



Sophie Hay is an archaeologist for the University of Southampton and is based at the British School at Rome. Photo: Sophie Hay

## 'Italy has no money for its heritage'

**Sophie Hay, from the UK, landed a dream job in the 1990s when she was posted to Pompeii to work in the competitive world of archaeology. She speaks to The Local about life in the field and Italy's struggles to finance and maintain its ancient sites.**

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### **What inspired you to be an archaeologist?**

My parents used to take us on holiday and get us to walk up and down hills looking for a column they'd read about. I liked the ruins and the sense of discovery.

The exact moment came when my parents brought me to Rome. We were walking around the forum and there was a woman working under an umbrella in the shade, with her wooden box and leather bag of kit. She was doing a detailed drawing and I looked at the scene and thought, "that's what I want to do!"

### **How did you come to work in Italy?**

I had finished my MA in Roman archaeology at the University of Reading and was recommended to work on the Pompeii Project, which was being

run by the director of the British School at Rome. I arrived in 1997 to study the walls of Pompeii, to document the layers of change and see how much I could learn without making a mess with excavation.

It was fantastic. I was left to my own devices on site and it was pretty formidable as a first job.

### **What was life in Pompeii like?**

One of the nicest things about being on site is getting to spend time in a place, unlike the tourists. You get to know locals and join in the local festivals.

Italians are very open to foreign people studying their culture; Pompeii alone has so many nationalities represented. I think they are very generous with their heritage and understand that they can't do it all.

When I was working in Pompeii there were six earthquakes within a few months; I woke up one morning and my bed was travelling across the room!

My friends were divided over what to do if Mount Vesuvius, which destroyed ancient Pompeii, erupted. One group took the "we're out of here" approach while another group said they would stay - I was with the first group!

### **Now you're based in Rome, what do you do?**

Since 2003 I've worked for the University of Southampton doing geophysics, but I'm based at the British School at Rome.

Geophysics means we use equipment to look under the ground without digging it up. It's a lot cheaper than excavation and we get to cover huge areas of land; we get the big picture while not destroying anything along the way.

We've done entire cities like this, such as Falerii Novi in the north of Rome, where you can even see the column bases in the forum.

### **So archaeology's not all about digging?**

No, a lot of sites we work on never get dug. There are levels to archaeology; people who look at satellite images, then drones that fly over at a lower level. Then there's us surveying the ground and the excavators that find the last detail.

### **What kind of projects do you work on in Rome?**

Projects have been getting smaller and smaller because there's less money; we're doing more projects in shorter amounts of time.

Archaeology has changed hugely; there's zero money for culture and heritage.

We get asked to do projects by the city council, who come to us but they don't have the money. There comes a point when we just do it because we are in Rome and we are research-led - we don't do anything for a profit.

Rome is one of the poorest city councils and we work hard at the British School to raise money and looking for sponsors.

### **Is it still possible for archaeologists to find work?**

It's hugely competitive. Archaeology definitely works on a 'who you know' basis, especially field archaeology. You're not only judged on your academic credentials and your ability.

This is because you're going to be working as part of a team that's going to have to live together for long periods of time, so people want to amass a team that works.

### **With few funds and tough competition, what makes archaeology worth it?**

The utter fortune of doing something that you really love. In archaeology, you really have to feel that passion. I do this five days a week or more - I'd rather have the happiness that comes with it than be an accountant and be miserable!

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