



THE

CITY

BENE

A journey into the **vast subterranean world preserved under Rome**—from ancient aqueducts and apartment buildings to pagan shrines

by **TONY PERROTTET**

photographs by
PAOLO VERZONE

The Vicus Caprarius (City of Water), an ancient apartment complex, was discovered in 1999-2001 while renovating a cinema near the Trevi Fountain.

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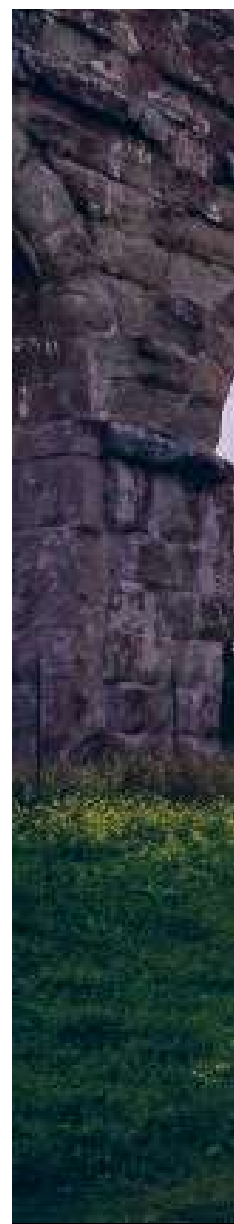
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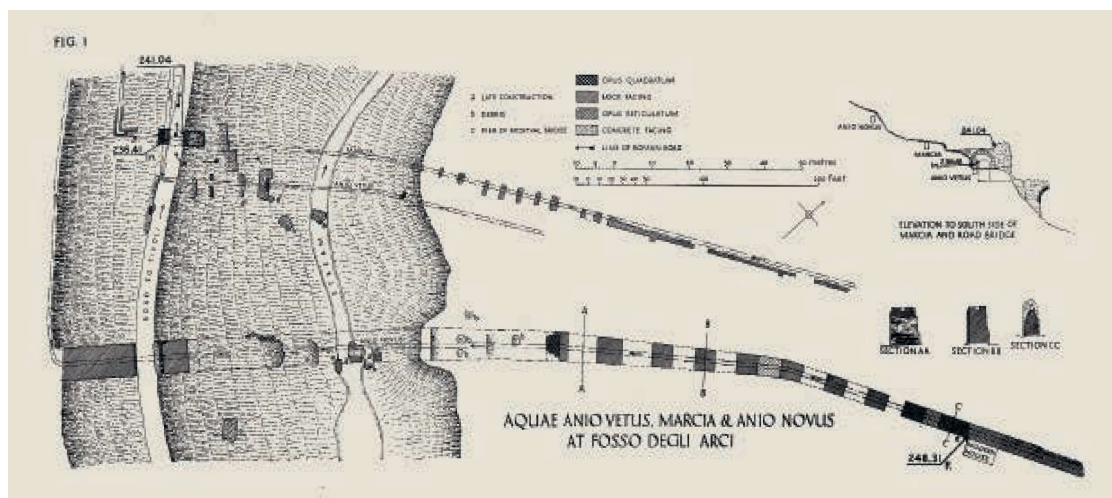
PAOLO VERZONE / AGENCE VU

“Watch out for that bat behind you.”

warned Luca Messina, a civil engineer who moonlights as a speleo-archaeologist with Sotterranei di Roma, Roman Undergrounds, a local group whose members **explore the darkest recesses of the Eternal City**. I ducked as the winged mammal swooped past my ear, then flitted beyond the beam of my headlamp and disappeared in the void ahead. “Don’t worry about those insects,” Messina added, nodding to walls hewn 2,300 years ago, and which I now saw were crawling with spider-like creatures called *Dolichopoda*. “They aren’t dangerous.”



THE AQUEDUCTS OF ANCIENT ROME / ARCHIVE.ORG



CHARTING THE COURSE Archaeologist Thomas Ashby produced an intricate map of the city’s ancient aqueducts while serving as director of the British School at Rome from 1906 to 1925. Speleo-archaeologists still consult his work today.

WATER PARK

Right, known for its picturesque ruins, the 600-acre Park of the Aqueducts has long been a favorite destination for locals and tourists wishing to escape the bustle and congestion of central Rome. Below, a well-preserved section of the Aqua Claudia, built between A.D. 38 and 52 by the emperors Caligula and Claudius to meet the needs of an expanding city.



COURTESY OF THE APPIAN WAY ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK, MINISTRY OF CULTURE (2)



Messina and I were standing in a sepulchral stretch of the Aqua Anio Vetus, one of the superbly crafted aqueducts that once channeled water into ancient Rome, built beginning in 272 B.C. and dry for nearly 1,500 years. To some, this might be the stuff of nightmares and horror movies. But to me, it was the start of an obsession with the city's last hidden corners.

Earlier that morning, I'd met the half-dozen fellow expedition members from Sotterranei di Roma, all self-taught adventurers like Messina, for a cappuccino and cornetto at one of the city's eastern metro stations. Chatting cheerfully in a nearby parking lot, we geared up in hard hats and headlamps, although some of the group also had industrial steel-tipped boots and gray protective overalls bearing the association's logo, an artistic outline of an ancient amphora. A short drive took us into the surprisingly wild city surrounds known as the Roman Campagna, or countryside, where we hiked across empty fields of tall grass and purple flowers, each of us carrying scythe-like implements to cut our way through the underbrush. "We're only a 20-minute drive from Rome, and it's like the Amazon rainforest," Messina said, laughing.

After passing beneath the overgrown arch of the ancient Taulella Bridge, which loomed like a relic from an alien civilization, the eyes of the group members turned resolutely

OUT OF JULES VERNE

The area beneath the A.D. 1100 Church of Sts. John and Paul on the Caelian Hill holds an otherworldly surprise for underground adventurers. Up until the fourth century A.D., it was quarried for the building material tuff. When quarry activities ceased, the extraction sites filled with rainwater, forming crystal blue pools, above, or became layered in calcium carbonate, turning the walls white and creating small stalactites, right.

downward. Our popular image of Roman aqueducts is of monumental aboveground structures—they can be seen most vividly in the Park of the Aqueducts, where six meet southeast of the city—but the vast bulk of their routes were actually underground, engineered at a slight decline to use gravity to keep the water flowing.

Over a period of some 500 years, from 312 B.C. to A.D. 226, 11 extraordinary aqueducts were built to supply the ancient city. Ten were cut when the Goths besieged Rome in A.D. 537, and today, their tunnels still snake beneath the modern city and for miles around, although they have never been properly mapped. Locating them involves detective work and has attracted eccentric explorers since interest in antiquity was revived in the Renaissance. The most complete studies were done by the British archaeologist and scholar Thomas Ashby, who scoured the remotest corners of the Roman Campagna

“If we **look at cities vertically**, it creates a timeline, right back to when the first people said: This is a good place to live.”

from 1906 to 1925, and produced a magisterial tome, *The Aqueducts of Ancient Rome*, which was published posthumously by his wife in 1935. Today, Messina and other intrepid members of Sotterranei di Roma use modern technology to expand on Ashby’s findings.

“Ashby mapped many aqueducts in detail, but he obviously had no GPS and couldn’t cite precise locations,” Messina said. “So his descriptions include landmarks that no longer exist—farmhouses that have vanished, trails have changed course, buildings destroyed in the war. We try to identify the spots he found a century ago, map them with GPS systems and post them on Google Earth.”

About 20 minutes later, Messina spotted a cippus, a low stone pillar placed during the reign of Augustus, the first emperor, every 240 Roman feet (11.6 inches) to mark an aqueduct’s subterranean course. “There are thousands of them in the countryside,” he said. “Only God really knows how many.” A nearby hole hidden by branches was an entrance to a vertical shaft once used by skilled Roman teams called *aquarii* to access the aqueducts for maintenance. “Calcium deposits

are a problem in aqueducts, affecting the flow,” he noted. “They’re like espresso machines—you have to clean them!”

Ancient footholds remain carved into the walls of the shaft, but the group opted to use a portable wire ladder to descend the 25 feet. Soon I was standing in a smooth stone corridor that few people have entered for the last 15 centuries. With our headlamps lit we clambered, hunched over, for about 80 yards into the pitch darkness, which in Italian is referred to as *il oblio*, “oblivion.” The air, which has not circulated for millennia, became stale. At one point, we scrambled over a pile of debris where part of the ceiling had caved in. “It’s very safe,” Messina assured me. “There has only been one collapse in 2,300 years, so we’d have to be very unlucky to be trapped.” I gazed ahead as he mapped the space with a hand-held 3D scanner. “Keep going,” he said with satisfaction, “and you’d end up on Rome’s Esquiline Hill.”

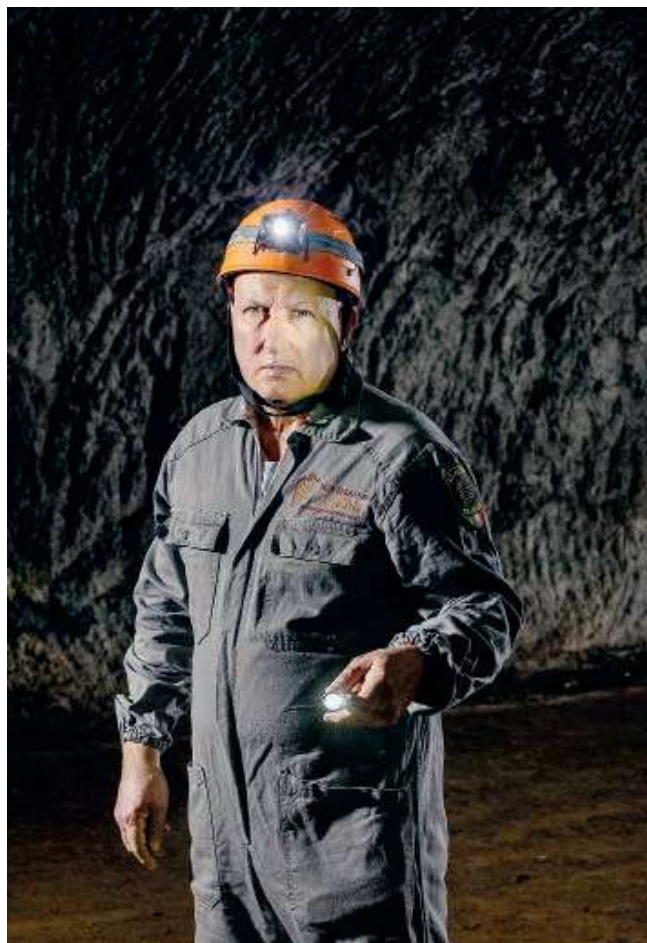
Descending into the Anio Vetus offered me a rare sense of discovery in one of the world’s most heavily visited cities, whose famous antique treasures have been admired by medieval pilgrims, 18th-century grand tourists, English Roman-



tics and contemporary Italophiles. Having first visited Rome more than two decades ago to research a book on ancient Roman tourists, I believed I had seen all the classical sites of note. But the adventure inside the aqueduct showed me that the city has a hidden dimension. And it is hardly the only subterranean site offering a fresh perspective on Rome's venerable grandeur—if you know where to look.

ANYONE WHO VISITS imperial Rome's most renowned relics—the Colosseum, the Pantheon, the Temple of Saturn—notices that their foundations lie far below the level of the modern streets. Since the demise of the empire in the fifth century A.D., the ancient city has been buried under some 30 feet of urban debris and construction, and the majority of it remains hidden under visitors' feet. In fact, there are enough subterranean spaces that regular street collapses swallow cars whole, making Rome "the sinkhole capital of Europe," according to the *London Times*. But this has also turned the city into a paradise for a quirky new breed of speleo-archaeologists, inspired amateurs who work with academics to piece together a more complete map of how the imperial city has evolved over the last three millennia, revealing a fascinating, multidimensional honeycomb of pagan shrines, public baths, hidden lakes, nymphaeums (private baths of the rich, adorned with seashells and faux forests), grand sewers, mining tunnels, Christian catacombs and ossu-

aries. In a sense, it's Roman archaeology's final frontier. "Many people think of imperial Rome as a lost city," explained Giuseppina Mattietti, an earth scientist at George Mason University outside Washington, D.C., when I met her for lunch last summer on Isola Tiberina, the trireme-shaped island in the middle of the Tiber River. "But that's the interesting thing: It's not gone! Romans just built on top of it, for century after century."



REPURPOSED SPACE

Created in the first century A.D. to extract tuff, volcanic rock employed in the making of Rome's famous concrete, the quarries of the Labyrinth of Rome have since been a garbage dump (right, broken amphorae from a second-century A.D. villa); an early Christian burial site (a human skull, above, and catacombs, above right); mushroom farms in the 20th century; and today, a unique subterranean attraction. At the Labyrinth, where Sotterranei di Roma rents space (left, founding member Marco Placidi), visitors can tour the passageways on foot or by bicycle.

The Rome-born Mattietti, who has lived in the United States for some 30 years, has joined Sotterranei di Roma on numerous adventures over the last ten or so summers—everything from crawling on elbows through tunnels beneath the Palatine Hill to wading through the Cloaca Maxima, the magnificent sewer that the first-century A.D. scholar Pliny the Elder regarded as a marvel of engineering, and still functions as an active part of the modern city's infrastructure. "I had to wear a full hazmat suit and have shots for hepatitis, typhoid, cholera," she told me. "Everything short of anthrax, I took them all!" Descending through a malodorous entrance in the Roman Forum, the team waded through the sewer until the water current became too powerful. "We had to proceed by digging sticks in the mud so we wouldn't be dragged under by the flow."

That wasn't an experience I was keen to repeat, but luckily there are many other underground sites that are entirely accessible to travelers, Mattietti said—if they know about them. Every summer, she takes students below the sidewalks of the historical center, Centro Storico, via little-known public museums like the Crypta Balbi, where visitors descend 40 feet





from the busy modern street level of cafés and souvenir stores by the Piazza Venezia, and the recently opened Roman Houses of Celio, which includes a lavishly frescoed aristocratic villa from the third century A.D. Many Christian churches also have haunting basement levels, most impressively the Basilica of San Clemente, where visitors end up in a Mithraeum, an altar devoted to a pagan cult popular in the first century A.D. Ancient mosaics even turn up in the basements of restaurants like Pancrazio in the old Pompey's Theater, near where Julius Caesar was stabbed, while the walls of some bars in Testaccio have glass windows to reveal layers of broken clay amphorae discarded in antiquity.

But many of Mattietti's favorite subterranean sites require some planning to visit, she said, since Rome's understaffed Special Superintendence of Archaeology only opens them by special request. This involves calling a local number and often requires a modest minimum fee of about €40. After lunch in Trastevere, whose name comes from the Latin for "across the Tiber," Mattietti led me to the Renaissance-era Palazzo Specchi and the Church of San Paolo alla Regola. Nothing indicated they were of unusual interest until a young custodian in the uniform of the superintendence arrived with an enormous



GIUSEPPE MASCI / ALAMY

SHELTERING A DICTATOR

During World War II, the Italian fascist ruler Benito Mussolini had three air-raid bunkers built underneath his residence at the Villa Torlonia, above. The final one, a state-of-the-art armored bunker, top, and detail, right, was started in 1942 but remained unfinished when "Il Duce" was arrested in July 1943. It was located 20 feet underground, protected by 13 feet of reinforced concrete, and featured a ventilation system and bathrooms.

“In the ancient city, water didn’t just sprout from nowhere. For centuries, people had to carry it up from the Tiber.”

rusty key, then unlocked a metal doorway in the palazzo’s exterior to reveal worn stone stairs lit by a bare bulb. We gazed down in silence for a moment, as if we were entering Tutankhamen’s tomb. “We are used to seeing cities horizontally,” Mattietti observed. “We talk about ‘urban sprawl’ in spatial terms. But if we look at cities vertically, it creates a timeline, right back to when the first people said: This is a good place to live.”

The steps led 25 feet down into an *insula*—literally “island”—or Roman apartment complex. Mattietti explained that this riverfront area of the Tiber in the first century A.D. was home to horse stables, shipping warehouses and sacred oak groves, but by the second century the structures were taken over as residences by poor Romans, and they remained inhabited throughout the Middle Ages. The strata of archaeological remains in Rome are often compared to a lasagna, she added, with layer after layer piled on top of each other, but they also overlap: “In the United States, we demolish old buildings and start over. In the ancient world, people reused them. Structures were built to last.” (Some underground sites were even repurposed in World War II as air-raid shelters—including the basement at the 18th-century Villa Torlonia, where Mussolini lived from 1925 to 1943.)

“There are nine different types of wall here,” she enthused, pointing out each different design, along

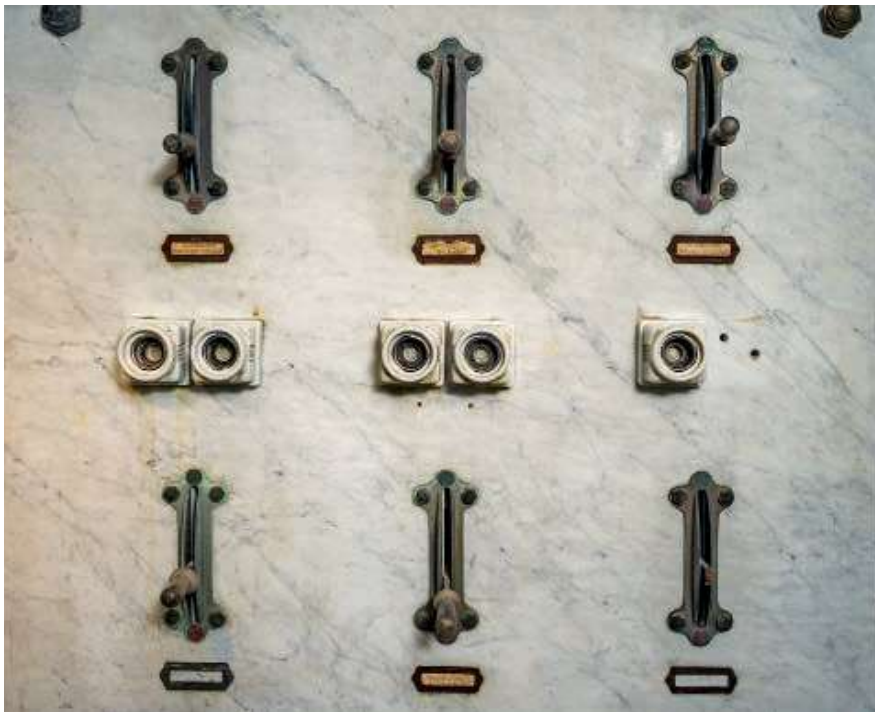
with embedded terra-cotta pipes, fragments of marble and a site where piles of shrimp shells were found. Even such oddities are important to scholars, she said. In fact, when we later walked by an overflowing garbage bin, she noted: “Today’s trash, tomorrow’s archaeological site.”

Exploring humble dwellings provides a fuller image of Roman society, she argues. “When we look at the ruins of ancient Rome, we often see what its emperors and aristocratic rulers wanted us to see: the Colosseum, the Forums, all the great monuments. But what about the real Romans who made up 90 percent of the population and brought the city alive? They are part of the story, too.”

WHY DON’T YOU come to ‘the cave’ for pizza tonight?” Marco Placidi, a founding member of Sotterranei di Roma, asked me when I inquired about his latest work. It was an irresistible offer. In 2020, Placidi said, the group opened its headquarters in the Labyrinth of Rome, a vast network of tunnels that extends for some 22 miles beneath Caffarella Park, a green oasis in the southeast of the city near the ancient Appian Way. The quarry was initially dug in the first century B.C. as a source for tuff, a volcanic rock that was pulverized as an ingredient for Roman concrete, the strong, essential material used to construct the city’s most illustrious architectural wonders.

And so at dusk I followed Italian families walking their dogs along bucolic paths through fields fringed with flowers, duck-filled lakes and woodland, until I spotted the quarry’s moss-covered entrance, where a half-dozen club members including Mattietti were chatting at a table over boxed take-away pizzas, olives and wine.

“My interest in the underground began organically,” said Placidi, whose day job is as a work safety officer at a local energy company. When a friend visited him from out of town in the 1990s, they went on a tour of the most renowned Roman tourist sites. “We were frustrated at how controlled things were,” he said. “You couldn’t even take photos in the Vatican Museum! So we decided to find more unusual, hidden places, where we could experience the city more freely, walk where we wanted, touch things. And that very often brought us to hidden spots below Rome’s surface.” In 2000, he and a handful of fellow enthusiasts founded the first speleo-archaeological club, which split into two rival groups about a decade



ago. “We started pre-internet with 50 members,” Placidi said. “We now have 2,000 or so members, including Europeans, Americans, Japanese . . .”

Renting in the Labyrinth of Rome at a nominal fee from its owners fulfilled one of Placidi’s fantasies. “Rome’s Centro Storico is a web of bureaucracy,” he lamented. “When we work at sites there, we have to deal with the Superintendency of Archaeology, the Commune of Rome city government, the Vatican, the water company Acea. But the quarry is privately owned, which gives us

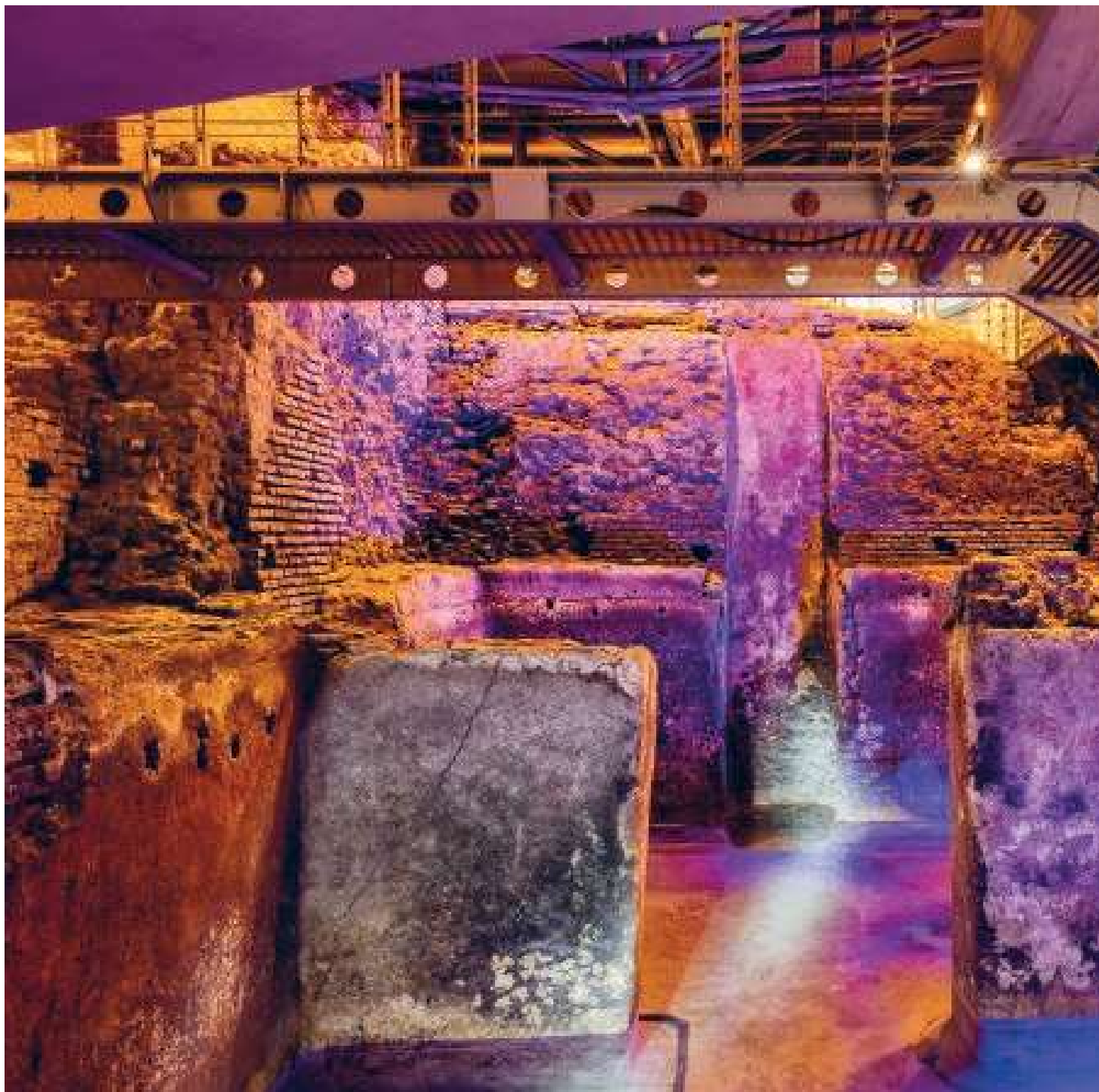
a lot of freedom.”

After the pizza, we descended into the Labyrinth, which was garlanded with electric lights for the first hundred or so yards. The association has converted several of the first rough-hewn chambers into meeting rooms, including a recreated Mithraeum decorated with faux Roman statues surrounded by ferns, which members have dubbed “La Bat Caverna.” Every weekend they conduct walking tours and even lead groups on mountain bikes into the darkest recesses of the complex.

BYLINES

Frequent contributor **Tony Perrottet** last wrote for the magazine on General Douglas MacArthur’s tour of duty in Australia.

For three decades, **Paolo Verzone** has been photographing the world around him, specializing in science and the environment.



Wandering deeper into the dank maze, we arrived at a metal ladder leading 20 feet up to a hole in the stone ceiling. In the Middle Ages, tomb raiders knew the quarry extended beneath an early Christian catacomb, Placidi said, so they dug upward. Another club member, a Spanish-born schoolteacher named Alfonso Diaz Boj, started climbing and beckoned me to follow as Placidi held the ladder steady. Soon I was crawling in the fetid darkness as my headlamp lit up niches filled with shards of pottery and Roman mosaics, and what I realized were human remains,

including a skull. “The grave robbers hoped to find treasure,” Diaz Boj said. “All they found were bones.”

I had been to several of the more official catacombs run by the church, many of which were impressive complexes—St. Sebastian with a pagan basement with Medusa frescoes, St. Callixtus with its four underground levels—but somehow, squatting in the darkness with my hands and knees covered in grime caught my imagination more.

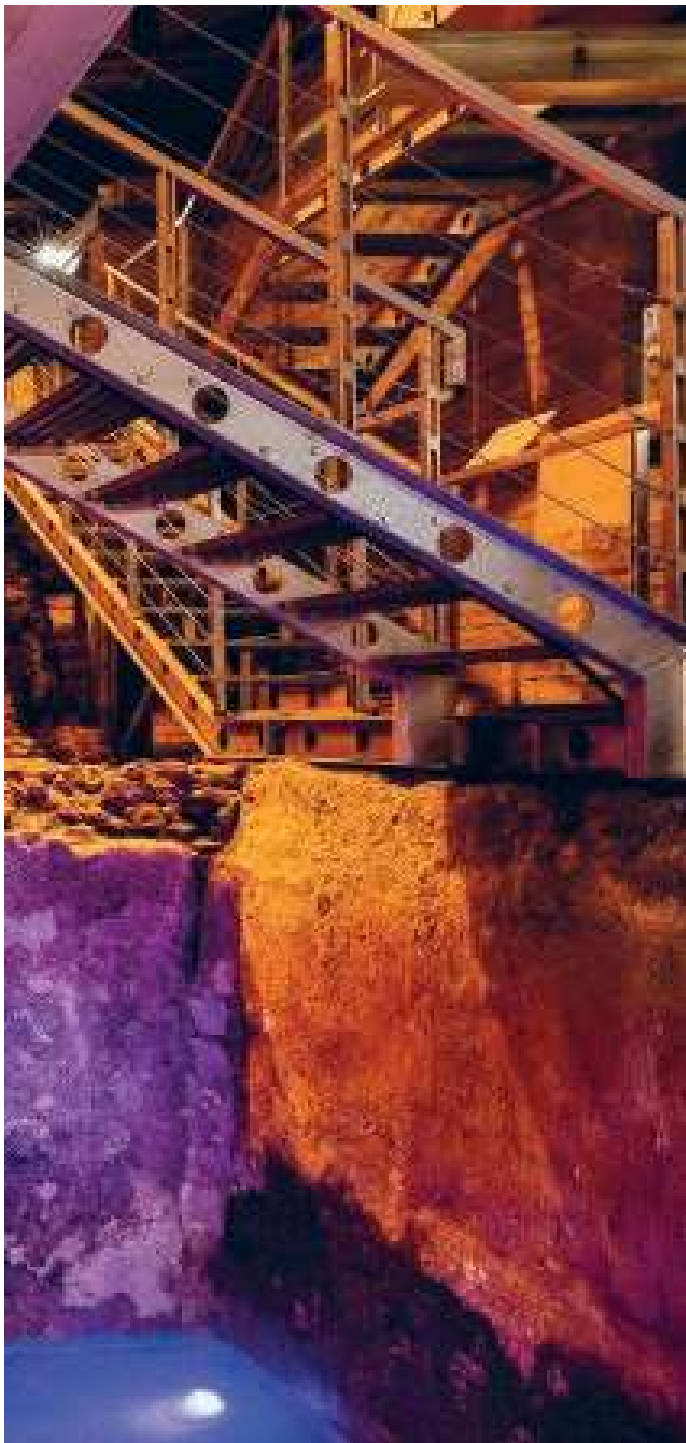
“Some academics look down on Sotterranei di Roma association as amateurs,” Mattiotti said after she joined us crouching in the musty alcove. “But I think the members are like ‘citizen scientists’ in the U.S. They are dedicated and deeply passionate. They don’t get any glory out of it, certainly no money. They explore for the love of it.” (One veteran member I met had the letters SPQR tattooed on his wrist—the Latin motto of the ancient city, *Senatus Populusque Romanus*, the Senate and the People of Rome.) “The reality is that most academic archaeologists don’t want to explore underground. They don’t have the means, they don’t have the training, and frankly they don’t want to kill themselves!”

NEW^S OF OTHER UNDERGROUND sites is passed on by word of mouth. For some time, I’d heard rumors about lakes hidden beneath the Temple of Claudius on the Caelian Hill in the very heart of the ancient city. It sounded like something out of a Jules Verne novel, but some Roman friends in the know tipped me off that visits are now organized by the city’s other organization of speleo-archaeologists, which has the confusingly similar name Roma Sotterranea, Rome Underground. And so the next afternoon, I set off to find the ancient temple’s entrance, which in the Middle Ages was cannibalized as part of the Church of Sts. John and Paul. I promptly became lost, wandering around the church’s ornate interior until a kindly sacristan in black robes took pity and led me to a metal grille by a courtyard, where a half-dozen excited Romans were putting on hard hats.

Built after Emperor Claudius’ death in A.D. 54, the temple was once one of imperial Rome’s most extravagant pagan edifices, whose foun-

HIDDEN WONDER

Among the discoveries made during the excavation at the archaeological area Vicus Caprarius (City of Water) was a *castellum aquae*, left, a large reservoir where water from the nearby Aqua Virgo was stored. Some 2,000 years later, water from the aqueduct continues to flow through the site—and to feed one of Rome’s most famous attractions, the Trevi Fountain, just a coin’s throw away (below, in a 1750 pencil, pen-and-ink, and watercolor sketch).



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I had finally been granted permission to accompany an official **into the Aqua Virgo** via an off-limits entrance in the heart of Rome.

datations measured some 600 by 650 feet, more than the area of two football fields. A young guide named Chiara Massimiani pointed out several of its monolithic columns still embedded in the church structure, then led us down steep metal steps to a rough-hewn opening. Instantly, the summer heat of Rome was replaced by the cold, clammy air of tunnels that, like the Labyrinth of Rome, were first carved to mine tuff. We then entered a cavern containing the first of two small lakes filled with eerily blue, vodka-clear water. It was also biologically pure, Massimiani noted: "Rainwater has dripped through ten meters of stone above our heads, so all the impurities have been removed. We could drink it like Pellegrino!" She felt a civic pride that Rome still had secrets to reveal: "To have such a site only a few hundred meters from the Colosseum and Forum is a marvelous thing."

MAGICAL THOUGH THE LAKES ARE, the deepest passion among romantics and scholars has been aroused by the man-made water systems. Before traveling to Italy, I'd tracked down a copy of Thomas Ashby's *The Aqueducts of Ancient Rome*, which is so rare that I was obliged to read it in a supervised section of the New York Public Library, poring over brittle, yellowed pages, meticulously drawn maps and murky black-and-white photos. It was easy to share Ashby's sense of wonder, and today the network remains key to understanding Rome's inner workings. "In the ancient city, water didn't just sprout from nowhere," Mattiotti said. "For centuries, people had to carry it up from the Tiber. There were cisterns on the seven hills to collect rain. But the city's growth was limited until Roman engineers devised the aqueducts." The increase in drinking water allowed Rome to expand into an imperial megalopolis by the first century A.D., with an estimated population of one million people.

To explore the network, I started in Rome's most water-oriented hotel, the Anantara Palazzo Naiadi. It was built in grandiose neo-Classical style in the late 1800s to follow the curved walls of the exedra, or waiting room, of the enormous third-century A.D. Baths of Diocletian, which covered some 32 acres and allowed 3,000 bathers at a time in palatial, marble-encased chambers and pools. The hotel has mosaics from the baths in its basement and a pool on its rooftop (a rarity for Rome). It also looms above the Fountain of the Naiads, decorated with frolicking water nymphs, which was erected in the Piazza della Repubblica beginning in 1888 when a short stretch of one aqueduct, the Aqua Marcia, was revived by Italian engineers with modern hydraulic pumps.

The hotel has so embraced the ancient aquatic past that it even offers an early-morning jogging tour retracing the aque-

duct routes, led by a Roman art historian, Isabella Calidonna—a pursuit she dubs "archaeo-running." Our focus was to follow the one ancient aqueduct that still functions today, the Aqua Virgo (as it was named in Latin, or Acqua Vergine in Italian), a 13-mile artery inaugurated by Marcus Agrippa, the brilliant general and son-in-law of Emperor Augustus, in 19 B.C. When the other ten aqueducts were broken by the Goths in 537 A.D., the Virgo's channels, which were laid mostly underground, remained intact. When its flow was reduced and it fell into disuse during the Middle Ages, the lack of drinking water helped turn Rome into a virtual ghost town. "Who would live in such a city?" Calidonna asked, rhetorically. The Aqua Virgo was restored to its original glory by Pope Nicholas V in 1453, helping to provide the life-giving water needed for Rome's expansion and rebirth: literally, its "Renaissance."

"Water has always been a symbol of power in Rome," Calidonna declared as we set off in the eerie, traffic-free calm of 7



a.m. "In antiquity, the emperors built splendid baths for the people, and in the Renaissance, the popes built magnificent fountains." A key stop was one of Rome's most beloved tourist attractions, the Trevi Fountain, an 18th-century Baroque masterpiece adorned with statues of the water deity Oceanus in a shell-covered chariot, surrounded by mermen—and which, unbeknown to the many thousands who toss coins into its depths daily, is fed by the Aqua Virgo. Several stretches of the aqueduct are visible nearby. We jogged past one original section exposed behind an iron fence on the Via del Nazareno, then entered a department store called La Rinascente on the Via del Tritone, whose floor plan promised in the basement: Acquedotto. It seemed wildly unlikely, but after riding the escalator down past the latest Gucci and Prada summer



DESIGNER WALL

At La Rinascente's glitzy new flagship store, left, between the Spanish Steps and the Trevi Fountain, you need only descend an escalator to view ancient Rome. In the basement, forming one wall of a gallery and events space, is a nearly 200-foot stretch of the Aqua Virgo, above. Built by Roman general, statesman and architect Marcus Agrippa and completed in 19 B.C. during the reign of Augustus, it is the only one of the city's 11 original aqueducts still functioning.

fashions, we found 15 intact stone arches extending nearly 200 feet. A quirky museum nearby, the Vicus Caprarius (City of Water), allows visitors to explore yet another section of the aqueduct and its workings discovered during excavations for a movie theater between 1999 and 2001.

Rumors and urban myths circulate all around the Aqua Virgo. Mattietti had told me there was a rarely used entrance through which one could descend a lovely Renaissance staircase and wade through its still-flowing, waist-high waters—the holy grail for anyone fascinated by the underground. But access was controlled by the modern Roman water board, Acea, making it as difficult to penetrate as the Vatican's inner sanctum. In fact, I had put in a formal application two months earlier, but heard nothing. It seemed an impossible goal.

So I turned instead to the adventurers of the group Sotterranei di Roma to see if they knew of a site that was almost as

exciting. That was how I found myself, on my last morning in Rome, driving back into the verdant Roman Campagna to engage in a modest act of “guerrilla archaeology.” We were searching for a site whose engineering had most impressed the indefatigable Thomas Ashby, in the village of Vicovaro, about 30 miles from the Forum, where two aqueducts, the Claudia and the Marcia, meet and overlap. Placidi and Diaz Boj had explained that access to the underground intersection would be a challenge. The Monastery of San Cosimato had just closed off the main entrance, they warned, citing the need for repairs. But there were other entry points. “We might get arrested,” Diaz Boj joked. “But we can try!”

After the regulation espresso stop in the village, we parked by a lonely roadside and descended through thorny bushes to the serene Anio River. “*Ecco qui!*” Placidi declared, pointing at a dark hole. “Here it is!” Then he added reverently: “Pliny the Elder said the Aqua Marcia had the best-tasting water in all of Rome!” Constructed between 144 and 140 B.C. by an ancestor of Julius Caesar, the praetor Quintus Marcius Rex (after whom it was named), the Marcia was also the longest of the 11 aqueducts, running nearly 57 miles from its source springs to Rome.

With headlamps lit, we climbed into the beautifully preserved specus, or tunnel. Its floor and sides were smooth, while the roughly hewn ceiling still showed the marks of

ancient construction workers' picks. We were part of a great tradition of visitors, Diaz Boj said, pointing out graffiti from explorers in the 1400s and 1600s. Finally, about 50 yards into the aqueduct, he shone his headlamp on the carved signature of the venerated Ashby himself. Minutes later, we stopped at a second Ashby signature. "He stayed here for two days, so signed twice," Diaz Boj marveled. "They might even have slept in the aqueduct!"

I THOUGHT THAT MY OBSESSION with the Roman underground had run its course. But I had only been back in New York a few days when I was surprised to find in my inbox an email from the water company Acea. I had finally been granted permission to accompany an official into the Aqua Virgo via an off-limits entrance in the heart of Rome, using the legendary 16th-century staircase in the Villa Medici. This was something too much out of the *Da Vinci Code* to resist, so I booked a flight back to the city and checked into the Hotel Mediterraneo, a marble-lined Art Deco gem filled with the busts of emperors and heroes, whose over-the-top grandeur seemed to encapsulate all our enduring fascination with antiquity.

The next morning at 10, I climbed the Spanish Steps to the fortress-like Villa Medici, whose outer wall was embedded with an anonymous gray metal door and a small, worn and barely legible marble plaque announcing access to the Aqua Virgo. Waiting for me was Marco Tesol, an engineer with Acea who manages visits to its restricted sites. Far from a faceless bureaucrat, he turned out to be a burly, affable, bearded Roman with a love for the inventiveness and craftsmanship of his classical ancestors. Joined by three other Acea workers, we pulled on fishermen's waders that came up to our armpits, donned company hard hats and descended one last time into il oblio.

Two thousand years of Roman history now came together in one spot. First, I stepped onto a spiral stone staircase known as La Chiocciola del Pincio (*chiocciola* means "snail"), which descends like a corkscrew some 80 feet below street level. Long closed to the public, it is an astonishingly elegant Renaissance creation, with a symmetry that might be ascribed to a Michelangelo sketch. It was built around 1574 on the orders of the villa's then-owner, the wealthy Cardinal Giovanni Ricci da Montepulciano, an efficient papal administrator and antiquities collector who oversaw ongoing renovations of the aqueduct, and was designed by a famed engineer and champion fencer named Camillo Agrippa. Then, after descending 117 well-worn steps, I was back in antiquity: inside the 2,000-year-old carved tunnel of the ancient Aqua Virgo, whose crystal clear waters were flowing smoothly below my feet. The aqueduct was functioning just as it had in 19 B.C. Rarely has history felt so alive.

"There are two legends related to the Aqua Virgo's name,

"Virgin," Tesol explained as I took the last few steps down a metal ladder into the channel. The first is that it was named for the purity of its water. The second, that it was named after a maiden who showed some weary legionnaires the way to the mountain spring. "But today it's not pure enough to drink!" Tesol warned. "Along the route, bacteria may have seeped in."

There was something almost baptismal about stepping into the flow, which had originated in the hills east of Rome and soon enveloped me up to the waist in an icy caress. There was a layer of gravel underfoot, some parts of the aqueduct's sides were calcified, and slender white stalactites hung in clusters from above, but the superb Roman engineering was entirely intact. As Tesol explained what was above our heads, I could imagine a new map of the city. We waded 100 yards in the direction of the Trevi Fountain, which is today so popular that a tourist commissioner proposed in September that tickets be charged to control access. We then doubled back 200 yards beneath the Villa Medici and its marvelous Renaissance gardens, among whose sculpted groves I had once attended artistic and musical events hosted by the French Academy (which has owned the villa since 1803, after Napoleon purchased it). Along the way, we admired flourishes like carved arches and a 75-foot-high shaft used by construction and maintenance workers. At one stage we carefully navigated underwater steps.

"Most of the Vergine was too deep for the Goths to destroy," Tesol said proudly. "That's why it could be restored in the Renaissance and flows today." The sixth-century A.D. chronicler Procopius records how scouts of the besieging Goths even tried to enter Rome carrying torches through the Aqua Virgo but found the route blocked by defenders.

After about 90 minutes, we pulled ourselves out of the

Although gone now, the sophisticated device **would not be equaled in Rome until the late 19th century.**

water and began to ascend the "Snail." According to Italian historians of science, the Renaissance staircase had another purpose beyond providing access for workers: In 1574, Camillo Agrippa, the staircase's designer, devised an ingenious hydraulic system here, using wooden wheels to pump the aqueduct's water back up the corkscrew steps via a metal tube embedded in the wall to irrigate the Medici gardens. Although gone now, the sophisticated device would not be equaled in Rome until modern engineers began improving the water systems of the city in the late 19th century—an extraordinary bridge between ancient and modern.

Stripping off my waders, I was elated by the immersive experience. But I had to confess that I'd finally had my fill of il oblio. It was time to repair to an outdoor café and enjoy a pasta luncheon, bathed in Roman sunshine. ♦