Travel Essay

Our journey in Rome is between 21th Dec and 28th Dec 2000. It is the end of Jan 2001 now; my memory about Rome is not so fresh. When I look back, the first I could recall is baroque style sculptures. In terms of sculpture, the baroque meant one person -- Bernini. You know what Rome is called "Bernini's Rome"! since there are so many pieces of this unequalled master, scattering in museums, piazzas, churches, and bridges. One of the places that host some of Bernini’s master-piece is the museum of Borghese. We visited Borghese museum the second day we arrived Rome. Believe me, this is a must-see. It is such a hot place that you have to order in advance and every one is allowed to stay in the museum for only 2 hours, one hour for the painting, the other for the sculpture. I suggest you visit the sculptures first, because you always could not finish the first part within one hour, leaving the second part less time. The sculptures are fabulous. The one I love most is Bernini’s Apollo e Dafne, illustrating the moment when Dafne asking his father to turn her into a laurel tree to escape Apollo’s chasing. Another one I appreciate very much is Canova’s famous statue of Napoleon’s sister, who is married with the Borghese family member. It is so vivid that you could see the tiny curves in the women’s back and even feel the pressure of the body imposed on the cushion. There are also some paintings from Raphael, Michelangelo in the Borghese museum.

Vatican museum is, no wonder, a tourist intensive place. I feel that one visit is probably not enough to appreciate the full value of the collections, although I was totally exhausted after half-day visit to the museum. You will know why Rome is also called "Raphael’s Rome " when you visit the magnificent Stanza di Raffael. The young artist paints those apartments at the age of 25. Among the paintings are the grand "The school of Athens", featuring scholars gathered around Aristotle and Plato. I did not strongly perceive Raphael’s genius until I saw the painting of others at the same era, most of which are flat and stiff. Raphael is highly appreciated, maybe partly because he died at his 30s and his creativeness had never been exhausted. We saw his tomb in the Pantheon. Knowing that there are only 3 tombs in the pantheon (the other two are for a king and a pope respectively), you will have an idea on the social status of the young artist. Another big name, which is tightly associated with Vatican museum, is of course, Michelangelo. At the end of the itinerary, we visited Sistine Chapel, which is best known for two of the most famous works of art in the world: Michelangelo’s 800 sq meters ceiling painting -- "Creation", and "Last judgment" on the end wall. I was really touched by the grandeur and creativeness of the paintings. We also visited his tomb some days later, which is located in a church(Basilica Santa Croce) at Florence.
Michelangelo was a supremely talented architect and painter, but he regarded himself as a sculptor above all else. His tomb is decorated with three gods who are in charge of architecture, painting and sculpture, respectively. Next to Michelangelo’s tomb is a cenotaph dedicated to Dante, the laurel poet. This is a very interesting church, whose floor is paved with the tombstones of famous Italians of the past 500 years and monuments to the particularly notable surround the wall. We found Leonard Da Vinci, Galileo and even Femi (a physicist). Those were all Italians!

We visited Vatican City at another day. It was Christmas Eve and there supposed to be a big gathering in San Peter’s piazza. The Pope would give a speech at that night. Since it is the holy year of Christian world, there were many prayers from all over the world to attending this big event. We left the piazza before the crowds popped in. Piazza San Peter is also considered to be one of Bernini’s masterpieces. At the end of the oval piazza is San Peter’s basilica. There are a lot of attractive things, like the beautiful sculpture “Pieta” of Michelangelo’s. I tried to take a picture for the “Pieta”, but turned out to be a failure because of the reflection of the bulletproof glass. One of the unique experiences is climbing the dome of St Peter. First a elevator and then a long and tiring narrow staircase eventually leads to the top of Michelangelo’s 119m high dome and St Peter’s lantern. There we had an unequal view of Rome, especially Vatican City. So, it is well worth the effort.

Rome is also famous for its piazzas and fountains. We visited them on public holidays, because most museums will be closed on holidays. Most of the famous piazzas are scattered within walking distance, so it is not hard to schedule the itinerary. The piazzas are decorated with more or less known fountains, which fuse very well with the surrounding atmosphere and architectures.

Still remember Audrey Hepburn’s “Roman Holiday”? This film should be awarded the “best advertisement for Rome”. We followed most of the processes that a stupid tourist should do: went to Pizza Spania and counted the staircase, put the hands and took a picture at the “true mouth”, threw a coin into the “fountain di trevi” (Happy fountain, sorry for the ugly translation ;-) and even worse, had pictures together with the “Gladiator” in front of the Colosseo. It is really ridiculous. But, anyway, having fun is the most important! I suggest you see the film again well before departure.
Other places, like the pantheon, San Angel’s Castle, Roman Forum, are so famous that it is impossible to miss them.

We lived in some of the friends’ home and it really helped a lot. The food we usually had is pizza and Spaghetti. Italian pizza is much tasteful than Norwegian ones and cheaper. The regretful thing is that we had no time to shopping. Italian shoes and clothes are said to be very good in style and quality.

We spent one day in Florence. Left in the early morning of 26th and returned at night. It took 2 hours by train. Florence is very fascinating. I still remember, in my history book, it says that the Renaissance first sprouted in Florence. Now, I could see it by my own eyes.

The marbled Duomo is the most dominant feature of Florence’s skyline. The Duomo looks very vivid, perhaps by an effect of its pink, white and green marble facade. It is really like the castle in a fairy tale. Just beside the Duomo is the graceful and unusual Giotto Bell Tower.

The day we visited Florence was raining. It was a pity, but it didn’t prevent us from appreciating the enormous treasures kept in various galleries. There were long queues in front of many of the galleries. The longest one is at Uffizi gallery. The Uffizi gallery in Florence houses the world’s greatest collection of Florentine art, mostly are paintings. Some of the paintings I like most are:

Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus” and “Joy of Spring”. They are very classic, beautiful and enigmatic. I bought dozens of postcards at the gallery. You will also find the big names there. A pity is that we missed Michelangelo’s “David”, which is located at Academic gallery, due to the tight time schedule. A picture was taken for a copy standing in front of Uffizi gallery. We also had a picture at the “Old Bridge”, where Dante met his lover.

We left Rome in the afternoon of 28th. I spent my last few Liras at the airport, buying two extremely expensive chocolates. Coming up would be Paris.

Bye Rome, Bye Italy, and see you later…
Some suggestions:

1) A travel guide is of great help. It helps you to understand where are the places, the sights, that make the destination special. I strongly recommend the series published by Lonely planet. Italy is definitely a country worthy of the money.

2) Some basic art and architecture knowledge, especially during the renaissance, and baroque period, may help you a lot in gaining some insights of the masterpiece.

3) Always bear this in mind: Rome is also the religious center of Christian world. So it is no wonder why enormous paintings and sculptures took bible story as the content. It is recommended that you know some basic facts about the bible story.

4) An umbrella is useful if you travel in winter, since Italy is a typical winter rain country.