

TRAVEL + LEISURE

THE ACCESS ISSUE

*Faraway Magic,
Always Within Reach*



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TRAVEL ADVISORS WHO ELEVATE EVERY ESCAPE



LEFT *The remains of the amphitheater in Santa Maria Capua Vetere, Italy, where Spartacus fought.*

All Roads Lead to Rome

On a journey down the Via Appia—Italy's first highway—Erica Firpo and her husband retrace the past, one archaeological site at a time.

ONCE AGAIN, I had lost my husband under an ancient arena. On a clear day last September, Darius, an archaeologist, disappeared into a maze of crumbling stone corridors under the Amphitheater of Capua, the second-largest arena in antiquity after Rome's Colosseum. This is our normal. Often, we head into an archaeological site together—crawling through aqueducts, exploring acropolises—and Darius doesn't come out for hours.

Capua was one of the first stops on our five-day journey tracing the ancient Via Appia, dubbed "the Queen of Roads" by the Latin poet Statius. Built between 312 BC and the fourth century AD, it was Italy's first superhighway, beginning just south of the Colosseum and ending in the port of Brindisi, Puglia, with monuments like military outposts and mausoleums holding prominent figures (such as early popes) along the way. In 71 BC, 6,000 of the soldiers who followed the slave-turned-rebel Spartacus were crucified along this very route. In 2024, UNESCO added the road that carried

was built by the Roman military one mile at a time as they conquered city after city," Darius told me. "A 335-mile statement of confidence—and control."

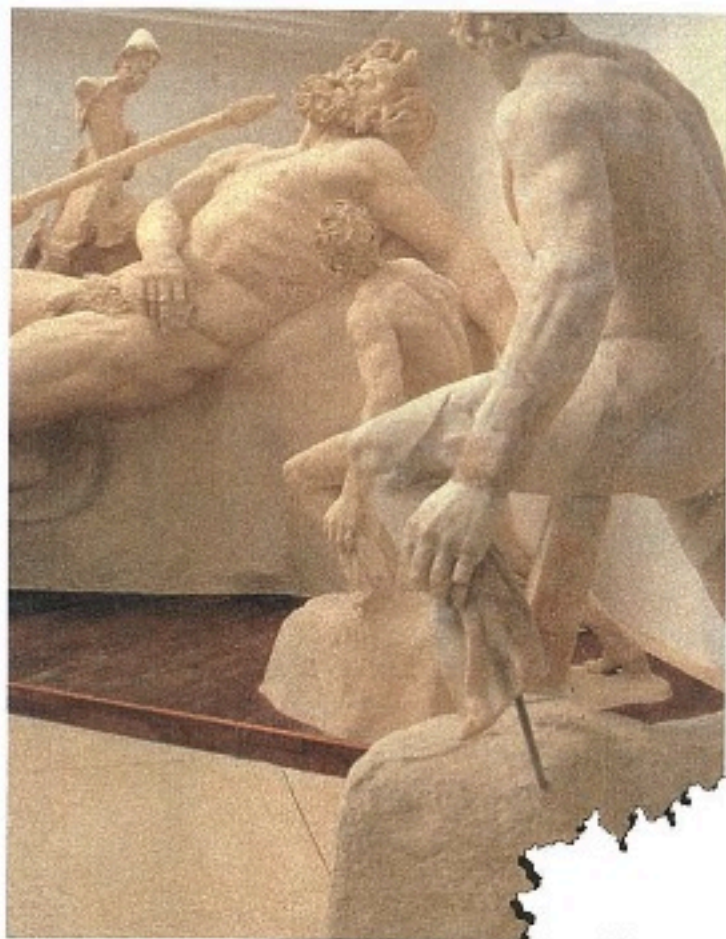
Over the 25 years we've lived in Italy, Darius and I have visited fragments of the road, walking, driving, and even biking it. Some stretches still appear in their original form, ancient stones and all. The most famous is the eight-mile sweep of original basalt that begins at the third Roman milestone, the Mausoleum of Cecilia Metella, and is shared today by walkers, cyclists, and the cars of those who have homes there. Some segments have been absorbed by cities, as in the main piazza in Terracina, while other portions surface as mere fragments, or are preserved within archaeological parks. But the majority has been paved over by a modern asphalt highway, the Strade Statale 7 Via Appia (SS7), which makes an excellent route for a history-filled road trip.

We recently decided to follow the whole road, starting from our home in the Regola neighborhood of Rome.

DAY 1: TERRACINA AND SPERLONGA

We set out from the southern end of the Circus Maximus in Rome's historic core, where today only grassy ruins remain—the official starting point of the Via Appia. About 12 miles into the drive, the SS7 joins a spectacular stretch of asphalt laid directly over the ancient roadbed. The route, flanked for some 30 miles by umbrella pines, leads right into Terracina.

We've been going to this beach town for years; Darius for the history, and me for the deep-fried, cream-filled doughballs known as *bombas*. Around 406 BC, almost 100 years before the Via Appia was built, the Romans expanded southward and reached the limestone cliffs that skirt the coastline, and—in true Roman fashion—crowned them with a temple. At nearly 745 feet above sea level, the vast arches of the **Temple of Jupiter**



IN TOP: UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP; NORTH AMERICA; ILLUSTRATION BY BASHIEL LUBARSKY; COURTESY OF VISTA OSTUNI

the limestone structure is covered in Parian marble, with sculptural relief panels that tell the story of the emperor's life and military exploits. Darius read the friezes like a comic book, detailing historical events and mythological allegories.

DAY 3: OSTUNI, TARANTO, AND BRINDISI

The sweet spot toward the end of our Appia adventure was **Vista Ostuni** (*doubles from \$483*), a 14th-century convent refashioned into a hotel. From the outside, it resembles a palazzo more than a convent; while inside, it's a cloister of contemporary design, highlighted by ecclesiastical cross-vault ceilings and hanging textiles. On our first night, Darius and I toasted Ostuni with Negrinis at the rooftop bar, from which we could see the city's white walls layered in the distance.

Driving southwest across the heel of Italy's boot, we hit the Ionian coast, where industrial plants contrast sharply with the white-sand beaches that lead into Taranto. The city was founded by the Spartans in 706 BC and became a maritime powerhouse. Then the heart of the Greek community, it was the last stronghold to resist Rome. "Taranto was the key to controlling the entire south," Darius explained. "The Romans took it in 272 BC and never looked back."

Taranto is made up of two contrasting parts: the old city, on a small island, connected by a swing bridge to the modern city on the mainland. In the labyrinthine old city, we found two Doric columns, standing lonely beside a block of palazzo-style buildings. These massive pieces of limestone, each roughly 30 feet tall, once anchored the Temple of Poseidon; now, they are all that's left

Heading east, we stopped at **Muro Tenente**, a somewhat desolate archaeological site set among olive groves, where a short stretch of the Via Appia is preserved. This spot is part of a developing green space and bike network that will highlight sites along the route, formally reconnecting this part of the ancient road with the city of Brindisi.

"There are all these new archaeological stopping points that weren't even accessible 10 years ago," Darius told me. "It's like the Appia is still being uncovered, mile by mile."

We followed the final stretch into Brindisi, heading straight to the **F. Ribezzo Archaeological Museum** for a walk through its galleries of bronze statues, ancient anchors, amphorae, and other salvage from Roman shipwrecks. At a tiny piazza near the water, two magnificent Corinthian columns stand atop a staircase as honorific harbor monuments. While we recognized their symbolic importance at the end of the Via Appia, no one else seemed to be paying attention to them. Darius and I sat on the steps overlooking the Adriatic, taking in the flow of people along the promenade, before getting behind the wheel again. Like so many ancient travelers before us, it was time to return to Rome. 🌐



ABOVE "The Blinding of Polyphemus" at Spertonga's archaeological museum.
BELOW The garden pool at Vista Ostuni, with Ostuni's old town in the background.

