

ETERNAL CITY---or Infernal Garage?

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October, they say, is the best time to see Rome. Sunny but cool. And it's true. You should have a good time if you survive the petrol-fumes, get across the many narrow roads safely, and don't have a nervous breakdown from lack of sleep.

*J* Buses and lorries [are allowed to] trundle through the city in hundreds every day belching enormous black clouds of diesel smoke. The trees look tired and half burned-up. On a cloudy day one can see the dull, dirty haze of fumes hanging in the streets. It can't be good for the lungs. Yet Rome is supposed to have the finest climate in the world.

Traffic has improved over the last two years. Cars used to make a target of you if you tried to cross the road, and swerved round you just in time. But now there is a speed-limit (cars are slower than in London, on the whole), and drivers seem tired now of using their cars for self-expression.

Zebra crossings were painted on the roads two or three years ago to make it possible for people to cross the street sometimes, but either because there weren't enough police to impose thousands of fines every day, or because it delayed the city's one-way traffic system, they were more or less dropped from use, though they---and the law regarding them---

are still there. Also, you got people strolling <sup>across</sup> over them---<sup>so that</sup> and fines were needed for the pedestrians as well. The crossings remain now as a kind of legal defence: if a car hits you he's to blame.

But it <sup>is</sup> more than your life is worth to plant your foot on one of these zebra crossings and just walk <sup>as</sup> as you might in London. You would probably get across---Romans are quick and intelligent drivers---but there are more amusing ways of giving <sup>getting</sup> yourself a scare. One thing has changed: the old sense of car-drivers belonging to the privileged and pedestrians to the under-privileged has gone. As combatants you are now on an equal footing, at least.

Cars have totally ruined Rome. The little square outside the Palazzo Borghese, where you could once stand and see why the building was always called 'the harpsichord', because of its subtle curve, is so packed with cars that you can hardly walk in or 'out.' Two streams of traffic roar round the little stone boat in the middle of Piazza di Spagna, where people used to sit and admire the steps leading up to the Trinità dei Monti. The narrow streets in the ~~old Spanish quarter~~---perhaps the most attractive part of the centre, with tiny hotels and delicatessen shops---are fume-traps, and being a shopkeeper in one of them must be slow torture. A year or so ago there was a much-publicised scheme for eliminating traffic from these narrow streets at the centre altogether, but it raised too many problems. There would have had to be a priority-system---priority for doctors, delivery vans, taxis---and in a short time the

priority would have spread in a Roman way: priority-tickets might have been on sale (privately), and in the end one of the left-wing newspapers might have unearthed a public scandal. An old story.

At the recent opening of the Ecumenical Council, when thousands of priests from all over the world came to Rome, the whole of St. Peter's square was lit-up in the evening, and the castle of Sant' Angelo close by (the ancient refuge of the popes, built squarely on top of Hadrian's tomb) was ringed with flaming oil-lamps like a vast wedding-cake. So many cars poured into Rome for the 'homage to the pope' that for four or five hours the whole city echoed with one persistent blaring of car-horns in protest, and all the main streets within a kilometre of the Vatican were choked full. It gave one a preview of what will one day happen throughout the city if car-ownership increases at its present rate.

Two or three years ago there were no fly-over roads or underground passages. There was a great fear of unearthing ancient Roman treasures which would then hold up construction indefinitely while archaeologists arrived from all over the world. But somebody must have got the order to disregard anything ancient that was found: the new roads had to be ready for the Olympics in 1960, and they were built with miraculous swiftness. Immense holes appeared all over Rome, and work went on under floodlights at night. [Ancient things must have been found, since modern Rome is built straight on top of the ancient city.]

This reduced the noise, too. Or rather, it reduced

the fragmentary noise---the bangs, whistles, skids, roars, petulant taps on the ~~hooter~~, which you used to hear. There is more of an homogeneous city-roar now. Also the police tightened up on the law about silencers. At one times-- since an engine that roars gets more appreciation <sup>in Italy</sup> than one that doesn't---it was quite the thing to have your silencer off and make a noise like an aeroplane. People said it was 'gay<sup>er</sup>'. Besides which, it was supposed to save petrol.

[By midday the city is a madhouse.] In the heat nerves get frayed easily: people hardly even look round now if a driver leaps out of his car and stands yelling curses at the man behind him. The buses <sup>at midday</sup> are crammed so full that the doors don't close. As a ticket-man on one of them said the other day, sitting in his little seat near the rear-door, 'I've been sitting here for twenty-five years, and do you wonder I'm looking forward to my old age?' Two-decker buses were planned once, but you only see them at the sea-resorts. Probably they wouldn't be able to manoeuvre the ancient bridges and arches which you could once admire in more or less peace; the massive gates leading into the city at Piazza del Popolo and Piazza Fiume, for instance, are now dark arched shadows hanging over a stream of traffic, hardly getting a glance from anybody.

[And cars are still allowed in St. Peter's square, right up to the steps of the church. This can be particularly nerve-wracking at night when the square is dimly-lit, because there are no traffic-lanes: you can be caught out in the open.]

*Can can still drive.*

You can also ~~drive~~---quite unnecessarily---in the tiny square of the Capitol, which is one of the most consoling and intimate places in Rome, high above the Piazza Venezia. Recently ~~the~~ <sup>a few weeks ago</sup> bishops and cardinals of the Ecumenical Council were invited there for a reception ~~in the late afternoon,~~ <sup>the square was silent except for</sup> and for ~~once~~ the traffic was barred. The difference was astonishing. You could really stand and look at the square. Apart from which the walls, roofs, windows, were lined with flaming oil-lamps as Sant' Angelo had been the first evening, so that the whole square, with its bronze statue of Marcus Aurelius in the middle, looked mellow and warm as it must have done a century or two ago. It gave one a glimpse of the old Rome, which was still more or less intact even ten or fifteen years ago, before the garage-epoch set in. It must have smelt like that in the days before electricity, too---a faint oil-smell from the flaming torches. Our electricity is naked and glaring by comparison, and it makes stonework look naked. You could really see the flaking stone walls for the first time, and the sky was visible over the roofs. You could just see Michelangelo's courtyard through the arched and cobbled entrance of the museum, where the cardinals were going to and fro.

But it isn't like Rome to protect herself against the ravages and discomforts of time. She always seems to get the worst of every epoch---whether it's an invasion of Goths or an invasion of cars. This, people say, is the city's power of survival. It never gets like a museum.

Still, you don't have to be in a museum not to get

asphyxiated or run over. On the other hand, Rome has never been a real city and never will. This is its power over foreigners, perhaps. It has always had the flurry and discomfort of a badly-run small town. Even Catullus complained about the deafening noise.

So it provides the traveller with an element of risk. Perhaps it means to. After all, it may change your life--- if you survive the visit. A worthwhile bargain, perhaps.

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