

WHEN Audrey Hepburn anoints a place the best, you simply follow the script. Which is how, on my own Roman holiday, I ended up at her favourite hotel in the Eternal City.

The legendary, century-old Hassler Roma is perched prettily in the cobblestone piazza atop the Spanish Steps, just beside the Renaissance church of Trinità dei Monti.

Guarded by doormen in cream-hued livery like toy soldiers, the hotel played host to Hepburn again and again, drawing her in with its independent spirit – it remains one of the few historic, family-owned five-star hotels in the Caput Mundi – and the privacy of the cocooning presidential suite San Pietro, which she first fell for in

Roman Holiday at Hepburn's hideaway

Awash in vintage stardust, Hotel Hassler Roma is a timeless escape, long adored by Hollywood royalty



the 1950s, while filming Roman Holiday.

While my room is just next door, I'm given a tour of her suite, awash in vintage stardust and resplendent in warm, golden-brown rosewood, the colour of panettone and sourced from Germany's Black Forest. It was on the very terrace of this suite – with impossible rooftop views across the city – that Hepburn was famously photographed, telegram in hand, announcing her Best Actress award for *The Nun's Story* in 1960.

While Hepburn is perhaps the most iconic of the hotel's alumni, she is far from the only star to leave an imprint. Chanel's long-time creative director Karl Lagerfeld favoured the presidential suite Trinità dei Monti, the hotel's bold black-and-white suite, with lacquered contrasts that echoed the crisp monotone geometry of his personal wardrobe. Meanwhile Tom Cruise, ever the high-altitude aficionado, prefers the penthouse Villa Medici Suite, a glass-wrapped aerie with a 150sqm panoramic terrace suspended above the city. Still, I'm with Hepburn on this one – her suite is my favourite too.

Another icon whose judgment I'd happily follow is Princess Diana. She reportedly declared that the Hassler made the best Bellinis in Rome. While she

BY
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Suite treats:
Audrey Hepburn
and, above, her
favourite room
at Hotel Hassler
Roma



sipped them in the hotel's intimate Carmen's Bar, I try the classic cocktail over the hotel's sprawling breakfast buffet, pairing it with a high-octane espresso and decadent Roman breakfast staple, the maritozzo – a soft, lightly sweet bun split filled generously with light-as-clouds whipped cream. Who wouldn't fall in love with this city after a breakfast like that?

In case it wasn't already apparent, the hotel also excels on the food front. Dinner at the Michelin-starred Imago feels like stepping into a snow globe, with panoramic windows framing the domes and spires of Rome's basilicas and monuments. Each course is an act of theatre. Then there's the wine list, 1,500 labels strong, curated with earnest enthusiasm that persuades anyone to fall in love with Italian wine – not that it's difficult.

However, it's executive chef Marcello Romano's amatriciana, served in the deli-

ciously opulent Barolo-hued Salone Eva, that I can't stop thinking about.

Enhanced here with a fiery undertone of red peppers for a little swagger and guanciale shredded paper-thin and fried until it reaches a caramelised crispness, it's hands down the best in the city. Classic comfort food reimagined with just a pinch of pomp and pizzazz. If you dine at night, the dish arrives with a side of live music played on a grand piano, which only deepens the sense of old-fashioned splendour. After a few negronis, you might forget what century you're in.

Now run by the sixth generation of the Wirth family, the Hassler is poised for the future. A new spa – two floors below ground, complete with a pool – is slated to open this summer, alongside refurbishments to the Palm Court Garden, the hotel's elegant secret garden. Already open is the new seventh-floor Terrazza Panoramica for light meals and sunset aperitivi.

Despite what the future may bring to the hotel, I'm assured its soul won't change. The Hassler is eternal – much like Rome itself.

TRAVEL FACTS

Fly Irish airports to Rome from €40 return, *ryanair.com*. Rooms at Hotel Hassler Roma from €1,300, *hotelhasslerroma.com*.



ARRIVING in Paris in mid-winter before the Christmas rush is one of the least hectic times to visit the City of Lights, but it is always busy and crowded in Paris.

Statistically speaking, it's the most densely populated city in Europe. 'And in the world,' one Paris denizen told me wearily on an overcrowded evening bus that was advancing sporadically along the Rue Rivoli. Outside our slow-moving vehicle, multitudes of coloured lights twinkled from the Jardins des Tuileries.

When it comes to transport, there's one strange change to Paris's policy that you need to be aware of – they've decided that you should have one pass for trams and buses and another pass for the metro and suburban train lines.

It's counter-logical and therefore not very French, but you need to be up to speed with this fact

before you download the IDF Mobilités app that opens the portal to its otherwise brilliant transport system.

In recent years, the TikTok brigade have been racing in the footsteps of various American stars of screens big and small to find the magic of Paris but you're far more likely to find a bit of bliss by following the example of locals.

Always a good place to start and one that has still not been ruined by people clamouring to it in vast numbers is the atmospheric – and thoroughly Parisian – Rue Cler. Located in the 7th arrondissement, its nonchalant charm works its magic on any day of the week.

However, avoid Mondays, when many of the shops are shut, and try for Saturday morning, when the market is in full swing.

From here, it's only a five-minute walk to Parisians' favourite picnic spot, the Champ de Mars, the long public garden behind the Eiffel Tower. If the weather is dry, it's ideal for picking up your picnic and making an outdoor meal of it in the shadow of the magnifique Tour Eiffel.

Paris is an artistic capital of some note and its artistic heritage stems from the turn of the century – the era known as the Belle Époque and a time when the eyes of

the world were firmly on the French capital. If you want to get a deep sense of that spirit, there are currently two exhibitions guaranteed to leave you spellbound.

The first is at the superb Musée d'Orsay, called Paris Éblouissant (Dazzling Paris). It's a very rare opportunity to see an exhibition of John Singer Sargent paintings that have crossed the Atlantic from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The collection covers the length of the great impressionist's illustrious career – from his beginnings in Italy and being recognised by his American tutor as a rare talent, through to his acceptance into the Paris Salon at the age of just 19, through his meteoric rise as a portraitist in high demand, and to his latter career when he eschewed the fame and fortune to get back to what he loved best.

The portrait for which he is most famous – and which caused outrage and infamy at the time – is *Madame X*.

Looking at it today, it's not easy to see why it aroused such negative reaction, but that probably just goes to show how restrictive even Parisian society

was at the time in terms of artistic expression.

The exhibition not only gets you up close and personal with one of the great artists from the period, it also gives you an insight into the social and cultural history of the time.

The good thing about the Musée d'Orsay is that even if you don't make that exhibition, this former railway station is probably the world's greatest repository of art from the turn-of-the-century era that really put Paris on the global artistic map.

Up on the top floor is where you'll find the stunning display of all the Impressionist superstars. Striding from room to room, there's instantly recognisable works by the likes of Manet, Monet and Van Gogh.

On the second floor, meanwhile, there's a wonderful art déco exhibition, featuring beautifully mocked-up rooms and offices resplendent in the designs of the day.

That will whet your appetite nicely for 1925-2025 Cent Ans d'Art Déco at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. Housed in the Louvre building complex with an entrance from Rue Rivoli, it's a museum dedicated to the decorative

