

ANGELS AND DEMON BOWLERS

A team of literary cricketers descends on Rome to challenge the Vatican and experience the secret delights of the Eternal City

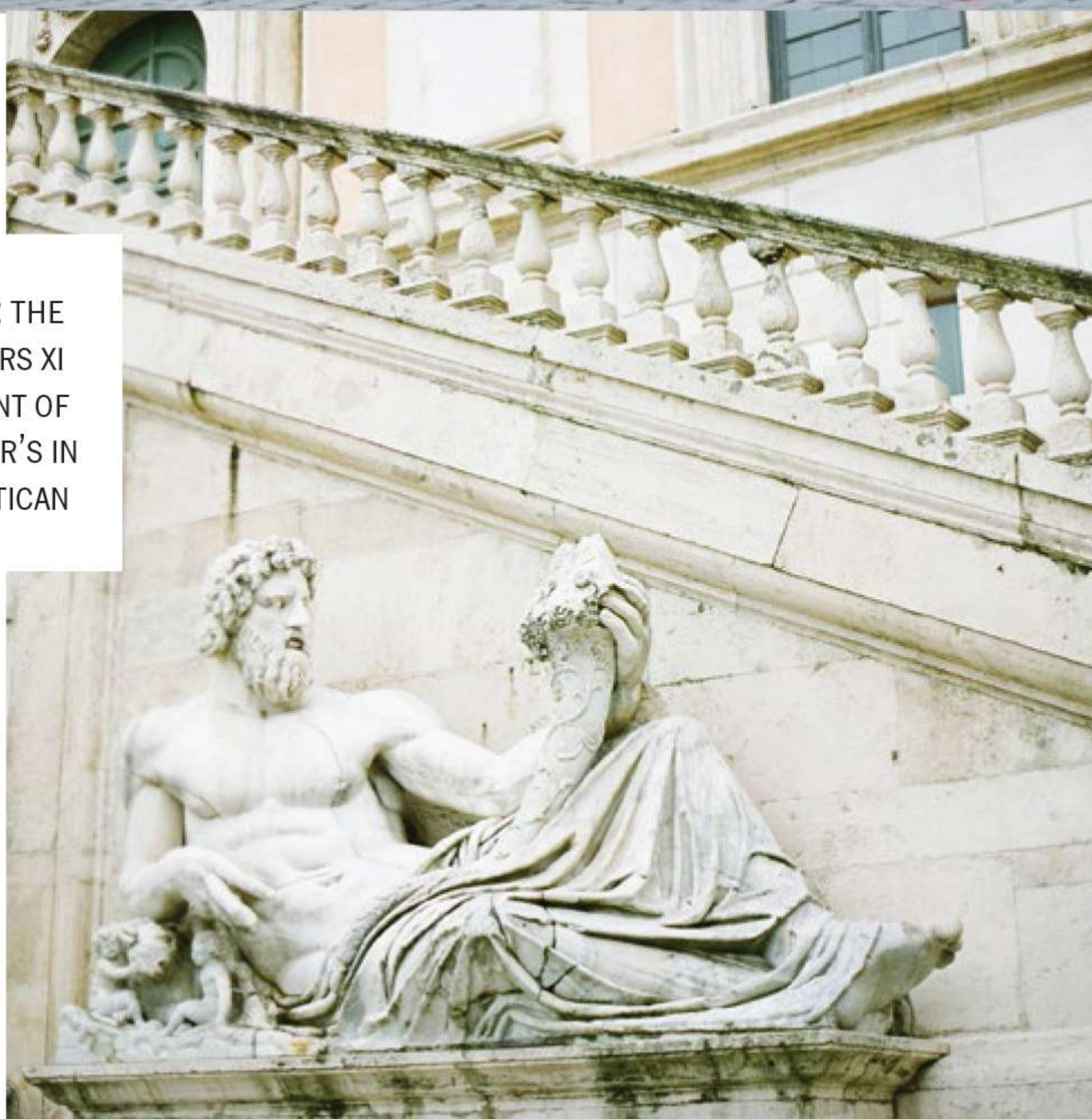
BY ALEX PRESTON



In the end, even an audience with his Holiness Pope Francis couldn't save us. The Authors XI, a motley gaggle of ageing scribblers, came, saw and were conquered by the Vatican's cricket team, a group of whippet seminarians and novitiate priests. Some of us, as we walked off the field after the second drubbing of our Roman sojourn, called to mind a hill station, high in Sri Lankan tea country, the scene of our one solitary victory in several dozen matches away from English soil. Others – I among them – recognised that it has never been just about the cricket, and thought instead of the palaces, the chapels, the loggias and shady lemon groves through which we'd been whirled those past few days.

We lived as if in a dream of Italy. Or a film by Fellini. We waltzed through Roman palazzos that are usually known only for their firmly bolted doors, their air of vault-like

ABOVE: THE
AUTHORS XI
IN FRONT OF
ST PETER'S IN
THE VATICAN





TRAVEL

impenetrability. We swept up their marble staircases, danced in their ballrooms, stood like white-flannelled caryatids on their colonnaded verandahs. Rome, for all its sumptuous open spaces and architectural delights, can sometimes feel secretive, tucked away from the view of the mere tourist. The thrill of our journey lay in opening the unopened doors.

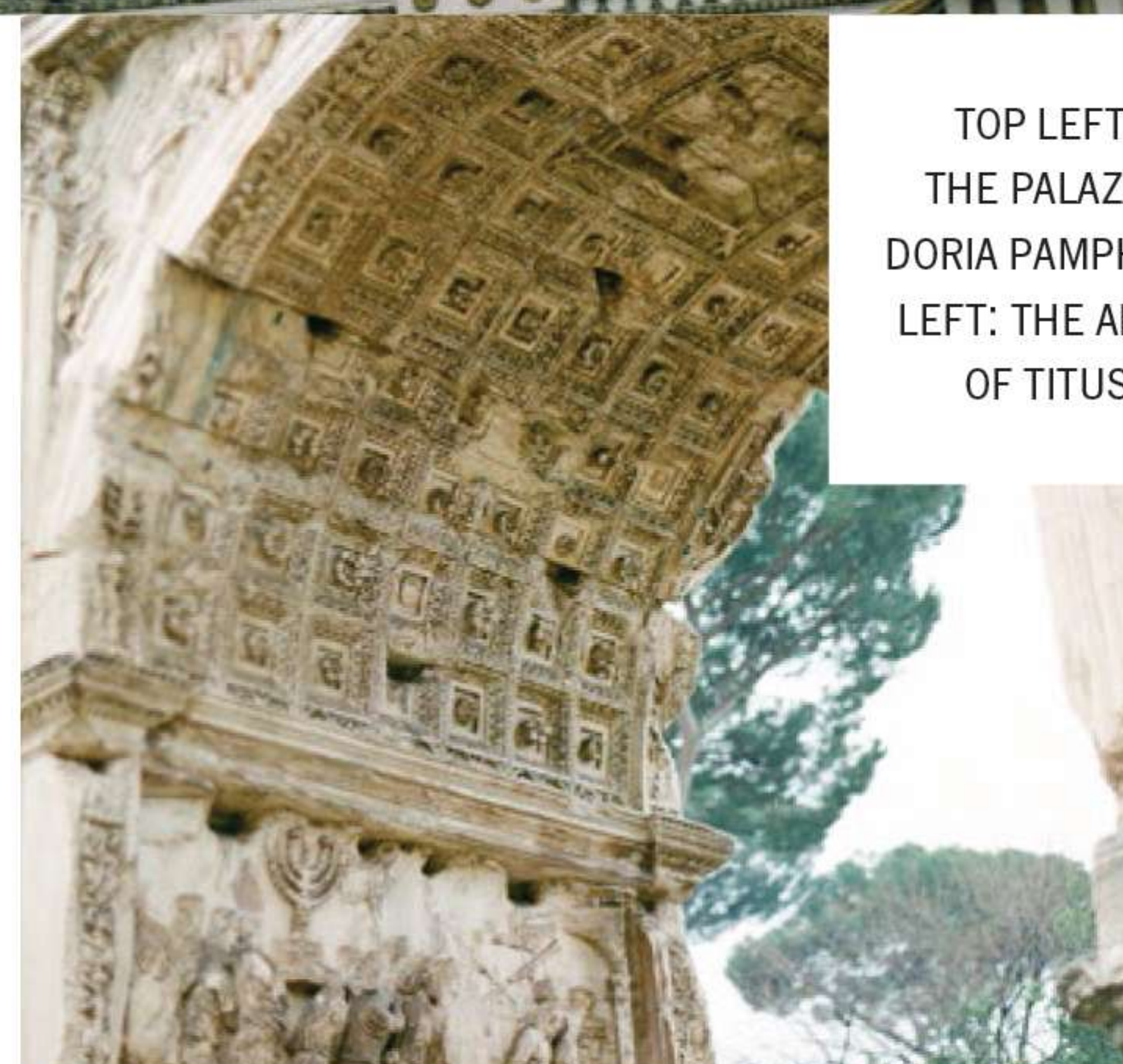
The Virgil guiding us through this *paradiso* of palazzi is Lady Paola Windsor, the sister of our big-hitting middle-order batsman and Byzantine scholar Peter Frankopan. Lady Paola is married to Lord Nicholas Windsor, the son of the Duke and Duchess of Kent, and is a globe-trotting ambassador for Caritas Internationalis, the vast Catholic aid organisation headquartered in the Vatican. She glides swan-like through the dizzying world of Italian high society and, as we authors are ushered from soirée to glimmering soirée, she is always there to introduce another principessa, to hand us a perfect bellini, to draw our attention towards a rarely seen Caravaggio or Titian.

After our early-morning date with Pope Francis, we arrive at the Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, the largest private palace in Rome. Dark and colonnaded, the palazzo sprawls over a block at the southern end of the bustling Via del Corso, its soaring halls and gilt passageways hung with the work of the great masters. Our collective Italian is as rusty as a 1976 Lancia, and yet as we walk through rooms with our hostess, Princess Gesine Doria Pamphilj, we feel ourselves charming and, sipping prosecco, share intimate jokes with the other guests – a bustle of glamorous marchionesses. We delve into the Princess' private chambers, past a huge throne with its back turned to the room, a sign that the family is one of the *nobiltà nera* who sided with the papacy when Rome was invaded by the Savoy-led Kingdom of Italy in 1870.

We walk on fine 18th-century parquet past sfumato frescoes of generations of the Doria Pamphilj family, until we come to the Princess' boudoir, all draped in heavy red velvet. This was the bedroom of Lady Mary Talbot, daughter of the Earl of Shrewsbury, who with her sister Gwendolyn was one of the leading lights of Roman high society in the latter years of the 19th century. At the foot of the four-poster bed is a golden cradle, made for a Doria prince who died in it (despite the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor being



EVERY CLUSTER OF COLUMNS CARRIES STORIES OF INTRIGUE AND VENGEANCE, BETRAYAL AND HEROISM



TOP LEFT:
THE PALAZZO
DORIA PAMPHILJ.
LEFT: THE ARCH
OF TITUS

his godparents). Everywhere in the palace is a sense of history pushing up into the present, a feeling of being in permanent correspondence with the spirits of other ages. We wander through the galleries, stopping to admire the Princess' favourite painting, a Brueghel menagerie, and then the glories of Caravaggio and Fra Lippi and Raphael.

The next day, we are given a tour of the Forum by one of our team-mates, the historian Tom Holland, who shows us the way the city built up, palimpsest-like, over the centuries, with every ruined temple, every cluster of time-smoothed columns carrying stories of intrigue and vengeance, betrayal and heroism. It is a wrench to drag ourselves away down the Appian Way to the Capannelle hippodrome, where, with cicadas loud in the cypresses around us, we lose our first game of the tour, despite a brutal late-innings assault from the bats of Peter Frankopan and Sebastian Faulks. Our opponents are one of Italy's leading league sides, a mixture of Italian internationals and wily Sri Lankans living in Rome. We have a swift drink with them as the Alban Hills turn purple with the coming of evening, then rush back to the centre of the city.

This time, it's cocktails and antipasti at the stunning Palazzo Borghese, home of the Honorable Rocco Crimi,

a leading Italian politician. The apartment is on the third floor, overlooking a beautiful hushed garden of lemon-groves and box hedges. We sit on gilt divans and sip champagne, or make more game attempts at conversation, the assorted aristocrats and politicians laughing delightedly at our every botched bon mot. Then it's out into the warm Italian night for dinner and more drinks.

Our final day in Rome starts with an attempt at a cricket match in St Peter's Square. We have made applications through official channels to be allowed a couple of overs in front of the great late-baroque bulk of the church, but barely has the first ball been bowled than there are carabinieri waddling self-importantly towards us. We tuck our bats under our arms and make our way into St Peter's, where the coach of the Vatican's cricket team, Father Eamonn O'Higgins, says mass for us in the crypt. It's astonishing, some 40 minutes later, after a service during which the chanting of a dozen other languages comes through to us from other chapels, and Father Eamonn gives a brief, beautiful sermon, to see tears in the eyes of our fellow cricketers, grizzled and cynical to a man.

One final, extraordinary experience before our drubbing by the Vatican's squad of ruthless priests: we are invited for coffee at the home of the British Ambassador to the Holy See, Nigel Baker. His apartment, Rome's highest point, has a terrace that looks out over the Forum to the broad sweep of the city. We laugh, suddenly breathless, as we look out over the terracotta rooftops to distant hills, full of the joy that this late-in-life sporting adventure has brought us, the beauty of Italy, the memories of our Roman holiday already sepia-tinged with nostalgia.



THE COLOSSEUM. LEFT: THE AUTHORS XI MEMBERS JONATHAN WILSON AND MATTHEW THACKER

ROMAN EXPERTS

Whether you're looking for a cosy trattoria for lunch or the city's best gelato, contact Emily FitzRoy's Bellini Travel.

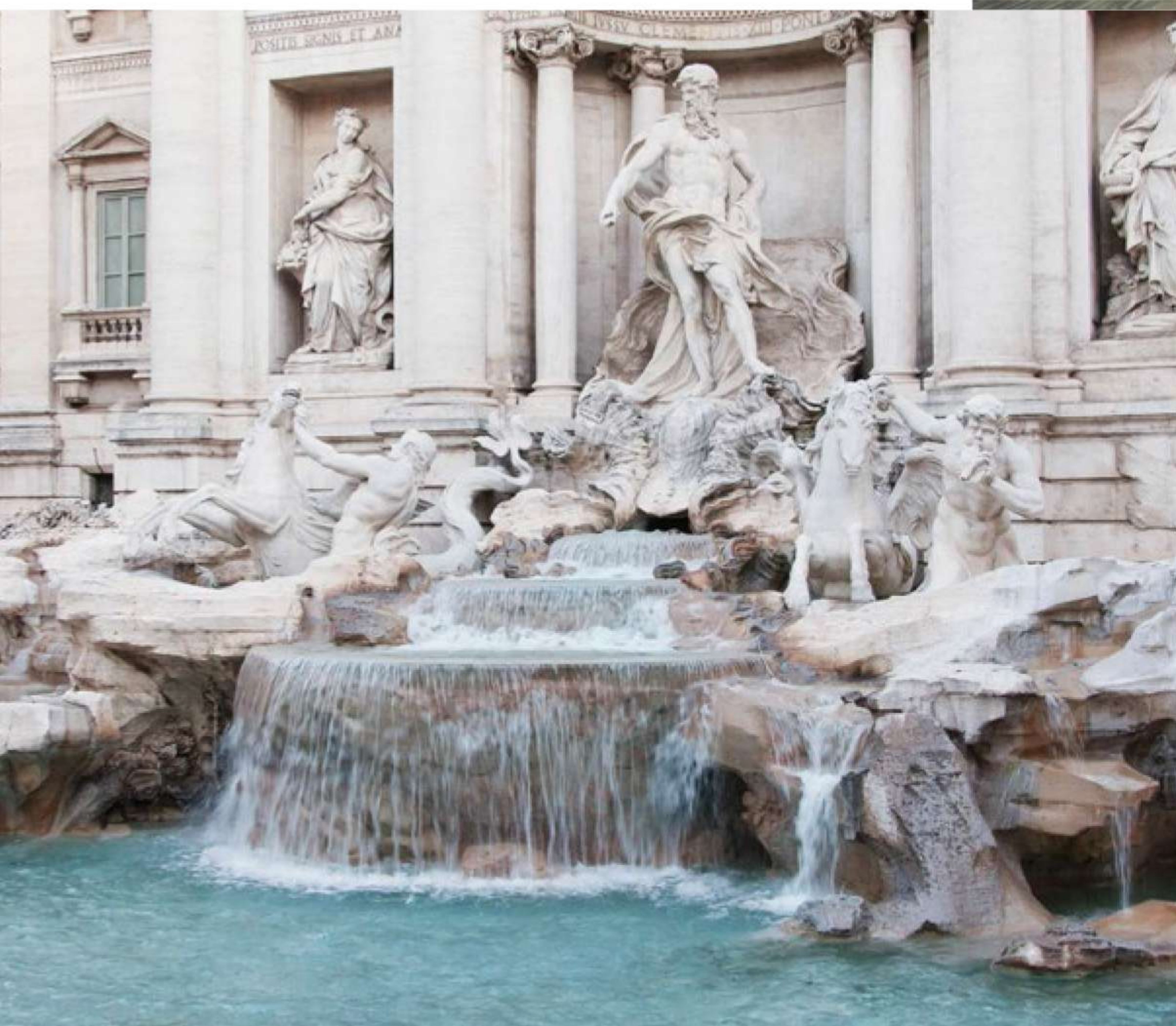
The first choice of the cognoscenti, she and her team will point you in the direction of hidden gems like the Pope's tailor Gammarelli, whose red socks make chic souvenirs. *Bellini Travel* (www.bellinitravel.com).

Carrier's Privileged Access lets you avoid the crowds at Rome's cultural treasures with out-of-hours entry. You can explore secret tunnels and gladiators' cells with

an experienced guide in the Colosseum, and Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel are yours to admire in private. *Carrier* (www.carrier.co.uk).



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: THE TREVI FOUNTAIN. THE SISTINE CHAPEL. THE PIAZZA DI SPAGNA





WHERE TO STAY

BEST FOR...

A PLACE OF YOUR OWN

This June, the private-rental company Onefinestay is adding Roman residences to its books. Each of the handpicked homes comes with pristine sheets, towels and toiletries, an iPhone with unlimited data and local calls, and neighbourhood recommendations from your hosts.

Onefinestay (www.onefinestay.com).

BEST FOR... ELEGANT SECLUSION

With a discreet entrance on a side street near the Piazza Borghese, JK Place is the smart traveller's urban hideaway. Formerly the city's school of architecture, the hotel has a beautiful glass-roofed lobby lined with classical statues. Classrooms have been transformed into 30 chic bedrooms and suites, whose polished-wood panelling and moody hues were inspired by Tom Ford's *A Single Man*. Downstairs, there's an excellent bar for an aperitivo, with Massimo Listri photographs adding to the sophisticated ambience.

JK Place Roma (www.jkroma.com), from about £310 a room a night.

BEST FOR... STYLISH GLAMOUR

After funding the restoration of the Trevi Fountain, Fendi has unveiled another Italian icon – the newly refurbished Palazzo Fendi, where seven Private Suites mark the fashion house's first move into hospitality. The 17th-century mansion is now home to the largest Fendi store in the world and a Zuma outpost on the roof. The suites themselves are adorned with fabulous Modernist pieces, from a Giò Ponti daybed to Murano-glass chandeliers.

Fendi Private Suites (www.fendiprivateSuites.com),

TRAVEL



A SUITE IN
RESIDENZA
NAPOLEONE III.
LEFT: THE LOBBY AT
JK PLACE ROMA

BEST FOR... OPULENT INTERIORS

For the royal treatment, check into Residenza Napoleone III, named after France's last emperor, who was once a guest. Principessa Letizia Ruspoli has opened the two rooms to guests within her own central palazzo. The main suite is filled with candelabras, gilded busts, silks, tapestries and vast oil paintings, including one that swings back to reveal a bijou marble bathroom. The Roof Garden Suite is less lavish, but has fabulous views of Rome from its lavender-filled garden.

Residenza Napoleone III (www.residenzanapoleone.com), from about £425 a room a night.

BEST FOR... COOL MODERNITY

Ten spacious suites in G-Rough, a 17th-century townhouse near Piazza Navona, are yours to call home at this hipster-luxe den. The name nods to the bold design decision to leave the walls stripped back inside. Unearthed fragments of decoration are complemented by stylish upcycled pieces from the Sicilian design firm Leftover. There's no restaurant, but local cheeses and charcuterie can be enjoyed in G-Bar, or the hotel can arrange dinner with a Cordon Bleu-trained chef in a nearby palazzo. □

G-Rough (www.g-rough.com), from about £295 a room a night. LUCY HALFHEAD



ABOVE: A SITTING-ROOM IN
RESIDENZA NAPOLEONE III.
BELOW: THE LOBBY AT
G-ROUGH. BELOW LEFT:
ONE OF G-ROUGH'S SUITES

