



NATIONAL ARCHEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF PALESTRINA
Piazza della Cortina, 1.
Open daily, 9am–7:30pm
(temple until 5:30pm). €5
(€2.50 reduced), includes
entrance to archeological site.

Palestrina: Mosaics, Temples, and More

OUT OF TOWN Take a break from the crowds with a day trip to this fascinating yet little-visited town. **Tiffany Parks** has the details.

Located just 22 miles east of Rome, in the foothills of the Apennine Mountains, Palestrina is a quaint, unassuming town, rarely visited by international tourists. That makes it all the more astonishing when you learn that it possesses one of the most important Roman sanctuaries in existence, as well as a couple of highly significant artifacts.

Ancient Praeneste, as the town was once called, was inhabited at least as far back as the 7th century BC, most likely by Etruscan settlers, and was eventually conquered by the Romans in 338 BC. The town's most spectacular and historically significant sight is **The Temple of Fortuna Primigenia**. The magnificent 2nd-century BC temple is notable for its grand series of terraces, exedras, and porticoes built over six levels, which spill down the side of Monte Ginestro and into the medieval town, more like a Greek acropolis than a Roman temple. Dedicated to the "first-born" goddess of Fate and Luck, who just happened to be the mother of Jupiter and Juno, the temple was also the site of an ancient oracle.

If visiting the temple only whets your appetite for ancient history and legend, be sure to visit the **National Archeological Museum of Palestrina**. Situated inside a palace that was constructed out of the ruins of the highest level of the temple, the museum's collection includes colossal statues, original Greek and Roman sculptures, ornate Etruscan bronze mirrors and *cistae*, the famous Grimani reliefs, terracotta votive lamps, and, most notably, *The Capi-*



tole Triad sculpture group. The latter is an extremely rare depiction of the three main gods in the Roman pantheon, Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, and one of the most sacred icons of the ancient Romans' faith.

On the museum's top floor, you'll find the most awe-inspiring of Palestrina's many treasures, the enormous *Nile River Mosaic*. This extraordinary work, created in the 2nd century BC by artists from Alexandria, is one of the earliest known Roman representations of Egypt. The mosaic depicts the annual flooding of the Nile, a phenomenon that contributed to the rich fertility of the area, and as a result, the prosperity of the empire. Twenty separate scenes, each one rich in detail, feature hunters, fisherman, boaters, swimmers, soldiers, reclining maidens, washerwomen, numerous varieties of plant life, and dozens of different animals, including camels, pythons,

hyenas, turtles, otters, monkeys, hippos, crabs, peacocks, crocodiles, giraffes, lions, lizards, bears, cheetahs, and mythical creatures.

Once you've seen the town's marvels, enjoy a relaxing stroll around the medieval center and some well-deserved refreshment. **Ristorante Zi Rico** (Via E. Toti, 2/4) creates traditional local dishes with a modern twist, **Birreria La Martuccia** (Via della Martuccia, 3/5) serves craft beer and gourmet burgers, and **Nunc Est Bibendum** (Corso Pierluigi, 25) is a funky wine bar with plenty of nibbles.

DID YOU KNOW?
Palestrina
was the hometown of
the great Renaissance
composer Giovanni
Pierluigi da
Palestrina.

Getting there: Take a blue Cotral Bus (€1.30 each way) from the Anagnina metro station (last stop on the A-line).