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Water Wonder

BY TIFFANY PARKS

If there is one thing that the Romans knew, it was water. How to bring it into the city efficiently, how to harness it for agricultural and mechanical purposes, and—perhaps most tellingly—how to use it to display their wealth and power. To the Romans, water was not merely the source of life; their seemingly unlimited access to it was what set them apart from the other great civilizations that had come before them. Ancient Rome was littered with large, impressive “showcase fountains,” which held no other purpose than to exhibit their genius at harnessing the power of water. In a time when water was a precious and hard-to-come-by commodity, their glaring message was: we have so much that we can afford to throw it away.

No other monument in Rome testifies

to their hydraulic accomplishments better than the **Aqueduct Park**. This sprawling green space, at once romantic and rustic, is located just far enough outside the historic center that it remains decidedly off the well-trod tourist path. This is a bonus for travelers who appreciate being the only tourists in sight (sometimes for miles), especially in May, a time of year that sees the Eternal City overrun with visitors, its sites clogged with tour groups and interminable lines. So for an afternoon out of the ordinary, visiting a site that nevertheless represents a vital aspect of Rome’s history and patrimony, the Aqueduct Park can’t be beat.

In 312 BC, Roman censor Appio Claudio Cieco built Rome’s very first aqueduct, an unprecedented feat of engineering fed by a series of underground springs located

in the Alban Hills southeast of the city. By 226 AD, 11 aqueducts, some with multiple branches, stretched across the city, bringing water into Rome from as far as Lake Bracciano in the north and Lake Albano in the southeast. Archeologists calculate that, at the height of the empire, when the city’s population topped one million, over one cubic meter of water was provided daily for each inhabitant, an amount that has never been matched in any other city, in any other moment in history.

Although the vast area of the Aqueduct Park is crossed by the remains of an impressive six aqueducts, Aqua Anio Vetus, Aqua Marcia, Aqua Tepula, Aqua Julia, Aqua Claudia, Aqua Anio Novus, and Acqua Felice, most of them are, sadly, invisible. Many visitors don’t realize that aqueducts ran un-



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derground for the most part, in channels bored through volcanic rock, and were generally raised on arches only as they approached the city, to give the water added momentum.

An exception to this rule is the Aqua Claudia. One of the most monumental aqueducts in Rome, this double-decker conduit is an impressive 69 kilometers long, 14 of which run above ground. The 154 arches, snaking through the Roman countryside, make for a spectacular scene. Sections of the Aqua Felice are also visible throughout the park. This aqueduct is a Renaissance-era reconstruction of the ancient Aqua Marcia. While perhaps not as historically significant as the Claudia, the Felice is nevertheless a visual marvel of engineering, particularly considering it feeds some of the most famous fountains in Rome to this day.

In the 6th century AD, Rome was sacked by the Goths, who broke and in some cases destroyed the aqueducts leading into the city, effectively cutting off Rome's water supply. It wasn't until the Renaissance that the aqueducts began to be repaired and rebuilt, and Rome became, once again, a city of fountains. The evidence of the aqueducts' continued functionality is visible all over the city, from the ubiquitous *nasoni* (the small, fire hydrant-like drinking fountains) that can be found in almost every pi-

azza, to the spectacular "showcase fountains" like the Trevi, a tradition revived by the popes in a bid to rival the greatness of their ancient ancestors. Rome still boasts one of the world's most abundant supplies of potable water, which comes, for the most part, from natural springs and lakes outside the city, just as it did 2000 years ago.



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In addition to being a fascinating archeological site, the Aqueduct Park is also an oasis of nature. Straight lines of majestic umbrella pines can be seen throughout the park, as well as hemlock, poplars, willows, wild alfalfa, wheat, and violets. What's more, right now is the best time of year to visit, as May sees thousands of poppies bloom in the fields that flank the aqueducts, creating a fresh crimson

carpet that contrasts dramatically with the crumbling stone arches. If you come in the early hours, you might even spot a shepherd with his flock as they graze beneath the arches. Then you can easily imagine you've wandered back in time. With its numerous trails, the park is a haven for joggers and bikers alike, and its many wide-open spaces are an invitation to picnickers, so bring a basket and a blanket, and soak up Rome at its most wondrous.



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