

Hi, I'm Rick Steves, back with more of the best of Europe.

I'm in Rome and this is the ancient Appian Way, Europe's first superhighway.

The gates of Imperial Rome are a two-mile chariot ride this way, thanks for joining us.

[MUSIC] Rome is huge, complex, and endlessly entertaining.

And this is one of three episodes we dedicate to the Eternal City.

Our focus in this episode, classical Rome, once the capital of the Western world.

We'll marvel at the biggies, the Colosseum, the Pantheon, the empire's powerful art.

Then we'll go off beat to bike the Appian Way and be inspired by Roman engineering.

[MUSIC] The story of ancient Rome can be overwhelming.

We'll take it slowly, starting where the city began, in the Forum, and try to bring to life all this ancient rubble.

[MUSIC] In a nutshell, classical Rome lasted about 1,000 years, roughly 500 BC to 500 AD.

Rome grew for 500 years, peaked for 200 years, and fell for 300 years.

The first half was the Republic, ruled by elected senators.

The last half was the Empire, ruled by unelected emperors.

In its glory days, the word Rome meant not just the city, but what Romans considered the entire civilized world.

Everyone was either Roman or a barbarian.

People who spoke Latin or Greek were considered civilized, part of the empire.

Everyone else, barbarian.

According to legend, Rome was founded by two brothers, Romulus and Remus.

Abandoned in the wild and suckled by a she-wolf, they grew up to establish the city.

In actuality, the first Romans mixed and mingled here, in the valley between the famous seven hills of Rome.

This became the Roman Forum.

[MUSIC] In 509, they tossed out their king and established the relatively democratic Roman Republic.

That began perhaps history's greatest success story, the rise of Rome.

From the start, Romans were experts builders and they had a knack for effective government.

This simple brick building was once richly veneered with marble and fronted by a grand portico, it's the Curia.

The Senate met here and set the legal standards that still guide Western civilization.

The reign of Julius Caesar, who ruled around the time of Christ, marked the turning point between the Republic and the Empire.

The Republic, designed to rule a small city-state, found itself trying to rule most of Europe.

Something new and stronger was needed.

Caesar established a no-nonsense, more disciplined government, became dictator for life.

And for good measure, had a month named in his honor, July.

The powerful elites of the Republic found all this change just too radical.

In an attempt to save the Republic and their political power, a faction of Roman senators assassinated Caesar.

His body was burned on this spot in 44 BC.

The citizens of Rome gathered here in the heart of the Forum to hear Mark Antony say, in Shakespeare's words, friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.

I've come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.

But the Republic was finished and Rome became the grand capital of a grand empire.

[MUSIC] The Via Sacra, or Sacred Way, was the main street of ancient Rome.

It stretched from the Arch of Septimius Severus to the Arch of Titus.

Rome's various triumphal arches, named after the emperors who built them, functioned as public relations tools.

Reliefs decorating the various arches show how war and expansion were the business of state.

Rome's thriving economy was fueled by plunder and slaves won in distant wars.

Ancient Rome had a population of over a million at its peak.

And anywhere you dig in the modern city, you'll find remains of the ancient one.

Largo Argentina is a modern transportation hub, with traffic roaring all around some of Rome's oldest temples.

The Capitoline Hill, which rises majestically from the busy streets, has long been the home of Rome's city government.

During the Renaissance, Michelangelo designed this regal staircase.

He gave the square its famously harmonious proportions and its majestic centerpiece, an ancient statue of Emperor Marcus Aurelius.

This is a copy, the second-century original, the greatest equestrian statue of antiquity, is showcased in the adjacent Capitoline Museum.

This, like the other great statues of antiquities, is now safely out of the elements.

The museum helps you imagine life before the fall of Rome.

These relief show Marcus Aurelius performing the various duties of an emperor.

Here, as the chief priest, or pontifex maximus, he prepares to sacrifice a bull.

Here on the battlefield, he grants clemency to vanquished barbarian leaders.

And this one puts you curbside at a victory parade with the emperor, the Eisenhower of his day, on a chariot, Winged Victory on his shoulder, and trumpets proclaiming his glory.

[MUSIC] The art of Imperial Rome almost always carried a message.

This dying Gaul, a Roman copy of a Greek original, was part of a monument celebrating another victory over the barbarians.

Like any propaganda art, battle scenes stoked imperial pride.

[MUSIC] You can wander among heroic statues and grand halls, and look into the eyes of long-forgotten emperors.

[MUSIC] And the museum also shows a more peaceful and intimate side of Roman life.

Here, a boy quietly pulls a thorn from his foot.

[MUSIC] At first glance, these look like paintings, but they're actually micro mosaics, made of thousands of tiny chips.

[MUSIC] This mosaic hung in Emperor Hadrian's villa.

[MUSIC] Romans emulated the high culture of the Greeks.

And when it came to capturing beauty, their forte was making excellent copies of Greek originals.

[MUSIC] The Capitoline Venus is one of the truest representations of the concept of feminine beauty from ancient times.

Like so many classical statues, this is a 2,000-year-old Roman copy of a 2,500-year-old Greek original.

And this statue called the Drunken Faun is a playful reminder that a trait of ancient Rome that survives to this day is a fondness for good food and fine wine.

[MUSIC] Part of your Roman experience, regardless of your budget, should be experiencing a fine meal.

And we're doing that alfresco on Piazza Farnese.

[MUSIC] We're starting with a great spread of antipasti, prosciutto, porcini mushrooms.

Punterella, a local salad, and fresh mozzarella.

As everywhere, eat with the season.

Tonight, we said bring on whatever is fresh.

Travelers can enjoy better restaurants without going broke by sharing an array of smaller dishes.

And now, the pasta, I often find the antipasti and pasta dishes more varied and interesting than the more expensive secondi, or main courses.

Even in early May, it's plenty warm to dine outside.

Dinner within splashing distance of a tub from the ancient baths of Caracalla caps a perfectly Roman day.

Rome is a big city too big to walk everywhere.

Take advantage of public transport.

I like the hotel in a convenient neighborhood near a subway stop.

Rome's subway system, while not extensive, is easy to use.

From our hotel, it's a straight shot to the Colosseum.

Colosseo, that's our stuff the.

The Colosseo was and still is colossal it's the great example of ancient Roman engineering.

It was begun in 72 AD during the reign of Emperor Vespasianus, when the empire was nearing its peak.

Using roman pioneered concrete, brick and their trademark round arches, Romans constructed much larger buildings than the Greeks.

But it seems they still respected the fine points of Greek culture.

They decorated their no nonsense mega structure with all three Greek orders of commerce, Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian.

Stepping inside you can almost hear the roar of ancient Rome.

Take a moment to imagine the place in action.

Romans filled an emptied the coliseum 50,000 seats as quickly and efficiently as we do our super stadiums today.

[MUSIC] >> It's filled with two theaters facing each other, that's what an amphitheater is.

So twice as many people could enjoy the entertainment.

>> Canvas awnings were hoisted over the stadium to give protection from the sun.

These passageways underneath the arena were covered by a wooden floor.

Between acts, animals, and gladiators were shuffled around out of sight.

[MUSIC] >> Ancient Romans whose taste for violence succeeded even modern America's came to the Coliseum to unwind.

Gladiators, criminals and wild animals fight to the death providing the public with a festival of Gore.

To celebrate the Coliseum his grand opening, Romans retreated to the slaughter of 5,000 animals.

[MUSIC] >> Nearby Trajan's column trumpets, the glories of Emperor Trajan who ruled Rome and its heyday.

This is a textbook example of continuous narration.

Like a 200 yards long scroll, it winds all the way to the top.

[MUSIC] The purpose, more PR, telling the story of yet another military victory.

Trajan extended the boundaries of the Empire to its greatest size ever from the Nile to that north of Britain.

Controlling its entire coastline Romans called the Mediterranean simply Mare Nostrum, our sea.

Downtown Rome is a kind of architectural time warp, you'll see almost nothing built post World War II.

A striking exception is this contemporary buildings showcasing the Ara Pacis.

This altar of peace offers a stirring glimpse at the pride and power of the Roman Empire at its peak.

>> Nine years before Christ, Emperor Augustus lead a procession of priests up these steps to the newly built altar of peace.

They sacrificed an animal on the top and thanked the Gods.

The last of the serious barbarian resistance had been killed, and now there could be peace.

The Empire was established and this marked the start of the Pax Romana.

[MUSIC] >> The Pax Romana or Roman Peace was a golden age of good living, relative stability, and military dominance, that lasted from the time of Christ for about two centuries.

[MUSIC] The ultra is exquisite reliefs celebrate Rome success and prosperity.

This goddess of fertility is surrounded by symbols of abundance and this procession shows a populist thankful for its Emperor.

[MUSIC] The stability and relative prosperity that characterized the two centuries of the Roman piece was due in part to a steady succession of capable rulers.

[MUSIC] As visitors, it's our challenge to appreciate the grandeur of this incredible city built on the scale of giants.

For instance, when Rome went to the races, it came here The Circus Maximus.

>> Imagine a quarter of a million Romans cheering on careening chariots and overlooking it all, the Palatine Hill, filled with towering palaces.

>> And a visit to the National Museum at the Palazzo Massimo helps humanize the Empire.

While ancient Rome's architecture was monumental, it's citizens we're just people like you and me without electricity.

[MUSIC] These frescoes a rare surviving example of Roman painting, bring color to our image of daily life back then.

[MUSIC] Romans like to think of themselves as somehow living parallel with the Gods.

These domestic scenes come with a twist of mythology.

[MUSIC] And this painted garden, wallpapering a Roman villa showed an appreciation for nature while creating an atmosphere of serenity.

[MUSIC] Admiring the artifacts of Rome's elite from exclusive jewelry to this delicate golden hair net, we can only marvel at lifestyles of the rich and Roman.

[MUSIC] Many aspects of Roman life are represented, Roman artists excelled in realism.

This boxer is a picture of exhaustion, with a roughed up face and tired hands complete with brass knuckles [MUSIC] The museums collection tells the Empire story through art.

Caesar Augustus was the nephew of Julius Caesar and the first grade emperor of the Pax Romana.

Looking into the eyes of the man who called himself the first among equals,, you get the feeling that the ship of state was in good hands.

[MUSIC] But by the time this statue was carved, it's clear, the Pax Romana was finished, and Rome was falling.

[MUSIC] This boy is about to become head of state, it was a chaotic and unstable time.

In fact, in the third century, 16 emperors were assassinated in a 50 year period [MUSIC] Surrounded by nervous Senators, this child emperor is no picture of confidence.

[MUSIC] After seeing its museums, it's easier to envision Rome at its peak, once a metropolis of marble embellished with countless statues.

Surviving bits of the ancient empire are everywhere you look.

Important squares are still marked by towering columns.

[MUSIC] Medieval Romans built with scavenged fragments of once grand buildings.

Obelisks shipped from Egypt 2,000 years ago still stand like exclamation points.

And pillar of any street or square.

This is a republican era temple.

And you'll find stoney remnants of Rome's grand past standing right next to its modern present.

>> Throughout the ages, people mind one glorious buildings as quarries.

Imagine they were stacked with pre cut stones free for the taking.

Block by block they carted away most of this temple and then incorporated what was still standing, like these columns, into a modern building.

Thankfully, no one cannibalized the magnificent Pantheon, the best preserved temple from ancient Rome.

The portico with it stately pediment has symbolized Roman greatness ever since antiquity.

Like the obelisks, its massive one piece granite columns were shipped from Egypt.

They're huge.

It takes four tourists to hug one.

[MUSIC] Step inside to enjoy the finest look anywhere at the splendor of ancient Rome.

Its dimensions are classic, based on a perfect circle as wide as it is tall, 140 feet.

The oculus is the only source of light.

The Pantheon survived so well because it's been in continuous use for over 2,000 years.

It went almost directly from being a pagan temple to being a Christian church.

The beauty of the Pantheon and the brilliance of its construction has inspired architects through the ages.

The dome is made of poured concrete which gets thinner and lighter with height.

The highest part is made with pumice, an airy volcanic stone.

Pantheon means all the gods.

It was a spiritual menagerie, where the many gods of the empire were worshipped.

[MUSIC] There was a kind of religious freedom back then.

If you were conquered, you're welcome to keep your own gods, as long as you worship Caesar, too.

This was generally no problem.

But the Christians, who had a single and very jealous God, were the exception.

Because they refused to worship the emperor, early Christians were persecuted.

For a little early Christian history, we're heading outside the city for a look at the catacombs.

Rome's ancient wall stretches 11 miles.

It protected the city until Italy was united in 1870.

From gates like this, grand roads fanned out to connect the city with its empire.

The Appian Way, Rome's gateway to the east, is fun to explore on a rented bike.

It was the grandest and fastest road yet, the wonder of its day.

Very straight, as Roman engineers were fond of designing.

It stretched 400 miles to Naples and then on to Brindisi, from where Roman ships sailed to Greece and Egypt.

These are the original stones.

Tombs of ancient big shots line the Appian Way like billboards.

While pagans didn't enjoy the promise of salvation, those who could afford it purchased a kind of immortality by building themselves big and glitzy memorials.

These line the main roads out of town.

Judging by their elegant togas, these brothers were from a fine family.

This is the mausoleum of Cecilia Metella whose father-in-law was extremely wealthy.

While it dates from the first century BC, we still remember her to this day.

So apparently, the investment paid off.

[MUSIC] But of course early Christians didn't have that kind of money, so they buried their dead in mass underground necropoli or catacombs dug beneath the property of the few fellow Christians who did own land.

These catacombs are scattered all around the city just outside the walls, and several are open to the public.

[MUSIC] The tomb-lined tunnels of the catacombs stretch for miles and are many layers deep.

Many of the first Christians buried here were later recognized as martyrs and saints.

Others then carved out niches nearby to bury their loved ones close to these early Christian heroes.

By the middle ages, the catacombs were abandoned and forgotten.

Centuries later, they were rediscovered.

Romantic age tourists on the grand tour visited by candlelight and legends grew about Christians hiding out to escape persecution.

But the catacombs were not hideouts.

They were simply budget underground cemeteries.

Further along the Appian way is Rome's Aqueduct Park, offering a chance to see how the ancient city got its water.

With its million people, Rome needed lots of water.

These ingenious aqueducts carried a steady stream from distant mountains into the city and they still seem to gallop as they did two thousand years ago into Rome.

These aqueducts were the achilles heel of Rome.

If you wanted to bring down the city all you had to do is take down one of the arches.

In fact in the 6th century the barbarians did just that.

Without water, Rome basically shrivelled up.

[MUSIC] Today, the park's a favorites with locals for walking the dog, or burning off some of that pasta.

[MUSIC] With its imperial might and those stories about persecutions and hungry lives in the Colosseum, it's easy to forget that the last century of the Roman Empire was Christian.

In 312, the General Constantine, following a vision that he would triumph under the sign of the cross, beat his rival.

Taking power, Emperor Constantine then legalized Christianity.

This obscure outlawed Jewish sect ultimately became the religion of the Empire.

In the year 300, you could be killed for being a Christian.



In the year 400, you could be killed for not being a Christian.

Church attendance boomed, and Emperor Constantine built the first grade Christian church right here, San Giovanni in Laterano, St.

John's.

It opened as a kind of first Vatican, St.

John's, which has been rebuilt over the ages was the original home of the Bishop of Rome, or Pope.

High atop the canopy over the altar, a box supposedly contains bits of the skulls of St.

Peter and St. Paul.

The church is filled with symbols of Christianity's triumph over pagan Rome.

For instance, tradition says these gilded bronze columns once stood in pagan Rome's holiest temple.

And what better doors for this first grand church than those which once hung in ancient Rome's Senate House.

[MUSIC] The adjacent Holy Stairs are a major stop on Rome's pilgrimage trail.

Many credit Emperor Constantine's mother, Saint Helena, for her son's conversion.

She brought home wagon loads of relics, including these stairs, believed to be from the palace of Pontius Pilate.

For 1,700 years pilgrims believing Jesus climbed to these stairs on the day he was condemned have scaled the Scala Sancta on their knees.

[MUSIC] The influence of ancient Rome is everywhere.

Its noble ruins tell a tale of power, politics, and imperial egos.

Of pagan gods now forgotten.

Of public art on a grand scale, and of enduring engineering feats.

It's a story of colossal achievement and monumental failure.

By the year 500, the over expanded, corrupt and exhausted Roman Empire had fallen.

But the grandeur of the Roman Empire lived on in the Roman Church.

Over time Trajan's Column was capped with a Christian saint.

The Pantheon became a church.

Emperor Hadrian's Mausoleum became the Pope's fortress.

And the tomb of the Apostle Peter, a man the Romans executed, was crowned by the grandest building in the city.

St. Peter's Basilica.

[MUSIC] Today, visitors to Rome find fascinating layers of history and culture, early Christian, Baroque, and Modern.

But it all sits upon a solid foundation of the ancient city, which for centuries was the capital of our western civilization.

I'm Rick Steves.

Until next time, keep on traveling, ciao.

Everyone else, bar bar bar barbarians.

[LAUGH] >> Bar bar bar, bar bar barbarians, bar bar bar, bar bar barbarians.

>> Imagine a quarter of a million.

[LAUGH] Okay.

>> The heavy hold is doing it.

[MUSIC] Baby.

>> Wow, this is ugly.

[LAUGH] [MUSIC]