestant Anglos held deadly views of each other, often resulting in killing for religious reasons.

We had been to Rome a few years ago, but for only two days. Being the family tour guide, I set up the trip to stay in Rome for a week. Holly is also a student of history, and Rome’s Vatican is a treasure trove of museums about the past times of the Catholic Church.

I joked with Holly that I would feast on Italian pasta and be sure not to tell any of the citizens I was a Baptist.

Seeing the Sights

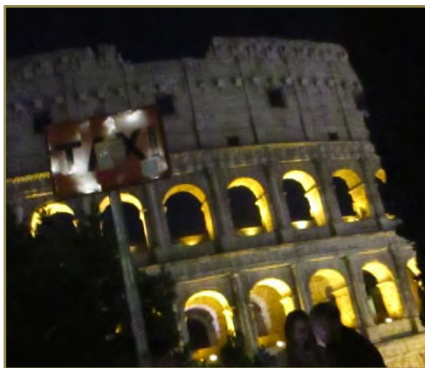


Figure 7-3. Cause for reflection.

For the first two days, we jointly saw the sights. One of my favorite places in Rome is the Coliseum. We had seen it by day few years ago. One of our tours was at night, which allowed me to take the photo shown in Figure 7-3. The scene was, according to our guide, uncharacteristically quiet. We were the only people round. All of us have seen movies about this amphitheater. Lions tearing slaves apart. Gladiators dueling to the death, depending on a thumbs-up or thumbs-down from a decadent Roman emperor. Hollywood aside, these events took place, beginning around 70 AD.

I was looking at a building that was over two centuries old. For a few seconds, I took pause. The Coliseum was teeming with people over a century and a half before the North

¹ A fine book on this part of the country during the 1840s-1890s is *Blood and Thunder*, by Hampton Sides (New York, Anchor Books, 2006).

American wilderness was beginning to be explored by the Europeans. We humans are so caught up in our daily travails, we often forget we are only a short blip on the radar screen of life.

Back to the Hotel

The previous evening, our first night in Rome, we had an extraordinary meal at a restaurant in the Westin Hotel. The pasta with tomato sauce was a treat. ...By the way, tomato sauce by itself is not what I was eating during this trip. I was sampling and testing the spices that chefs mixed into the sauce. Some were tantalizing and did not need anything else...okay, maybe some bread and Chianti.

Returning to the hotel saga, we were taken to a different room. However, our package tour price was not sufficient to acquire a room with two chairs.

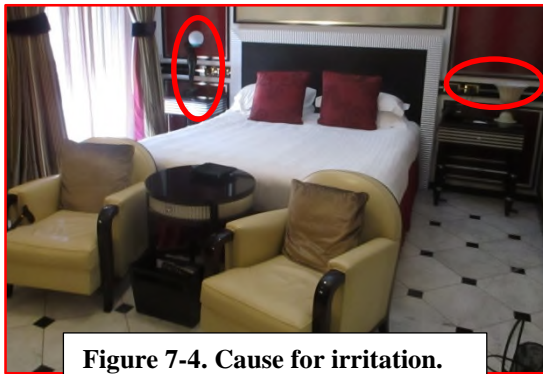


Figure 7-4. Cause for irritation.

The person who showed us the room (see Figure 7-4), likely without thinking, said, “Oh, this room has not been redecorated.”

And then, certainly with thinking, “This room fee is extra than what you have currently paid for the week.”

I did not contest her. In hindsight, I do not know why I didn’t. One side of the bed had no lamp. The other side had a lamp that hardly cast any light. (See the red oval circles in the photo.)

I had been lethargic all day, not feeling well, and my back was begging for a place to be horizontal.

“What’s the difference?”

“Two hundred Euros.”

“Okay, that’s reasonable. Just put it on our bill.”

“That’s two hundred Euros per night.” Which added up to about \$2,000 for the stay at the hotel.

Where were we to go? We did not know the area. We were tired and both of us were coming down with bad colds and I also with stomach problems. They had us over a barrel, and they knew it. We dismissed them, took on the fee, and I immediately went horizontal for a few hours.

A side note: I am lodging complaints to the European travel agency. I told the front desk manager that we believed we had been treated unfairly and that their website was engaged in deceptive advertising. So far, to no avail.

As mentioned, Holly and I both came down with colds, and I came down with stomach problems. For two days, the third and fourth in Rome, we seldom left our beds. For the sake of the local Italians, I silently hoped we were not practicing, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

Holly recovered, and spent the last three days exploring the Vatican and bringing in soup and offering encouragement to me.

With the wisdom of hindsight, this week in Rome was not so bad. I got a lot of rest. I watched little TV and read a lot. I finished the book on the Anglo-Comanche wars, caught up on

more Roman history, and read another fine book, *Sully*, the story of Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger and his amazing feat of landing a large commercial airliner in the Hudson River.

As I reminisced about this amazing man and how he handled adversity, I mentally kicked myself in the ass, *you've never had it so good*. Pleasant reading while resting in a fine bed; room service from a loved one, accompanied with an imported Snickers bar every day; vicarious visits to the Vatican, courtesy of a knowledgeable Catholic.



Figure 7-5. A lamp in disguise.

But one complaint. With all my reading, I needed a bright bedside lamp. This five-star hotel, as mentioned, had no light on one side of the bed and a statue, pretending to be a lamp, on the other side. See Figure 7-5.

This lamp in disguise fit the décor of the room. Maybe the interior decorator, thinking back to the time of the hotel's being built (1892-1894), thought that people had no lamps at their bedside in those times. So, the decorator wanted to keep to the spirit the hotel's history.

But I could not read using this elegant but useless piece of furniture. After a few attempts, I brought over a floor lamp and propped it against the statue. Problem solved, I waited out my ills.

For the last few days of the stay in Rome, Holly slept in and I got up early, having been asleep most of the past 24 hours anyway. I would stay in the lobby, relaxing on a sofa (left photo in Figure 7-6), reading newspapers, and enjoying the lobby itself (right photo in Figure 7-6).



Figure 7-6. The lobby.

On each of these early mornings, I was practically alone. A desk clerk stayed invisible, but visible enough to give me two newspapers: *The New York Times* and *The China Daily*. A doorman stayed outside.

Every few minutes, a hotel attendant would walk through the lobby, likely checking if all was well. On the first day of my sitting in the sofa, he approached me. I was surprised he

knew my name. How, I never discovered. Perhaps from a five-star hotel's intelligence services. We talked for a while.

He said, "Mr. Black, would you like some coffee?"

I had never been presented with such an offer...in any hotel around the world. There I sat, reading about the ideological tete-a-tetes between two adversaries, America and china. But without coffee, a morning mainstay for me.

"Yes! Just what I wanted. But your restaurant is closed."

"Not to worry. Would you like Italian or American coffee?"

When in Rome, do as the Romans do. "Italian...and I've never had Italian coffee."

Each morning that I came down from our room to the lobby, I was given the two newspapers. While I was reading, this gentleman would appear, “Buongiorno, Mr. Black. Coffee?”

“Buongiorno to you. Yes, please.”

“Italian or American?”

“Italian.”

“Bene.”

And “bene” to this hotel. These two or three mornings in the lobby assuaged my ire about the room rate shake-down.



Figure 7-7. Aiding digestion.

The breakfasts at the Regina Baglioni Hotel riveled those on the Viking cruise. Maybe they bettered Viking, as we dined while listening to the music of a harp player, as depicted in Figure 7-7.



Figure 7-8. Some of the sweets.

Figure 7-8 shows one of the tables of “sweets” that could accompany our breakfast eggs. When I was able, I made it a point to at least read in the lobby and take in breakfast. On one morning, I ordered soft-boiled eggs, something my mother used to cook, and something I had not had for many years. Nowadays, finding a restaurant that serves this treat is nearly impossible.

It took a while to cook two-minute eggs. Boiling the water and all. The Italian waitress thought Holly also ordered two soft-boiled eggs. So, we ended-up with four. I ate two of them. The maître d’, concerned that we might be unhappy with this misplaced order, offered the other two eggs to me. I reluctantly said, “Thank you but no.”

These two weeks, one on the Med, the other in Rome, with plans for another week in other parts of Italy, were welcome changes to my US-situated habits. I think, at least for me, that falling into a life routine of habits can be damaging to one’s life’s moods, to one’s outlook on life.

But I had over extended in what I thought would be a simple trip. My aging body was sending messages to my aging mind. It was time to face the facts. Venice’s canals would have to wait for another time. So would the train rides across Italy.

Nonetheless, a certain way toward immobility is to acquiesce to the urge to be immobile. It is so easy to sit back and do nothing. I hope that never happens to me. I hope I keep fighting old age and its attendants. Paul Simon's thoughts on this idea is stated well in his song, "Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes."

People say I'm crazy.
I got diamonds on the soles of my shoes.
Well, that's the way to lose those walking blues,
diamonds on the soles of your shoes.

For all of us, let's keep diamonds on the soles of our shoes. Let's keep on walking.

Here is some information on the Regina Baglioni Hotel.

The hotel, built between 1892 and 1894 on a project by the architect Giulio Podesti (1857-1909), is in one of the most prestigious streets in the capital, Via Veneto, opened in 1886 as the main artery of the Ludovisi district and made famous by frequentation by artists, men of letters and actors and the charm of the "sweet life" of Fellini. The area took shape in the part of Rome in which there stood the splendid villa of Cardinal Ludovico Ludovisi, who himself conceived of the amazing complex that stretched from Salaria to Piazza Barberini. The magnificent Liberty building of the hotel, inaugurated in 1904, owes its name to Queen Margherita of Savoy, who chose it as her abode immediately after the assassination of her husband, King Umberto I. Having left the Royal Palace to the new sovereign, her son Vittorio Emanuele III, the queen sojourned in the Hotel while waiting for her new residence to be completed: this was Palazzo Margherita, which now houses the embassy of the United States of America. The official deed through which the owner of the day was given permission to decorate the hotel with the insignia of the Savoy House and the name Regina dates from 1911. This was acknowledgement of the excellent service given to the sovereign and a testimony to the regal quality that right from the start marked hospitality at the hotel. A few years before Podesti had designed one of the most elegant hotels in Rome, the Grand Hotel, and the original nucleus of the General Hospital, considered one of the happiest moments in building in the new capital. He now created a building with five floors and a mezzanine, projected onto the outside through elaborate stringcourse cornices adorned by palmettes and dentils in accordance with ornamental fancy that also characterizes the beautiful windows. Taken over by the prestigious Baglioni Hotels chain, which includes luxury hotels in historic buildings of cultural and artistic merit, the hotel is now called Regina Baglioni. At the entrance the gaze is instantly captured by the imposing bronze Retiarius statue, depicting a Gladiator with a net and trident, in a complex in which precious Siena marbles, the stuccoes and the big Murano chandeliers communicate elegance and style: the final result is that of an abode at once aristocratic and homely.