

TRAVEL

TIME TO GET AWAY

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Short and sweet Roman holiday

BIKE TOUR: See the important sights and avoid getting stuck in city's notorious traffic

 BY NEVILLE JUDD
SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE

You think skydiving is exciting? Try riding a bike through Rome for four hours: With your kids.

"Roman motorists tend to think of pedestrian crossings as just another hurdle to be navigated," said Roberto, our guide. "In other words, don't expect them to stop ... for anything."

Roman motorists probably tend to think of cyclists as 'another hurdle,' which may explain why we saw so few bicycles during the two days we were there. But with less than 48 hours in Rome, a bike tour made sense.

Riding plugs you into a city's arteries and its heartbeat. When those arteries get as clogged as Rome's, two wheels keep you moving and come with a breeze — more than welcome in 35-degree heat.

We mounted cruiser bikes on Via Ostilia, a back street a couple of blocks from the Colosseum. A minute later we were pedalling past the most iconic symbol of the Roman Empire. Over the course of six centuries, half a million people are estimated to have lost their lives fighting in the Colosseum. "Sometimes it would be flooded to stage water battles," Roberto told us.

My mind wandered to Russell Crowe, gladiators, executions and exotic animal hunts.

"Wouldn't it be great if they converted it into a soccer stadium," said my 13-year-old son Ryan.

"Vancouver library looks like that," said my 11-year-old daughter Emma.

Watching the hordes sweat in line-ups to enter the Colosseum only made me happier to push on, following closely behind Roberto as he sailed past tour buses and taxis to Circus Maximus.

Considering it was the greatest arena ever built, once accommodating 330,000 people, Circus Maximus today is an anticlimax. Dog walkers and joggers use the greenery where chariots once thundered. The only evidence of the venue's illustrious past is the spina, a raised median in the middle of what was once the racing track.



Eleven-year-old Emma Judd takes advantage of a rare break in the traffic entering St. Peter's Square during a bicycle tour of Rome and the Vatican. A bicycle tour is an efficient way to tour the city — that is if you're brave enough to face the traffic in Rome. NEVILLE JUDD — SPECIAL TO PNG

"Much of the Rome you see today was built with material looted from Circus Maximus," said Roberto. "They say parts of Circus Maximus are all over the city."

The venue between the Aventine and Palatine hills still serves as a useful meeting place for Romans. More than 700,000 of them gathered here to celebrate Italy's soccer triumph in the 2006 World Cup. And those who weren't there packed Campo dei Fiori, where we cycle a little later.

"It was chaos in here ... anarchy"

said Roberto, recalling the night Italy beat France on penalty kicks.

A few market vendors were quietly selling fish and veg in the piazza, which is fronted by bars and cafés. But it was easy to imagine several thousand soccer fans funneling through narrow surrounding streets and conquering the piazza for a night. And they didn't have to go far to gloat. Just around the corner is Palazzo Farnese, 150 feet of Roman Renaissance splendour and the home of the French embassy.

"There were a few hundred French fans gathered outside," said Roberto. "They left pretty quietly afterwards."

We refilled our water bottles from an antiquated cast-iron water fountain. You'll find a municipal water fountain on almost every street corner in Rome. They all bear the initials SPQR, 'Senatus Populus Que Romanus,' or 'the Senate and the People of Rome.' That's if you can see past the graffiti, which taints almost every public space in Rome. Thankfully graffiti is harder to spot in Piazza Navona, a square so

beautiful as to prompt cyclists to spontaneously dismount.

Emma walked off to watch sketch artists at work while the rest of us sat and gazed at the Fountain of the Four Rivers, Gianlorenzo Bernini's Baroque Roman masterpiece. Four Gods frame the centrepiece of the fountain, the Obelisk of Domitian, which is crowned with a dove. They represent the Nile, Danube, Plate and Ganges, the world's known major rivers in 1651 when Bernini created the landmark.