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When in Rome: what to expect in the Eternal City

With a history that spans millenia, Rome is a city that takes a lifetime to discover and contains near-infinite sights and monuments across its vast territory. While many of these are well-known and top travelers' bucket lists, the Eternal City has its share of secret places that even the locals overlook. Read on to discover the most intriguing hidden spaces in Rome for a different perspective of the capital.

The Botanical Gardens

Founded in the 14th century as “gardens of the simple,” used to cultivate medicinal herbs, the land was later turned into an orchard and kitchen garden for the papal court. In the 16th century it officially became Rome’s botanical gardens under the direction of the prefect Michele Mercati, the pope’s physician. Nearly thirty acres of land are filled with over 7,000 plant species, including aromatic and aquatic plants, centuries-old trees, rose gardens, and evergreens. There is a lovely Japanese garden and a garden of fragrances that will make this visit memorable even for the visually impaired. The 18th-century grand staircase is the work of the architect Ferdinando Fuga. Today the botanical gardens are the seat of the University of Rome’s Department of Environmental Biology, where research is carried out in the fields of botany, ecology, and the natural sciences. Exhibitions and lectures are periodically held here.

The Orange Garden

Parco Savello is more commonly known as the Orange Garden for the large number of Seville or bitter orange trees that grow there. It once surrounded an ancient fortress built in the late 13th century over what was left of the Crescenzi Castle, which dated from three centuries earlier. The embankment overlooking the Tiber offers one of the most breathtaking views of Rome. Today’s symmetrical layout was designed in 1932 by the architect Raffaele De Vico. The main entrance features a curious fountain comprising a thermal bath in Egyptian granite and a mascarón with frowning eyebrows and thick moustache sculpted by Bartolomeo Bassi according to a design by Giacomo Della Porta.

Villa Ada

This ancient and vast farming estate was reorganized into gardens in the 18th century by the Princes Pallavicini and later purchased by the Savoy family as a hunting estate. The villa park, in

addition to the countless trees, hosts a surprising variety of plants, including a rare aquatic conifer imported from Tibet in 1940. This site is also interesting from a historical-archaeological point of view; thanks to its closeness to the Via Salaria, the oldest consular road in Rome, there are traces here of Christian sepulchers, necropolises, and catacombs. In addition to the royal villa, the park also hosts several buildings, including the Temple of Flora and the stables, and a few examples of industrial archaeology, such as the “bunker,” the royal air-raid shelter with armored doors that in the 1960s still had its original furnishings. Villa Ada is now public property and hosts musical festivals and other forms of entertainment.

Villa Borghese

Superb fountains, enchanting lakes, and Italian-style gardens make this villa, which was owned by the Borghese family until the 20th century and then acquired by the state, one of the city’s most precious treasures. Inside the park are so many exhibition sites that it is often referred to as “Museum Park.” It includes the Galleria Borghese (formerly the noble summerhouse of Cardinal Scipione Borghese), which currently houses some of the most important Italian works from the 16th to the 17th centuries, the Museo Canonica, the Casa del Cinema in the Casina delle Rose, and the Museo Carlo Bilotti. The Villa Borghese is a source of inspiration for artists, poets, and musicians and an unforgettable experience for all who visit.

Villa Doria Pamphilj

Among the largest and most beautiful villas with a park in Rome was the country estate of the noble Pamphilj family. In the mid-19th century, the estate, together with the bordering Villa Corsini, was turned into a farm. After changing hands several times, the villa became state property in the mid-1800s and was opened to the public in 1972. The villa is where the Italian government officially receives its guests. What makes a visit here special is the wealth of art and architecture that has been accumulated over the centuries—from the remains of a Roman aqueduct to funerary structures, from late medieval artifacts to splendid works of Baroque art and architecture commissioned by Pope Innocent X from Algardi, Bernini, and Grimaldi, not to mention the countless architectural gems that make the villa a treasure trove of works by Italy’s major artists and architects.

Villa Sciarra

In ancient times it was known as the sacred wood of the nymph Furrina, and it truly is a landscape masterpiece thanks to the presence of over 100 plant species of fruits and flowers, both exotic and Mediterranean. When the magnolias bloom in spring, the Villa Sciarra resembles something out of a fairy tale. Legend has it that Cleopatra stayed at the villa when Caesar’s Garden was here. If you enter from Via Dandolo, you’ll see the lovely Wurts aviary where white peacocks were once bred (the villa was at one time called the Villa of the White Peacocks). Directly opposite is a lovely fountain of satyrs from a Lombard palace owned by the Visconti. The park is filled with countless 18th-century statues and fountains, including the exquisite fountain of the Putti and of the Tartaruga, as well as the Junonic statue of Astrology.

Villa Torlonia

It started out as a farming estate owned by the Pamphilj family and was later acquired by the Torlonia family, who in the 18th century hired the architect Valadier to design the park, transform the existing buildings, and build the stables. Later, other artists contributed to the originality of the villa by working on the landscape and designing a surprising number of eclectic structures. The noble casino (summerhouse) hosts the Museo della Scuola Romana, with

numerous paintings and sculptures by artists from that period; it is connected by an elegantly decorated underground tunnel to the Casino of the Princes, where Alessandro Torlonia once held lavish events and which currently hosts the school archive. The Casina delle Civette, built in the mid-19th century by Giuseppe Jappelli, is decorated with magnificent glasswork by Duilio Cambellotti. For years it was the official residence of Benito Mussolini, becoming one of the city's public parks in 1978.

Galleria Spada: a hidden gem in Rome

Rome's Galleria Spada hosts an exquisite art collection.

Galleria Spada, located in central Rome between Campo de' Fiori and the river Tiber, hosts a **sumptuous art collection** of works by 16th- and 17th-century masters.

The museum's four rooms contain paintings by artists such as [Caravaggio](#), Guido Reni, Guercino, Orazio and [Artemisia Gentileschi](#), Titian, Baciccia, Dürer, Jan Brueghel the Elder and Rubens. The gallery also happens to be housed in one of **Rome's most beautiful buildings**, the 16th-century Palazzo Capodiferro, built originally in 1540 for Cardinal Girolamo Capodiferro.

Purchased in 1632 by Cardinal Spada, the palace's front façades were decorated with Mannerist stucco sculptures representing Roman heroes and emperors while its elegant inner courtyard was adorned with Olympian **gods and goddesses** and mythological scenes.

The palace's **secret garden** is also home to an optical illusion by Baroque genius Francesco **Borromini**.

This stunning example of forced perspective – commissioned by Cardinal Spada – is centred around a magnificent colonnade whose diminishing rows of columns and rising floor level **trick the eye** into thinking the corridor is 37 metres long instead of its actual nine-metre length.

Borromini's spectacular *trompe-l'œil* effect is compounded by what appears to be a life-size statue at the end of the colonnade; the statue of Mars - the Roman god of war - is in fact only 60cm high.

Palazzo Spada was purchased by Italy in 1927 and today houses the Italian Council of State.

The gallery is open 08.30-19.30, closed on Tuesday. Guided tours are available on prior booking in English and Italian, tel. 0632810. On Thursdays, entrance is via the nearby Via del Polverone 15/b.

Via Piccolomini

Visitors looking to experience Rome's hidden gems will have stumbled upon Borromini's famous *prospettiva* within Galleria Spada but there's another lesser-known optical illusion that is worth a visit. Tucked away behind Villa Doria Pamphili park, Via Piccolomini is an unassuming street that creates a fascinating perspective onto St. Peter's dome: as you drive towards it, it seems to recede into the background and become smaller in the distance but as you drive away, it seems to expand in size and rise up from below. You'll often see scooters driving around in circles late at night to experience this interesting phenomenon.

Antica Farmacia della Scala

Piazza della Scala is a quaint ivy-laden piazza in Rome's bustling Trastevere neighborhood and is best known for its cafés and trattorias, though it houses a real treasure within it. The Farmacia Santa Maria della Scala pharmacy, built into the cloister of the nearby church, has modern medicines today but a visit to its upper floor lets you step back to the 17th century when it was the pharmacy of the Papal Court. It is still run by Carmelite monks who guide you through the evocative space, filled with painted vases, hand-labeled bottles and frescoed ceilings. Tours must be arranged [by phone](#) in advance.

Chiesa di Dio Padre Misericordioso

American *starchitect* Richard Meier has left his imprint on Rome in the form of two contemporary buildings: the well-known Ara Pacis museum containing a 2,000 year old Altar of Peace, and the often overlooked Jubilee Church in the city's eastern Tor Tre Teste neighborhood. Built between 1996 – 2003, it is an unusually contemporary church that was designed to resemble a ship with three curved walls and skylights that let light flood into the space. The church was commissioned as part of Pope John Paul II's Millennium project to mark the Jubilee of 2000.

Pozzo Corridor at St. Ignatius

Church of the Gesù, the mother church of the Society of Jesus, has impressive trompe l'oeil effects on its ceilings but an even more peculiar visual effect lie tucked away in the next-door Rooms of St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuit order. Decorated by Baroque painter Andrea Pozzo, the ornate Pozzo Corridor was inspired by the Galleria Colonna within nearby Palazzo Colonna and features scenes of the life of St. Ignatius. It is fascinating because it was a relatively contained corridor that gives the impression of being much longer because it is painted as a slant: indeed, as you approach figures, they become distorted and stretched when seen from up close.

Casina delle Civette

Casina delle Civette is a whimsical house-museum nestled within Rome's Villa Torlonia park. Designed by neoclassical architect Giuseppe Valadier, the park was home to the noble Torlonia family and is best-known for being the state residence of Mussolini from the 1920s onwards. The park has numerous interesting museums but the most unusual is certainly the Casina delle Civette, or 'House of the Owls', which was built to resemble a Swiss cabin and features stained glass windows with animal figures, numerous loggias, porticos and turrets.

Domus Aurea

Emperor Nero's 'Golden House' is an incredible archeological site that has only recently been opened to the public for [guided tours](#) on weekends to help fund ongoing restorations of the ancient villa. This enormous palace dates back to 64 AD and was built after a great fire raised much of the city to the ground; it extended through many of Rome's famous Seven Hills, including the Palatine, Esquiline, Oppian and Caelian hills and contained as many as 300 rooms. It was covered in frescoed, gold leaf, stucco and precious stones, making it one of the most sumptuous palaces ever built in history.

Palazzo Farnese

Just behind touristy Campo de' Fiori lies the elegant Piazza Farnese and its (namesake) Palazzo Farnese, the seat of the French Embassy in Rome and one of the most important High Renaissance villas in all of Rome. It was designed in the early 16th century for the influential Farnese family and features important artworks, including Annibale Carracci's elaborate *The Loves of the Gods* ceiling fresco. The secret of Palazzo Farnese lies in the fact that the building is open to the public through [guided tours](#), with English tours taking place each Wednesday at 5pm.

Tempietto del Bramante

The Tempietto del Bramante, located within the courtyard of San Pietro in Montorio up in the Gianicolo neighborhood, is one of Rome's greatest examples of High Renaissance architecture. It was commissioned by the Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, named 'Catholic King and Queen' by Pope Alexander VI in 1494, for their son John who died prematurely in 1497. The circular temple, which reflects Brunelleschi's harmonious style, features Tuscan columns, an ornamental molding with a curved balcony, and a dome. Although it is one of Rome's architectural jewels, it is an often overlooked attraction in the city.

Piccola Londra

Located in Rome's northern Flaminio neighborhood, the tiny residential street of Via Bernardo Celentano is a real off-the-beaten-path gem. With its multicolored Liberty-style row houses featuring private gardens and fences, it resembles a 'little London' more than an alley in the Eternal City. The street was designed by architect Quadrio Pirani in the early 20th century under the leadership of Mayor Ernesto Nathan who wanted Rome to become a proper European

metropolis. The urban project never spread beyond this little street but it has been well-preserved and is one of the city's best kept secrets.

Fondazione Pastificio Cerere

Located in San Lorenzo, Pastificio Cerere is an old factory that produced pasta in Rome for over 50 years. Named for the goddess of fertility Ceres, the factory was founded in 1905 and helped feed the capital during the two World Wars. Production ceased in the 1960s and the factory was reopened as a multifunctional artist space a decade later. Today, the Pastificio Cerere Foundation contains artist and design studios, artist ateliers, galleries and a photography school. The lower level also houses the well-regarded Pastificio San Lorenzo restaurant.

Santa Maria degli Angeli e dei Martiri

Santa Maria degli Angeli e dei Martiri is one of the most fascinating basilicas in Rome. The church facade is unassuming until you realize it is a fragment of the frigidarium, or cold pool room, of the ancient Baths of Diocletian. These baths were the largest in ancient Rome, though this fact is difficult to comprehend because they have been incorporated into streets, buildings and piazzas. Stepping inside the church gives you an idea of their size: the basilica, which was designed by Michelangelo in the 16th century, features a dominant transept, meaning the church extends horizontally rather than vertically – a truly unusual effect, due to the fact that it was built within the original bath structure.

The Most Beautiful Piazzas in Rome

Piazza Navona
Church

Probably the most elegant piazza in Rome, [Piazza Navona](#) was constructed over the ruins of the ancient circus of Domitian and maintains its distinctive oval shape, albeit now lined with gorgeous pastel *palazzi* and dotted with elaborate Baroque fountains. The square is always bustling with activity but is worth visiting at night when the tourist crowds die down and [Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers](#) is perfectly lit.

Campo de' Fiori

Home to one of Rome's most historic and colourful markets, [Campo de' Fiori](#) should be seen in the morning when locals and visitors rub shoulders while stocking up on fresh produce. The name refers to the 'field of flowers', which was what the site was in ancient times before being developed into a public square used for executions (note the ominous statue of the heretic Giordano Bruno who was burned at the stake on this site in 1600). Once the market clears and the sun begins to set, [Campo de' Fiori](#) begins its transformation into one of Rome's most frequented nightlife spots thanks to the concentration of bars and eateries in the area.

Piazza di Spagna

With the iconic [Spanish Steps](#) and multiple designer stores and boutiques, [Piazza di Spagna](#) is the hub of upper-class Rome and one of the most instantly recognisable spots in the city. Head there early in the morning to get the staircase (almost) to yourself or join the throng at sunset when the piazza is bathed in a rosy glow and climbing to the top of the steps will reward you with one of the most romantic views of the Eternal City

Piazza di Santa Maria in Trastevere

[Piazza Santa Maria](#) is the centre of the picturesque yet trendy neighbourhood of [Trastevere](#), located across the Tiber River to the south. During the day, the piazza is a sleepy, chilled-out spot to sit back and admire the eponymous church but come evening it becomes a hive of activity with locals grabbing an aperitivo and street performers and musicians entertaining the crowds.

Piazza del Campidoglio

[Michelangelo](#) designed the geometric [Piazza del Campidoglio](#) as well as the surrounding *palazzi* which are now the site of the [Capitoline Museums](#), home to some of Rome's most important ancient artifacts, as well as Rome's town hall. A grandiose staircase leads up to the piazza, which is dominated by a replica of a bronze equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius now found inside the museums. Head to the balcony at the rear of the piazza for an unrivalled view across the Roman Forum to the [Colosseum](#).

Piazza della Rotonda

As you turn a corner into [Piazza della Rotonda](#), you are immediately confronted with the majestic grandeur of the [Pantheon](#), the best-preserved temple in Rome which dates back to the 2nd century and is now a functioning church. The piazza itself, with its pretty fountain and lively cafés, is the place to pull up a chair and admire the amazing feat of ancient engineering while doing a little people-watching.

Piazza San Pietro

The vast expanse of [St Peter's Square](#) provides the perfect approach to Basilica di San Pietro, the largest church in the world and symbol of the [Vatican](#). The two sweeping colonnades were designed by Bernini to represent welcoming arms and the square was constructed to accentuate the enormity of the building and to allow as many people as possible into the piazza to see the pope. Make sure to visit at night when the hoards of tourists have dispersed and the empty piazza and church are beautifully illuminated with a warm light.

Piazza del Popolo

One of the largest squares in Rome, the circular [Piazza del Popolo](#) is almost perfectly symmetrical, from the twin churches on the southern edge to the fountains on either side, while the centre of the square is dominated by the imposing Egyptian obelisk. The size of the piazza makes it a frequent location for concerts and events in the summer months, while a trip up the steps to the edge of the piazza will bring you to the [Pincio terrace](#), which offers a fantastic view over the piazza and right across the rooftops of the city.

Piazza della Madonna dei Monti

As the social hub of the hip district of [Monti](#), the small but lively [Piazza della Madonna dei Monti](#) is the hangout spot of choice for young Romans on warm summer evenings. Grab a bottle of beer and a bench by the fountain to join in with the locals or settle down for an aperitivo at one of the charming outdoor bars.

Piazza Mattei

[Piazza Mattei](#) is a tiny, quiet square in the [Jewish Ghetto](#) quarter of Rome that gives of an air of peace and tranquility at any time of the day or night. The pretty piazza is famous for the gently trickling waters of the Fontana delle Tartarughe, the Turtle Fountain, which was designed by architect Giacomo della Porta in the 16th century.