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Alone (or Almost) With Michelangelo in Vatican City



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

A view of St. Peter's Basilica from the Vatican Museums.

By ADAM NAGOURNEY
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It was just after 8 p.m., by now dark outside the walls of Vatican City, and a small group of us were following a guide through the maze that is the Vatican Museums. We had wandered for 40 minutes through galleries crammed with 15th- and 16th-century Italian paintings, courtyards displaying Greek and Roman sculpture, and seemingly endless hallways lined with ancient maps and musty tapestries, before passing through a small doorway I had not noticed on my previous visits here. I glanced up and realized we had arrived in the Sistine Chapel.

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And just us: the nine members of a tour group, one guide and a Vatican guard. Our guide, who had hustled us along with a chattering narrative through the rest of the museums, went theatrically silent as our group stopped, startled by the slow recognition of where we were. We walked the length and breadth of the chapel, heads tilted back and mouths open, enjoying each discovery of a new perspective from which to appreciate the frescoes that arched above us and covered the walls. Only our footsteps broke the silence. We had the place to ourselves.

As anyone knows who has endured a visit to the Sistine

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Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times
Visiting the Gallery of Maps, where 40 maps are frescoed on the walls, on a night tour of the Vatican Museums.

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Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times
The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel on a night tour of the Vatican Museums.

Chapel during the day — the shoulder-to-shoulder scum of tour groups, the guards barking “no pictures, no pictures,” the fight for seats, the pressure to move on to make way for the crush behind you — this was an indulgence of the highest order. With little fanfare, a few tour operators have in recent years arranged for after-hours group tours of the Vatican Museums, culminating with the Sistine Chapel.

Not surprisingly, the private tour we took comes at a heart-stopping cost: 275 euros (about \$388 at \$1.40 to the euro) per person in a group limited to 15 people, though it may be possible to negotiate a lower per-person rate if there are several people in your own group. (Regular admission to the museums starts at about 15 euros.)

Is it worth it?

I had toured the chapel twice before on trips to Rome, and my lasting memory of those visits was less the “Creation of Adam” and more the clatter of tourists — and this was before the restoration of Michelangelo’s ceiling drew more people through its doors.

This place where popes are elected had all the intimacy and spirituality of Grand Central Terminal at rush hour. In my mind, at least, it made the Sistine Chapel a check-the-box, been-there, done-that tourist stop; impressive, yes, but impossible to absorb or really appreciate, with little reason to return.

But my friend and colleague at The Times Ian Fisher, who had done a tour as the paper’s Rome bureau chief, informed me that there was really only one way to see the Sistine Chapel, and put us in touch with Helen Donegan, an Irish expatriate and the charming entrepreneurial force who arranges one of the smaller (and thus pricier) tours that are floating around the Internet.

From the moment I made contact with Ms. Donegan, the whole experience had a kind of vaguely illicit aura to it; reminiscent less of visiting one of the great museums of the world and more of gaining admittance to an after-hours club in New York.

Ms. Donegan told us — my partner, Ben, and me — to show up at 6:30 p.m. at the offices of her tour agency on Via Vespasiano, a short walk from the entrance to the Vatican Museums. We arrived to find the front door locked, seeming to confirm my fear that this was not for real. But suddenly, Ms. Donegan burst from a storefront next door, offering a platter of bruschetta and glasses of wine as we joined the rest of our gathering group. The tour would begin at 7.

It was short walk from Via Vespasiano to the Vatican. The sky was purple, the street in front of the museum was deserted, and the soaring doors that lead inside were sealed. It was most assuredly closed. But at precisely 7 p.m., as promised, we heard the jangle of keys from inside and one of the doors swung open slowly, spilling light onto the empty street. Without saying a word, a guard whisked us in — we passed an exiting stream of museum staff members heading home for the night — and swiftly the door shut behind us, lest a less-entitled passer-by inquire just what was going on here.

The quiet was almost spooky. Like most major European cities these days, Rome has become overrun with tourists. Passing through the doors of the Pantheon at dusk a few



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evenings later was like trying to navigate Seventh Avenue outside Madison Square Garden a half-hour before a Springsteen concert. Inside the museum, there were only us and a skeletal night staff.

First things first: this is not a tour for those who crave predictability or order. As our guide, Jay Good, made clear from the outset, we were at the mercy of the Vatican guards and whatever personal relationship they have with the guides. The guard can decide — in advance or just on a moment's whim — which rooms to open, where we can stand and for how long. Keys in hand, they walked ahead to open galleries, and we could hear them lock the doors behind us as we left. "It's an absolute monarchy," Mr. Good, an expatriate from the United States, said. "We have certain guards who are better than others. It depends on what they feel like doing." The one promise, Mr. Good said, is that visitors will see the Sistine Chapel and the [Raphael](#) rooms.

The tour lasts precisely two hours, and it was obvious from the guard who kept an eye on his watch — and flashed an impatient look at Mr. Good as the half-hour mark arrived in the Sistine Chapel, which is a long walk from the entryway — that this is one firm deadline. That had logistical implications as well; at various points, the tour felt something like a sprint. (It is simply impossible to see the museums in two hours.)

Mr. Good said that, depending on the desires of the guards and his own interests (he often leads three Vatican tours in a day), he chooses different rooms and galleries along the way to the Sistine Chapel. Like the Gallery of Tapestries. "This doesn't look anything like it looks during the day," Mr. Good said. "There are normally 150 people here."

This gave us not only the space and silence to view the artwork, but also to smell it: musty, pungent and aromatic, a sensory experience that I suspect would have been difficult to appreciate in a room packed with tourists. In the octagonal courtyard in the Pius-Clementine museum, we stopped to inspect the striking white marble sculpture of Laocoön and his sons struggling with sea serpents, attributed to three Rhodian sculptors working in the first or second century B.C.

If I had had any complaint, I wish there had been more time for our guide to discuss the work of Michelangelo, Raphael and Botticelli that surrounded us during our half-hour in the chapel. As it was, the return walk felt like a footrace, Mr. Good gently pulling us along as he walked briskly backward.

Yet that is a quibble. Our group of nine could sit anywhere, walk anywhere and even (shhhh) take photographs (no flashes, please). This is the kind of privilege that previously had been afforded mainly to prominent political leaders and celebrities. "I don't know how celebrities get in there, but I know it sure seems to be easy for them," said Ms. Donegan, who said she spent years negotiating with Vatican officials to arrange these tours. (Until recently, the tours took place about once a week; now they are more episodic.)

Our tour ended just as furtively as it began. The guards opened the door, ushered us quickly out, and closed it just as quickly. Ms. Donegan was waiting outside to take us back to her office and send us off for a late supper.

IF YOU GO

We used the tour company **Italy With Us**, which provides a variety of tours of Italy, including private after-hours tours of the Vatican Museums.

Tours average about one a week, though the schedule varies depending on demand and availability. Reservations should be made at least a month ahead; they are now being accepted for dates in April, May and June, as well as later in the year.

Cost: 275 euros per person (about \$388) for a two-hour tour, though group rates are negotiable. Groups average 20 people, with a guide for each 10.

Italy With Us, Via Vespasiano 16-18, Rome; (39-06) 3972-3051;
www.italywithus.com/vatican-after-hours.php)

A recent Web search turned up other tour options. They, too, provide evening tours of about two hours.

Viator Tours (www.viator.com/Rome/d511/vatican-tours), starting about \$460 per person, for groups of up to 20 people.

Context Travel (www.contexttravel.com), 280 euros per person. Each group of about six people has its own guide.

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