

TRISHA'S DREAM CITY-BREAK

Before she went to Italy Trisha thought *La Dolce Vita* was a kind of biscuit. She found out in Rome what it really meant, and decided that nothing's what it's cracked up to be. She'd gone with a walkman, Guidebook, and high hopes. Hadn't bothered with a hairdryer because the hotel said there was one fixed to the wall in her room.

Trisha took an early Airport Express and saw everything go from dark to day. Checked-in quickly with hand-luggage only and watched the shop girls putting on their duty-free faces, sleep still in their eyes. Thought about maybe buying an iPod, but decided to wait, see if there was any money left over after her weekend.

It was a no-frills flight, no manners either – Trisha in a window seat next to sulky lovers who tutted and muttered when she went to the loo. Both times.

Trisha got to the hotel hot, and unlocked the door to her room with a key that turned the wrong way. On a wall-stand too high up was a television with 39 channels, and by the sink a hairdryer that didn't work. No shower, just a loo in the corner. If she stood like Renaissance Man she'd touch both sides of her room.

Make the best of it she told herself. It's only a room, and besides, number Five – lucky five. That had to mean something - a promise, maybe, of good things around the corner, dreams coming true.

Trisha opened the shutters, to let in the light, and the smell of bleach out. Hadn't expected to see much from her window, not on her budget, but she'd hoped for more than bricks sprayed red with a big 'A' for Anarchy. Make the best of it, she told herself, again.

Trisha had a shower down the hall in water too hot, then too cold, slipping on something slippery and hoping it was shampoo. Got dressed and went sightseeing with wet hair, too shy to buy even an ice-cream - not till her hair had dried.

Later by a church squashed in at the end of an alley - the Guidebook called it 'a jewel' - Trisha had a late lunch, early supper, sitting outside at a table that wobbled, with a table-cloth made to look like gingham, only plastic. She had tomato and beans on toast - they called it *bruschetta* - and a rocket salad with apple and pine nuts. Trisha didn't like fruit in a salad, not normally, except in a fruit-salad, but thinking 'when in Rome...', then thinking how clever! And it was OK - but it would have been nicer if she hadn't poured on too much vinegar she thought was oil.

Then it rained. Not much. Just enough to turn lettuce soggy and put out a cigarette. Trisha moved inside where they were playing songs in Italian. She knew they were sad songs because they sang the word *dolore* a lot. Afterwards they played something by Westlife, which was OK but it made Trisha feel like she wasn't really on holiday anymore.

No one else was eating alone, except a German girl, and she never left a tip. Trisha saw the waiters rolling their eyes. She made sure she left one, only it was bigger than she meant, Trisha not really knowing one Euro from another.

After her lunch-supper, Trisha was a little tipsy. She'd tried to order a half-bottle of Chianti but didn't know the word for half so she ended up with a whole one. She started to walk back to the hotel, dizzy in the drizzle and having to check her map on the wet steps of a church she'd written an essay about at college. She'd taken the wrong turn. It meant going back the way she'd come – right passed the restaurant, Trisha pretending she was just strolling, listening to snippets of Vivaldi on her walkman.

The shops were all closing, but the hawkers were just getting started. An African was selling action-men that lit up when their guns fired. Trisha wouldn't buy one – on principle – and the hawker cursed her. And in Piazza Navona Trisha got ready for another argument, this time with the portrait artists. The Guidebook said they could be very persistent, but with Trisha, not one of them said 'make nice picture of pretty lady', not even lying to her, like they did in Leicester Square.

The wine was making Trisha feel sad then happy then sad, feelings all mixed up like the fruit in her salad – bittersweet. Sad from the Vivaldi and because it was so long ago she'd written that essay, and sad nobody wanted to paint her. And then annoyed that because of her over-generous tip, she could kiss goodbye to that iPod from duty-free. But Trisha was happy too, to be on holiday in Rome, seeing things she'd only ever written about, dreamed about. She tried hard to

ignore a thought creeping in from the edge – that she'd be back in the office on Monday and all this'd be a distant memory. Make the best of it all, she told herself, concentrating on her steps so she didn't trip on the cobbles.

Trisha got back to the hotel with hair wetter than when she'd left. She went to bed worrying about tomorrow's queue to the Vatican. The Guidebook warned 'get there early, to avoid disappointment'. Trisha set her alarm and turned off the light in her room with 39 channels too high up and a loo in the corner, and the sounds of snoring coming from the man in Room 4, and a couple doing it in Room 6. Make the best of it, Trisha murmured - hoping one day it'd be her sighs in the room next door keeping someone else all alone from a good night's sleep. One day, for sure.

When Trisha finally fell asleep, she dreamt of a man holding her all through the dark hours. And his name was Benedetto.

There was no queue to the Vatican at 9.00am. Trisha took this as a good sign, and rushed passed the Raphaels, hurrying to the main attraction – the Sistine Chapel. But it was already packed – hundreds of tourists whispering in awe about how big it was, or how small, or more beautiful than they imagined, or not worth the entrance fee and what they were going to have for lunch. But not Trisha – she was silenced by the ceiling, and imagined Benedetto touching her in front of The Last Judgement, breathing in her ear the names of saints and sinners - so close she'd smell his aftershave, feel the graze of his bristle on her cheek. And she'd know right there – his lemony scent lingering round her throat - that she was one of the saved. For sure.

But there was no sign of Benedetto in the Vatican and Trisha decided to find him on the Spanish Steps instead, like in a film. She sat waiting by a fountain, watching the living statues twitch, wondering why they even bothered in Rome - they'd always come a poor second to the real statues. But Benedetto never came, or if he did he never found Trisha. She waited two hours hoping, then left, walking through soap bubbles made by children with machines like guns - firing them out like bullets, only slower, so they'd hang in the air, their petrol glaze all shimmery like a bruise. Hundreds of bubbles floating and bursting all around her, making Trisha's eyes sting.

Then it rained again, and Trisha with no umbrella took shelter in a church and saw a statue of a saint having an orgasm - because, according to the Guidebook, God had said it was OK on this occasion. Trisha imagined how the lady in Room 6 last night might have looked, and she thought of Jackie from accounts back home; she'd said she could have an orgasm just by touching her nipples - even though she was a catholic. It's alright for some, sighed Trisha.

After the rain Trisha risked a walk in her new holiday shoes and got mud on her toes. To cheer herself up she bought a ticket to see singers singing songs she'd heard on Classic FM on Sundays. They wore 18th century clothes, only made from nylon seeing as it's easier to clean than real velvet. Trisha sat next to Americans who drank coke in the quiet bits, and said the show was neat. They told her between arias they were from San Francisco, like it meant something special. Trisha never said where she was from - she knew they wouldn't have heard of it. Just said London, and the Americans said neat again, and told Trisha

how much they loved Notting Hill – the film, not the place. Trisha told them she'd never seen it, even though it was actually one of her favourites.

At the end of the singing there was an encore and everyone clapped in time to the song, and the tenor pretended to flirt with the soprano but later Trisha saw him holding the baritone's hand under an umbrella when it had started raining again.

Waving goodbye to the Americans, Trisha said she was meeting her boyfriend for dinner. She dipped round the corner into a pizzeria, and ordered off the tourist's menu. When the Americans came in, Trisha tried to hide behind her Guidebook but they ended up at the table next to hers and stared at her pizza. They said it looked nice, but not so nice as what they got in California. Trisha asked for the bill, only the waiter didn't understand her, and brought her a tiramisu. She only ate half, said goodbye to the Americans again, this time telling them she was off to meet her Benedetto at the Trevi Fountain.

Trisha walked back to the hotel, her eyes stinging again, her hair wetter than ever. Back in her room, she discovered too late that the flush on her loo wasn't working.

Trisha couldn't sleep for the noise of scooters, and sighs from one side and snores from the other. She would have said something to the manager, but she told herself – make the best of it, and besides, it wasn't just her holiday. Turning to face one wall, then another, Trisha lay awake in her room with 39 channels,

not even a whiff of Benedetto's aftershave for company – just the smell of a loo in the corner, unflushed.

In the dream he was meant to ask her for the time, a light, if this seat was taken. And Trisha, she'd smile and say 1.45pm and yes and no. And he'd buy her a cappuccino in Bramante's cloister, and dip his biscotti into it all suggestive. And afterwards they'd lie under an almond tree in the Villa Borghese. With the moon rising, there'd be a lament in the air, made by a Chinese man playing a saw. And Benedetto - he'd hold her hand, look into her eyes. And everything would be different. Better. And there'd be more point to things.

On Trisha's last night, Rome glittered in the rain like Benedetto's eyes. Only Trisha'd forgotten to shut her shutters, and the rain had come in. She couldn't believe it. Rome was meant to be dry. She'd gone to Amsterdam, which was full of water, and she'd stayed dry the whole time – not counting Jackie's sick, who'd taken something she shouldn't have – which sort of spoilt the hen-party, and Trisha's slippers. And they'd done a boat trip to Delft – apart from Jackie who wasn't up to it - where the pottery looked just like Nan's – all blue and white but much more expensive so all Trisha'd bought was a milk jug in the shape of a cow, only the tail had broken off in Happy Hour. But at least in Holland the hairdryer had worked, and the loo flushed.

In Rome, on her last day - that's when Trisha knew there wasn't going to be a Benedetto. Because Benedetto meant 'blessed' – according to the Guidebook - and things like that didn't happen to her. She packed her overnighter and took

the bus back to the airport, Rome behind her, golden and pink under a setting sun – not a trace of rain in the sky.

At check-in they took away Trisha's tweezers, but she did get an aisle seat so she'd not upset anyone by getting up to go to the loo – either time. It meant she wouldn't be able to see the moon above the clouds, not from the aisle - but it's all trade off, she told herself. Make the best of it.

For a second Trisha debated buying a posh moisturizer as a treat from the duty-free cart. But they only had brands that said *You're Worth It* on the box. She nodded no thanks to the boy pushing the cart. He smiled and said she didn't need it – not with her complexion. Trisha blushed and noticed the gold in his eyes. She whispered thanks, and looked at his badge. *Safe In Our Hands – Easy Does It!* And written above in silver letters, his name – Ben.

Nice holiday? he asked.