

## LEISURE &amp; TRAVEL

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# 48 hours in Rome

## Plan ahead for quick stops in big cities



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TIMES & TRANSCRIPT STAFF

When you have limited sight-seeing time on a short trip, it's all about picking and choosing.

But when your stay involves a city incredibly rich in history, those choices are that much tougher.

Such was the case this summer during a multi-generational family adventure to Europe. After five days in Paris, our group of six flew to Rome for a two-day stop in the Eternal City en route to Italy's Tuscany region.

I knew before we even left Moncton that 48 hours in Rome would allow my husband, daughters, parents and I to explore only a few of the many landmarks that the Italian capital has to offer. With a history dating back more than 2,700 years, this long-standing centre of power, culture and religion has a wealth of interesting sights to see.

So how to pick?

Armed with a multitude of guidebooks, online information and suggestions from friends and family, I developed an itinerary with my mom for our brief visit. While it can be fun to pop in randomly to attractions when your timelines are ample, quick trips pretty much force you to nail down an agenda ahead of time.

Boy, was I glad we did.

Although we were a small group, our plan gave everyone a heads-up on what we were doing and when, and allowed those who weren't overly keen on a certain site to opt out.

Getting to Rome was a breeze, fortunately. Even though Italy is known for having a multitude of transportation-related strikes each year, we had no problems flying into Leonardo Da Vinci Airport, commonly known as Fiumicino, located just outside Rome. After retrieving our luggage, we met the driver we'd booked to take us to our rental apartment in Centro Storico, Rome's historical centre.

The drive to the apartment was stunning, especially as we turned down modern streets only to have our breath taken away by major attractions like the Colosseum, completed in 80 AD. The juxtaposition of its ancient arches and columns a short distance from much newer buildings was hard to get our heads around at first.

But as our driver pointed out other landmarks, including the sprawling Roman Forum, we soon



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When visiting the Sistine Chapel, be sure to look up.

realized that this mix of very old and quite new is all part of Rome's highly intoxicating atmosphere.

After unloading our luggage at our temporary home, we wasted no time in getting out the door to start exploring.

But since it was noon and viciously hot, we first rehydrated at a local restaurant, while also sampling some delicious potato gnocchi.

Refreshed and raring to go, it was off to the Trevi Fountain, the largest Baroque fountain in the city and one of the most famous in the world. Legend has it that if you throw a coin into the fountain, you're ensured a return to Rome. From the little we'd seen of the city so far, we knew this was one tradition we had to keep!

As expected from reading the guidebooks, the fountain's locale was bustling with tourists. We squeezed our way through the crowds and down the stairs opposite the attraction, which stands 26 metres high and 20 metres wide. After snapping a few family pics and performing the obligatory coin tosses, we stepped back, found a shady seat and "hung out," a talent which Italians seem to have perfected.

From there, it was on to the Pantheon, another impressive example of the architecture of ancient Rome. This huge cylindrical body of equal height and width was constructed as a temple to the gods by Marcus Agrippa in 25 BC. It was rebuilt by Hadrian around 120

AD. Many Italian rulers as well as important artists, such as Raphael, have been buried in the Pantheon.

Following a free tour of the intriguing space, we roamed the lovely square opposite the site, Piazza della Rotonda. When our tummies were rumbling again, we continued on to another spot recommended by friends for good food and a lively atmosphere – Piazza Navona.

We cooled our heels at a restaurant adjacent to an open-air market and not far from the piazza's three

► See **PLANNING**, G6



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TOP: Vatican City, as seen from the Tiber River. ABOVE: According to legend, if you toss a coin in the Trevi Fountain, you are destined to return to Rome.



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The Piazza Navona has a lively atmosphere.

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Rome's Coliseum

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▶ Continued From G1

gorgeous fountains: Fontana del Moro, Fontana di Nettuno and Fontana dei Fiumi.

Flipping through a guidebook while sipping on a frosty "birra," I learned that around 86 A.D., Emperor Domitian had a stadium built in the area. Over the centuries, it became a place for games, tournaments and processions. From the 17th to the 19th centuries, the square was flooded to allow the ships of princes and prelates to parade in a background of fireworks. No boats these days!

After an hour or two of meandering around Piazza Navona, perusing the works of local artists, pausing to watch some hilarious buskers and treating ourselves to an evening gelato, we slowly made our way through the narrow cobblestone

streets back to our home base.

The next morning, our 'plan' called for a visit to the Colosseum before embarking on a 1 p.m. tour of the Vatican. Half the group — my husband and daughters — stuck with the agenda and headed out that morning, while my parents and I, a bit pooped from our hot trek the previous day, chose to relax in the air conditioned apartment a bit longer. The Colosseum-bound crew, armed with lots of water and sunscreen, hiked to the ancient monument. My husband, a big fan of gladiator-type movies, was likely the most excited about the destination, curious to see where Romans had once killed thousands of men and wild animals.

Despite the fact that two thirds of the original Colosseum has been destroyed, both dad and daughters were fascinated by their tour of what had been the largest amphitheatre in the Roman world, capable of holding some 50,000 spectators. The trio was readily able to imagine the screaming crowds and the bloody battles.

After arriving back at the apartment, the threesome took a break before joining the rest of us via cab at our next stop: Vatican City.

We were keen to explore this landlocked sovereign city-state — a UNESCO world heritage site — whose territory consists of a walled enclave within the city of Rome.

To make life easier, we booked a Vatican tour with a company called Through Eternity, after reading excellent reviews about the firm. While various options were available, we took a 3.5-hour walking tour through the Vatican Museums and St. Peter's Basilica. (My mother, a painter, was particularly interested in the Sistine Chapel.)

Our tour guide for the afternoon was art historian Cinzia Cutrone. Despite the heat and crowds, Cinzia's passion for and knowledge of art made our visit much more meaningful and memorable.

The Vatican Museums — from the Sistine Chapel to the Raphael Rooms — were amazing. Yes, the long walk through the myriad of galleries is tough on a sweltering day. But the chance to view historic artwork in a remarkable setting is worth it! (Don't forget the water!!)

As we exited the museums, we had our first view of Piazza di San Pietro — St. Peter's Square — a massive area surrounded by a series of huge columns constructed in 1667. In the middle of the square towers an enormous obelisk, a slender four-sided monument, flanked by striking fountains.

Before we descended the stairs into the square, Cinzia took us into the basilica itself, where we found ourselves in awe yet again.

The largest basilica in the world, St. Peter's covers 22,000 square metres, room for 20,000 to pray. Its huge façade is 114 metres wide and 47 metres high, its main dome 136 metres high, 42 metres in diameter.

Entering this holy Roman Catholic site, we made sure to cover our knees and shoulders to respect the Vatican dress code. (Tote a scarf if you're wearing a tank top!) According to Catholic tradition, the basilica is the burial site of Saint Peter, one of the 12 apostles of Jesus, the first Bishop of Rome and the first in the line of the papal succession.

The decor inside St. Peter's is regal, with a tremendous use of inlaid marble and rich gilding. The first basilica was built by Constantine the Great about 320 A.D. Around 1450, reconstruction work was entrusted to artists including Raphael and Michelangelo.

Today, Pope Benedict XVI resides in the Papal Apartments, overlooking Saint Peter's Square. Our guide informed us that since the shutters of a corner apartment window were open, the Pope was likely in town (though our family certainly wasn't expecting a private audience with him!).

Overflowing with information about all things Vatican, we left our cheery tour guide and taxied back to our apartment, thankful to put up our feet before dinner.

The next morning, my husband, daughters and I took a stroll past the Italian Parliament to browse the shops along Via del Corso. The street — the main artery that cuts through the centre of Rome — offers a broad selection of shops that suit every taste and wallet.

With a few trinkets in hand, we scooted back to the apartment and soon to the train station to continue our journey northward.

There are many other stops in Rome we would like to have made: the Spanish Steps and Capitoline Hill to name a few.

They'll wait until next time. Knowing our coins reached the Trevi Fountain, we feel pretty good about our chances of returning to this extraordinary city.



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