

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of Rome

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People visit Rome for all sorts of reasons. Art lovers flock to its great museums, the faithful make pilgrimages to St. Peter's Basilica and the Vatican, and others come to soak up Italy's culture and atmosphere (or just the sun). In *Rome For Dummies*, we give you our opinions on the best Rome has to offer. In this chapter, we list our very favorites. Throughout the rest of this book, the Best of the Best icon marks the places listed in this chapter.

The Best Museums

Rome boasts numerous museums, some vast and famous, others small and catering to specialized audiences. Here is our short list of the not-to-be-missed museums that contain internationally renowned masterpieces and other mind-boggling beauties.

- ✔ The **Vatican Museums** top our list, for the monumental size of their collections and amazing number of masterpieces. They include dozens of rooms dedicated to Renaissance painting and sculpture, as well as a fantastic Egyptian section, an impressive ancient Roman collection, and ethnological art from all over the world. The museums are also home to the Sistine Chapel (mentioned in the next section). See Chapter 11.
- ✔ The **Borghese Gallery** isn't very big, but it is a triumph of Renaissance beauty. Caravaggio paintings and Bernini sculptures are only a few of its many treasures. See Chapter 11.

- ✔ The **National Roman Museum in Palazzo Massimo alle Terme** is a huge museum completely dedicated to ancient Roman art. It contains hundreds of artifacts unearthed during the excavation of archaeological sites in Rome and the surrounding areas, including a superb collection of sculptures and some breathtakingly beautiful Roman frescoes. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ The **National Etruscan Museum of Villa Giulia** holds a wonderful collection dedicated to the Etruscans, the mysterious predecessors of the Romans. This is a unique treasure trove of Etruscan artifacts and jewelry. See Chapter 11.

The Best Churches

Among Rome's hundreds of churches, we considered not only the architecture and the importance of the artwork inside, but also the individual charm and personality of each. Here are our top picks.

- ✔ **St. Peter's Basilica** is the most famous church in a city filled with magnificent churches. Its majestic colonnade and soaring dome are a symbol of Rome as well as of the Catholic Church; treasures inside include Michelangelo's *Pietà*. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Santa Maria sopra Minerva**, the city's only Gothic church, is filled with artistic delights such as Michelangelo's sculpture *Cristo Portacroce*. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ The **Sistine Chapel** contains the most famous artwork in all of Italy. After the *Mona Lisa*, the ceiling of the chapel is probably the most famous single piece of art in the world. Decorated with Michelangelo's frescoes, it is accessible from the Vatican Museums. Don't forget your binoculars. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ The little chapel of **San Zenone in Santa Prassede** will take your breath away. It is one of the oldest churches in Rome and completely covered with gilded mosaics. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ The church of **Santa Maria in Trastevere** is a splendid example of Medieval and Byzantine art, which is rare in Rome after the general baroque overhaul. It is also an excellent excuse to visit Trastevere, a delightful neighborhood. See Chapter 11.

The Best Ruins

On your visit to the site of the world's largest collection of ancient Roman archaeological remains, deciding which places to visit can be a trying affair. Here's a list of our favorite and most atmospheric sites.

- ✔ The majestic and austere **Colosseum**, where the Romans watched “sports” (as in fights to the death) and chariot races, is Rome’s most famous ruin and an impressive work of architecture. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ The **Roman Forum** and the nearby **Palatine Hill**, containing the remains of temples, public buildings, villas, and triumphal arches, will take you back in time. They are particularly evocative on romantic Roman nights. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ The Appian Way, the first road built by the ancient Romans, has been transformed into the **Appian Way Archaeological Park**, which you can visit on foot or by bicycle. Along the way are the remains of tombs and villas that make the trip well worth the exercise. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ The **Caracalla Baths** were among the largest in Rome and are still an impressive sight. They also stage opera performances during the summer. See Chapters 11 and 15.
- ✔ The **Villa Adriana** near Tivoli, outside Rome, is more than just a villa. It is a huge complex of buildings, gardens, reflecting pools, and theaters built by the Emperor Hadrian in the second century A.D. In the mountains above Rome where Hadrian and a few hundred friends could get away from it all, the villa remains an atmospheric retreat. See Chapter 14.

The Best Hotels

We picked our favorite luxury hotels as well as our preferred moderately priced and inexpensive accommodations.

- ✔ **Hotel Hassler** tops our list as the hotel with the best service among Rome’s many wonderful luxury lodgings. Its location on top of the Spanish Steps also makes it a unique place to stay. See Chapter 9.
- ✔ Presidents and stars stay at the **Hotel de Russie**, positively one of the most elegant and classiest hotels in the world. Contemporary design and exquisite good taste are coupled with the classic beauty of its architecture. See Chapter 9.
- ✔ The **Albergo Santa Chiara** is one of the oldest hotels in Rome and our favorite in the middle price range. The beauty of the palace and the quality of the service make it a great value. See Chapter 9.
- ✔ The **Hotel Arenula** is the best of Rome’s budget hotels for service, quality of furnishings, and location. See Chapter 9.

The Best Restaurants

Here is a short list of our favorite restaurants in Rome. We love many more than those we describe here, and you'll find the ones we left behind in Chapter 10.

- ✓ For fantastic views over the Eternal City, with wonderful food to match, try **La Pergola**. A meal at this elegant restaurant will be one of your most romantic experiences in Rome. See Chapter 10.
- ✓ For a truly Roman outing — vetted by Alessandra, a Rome native — nothing can beat **Cecchino dal 1887**, a historical restaurant in Monte Testaccio. See Chapter 10.
- ✓ The best *enoteca* (restaurant winery) in town is **Enoteca Capranica**. Not only will you love the food, the wine, and the atmosphere, but you'll also get to enter one of the most charming Roman palaces in the historic center. See Chapter 16.

The Best Buys in Rome

Shopping in Rome is great fun and a perfect excuse to stroll the labyrinthine streets. You can also find some unique treasures, including some great souvenirs.

- ✓ Select a pair of **socks fit for a cardinal** — or any other religious item you might think of — from one of the shops in the center of Rome. The vendors showcase a variety of items, from apparel to artwork. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ Give yourself the pleasure of a handmade piece of **gold jewelry**. The ancient tradition of goldsmithing is alive and well in Rome, and you'll find craftspeople working in a variety of styles, from reproductions of ancient classics to contemporary designs. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ An **antique print** makes a wonderful gift — for yourself or a loved one. This craft has been a Roman tradition since the Renaissance. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ Get a **picture of the pope** from the huge collection at the Vatican gift shop. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ Take your pick of **fashion accessories** — scarves, leather gloves, handbags, wallets, watches, sunglasses — from the many local designers. See Chapter 12.

The Best Daytime and Nighttime Outings

In our opinion, you shouldn't leave Rome without taking part in at least a few of the following adventures.

- ✔ Go for a **river cruise along the Tiber**. The Compagnia di Navigazione Ponte San Angelo organizes both romantic dinner cruises and day excursions, including a great one to Ostia Antica. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ Take a walk by moonlight near the church of **Santa Maria in Aracoeli** and up to the **Capitoline Museums** on **Piazza del Campidoglio** for a unique view over the Forum. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ Book tickets for an **opera performance** at the Caracalla Baths, the summer location of the Teatro dell'Opera. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ Enjoy a concert or a dance performance at the **Parco della Musica**, the city's recently opened state-of-the-art performing arts center. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ Have a drink at one of Rome's historical cafes, the best being the **Caffè Greco** in Via Condotti, near the Spanish Steps. It still has its original 19th-century furnishings and decoration. See Chapter 16.