



Domes of Rome

By Tiffany Parks

Manhattan has skyscrapers. Prague has spires. And Rome has domes. They dominate the skyline, symbolize the city and have inspired poets for centuries. The most famous are, of course, Michelangelo's masterpiece in Saint Peter's Basilica, and that of the ancient and enduring Pantheon. Saint Peter's dome is the tallest in the world, the highest point in the city and an unmistakable icon of Rome. The dome of the Pantheon, technically two feet larger in terms of diameter –although by many not considered a true cupola– is a marvel of ancient ingenuity, and was studied meticulously by the architects of the early Renaissance as they sought to recreate the wonders of antiquity. These two landmarks are a must on any traveler's visit to the Eternal City, but there are dozens more worth searching for. We've chosen ten of the most stunning and fascinating domes in Rome, each of which would probably be considered the number one tourist attraction, were they in nearly any other city in the world.

With the second largest dome in Rome, > **Sant'Andrea della Valle** can be seen from nearly any vantage point in the city. It is also the site of the first act of *Tosca*, Puccini's beloved Roman opera. This majestic Baroque church was designed by Carlo Maderno and its dome was frescoed by Giovanni Lanfranco and Domenico, in one of the largest commissions of the time. The windows in the cupola allow the interior to be bathed with natural light.

> **San Giovanni dei Fiorentini**, an early Baroque church built for the Florentine community in Rome, was designed by Giacomo della Porta and Carlo Maderno and boasts an elegant and understated dome. Maderno's apprentice for the project, his young nephew Francesco Borromini, (who is now buried within) got his first taste of Roman church building during this project, and would later go on to revolutionize and advance Baroque architecture.

> **San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane** –affectionately called San Carlino for its diminutive size– was Borromini's first masterpiece. With an all-white interior, optical illusions and graceful curving lines, the tiny church is a jewel of baroque architecture. The dome is a masterful puzzle of interlocking crosses, hexagons and octagons, diminishing in size the higher they rise. It is an echo of the ceiling of the 4th century Mausoleum of Constantia.

> **Sant'Andrea al Quirinale** boasts the only dome in Rome designed by Baroque master sculptor and architect Gian Lorenzo Bernini. A contemporary and lifetime nemesis of Borromini, Bernini's style can easily be compared to his rival's as this church is just down the street from San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane. The spectacular



- 1 – Sant'Ivo
- 2 – Chiesa del Gesù
- 3 – San Giovanni dei Fiorentini
- 4 – Pantheon
- 5 – San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane



dome, complete with gilded herringbone and coffering expresses the excess and opulence that came to characterize the Baroque style.

Like so many other churches of the period, > **Santa Maria della Pace** was built on the foundations of an earlier church. The present structure was restored by Pietro da Cortona in the mid-17th century and possesses a cruciform vault and a tribune surmounted by an unusual cupola. It is one of the first examples of a composite of two distinct types of dome decoration, combining octagonal coffering and a series of ribs radiating from the lantern.

Without a doubt one of the greatest masterpieces of Baroque architecture of all time, Borromini's exquisite > **Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza** shakes up Rome's skyline of traditional domes with its distinctive spiraling pinnacle. The shape of the dome, which resembles the Star of David, is in fact stunningly complex, with a series of concave and convex undulations that nevertheless result in perfect symmetry.

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The imposing and magnificent > **Chiesa del Gesù** is the Jesuit mother church and was built during the Counter Reformation, when new standards for church building were formulated. The design was masterminded by architect Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola, but the stunning cupola was the work of Giacomo della Porta. The dome as well as the cross vault were sumptuously frescoed in rich colors by Giovanni Battista Gaulli.

> **San Teodoro** possesses Rome's first dome since antiquity. Redesigned in the mid-15th century by Bernardo Rossellino, this cylindrical church was originally built as early as the sixth century over the ruins of an ancient granary on the Palatine hill. As an early medieval church, it is partially underground and therefore the dome is not as visible externally as the other domes of the city. The apse of the church is decorated with an exquisite original mosaic with Rossellino's dome soaring majestically above.

Don't miss the dome that's not a dome. > **Sant'Ignazio di Loyola**, designed in the height of the Baroque period by Orazio Grassi, possesses a magnificent vault that seems three-dimensional, as hundreds of frescoed figures appear to be ascending straight through the roof of the church. But even more confounding is the *tromp-l'œil* dome, in reality just a round canvas stretching across the church's crossing, which



—from a specific spot in the church, marked by a star on the floor—appears to be a tall, ribbed and coffered dome. Both are the work of frescoist Andrea Pozzo.

Considered a work of architectural perfection, the > **Tempietto** is a miniature masterpiece of Renaissance perfection. Designed by Donato Bramante in the early 16th century, this tiny circular church (which occupies the courtyard of the much larger San Pietro in Montorio) is only

15 feet in diameter. Clearly not meant for regular use, it was mainly intended to be viewed from the outside, almost as if it were a sculpture. Its purpose was to provide a kind of marker for the location that was long believed to be the site of St. Peter's martyrdom. Modeled after temples of antiquity, the perfectly symmetrical and harmonious Tempietto combines slender Tuscan columns, a Doric entablature and, of course, a dome—perhaps the smallest, but certainly not to be missed.

The tromp-l'œil dome—in reality just a round canvas—appears to be a tall, ribbed and coffered dome.