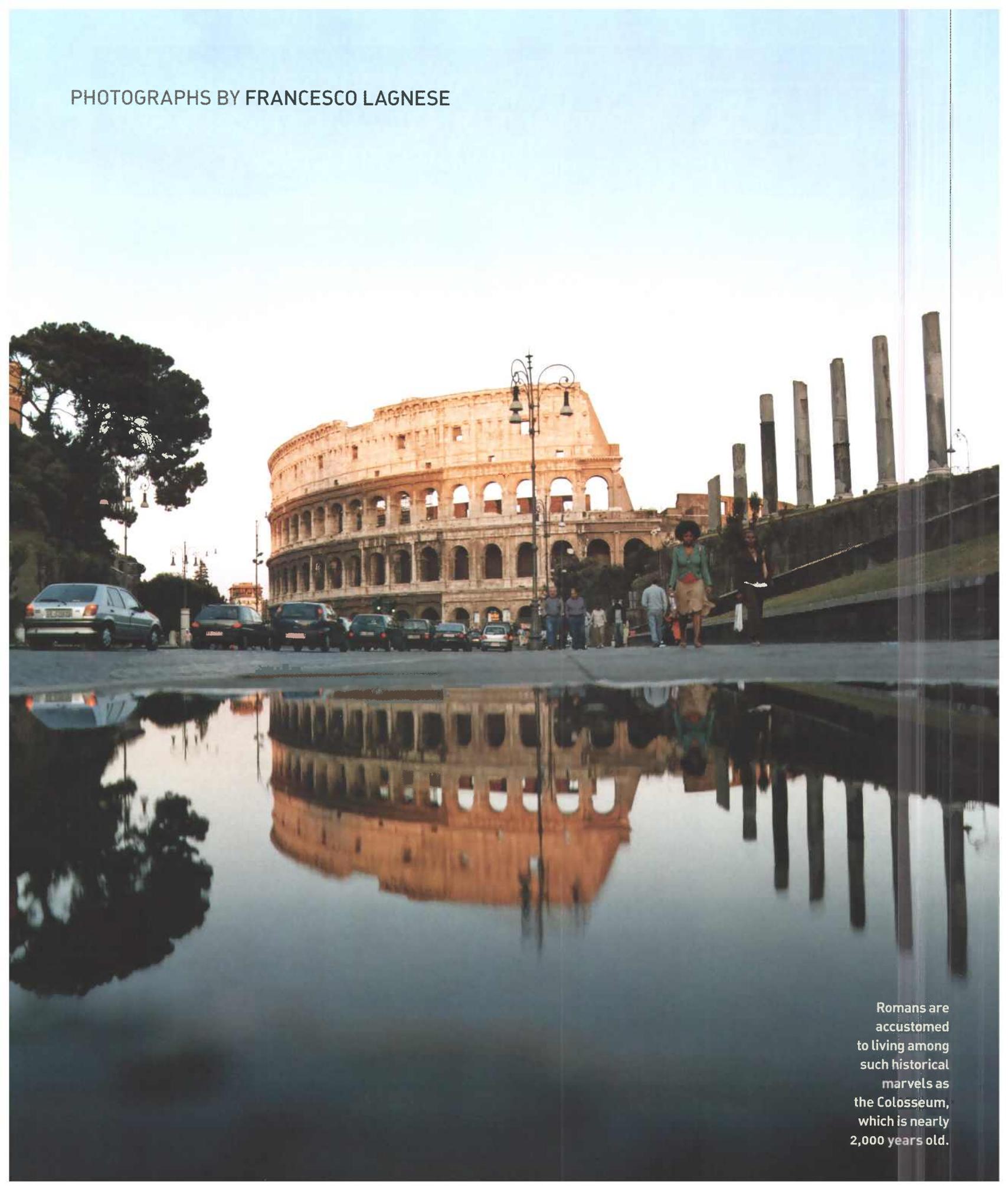


PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANCESCO LAGNESE



Romans are accustomed to living among such historical marvels as the Colosseum, which is nearly 2,000 years old.

# RO

A  
PRIVATE  
LOOK

There's the public  
**ROME,**  
of monuments,  
piazzas and  
antiquities;  
then there are  
the city's palazzos,  
which reveal  
a hidden world  
of splendor  
and opulence.

BY  
ELIZABETH  
HELMAN  
MINCHILLI

# ME

# GUIDE

During the 18th century, men and women of noble rank taking the grand tour used letters of introduction to gain entrance to Rome's villas and palaces, which held some of the world's great art collections. Today, although many once private works have been moved to museums, a surprisingly large number of masterpieces remain tantalizingly behind the gates of residential palazzos. There is, however, one way for travelers to see them: with Count Stefano Aluffi-Pentini, whose company, A Private View of Italy, makes such sites available, pulling strings to reveal Rome's most elusive treasures.

Stefano founded A Private View of Italy eleven years ago, drawing on his knowledge of art history and on his impressive connections among his fellow Roman aristocrats. "Because of my background, I have access to certain collections that are off-limits to others," he explains over coffee in his library, near the Colosseum.

Growing up, Stefano was highly influenced by the academics in his family. "As a boy I was lucky enough to see Rome through the eyes of my grandfather, Bruno Apollonj Ghetti," he recalls. Apollonj Ghetti, a famous archaeologist, was on the team that discovered St. Peter's tomb in the 1940s. "I often used to accompany him on digs in palaces, villas and churches around the city."

Stefano's uncle, historian Fabrizio Apollonj Ghetti, amassed the prints, antique maps and some 18,000 books that line the room we sit in. The library's rare volumes, in particular guidebooks and memoirs by 18th-century travelers, help inspire Stefano's 21st-century itineraries, which are based on hours

of painstaking research. He completely customizes each one.

"We spend a lot of time with our clients working out the specifics by phone and fax," Stefano says. "From the minute you hit the ground, we anticipate and arrange everything: transportation, guides and more." Most of his clients—among them the trustees of the American Academy in Rome and of the World Monuments Fund—request excursions lasting a few days to a week. Prices vary considerably, depending on the logistics. Although Stefano oversees every detail, members of his staff of fellow art historians (which includes, naturally, a titled docent or two) usually lead the trips. He recently organized an event for the trustees of London's Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation during which they made a candlelight visit to the grotto of the Cumaean Sibyl, at Lake Avernus, and sailed from Naples to Palermo.

Stefano usually caters to groups of twenty or more, but today he agrees to arrange a special one-day tour of Rome for me alone. I give him simple parameters: I wish to focus on Baroque interiors, but I also want to see a garden or two and meet local artisans. Above all, I want to be surprised. Since I've lived here for almost twenty years and have even written a book called *Private Rome*, I doubt he can meet this last criterion. Relishing the challenge, Stefano assures me that what we see will amaze me.

We set out on a sunny spring day. Following his usual procedure, Stefano chooses a mode of transportation to fit the journey. Although he may use a horse and carriage in Sicily or a river barge in Syracuse, today we will ride on his red Vespa. "For speed," he explains. "If we are to pack in everything in one day!" I climb on behind him.

"Rome is all about continuity," Stefano declares as we head out into the city's notorious traffic. "The past and present overlap in a way that's intriguing and unique." He underscores his point by weaving among the Fiats circling the Colosseum.

As we park the Vespa on Via XX Settembre outside the gates of the Palazzo Barberini, I think with slight disappointment, Ah, just another visit to a museum. Pope Urban VIII commissioned the palace in the 17th century, and Carlo Maderno designed it; Bernini and Borromini later altered it. The main building, which the government acquired in the forties, houses the exceptional Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, two of whose masterworks are Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* and Raphael's *La Fornarina*.

Many grand residences in Europe have long since been turned into museums, but Stefano explains that the situation in Rome is much different. "Of all European cities, this one has the most historic palaces and villas still in private hands," he says as we walk across the portico. "This is because in Italy, the papacy was elected. Each time there was a new pope, another family came to power and was able to commission incredible buildings. Amazingly enough, many of the descendants still own and live in these."

I am more than a little confused, since I assume that the Barberini family no longer resides here. As we talk, Stefano leads me down the imposing halls and out to a hidden garden. Soon we are knocking on the door of a building nestled in the garden's farthest corner. To my astonishment, the door is opened by a

**A PRIVATE VIEW OF ITALY**

Stefano Aluffi-Pentini, third from left, and his team of art historians guide travelers into the spectacular inner sanctums of important families.





woman Stefano introduces as Princess Giovanna Barberini.

"Welcome," our hostess says graciously, ushering us into her library. The room, which boasts 16th-century frescoes, has a lofty ceiling and hand-carved bookcases that hold her husband's collection of rare volumes. My eyes go to a wall on which hangs a remarkable 17th-century tapestry depicting the family coat of arms. After seeing the rest of the home, including an intimate flower-filled courtyard and a divine salon, we are on our way again.

"This is the Rome I try to share with my clients," says Stefano as we climb back on his Vespa. This time we proceed to the home of one of his childhood friends. It's no ordinary house, of course, but an immense palace: the Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, on the Piazza del Collegio Romano, southeast of the Pantheon. Containing major works by Raphael, Caravaggio and Velázquez, its picture gallery, which is open to the public, remains the most important private collection in Rome if not in Europe. Forty-two-year-old Prince Jonathan Doria Pamphilj receives us in the Galleria degli Specchi, or Hall of Mirrors, where, true to the room's name, Baroque mirrors in glittering gilt frames line the walls. Stefano frequently organizes exclusive dinners and concerts here after the public has left for the day.

Our next stop, the Palazzo Colonna, just a few blocks away, is equally spectacular. I live almost in the shadow of this splendid palace and have often longed to explore it. Although the painting collection is open to the public one day a week, the Colonna family, which has lived on the grounds for more than a thousand years, rarely receives visitors curious to view the other interiors.

Commissioned by Pope Martin V in the 15th century and completed in the 18th, the palace has glorious staterooms and the famous Galleria Colonna. We go straight to the gallery, which rivals the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles for magnificence. While I marvel at the frescoes celebrating the lives of the Colonna family, Stefano quickly approves the tables that have been set up for a dinner he is giving here tonight. We proceed to the Sala della Musica, where his guests will attend a concert beforehand.

"The quartet, which includes someone playing an antique harpsichord, will perform a piece by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi that may have been played in this very hall in the 18th century," says Stefano. "It's exciting, and a real privilege, to be able to create events that incorporate music and instruments from the same period as the palace itself!"

Afterward we take a break for a much needed midmorning cappuccino at the renowned coffee bar Natalizi, on the Via Po near the Villa Borghese. Stefano piques my curiosity by telling me that he next wants to show me artisans at work on a project for the palazzo we've just seen. We motor west, across the river, to Trastevere, one of Rome's oldest and least known neighborhoods. For years Trastevere was the domain of artisans and small-scale manufacturers. Today it is predominantly residential, but workshops survive. In a small building not far

**PALAZZO COLONNA**  
**The Sala di Pranzo, or dining hall, is among the most luxuriously decorated rooms in the palace. Gilt-framed frescoes by Pomarancio, Giovanni Baglione, Jacopo Zucchi and other 16th-century artists adorn the ceiling.**

from the Tiber, we are ushered through the heavily fortified portal of one of them: Ditta Paolo Medici & Figlio.

"Ditta Medici has been restoring Rome's marble since 1838," says our hostess, Priscilla Grazioli Medici, the latest member of the family to oversee the vast workshop. The rooms reveal works in progress, with every available surface covered in brilliantly colored marble pieced into intricate geometric designs. "This is for a private chapel at the Vatican, and this is for the Palazzo Colonna," says Medici, indicating marble paving waiting to be delivered and installed. "But we also have a 'ready-to-wear' line that we sell by the square meter. We realize that not everyone has to pave a ballroom, so we offer smaller versions of the same patterns."

Our last palace is the Palazzo Massimo di Pirro, on the centrally located Corso Vittorio Emanuele, where Eleonora Sem-mola Coppa Solari takes us on a tour. As we stroll through her home's *piano nobile*, or second floor (traditionally the most richly decorated), the princess gestures toward mythological scenes in a frieze that surrounds the ceiling of the salon. "The 16th-century frescoes are by the school of Giulio Romano," Coppa Solari explains. "They were in horrid shape when my mother decided to have them restored. Luckily for us, even though the restorers were working on Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes at the time, they were able to come here every afternoon once they had finished at the Vatican."

These frescoes and the 1st-century mosaic in the next room make me believe that we have wandered into a museum. But the Palazzo Massimo di Pirro, like all the palaces we have visited, is still very much a family home, as is made clear when Coppa Solari's six-year-old son kicks a bright red plastic ball from one end of the ballroom to the other.

"So now are you convinced that there is a Rome that even you don't know?" Stefano asks teasingly as we leave. I have to admit that yes, the interiors we have seen so far have been a revelation. "Now we will finish with a visit to Santa Croce," he says as we travel southeast, away from Rome's center. The church, which is somewhat off the beaten track, houses a famous 15th-century fresco cycle and what is said to be a fragment of the True Cross. But we head to a small door that breaches the thirteen-foot walls to the right of the church's façade. I have passed Santa Croce many times but have never noticed these ancient walls, which, Stefano explains, *(continued on page 140)*

**"COMMISSIONED BY POPE MARTIN V IN THE 15TH CENTURY, THE PALAZZO COLONNA HAS GLORIOUS STATEROOMS."**



## PALAZZO DORIA PAMPHILJ

The Sala Aldobrandini features Hellenistic statues and 18th-century paintings. **OPPOSITE:** Prince Jonathan Doria Pamphilj in the Galleria degli Specchi, the Hall of Mirrors, which dates from the first half of the 17th century. The ceiling, painted by Aureliano Milani, depicts the fall of Hercules.



**NATALIZI**

The popular coffee bar serves delectable cappuccino, **OPPOSITE**, and tarts, including one made with tiny wild strawberries, called *fragolini*, **THIS PAGE**.







**PALAZZO COLONNA** The Sala del Baldacchino, the throne room, is where Maria Mancini, the wife of Prince Colonna, held audiences in the 17th century.

**PALAZZO BARBERINI** Princess Giovanna Barberini, OPPOSITE, sits in her library before a 17th-century tapestry designed by Jacopo della Riviera.





**PALAZZO MASSIMO DI PIRRO**

**OPPOSITE:** Eleonora Semmola Coppa Solari in her 16th-century salon. Her two sons, aged four and six, think nothing of playing ball on a 1st-century mosaic floor. **THIS PAGE:** An ancient cobbled street in Trastevere.





**PALAZZO COLONNA** The Sala della Fontana, named for the marble fountain in the foreground, is part of the palazzo's private apartments. Renaissance artist

Pinturicchio designed the ceilings, and the landscapes on the walls were painted by Gaspard Dughet or Crescenzo Onofri. **OPPOSITE:** The Appian Way, built in 312 B.C.



## ROME: A PRIVATE LOOK

(continued from page 87) were once part of an amphitheater.

As we pass through the doorway, the chaotic city melts away and we find ourselves in a paradise. Birds sing, butterflies flutter, and the air is perfumed with roses, jasmine and mint. We are in the most perfectly laid-out vegetable and flower garden I have ever seen, with everything symmetrically planted on either side of a white gravel path. Although our day has been full of impressive surprises, I am struck speechless.

"It's very special, isn't it?" says Father Simone Fioraso, who has kindly agreed to show us around; he can see the awe in my face. I soon find out that it was Father Simone's huge efforts that brought this formerly neglected garden back to life.

"The church itself was built on the ruins of an ancient Roman villa," Stefano says. "This included a round amphitheater. Over the centuries, this protected space became the monks' garden. It was only in the past century that modern life intruded. They've cleared it all out, and it now reflects what the monks probably had in mind."

At each spot on our journey, Stefano has regaled me with fascinating insights into the histories of important Roman families. At first I was thrown by his tendency to refer to them in the present tense; for years I have read about the Barberinis, the Colonnas and the Dorias in history books. But today I have not only met some of them but had a peek into their private worlds. "Are you beginning to sense the wonderful continuity?" Stefano asks.

As we wander along the path that bisects the garden, I can't help myself and bend down to pick a strawberry. I pop it into my mouth and savor its incredible sweetness. It's hard to believe I'm still in Rome. We make our way to a wooden door leading to a narrow staircase, which we climb to reach a terrace. On one side is a bird's-eye view of the garden sanctuary; on the other, a glorious vista of domes, bell towers and rooftops spreads out before me. When Stefano picked me up this morning, I thought I knew Rome intimately. Now I realize that there is so

much I have yet to discover about this marvelous multilayered city.

*A Private View of Italy: 40 Via Polveriera; 011-39-06-474-1985.*

### EXPLORING ROME

#### GALLERIES

Certain rooms in the following palazzos are open to the public.

**Galleria Colonna** Works by Tintoretto and Veronese, among others, in a magnificent setting. *Open Saturday from 9 to 1. 17 Via della Pilotta; 011-39-06-679-4362; www.galleriacolonna.it.*

**Galleria Doria Pamphilj** Superb selection of Renaissance and Baroque art, including paintings by Titian, Raphael, Velázquez and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. *Open Friday through Wednesday from 10 to 5 or by appointment. 2 Piazza del Collegio Romano; 011-39-06-679-7323; www.doria-pamphilj.it.*

**Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica** Part of Palazzo Barberini, containing works by Raphael, Andrea del Sarto and Caravaggio. *Open Tuesday through Sunday from 8:30 to 7:30. 13 Via della Quattro Fontane; 011-39-06-481-4591; www.galleriaborghese.it.*

#### BOOKSTORE

**Studio Bibliografico la Linea d'Ombra** A favorite of Stefano's; he loves to peruse it for antiquarian titles and rare guidebooks to help plan his itineraries. *2 Piazza Campitelli; 011-39-06-6994-0674; linombra.it.*

#### CHURCH

**Santa Croce in Gerusalemme** Consecrated in 325, with a Baroque façade and artful Cosmatesque paving dating from around the 12th century in the interior. *12 Piazza di Santa Croce in Gerusalemme; 011-39-06-701-4769.*

#### MARBLE WORKSHOP

**Ditta Paolo Medici & Figlio** The ultimate source for marble flooring. Used by the Vatican. *32 Via dei Papareschi; 011-39-06-556-1646; dittamedici.it.*

#### COFFEE BAR

**Natalizi** Known for its excellent pastries (try the brioche filled with orange marmalade). *124 Via Po; 011-39-06-8535-0736.* ❖

## REALLY CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

(continued from page 129) chimp who sent *Today's* ratings soaring when he became a regular on the show, in the 1950s, had to be taken off the program even earlier, at about five, because he was too rambunctious. I learned about chimps firsthand during the initial four days of my Uganda journey, getting an intimate look at them in captivity and in the wild.

My first stop after I flew into Entebbe was the Ngamba Island Sanctuary, in Lake Victoria. Founded in 1998, this haven for orphaned chimpanzees is home to thirty-nine chimps who were confiscated from poachers and who spend their days roaming the hundred thickly wooded acres. Because the chimpanzees' forest dwellings have been cut down for lumber and farmland and because the animals have been hunted for trophies, meat and the pet trade, there are slightly fewer than 5,000 in Uganda, a number that reflects a drop in population of nearly 90 percent over the past 500 years. Today in Uganda, it is illegal to kill, capture or own this endangered species, and with this protection the number of chimps appears to be growing, albeit very slowly.

Any visitor can take the hourlong boat ride from Entebbe to Ngamba Island to watch the chimps being fed. But as an A&K guest, I am one of the lucky few allowed to sleep over so I can go for a morning walk in the forest with the youngest chimps. After spending the night in a spacious safari tent, listening to the crescendoing pant-hoots of the chimps, I rise early to watch them have breakfast. The young ones tip bowls of milk into their mouths, and the adults eat *ugali*, a polentalike staple of the East African diet.

After breakfast it's showtime. Stany Nyandwi, the head caregiver, unlocks a gate, and another guest and I enter the forest. Nyandwi tells us to stand still so the young chimps emerging from the huge cage where they sleep can check us out. Yoyo, a seven-year-old female, effortlessly scales my back and wraps her long arms around my neck. Once she's settled, she begins grooming my chest while smacking her lips with gentle *pfft* sounds as she picks pieces of dirt from my shirt. "Yoyo loves to be carried," Nyandwi says. "If you