

Rome as seen from the top of St. Peter's. Follow the author as he discloses where to find the most beautiful women in the Eternal City.



Six weeks in Rome

By MANNY GONZALEZ
Plantation Bay Resort & Spa

(Part 1 of 4: The Most Beautiful Women in Rome)

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At the Movies. From *Come September* (Universal 1961, Rock Hudson and Gina Lollobrigida) and *How to Murder Your Wife* (United Artists 1965, Jack Lemmon and Virna Lisi), reconfirmed by *Only You* (Tristar 1994, Robert Downey Jr. and Marisa Tomei), I learned that Italian women are breathtaking. (Marisa Tomei is genetically Italian; don't get technical on me.)

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All of which doesn't amount to much. And as someone once said, the beginning of wisdom is the admission of one's own ignorance. Having visited Rome only three or four times in my life, the last time back in the spring of 2012 for only five days, I realized that it was still a huge unknown to me. Though, owing to the company, that visit was pleasant enough, I told myself that there must be more to this place than pizza, pasta, and prosciutto, and resolved to cure this intolerable deficiency.

Thus it was that, still taking inspiration from the movies, I signed up for Italian language classes at an outfit called Scuola Leonardo. (By accident, it turned out that this was the very school that the author of *Eat Pray Love* had attended, though you wouldn't have been able to figure it out from the movie.)

And now, a little history...

The Most-Painted Rape Ever. As a result of a liberal education, I was of course aware that there exist numerous paintings around the world titled "The Rape of the Sabine Women." While the subject was, in general terms, appealing, most of the women were depicted by the Old Masters as more — shall we say — sturdy than my personal preference, so I never took much interest in this quasi-mythical event.

It wasn't until my recent sojourn that I finally stitched together the true, shocking story. You have probably heard of Romulus and Remus. Well, they were gangsters. Raised by a she-wolf, they were not what you would call genteel. First chance he got, Romulus killed Remus over a trifle, then set himself up as leader of his own mob — "The Romulus Gang," later shortened to "Romani."

As basically a group of outlaws, the Romani were mostly males. Longing for feminine company, they looked around them, and — lo! The Sabine tribe, living on the next-door hill, had women. Beautiful, sexy women. Well, women.

So the Romans invited the Sabines over for a friendly soiree. For reasons unknown, the Sabines accepted, and when the Sabine men were good and drunk, the Romans hauled off the Sabine women and raped them. This took place somewhere near the Palatine Hill (see picture).

As Romans tell the story, the Sabine women were so (ahem) satisfied by the rapists that they chose to remain. And so Rome was born. This is a true story. Mostly.

Go Where the Money Is. To recall our subject matter, there are many beautiful women in Rome, and now I will tell you where some of them are. Fast forward 2,500 years from the Rape, and in present-day Rome, on the well-proven theory that money can buy good looks (through marriage, cosmetic surgery, and the halo effect of shockingly-expensive clothing), one place you are sure to see some stunners is the via Condotti. The area around this street has the smartest shopping in the city, cramming hundreds of designer boutiques into a few hectares between the Spanish Steps and via del Corso. See picture; this is the least expensive shop on via Condotti (and the only one whose personnel didn't sniffle when I ambled in).

Women who can afford to spend 5,000 euros on a casual jacket (Hermès), or 800 euros



The least expensive store on via Condotti. The black dresses ran about 400 euros (a real bargain, so I was given to understand), and the beige cashmere coats start at only 900 euros.



The Fontana del Quattro Fiumi (Four Rivers) in the center of Piazza Navona. The author was too embarrassed to take shots of the bare midriffs and mini-skirts, etc. By the way, this is the fountain where the fourth cardinal in *Angels and Demons* is supposed to be drowning until Tom Hanks saves him; it is really only two feet deep; see, you've learned something useful already.

for a sweater (Dolce e Gabbana) will statistically tend to look pretty sharp. Also their daughters. In case the genetic causality isn't clear to you, let me spell it out. No, come to think of it, let me not. I already have enough death threats. Just take my word for it: when in via Condotti (if you are male), don't waste your time looking at the display windows; instead look at the shoppers.

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(And the name of the other country is... going to be revealed later in this series.)

Who knows why this is so. It isn't the ancient Roman genes left over from the Romulus Gang and the Sabines, because the ancient Romans were pretty much wiped out, or at least widely dispersed, when in 550 AD or thereabouts, an enterprising barbarian cut off the aqueducts (i.e., water supply). Rome's population, which had surpassed one million during the heyday of the Empire, fell to just a few thousand villagers along the Tiber.

Anyway, ladies, take my word for it. If su-



The Palatine Hill, near where the famous Rape of the Sabine Women occurred.



The level of good looks among women at the author's Italian-language school was remarkable. (Since the same could not be said of the men, such as the male students at this table other than the author, they were cropped.) And they came from all over the world. Renske (blinking) is Dutch. Dani (standing) is Brazilian (and six feet tall, alas). Genevieve is Australian.

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Piazza Navona Shorts. There are surprisingly few big open spaces in central Rome, which is for the most part a medieval (1000-1500 AD) ghetto with three-meter wide streets, punctuated occasionally by a Baroque (1600-1800 AD) church, plaza or something-or-other. (More on Roman architectural history later in this series.) The biggest paved open expanse is probably St. Peter's Square. But most of the women to be found there are headed for the Vatican or the Basilica, where feminine flesh is inexplicably frowned upon, and sleeveless shirts, shorts, and all things remotely prurient are disallowed.

This leaves the fourth grandest paved open expanse (No. 2 is mostly a road intersection; we will talk about the No. 3 one later). Piazza Navona was built above, and faithfully follows the contours of an ancient Roman chariot-race track and athletic field. Here, in this piazza (PYAHT-suh), hordes of breathtaking women come to parade their charms to admiring onlookers. Here, you will find the shortest of shorts, the mini-est of skirts, bouncing-est of halters, most hugging of T-shirts, barest of midriffs, and much other attire calculated to stoke the male imagination.

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home to one of the most celebrated sculptures in the world, Bernini's Four Rivers, and it is this that I photographed, not the short shorts, bare midriffs, etc. See picture. Enjoy. It's art. But even Piazza Navona has its fair share of frumpiness, so it can't take top honors.

And the Winner Is... Let's put Bernini aside for now, and return to the question burning in your minds, dear readers. If not in Piazza Navona, where then are the most beautiful women in Rome to be found?

If you have been paying attention, you already know the answer: the Scuola Leonardo, where I went to study Italian. In fact, when you stop to think about it, it's obvious. What kind of foreign woman would want to learn Italian? Someone vivacious and outgoing. Passionate, probably. Confident of her attractiveness, certainly.

What kind of person would actually be willing to wade through the complexities of Italian grammar (the many variations on *congiuntivo*, in particular)? Probably someone smart, motivated, and self-assured, which generally correlate well with physical attractiveness.

And what kind of person can afford (or is chosen by her company for) a month-or-longer holiday in Rome? Probably someone well-off (or well-regarded at the company), and as we've established, this definitely correlates favorably with good looks.

Whether you buy my explanations or not, the fact was (is) that at the Scuola Leonardo you couldn't walk halfway to the bathroom without brushing bodies with several gorgeous females of some type or another — Norwegians, Irish, Japanese, and Austrians, doctors, cooks, singers, and corporate executives.

And being located in space-challenged central Rome, the Scuola has one-meter wide corridors, making some bodily brushing unavoidable, however regrettable. This is a true story.

Okay, have a look at the picture and decide for yourself. There were so many good-looking women at this school that some of them even wound up going to dinner with me... One dinner, anyway... More like a pre-dinner, actually... Nonetheless, the Scuola Leonardo stands out in my mind as having more beautiful women per square meter than any other location in Rome, and I recommend it highly for all fans of feminine pulchritude.

(Next: How to Do Rome in a Day)

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