
Girton Travel Award Report

Following Paul's Missionary Journeys

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Following Paul's Missionary Journeys

Thanks to the generous contribution of the Girton Travel Award, I was able to spend a week in Rome experiencing the local culture, visiting historic and religious sights and learning more about Paul's missionary influence in Rome.

Day 1 - Central Rome & The Pantheon

Along with a course-mate, I began my journey to Rome on the 1st July. Having awoken before the sun had made its appearance, we boarded the plane with bleary eyes and full of (somewhat sleepy) excitement about what we would discover during our week. We arrived at Rome Ciampino airport and quickly became accustomed to the Italian public transport and the midday heat as we made our way into the city centre by bus and tram to find our apartment nestled within a street of colourful flats and tiny Italian cars. Once we had settled into our apartment and visited the local supermarket to stock up on groceries for the week, we set out to find much-needed local coffee and to explore the centre of Rome. Following the bustling, windy streets, we turned a corner into the Piazza della Rotondo and were taken aback by the sight of the enormous Pantheon which dominated the square. We explored this once-pagan-temple (more recently converted to a church) along with a number of other beautiful ancient churches until our feet were pleasantly sore. Over our first taste of true Italian pasta, we sat down to plan how we could best spend the next 6 days and realised how much there was to do and see! Once a plan had been made, we returned to apartment to appreciate our air-conditioning and get a good night's sleep ready for the next day for the first of our Paul-adventures.



Day 2 - The Vatican City

Our day trip to the Vatican City was one never to be forgotten. Having woken early in attempt to beat the heat of the day and to meet our guide, we arrived outside the towering walls of the Vatican and collected our tickets. Thankfully skipping the huge

queues stretching the length of the walls, we entered the city with ease and were immediately overwhelmed by the beauty. The gardens were perfectly kept with white stone of the various buildings towering around on each side. We spent the majority of the morning wandering the Museums which were full of fascinating artefacts and both Greek and Latin carvings and texts (with which we were able to practise our Greek and felt satisfied that two years of class had paid off!), as well as some incredibly beautiful paintings and icons. My personal favourite was the room with a huge tapestry of various Biblical stories and an incredibly rich and striking painting of Jesus' transfiguration (photographed below). After making the most of these galleries, we embarked on the long and crowded journey into the sistine chapel, following a trail of hundreds of other expectant tourists. Thankfully, the corridors that led to the famous chapel were embellished with the most incredible painted walls and ceilings to admire along the way. We were only briefly able to enjoy the beauty of the sistine chapel since we were shepherded through to avoid congestion due to the numbers of tourists, but were glad to get out for some fresh air. Here, we could enjoy a broader view of the city, admiring its white stone and pillars, and sitting for some lunch before entering St. Peter's Basilica. This was an incredible experience as the magnitude of the building was overwhelming. It was huge and ornate, and provoked a lot of thought between the two of us as we compared the church to those we have experienced previously, particularly in the largely protestant UK church. This was by far the largest building I have ever entered and the beauty of the Vatican is such that I will not quickly forget! We ventured shortly back to our apartment for a rest and cooked a meal before bed, feeling thoroughly tired and cultured.



Day 3 - St Paul's Basilica

After a long sleep and a fresh breakfast, we travelled by bus to St Paul's Basilica, intrigued as to what it would be like considering the size and standard of St Peter's the previous day. Upon arriving, we were shocked that there were hardly any people around! We seemed to be among about ten people wanting to explore the church, which was incredible compared to the crowds of the Vatican. This site, considerably more humble than St Peter's (to our surprise after our academic study of Paul's letters and his contribution to Christian theology and scripture), was in no way less beautiful. Though less embellished and ornate, the colourful marble and towering pillars were stunningly beautiful in the morning sun. We spent a long time out here enjoying the peaceful atmosphere before venturing inside the church. Again, while the interior was far less impressive than St Peter's in terms of magnitude, we both agreed that we found the simplicity and the design of this church far more appealing to us (though we were perhaps biased due to our enjoyment of our study of the Saint this year). We were able to view the relics of the Saint, exposed beneath an altar, and a series of inscriptions, statues and carvings depicting the life and mission of Paul.



Feeling enlightened and inspired by the significance of Paul's life and mission, we thought it only right to celebrate with ice-creams in a local Gelateria. We spent some time exploring this district of the city, a little out from the usual bustle of tourists, before heading back for a rest as the temperature rose. We researched the best dinner option, dressed up and ventured out for an delicious and authentic pizza in a restaurant hidden down a side street of the city centre and re-visiting some of the famous scenes such as the Trevi fountain which was lit up by night - a perfect way to end another great day!

Day 4 - The Forum, Colosseum, Mamertine Prison & San Clemente

A slightly slower start to the morning allowed us to enjoy strong Italian coffee served from a kiosk in our local park, before taking the tram into town to explore the ancient ruins of the forum. Here, we explored stretches of ancient ruins and to envisage how Rome was at the time that Paul was writing and travelling. The Colosseum, despite having seen endless photos, did not disappoint and was far larger than I'd ever imagined! We were very impressed and took another Gelato break. Re-fuelled, we next visited the Mamertine Prison where it is commonly believed that Peter and Paul spent their last days

before their executions, as marked by two chapels built one on top of the other, over the cell where they were kept. Along with many interesting artefacts, we were particularly struck by the beautiful carving which depicted the missionaries baptising prisoners while in their chains. We followed the windy stairs into the preserved cell and felt incredibly privileged to be standing where the Saints were held captive. This was a really amazing moment for us both and never to be forgotten. After some lunch, we visited the incredibly beautiful Basilica di San Clemente, not far from the Colosseum. This visit was by far the highlight of the trip. The church is made up of three "layers": the present building founded during the Medieval period, a fourth century church underneath, and underneath that an old Roman mansion, used as a house church in the 1st Century. It was incredible to imagine the first Christian meetings occurring in that very location. We also spent some time here admiring the beautiful mosaic, entitled "The Tree of Life" which was positioned above the altar on the top level of the church.



Day 5 - Savouring the Italian sun (& shops!)

After a busy few days, we spent our last full day soaking up the sun, buying gifts for home (and a few for ourselves), enjoying the city bustle and savouring our final tastes of Italian ice-cream. Travelling back, we spent hours reminiscing over our favourite moments and sights of the week, certain that we'd be back one day. Such beautiful and profound experiences of the ancient sites and awesome holy buildings, along with the broader experience of the city, enabled me to engage on a much deeper level with the Roman culture with which Paul, primarily, was contending as he wrote his Epistles at the start of the Christian movement. This essential context will no doubt be valuable to me in my academic study as well as on a personal level and I am very grateful.