Inside the caverns making Rome sink

The catacombs and historic quarries of the eternal city are opening to the world above, reports **Tom Kington**

MARCO GRADOZZI; IVANO STRANIERI; MASSIMO PERCOSSI/EPA

The Monteverde quarry was reopened after being sealed and forgotten about in the 1970s. Rome has become the sinkhole capital of Europe, with cars vanishing as the ground suddenly opens. Nobody was injured in this incident

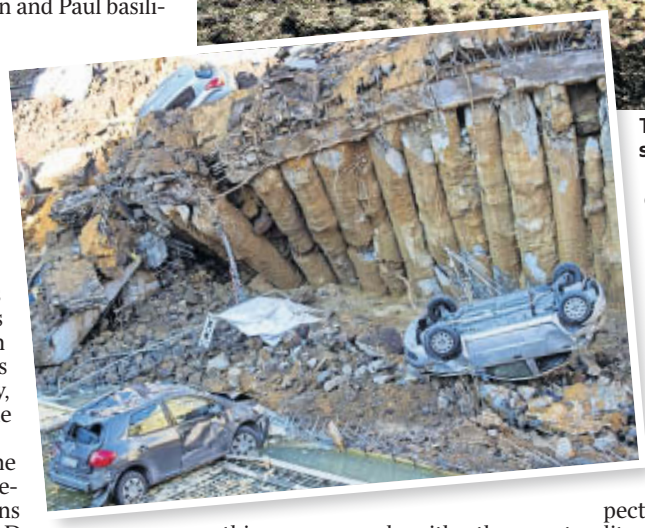
This summer in Rome small groups were being ushered through a door by a church 200 yards from the Palatine Hill to enter a parallel world.

The visitors put on helmets and descended a flight of steps into a labyrinth of dripping tunnels wide enough to hold a Tube train, filled with stalactites. They went deep underground to pools of clear water the size of tennis courts.

"Don't stray or you might get lost down here," the guide warned.

The visits were the first public glimpse of an ancient subterranean quarry started in the 5th century AD, one of hundreds that have been blamed for a growing number of sinkholes that have swallowed cars and threatened to topple buildings.

"There are plenty of sights to see on the surface in this city but the surprises are underground," Marco Gradozzi, a speleologist with Roma Sotterranea, said. The group explored the quarry next to the Saints John and Paul basilica on the Celio hill, which was opened to the public in June.



The ancient Romans dug the quarries to reach rock harder than that on the surface. The quarries are being eroded by underground torrents as climate change brings more storms. Each year 100 new chasms appear in the city, making it the sinkhole capital of Europe.

The quarry under the Celio hill was dug beneath the foundations of a 1st century AD Roman temple, on top of which a four-storey convent now stands. The quarry was a source of tuff, a porous volcanic rock used for building until the 18th century. During the Napoleonic occupation of Rome it was used as a dump for rubble from the Colosseum.

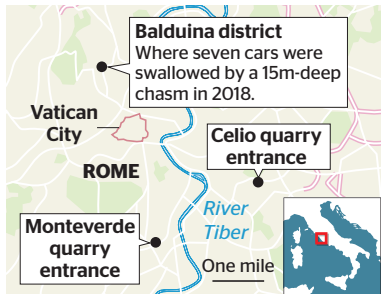
The remaining cavern is big but nothing compared with the next surprise the speleologists have in store for curious Romans — a 350m long quarry deep under the Monteverde neighbourhood.

The site was discovered five years ago when builders digging a garage realised that there was empty space beneath their feet. "We were called in and lowered ourselves on a rope down a drilled shaft," Adriano Morabito, a scuba diver and president of Roma Sotteranea, said.

"We found we were in a cavern with 7m high ceilings. Our torches were not powerful enough to pick out the end of the cavern — it was one of the most exciting moments of my life."

Morabito said the space could have served as the ancient Jewish catacombs that historians suspect are in the area. All traces were obliterated when workers with dynamite began quarrying for rock in 1870 to drive the building boom after Rome became the capital of the newly unified Italy.

During the Second World War the quarry became a bomb shelter, then it was partly filled with rubble from bombed buildings. In the 1950s, developers installed foundation columns in the cavern for the apartment blocks they built above. By the 1970s the cavern was sealed and forgotten.



"Someone got in, perhaps in the 1960s, and got lost," Morabito said. "We found his skeleton in a foetal position."

At the back of a car park on a busy road at the foot of the Monteverde hill, one of the original entrances, since bricked-up, to the quarry was found. Entering through a new opening, visitors will pass the remains of a gramophone and a pasta drainer left from the war before venturing along a ghostly and bewildering network of tunnels blasted out of the rock more than a century ago.

As the temperature falls to a steady 18C, water drips incessantly, humidity swirls and strange, blind spider-like insects that live only underground scrabble over the rocks.

Sections of the ceilings soaring overhead have collapsed, despite the 20th-century concrete columns propping them up. Morabito insisted, however, that the quarry was sound.

"There's 20m of rock between us and the buildings above," he said. "It's safe and this could be the next site we open so Romans can finally see the spaces beneath their feet."

Sardinian blood feud leaves ten dead

Italy
Tom Kington Rome

A murder in a tiny Sardinian village has been linked to a 23-year vendetta between families that has claimed nine other lives, suggesting that an ancient tradition of blood feuds is still thriving on the holiday island.

Luigi Cherchi, a 67-year-old farmer, was shot dead on Thursday while tending his livestock. Investigators believe that Cherchi, one of 300 residents of Noragugume in central Sardinia, may be the tenth victim of a local feud thought to have started with a land row in 1998 which led to the fatal shooting of two of his brothers.

"We are shocked because we thought we had got beyond this kind of violence, but if it is a feud killing it means there are some people who continue to live in the past," Rita Zaru, the mayor, said.

Known for its bustling resorts and beautiful beaches, Sardinia also has a rugged mountainous interior of remote villages where sheep farming is the economic mainstay and disputes over grazing rights or simple insults can trigger violence and leave a trail of blood lasting generations.

As battlelines were drawn up in Noragugume in 1998 after the murder of Cherchi's brothers, local families took sides, with the Nieddus and the Spadas joining the Cherchis to feud with the Corda, Pinna, Marongiu, Falchi and Argiolas families.

Two Corda family members were quickly killed, followed by six more local men including the brother of the then mayor and a village councillor.

The murders paused as the Italian courts entered the fray and handed a life sentence to Cherchi's third brother, Giulio, who was found guilty of the murder of one of the Cordas. After six years on the run he was captured and died in jail last year.

Giampietro Argiolas, who had been accused of one murder and was later acquitted, was gunned down in 2015 yards from the lonely rural spot where Cherchi was killed last week.

Fears are growing that Cherchi's death could prompt another round of murders in Noragugume. It follows a recent murder in the town of Orune, where a bitter feud is thought to have claimed more than 100 lives since it started in 1951. "The population of Orune has sharply declined in the last 50 years as people left because of the feud," Maria Giovanna Fossati, a reporter with the press agency Ansa, said.

"People suspect they won't get justice in the courts, and they often get away with these murders because they are carried out in remote places, often at night or at dawn."

She said that, unlike in Sicilians, Sardinians had never formed mafia-like clans to settle disputes. "The mentality here is 'if I have an enemy I will do it myself'," she explained.

Workmen stumble across hoard of gold coins in wall

France
Charles Bremner Paris

A trove of 17th-century gold coins found in a Brittany manor house is likely to fetch €300,000 at auction.

Three stonemasons came across a small box embedded in a wall in the run-down house at Plozévet, near Quimper. When they opened it coins bearing the head of Louis XIII and XIV tumbled out. They telephoned François Mion, the owner. "I thought it was a joke," he said. A few days later the workers found another stash of Louis d'Or, inside the remains of a pouch hidden on a rafter. "It was quite emotional," he told *Le Télégramme*, the main Breton newspaper.

The 239 coins are from the reigns of Louis XIII and XIV

Mion, 63, and his wife Veronique, 61, reported the find of 239 coins to the mayor, who sent in the gendarmerie and archeological experts. They took possession of the collection, which was found in 2019 but not made public until now. The auction is on September 29.

The coins date from 1638 to 1692. Most are worth up to €2,000 each, but a 1640 Templars Cross Louis is said to be worth €12,000.

The Mions were entitled to the trove as they acquired the manor in 2012, four years before a law that makes the state the owner of archaeological finds on private property. They are sharing the proceeds with the three masons.