LATIN IN ROME

Education and Adventure in the Heart of the Classical World

by Eliel Anttila
I began studying Latin as a freshman in high school and have been in love with the language ever since. My teacher, Henri de Marcellus, is dynamic, energetic, and passionate about Latin and classical history. When he told me about the Latin in Rome summer program offered by the University of Dallas, I was extremely interested. He said that it could take my Latin comprehension to the next level, as well as provide opportunities to see some of the most important historical sites in the classical world.

My adventure began on July 16, 2011, when I said goodbye to my parents and boarded a plane in San Francisco. After navigating a completely baffling German signage system in the Frankfurt airport and surviving a harrowing taxi ride over lawless Italian freeways, I arrived at University of Dallas' beautiful Rome campus, my home for the next three weeks. I was here to study Latin, and study Latin I did, alongside several unique, funny, and talented people, in one of the most beautiful settings in the world.

Latin in Rome is led by University of Dallas professors Dr. David Sweet and Dr. Karl Maurer. With the help of several other professors and RAs, the two professors guided us through some of the most difficult, inspiring, and enlightening language-learning experiences I've ever had.

**Campus Life**

On campus, most of our learning took place in tutorials, in which a group of about six students and a professor worked through Latin passages we had been assigned to translate. On the few days spent entirely on campus, we had tutorials twice a day; on the other days, we had one evening tutorial related to the day's travels.

The tutorials themselves were superb. Early on, they involved quite a bit of grammar review and translation exercises and were frequently punctuated by quizzes, but later tutorials focused primarily on Vergil's poetry, and the *Georgics* in particular. I was lucky enough to have tutorials with both Dr. Sweet and Dr. Maurer during our reading of the *Georgics*, and as a result have an affinity for that text that I never would have otherwise. While Dr. Sweet explained logically why certain lines were written as they were, Dr. Maurer marveled over Vergil's word choice and artistry. He professed his love of certain imagery with such conviction and showed such passion for linguistic perfection that every tutorial with him was a riveting experience. By the end of the program, most of us were able to read a variety of Latin passages with ease, explain why Vergil chose to emphasize one word over another, and translate new passages with much more precision and art than we had before.

Between tutorials, studying, and grammar sessions, life on campus was filled with a multitude of things to do. Quieter activities included reading in the wisteria-covered...
gazebo, located in the midst of a lawn dotted with olive trees and overlooking a panorama of Rome and the surrounding countryside, or simply picking fresh peaches in the orchard. Several of us also reveled in barefoot soccer games at night, caffeine-fueled bouts of epic ping-pong, swimming, and tennis.

**Up the Coast, Back in Time**

On most days, we would either head into Rome or take side trips into areas around Rome or even further afield. One of my favorite aspects of our trips to historical sites was the readings that accompanied our visits. More often than not, we would sight-read a relevant Latin passage together during our visit. This made each passage we read and every sight we saw all the more relevant: At the Forum, we read about the quirky personal habits of Augustus as we sat atop what had once been his lawn. We read Cicero when we visited his hometown of Arpino, and we read Vergil’s account of Aeneas’s discovery of a temple of Apollo at Cumae as we sat upon the ruins of the very same temple.

On one memorable trip, we drove up the Italian coast, stopping to explore an Etruscan necropolis and visit a museum filled with Etruscan and Roman artifacts in the gorgeous coastal town of Tarquinia before arriving at our final destination of the day: the ancient Roman port of Ostia. Once the hub for sea-based trade going in and out of Rome, Ostia was a city of merchants and sailors, filled with shops and brothels and complete with its own forum and amphitheater. Built at the mouth of the Tiber, Ostia Antica (“Old Ostia”) was abandoned after the flow of the Tiber shifted and the mouth of the great river became a malarial swamp. While this was less than ideal for the residents of Ostia, it was a boon for classical history enthusiasts, as the abandoned city was essentially protected from redevelopment and destruction.

Entering the ancient city, we walked down an original street paved with enormous stone blocks. The farther we moved toward the center of town, the more complete the ruins around us became: most buildings had second stories, as well as ornate statues and mosaics. Our entire group sat on the steps of the temple of Ceres, located squarely in the middle of the ancient center of Ostia’s commercial district, and with the help of Drs. Sweet and Maurer, sight-translated an account of piracy at Ostia. Then we were free to explore buildings—several with elaborate tile counters and beautifully tiled floors, and some even with original pigment on the walls—just as an ancient merchant might have done 2,000 years earlier.

**Adventures Fit for an Emperor**

Another trip took us from Rome to Naples and points south. Early in the morning of the day after our arrival in Sorrento,
we walked through the center of town, down flights of stairs built into the cliffs bordering the town, and onto a ferry bound for the island of Capri, site of the villa of the Roman emperor Tiberius.

Once in Capri’s colorful town square, the instructors and RAs gave us free reign for several hours. About six of us banded together and set out to explore the island. We decided to climb to Tiberius’s villa, which was perched on a promontory about 45 minutes’ walking time up the hill from the main square. Wandering through the tight, whitewashed streets of the little downtown area was an adventure, since we had absolutely no idea where we were going! Finally, after asking a knowledgeable local—using suspiciously Latin-like Italian and vibrant hand gestures—we were pointed in the right direction.

We followed a sequence of hand-painted tile signs to the villa, trudging up skinny cobbled alleys bordered by vine-covered white walls, small grocers, and wrought-iron gates leading to some of the most beautiful old houses I have ever seen. We climbed ever higher on the hill, and when we finally reached a ridge, I walked out onto a small side path while the others rested. You can imagine my surprise when the trail abruptly ended in a vertical drop of several hundred feet, straight into the azure water below! Dr. Sweet later told us that Tiberius used to punish astrologers whom he deemed false by throwing them off a similar cliff closer to his villa.

As we finally neared the villa, it became clear why it was built where it was: the entire Bay of Naples, Vesuvius, and a good length of the Amalfi coast opened up before us. Exploring the ruin itself was amazing. Butted up against nearly 1,000-foot vertical cliffs on either side, the palatial estate was a beautiful example of Roman masonry and architecture.

Two hours later, we were back near the harbor, enjoying the local specialty drink of frozen lemonade with orange juice squeezed over it. That night, we wandered the perennially busy main street with its gelaterias, bars, clothing stores, and droves of girls. For six excitable, tired, non-Italian speaking American high school guys like us, Sorrento’s main street was heaven. We had a great time. Back at the hotel, the night was capped off by a very, very late night verb study session and poker game, followed by Bill the RA’s joking admonition of our attempts to meet the locals. We explained to him that the language barrier proved rather difficult to overcome at times, and that sadly none of the local girls spoke Latin.

**Study and Reflection**

On our second-to-last day, we took a rigorous final exam—after all, this was a college-level Latin class—that involved a lot of translation and a lot of conjugating of a lot of verbs. I am great at the former and abysmal at the latter, so while I was as prepared for the final as possible (thanks to the excellent classes, helpful teachers, and two study days before the test), I was not completely comfortable with all the material on the test. Still, I felt like I had quadrupled my Latin ability in a short time.

Our last day in Rome was extremely well spent. We were dropped off in the heart of the city and given free reign once again. As the group split up, many of us stuck together and followed Dr. Sweet to one of his favorite bookstores in Rome. On the way, we visited several famous churches, the Pantheon, and an excellent gelateria—all in five minutes’ walking distance! After searching in vain for a reasonably inexpensive copy of Vergil’s *Georgics*, we ventured into the city. We saw the Trevi Fountain, bargained for soccer jerseys and cheap sunglasses, and ended up atop the Spanish Steps, thoroughly exhausted both from a long day in the city and three weeks of nearly non-stop activity. Later that night, we rejoined the rest of the program for a final dinner at a small restaurant directly next to the ruins of Trajan’s Market. The food was delicious, the atmosphere was one of satisfied relaxation, and we enjoyed one another’s company as if we’d known each other for years.

Whether it was the studying, the intense academic climate, the late-night soccer and poker games, the exploring, the confusion and excitement of Italy, the delicious food, or the fact that we shared a common interest in Latin, we had become the best of friends, and had seen and done things that I will remember for the rest of my life. Though 2,000 years have transpired since its heyday, in my opinion, Rome still is the heart of the world.

Eliel Anttila, 16, is a senior at The Branson School in Ross, CA, and a nationally ranked cross country mountain biker. When he is not studying or training, he can be found surfing the Marin coastline or practicing his piano and cello.

For more information about Latin in Rome and several other study abroad programs, see page 32.