SAM’S ADVENTURES

ROME
TANZANIA
LAKE EYRE
n the brilliant January dawn of the northern winter, a group of 20 students and interested participants arrived in the eternal city to undertake the 2009 Classical Rome Summer School. This course — run by the Department of Classics and Ancient History — examines the physical fabric of the ancient city: its topography, art, architecture, history, and their later reception and use in the middle ages, Renaissance and early modern periods. Over 18 days and nights, participants live in Rome, visit archaeological sites (many of them still in the process of excavation), examine monuments, and experience some of the most extensive and exquisite museum collections in the world. In the evenings, a series of lectures offer historical and cultural context for the development and meaning of the city and its monuments. An extension tour gives the option of four further days exploring the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum, as well as Naples and the Coast of Campania. For the duration of the course in Rome, participants stayed in Trastevere, a neighbourhood south of the Tiber whose prominence in the medieval period is still attested by its evocative cobblestone streets, narrow alleys, and basilicas spanning the fifth to ninth centuries. Trastevere is also (very importantly) the location of a number of excellent restaurants and cafes — it is a favourite destination for Romans at night and on weekends — and an easy walk to the historical and archaeological centre of the city. In the Classical Rome Summer School, participants map the development of the city’s urban space against the backdrop of a number of historical, social, and political contexts. Two enduring factors were the exponentially increasing wealth that Rome’s empire brought into the city, and the ongoing competitive self-representation of aristocratic politics. As the influx of wealth from the Mediterranean empire reached its apogee in the first centuries BC and AD, the previously ad hoc development of the republican city gave way to its most famous and influential public spaces: the Forum Romanum, the imperial Fora, the many privately sponsored porticoes, and structures built to house spectacles, such as theatres, circuses and amphitheatres. Individuals, such as the emperor or a prominent politician, often sponsored public monuments, ensuring their name, resources, and reputations were permanently
To the day, the Pantheon bears witness to the wealth and power of Marcus Agrippa, who commissioned and gifted to the people the original Pantheon from his own funds (and on his private property), as part of a scheme of buildings celebrating the emperor Augustus (31 BC-14 AD). A theme, which emerged quickly in our stay, was Rome as a palimpsest — a city continually and creatively in dialogue with its own past, a community overlaying and reinventing its own urban space with the concerns of new periods and cultural influences. This ongoing use can be seen in the Borsa, the Roman stock exchange, whose northern façade still preserves a second century AD temple to the deified emperor Hadrian (ruled 117-138 AD). On a smaller scale, the streetscapes and urban spaces determined by ancient buildings, such as the Stadium of Domitian (built in the 90s AD and giving the Piazza Navona its distinctive shape), and the Theatre of Pompey (built in the 50s BC and still visibly influencing the streets west of the Campo dei Fiori). Similarly, bicycles propped against the Pantheon and concerts held in the Colosseum continually remind us of the remarkable privilege of modern Romans, whose daily life is adorned by these breathtaking and fundamentally important buildings.

A perfect example of this complex and continuing dialogue was found on the site of the Basilica of San Clemente near the Colosseum. On this site, a Roman house from the republican period was built over by an apartment block and a larger house in the first century AD; in the third and fourth centuries, a Christian church harmoniously co-existed on the site with a temple to the pagan god Mithras; by the late fourth century, the site had become a basilica; the current basilica, replete with medieval mosaics, was converted into its present form in the 12th century. The site has thus been in continual use for more than two millennia, and all of its phases are accessible to the visitor who descends a sequence of stairs beneath the church through the levels of its excavations. At its lowest level, some 12 metres below the modern street level, the sound of continually gushing water from the Roman-built cloaca (drain) — still operating as it has done for thousands of years — echoes throughout the site.

Excursions outside Rome include visits to Ostia Antica, the ancient harbour of Rome, whose apartment blocks, taverns, and necropolis provide valuable evidence of the everyday life of ordinary citizens: a world so often obscured by the grandiose monuments of aristocrats and emperors. Students also visit the republican sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia in Palestrina, some 30 kilometres east of Rome. This cult centre represents a colossal tour de force of Hellenistic and Roman architectural styles. It ascends a hillside in a bravura use of brick-faced concrete (then a cutting edge material) over seven separate levels to the shrine at the peak.

In the second half of the course, the influence of Roman art and architectural forms is traced throughout the churches of the Medieval and Renaissance periods. Churches such as Saint John Lateran (once the private property of the Roman family the Laterani), St Peter’s, and Santa Maria Maggiore all draw on their pagan and secular predecessors, and reconfigure expressions of power to leverage the position of the papacy within the city at varying points in its history.

The final day is wholly devoted to a walking tour of the baroque city; it is enough merely to scratch the surface of this infinitely rich period of Rome’s history, and provides an introduction to the profound achievement of Borromini (1599-1667) and Bernini (1598-1680). The importance of baroque hydraulics is reflected in the city’s many fountains and in the development, in the 17th century, of areas such as the Campus Martius and the Quirinal Hill in the north east of the city. We finished this last day — and the course — in the Borghese gallery, admiring [among its many other treasures] its four Bernini sculptures, Apollo and Daphne (1622/3); Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius (1619); Proserpina (1621-2); David (1623-4).

Roma. Non basta una vita (“a lifetime is not enough”). And yet, the Classical Rome Summer School offers its participants an ideal and intensive orientation to the classical city, its culture, and its legacy.

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Traveling with a true purpose – beyond just getting there and lying in the sun, that is – could be a sign of maturity, or chronic fidgets. Either way, it’s a condition that lends itself to exploring the specialist travel options offered by the University’s CCE [Centre for Continuing Education]. The choices border on the bewildering but most of us have a secret passion or freely admitted penchant for something: uncovering Etruscan – ceramics, snapping a rare Hartlaub’s Turaco, nibbling pomegranates in Isfahan: who doesn’t itch for the unknown and untried?

Coming up in the next 18 months: art and archaeology in Spain with Chris Carter: Moros y Cristianos, anyone? Or Syria and Jordan in October 2010 with Dr John Tidmarsh? On the other hand, as someone brought up in the Kenyan bush, it’s hard to go past Robin Nichols’ photographic safari in March 2010. Few could fail to be awed by the landscapes, histories and wildlife of the African continent. The diversity – north to south, east to west – is incomparable and there is a strong temptation to try to do too much. An itinerary that leaps from country to country, culture to climate may look good on paper but unless there is time to spare – six months, say – to properly experience the contrasts, the grasshopper tourist risks coming home with a memory stick full of images of... um, well, was that blur Botswana or a lion or an anthill?

Nichols is well known to CCE students of his digital photography classes and photographic weekends. So an expert guided tour of some of the less trammelled but more magnificent parts of eastern Africa is a heady prospect. The trip begins in Nairobi at the Karen Blixen Museum and the Giraffe Centre. Blixen’s *Out of Africa* is the classic real life romances of colonial Kenya (she “hed a farm vunce in Ahfrikah”) and her house is White settler life in microcosm.

The Giraffe Centre is a major conservation enterprise, dedicated to the rare Rothschild Giraffe, which may or may not be a separate species from Reticulated and Masai giraffe (jury out at the moment) but is distinctively different: creamy pelt with warm golden-brown markings.

Next stop is Amboseli, at the foot of Mt Kilimanjaro. It is not as over-run with tour buses as the Masai Mara and is a photographic gift with the mountain, hundreds of species of birds and all the most sought after big game to pose picturesquely at dawn and sunset.

Across the border into Tanzania is Lake Manyara National Park where the black-maned lions prove that big cats do climb trees. Nearby Kirurumu Lodge is where photos are critiqued via laptop each evening between admiring the endless views across the river gorge, or enjoying the safari life in a luxurious walk-in tent with all mod-cons (Karen Blixen never had it so good).

Two of the destinations of a lifetime, no matter how many have been there before, are the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater. You might think you know about them courtesy David Attenborough, but nothing can prepare you for the real thing.

Take time to pay attention to the less fashionable inhabitants of these parts: Wildebeest with their goofy long noses and amazing desire to walk hundreds of kilometres back and forth on annual migration; various antelope that may look alike at first glance but are all different and exquisite. And, of course, the most remarkable design jobs of all: the Zebra. They are as opinionated and playful as most mid-size horses and the black and white stripes of each are unique.

Had enough of wildlife and wilderness shots? The final destination is Zanzibar. The name itself evokes romance and mystery and the island, although well and truly discovered by western tourism thanks to Sting and Bryan Ferry, doesn’t disappoint. It has been successively colonised over the centuries: Omani Arabs, the Portuguese and finally the British all used it as a garrison and base for their trade in slaves and ivory from the mainland and the island-grown crop: sweet-scented cloves that never quite overcame the stink of misery and blood.

The island’s older buildings, including the Sultan’s palace and the cathedral with its remnant artefacts from its time as the centre of slavery, lend themselves to photography, as do the relics of another culture. From the 1970s the island was blessed with “aid” from communist bloc countries and dreadful but strangely photogenic crumbling buildings are the souvenirs.

The Red Colobus monkey is also worth tracking down for its beauty and rarity; a long lens and patience may be rewarded; these two accessories are possibly the most useful to take on any African trip.

To register your interest and receive information as available, call (02) 90364790 or email cce@usyd.edu.au.
Earlier this year, there were excited media reports of the flooding of Lake Eyre and the subsequent arrival of countless birds using some kind of avian telepathy to know that conditions were right for nesting. Companies running outback tours were quick to respond (neatly capitalising on the GFC-assisted trend towards travel within Australia): “See Lake Eyre in flood – once-in-a-lifetime experience” was the tenor of the ads in travel sections of newspapers, with offerings ranging from one-day charter flights to longer tours with land trips to the Lake and visits to other remote regions. It was the second of these two options that attracted a friend and myself and we signed up for a five-night light plane trip visiting Mildura (Victoria), Marree (the jumping-off point for land trips to the Lake) and Innamincka in South Australia, Birdsville and Bedourie (Queensland), and Bourke (NSW). The first disappointment came before we took off from Bankstown Airport: we would be unable to land at Lake Mungo, because of a sodden landing strip. We did however fly low over the dry lake so we could see the celebrated Walls of China at close range. Our group of 16 was divided between two small planes, Piper Navajos with a seat layout allowing everyone a window. We took it in turns to sit up front with the pilot, an experience which – as well as affording a great view – was inspiring for the complexity of the pilot’s take-off and landing routines, and flying skills. We dined – superbly – on our first night at Stefano da Pieri’s in Mildura, a culinary peak from which there could only be decline as we progressed into steak-and-chips country. From Mildura we crossed the attenuated oval-shaped Lake Frome, its white salt bed punctuated by areas of pinkish sand and blue ribbons of water from recent heavy rains. An island of scruffy green vegetation presented a startling contrast. It was a tantalising foretaste of the larger salt lake to come. It was also our first experience of what proved to be the highlight of this trip, namely, seeing the landscape from a small plane at low altitudes, in contrast to the distant view from a jet at tens of thousands of feet. It’s a privilege that few have enjoyed, and blows away the idea that outback Australia is one big undifferentiated desert, unchanging and boring. Once past Lake Frome we flew across the northern end of the Flinders Ranges, with their ranks of brown-red peaks stretching into seeming infinity. On to Marree, a town once a major stop on the Ghan and now primarily a centre for passing travellers, ranging from airborne blow-ins like us to grey nomads in massive Winnebagos. Life in Marree centres on the gracious old two-storey pub, enlarged to meet recent demand with a dozen or so demountables transformed into motel units. Locals – an apparently even mix of whites and Aboriginals – stage a nightly guitar sing-along under its overhanging veranda. And so to the focus of the trip: Lake Eyre. It should be noted that the 2009 flood peaked at a mere 1.5m in late May, only a quarter of the maximum recorded depth of 6m. Floods of the latter dimension have occurred, on average, a couple of times in a century, so it could be said that some tour operators were rather overstating their case. Moreover, by the time we were bussed out there, in early June, the lake was evaporating fast, much to the disappointment of many in our group, who had expected a vast expanse of swimming-pool-blue water. (The Lake Eyre Yacht Club – yes, seriously! – website reports that the smaller South Lake was completely dry by 18 June.) To reach any water meant crunching across 20 or 30 metres of dried salt. It seemed like vandalism to leave footprints in the exquisite, glistening pink and white crystals. There was a marked lack of birds, apart from a few forlorn gulls that looked as though they’d rather be at Bondi. A recent 7.30 Report item showing huge flocks of nesting birds had fuelled visitors’ expectations, but the birds favoured the upper reaches of the vast Lake Eyre Basin, north of Birdsville, where large lakes had appeared in January as a result of monsoonal rain. This was confirmed later when we saw thousands of...
of pelicans nesting at Lake Machattie – a stunning sight from the air.

Bedourie’s ‘Simpson Desert Oasis’ sounded alluring: but the reality was a few motel rooms supplemented by demountables with a moulded shower recess and a minuscule, theft-defying TV on a wall bracket so high that watching was like looking through the wrong end of a telescope; and a large communal bar/dining room serving immense slabs of steak and mountains of chips to resident road workers. You knew you were in the outback at Bedourie …

Because of the distance we covered the trip involved a lot of sitting: on tour buses, on riverboats in Mildura and Bourke, and of course on planes. More opportunities for walking would have been welcome (not for everyone). And refuelling stops, though vital, took time. However, a second landing in Birdsville was an opportunity to have another cup of the best coffee of the trip, at the Birdsville Pub. Birdsville also features the terrific Working Museum, a staggering collection of memorabilia ranging from antique radios and bowser to 19th century water pumps and a classic corner shop, fully stocked with nostalgia-inducing contents for anyone over a certain age. Reckitt’s Blue or Dr McKenzie’s

Menthoids, anyone?

While our experience was confined to one tour company, from talking to other travellers it seems that thoughtful planning and customer service may have taken a back seat in the effort to wring maximum profit out of our Lake experience. Better current information in advance would have helped lower unrealistic expectations, and there were some avoidable organisational glitches, like unbooked accommodation. Anyone simply wanting to see Lake Eyre might have done as well to take a day trip by light plane or helicopter, and earlier in the “flood” period.

But on the longer trip, the compensations were many: the swollen Coopers Creek and Diamantina River – two of the main feeders of Lake Eyre – with ribbons of green after the long dry snaking along delta-like tentacles; the endless red sand ridges of the Simpson and Strzelecki Deserts; and the bleak beauty of the Sturt Stony Desert.

As mesmerising landscapes unfolded, it was impossible to tear your eyes away from the constantly changing colours, deep red to pale pink to warm brown; the stark white salt pans, the grey-green and khaki of the dotted vegetation, and the delicate patterns made by plants, wind, water and erosion. The ultimate effect, like a series of brilliant, gently overlapping Aboriginal paintings, will remain imprinted on my mind for a long time.

Additional info

Our baggage allowance was 9kg, packed in a soft bag to easily fit into the planes’ holds, which were in the wings. My luggage weighed 8kg and comprised two pairs of slacks (one on, one off), socks and underwear [minimal, could be washed en route], a warm sweater, one drip-dry shirt, three long-sleeved T-shirts, a reversible quilted jacket (worn constantly), boots and walking shoes [one of these would have been enough], pyjamas and minimal toiletries. It was very cold at night, but it was possible to keep warm by layering some of these components. I wore everything I took except a pair of gym leggings, included with a view to exercising every day. Ha ha. Before we left everyone had to be weighed with their luggage, and we suspected that a couple of obese passengers rather skewed the situation for the rest of us: several people had to exchange their bags for lighter ones provided by the airline, or even remove some contents. Personally, I was glad the airline was strict about the correct total weight.

Travelling can be unpredictable.
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