

# When in Rome

You can't help but warm to the flirtatious locals in Italy's romantic capital, says Sharon Stephenson



**THE POLIZIA DI STATO COME** thundering past the Via Aurelia, sirens squealing and lights flashing, scattering tourists and causing even the beggars to raise their weary eyes. The four uniformed occupants – all of whom could moonlight as Armani models – rush into a cafe, only to emerge minutes later with a cappuccino each.

Caffeine emergency over, they saunter back to their vehicle in that terribly cool Roman way, mentally undressing every woman who crosses their radar.

Welcome to Italy's headline act where, if you're female, it's impossible not to attract male attention. Here, among the ancient cobblestones and buildings that crumble like half-eaten muesli bars, men shamelessly flirt with women. All the time.

Italian men will stare at you, shout "Bella!" as they whiz past on their Vespas and kiss your hand, your cheek or anywhere you'll let them. Italian men, it would seem, are genetically incapable of not appreciating the female form. And age is no barrier – a woman's charms don't come with a sell-by date in the Eternal City.

"If flirting is an Olympic sport, then Romans are gold medallists," souvenir vendor Massimo tells me proudly.

Having been through the Sistine Chapel once before and unwilling to part with \$36 to repeat the experience, I tell my husband I'll wait for him while he strains his neck to ogle Michelangelo's greatest hits.

And so this girl waits. And waits. For two hours, I consume espressos so strong they threaten to melt my fillings, and observe tourists of every make and shape shuffle into the Vatican Museums. And for two hours, I get hit on by random passers-by and several lads who've set up a souvenir stall nearby. No I don't want a Papal snow dome, a plastic baby Jesus or a date, thanks.

Massimo, who has been flogging these tasteless tidbits to travellers for the past 10 years, laughs when I flash my wedding ring and tell him I'm already sorted.

"Ah, but I don't want to marry you, bella," he says. "I just want to kiss you. Italian men love to make a woman feel beautiful, we love to tell you we will die without you. But it's all good fun and at the end of the day, we go quietly home to our wives and our mamas."

You'd have to be crazy not to warm to that.

Perhaps it's because this is one of the most romantic cities on the planet, or maybe it's because the place is swarming with over-caffeinated, good-looking people. Or it could be as simple as the locals' penchant for drinking wine at any old hour. Whatever the reason, in Rome passion is everywhere.

We watch a particularly vocal domestic taking place in a restaurant the next day; all raised voices and even more dramatic gesticulation than usual. The slap is audible from across the room but as his fiery partner stomps out, the aggrieved male merely sighs and gets back to his bucatini. We are the only ones who stare.



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** The roof of one of the many rooms in the sprawling Vatican Museum; Gladiators tout for business; Sharon and husband Martin at the Colosseum; Down the street from Catholic HQ, St Peter's Basilica.

The New Zealand friend we are staying with says because Roman apartments tend to be small, residents do most of their living on the streets and in cafes.

"You hear all sorts of conversations and see sights you might not see in New Zealand," she says.

Like the long-lashed Lothario we see in the Jewish quarter the next day. While we devour delicious deep-fried artichokes, we hear him wooing a Scandinavian tourist with the unbelievably cheesy line, "I used to be bad but now that I have fallen in love with you, I'm reformed. Let me take you to Tivoli and we can discuss our future."

A few hours later, while pushing my nose up against vastly overpriced shops in the Via Condotti, we spot our signor working it with another group of women. I have to shake my head to ensure I'm not hearing things when he says, "Sleep with me tonight and I'll give up smoking."

We cross the Tiber river to Trastevere, a former working-class area that is now a haven of cool cafes, restaurants and bars filled with locals who seem to have fallen off some production line for beautiful people. →



**TOP LEFT AND ABOVE:** Be sure to explore the knot of streets that make up the Trastevere. **LEFT:** A fresh artichoke sculpture outside a trattoria in the Jewish quarter. **FAR LEFT:** This bronze sculpture at the Vatican's Cortile della Pigna is called *Sfera Con Sfera* (Sphere within Sphere).

## AS WE QUEUE TO GET IN, WE WATCH THEM USE THEIR FELLOW CENTURIONS' SHINY ARMOUR AS MIRRORS, AND CHAT UP EVERY FEMALE WHO STRAYS INTO THEIR PATH

Trastevere also boasts the glorious Basilica di Santa Maria, one of the oldest in Rome, which is filled with 13th century mosaics by Pietro Cavallini and a monster of a ceiling painting by Domenichino that is simply breathtaking. But even this portal to religious and artistic nirvana isn't off the flirting menu: I spy a bored young security guard in a pristinely ironed uniform chatting up some equally bored English teenagers.

You can't come to Rome and not visit Catholic HQ so we 'do' St Peter's Basilica, avoiding the conga line of tourists by sneakily jumping the queue. It's not very Christian-like, but I don't have time to waste lining up when there are so many other treasures to see. Back in the 18th century when the holiday industry first hit Rome, most tourists took two years to tour the city; we only have two days and I don't want to spend them looking at the back of a German school party.

St Peter's Basilica over with, we head past the gloriously over-the-top Monumento Nazionale a Vittorio Emanuele II, or the wedding cake as it's more commonly known, towards the Colosseum. You'd think, wouldn't you, that a lump of rock this big would be easy to find? But the city is setting up for the Rome marathon and the main arterial routes are closed, meaning we end up

somewhere around the back of the Forum near Circus Maximus.

Stumbling across the road (my New Zealand-turned-Roman friend says the trick to navigating cobblestones in heels is to walk on your toes, a tip that my new Italian boots are extremely grateful for), we finally arrive at the giant amphitheatre that was built in 80AD to house 50,000 blood-thirsty spectators.

Old men in gladiator outfits who look more like Russell Crowe's grandfather pose for photos in return for a few Euros. They also provide free entertainment because as we queue to get in, we watch them use their fellow centurions' shiny armour as mirrors, and chat up every female who strays into their path.

And that's the thing about Rome – flirting is as natural as breathing and political correctness is a foreign concept. On the last day, as we lug our suitcases to Rome Termini station, around 50 mounted police trot past us. Every one of them checks us out – not surreptitiously or sleazily, but in that classic Italian way that simply is what it is.

And who am I to argue with that? **✎**  
Sharon Stephenson travelled to London courtesy of Air New Zealand ([www.airnewzealand.co.nz](http://www.airnewzealand.co.nz)) and then flew on to Rome.

### Where to go

The Eternal City is like a tiramisu – spoon through the layers to discover the history that hangs around every doorway, the vast churches and palaces, the intimate trattorias and eye-wateringly expensive shops. Make like Audrey Hepburn in the classic film *Roman Holiday* and explore the city that everyone should visit once in a lifetime.

● **If you only see one thing:** Some would suggest the Colosseum or the Vatican, but the queues at both can be soul-destroying, so head down through the Quirinale area to the Trevi Fountain. Completed in 1762, this Baroque fantasy of rearing sea horses and muscular Tritons is most famous for actress Anita Ekberg's midnight dip in the movie *La Dolce Vita*. Legend has it that throwing a coin over your shoulder into the fountain will ensure you return to Rome. Alternatively, arrive early and watch the coins being harvested; the fountain makes the city millions of euros a year.

● **Nobody does gluttony like the Italians:** In the heart of Rome's Jewish quarter, try one of the best eateries on the planet. Da Giggetto's (Via del Portico d'Ottavia 21a; [www.giggettoalportico.com](http://www.giggettoalportico.com)) distinctive Roman/Jewish cuisine includes carciofi alla giudia (lightly fried artichokes) and baccalá (crispy salted cod fillets) – and some of the most flirtatious waiters you're ever likely to meet. If, however, you're watching your euros, have lunch at Pizzeria Luzzi (Via S Giovanni in Laterano 88), the classic Roman trattoria of your imagination that is five minutes' walk from the Colosseum. Ignore the cheesy chequered tablecloths and candles stuck in wine bottles, and chow down on the cheap but tasty cannelloni, tomato salad and a quarter-litre of house wine that should set you back, in total, around NZ\$30.

● **You'll need to top up your mortgage to go shopping:** Join the Botox brigade who prowl the streets of Via Condotti, a dazzling strip of luxury stores that showcase the latest collections of Armani, Gucci, Cavalli and co. Intriguing one-off shops are further north, on Via del Babuino, or clustered around Via dei Serpenti. The current European trend for concept stores is best experienced at TAD, a classy but quirky shop that offers everything from bags and flowers to sushi (Via del Babuino 155a).

● **Try some of that famous Italian coffee:** Any of Rome's street-corner bars will serve you a decent cappuccino. Just remember to stand at the counter and drink it; that will cost you half or even a third of what it will if you sit down. Some of the best coffee to pass my lips was at La Casa del Caffè Tazza d'Oro (Via degli Orfani 84), a standing-room only joint cluttered with coffee tins and lolly jars that, in the words of my coffee aficionado husband, "takes its caffeine seriously". If you can handle the sugar rush, opt for a hot chocolate – it's so thick, the spoon almost stands up in it.

**MAIN IMAGE:** Trevi Fountain. **INSET:** The scene that made the fountain famous; Anita Ekberg in *La Dolce Vita*.

