

## TRAVELOGUE

## WHEN IN ROME . . .

It was the first time I realised that a Roman holiday could very well remind you of Bangladesh. Oddly, it is a familiar sight across Rome. A quick visual audit of the city and nearly every other roadside vendor, souvenir seller, shop worker and restaurant waiter appears to be of Bangladeshi origin. Who would have thought that the population of immigrants from Bangladesh living in Italy exceeded 100,000 as of 2013 to become the second biggest diaspora in the world after Great Britain!

Now this trip of mine was hatched between my stop-over in Spain, away from the chaos of Dhaka, my newly-found home at the time, and Santorini in Greece, well the city that did not end up happening to this date, but I shall get to that part a little later.

Arrival in the heart of Rome is somehow coming back home, regardless if it is your maiden voyage, notwithstanding cultural and language barriers. The ancient monuments, the strong, willful presence of God towered by the Vatican, the smiles and even the catcalls from random men on the street making their presence known and reminding you how well you look! Oh yes, I was informed by fellow travellers before that I would feel right at home in the streets of Rome, going from Dhaka!

The best way to see this city is to walk. Having experienced the unpredictability of the weather in London or Paris, one can actually count on good weather and unreliable transportation here. On foot is also where you will discover the hidden marvels of this city – the warm aroma

of a bakery and handmade leather of a local craftsman, grandmas drying clothes out the balcony and how can anyone resist the arcane piazzas that seem to be still stuck in the 16th century!

It is very challenging to get away from art in Italy. Once you do get a taste of it though, you have to hop chapels and cathedrals to discover the real masterpieces. Like most basilicas, entry is free in these churches and is one of those eyes-feasting pleasures in this world that money cannot buy. While the entire city of Rome is a museum in itself, Galleria Borghese is quite the find. You are exposed to antiquities, the Renaissance and other collections in a 17th century villa made up with a compact course in the Italian aesthetic.

Before I move on and sweep your feet off with the treasures held inside the confines of the Vatican, one last art-related suggestion would be the Giorgio de Chirico House that gives you a peek into the 20th century with some of the signature works of the master of classically fuelled surrealism and his sunny attic studio – the apartment where De Chirico lived for more than 30 years until his death in 1978.

A travel tip for the first-timers visiting the Vatican would be to spare an ample amount of time. This is one place, please take my words for it, that you absolutely do not wish to rush through.

There is a vast amount of art and sculptures to view, as you make your way to the Sistine Chapel. This is where Michelangelo carved the first of his great masterpieces on Italian Renaissance. The pin-

nacle of Renaissance painting and masterpieces, Michelangelo covers the ceiling and altar wall of the Sistine Chapel, the grand hall, where the cardinals meet to elect a new pope.

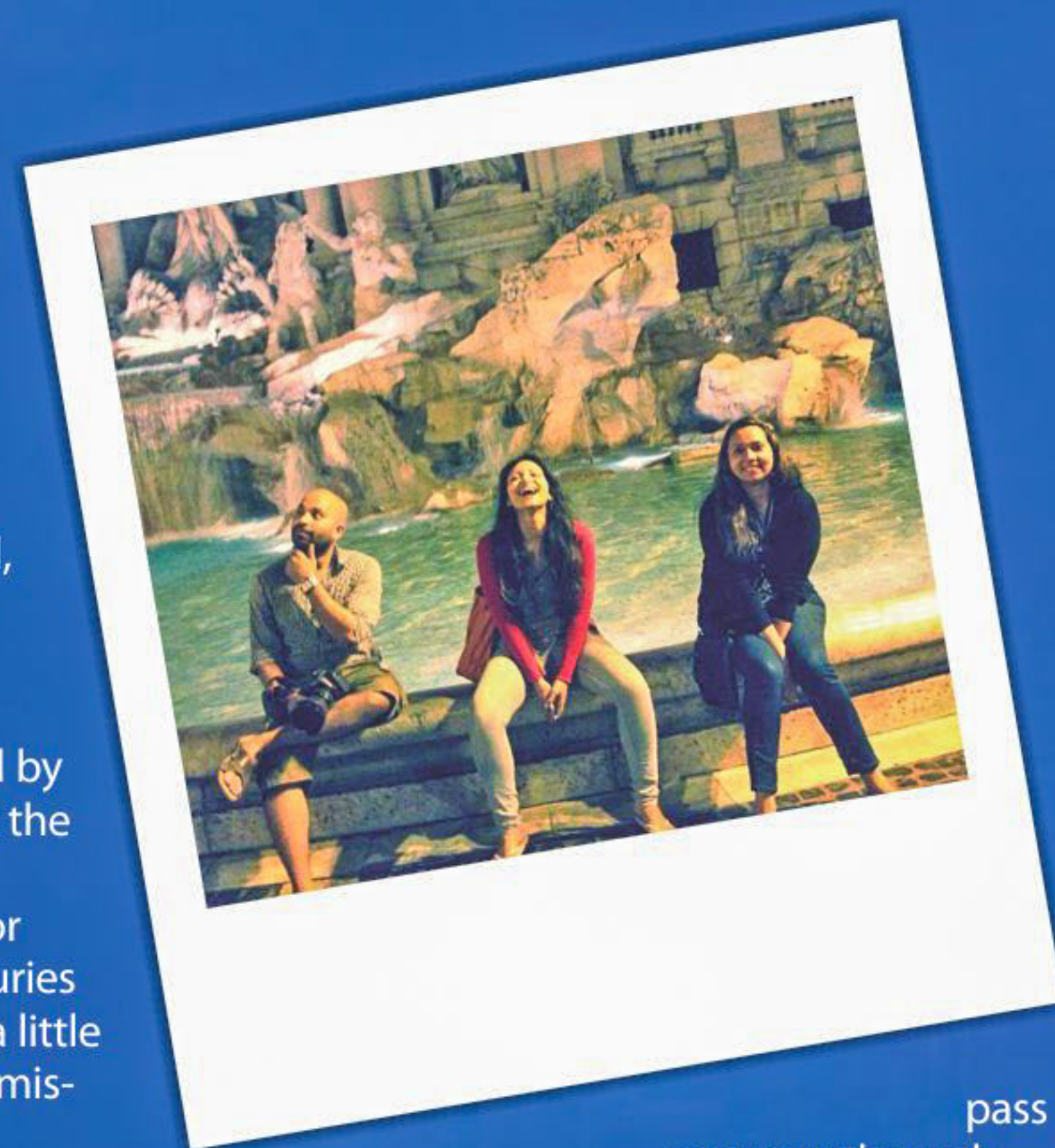
As the history goes Michelangelo, commissioned by the Pope Julius II to decorate the chapel ceiling, initially complained that he was a sculptor and not a frescoist, and centuries later the whole world is just a little bit relieved that a papal commission cannot be ignored!

After dedicating so many words to Michelangelo, I believe it would be rather unfair if I did not mention that my personal favourite inside the Vatican is actually that of Raphael's – the School of Athens. This is one of the most famous frescoes by him, representing philosophy, poetry, theology and law, and depicts the distinct branches of knowledge.

One thing to consider in regards to dress code is no bare shoulders, no very short shorts or skirts, if you do not want a bizarre array of spiteful Italian being gushed at you at any of these religious establishments (okay guilty as charged!).

Indulging in the mouth-watering gelatos, that can make any person without a sweet tooth go weak in the knees, my friends and I had managed to walk around this museum of a city, always clutching our belongings with dear life at all times.

Having experienced both Istanbul and Barcelona in a row, this came to us quite naturally. But what made our mouths drop next was the unmissable sight of Rome's most famous ruins – the Colosseum! Half circus, half sports arena, we managed to be one of the lucky visitors to have access to the underfloor



passageways through which gladiators and wild beasts made their entrances. A sight to behold! Soon after we made our way back to the Spanish steps, a monumental stairway of 135 steps, where the city met after hours. This is one of the busiest parts of Rome where you get to catch a glimpse of McDonald's with a startling reminder that we were still in fact living in the 2000s.

Slowly making our way towards the stairs though, a pack of men casually circled my two friends and me, in the middle of the crowded street, and we were robbed off our passports, credit cards and left absolutely penniless.

It was a Friday night unfortunately, which meant we had to survive till Monday till the embassies re-opened and which also meant that early morning flight to Santorini had to be given a miss. How we survived that super long weekend, why don't I reserve till my next anecdote, next time! Till then, happy travels!

**By Naaz Fahmida**  
**Photo: Raf Mustafa**

