

The Vatican — the Right Way

BY TIFFANY PARKS

We're not going to lie to you: visiting the Vatican Museums and the Sistine Chapel in September is no walk in the park. It's hot, it's crowded, and there's so much to see it can be overwhelming. But with our expert tips, you can avoid rookie mistakes and make the most of your visit to arguably the greatest museum on the planet.



1 PLAN AHEAD

The very first (and smartest) thing to do before visiting the Vatican is to reserve your tickets in advance. The lines to enter the site can be gargantuan, sometimes lasting for upwards of two hours on the busiest days, often in direct sunlight. Do yourself a favor and book your tickets online. The official Vatican website (biglietteria.vatican.va) offers easy-to-follow instructions on purchasing tickets for a specific day and time, with only a €4 per person reservation fee on top of standard ticket prices. Touts on the street charge upwards of €20 per person for the same privilege.

2 WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES

The Vatican is one of the only museums in Rome that is open on Mondays, making it excessively busy that day. And since it's closed Sundays, Saturdays are perhaps even more chaotic, as it's the only option for weekend visitors. Wednesdays are a wild card due to the Papal Audience, making Tuesdays and Thursdays by far the least crowded days. If you're not in Rome mid-week, Friday is your best bet.

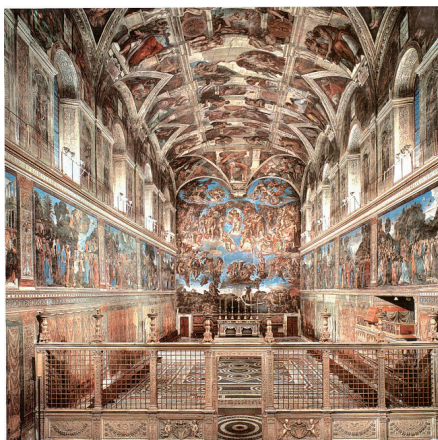
3 TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE

A common misconception is that the earlier you get to the Vatican, the less crowded it will be. Wrong! The majority of tour groups enter at 9 or even 8am, and the earlier individual time slots are the ones that consistently sell out first. The solution is to plan a visit for as late in the day as possible, when the museums are significantly less overrun. The last entrance is at 4pm, and the site officially closes at 6 (although the guards

start shepherding visitors out from around 5:30). If two hours are enough for you, plan to enter at 3:45pm. If you need a bit more time, 3pm is the sweet spot.

4 TAKE CARE OF BUSINESS

Once you've gone through security and traded your voucher in for tickets, you'll find yourself at the top of a massive escalator in a modern glass-roofed space. You may be itching to get to all that art, but resist. The bathrooms in this area (just to the right of the top of the escalator) are the largest and most convenient (and generally the least crowded). Make a pit stop now, as bathrooms can be hard to locate as you continue your visit, and will get busier the closer you get to the Sistine Chapel.



5 GO OUTSIDE

Fortunately, the Vatican Museums are littered with outdoor spaces, courtyards offering welcome breezes, limited shady areas, and sometimes benches. Every time you're feeling overwhelmed, head outside for an oxygen refill. Bonus: they're gorgeous. The Pinacoteca Courtyard, the first you'll encounter at the top of the entrance escalator, offers a stupendous view of St. Peter's dome that can't be topped from anywhere else in the city. The Pinecone Courtyard is a massive open space if the crowds are getting you down, and the Octagonal Courtyard holds two of the collection's most important ancient sculptures, *Apollo Belvedere* and the *Laocoön* (pictured above).

6 PACE YOURSELF

A calculation was once made that if you spent only 10 seconds standing in front of every work of art in the Vatican's collection, it would take you over seven years to see it all. We're guessing you don't have that kind of time. So



pick your favorites carefully, and stick to them. Don't feel guilty if you speedwalk down a gallery that doesn't interest you or skip entire sections of the museums. Trust us: you can't see it all. And remember, the downside of an over-ambitious itinerary is that you'll likely arrive at the Sistine Chapel so burnt out that you won't be able to fully appreciate it.

7 TAKE BREAKS

Visiting the Vatican Museums in the best of circumstances is an intense experience. Stendhal's eponymous syndrome holds that two hours is the maximum any person can take of full-on culture consumption. But on a hot, busy day, that time might shrink considerably, and with the inevitable waits and delays, you'll likely be inside for much longer than two hours. Take a breather—and a much-needed recharge of caffeine and sugar—in the café near the Sistine Chapel, before going in. When you reach the chapel entrance, instead of going inside, walk to the bottom of the staircase and take a right. The lower level of the café offers several tables.

8 NEVER LOOK BACK

To see the museums in the most efficient and least crazy-making way possible, never ever turn back. Unlike other large museums such as the Louvre or New York's Metropolitan, the Vatican's galleries and museums are set up in a one-way route. It's not strictly against the rules to go backward, but it's extremely unadvisable, especially as the Sistine Chapel is the very last stop. So, although we recommend keeping a fairly brisk clip throughout your visit, if you see something that fascinates you, stop and soak it up immediately, because you do not want to get to the opposite end of the museums and realize it's too late to go back.

9 MAKE YOUR EXIT

This is probably the single most important tip on the list. There are two exits of the Sistine Chapel, and they lead in two very different directions. If you're planning to visit St. Peter's Basilica after you visit the museums (which is ideal), make sure to take the exit that is on your right when you have your back to the high altar. (Hint: this exit leads down stairs, while the other leads up a ramp.) Why is this so important? While the other exit will oblige

te you to trudge all the way back to the entrance of the museums (over a kilometer of walking through rooms and galleries much less impressive than the ones you've just seen), and force you through what feel like endless souvenir shops, the exit to the right takes you down a back staircase that leads directly to the entrance of St. Peter's Basilica, saving you a 15-minute walk to get there, as well as what can be an hours-long wait in line.

10 TAKE IT ALL IN

Once you've made it into the wide-open spaces of enormous St. Peter's Basilica, you may think you've left the crowds behind at last. Think again. Sometimes the Basilica can be even more chaotic than the Museums, and it's easy to get swept up in the crowd. Take a moment instead to marvel at your surroundings: as soon as you step inside, don't follow the masses toward the front of the basilica, but head left and back, positioning yourself in front of the closed central doors. There's a pocket of space here where you can stand in reverence of the length and height of this truly awe-inspiring church without feeling compelled to keep moving. It's also a great spot to snap a few Instagram-able photos.