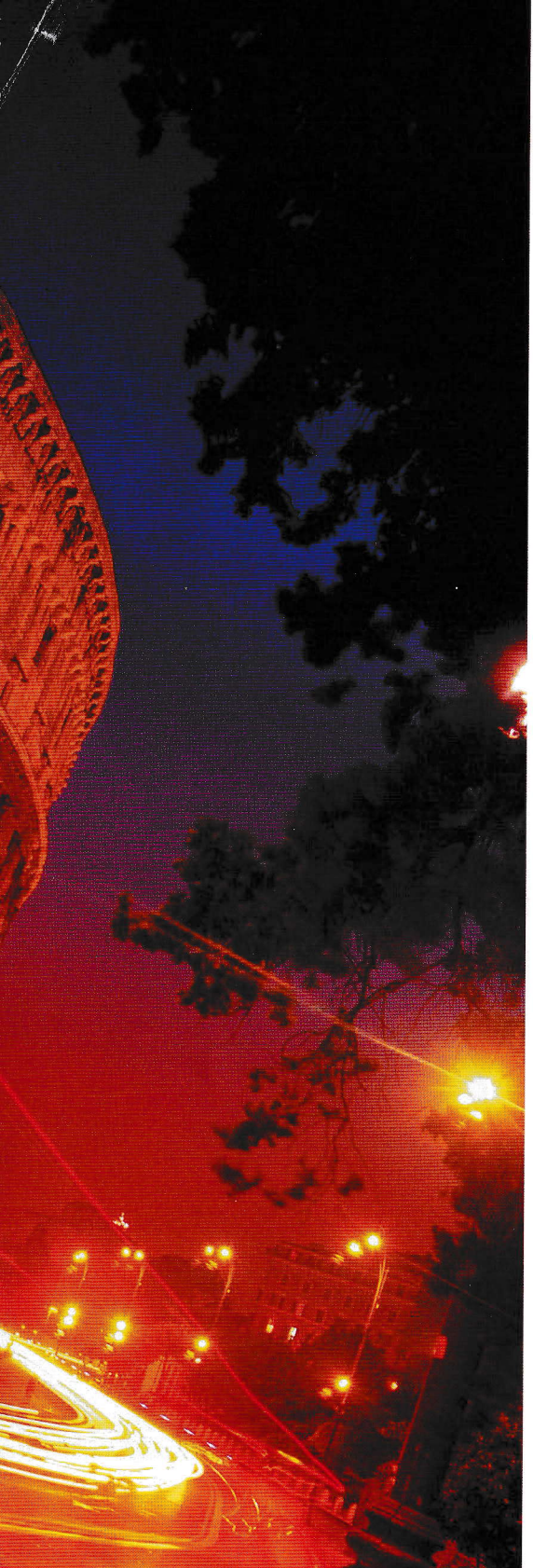


Rome: breathtaking and unexpected

By JACQUI PATERSON

HOT CITY HOT CITY

Rome is breathtaking at every second of the day, but when the sun sets the Eternal City truly comes alive for me.

The bars fill up and live Italian music spills from the cafés. There's a frenetic, happy vibe as tourists and locals mix while Vespas buzz by in the background. There are so many must-sees in Rome, though it is the Piazza Navona late at night that I adore.

Sipping a creamy caffè e latte while overlooking Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers encapsulates everything that is magical about the city. Gorgeous baroque architecture, glamorous Roman women, and wildly gesticulating men. And all backed by the musical lilt of the Italian language.

The first time I visited I wandered the city's cobblestone streets with no clear direction in mind. I'll never forget the excitement of turning a corner and finding myself at the stunning Trevi Fountain.

Now I always recommend that visitors ditch the guidebooks. With every few steps you'll find a stunning piazza, fountain or statue that will take your breath away.

One balmy evening I stumbled across an outdoor opera concert, illuminated with hundreds of tea light candles. It was so unexpected, and so delightfully Italian.

The Colosseum is touristy but still a majestic sight. I prefer visiting in the early afternoon, when the ancient stone takes on a golden glow. In Vatican City I was struck by the elegant, curving colonnades of St Peter's Square.

For shopping, the Spanish Steps are worth a visit if only to peer longingly in the window of Dolce & Gabbana. But I also love to explore the shaded back streets for more affordable boutiques. That's how I found my favourite jacket, made from gorgeously soft leather. But be warned – if you live for shoes and bags you'll never want to leave.