Rome

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Rome

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The Walking Tree

There are many things, when it comes to Rome, that are challenging to talk about.

Its light, for one, which looks like no other. Its relationship with time, because here the past has never ended, and the future—well, who knows if it'll ever come. For 2,776 years the city has lived day to day, and since 1847 not a day has gone by without the cannon at the Janiculum marking the hour at noon, making you wonder what to do with the present in a city where instants have turned into millennia, and forcing you to remember what the city once was and no longer is.

It's hard to talk about Rome's relationship with the weather, too. Try telling a foreigner, or even someone from Florence or Milan, that when it rains appointments get canceled, the city comes to a standstill, and any excuse is valid to avoid doing what you're supposed to do and simply disappear. Try explaining that when spring comes it's not just the gardens that bloom but the streets, the balconies, people's chatter and opinions, the bus stops where

the bus either never comes or has just left, and what should be a thoroughfare becomes a meditation space suffused with the smell of jasmine and linden flower. And try explaining to this stranger, while you're at it, that winter here can be terrible even when it's not cold, or maybe precisely *because* it's not cold—this town couldn't pull off wintry magic even for a minute, and when it's left with no light, no sun, no birds, no leaves on the trees, it forgets everything and shows neither pity nor tenderness to itself or to anyone else. Maybe that's why, in Rome, Christmas is the gloomiest time of the year: the decorations always seem to be too many or too few, poorly chosen, out of place. The smell of defeat is in the air, and you can escape it only on the night of the 24th, or on the 26th, hiding in the darkness of a movie theater. The other days, each corner, each building, each street seems to say: *We've had enough of the old year, let's move on*. We are nostalgic about everything and compassionate for nothing.

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It's even hard to talk about the name, *Roma*, because its exact meaning is still unclear. Nobody knows for sure. Many, of course, think of Romulus. Yet the city was founded in 753 BC, and the legend—told by Livy and Virgil in particular—wouldn't appear until several centuries later, in 29 BC. It's Romulus, then, who takes his name from Rome, not the other way around. Some theorize it might

come from the Etruscan *ruma*, meaning "udder," referring to the mythical she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus in the famous tale of the city's foundation. Others connect it to the ancient name of the Tiber river, *Rumon*, which in turn could derive from the verb *ruo*, "to flow." Mythology buffs are convinced it has something to do with Enea's landing on the shores of Latium—that it comes from the Greek *rómé*, "strength." What is certain is that it's a magnificent name, R-O-M-A, four letters that flow together so exceptionally well. A name that's simple and yet powerful, that when reversed becomes A-M-O-R, Latin for "love." And is there anything more challenging to talk about than love? Even backward, Rome retains all its mystery.

Since we have to start somewhere, we might as well start with the numbers: 497 square miles of surface area, 2.87 million people—5,774, on average, per square mile (few, incredibly few, four times fewer than Naples and ten times fewer than Paris, because in Rome there's often empty space between one neighborhood and the next, and sometimes when we're driving along the ancient paved roads or on the offensively new roundabouts we'll point at some massive building and say, "It was all fields here once").

Then there are the two million square meters below the surface—the subterranean Rome—because here what has been not only persists but resurfaces as soon as you dig. This is in part why the city can't plan for a decent subway system: you can't so much as

stick your head underground like an ostrich without the risk of banging it against the capital of a Roman column or the wall of a *domus*, without unearthing all manner of treasures, knickknacks, and troublesome complications that have been hidden for thousands of years, waiting for someone to find them.

The number of its *municipi*, its boroughs, is fifteen—or rather XV, because of course the numerals here are Roman. Looking at them on a map, a newcomer might mistake these for Parisian *arrondissements*, but she'd be dead wrong: each *municipio* is as big as a city, and they exist purely as administrative subdivisions. No one would ever say "I live in the Third" or "I'm moving to the First," the way they would in Paris or Montreal or Brazzaville.

Finally, the most important number: seven. Like the kings who once ruled over the city; like the ancient consular roads (*All roads lead to Rome*, they say, and even back then starting from Rome you could get very far indeed); seven like the hills upon which the city was built. The seven hills are where it all began, so maybe it's there that we should start.

To an extent, any attempt to describe the city to a first-time visitor will be futile. A matter of space, for starters: all seven hills of Rome are located entirely within the first *municipio*. It would take fourteen more books to fully explore a city that contains a full-fledged country within itself (the city-state that is the Vatican), that contradicts itself every minute—once you think you understand something, just turn a corner and you'll find it completely different—

and that's large as Turin, Milan, Bologna, Genoa, Florence, Naples, Palermo, and Catania combined. A matter of time, too: Rome is older than Jesus Christ, and over the centuries it's accumulated so many different layers, trophies, and regrets that a lifetime wouldn't be enough to point them all out. Ancient Rome, medieval Rome, the Rome of the popes, of the Renaissance, baroque Rome, the city of the Dolce Vita, the Jubilee, home of the AS Roma and Lazio football clubs, host city of the Olympics and the Internazionali tennis tournament; the Rome of *The Great Beauty*, of the unstoppable surge of Airbnb and garbage no one can dispose of; the city of Roman centurion costumes, of mafia clans and little shops extorted for protection money; the Rome of ambassadors and politicians, nuns, real estate developers, movie industry people, fashion industry people, kids on mopeds and knife sharpeners peddling their services from rickety three-wheelers; the Rome of offal, artichokes, wine from the *Castelli*, deep-fried codfish filets and rectangular pizza slices. Each had its moment of glory and its downfall; each lives next to, on top of, nestled inside the others, obstinate and finally, inevitably, defeated. And yet all these things, in their own way, keep existing and resisting, and they've done so for so long now that everything suggests they'll never stop *being there*, contradicting and canceling each other out. They will find a way of sneaking into these pages, bouncing from one hill to the next to make their voices heard. That's the destiny of a town called the Eternal City, not because

it's endless but because it no longer fears the end. As anyone who visits will discover, the end of Rome has already come many times over the last couple of millennia. Nobody took it very seriously, though. They all had better things to do.

Aventino

It's always this way, as far as I know: every time someone is looking for a place to rent or buy, for themselves or someone else, every time you end up talking about neighborhoods you'd love to wake up in and come home to at night, every time listings are looked up, agencies consulted, futures imagined, every time you start evaluating the pros and cons of living in the north or the south or the center or just outside the GRA,[1] at some point someone always says: "And then there's the Aventino." Usually in a quiet voice, almost a whisper; these are not the words of a contrarian, just of an aesthete. They say it because it has to be said, because if nice places to live are being discussed then the Aventino must be named. Even though it's unlikely to come true—because of costs per square foot, because people who own there are never looking to sell, because of the neighborhood's dearth of services and relative isolation from everything else. It's austere, the Aventino,

1. The *Grande Raccordo Anulare*, the city's beltway.

in a purely Roman way: mediterranean, all light and stone and greenery. A sweet, lovely austerity, free of hard edges, founded on the unspoiled beauty of streets and buildings designed and somehow preserved in a state of grace. One speaks of the Aventino as one speaks of saints, unicorns, comets: honoring the name, but knowing there's no real chance one will ever belong to that world.

For those who don't know the Aventine Hill, it's helpful to start imagining it by subtraction. Forget that it's right across the river from Trastevere, with its quaint little alleys; that just at the bottom of the hill is Testaccio, with its market, its pretty village square, and its public housing. Forget the city center too, no matter how close it is: there are no picturesque streets here, no lively *piazzas*, no baroque churches. Let go of the wobbly cobblestones, the tinkle of coffee spoons on bar counters, the merry voices in the shops (which are disappearing from the city center too, but here they've never even existed). Once you remove all that, what's left of Rome? The stone, the light, the greenery.

Back in the founding days of the city, the Aventine was Rome's southernmost hill, and the hardest to reach. To this day, the neighborhood maintains this reserved, almost standoffish character, even though it's only steps away from the center. The city, now immense, envelops it from every side, but even at the heart of town the Aventine remains *other*, an appendage without Rome's most celebrated characteristics. There's no traffic here, for one thing, and

barely any noise. There's no talking, no yelling: you pass through without lingering. You breathe in the air and the silence as you walk, uphill or downhill on streets that are never too steep but never truly flat, flanked by a procession of small charming buildings surrounded by trees and private courtyards. In these houses, these gardens, we imagine the lives of quiet couples and well-behaved families, nuns and priests at prayer, bird's nests hidden among the branches, scholars both fresh-faced and ancient hunched over their books, newborns asleep in rooms with flowered marble floors.

Across the large road that bears the name of the hill is San Saba, also known as "little Aventino," and there at least you can find a couple of restaurants, a butcher shop, a mechanic, a nightclub, a produce market. On the Aventino there is nothing: it's a realm of emptiness, a province of silence. You could say it's a place where time stands still, but that wouldn't be accurate. In a certain sense, time doesn't exist here: it's a dreamy land, full of mirages, and maybe—if we forget the Vatican, which is its own country and therefore doesn't count—the only urban area in Rome that truly reflects its spirituality.

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The legend is well known: Romulus and Remus, ordered to be killed by King Amulius, were instead left by a servant in a basket on the Tiber, saved by

a she-wolf, fed by a woodpecker, and raised by a shepherd. When they became aware of their noble origins, they decided to found a city. Romulus wanted to call it Roma, Remus Remoria. As Livy recounts in his *Ab Urbe Condita*: "As they were twins and no claim to precedence could be based on seniority, they decided to consult the tutelary deities of the place by means of augury as to who was to give his name to the new city, and who was to rule it after it had been founded. Romulus accordingly selected the Palatine as his station for observation, Remus the Aventine."[2] In short, the winner would be the twin who counted more birds in flight. Remus immediately spotted six vultures; immediately after, Romulus spotted twelve. Both proclaimed victory, Remus because he saw the birds first and Romulus because he saw more of them. A fight ensued, and Remus ended up dead (by Romulus's hand in one version, in the chaos of the brawl according to another). The year was 753 BC and Romulus was named the first king of Rome. And the Aventino, the hill Remus had chosen as his observatory, entered history as the land of the king who never was, of something that could have been and would never be.

Until the end of the Republican period, the Aventine Hill was a place for plebeians: this in contrast with the Palatine Hill, where the patricians had established themselves. But history would ultimately even the

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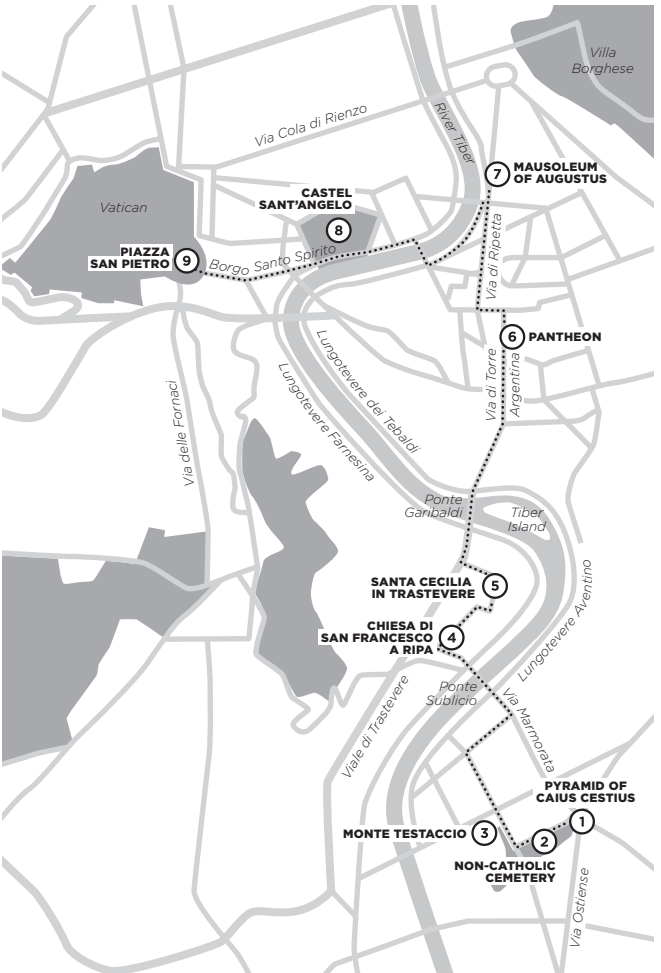
2. Livy, *From the Founding of the City*, Book I, trans. Canon Roberts, 1905.

score: today the Palatine Hill is an open-air museum where nobody lives, while the Aventine has become the highly desirable neighborhood the other once was.

Itineraries

The following itineraries are meant to push you to explore different parts of the city, within and beyond the seven hills. But Rome is a difficult city to visit by pre-established routes: there are so many layers and stories and sights that it's impossible to go from one place to the next without getting distracted, feeling pulled in by something, hitting a snag or some road-work, or simply changing plans. Use these itineraries but don't hesitate to break free of them: then they'll have served their purpose.

1.


Villa Borghese
Via Cola di Rienzo
River Tiber
7 MAUSOLEUM OF AUGUSTUS
Vatican
CASTEL SANT'ANGELO
8
PIAZZA SAN PIETRO
9
Borgo Santo Spirito
Via di Ripetta
6 PANTHEON
Lungotevere dei Tebaldi
Via di Torre Argentina
Via delle Fornaci
Lungotevere Farnesina
Ponte Garibaldi
Tiber Island
SANTA CECILIA IN TRASTEVERE
5
CHIESA DI SAN FRANCESCO A RIPA
4
Lungotevere Aventino
Ponte Sublicio
Viale di Trastevere
Via Marmorata
PYRAMID OF CAIUS CESTIUS
1
MONTE TESTACCIO
3
2
NON-CATHOLIC CEMETERY
Via Ostiense

It might seem a tad macabre to go around looking at tombs, but Rome is a city of remains and relics, and we may as well find a way to explore them.

The **Non-Catholic Cemetery**, built in 1716, is one of the most evocative places in the city. Here are buried, among others, Keats, Shelley, Gramsci, and Amelia Rosselli. You can walk from the subway station in front of **Piramide Cestia**, which is also a tomb: it was built between 18 and 12 BC, commissioned by Gaius Cestius, a Roman politician whose fame is inextricably tied to his eccentric burial site. From there you can walk to **Testaccio**, a port in Roman times, then a working-class neighborhood, and to this day an extremely lively one, with a nice market, large apartment buildings with inner courtyards, and most importantly a vibrant, generous square. Seen from here, Rome looks like a large village. The **Monte dei cocci**—optional—is also a graveyard of sorts, not for people but for objects: you'll find the remains of fifty-three million urns, used in Roman times to carry oil, wine, and other foodstuffs, forming a hillock a hundred feet high. Across the river, you can reach **San Francesco a Ripa**, where Giorgio de Chirico is buried (there's also a magnificent *Ecstasy* sculpted by Bernini). At this point you'll be in Trastevere, where wandering around is inevitable: just make sure to explore both sides, to the right and to the left of Viale Trastevere, and to visit the **Santa Cecilia** basilica, where the eponymous saint, a Roman noble who was martyred and is now patron saint of music,