

# See Rome, not just the crowds

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To beat the crowds that were sure to be at the Vatican, I book an early Vatican tour with Presto Tours, one of a handful of companies whose guests are allowed in one hour before the general public.

We begin with the Vatican museums, encompassing more than 11,000 rooms. They're linked by long corridors with the occasional window where you can glance outside and rest your eyes from the ancient statuary, frescoed walls and gilded ceilings.

We move quickly from room to room, stopping briefly to admire the most acclaimed works — the *Appollo Belvedere* with his marble curls and cape, Caravaggio's compelling *Entombment of Christ*, Raphael's masterpiece *The School of Athens*, and a floor-to-ceiling tapestry of the resurrected Christ with eyes and feet that appear to turn and follow us as we pass.

Soon, though, our head start is over. As we move closer to the Sistine Chapel, the floodgates open and we're swept along on an incoming tide of humanity.

This year, more than 5 million people will squeeze into this chapel, craning their necks to gaze up at Michelangelo's famous frescoes.

I consider returning to the Vatican the next day — a Sunday — to join the throngs at St. Peter's Square to see the pope, but another experience changes my mind. Late one afternoon, after a glass of wine with a couple of writing colleagues who live in Rome, we wander into a church I've never heard of. I'm gobsmacked by its beauty.

The ceiling of Sant'Ignazio di Loyola is a clever *trompe l'oeil* that appears to be curved although it is flat. White marble, gold trim and precious stones adorn its massive interior. There are maybe a couple dozen people inside.

I decide to spend my final day visiting lesser-known churches with more elbow room. Early the next morning, I head for the church of Santa Pudenziana, not far from the convent where I'm staying. Its plain exterior belies its attractive fourth-century apse, with what's thought to be the oldest surviving Christian fresco in Rome. St. Peter — the very first pope — apparently lived for several years in a house where the church stands now.

Up the street looms Santa Maria Maggiore, one of the four major churches in Rome, with a dome that's strikingly similar to St. Peter's Basilica. Inside, a gold-embossed ceiling is stunning; the gold is said to be the first that Columbus brought back from America.

Across the piazza and down a narrow side street, the church of Santa Prassede gets even fewer visitors, although it holds a veritable feast of medieval art.

In early Christian churches, glass tiles impressed with gold leaf were used to create pictures and patterns. The mosaics at Santa Prassede glitter in the dim light.

The church of San Pietro in Vincoli is harder to find, but when I do, I come face to face with Moses, or at least Michelangelo's sculpture of the Old Testament leader and prophet. I thought Moses had trouble keeping his tribes in line, but you wouldn't want to tangle with this Moses. He's all rippling muscle.

For my next church, I hop onto the subway to reach San Giovanni in Laterano (St. John's in Lateran), on the outskirts of Rome.

It is this church, not St. Peter's, that is the official seat of the pope. It's an enormous edifice, made more imposing by larger-than-life statues of Christ and his apostles peering down from on high. Inside, the amount of mosaic and marble is simply astonishing.

Nine hours after I began, I end my self-guided tour atop the Spanish Steps at Trinita dei Monti, with its twin bell towers. Evening vespers are underway and the church is filled with worshippers singing a joyful hallelujah. A white-robed priest walks down the aisle flinging holy water over their heads.

I can't get close to Daniele da Volterra's painting *Descent From the Cross*, but the sun is streaming through a window at the back, illuminating Mary's sorrowful face and the limp body of her dead son in *The Deposition* by German sculptor Theodore William Achtermann.

When I catch a drop of holy water on my forehead, I realize this is Rome as the popes probably envisioned it — with faith and art mixed together in all their glory.

*Suzanne Morphet is a freelance writer in Victoria, British Columbia.*



The *trompe l'oeil* ceiling of Rome's church of Sant'Ignazio di Loyola tricks the eye into thinking that the flat ceiling is rounded. The church was built in 1626 and is one of many churches outside the Vatican that are worth a visit.



A close-up of Mary and Jesus after his Crucifixion is from *The Deposition* by German sculptor Theodore William Achtermann.



Mass is underway on a Sunday morning at Santa Pudenziana church in Rome, which has a large Filipino congregation. Note the fresco in the apse.



Mosaics from the 12th century decorate the basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano. San Giovanni was the first church built in Rome.



Rome's earliest churches had plain exteriors but spectacular mosaics inside. This mosaic is at the Chapel of Zeno entrance inside the church of Santa Prassede.

## When you go

Presto Tours' Early Bird Vatican Tour begins at 8 a.m. and includes the Vatican museums, Sistine Chapel and St. Peter's Basilica. Group size is 15 guests or fewer. Cost is about \$100. [prestotours.com](http://prestotours.com)

See the pope on Wednesday mornings from 10:30 to noon in St. Peter's Square (at Castel Gandolfo in August) and Sundays at noon. Tickets for the Wednesday audience can be obtained from the American Catholic Church in Rome. See [www.santasusanna.org](http://www.santasusanna.org). No tickets are necessary for the Sunday blessing.

### Stay

I stayed at a Casa Il Rosario, a convent guesthouse run by the Dominican Sisters of

Charity and booked through Monastery Stays. My large, clean room came with a private bathroom. The convent has a shaded garden and rooftop terrace. My single room, breakfast included, cost about \$90 a night. [monasterystays.com](http://monasterystays.com)

### Eat

A food tour with Eating Italy, run by former Philadelphian Kenny Dunn, introduces guests to authentic Roman eateries, a wine cellar in a former synagogue, an artisanal gelateria and — yes — another church. Santa Maria della Scala once operated a pharmacy for the pope, and you can still see and smell old medicinal potions. \$103 per adult. [eatingitalyfoodtours.com](http://eatingitalyfoodtours.com)



This mosaic of the Virgin Mary is on the side of a church in the Monti district.

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