



ETERNAL SUNSHINE

How to spend the perfect autumn day in Rome? Simple, when you have the 'Nota Bene' team as your guide

The Romans have a special word for an October excursion: *strabata*. For the locals, the word conjures up bucolic wine-quaffing expeditions to the Castelli Romani, east of the city. But the Eternal City itself is perfect for an *ombiate*, especially if you're flying in from the cold north. We love Rome in the early autumn: it offers the perfect balance of great weather (think England in August, without the rain) and cultural buzz (the gallery and club scene is dead in summer, and takes a while to get up to speed in September).

And while Roman hotels leave a great deal to be desired, there are exceptions – although there is no single must-book option like the Four Seasons in Milan. For us, the one that comes closest is the Hotel de



Russie. Re-opened in 2000, this contemporary classic Rocco Forte property still has the design and service edge over its five-star competitors.

The good things about the de Russie? First, its position, at the piazza del Popolo end of via del Babuino. Second, the delightful courtyard and terraced gardens. Third, the ethno-moderne design of the communal spaces, which has worn surprisingly well. And fourth, the service – still pretty good despite the departure of Rome's best

concierge, Antonio Barbieri. There are only two real downsides to the de Russie. The first is that it is overpriced. The second is that bedrooms can be disappointing, and you need to be very careful which one you get – not always easy, as this is one of those hotels that hates

clients specifying rooms by number. Too bad: our tips are junior suites 337, 437, 537 and 621, with deluxe double \$29 as a cheaper (and less roomy) option. Avoid corner executive suites – bedrooms are too cramped, in our view, to justify the €1,500-and-counting price tag.

For us, there are two real alternatives to the de Russie. One is the Residence Napoleone III, a suite of three sumptuous, antique-strewn rooms in Palazzo Ruspoli. The other option is a far more modest beast – the 12-room designer B&B Casa Howard. It's divided between two apartments, both within easy walking distance of the Spanish Steps; only the name on the bell announces their presence, so be sure to memorise the street number. Of the two, we prefer the via Sistina branch.

Settled in, it's on to the perfect October day in Rome. Begin with cappuccino and home-made cornetti (sweet croissants) at Rosati in Piazza del Popolo, where Calvino and Pasolini used to hang out. The bar is a popular *aperitivo* stop, but we love the in-the-know, locals-only breakfast vibe.

After taking in the Caravaggios in Santa Maria del Popolo across the square (Rome is not the world's best museum city, but it has some great in-situ art), we might wander through the Borghese gardens to Villa Borghese – just to take one more look at Bernini's sublime sculpture of Apollo and Daphne. If it's warm enough to eat outside, lunch would have to be at San Teodoro – a delightful seafood-oriented trattoria in a tiny residential enclave around the back of the Forum.

The afternoon would be dedicated to shopping and browsing – not only in label-lined Via Condotti, but also in the smaller streets that head north from here, where a quirkier fashion mix can be found. We especially like Via del Babuino. At 155, is the TAD "concept store", a tri-level lifestyle emporium that is the Roman equivalent of Colette in Paris.

If you're looking for a Martini with a view, head up the Spanish Steps and home in on the Hotel Eden. We think its rooftop La Terrazza restaurant is overrated, but the adjacent bar really is quite special around sun-

set, when the rooftops of the Eternal City lie russet-tinted at one's feet. But where to go for dinner?

The perfect meal to end a perfect day would probably be at Agata e Romeo – or, if we were feeling a little more bohemian, at Uno e Bino. Then off to Salotto 42 for a nightcap. This new "book bar" has a cultured, laid-back atmosphere. And the eponymous hoose cocktail – sake and grape juice, mostly – sets you up nicely for the short walk back to the de Russie. ☺

Hotel de Russie, via del Babuino 9, www.rfhotels.com; Residence Napoleone III, largo Goldoni 56, www.prestigiousrome.com; Casa Howard, via Capo le Case 18 & via Sistina 149, www.casahoward.com; Hotel Eden, via Ludovico 49, www.hotel-eden.it; Uno e Bino, via degli Equi 58, tel: 06 39 06 4460 702; Agata e Romeo, via Carlo Alberto 45, tel: 06 39 06 4466 115; Salotto 42, Piazza di Pietra 42, tel: 06 39 06 678 5804. 'Nota Bene', the world's most discerning travel review is available by subscription. Visit www.notebene.com

It may not have been built in a day, but Rome is the perfect destination for an autumn break.

October city escapes

Barcelona
With its bars, beaches and beautiful people, Barcelona is the destination for all seasons but the autumn is a particularly pleasant time to stroll down Las Ramblas, wander through the Gothic Quarter or gaze at the Gaudis.

Paris
Yes, yes, yes, we love Paris in the springtime too. But it's quieter in the autumn which means it's easier to get a table at the finest restaurants, ample room at the Louvre and the Pompidou and more of an air of locals quietly going about their daily business. Allez.

Athens
October is the ideal time for sightseeing – the island hoppers have gone home and you won't have to fight your way through crowds of tourists to get to the Acropolis. By October, the weather has also started cooling down so the city is less polluted.