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## PIAZZA PERFECT

Soak up Rome's Unique Atmosphere in  
One of her Glorious Squares

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# It's Hip to Be Square

Grab a gelato, a coffee, or a heaping plate of pasta and snag a table or bench in one of Rome's most beautiful piazzas for an afternoon of people watching and soaking up the sun. **Tiffany Parks** shares her suggestions.





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The Italian piazza is the ultimate urban living room, a visually stimulating public space (preferably void of traffic) where the city's residents can relax and its visitors can take a well-deserved break from sightseeing. Bright, airy, full of glorious works of architecture, and nine times out of ten with a fountain splashing in the center, Rome's piazzas can sometimes feel like open-air museums. Most of the city's major piazzas can also boast a café, a bench, or at the very least some convenient church steps, upon which to enjoy a few minutes or hours of *dolce far niente* (sweet idleness).

If you've flipped through a guidebook, you've doubtless heard of (and probably already visited) Rome's most famous piazzas, such as Piazza Navona with Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers, Piazza di Spagna with the iconic Spanish Steps, Piazza della Rotonda in the shadow of the Pantheon, and Piazza di Trevi with its eponymous fountain. These must-see squares are undeniably spectacular, but during the height of tourist season, you'd be hard-pressed to find a free place to sit, let alone a corner of tranquility to soak up Rome's unique atmosphere. Luckily, the city has a seemingly endless supply of piazzas, each offering its own distinct character.

## MAGNIFICENT MONUMENTS

Located at one of Rome's most important gates, Porta del Popolo, marking the beginning of ancient Via Flaminia, **Piazza del Popolo** provided the first glimpse of the Eternal City for the thousands of "Grand Tour" travelers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Designed by neo-classical architect Giuseppe Valadier, the piazza features the 36m obelisk of Seti I, three fountains, a staircase up to the Pincian Hill, and three impressive churches (one of which boasts works by Caravaggio, Bernini, and Raphael!).

Just a few steps from the Pantheon, **Piazza di Pietra** (left) is one of Rome's most surprising squares. As you step into the piazza from one of the narrow side streets, the Corinthian columns of the Temple of Hadrian rise to greet you. The 2<sup>nd</sup>-century AD temple was erected on occasion of the deification of Emperor Hadrian, by his heir and adoptive son Antoninus Pius. Today, what remains of the temple has been incorporated into a 17<sup>th</sup>-century building, although the effect is no less arresting.

Halfway down Via del Corso, **Piazza Colonna** is another square that will delight your pupils with an extraordinary wonder. The Column of Marcus Aurelius is the centerpiece of the piazza, a towering monolith stretching roughly one hundred feet into the sky. The column, made of 28 cylindrical blocks of white Carrara marble, was built to commemorate the military victories of the great philosopher-emperor, and each section of the bas-relief spiraling around the column's shaft recounts a specific historical event.



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**Piazza Farnese** (on cover) is the epitome of elegance and nobility. Dominating the broad square is Palazzo Farnese, the largest and most opulent once-private palace in the city. Designed by Antonio da Sangallo and Michelangelo, the palace is now the seat of the French Embassy, and features exquisite frescoes by the Carracci brothers. The two fountains that flank the square were repurposed from enormous ancient Roman bathtubs from the 3<sup>rd</sup>-century Baths of Caracalla, and the long travertine bench that runs the entire length of Palazzo Farnese makes the square a great place to park with a book and a gelato.

## GATHERING PLACES

If you're more interested in people watching than sightseeing, Rome has many piazzas offering opportunities to do just that. **Piazza San Lorenzo in Lucina** is a triangular wedge in the heart of the Campo Marzio neighborhood where the well

## TOP Piazza Restaurants

**Ar Galletto**  
(Piazza Farnese,  
Tel 066861714)

**Pierluigi**  
(Piazza de Ricci,  
Tel 066868717)

**Obikà**  
(Campo de' Fiori,  
Tel 0668802366)

**Osteria dell'Ingegno**  
(Piazza di Pietra,  
Tel 066780662)

**Cul de Sac**  
(Piazza di Pasquino,  
Tel 0668801094)

**La Taverna de' Mercanti**  
(Piazza de' Mercanti,  
Tel 065881693)

**Roma Sparita**  
(Piazza Santa Cecilia,  
Tel 0658363165)

## From Portico to Piazza

In ancient Rome, many temples were surrounded by columned porticos to set them apart from the rest of the city and create a sacred space around the places of worship. Just as the portico was a place of congregation and socializing in ancient times, its modern counter-



part, the piazza, is still today the center of Italian urban life. A place for young people to meet, for the older generations to discuss politics, for kids to play a pick-up game of soccer, the piazza is the heart of every Italian city.

### TOP PIAZZA CAFÉS

1. **La Caffettiera** (Piazza di Pietra)
2. **Vitti in Lucina** (Piazza San Lorenzo in Lucina)
3. **Caffè Farnese** (Piazza Farnese)



© MICHAEL FOLEY

heeled can be seen browsing in shops like Louis Vuitton, Bottega Veneta, and Pomellato, or stylishly sipping cappuccinos in one of the open-air cafés. While you're there, be sure to visit the eponymous church, with works by Bernini, Guido Reni, and Carlo Saraceni, and an underground section that includes fragments of the original 4<sup>th</sup>-century church.

**Campo de' Fiori** (above) is a truly 24-hour square. Activity here starts around 5am when stalls selling fresh produce, spices, honeys, jams, cheese, fish, cured meats, and more set up as part of Rome's most famous outdoor market. When the market winds down around 3pm (and after the street sweepers have done their work), the square becomes a magnet for the city's social butterflies. Enjoy a lazy aperitivo at one of the square's many outdoor bars, stick around for dinner, or join the rowdy drinking and amorous mingling that continues here long after midnight. Just try not to be intimidated by the ominous glare of the statue of Giordano Bruno!

Across the Tiber River in trendy Trastevere, **Piazza Santa Maria in Trastevere** (previous page) is the indisputable meet-up spot for Rome's young international crowd, who can be found chatting on the steps of the fountain or milling around the square at any time of day or night. Lively 5-piece street bands, mimes, dancers, fire eaters, and other entertainers can be found performing for tips here any night of the week. But don't be so distracted by the performers that you miss the stupendous church of the same name, decorated with medieval mosaics by Pietro Cavallini and 22 ancient Ionic and Corinthian columns.

In the hip, happening neighborhood of Monti, **Piazza Madonna dei Monti** is home to a battered fountain with plenty of place to sit with a good book or your favorite hip-

ster friend. Lots of little bars and hot spots surround the square, with outdoor seating spilling out onto the cobblestones.

### QUAINT AND CHARMING

If what you're looking for in a piazza is character and charm, Rome will certainly not disappoint. A magnificent oak tree (*quercia* in Italian) gives its name to this adorable square just a few blocks from Campo de' Fiori. **Piazza della Quercia** (left), home to the miniscule Santa Maria della Quercia church, is so quaint in fact, that if you didn't know any better, you'd think you were in a small Italian country village instead of the capital city.

Although **Piazza Mattei** (previous page) is a favorite square for many Roman residents, it is more often than not missed by the average tourist, since it is buried within the tangle of narrow backstreets that make up the Jewish Ghetto. The piazza's crowning glory is the Fountain of the Turtles, a small but exquisite fountain by Giacomo della Porta, decorated with four bronze turtles that were, according to popular belief, added by Bernini.

**Piazza di Pasquino**, just around the corner from Piazza Navona, is famous for its "talking statue," who gave his name to the tiny square back in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century when he became an unofficial posting board for the complaints of an oppressed citizenry (long before freedom of speech or press had caught on in Rome). The piazza is also the gateway to Rome's best street for vintage and boutique shopping, Via del Governo Vecchio.

If there's one piazza in Rome that will make you feel you've stepped back in time, it's **Piazza de' Mercanti**. Located on the quiet side of Trastevere (east of Viale di Trastevere), the square is lined with medieval buildings, dripping with ivy and lit by flaming torches come sundown. Two famous restaurants vie for dominance on either side of the piazza. Grab a table and pretend you're visiting Rome in the time of Raphael.