

It was June 1975. Mary and I were looking forward to Rome; particularly after 3 weeks on the road. Our first planned stop this morning in Florence was the post office, however on a weekday Monday there was a disconcerting calm. It was another unexpected public holiday. We got into our 1966 Sunbeam Alpine and found a filling station for petrol and left town.

The Autostrada had ended at Siena and become Highway 2, which lowered our speed but also gave us time to better appreciate the rolling verdant hills. We drove across wide panoramas of high hills, olive groves, dark pine trees and deep plunging valleys. Fleecy clouds scudded across a pale blue sky. It was a great day to be travelling and the country we were crossing looked unchanged since Roman days.

It was about now that I noticed that the fuel gauge was below half. We'd last put petrol in at Florence, some 80 kilometres back. The Alpine didn't have a big tank and we'd been climbing hills most of the morning, often in third gear. Unfortunately though, this area of Italy seemed to be amazingly unpopulated. The tiny hamlets we passed through were too small even to have stores, let alone a filling station.

As we passed through the forgettable place of Acquapendente with just a few crumbling stone buildings and a road sign, I glanced at Mary.

'This is looking a bit grim. Under half a tank and no bloody petrol stations.'

'Maybe you should have put in more at Florence'

'All we could afford was five thousand lire,' I reminded her. 'Remember, it's a public holiday and the banks are closed.'

'How far to Rome?'

'Can you tell me. The road atlas is in the back there.'

Mary pulled out our Philips Road Atlas of Europe and studied it for a while, the book jiggling in her hands with the noisy progress of the sports car.

'There's a town called Viterbo about 16 kilometres ahead. Maybe there'll be a station open there.'

We were skirting a pale sparkling lake that looked volcanic. Bare hills rose around it giving it a strange, almost biblical look. But I was in no mood for scenery. The drive to Rome had become a nail-biting quest to make it before the petrol ran out.

We came into Viterbo, a reasonable-sized town, but again the two filling stations we closed were both taking a public holiday siesta. I cursed the Italians for leaving car travellers without any means of getting fuel. But then we appeared to be the only vehicles on the road. A road sign announced ROMA 70kms. Our fuel gauge was hovering between quarter and halfway. Would we make it?

I began to coast down hills whenever I could to preserve our precious petrol. Luckily for us, we were coming down out of the hills and this was possible more times than not. I barely noticed the countryside, such as it was. Most of my attention, other than the road ahead was glued on the fuel gauge which had now slipped to the quarter mark. Rome was now 42 kilometres ahead.

We made into Rome on a wing and a prayer. Even though it was a public holiday, we had a map and the streets were near empty, we still got lost. However providence smiled on us and we were soon in the Vatican area where cheaper hotels abounded. We arrived there on the last gasp of petrol in the tank.