



The Vatican's Brand New Tourist Attraction

by Lucy Gordan | Travel | 0 comments



Print of Castel Gandolfo

By now everyone knows that Pope Francis lives simply in the Casa Marta guesthouse and not in the elegant Papal Apartments



Castel Gandolfo today

overlooking St. Peter's Square where he does, however, receive important guests and bless the crowd below during the Angelus on Sundays at noon. Being a workaholic, he prefers to stay in Vatican City during Rome's stultifying summers. He says he's too busy to escape the heat and "vacation" in the 136-acre papal summer residence, known as the Pontifical Villas. It's located 25 kilometers to the southeast in the hilltop town of Castel Gandolfo overlooking the volcanic crater Lake Albano. (By way of comparison the Vatican City State is 109 acres).



Lake Albano

As part of his program for a Church whose doors are wide open, last summer Pope Francis ordered Antonio Paolucci, Director of the Vatican Museums, to open the Barberini Garden at the Villas to public tours. During the past year he went one step farther. He told Paolucci that, since he had no intention of spending his summers in Castel Gandolfo, to open the Pontifical Villas as well and to make them accessible by train from Vatican City.

So starting on September 12 and running every Saturday all-year long the Vatican Museums has organized two tours,

starts at 8 AM with a two-hour audio-guided visit to the Vatican Museums (with no waiting in line for entry) and the Sistine Chapel. The Museums' tour is followed by a one-hour audio-guided walk through the Vatican Gardens and a one-hour train ride from Vatican City's railroad station to Albano Laziale.

This new "Full Day in the Vatican" tour will be the first time the Vatican train station has offered a regularly scheduled passenger train. The last pope to leave from here was St. John XXIII when he traveled to Loreto and Assisi on October 4, 1962, on the eve of the Second Vatican Council. His trip marked the first time a pope had left the Vatican since 1857, when Pius X declared himself a "prisoner" after the loss of the Papal States.



Main entrance to the Pontifical Villas



Gardens at Pontifical Villas

From Albano Laziale shuttle buses transfer visitors to the Pontifical Villas in nearby Castel Gandolfo where at 12:30 a mini-



Gardens at Pontifical Villas

train awaits them for a one-hour tour of this 136-acre property, which includes three palaces, the ruins of the summer villa of the first-century Roman emperor Domitian, olive orchards, and greenhouses as well as the formal gardens. The mini-train also drives past the tiny helipad where Pope-emeritus Benedict XVI, who'd moved to the Pontifical Villas after resigning, greeted Pope Francis soon after his election, as well as a working farm that raises cows, hens, rabbits, ducks, and bees. After the gardens the tourists go indoors to visit the new portrait gallery in the Apostolic Palace. It's the first time the Apostolic Palace, which houses the still-private papal apartments and the observatory dome of the Pope's Jesuit astronomers, has officially opened to the public.

The six rooms of the portrait gallery feature oil paintings of the popes dating back to the 16th century and their vestments, "*sedie gestorie*" or portable chairs, thrones, a gold and silver desk set used by pope Pius VIII, and even Pope Clement XII's enormous slippers. It also boasts mannequins wearing the fancy clothing of the one-time papal court-officially abolished in 1968 by Pope Paul VI.

The tour ends at 1:30 and from then on there's free time for lunch and a wander around town until 4:45 when the shuttle returns to the Albano Lazio station for the train leaving at 5:18 for Rome's station "San Pietro" just outside the Vatican City walls.

meeting point is the Rome's "San Pietro" station at 10:45. Once at Castel Gandolfo's railroad station you must reach the town's main square, Piazza della Libertà, on your own. The tour of the Apostolic Palace lasts from noon to 1:30. Free-time lasts from then until 5:10 at Castel Gandolfo's station which you must reach on your own. Train for Rome's "San Pietro" station departs 5:24.



Giovanni Pagnanelli's when it opened

Neither tour has wheelchair accessibility; both are inadvisable for people with ambulatory problems. In both cases wear very comfortable shoes. For now the audio guides are available in English, Italian, and Spanish.

For excellent lunches I recommend first-hand "La Gardenia" and "Pagnanelli". Both have large terraces with magnificent views overlooking Lake Albano. Reservations are recommended. "La Gardenia" is TripAdvisor's no. 1 choice; "Pagnanelli" is

TripAdvisor's No. 2 choice; both have TripAdvisor's Certificate of

Excellence. "La Gardenia" specializes in family parties and fish dishes. Closed on Monday. Founded in 1882 by Giovanni Pagnanelli, "Pagnanelli", next door to the Pontifical Villas, is now run by the fourth generation of his family. The most unusual dish of its extensive menu is fried wisteria. Sommelier courses as well as cooking and bread-making are offered here. On display in its well-stocked wine cellars are collections of antique corkscrews and coffee grinders. Open everyday.



Pagnanelli's today

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