

INSIDE (AND JUST OUTSIDE)THE VATICAN: PRACTICAL TIPS

by Lucy Gordan | Travel, Travel blog



An aerial view of the Vatican, photo by
Stefan-Meier

Rome/Vatican City, Easter Sunday 2007.

It takes only about 45 minutes to make a complete trek around walls of Vatican City, the world's smallest independent country of 44 hectares, or 108.7 acres. There's a lot more to explore here than St. Peter's, the Sistine Chapel and the Vatican Museums, all well-explained in guidebooks, especially if you plan in advance.

Open from 7 AM-7PM St. Peter's is the only church in Rome not to close at lunchtime. Free tours in English leave every day at 3 PM from the information desk in the porch.

Founded by Pope Julius II in 1506, the Swiss Guards are the oldest military corps in existence. Brief changing ceremonies are held each day under the Bell Arch, every hour on the hour from 8 AM until 6 PM. Alternatively at the Bronze Door it's every two hours on the hour from 8 AM until 6 PM, with one extra at 7 PM.

For a blessing face-to-face from Pope Benedict XVI, request free tickets to ceremonies or to a Wednesday audience in writing, to Archbishop James Harvey, Prefettura della Casa Pontificia, 00120 Vatican City, or by FAX 011-39-06 (the prefix from USA to Rome) followed by the local number -69885863. Specify your name, the date, the liturgical ceremony and the number of tickets requested.

Tickets, usually available but not guaranteed, must be picked up no later than the day before the event at the Bronze Door. It's at the end of the right-hand arm of Bernini's colonnade as you face St. Peter's.



Swiss Guards, photo by Stefan Meier

Seating is by section, not seat number, so arrive at least one hour in advance. For midnight masses, no matter what the season, dress warmly especially when it comes to footwear.

A 90-minute guided tour of the pre-Constantine cemetery underneath the crypt of St. Peter's, where archeologists believe St. Peter is buried, must also be booked in advance: FAX -69873017 or scavi@fsp.va. Specify the names of participants, preferred date, your mother tongue, group size (no admittance to children under age 14), and alternative dates.

Reservations will be confirmed. Tickets: 10 euros (\$13.50) per person. Pay at the door.

Though, once again, you pay (12 euros – \$15.00 per person) at the door, it's wise to reserve your two-hour tour of the Vatican Gardens to guarantee your language choice. For groups FAX -69883578; individuals FAX -69885100. Every day

except Wednesday and holidays at 10 AM you leave by minibus from the Information Office for Pilgrims and Tourists in St. Peter's Square. Bring your passport.

Since February 12, 1931 Vatican Radio (3 Piazza Pia, near Castel Sant'Angelo) has been broadcasting in 33 languages to 100 countries. To arrange for a free one-hour tour, telephone -69883045.

Once another free sight in Vatican City was the Stamp and Numismatic Museum, when it was first located in the polychrome marble railroad station built by Mussolini and last used in 1962



Statue of St. Peter, photo by Lucy Gordan



photo by Lucy Gordan

during Pope John XXIII's reign. From September 2007 the Museum will move to rooms in the Vatican Museums. On display will be every issue of Vatican City State stamps, postcards, aerograms, and coins.

Vatican stamps (separate from Italy's) are a favorite souvenir. Buy current ones at the Post Office in the museums or the three in St. Peter's Square (8:30 AM-7 PM weekdays, 8:30 AM-6 PM Saturdays) and collector's editions at face value from the Philatelic Service in the *Governatorato*, or government office building (9 AM-noon).

Postal rates are the same as Italy's, but you must buy Vatican stamps to mail from Vatican City. Don't confuse the Vatican's yellow mailboxes with Italy's red ones.

Sister Silvana runs the Ufficio Benedizioni on Via del Pellegrino to the right of St. Anne's Gate (10 AM-noon). Here you can choose from some 20 different types of Papal blessings on printed or hand-illuminated parchment. Prices range from 11 to 23 euros.

At the Mosaic Studio, tucked beneath the *Governatorato*, you can buy finished works or commission a reproduction of a favorite-work-of-art or family photograph, which can be

shipped worldwide. Prices depend on the *tesserae* size. It costs nothing to see the artists at work, but first write to Studio del Mosaico, Fabbrica di San Pietro, 00120 Vatican City or FAX -69885518.



Mosaic studio, photo by Stefan Meier

To replay the Wednesday papal audience you attended, go to the Centro televiso vaticano in the Palazzetto del Belvedere through St. Anne's Gate (9 AM-1 PM and 3:30-6 PM). DVDs and VHS videos both cost 30 euros.

To the right of St. Peter's Basilica at the exit from the grottoes is *Oggetti Religiosi*, the souvenir shop. Run by nuns, it carries a vast assortment of postcards, guidebooks, and handmade artifacts from African and Asian missions.

There are no hotels, except Domus Sante Marte, open exclusively for guests of the Holy See, in Vatican City. If there should be extra space, valid special requests faxed to 011-39-066982417



Domus Sanctae Martae, photo by Lucy Gordan

will be considered. Nearby at the atmospheric Hotel Columbus (tel.- 6865435, Fax -6864874, www.hotelcolumbus.net) in the Renaissance Palazzo dei Penitenzieri a double with breakfast costs 200 euros (\$335); instead at family-run Sant'Anna (tel. -68801602, FAX -68808717) 150 euros (\$200). At the Hotel Atlante Star (tel. -6873233, FAX -6872300) rooms 309, 406, 407, 514, 515, and 517 overlook St. Peter's dome.

You can either go to the website of the monthly magazine, Inside the Vatican, (I'm the culture editor): www.insidethevatican.com and order the January/February 2005 issue or contact the Vicariato (tel. -69886217/69886258, FAX -69886546) for extensive lists of good-value convent/guesthouses.

The Vatican's only restaurant is the museums' cafeteria. The rooftop Les Etoiles at Hotel Atlante Star, elegant Taverna dei Gracchi (Via dei Gracchi 266/268, tel. -3216958, closed Sunday and

Monday noon) or the family-run I Quattro Mori (Via S. Maria alle Fornaci 8/a, tel. -632609, closed Monday) are excellent nearby alternatives.

Fans of Benedict XVI will want to try his favorite consomme with omelette

strips and strudel at the rustic Cantina Tirolese (Via Vitelleschi 23, 06-68135297) where he was a regular at table 6 before becoming Pope. The

present-day owner, Manuela Macher, daughter of the Austrian founder, likes to recount her favorite Ratzinger anecdote: "A client, who'd lost his dog, pinned up a sign: 'Has anyone seen this German shepherd?' When Cardinal Ratzinger saw it, he supposedly said: 'No, no, that's not me. I'm here.'"

For a taste of international intrigue, try the somewhat sleazy Caffè San Pietro (Via della



Les Etoiles restaurant



Manuela Macher at Cantina Tirolese, photo Lucy Gordan

Conciliazione 48). Here Mehmet Ali Agca drank his last cup of coffee before attempting to assassinate Pope John Paul II in 1981.

The only guide to the Vatican in English is by American journalist Nino Lo Bello, “Nino Lo Bello’s Guide to the Vatican” (Chicago Review Press, 814 N. Franklin Street, Chicago, Illinois 60610, 1987, \$9.95 paper). It’s most tantalizing chapter is “The Vatican You Can’t Visit.”

A new Roman attraction is the yellow Christian Rome bus. Its two itineraries leave from the top of Via della Conciliazione almost at St. Peter’s Square, everyday including Sunday and holidays, from 8:30 AM to 7:30 PM. Self-audio guides are available in ten languages. Tickets are sold on board and it is possible to get on and off at all 41 stops and hop on a later bus. Among the Christian stops on Line A “San Pietro” are Castel Sant’Angelo (the papal fortress), Santa Maria del Popolo (with its three Caravaggio’s), the Basilica of St. Mary Mayor, Irish Dominican San Clemente, and Santa Maria in Cosmedin with the Mouth

of Truth. As for Line B “San Paolo”: Santa Maria in Trastevere, San Pietro in Montorio where St. Peter was crucified, the catacombs, the Basilica of St. John in Lateran, Rome’s cathedral; the

Basilica of St. Paul, and Rome’s synagogue. Tickets cost 12 euros if you remain on the bus; 15 euros for 24 hours; and 20 for 48 hours. For more information www.orpnet.org.



photo by Lucy Gordan

City

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