

TRAVELLER'S TALE

NO PLACE LIKE ROME



DANIEL TULLY TRAVELLED TO ROME TO SEE CELTIC FC AND EXPLAINED THE EXTENT MANY FANS GO THROUGH TO SEE 'THEIR' TEAM PLAY IN EUROPE

It was 4am and the sound of my alarm woke me from my light sleep. Whilst the rest of my street lay silent on this chilled, crisp morning - it was time for me to start my European away trip. Awaiting myself, my brother and friends was an extensive three-legged journey from Edinburgh > Dublin > Naples and finally onto Rome.

From the very moment the Europa League group stage draw was made, plans were already in full motion.

Which game do we pick? What is the best option? The most conspicuous choice was to visit the Eternal City to see Celtic take on the might of the Aquilotti - yes, it's Lazio.

A lesson you learn when wanting to watch your team play abroad is to act both shrewdly and efficiently. From the second the dates of fixtures are confirmed, flight prices spike rapidly. When supporting a team with such a large traveling support such as Celtic, this trend only gets worse. Outward



journeys can become ludicrously long just to keep costs down - hence my own crazy travel plans. Yet, it's always a small sacrifice to make in the grand scheme.

With a quick jaunt across the Irish sea from Edinburgh, we entered a five-hour long layover in Dublin. It was here you began to see the congregation of fellow supporters ready to make the same trip - albeit via various different routes. With time on our hands the only thing to get us



Green army: The Celtic fans enjoy some Italian hospitality ahead of their match at the Stadio Olimpico.



through the wait for the help of the infamous local barge. A good few exquisitely priced pints were devoured and we were ready for our flight to Naples.

This flight was awash with people dressed in green and white attire with those in and around my row willing to exchange some good banter along the way. On landing, we knew we were pushed for time if we were to make our train to Rome. If we wanted any down time in the capital at night, then it was imperative we made it.

The taxi driver who takes us to Napoli Centrale train station has just as poor standard of English as we do his native tongue. Some drunken shouts of "Diego Maradona" and various other Napoli legends seemed to bode well as he expertly navigated the busy Neapolitan streets and cobbles. He bombed it. The train was just barely made.

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The hour-long journey to Rome provided a time for reflection on what awaited us. The reverse fixture had seen Celtic seal a last-minute victory over their Italian counterparts in a pulsating 90 minutes. However, it was the scenes off the field which caught a large part of the headlines. A video emerged of a portion of the Lazio ultra group, the Irinducibili doing nazi salutes down Buchanan Street in Glasgow. This Celtic supporter who robustly spoke out against Lazio's ties to fascism - by displaying various banners including a depiction of former Prime Minister of Italy and fascist leader Benito Mussolini being hung upside down next to the words "Follow your Leader".

This was said to have incensed the Lazio hardcore who have notoriety for being some of the most volatile and violent towards visiting fans (earlier in the year, four Sevilla fans

were wounded in knife attacks by Lazio ultras). Tensions were intensified and this was reflected in the strict safety & travel advice provided by the UK Government and Celtic's hierarchy. Key points included avoiding certain areas within the city, avoiding wearing club colours and being aware of a city centre alcohol ban.

As we pulled into Rome Termini, and headed off to our hostel, there was already a clear indication of the high volume of Celtic supporters within the city. An estimated 10,000 were expected to travel - a quite astounding number. Predications also claimed Celtic fans would eclipse the Lazio support in the Stadio Olimpico. Their home attendances for Europa League matches are surprisingly low and with UEFA's decision to hit the Italian's with a partial stadium closure due to racist chanting, it was sure to impact the crowd even further.

With check-in completed and our bags dropped off, we set about visiting some local bars. Without a definite plan we adopted the actions of many by aimlessly walking in hope of finding a good (preferably Irish) bar with any type of beer on tap. Our first attempt proved inconspicuous as we found a small narrow Irish bar without much atmosphere, no space to breathe. Our brief visit was perhaps encapsulated by an encounter with a very intoxicated man who ended up paying us 20 euros for showing him the way to the toilet.

As a group, we moved on to another Irish bar which was a short distance away in the Termini area. Inside was more of what we were after. Yet another narrow bar, this time packed with hoops supporters, where we huddled round the back of the premise to watch Man City play Atalanta. The walls between bars were the most sobering parts of the evening as we traipsed through the streets past Termini train station. Graffiti on the walls, overflowing rubbish bins and a clear picture of the city's homeless problem was a far cry away from my previous experience of visiting Rome.

It was time to get some much needed rest for the match the next day. In the morning, we decided to head to the Scholar's pub - an establishment which had gained some notoriety as a good place to drink pre-match. As we headed in that direction we thought we'd visit some notable tourist attractions along the way. From the ancient structure of the Colosseum, to the white marbled Altare della Patria, this city has an obscene amount of architectural history, enough to tantalize those with the smallest of interests. It is always a pleasure to witness these finer parts of the city and a huge bonus for us as visiting football supporters.

Celtic are a club founded and deeply embedded with Irish roots. Despite its status for being open to all people, there can be no denying its ties to Catholicism and for many this trip could be deemed a pilgrimage to the sacred heartland of that religion. Just ask the hundreds of fans who held a mass at Pontifical college on the Wednesday morning which was attended by a number of top Celtic officials.

In Scholar's pub, despite holding a max capacity of 100-150 people it felt like the epicentre for the Celtic faithful. The balcony stood draped in Irish tricolours with a sea of hoops tops submerged below. It was great to see Celtic fans ignore the travel advice of not wearing colours and truly regrettable I hadn't brought my own.



Party time: A great night in Rome for the Celtic fans.



Worth the trip: Memories of Rome. Images: Daniel T...



Word must have spread to the Police of our whereabouts as they along with the riot squad assembled outside. The Roman Carabinieri have a reputation for being relentless and heavy handed, however our experience was on the contrary. It was clear they were there for our protection. Perhaps the most surprising part was their relaxed demeanour, particularly to drinking on the streets.

From the pub they escorted hundreds of fans through the Rome streets to Villa Borghese (the pick up point for our bus escort to the stadium). The songbook was in full swing as we paraded past the Spanish Steps - tourists smiling and recording us as we passed. The bus escort was a hugely enjoyable experience as our vast support was given priority through Rome's gridlocked roads.

On arrival to the stadium, the visual of the Stadio Olimpico - one of football's most famous cauldrons was a daunting reminder of the mammoth task awaiting the Scottish champions. The 80,000-seater could lay empty yet still carry an intimidating aura. The Olimpico went under small refurbishments back in 2009 when it hosted the UEFA Champions League Final. With minimal renovation over the years, the one-tier bowled shape stand with the running track offers a traditional/old school kind of stadium.

By Italian law, each ticket must have the name of the holder written on it. This presented a problem for many fans who had bought spares. However, fears of the stringent entry requirements were quickly disregarded at the turnstile. I along with 9,000 Celts were housed in the Curva Sud section behind the goal. In our seats one and a half hours before kick off and in full voice - we were ready for something special. A 7 minute opener from Ciro Immobile initially dampened hopes before being rekindled by James Forrest's bullet equaliser.

Celtic had much of the ball in the second half but were still susceptible to the odd Lazio chance. It looked as though we'd be settling for the point until a quick counter enabled Edouard to slip in his fellow Frenchman, Olivier Ntcham. A sublime chip nestled into the net and just like Olsacer before him, Ntcham had conquered Rome. The scenes in that Curva Sud were enough to make any one of those 'football limb' Twitter accounts become redundant. The ecstasy. People falling down rows. Piled on top of one another.

Long into the night rang the chant dedicated to Pope Francis. And to all of those 10,000 fans who travelled - our visit was truly blessed.

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