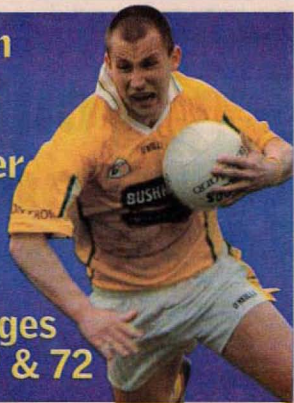


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most breath-taking city

acter.

A visit to the Piazza Navona is a must if you want to truly experience the laid-back attitude of the Italian people, who chat fervently together over coffees and watch the world linger by in this elegant square.

The Colosseum, inside and out is not to be missed and will lead you conveniently toward Rome's ancient city and the ruins of Caesar's palace, the living quarters of the vestal virgins and the Roman Forum.

Close by is the stunning Piazza di Spagna, and the Spanish Steps and then St Peter's Basilica, encapsulated by the vast

and impressive St Peter's Square, which, along with the Sistine Chapel, make up the all important centre-piece for Catholicism - Vatican City.

With its own post office, postage stamps, police service, specially-designated Swiss guard, closely guarded 'border', world-famous art and menacing marble statues to past pontiffs, Vatican City is breath-taking in beauty, and larger than life.

Hundreds of huge pillars frame St Peter's Square, and many tourists use them as a resting place to sit and take a moment or three to catch their breath and ponder on the strong

hold of Catholicism, that, just days before our arrival, had seen thousands gather to mark the passing of the much-loved Pope John Paul II.

Last, but by no means least, however, is the simply magnificent Trevi Fountain which, built in 1732, depicts Neptune, the sea god, riding a winged chariot driven by sea horses through the gushing waters from the Acqua Vergine aqueduct.

The chariot is drawn by winged steeds and is led by a pair of tritons, which represent good health and fertility and the turmoil and the contrasting peace of the sea.

Probably the most famous and beautiful fountain in Rome, it is, in my estimation the most truly magnificent piece of art ever designed.

And a note in case you ever visit the grand fountain, remember to throw a coin into the bright blue waters over your left shoulder, it's tradition and said to ensure your swift return to the city.

I threw in three, just to be sure.

ANCIENT: The Roman Forum, left, which makes up a small part of the vast ruins which remain of ancient Rome



PICTURESQUE: The Park Hotel Villa Grazioli in Frascati

Roman around the world's

Ciara McGuigan visits Rome to be inspired by Catholicism and catch a glimpse of the cities most awe-inspiring remnants of an ancient age

It's hard to say what you'll find most breathtaking about Rome – the arrogant opulence of the Vatican, the majestic elegance of the Trevi fountain, the historical significance of the Colosseum or the price of that frothy latte you sipped over elegantly, in one of the many street-side cafes that offer a well-deserved break for the eager sightseer.

And sightseer you must.

To say that Rome is a beautiful city is a huge understatement, and an insult to the mix of old and new that sit beside each other attractively, across the 150sq km expanse that is the hub of Christianity.

That's not to say however that Rome's modern architects have managed a perfect mix of ancient ruins and stunning skyscrapers – but rather, that the modern planners of this breath-taking city have evidently – and thankfully – been sympathetic to the city's ancient spirit and incorporated many of the early Roman's signature designs into the buildings which today frame the an-

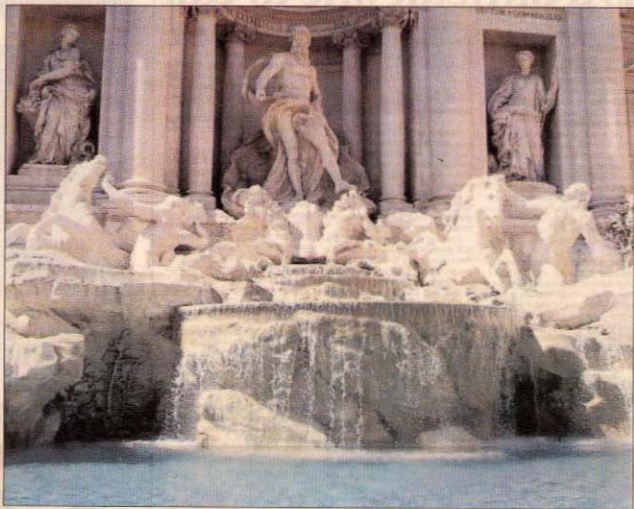
cient remains.

And this is clear, not least of all, in the awe-inspiring Vittoriano, which, built in 1870, fits perfectly into the cityscape, but which is demurely referred to as 'the wedding cake' by many culture-proud Romans.

Travelling to Rome with Easyjet, who are due to commence a direct service to the Italian capital from July 1, we arrived in Ciampino Airport, and were conveniently whisked into the heart of the city, to the Stazione Termini, in just half an hour by one of the numerous buses, laid on by the airlines, for just a few euro.

And, staying at the Rome Cavalieri Hilton, just ten minutes from the city centre, and then at the Park Hotel Villa Graciosa, half an hour out of town, in the town of Frascati, we were able to combine this mix of old and new, delighting in the Cavalieri Hilton's opulent surroundings and luxurious living, before getting a taste of Italy's history and beautiful rural countryside at the 16th century villa that is the Villa Graciosa.

Having eagerly anticipated this trip to Rome, and having been promised great things by all I met who have travelled there in the past, I'm delighted to say that all my expectations were met... and then some.



STUNNING: Rome's most well-known fountain, the Trevi Fountain

Simply summed up, Rome and its surrounding countryside are awe-inspiring, and not just in the clichéd sense of the word.

With the city's grand architecture, bustling cafes, quaint streets and cosmopolitan feel, and the close-by Frascati, with its vast vineyards, crisp clean air, beautifully detailed town centres, and delicious local wines, it was difficult not to wonder why the rest of the world hasn't attempted to copy-cat this close-to-perfect take on life.

Frascati offers a warm welcome and a stay that will leave you with a wholesome feel.

A visit to a local winery and its surrounding vineyards proved to be a step back in time, 700 years back in time to be precise, to the Casale Marchese vineyards which supply gallons of white wine and olive oil to an international market

each year.

Add to this the numerous cafes, restaurants and gelaterias dotted throughout the town of Frascati and you are close to experiencing the true taste of Italy as reward for venturing just half an hour outside the city's beaten-track.

Back to the real world, and we were advised to experience the sights of downtown Rome on foot, armed of course with comfortable footwear.

Extremely good advice, as it turned out, as this really is the only way to make sure you don't miss out any of the city's landmarks, and, as we discovered ensures you take in the numerous drinking fountains, candle-lit shrines to Our Lady, road-side billboards in ode to the recently deceased Pope John Paul and the thousands of zippy smart cars that truly give the city it's unique char-