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Enter Rome's Colosseum Like an Emperor, Through the "Commodus Passageway"

This long-hidden S-shaped vaulted underground tunnel united the imperial box to the outside, allowing Roman leaders to avoid the public

*Italian Hours*

Lucy Gordan

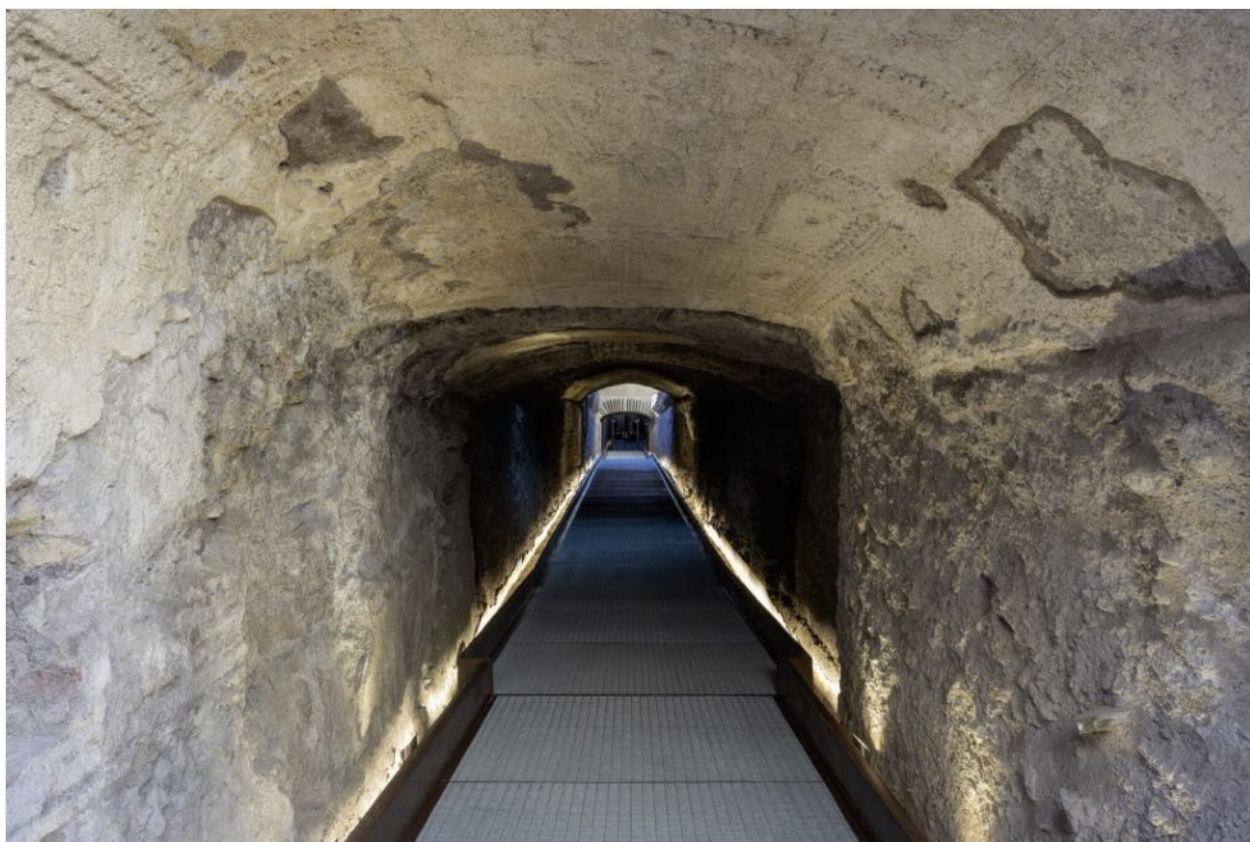


"Thumbs Down", an oil painting (1872) by the French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme showing a gladiator combat with an emperor seated in the pulvinar. The painting belongs to the Art Museum, Arizona. Photo credit: Wikipedia

Opened on October 27, "Commodus Passageway" is the first chance that tourists have ever had to enter the Colosseum in the emperors' footsteps.

During Imperial times this S-shaped vaulted underground tunnel united the pulvinar or imperial box to the outside. Thus, it allowed the emperors and other high officials to reach their tribune avoiding the public of up to 50,000 spectators, like them there to enjoy gladiator and wild animal combats and pseudo-naval battles.

Not planned during the Colosseum's construction, which ended in 80 AD just after the reign of Vespasian (69-79 AD), we know from its brick stamps' dates that this secret tunnel was carved out of the arena's foundations at the turn of the first and second centuries AD, probably during the reigns of Domitian (81-96 AD) or of Trajan (98-117 AD). Thus, its connection to treacherous and deeply despised Commodus, made famous by Ridley Scott's "Gladiator", has nothing to do with the Colosseum's original construction, which long preceded his reign (180-192 AD).



View of the "Commodus Passageway. Photo credit: Simona Murrone/Colosseum Archeological Park

According to Herodian's *Roman History*, Commodus, a great enthusiast and practitioner of gladiatorial combat, who fancied himself a reincarnation of the demi-god Hercules, was attacked here, hence the passageway's name, in 183 AD by a would-be assassin, a bold and reckless young senator named Quintianus, who was armed with a dagger. Supposedly, the plot of this unsuccessful attempt (one of several until he was strangled in his bath by a champion wrestler) was instigated by the emperor's sister Lucilla, who was jealous that Commodus' wife Crispina took precedence over her in the pulvinar.

After the fall of the Roman Empire in 476, the Colosseum fell into disrepair and was stripped of its marble and other decorations for use in other construction projects. The Commodus Passageway wasn't discovered until 1810, when Rome was ruled by Napoleonic France. It was fully excavated after the Unification of Italy, in 1874, and has been studied on and off since then. Recently, in 2020-2021, the Archeological Park of the Colosseum embarked on a stucco restoration project. A much more extensive project to restore damaged and collapsed vaults, walls and decorated surfaces started in 2024 and was completed a month ago.

Thanks to European funds of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, an escalator transformable into a lifting platform for tourists with reduced mobility and state-of-the-art lighting, imitating daylight, were installed.

Like the Colosseum's exterior, the Commodus Passageway was originally marble-clad and its walls still show traces of the metal clamps that held the marble slabs in place. The marble was later replaced with painted stucco depicting landscapes. Unfortunately, these wall stuccoes and those of mythological scenes inspired by the myth of Ariadne abandoned by Theseus and her marriage to Dionysus, still preserved on the vault, have been badly damaged by dampness. So have those in the niches at the entrance featuring amphitheatrical performances, such as boar hunts, bear fights and acrobats. All these decorations have been reproduced in an *in loco* video with digital recreations of how they would have looked in antiquity as well as on a tactile map for the visually impaired.



Bust of Commodus adorned like Hercules in Rome's Capitoline Museums.

Photo credit: Wikipedia Commons



Remnants of the stucco on the originally marble-clad on the passageway's walls. Photo credit: Simona Murrone/Colosseum Archeological Park

This opening to the public is only the first phase of a larger project dedicated to the Passage that extends beyond the Colosseum, probably leading to the nearby gladiators' barracks and *ludus magnus* where they trained, scheduled to be opened in 2026.

The Passage is open on Mondays and Wednesdays from 1-4 PM with a fixed tour guide schedule of Spanish at 1 PM, Italian at 2 PM and English at 3 PM. Since space is limited to 8 visitors at a time, book the 90-minute "Full Experience Ticket" for 50 euros at <https://ticketing.colosseo.it/en/eventi/Full-Experience-passaggio-di-commodo/>, functional only a week beforehand.



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