

COFFEE WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AFTER A TRIP TO ROME

by Heather Campbell Hapeta

AN amazing place, Rome is an extremely walkable city. Arriving by coach I inadvertently choose a pensione with 115 steps – not a lift in sight to enable me and my backpack to climb the five flights to reach my bed. Next morning after a coffee standing at the counter I go exploring. Down the hill I wander, turn left and amazingly there is the Colosseum. This sums up Rome. Every where I walk, life is continuing around ancient monuments – ignored by the locals who seem blind to the history they are driving around. The Arch of Constantine, the Roman Forum, Trevi Fountain, Spanish Steps, Pantheon and the Vatican City, all easily accessible on foot.

You can visit all these, and many more, with a guide-book under your arm, but the place that made me reconsider coffee is not in many books.

It is Australia Day, raining, and an Aussie, American and I go to check out a rumour that a church has dead monks in it. Umbrella sellers are out in force – we don't buy one – but duck for cover as we can. Horns, sirens, noisy Vespas, speeding traffic and the patriotic-singing Aussie all assault my ears in this very noisy place. Green lights do not mean it is safe for

pedestrians to cross, and cars park wherever they stop. We finally find the Piazza Barberini and the Chiesa di Santa Marie della Concezione. Dripping all over the foyer of the Capuchin Crypt, confronted by a monk with no English (and us with no Italian bar greetings, wine and food,) we nevertheless soon realise the suggested “donation” is an absolute must-pay-charge, so we pay and enter.

Bizarre. We are immediately confronted by short, robe-draped, cross-holding friar skeletons. The walls behind them could come from the “killing fields” in Cambodia. Wall-to-wall the area is covered with skulls. Angels have hip-bone wings, and even the chandeliers are created from scapula and collarbones. The area is divided into four chapels and I am flabbergasted at the skeleton of a small child on the roof of one. The notice reminds us: what you are now we used to be, what we are now you will be.

This collection of some 4000 Capuchin friars bones was started in 1528 and continued to 1870 – the soil on the floor of the chapel was brought from Jerusalem. We leave in a subdued mood but our next cappuccino has us laughing as we realise it was those very friars that the drink was named after.



GRISLY ART: Capuchin Crypt where human bones form decoration.



HISTORY ABOUNDS: The Arch of Constantine.

Happy New Year

More and more 50-somethings are travelling. Not only travelling again, but frequently



by Heather Campbell Hapeta

for the first time. I recently spent time with a group of Americans who were in New Zealand for two weeks, the majority were over 50 and here to hike.

So if you are over 50 and considering travelling – perhaps for the first time – what are the advantages of being a mature traveller?

Older travellers have a self-confidence that is different from that of younger travellers, the more one travels the more it increases. We also have the advantage that age is respected – even venerated – in many cultures and for many of us this can be liberating. Many older people leave a city or country with real knowledge of a place and its people because they observe rather than talk, and, unless on a tour, travel slowly – spending time in fewer places.

Alone or with others? Independent or joining a group?

Solo travel – the big plus for this is you can make your own choices about everything. However, this can be a disadvantage too. You have to read the map, find the accommodation, negotiate the language problems all on your own. While this creates pain at times it also ensures you get the full dose of pleasure.

Meeting locals is easier on your own, you become approachable. Where are you from, where are you going, can I help, people will ask. Locals often enjoy seeing a small brag book of your family, city and country.

Here are some strategies for the lone traveller when it all seems too much, too scary, and just plain overwhelming. Booking ahead for your bed saves many hassles. Eating alone concerns many; however, if you eat your main meal in the middle of the day you will find many others doing the same and – the meal will be cheaper than the exact same fare at night. Sitting at a table with a coffee and postcards will reduce the momentary fear of aloneness as well as letting you catch up with your correspondence. Even better – it is time to people-watch. This is the best, very best travel activity you can indulge in.

Be well-informed about places. Research history and know some important national figures. This will allow you to not only find out more about a place, but you will also appear to be an intelligent, thoughtful and most welcome tourist to the area. For example, I remember how Thai people appreciated that I knew their King's favourite hobby was photography and that they celebrated birthdays every 12 years.

For contact with people ask how to say XYZ in the local language. Other tourists too are a source of information and company; invite someone to join you for a coffee, come to the museum or movies with you. Feeling lonely is not confined to you! Other (read all) tourists feel like that every so often too.

Another way to tackle the fear of solitary travel is to travel with a purpose. Like bonsai trees? Go to all the gardens that display them, turn up at the local club, talk to people who have them in their garden, share pictures of your trees.

Drawing or painting your forté? Sit and sketch the local scene and many people will approach you. Subject-focused travel is always rewarding. Study a language, cooking, gardens – or the mating rituals of the local frog – whatever interests you now that you are 50-something going on 21.

Next week: travelling in a group. Send your best tips to me at: travel@thecitizen.co.nz

Italian art form

ITALIANS love food and have raised preparing and eating into an art form.

All areas have their own speciality so ask for the local dish – lunch is the main meal of the day.

Coffee is wonderfully strong espresso and be aware, it costs much more to have a coffee at a table rather than at the counter.

If the place is not busy ask if you may sit AFTER you have ordered and paid – usually they will say yes.