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## When in Rome: Plan your visit with these tips

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By **Hector Lareau**

Nearly the entire city of Rome is a museum -- and my wife, Liz, and I learned during our recent trip there that getting the most out of it requires some planning.

Without it, tourists find themselves at the end of hours-long lines while the better-prepared breeze by.

**Tip 1:** Timing is everything.

The best times to visit Rome are in April and May and late September through October. Many attractions will have restricted hours or be closed altogether during dates earlier than April and later than October.

August is both the busiest and worst month to visit. If the throngs aren't enough to keep you away, the uncomfortably hot weather will do the trick.



**Photo: Hector Lareau**

Trajan's market in ancient Rome -- one of the many sites visited by the author.



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Time your arrival in style. Trains can take you from the airport to the city, but the travel from the train station to your hotel can be a challenge, especially with luggage to schlep. And while Rome is fairly safe, Termini station is active with pickpockets, shady unlicensed taxis, and other inconveniences. Plan and pay for a stress-busting door-to-door ride from airport to hotel.

And speaking of stress, don't drive in Rome. Even with an Italian professional at the wheel, Roman traffic is not for those with older-model pacemakers or poor bladder control.

Our departing trip to the airport was a high-velocity adventure in testosterone-fueled traffic defiance. At one point, our driver zigzagged left over three lanes, then right back over them and onto the exit ramp -- all in dense traffic, at about 85 miles per hour, and within about half a mile. The driver took my nervous laughter as an ovation, and waved a modest hand in acknowledgement. Then he blandly checked Facebook on his iPhone.

**Tip 2:** Plan ahead, but go easy on the Web.

Plan on spending at least four days in Rome; art, history, religion and politics cover the city in thick layers.

For our week-long trip, we agreed that ancient Rome's highlights, the Vatican's highlights, and some of the more historic churches were the top priorities. That narrowed it down to --



**Photo: Hector Lareau**

Vatican tour guide Cristiano Pellegrini explains some of the significance of a Vatican Museum portrait sculpture of the Emperor Augustus in Rome, Italy.



**Photo: Hector Lareau**

Liz Lareau, of Moline, stands at the lunch counter at Ancient Ostia, Italy, built during Hadrian's reign. Ms. Lareau and her husband, Hector, toured the site with the aid of podcasts.

well, the entire city except for the shopping district.

Especially when you're looking for Roman travel ideas, the Internet can be a time-sucking vortex, however. So limit your Web use to finding the hotel that best suits your taste, price and location.

Because most of Rome's big attractions are clustered in a walkable area, look for a hotel roughly half way between the Tiber and Termini station.

Once you have your accommodations settled, turn to some actual books. Choose two or three of the more recent ones with good reviews (like the ones on Amazon.com). If you like the television-personality authors' shows, their books usually will be good for you, too.

Even armed with guide-book information, traps await. Take the Villa Borghese -- home to one of the world's great art collections -- as just one example.

Actually getting in to see the art is complicated. First, you have to reserve your tickets. And then you have to be there at a specific time to pick them up. Then you have just a few minutes to rent an audio guide. Finally, you'll enter the Villa. But don't dawdle as you go through the many galleries. You're only allowed two hours; then the attendants shoo you out to make room for the next group of ticket-holders.

**Tip 3:** Use experts -- in person when you can afford them.

The Borghese labyrinth was just one of the items our tour guide made easy for us. Cristiano Pellegrini is licensed by both the Vatican and Rome. He peeled back the city's layers so it felt nearly as though we were traveling through time to each of Rome's heights: ancient and imperial magnificence and, of course, the Renaissance peaks reached by Bernini and Michelangelo.

Cristiano's expertise helped with practical, Borghese-type matters before we arrived. (He even suggested restaurants for the meals before our tours.) And once there, he made Rome's overwhelming complexity and richness digestible. We wanted to take a day trip away from the city, and he helped us to choose based on our budget and interests.

He also guided us on three half-day tours: the Vatican, ancient Rome and Christian Rome.

Walking past the blocks-long lines to get into the Vatican was wonderful. Thanks to our expert's guidance, we were able to avoid the days with the thickest crowds.

Before going, I honestly thought there couldn't be much to the Sistine Chapel. I've seen every documentary, read the National Geographic issue -- complete with giant fold-out images -- about the restoration. What could the actual Sistine Chapel offer after all that?

As it turns out, Cristiano's 20-minute preparatory lecture -- which felt like a graduate-level art history course -- made the experience intense.

And so went the rest of the Vatican tour: St. Peter's was overwhelming on many levels (and it is simply the finest standing building anywhere in the world); the Vatican museums connected so much of antiquity to so much of our modern lives; and the Renaissance art was deeply moving.

Outside the Vatican, every block and piazza seems adorned by some fantastically historic and important church. Trying to see each would be a fool's errand -- there are more than 300 historical churches in Rome, dating back to the 300s A.D. Choosing among them is just one more instance where preparation counts.

Cristiano showed us hidden treasures, like Santa Maria in Trastevere, where the roof is

supported by like-new but 1,800-year-old pillars looted from the Baths of Caracalla. And the Basilica of St. Mary Major's ancient mosaics depict stories from noncanonical gospels. Plus, a 5th-century mosaic there features the first-ever winged angel.

Santa Susanna celebrates Mass in English, and is built right atop the house of early Christian martyrs (Susanna and her father Gabinus, martyred in 293 A.D.; the actors' patron, Saint Genesius, martyred in 303, and a host of others). After the service, we went to the kitchen where Susanna, Gabinus and other Christians ate and worshipped together in secret, as the faith was not permitted under Diocletian.

Several moments brought ancient Rome's colossal accomplishments into focus. One was Domitian's palace -- the surviving wall decorations would be considered ultra-modern in a 21st century building; the paved street inside the palace set the fantastic scale; and the indoor horseracing track (really) rocked me back onto my heels.

Pointing out the beautifully coffered ceiling in the Basilica of Maxentius's ruins, Crisitiano explained that Michelangelo had studied it while designing St. Peter's Basilica. St. Peter's ceilings are more than just echoes of the ancient past -- they are resurrections of ancient splendor.

Ancient Rome survives in unusual ways. Augustus Caesar erected a temple in the Forum to his adoptive father, the Divine Julius Caesar. The temple's altar still is relatively intact. Even so, the fresh flowers and cards on the altar caught us completely by surprise.

Like its aqueduct-fed fountains, Rome seems never to stop. Countless sites await our next visit. We'll be sure to plan carefully to make the most of our time there.

Hector Lareau is a freelance writer living in Moline.

### **Can't afford a guide? Try a podcast instead**

The depth and detail that our guide, Cristiano Pellegrini, brought to his guided tours would take several thousand more words to describe.

But he didn't come cheap, and we couldn't afford to bring him along outside of Rome proper to Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli, the Villa d'Este in Tivoli, or perhaps even Pompeii. Ancient Ostia has managed to maintain a state of preservation on a par with Pompeii, and some folks contend it is a more interesting and instructive site overall. Like Rome, Ancient Ostia is essentially a museum. Unlike Rome, nobody now lives there. But it is spectacular. Perhaps the oldest brick amphitheater in the world is there, modernized with modern stagecraft for the performances still presented there.

Rick Steves, tour guide of television and softcover fame, has recorded some podcasts (available free on iTunes) that provide solid tips on navigating sites like Ostia. So my wife, Liz, and I marched through Ostia guided by two sets of earbuds connected to my iPhone. Like Pompeii, Ostia presents a bustling ancient city frozen in time. What survives -- shops, warehouses, restaurants, temples, courts, residences -- feels modern. The baths were health complexes, not just the cool, warm and hot rooms we read about so often. Similar to modern YMCAs, they had workout rooms -- whose floors were covered in mosaic depictions of wrestlers training -- and a variety of other health-maintaining activities like massage rooms and bistros. Intact mosaics line the floors of the public baths -- and seemingly every other surface in Ostia. Mosaic pavements on three sides of the square of corporations tell a story of the specialty businesses needed in an Imperial Roman seaport. Sailing ships lie before the entry to a rigging company that sold ropes and sails. The podcast directed us to a largely intact lunch counter built during Hadrian's reign. It is easily recognizable as a casual restaurant.-- Hector Lareau

