

EDITORIAL: When in Rome, don't be an 'ugly American'



Two California tourists have been arrested for vandalizing the Colosseum in Rome.

BRUNO MOSCONI — AP

The Roman Colosseum is no stranger to human misbehavior. From gladiators to car exhaust, the ancient landmark has endured it all.

Still, how shocking is it that two California tourists were arrested over the weekend for carving their initials into the amphitheater with a coin so that they could have a better backdrop for their selfie?

Not only did the lame stunt, which ricocheted across the Internet, resurrect the “ugly American” stereotype that has dogged this country, but the young women, whose names were not released and who are both in their 20s, also made California look like a cradle of cretins.

Which, for the record, we aren't: Just a few months ago, the West Coast was up in arms over another tagger who had vandalized two of California's most treasured landmarks, Yosemite National Park and Death Valley. That woman, who used the moniker “CreepyTings,” remains the subject of an ongoing National Parks Service investigation, and she'd be hard-pressed to find anyone in this state who approves of her alleged misdeeds.

No, the pair who allegedly carved the letters “J” and “N” on the Colosseum's ancient brickwork came from a place where people know better. So why did they tell Italian police, according to the newspaper *La Stampa*, that they didn't think tagging an antiquity would be that big a deal?

Well, not to excuse them, but part of this may be that graffiti has been around a long time. Two years ago, restorers working on a passageway at the Colosseum uncovered, not far from some 1943 scribbles left by “Maria” and “Filippo,” a couple of good-luck phallic drawings left by gladiator fans that are believed to date to the 3rd century.

Part, too, though, may be that in this Instagram age, these antics are attention grabbers. This year alone, viral reports have included Russian tourists posting a porn video shot next to the Pyramids of Giza and two Arizona sisters kicked out of Cambodia for taking digital photos of each others’ backsides as they mooned a sacred site in Angkor Archaeological Park.

The French novelist Gustave Flaubert may have decried the “imbeciles’ names written everywhere” on the monuments of Egypt in 1850, but the only audience for those taggers was other tourists. The problem may be old, but California-born tech has raised it to a new sphere.

So, while we decry these latest monument vandals, at least one world heritage site is trying a new anti-tagging idea. Chinese authorities set aside a piece of the Great Wall of China as a free graffiti zone where visitors can freely scribble.

Better yet, we all ought to be respectful of natural and human-made structures that predate us and that, despite the best efforts of imbeciles among us, will exist long after we’re gone.

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