



# A Grand Tour of our own

Rome and Florence are staggeringly beautiful – but also busy, so plan, book in advance and explore, writes Alison Gray

**I**nspired by the gilded youth of earlier centuries we set off on our very own Grand Tour (not the recent one with Jeremy Clarkson) although sadly rather than the one to five years poets Keats and Shelley set aside for their education in European art and culture, we had a week off work.

Still there's a lot you can do in seven days when let loose on the cities of Rome and Florence, especially when you've got comfortable accommodation, a plan and all terrain trainers.

We began with a whistle stop tour of Ancient Rome and perhaps one of the most iconic structures in the city. The Colosseum is a thrill and such an incredible feature on Rome's skyline it's almost unbelievable that it wasn't considered of cultural significance until the 1990s. If

you'd visited then you'd have been able to stroll in and instead of today's crowds of tourists you'd have been met with the city's population of feral cats who had taken up residence in the arena. The Colosseum has a lot to thank Russell Crowe for even if 2000's *Gladiator* was mainly made on CGI with other scenes filmed in Morocco.

For a bit of orientation we hopped on and off a city tour bus and from the top deck spied Vatican City and the many wonders of Palatine Hill. We learned about Roman architectural lasagne, with apartments built on top of a historic theatre. Metal decorations and inserts to buildings were often pinched to make weapons or to adorn other buildings, especially churches.

We stayed in the Grand Hotel Palatino, which we found to



View of Florence and Santa Maria del Fiore Duomo, main; the Colosseum, above

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be a comfortable and friendly base for exploring the heart of the city. With smoothies made to order at breakfast and a beautifully refurbished room in muted tones with a sleek bathroom, it provided everything we needed for our Roman holiday.

The popular adage that all roads lead to Rome has caught us out during previous attempts to explore the city on foot. This time we were in luck. With a rough idea of where we were going we headed off on an early morning run in search of the Via Appia Antica, and not only

did we find a most interesting section of the ancient route, which connected Rome to Brindisi in the south east, it was the first Sunday of the month which meant free entry to mausoleums and monuments along the way. With burials banned within the city walls nobles honoured their dead on the Via Appia and three miles from the start of the route we found the Tomb of Caecilia Metella, a high-ranking woman whose family had served under Julius Caesar. One of the most well-known and best preserved monuments, previous visitors to this huge round mausoleum include one Lord Byron who references it in canto 4 of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Perhaps we really are getting this Grand Tour right after all. Writing poetry could be next. But before the muse could take us we had to leave Rome behind.

Just like Lucy Honeychurch in EM Forster's novel, our room in Florence came with a view, of the Duomo and its neighbouring bell tower. We wondered why they had left earplugs by the side of the bed

—had someone phoned ahead from Rome to warn them of the infernal snoring? But it was for the bells, which rang out at 7am. No one in that city needs an alarm clock.

Our lovely home from home Hotel Calzaiuoli had a bright breakfast room where the willing staff made endless coffees, but there's no restaurant as there are just so many places to eat in this foody city. From tavernas to trattorias there's a dining spot for you, but perhaps the place to try first is the glorious Food Market where the finest meat, veg and fish is on sale on the ground floor while upstairs there are dozens of cook stations to satisfy your every culinary desire. This is a good spot to try Florence's most famous street food, though I didn't because I am borderline frightened of tripe. If you are brave in your first stomach, you can sample the cow's fourth stomach which is served casually in a roll.

Suitably fortified we were ready to take on the artistic might of the Uffizi. The Renaissance art is located on the first floor of the building where the masterpieces are hung in chronological order. The corridors linking the rooms displaying the paintings are lined in Roman statues, which the Medicis picked up with enthusiasm, a collection which in turn benefited the Renaissance artists who used them as models. Botticelli, Titian, Michelangelo, each glorious canvas is more awe-inspiring than the last.

For a different perspective of Florence we wanted to go up the Duomo's bell tower, or Campanile, begun by Giotto and finished in 1359. Covered in

white, green and rose Tuscan marble it glitters in the morning light. Like all the attractions in the city, you've got to book and collect your tickets in advance which is a bit of a pest until you get the hang of it and then it works really well as you have a timed slot and you know what you're doing. We wanted morning light for our photos so climbed the 400 steps at 8:15am.

The medieval stone arched bridge that spans the Arno, Ponte Vecchio is a must see, even if you have to use your imagination a little bit. It's the only bridge in Florence that was spared from destruction during the Second World War and is noted for the shops built along it. Shops on bridges was common with butchers, tanners and farmers selling their wares. Today it's all high end jewellers so a little bit of the magic is lost.

You can find Michelangelo's David at the Galleria Dell'Accademia and if you need a break from the crowds go green and head to two of the city's beautiful gardens. Boboli Gardens which extend from behind the Palazzo Pitti are the better known but we loved the neighbouring Bardini Gardens (you can get a combined ticket to see both), especially its glorious wisteria pergola.

Since our return I see that Rylan and Rob Rinder have also joined the Grand Tour bandwagon with their new TV series, giving us another chance to relive our adventures in Italy.

**Rates for a double room at Grand Hotel Palatino in Rome start from €189. Rates for a double room in Hotel Calzaiuoli in Florence start from €470. [www.fhhotelgroup.it/en/index](http://www.fhhotelgroup.it/en/index)**



A room at the Grand Hotel Palatino, Rome



## Inspired by the Jurassic Coast

The small village of Charmouth on the Dorset coast is little changed from the 19th century, perfect for a re-imagining of Victorian fossil-hunters in Jody Cooksley's Gothic thriller *The Small Museum*

I've long been fascinated by the 19th-century urge to discover, collect and sort the natural world. A time of factories and steam power, with the possibility of progress and an entirely new, educated middle-class. As much as the Victorians were eager to exploit industry and dominate globally, they were frightened of the new evolutionary science and what it meant for religion. And they were obsessed with trying to understand it. It's a rich context for fiction and the opportunity to explore dark motivations for character.

Almost every wealthy family of the time had a small museum of some kind in their homes, a place to display elements of nature. Those who considered themselves to be men of science went much further in their searches for the strangest and most unusual.

There were cut-throat claims on discoveries and even outright fakes, designed to raise the profile of 'finders' with the societies. It's these unnatural behaviours that I wanted to explore in *The Small Museum*, the idea that such megalomania could drive characters to very dark and twisted ends.

In the novel, Dr Lucius Everley is a ruthless scientist with a burning ambition to restore his father's name – at any cost. He's worked for years towards the discovery of 'fish with feet' and appears to be on the cusp of realising his dream.

His young wife, Madeleine, a talented anatomical artist, is tasked with imagining his creatures in drawings. When she loses a child at birth, they travel together to Charmouth, a trip that she hopes will bring them together. But what she discovers about his work whilst they are there allows her to

piece together the horrors of the reality behind his small museum.

They stay in a boarding house, the first such experience for her, and the people that they meet there become vital in helping her to prove his guilt and exonerate herself.

An eclectic group, each with their own reasons for being by the coast and seeking the past. Such boarding houses sprang up in great number along the Dorset Coast at the time, catering to the race to be the first to discover and name new 'great lizards' and other finds. Ichthyosaurs, a type of marine reptile that measured up to ten metres, were discovered there in 1836 and these discoveries were swiftly followed by the scelidosaurus, a rare ancient herbivore that's still only been found in the region.

Together these sparked a goldrush of hopeful finders and a lucrative period for local traders. Dorset's limestone is perfect for preservation, creating an attractive draw for amateurs with little knowledge of how to look for specimens. Fossils of all kinds could be found very easily.

Perhaps more famous is Lyme Regis, the home of pioneer fossil hunter Mary Anning, and the subject of Tracy Chevalier's wonderful book *Remarkable*

Creatures. But Charmouth is just as beautiful, studded with history and finds. It was important for my novel that the place was quiet, allowing Dr Everley's secretive behaviour, and the village still retains the charm I imagine it had in Victorian times. The small high street, which dates back to the Roman empire, has a few traditional shops in a row of beautiful 19th-century villas.

Jane Austen, who in 1803 stayed in The Three Crowns (re-named as the Coach and Horses and now converted to residential apartments), flattered the village in *Persuasion*, describing its 'high grounds and extensive sweeps of country, more its sweet, retired bay, backed by dark cliffs, where fragments of low rock among the sands make it the happiest spot for watching the flow of the tide, for sitting in unwearied contemplation.'

It's a view that never diminishes. Dorset's beaches, backed by their high, rugged cliffs are such dramatic landscapes that one can only agree with Austen and sit in unwearied contemplation.

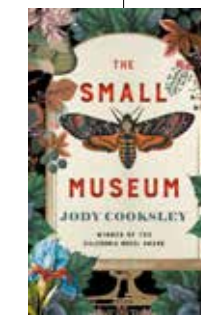
### View of Charmouth and its spectacular cliffs

In *The Small Museum*, Charmouth is Madeleine's first experience of the coast. Although she is nervous of the sea itself, she is immediately taken with the beauty of the sweeping coastline and takes to beachcombing herself as she waits for Lucius.

It's a feeling I had as a child, on the beaches of my home county in Norfolk, and I will never tire of walking on damp sand, peering into rock pools and piles of stones to see what treasures they may contain.

On Charmouth beach one can just as easily find the tooth of an ancient sea creature. Now recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage site, the whole Dorset coastline provides a unique insight into millions of years of evolution and a huge number of fossils continue to be found there. It's a coastal village ripe with possibility, both for science and for fiction.

***The Small Museum* by Jody Cooksley is published by Allison & Busby out now in hardback at £16.99 and as an eBook**



## Allergies shouldn't stop your travel plans

An allergy campaigner and a health expert share some top tips for travelling with allergies. By Abi Jackson



Allergy campaigner Julianne Ponan

There's a lot to think about when travelling with severe allergies. But with the right prep and research, you can still enjoy holidays.

"I have suffered from anaphylaxis since I was two years old, to peanuts, tree nuts, sesame, chickpeas and more," says Julianne Ponan, allergy campaigner and founder of allergen-free food brand Creative Nature.

"However, I grew up with parents who never wanted my allergies to limit me, which is why travel was something they ensured we did from very young, even though they had their worries and fears."

Here, Ponan and medical experts share some top tips for travelling with allergies...

### Plan and prep ahead

Firstly, make sure you specify your allergies when taking out travel insurance, so you are fully covered in the event of any medical emergencies overseas.

Next up, flying. That can be particularly anxiety-evoking for anyone living with potentially life-threatening allergies.

"When choosing the airline provider, check and print out the allergy policies. If I'm struggling to find the policy, I reach out directly to the airline to notify them of my allergies and provide them with my flight information. This ensures staff are informed well in advance," says Ponan.

"Upon arrival, I make it a point to inform the check-in staff, boarding team and flight crew about my allergies, specifying the location of my EpiPens, which are always easily accessible in case of a reaction."

### Carrying medication

Carolina Goncalves, superintendent pharmacist at Pharmica, suggests planning ahead with extra prescriptions.

"It's always better to be safe than sorry. Travelling can cause delays in accessing replacements, especially in remote areas or countries where prescriptions may not be readily available. Carrying an extra EpiPen also provides peace of mind, allowing you to enjoy your holiday without unnecessary worry," says Goncalves.

"Keep the back-up medication separate from the original medication, but in an easily accessible place such as a different bag if travelling alone, or with a family member or friend if travelling in a group."

### Dining abroad

The charity Allergy UK has lots of helpful info on its website about navigating food and dining while travelling.

"I always carry my 'Equal Eats' card, that translates my allergies and showcases the severity of them," says Ponan, who suggests asking eateries whether their kitchen has separate areas for preparing allergy-safe meals, and if it's possible to see the complete list of ingredients. "Sometimes, ingredients are omitted from the menu due to space constraints, so it's crucial to have access to all the information," she says.