

CARLA POWELL'S ROME

I am actually a newcomer to Rome. I grew up in an isolated valley in the Alps on the border between Italy and Switzerland, then spent the next 40 years of my life outside Italy, returning only four years ago.

My decision to settle near Rome was guided by several thoughts. First I wanted to be near the many good Italian friends – politicians, diplomats, journalists – whom I had accumulated while living abroad, most of whom regard Rome as home. It was important to me, too, to enable my very British grandchildren to spend their holidays close to the heart of Roman civilisation, so that they would absorb something of their Italian heritage. And third I was fed up with the cold, damp winters of both London and the Alps and wanted a little warmth in my bones as I grow older!

So I bought a farm in Lazio, about half an hour north of Rome, in the Sabine Hills, made famous when the raped women pleaded for the life of their assailant so that their unborn children could have a father. Not exactly in tune with modern feminism but practical all the same!

I renovated and extended the house and grounds and brought in some decorative sheep, together with ponies for the grandchildren, chickens and ducks to ensure fresh eggs for breakfast, a pet donkey, a pet lamb, a shifting population of cats and my two dogs. It's a rather English way of life transplanted to the outskirts of Rome.

I have chronicled elsewhere the trials and tribulations of coming to this surprisingly backward and communist-run corner of the Italian countryside. Italian I may be, but for the local bureaucrats and minor officials I was an outsider who had the temerity to demand her rights, above all her right to be connected to the public water supply. After four years and innumerable battles with the local Mayor I am still waiting. Perhaps I should ask my American friends to arrange for the US Army to invade Italy again, because they brought water to Iraqi villages in much less time than it takes the Commune of Palombara Sabina to supply it to me and my neighbours!

Then there was the tragedy – not connected to my troubles with the Commune, or at least I hope not – of the savage slaughter of most of my sheep and my pet lamb, Maria, who used to come to the door every morning and evening for her bottle, and the dreadful mauling of poor Giuseppe the donkey. He at least has been saved by devoted vets and a remarkable scientist, Fiorella Carnevali, but is still missing large chunks of his anatomy. My husband complains that vets' bills exceed doctor's bills by far!

But enough of the gloomy side of my Roman existence. There is much to celebrate and be happy about too.

There is the eighty foot high Roman tower in my garden. Some date it from 400 AD though others think more likely 1000 AD. Whichever, it is a stirring sight and a daily reminder of the might of Roman civilisation of which every Italian is justly proud.

Then there is the joy of the many friends who want to come to stay – far more here than in my remote Alpine village or even London – and bring me news from the wide world beyond. There's scarcely a week when someone is not here. It may be my 'confessor' (who refuses to hear my confession on the grounds that a week wouldn't be long enough), Father David Forrester, for many years the Roman Catholic Chaplain of Eton. Or Tony Blair or Colin Powell seeking a brief respite from official business in Rome. Or my children and grandchildren and friends. For all of them and many many more I try to offer a sanctuary.

And it's an excuse too to indulge my passion for cooking, using the eggs from my hens, the olive oil from my groves and the fresh fruit and vegetables from my garden. My unromantic husband regularly complains that it costs four times as much as buying the ingredients in a super-market but so what, compared to the joy of eating what we produce ourselves.

So my Rome is more *rus* than *urbe*. But the city centre is only 30 minute away and I make frequent forays into town – usually with our visitors – to see the sites. Indeed for some of the best of them, we don't need to go into the City at all. Only 20 minutes or so away are the gardens in

Tivoli of the great Villa d'Este, with its painted rooms, its terraces, grottoes and fountains, all set within four hectares. The Villa d'Este can arrange tours in English and the whole gardens can be enjoyed in an hour and a half. Four hundred year old plane trees and palms tower above waterfalls festooned with ferns and grasses, where the water splashes like a peacock's plume over moss, sponge stone and carved nymphs survey the scene. It is the fifth most visited garden in Italy with 60,000 visitors coming every year.

The water comes from the river Aniene, a tributary of the great Tiber. It is a triumph of nature over architecture. The waters of the Owl fountain and Oval fountain are turned on at certain times of the day to produce a musical sound as if you are listening to a madrigal. Perhaps this is why Franz Liszt came to live here for the last twenty years of his life (1865-1886).

The villa was built in the 1560s for Lucrezia Borgia's son Ippolito d'Este. Hospitals and churches were destroyed to improve the views. Hunting scenes and murals remind me of what we shall now miss in England. The town of Tivoli itself is still unspoilt. The old streets and people make an interesting walk. There are plenty of small shaded squares to have coffee in peace and quiet.

Only a little further on is Hadrian's Villa, built by the Emperor who also found time to build Hadrian's Wall keeping the Picts and Scots at bay from Roman Britain. From its vast lozenge-patterned stone walls, ponds and amphitheatres it is easy to see why this Emperor was the founding father of Italian architecture. Dating from the second century AD it is the largest villa ever built in the Roman Empire and truly an imperial palace, a reminder of the might of Ancient Rome. It stretches over 180 acres with wonderful views over the plains and hill villages of Lazio.

For a complete contrast, a favourite garden with my grandchildren, forty-five minutes away, is the Monster Park of the Bomarzo Gardens built by an eccentric Roman aristocrat, for the enjoyment of his wife/mistress. Here are comic, grotesque and arresting sculptures which make this place an oddity and curiosity for the imagination.

There is a life-sized elephant crushing a Roman soldier, the three dogs of Cerberus, and decaying mermaids, Madonnas and nymphs under every glade. It is both an ironic contrast to the grandeur of Roman architecture and a monument to madness.

Only a little further away still is the magnificent Duomo of Orvieto, some would say the finest cathedral in all Italy perched at the centre of this hill-top town, its narrow streets hosting plenty of fine restaurants. Many years ago, when we were still into sea-side holidays, we used to drive up here from the coast to meet Peter and Polly Jenkins – two of the most stimulating columnists in modern British journalism – who would come down from their villa in Cortona. We would while away afternoons arguing the merits and evils of Thatcherism – my husband was Margaret Thatcher's Private Secretary at the time – on vine-shaded patios and fuelled by Orvieto's own white wine.

Another favourite of mine is the Ninfa Garden. When the aristocratic English lady Ada Willbraham first saw Ninfa in 1922, with her husband who was the owner of Ninfa, the Duke Onorato Caetani, she was dazzled by the romantic beauty of the XIII century ruins. She understood in a flash that with its rich history, its abundant water and its air of mystery it was the ideal place to create a garden. Her efforts, together with those of her daughter-in-law and more recently her grand-daughter Leila produced something which is universally regarded, especially by the British, as an extraordinary example of a romantic garden. What makes it unique is that it has been created among mediaeval ruins deep in the Pontine marshes, watered by a spring of crystal clear water, which nourishes a network of streams and brooks. There are plants from all over the world with incredibly beautiful blooms and intoxicating scents, while the sound of bird-song and fluttering wings all combine to give the visitor the feeling of being in a dream world. Indeed a visit makes you feel you are wandering in a magic kingdom. Preserving the Garden's magic is the life-work of an extraordinarily dedicated and skilled curator, Lauro Marchetti, and he has succeeded superbly well.

The Garden is open the first weekend of every month from April to October, but with advance notice visits by groups can be arranged throughout the year. To get to Ninfa from Rome, take the Via Appia and turn off to the left at the 57 km post.

There is so much of beauty and interest to see in the countryside around Rome. Yet it is to the Eternal City that all my visitors are irresistibly drawn. Even in the autumn and spring, when the City is at its quietest, it still bustles with tourists of all nationalities holding maps as if they were born with them in their hands. The secret of visiting Rome is not to try to do too much. The simple pleasure of a cup of coffee in the Piazza Navona or, for the young, a night-time rendezvous in the Campo dei Fiori, with the promise of love and laughter, are antidotes to relentless tourism. Of course, the glories which are Rome should never be missed, even for the frequent visitor. I never tire of the Sistine Chapel – if you have Vatican connections to help you miss the two-hour queue - the Coliseum, a favourite with my grandchildren who complain that nowadays there are no Christians being fed to the lions, or the Pantheon with its frequent day-time concerts which you can simply wander in upon for as long as you like.

Really the best way to get about is to walk. And the best place to start is the Spanish Steps. Behind, at the top, on the Via Veneto, are charming little clothes and jewellery shops, much more reasonable than their famous counterparts below on the Via Condotti. At the foot of the steps is the Keats-Shelley Museum, a romantic oasis of books, paintings and memorabilia. Of anywhere in Rome it gives the feeling of what drew poets to Italy.

Beyond the Coliseum one of the least visited and most striking of Rome's many churches is the Basilica San Clemente. Water gurgles through its underground basilica. Even in the height of summer, its cool interior and frescos have a calming spiritual influence.

My own particular favourite is the Villa Borghese, girdled by formal gardens. I always take my visitors here, but arrive early and be prepared for at least a half-hour wait before the two hours it will take to tour the galleries, to see Caravaggio,

my favourite painter, the sculptures of Bernini, Perugino's Madonna and Child, Canova's Paolina Borghese, Veroneses, Raphaels and Titians. It is hard to beat and it epitomises Rome.

Sentimental, lyrical, gushing? I'm probably all of those when I write or talk about Rome. But who cares. For all my years abroad, I am still Italian at heart. And, however infuriating the modern politics of Rome and the ineffable superiority of Romans, I never tire of showing my friends the highlights of the greatest civilisation of all time.