

Off the beaten track - Rome

The Colosseum is one of Rome's biggest draws. And it's busy - busy with tourists, and busy with traffic, as it seems to be the biggest traffic island in Rome. But head just five minutes away and you can find two of the least known sights in the city.

Fine mosaics and a Christmas crib

In the direction of the Roman forum lies the small church of **Santi Cosma e Damiano**, named after two brothers who performed miraculous healings, and became the patron saints of doctors and physicians. Entered through a charming Renaissance courtyard, the church occupies two fine classical buildings - a vestibule or library of Vespasian's Forum, and the little circular Temple of Romulus.

The apse mosaics date from the sixth century, and influenced many later churches in Rome. The triumphal arch shows the Lamb of God on his throne, surrounded by seven candlesticks, by angels, and by the symbols of the Four Evangelists; in the apse, Saint Peter and Saint Paul present Cosmas and Damian to Christ. You can also see, on the left, Pope Felix IV holding a model of the church. And below, the Lamb of God standing on a little mountain, from which four rivers flow - that could be the four Gospels, or the four Rivers flowing from Eden. Twelve lambs represent the Apostles, while at the sides are the two holy cities, Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

Santi Cosma e Damiano has one other rather surprising sight; a Christmas Crib of the eighteenth century, in a room off the cloister. If you're in Rome near Christmas, you'll see practically every church with a crib set up - but none of the others are anything like as good as this.



Illustration 1: Mosaic in SS Cosma e Damiano

A fortified monastery and an oasis of calm

Head across Via Labicana from the Colosseum, past San Clemente and uphill, to find the little monastery of **Santi Quattro Coronati**. Its walls and fortified gate tower are impressive, but go through the church to the little cloister and you find a gentler, calmer world. In fact, the church has had its times of trouble - the Normans destroyed much of the nave in 1084, and you can still see the columns and arches of the original nave built into the walls of the second courtyard - but it's still an oasis of peace in a busy city.

On the right of the second court is the Chapel of Saint Sylvester, with fine paintings from 1248 showing the Donation of Constantine. The political message is clear - by this

edict, the Emperor gave power to the Pope, and this allowed the Pope to assert himself against emperors such as Frederick II - seen widely at this time as an Antichrist! (Frederick died only two years later though, and the Hohenstaufens lost their influence in Italy.) By the way, the edict itself is a forgery from the time of Charlemagne.

Off a busy road, three ancient churches

Head out along the busy Via Nomentana to find the exquisite churches of **Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura** and **Santa Costanza**, about two kilometres past the Porta Pia and city walls. The basilica is off a little courtyard, down a fine staircase decorated with old stonework and inscriptions from the catacombs.

Sant'Agnese is a typical seventh century basilica, though unusually with a later women's gallery or *matroneum* built over the aisles and west end. The mosaic in the apse, dating from around 630, shows St Agnes between two Popes - Symmachus and Honorius I. Honorius, who restored the basilica, holds a little model of the church. Underneath the basilica, you may be able to visit the catacombs - much less well known than the Appian Way catacombs, but much better preserved, though there are no paintings here.



Illustration 2: Santa Costanza

From the basilica, take a path to Santa Costanza. Originally planned as the mausoleum of Constantia and her sister Helena, daughters of the emperor Constantine, it's a round building, with 24 paired granite columns supporting the dome, and delightful early Christian mosaics. While on the walls you can see Jesus and the Apostles, the vault has secular subjects - vine tendrils, carts taking the grape harvest home, leaves, branches, and exotic birds. Constantia's porphyry sarcophagus (alas, a copy) also shows scenes of the vintage - perhaps an allusion to Communion wine, or just a Bacchanalian hangover from paganism?

The mausoleum was originally part of a complex of buildings joining a great Constantinian basilica. You can still see the ruins of the basilica - similar to old St Peter's, or to San Lorenzo fuori le Mura - with its massive apse walls. And if you

want some peace before heading back into the centre of Rome, wander here for a while in the gardens.

A trip to the cemetery

Although **San Lorenzo fuori le Mura** is some way out of the centre of Rome, it's easy to get to - it's right next to the main cemetery, the Campo Verano, so buses run regularly to let the citizens of Rome visit the graves of their loved ones. Florists and monumental masons tout for business outside.

This basilica must be the most unusual in Rome, as it's two churches back to back. First of all, there was a covered cemetery basilica in the fourth century. Then Pelagius II built a new church next to it in the sixth century. Finally, Honorius III united the two churches, knocking down the walls between them. So what you see today is a glorious mix, on different levels, of early Christian and Romanesque work. There's a lovely cloister, too, dating from the 1180s, and extensive catacombs, though they're not often open.

Across the Tiber

The Tiber Island or Isola Tiburina originally housed the temple of Aesculapius, god of healing. It continued to be a hospital island once the city became Christian, with the church of St Bartholomew occupying the site of the temple. A rather different healing experience is provided in summer by the excellent ice cream shop near Ponte Fabricio, the Roman bridge that leads on to the island from the north-east.

Take the other bridge to Trastevere - the name literally means 'across-the-Tiber' - one of the lesser known districts of Rome. Trastevere's main drag has now been discovered by tourists, but the back streets still offer delights such as the church of **San Francesco a Ripa**, where you can usually have a Bernini statue all to yourself. Bernini's statue of the Blessed Lodovica Albertoni is similar to his statue of Saint Theresa, showing the saint in ecstasy, and dramatically lit by concealed windows.

Take a trip uphill, to the Janiculum, and you'll find a tiny circular temple in the courtyard of San Pietro in Montorio. Built by Bramante, around 1500, it's a restrained work of classicism, showing the renaissance fascination with circular buildings. But the circular form was also associated with the mausoleum or martyrium, as in Santa Costanza - so since this building was erected on the site of St Peter's crucifixion, it's an appropriate structure.

Another mausoleum that's not often visited is the **mausoleum of Augustus**, in the north of Rome just off the Tiber banks. Even from the outside - which is all you'll see, usually, as the monument hasn't been looked after - it's impressive, a huge brick-walled tumulus. It would have been even more impressive when it



Illustration 3: San Giorgio in Velabro

retained its flanking obelisks (now redistributed to Piazza del Quirinale and Piazza del'Esquilino, outside Santa Maria Maggiore) and cypresses growing on top.

Just off the Roman Forum, between the Forum and the Capitoline hill, is one of the nicest small churches in Rome - **San Giorgio in Velabro**. It's been restored to close to its original state, with a portico - characteristic of early Roman churches - outside, and fine arcades inside. The Romanesque baldacchino over the altar is particularly beautiful. And unusually for Rome, it has some lovely Gothic painting (attributed to Pietro Cavallini) instead of an apse mosaic. Rest a while here to soak up the atmosphere.



Illustration 4: Santa Maria dell'Orazione e Morte

Outside, and actually attached to the church, is the smallest triumphal arch in Rome - set up by the moneychangers who had their headquarters here in honour of the emperor Septimius Severus. Much bulkier is the four-way Arch of Janus, which provided a covered space for the cattle-dealers who worked in the livestock market here in the late Roman Empire.

Just up the road is a charming circular church, **San Teodoro**, probably built into part of Agrippa's great granaries or a classical temple. There's a fine sixth century apse mosaic, and a little bone house outside if you're into the macabre. It's not often open, but you'll get to see it if you turn up for the Greek services here.

The Aventine Hill is usually thronged with tourists looking for the 'keyhole' view of St Peter's in the place of the Prioriato di Malta, or the fine church of Santa Sabina. But most tourists miss the **Savelli Park** or 'Giardino degli Aranci' (orange-tree garden) with its fine views over Rome and relaxed atmosphere. The little

steps that lead down towards the Tiber from one end of the garden take you past the ancient fortress of the Savelli family - a family that gave medieval Rome two popes, and several senators.

Here you'll also find the 'other' bocca della verità, just outside Santa Sabina, spewing water into a little trough. There's always a queue at Santa Maria in Cosmedin, with tourists waiting to put their hands into the sculpture's mouth and see if it bites them for telling lies - why not come up here instead?

The macabre and the weird

One of the most macabre sights in Rome - apart from the well known Capuchin church with its bone-encrusted crypt and monkish mummies - is the little church of **Santa Maria**

dell’Orazione e Morte, on the dead straight, kilometre-long Via Giulia that was laid out by Julius II in the 1500s. It was the headquarters of a confraternity that found graves for the poor, and for unidentified bodies - a work of Christian charity. In accordance with its charitable mission, it’s decorated with skulls, bones, and skeletons. The donation box, with its smiling skeleton, is particularly fine.

Next door is the Palazzo Falconieri, enlarged by Borromini, with giant falcons’ heads on the façade giving it an unusual appeal.

There are many more “off the beaten path” sights in Rome. You could for instance make it your mission to track down the talking statues - Lucrezia, originally a priestess of Isis, in front of San Marco; Pasquino, near Piazza Navona; Marforio, the river god of the Capitoline; Abate Luigi, actually a Roman emperor whose head comes from another statue, near San Andrea della Valle; and Il Facchino, the water-seller, in Via del Corso. Or look for the ‘big foot’ in Via Pie di Marmo, off the Corso.

Don’t forget the big draws; the Colosseum, the Vatican and St Peter’s, the Pantheon. But when you’re tired of the queues and the bustle, head down one of the back streets, or out of the centre, and you’ll find a different Rome - the Rome of curiosities, of the impromptu and the unexpected.



Illustration 5: Palazzo Falconieri