
Italy / Rome

Rome, the eternal city, is a blend of the ancient and modern, the sacred and the profane, which will keep the visitor interested every minute of the day. Pagan temples and ancient buildings stand beside St. Peter's the seat of Christendom. Museums house master pieces by Raphael and Michelangelo, while outside the congested traffic comes to a standstill.

Rome rose from humble origins to become the capital of the world. Though legend has it that Rome was founded by Romulus in 753 BC, archaeological evidence suggests that the city began as a small farming community about a century before that. As capital of the Roman Empire Rome ruled the world but with the fall of the Empire in the 5th century went into decline and did not recover until the Renaissance, when it emerged as the center of art and culture. During the 19th century the political power of the Papacy was confined to the Vatican and in 1870 Rome became the capital of the newly formed nation of Italy. Rome has only two drawbacks the traffic and the pick-pockets so be careful of your body and possessions.

Climate

Italy's climate is as diverse as its landscape. Along the Italian Riviera it is subtropical, hot summers get hotter the farther south you go, but are mitigated by shore breezes along Italy's 5,000 mile coastline. In Rome spring is usually dry and sunny with temperatures in the 70s. Summers are very hot, temperatures in the high 90s at midday in July/August.

Sights and Museums

Rome is full of churches and buildings and places of historical interest. The most famous church of all being, of course, the San Pietro in Vatican or St Peter's, The greatest church in Christendom and a magnet for pilgrims from all over the world. There is a lift to the roof of the church, which commands a spectacular view. From the roof steps lead to the lantern allowing a close view of Michelangelo's dome. Entrance to the rest of Vatican city is forbidden but from the roof of St. Peter's you can get a glimpse of the gardens. You can also take a special bus from the Piazza San Pietro through the Vatican gardens to the Vatican Museum housed largely in the Vatican Palace where you will also find the Cappella Sistina or Sistine Chapel containing Michelangelo's Last Judgement.

Castel Sant'Angelo; built originally as a mausoleum for the emperor Hadrian and his family. Because of its strategic position it was used as a fortress from the 3rd century on. Subsequently it was used as a papal residence, a prison and a military barracks. It was restored early this century and is now open to the public.

Colosseo; This massive structure dates from Roman times and was originally called the Amphitheatrum Flavium. It could accommodate 50.000 spectators, in the arena animal fights, gladiator contests and athletic games were held.

Foro Romano the ruins of the center of religious, political and commercial life of ancient Rome.

Trastevere: a lively and increasingly fashionable district "across the Tiber" of narrow streets and small houses and squares. It was traditionally the home of artisans and dock workers, and the inhabitants claim to possess a more ancient and purer Roman ancestry than residents on the other side of the Tiber.

Please note that many museums are closed on Mondays

Theatre and Nightlife

There is a variety of bars, nightclubs, discos and music venues to suit all tastes. Theaters usually present productions of the classics, eg Eliseo (Via Nazionale 183).

The Sistina (Via Sistina 129-130) features musicals and international variety acts. For movie-goers, the Pasquino (Vicolo del Piede 19a, off Piazza S Maria in Trastevere) is one of the few cinemas which show English language films in the original.

Note that in bars and cafes anything eaten or drunk sitting down at a table is much more expensive (sometimes a three times as much) than something bought at the bar and eaten standing up.

Shopping

Shopping hours are generally from 9 am to 1 pm and 3.30 or 4 to 7.30 or 8 pm. Most shops close on Sundays and many also on Monday mornings. The best (and most expensive) shops are situated in the streets around the Piazza di Spagna. These include top outlets for fashion wear, shoes, jewellery, furs and leather garments and accessories. The Via Coronari is famous for its antique shops selling furniture, silver, jewellery, pictures, etc, and a similar selection can be found along the Via del Babuino. There is also a small shopping area near the Pantheon which is less expensive.

Excursions

Ostia Antica (at about 25 kilometers from Rome). The remains of this ancient port of Rome are a must for anyone with an interest in ancient history and archaeology. It was founded in 300 BC and soon became a prosperous trading center. At the height of the Roman Empire it supported a population of over 100,000 people. Excavations were started in the 19th century. Works of art recovered from the site are on display in a small museum.

Tivoli/Villa Adriana Full day excursion, Spend the morning exploring the Villa Adriana and then the afternoon in Tivoli. The Bagni di Tivoli is a small spa town at about 20 kilometers from Rome. It has hot springs, baths and sulphurous waters which are supposed to have healing properties. 3 kilometers beyond the town is Hadrian's Villa (Villa Adriana) built in AD 125-134 by the Emperor Hadrian on his return from an extensive tour of his Empire. There is a model of the layout of the site in a room beside the cafe/gift-shop which is worth studying before exploring the ruins.

After visiting the Villa Adriana, return to the Via Tiburtina and turn right. At about 35 kilometers' distance from Rome you will find Tivoli, a small town and popular holiday resort for Roman in past centuries. The major attraction here is the Villa d'Este, a former Benedictine convent. You enter through the cloisters of the old monastery. There are beautiful gardens filled with magnificent cascading fountains.

Bracciano and Lake Bracciano. Full day excursion. Leave Rome by the Porta del Popolo travel along the Via Flaminia to the Piazza Appolodoro, take the Corso di Francia to the right, cross the Tiber and go left into the Via Cassia Nuova. At about 40 kilometers from Rome you will find the Town of Bracciano set on the hillside above the lake. The town's castle dates from 1485 and there are guided tours every hour (Tue/Sat). The lake is in an extinct volcanic crater and there are bathing places and restaurants along the shore.