ITALY TOUR STOP - THE VATICAN

A Brief History Of The Vatican

Situated on a hill on the banks of the Tiber River, the Vatican is one of the most historically rich and contemporarily influential places in the world. With a religious history spanning centuries and as a modern day city-state that is sovereign from the rest of Italy, the Vatican embodies many of the most important elements of Rome's cultural past and present.

The Vatican is the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church. It houses the central government of the Catholic Church, including the Bishop of Rome (more commonly known as the pope) and the College of Cardinals (essentially the pope's cabinet).

Each year, millions of people travel to the Vatican to see the pope, worship in St. Peter's Basilica, and appreciate the collections held within the Vatican Museums.

Technically, the Vatican is an independent city-state, the smallest in the world, and its official name is the State of the Vatican City. While the political body of the Vatican is governed by the Pope, it is much younger than the church itself. Vatican City as a political entity has only been a sovereign state since 1929. It was established in a treaty between the Catholic Church and the Kingdom of Italy that ended three years of negotiations over how to handle political, religious, and financial relations between the two entities. The pope and his cabinet refused to leave the Vatican compound until the dispute, which began in 1870, was finally resolved.

The 1929 Lateran Treaty defined the Vatican as a new entity, not as a vestige of the much larger Papal States that had encompassed much of central Italy from 756 to 1870. Most of this territory was absorbed into the Kingdom of Italy in 1860, and the final portion, namely the city of Rome and the region of Lazio, ten years later. But the roots of the Vatican itself can be traced back to the establishment of the Catholic Church in the 1st century A.D.

From the 9th and 10th centuries through to the Renaissance, the Roman Catholic Church had reached the pinnacle of its political power. The reigning popes had gradually come to govern the regions surrounding Rome, and the Papal States ruled central Italy for more than a thousand years until Italian unification. For much of this period, the popes resided in several palaces within Rome, having returned to the city in 1377 after a 58-year exile in Avignon, France. But when Italy achieved unification, they would not recognize the Italian king's right to rule, and refused to leave the Vatican compound until the dispute was resolved in 1929.

Much of the architecture, paintings, and sculpture that draw visitors to the city today were created during the golden years of the Papal States. Artists such as Michelangelo, Raphael, and Sandro Botticelli flocked to Rome to express their faith and dedication through the architecture and artwork of St. Peter's Basilica and the Sistine Chapel.
The Vatican in the 21st Century

Today, the Vatican is important as a landmark of religious and cultural history. People visit from all parts of the world to take in the beauty of its art and the depth and steadfastness of its history. But the Vatican is also important because its power and influence were not left in past centuries. As the center of the Catholic Church, one of the largest religions in the world, the Vatican holds a highly visible and influential place in contemporary times. Each year, countless visitors are drawn here seeking religious transformation and renewal through worship services, prayer, and audience with the pope.

Between the priceless artwork in the Vatican Museums, the stunning architecture of St. Peter's Basilica, and the social and religious significance of the Pope, Vatican City is one of the world's most popular travel destinations. It embodies some of the most significant elements of Italian and Western history, offering a window into our shared past, as well as a brief glimpse into a still-vibrant and enduring religious tradition.

10 Things You May Not Know About the Vatican

March 12, 2013  By Christopher Klein  (note: This was written 2 years ago)

1. Vatican City is the smallest country in the world.
Encircled by a 2-mile border with Italy, Vatican City is an independent city-state that covers just over 100 acres, making it one-eighth the size of New York’s Central Park. Vatican City is governed as an absolute monarchy with the pope at its head. The Vatican mints its own euros, prints its own stamps, issues passports and license plates, operates media outlets and has its own flag and anthem. One government function it lacks: taxation. Museum admission fees, stamp and souvenir sales, and contributions generate the Vatican’s revenue.

2. St. Peter’s Basilica sits atop a city of the dead, including its namesake’s tomb.
A Roman necropolis stood on Vatican Hill in pagan times. When a great fire leveled much of Rome in A.D. 64, Emperor Nero, seeking to shift blame from himself, accused the Christians of starting the blaze. He executed them by burning them at the stake, tearing them apart with wild beasts and crucifying them. Among those crucified was St. Peter—disciple of Jesus Christ, leader of the Apostles and the first bishop of Rome—who was supposedly buried in a shallow grave on Vatican Hill. By the fourth century and official recognition of the Christian religion in Rome, Emperor Constantine began construction of the original basilica atop the ancient burial ground with what was believed to be the tomb of St. Peter at its center. The present basilica, built starting in the 1500s, sits over a maze of catacombs and St. Peter’s suspected grave.

3. Caligula captured the obelisk that stands in St. Peter’s Square.
Roman Emperor Caligula built a small circus in his mother’s gardens at the base of Vatican Hill where charioteers trained and where Nero is thought to have martyred the Christians. To crown the center of the amphitheater, Caligula had his forces transport from Egypt a pylon that had originally stood in Heliopolis. The obelisk, made of a single piece of red granite weighing more than 350 tons, was erected for an Egyptian pharaoh more than 3,000 years ago. In 1586 it was moved to its present location in St. Peter’s Square, where it does double duty as a giant sundial.
4. For nearly 60 years in the 1800s and 1900s, popes refused to leave the Vatican. Popes ruled over a collection of sovereign Papal States throughout central Italy until the country was unified in 1870. The new secular government had seized all the land of the Papal States with the exception of the small patch of the Vatican, and a cold war of sorts then broke out between the church and the Italian government. Popes refused to recognize the authority of the Kingdom of Italy, and the Vatican remained beyond Italian national control. Pope Pius IX proclaimed himself a “prisoner of the Vatican,” and for almost 60 years popes refused to leave the Vatican and submit to the authority of the Italian government. When Italian troops were present in St. Peter's Square, popes even refused to give blessings or appear from the balcony overlooking the public space.

5. Benito Mussolini signed Vatican City into existence. The dispute between the Italian government and the Catholic Church ended in 1929 with the signing of the Lateran Pacts, which allowed the Vatican to exist as its own sovereign state and compensated the church $92 million (more than $1 billion in today’s money) for the Papal States. The Vatican used the payment as seed money to re-grow its coffers. Mussolini, the head of the Italian government, signed the treaty on behalf of King Victor Emmanuel III.

6. Popes did not live at the Vatican until the 14th century. Even after the construction of the original St. Peter's Basilica, popes lived principally at the Lateran Palace across Rome. They even left the city altogether in 1309 when the papal court moved to Avignon, France, after King Philip IV arranged for a French cardinal to be elected pope. Seven popes, all French, ruled from Avignon, and the papacy did not return to Rome until 1377, by which time the Lateran Palace had burned and the Vatican started to be used as a papal residence. Much repair work needed to be done, however, because the Vatican had fallen into such disrepair that wolves dug for bodies in the cemetery and cows even wandered the basilica.

7. The Swiss Guard was hired as a mercenary force. The Swiss Guard, recognizable by its armor and colorful Renaissance-era uniforms, has been protecting the pontiff since 1506. That’s when Pope Julius II, following in the footsteps of many European courts of the time, hired one of the Swiss mercenary forces for his personal protection. The Swiss Guard’s role in Vatican City is strictly to protect the safety of the pope. Although the world’s smallest standing army appears to be strictly ceremonial, its soldiers are extensively trained and highly skilled marksmen. And, yes, the force is entirely comprised of Swiss citizens.

8. At several times during the Vatican’s history, popes escaped through a secret passageway. In 1277, a half-mile-long elevated covered passageway, the Passetto di Borgo, was constructed to link the Vatican with the fortified Castel Sant'Angelo on the banks of the Tiber River. It served as an escape route for popes, most notably in 1527 when it likely saved the life of Pope Clement VII during the sack of Rome. As the forces of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V rampaged through the city and murdered priests and nuns, the Swiss Guard held back the enemy long enough to allow Clement to safely reach the Castel Sant'Angelo, although 147 of the pope’s forces lost their lives in the battle.

9. The majority of Vatican City's 600 citizens live abroad. As of 2011, the number of people with Vatican citizenship totaled 594. That number included 71 cardinals, 109 members of the Swiss Guard, 51 members of the clergy and one nun inside the Vatican walls. The largest group of citizens, however, was the 307 members of the clergy in diplomatic positions around the world. With Benedict XVI residing as a pope emeritus in the Vatican, the population will increase by one when a new pope is named.
10. The Vatican Observatory owns a telescope in Arizona.
As Rome expanded, light pollution from the city made it increasingly difficult for astronomers at the Vatican Observatory—located 15 miles from the city at the papal summer residence in Castel Gandolfo—to view the night skies, so in 1981 the observatory opened a second research center in Tucson, Arizona. The Vatican conducts astronomical research with a state-of-the-art telescope that sits atop Mount Graham in southeast Arizona.

10 Secrets of the Vatican Exposed - By David Goldenberg

Vatican City may have fewer than 1,000 citizens and span only 110 acres, but it also has a multimillion-dollar budget and an unbelievably complex history. Understanding how it all works requires parsing through centuries of religious texts. Is the Vatican confusing and mysterious? Is the Pope Catholic? Here's a look behind the scenes.

1. Regular Exorcise!
Baudelaire once said that "the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he doesn't exist." But in modern-day Vatican City, the devil is considered alive and well. The former Pope John Paul II personally performed three exorcisms during his reign, and the current Pope Benedict XVI is expanding the ranks of Catholic-sponsored exorcists throughout the world. In fact, Father Gabriele Amorth, the Church's chief exorcist, claims to expel more than 300 demons a year from the confines of his Vatican office, and there are more than 350 exorcists operating on behalf of the Catholic Church in Italy alone. Amorth also teaches bishops how to tell the difference between satanic possession and psychiatric illness, noting that those who suffer from the former seem to be particularly repulsed by the sight of holy water and the cross.

2. Where Thieves Go to Prey
With 1.5 crimes per citizen, Vatican City has the highest crime rate in the world.

It's not that the cardinals are donning masks and repeatedly robbing the bank, it's just that the massive crowds of tourists make Vatican City a pickpocket's paradise. The situation is complicated by the fact that the Vatican has no working prison and only one judge. So most criminals are simply marched across the border into Italy, as part of a pact between the two countries. (The Vatican's legal code is based on Italy's, with some modifications regarding abortion and divorce.) Crimes that the Vatican sees fit to try itself—mainly shoplifting in its duty-free stores—are usually punished by temporarily revoking the troublemaker's access to those areas. But not every crime involves theft. In 2007, the Vatican issued its first drug conviction after an employee was found with a few ounces of cocaine in his desk.

3. The Worst Confessions
Some sins are simply too much for a local bishop to forgive. While priests can absolve a sin as serious as murder (according to the Church), there are five specific sins that require absolution from the Apostolic Penitentiary. This secretive tribunal has met off and on for the past 830 years, but in January of 2009, for the first time ever, its members held a press conference to discuss their work.

Three of the five sins they contemplate can only be committed by the clergy. If you're a priest who breaks the seal of confession, a priest who offers confession to his own sexual partners, or a man who has directly participated in an abortion and wants to become a priest, then your case must go before the tribunal to receive absolution. The other two sins can be committed by anyone. The first, desecrating the Eucharist, is particularly bad because Catholics believe that the bread and wine transubstantiate into the body and blood of Christ. Messing with them is like messing with Jesus. And then, there's the sin of attempting to assassinate the Pope. That one's pretty self-explanatory.
The meetings of the Apostolic Penitentiary are kept confidential because they're a different form of confession. The sinner is referred to by a pseudonym, and only the Major Penitentiary, Cardinal James Francis Stafford, decides how the sin shall be dealt with. Presumably, a bunch of Hail Marys doesn't cut it.

4. Read the Pope's Mail

The Vatican's secret archives haven't been truly secret since Pope Leo XIII first allowed scholars to visit in 1881. Today, it's even more accessible. Outsiders are free to examine the correspondences of every pope for the past 1,000 years, although there is one catch: Guests have to know exactly what they're looking for. With 52 miles of shelves in the archives, the librarians prohibit browsing.

The most famous letter there is probably Henry VIII's request that his marriage to Catherine of Aragon be annulled, which Pope Clement VII denied. Henry divorced Catherine anyway and married Anne Boleyn (and four other women), leading to Rome's break with the Church of England. The archives also contain an abundance of red ribbons, which were used to bind 85 petitions from English clergyman and aristocrats.

5. The Pope Likes to Text Message

Pope Benedict XVI routinely sends text messages of his homilies to mobile subscribers around the world, and in 2009, the Vatican opened up an official YouTube channel to show various Papal addresses and ceremonies. The Vatican even released an iPhone application that contains multilingual versions of the Breviary prayer book and the prayers of daily mass. But the Pope's enthusiasm for technology isn't limited to cell phones and the Internet. The Vatican has also added solar panels to the roof of the Pope Paul VI auditorium as part of its commitment to fight climate change.

6. They Have the Finest Swiss Bodyguards

Nowadays, the Swiss have a reputation for pacifism, but back in the 1500s, they were considered an unstoppable military force. Swiss armies were renowned for the their mastery of a weapon called the halberd, a deadly combination of a spear and an axe, and their ground troops were famous for routinely demolishing legions of enemies on horseback. After Pope Julius II witnessed their ferocity in battle 500 years ago, he recruited a few soldiers to become his personal bodyguards. Ever since, Swiss Guards have pledged fidelity to the Pope, sometimes dying for the cause. During the sacking of Rome in 1527, for instance, three quarters of them were killed while providing cover for Pope Clement VII to escape.

Today, the hundred or so members of the Swiss Guard spend most of their time bedecked in Renaissance garb, twirling their halberds in ceremonies or manning checkpoints around the Vatican. When the Guards are actually protecting the Pope, they wear plain clothes and carry distinctly modern weapons.

7. The Mafia Dipped into the Collection Plate

In The Godfather: Part III, a shady deal between the mafia and the Vatican leads to the murder of the Pope. Was this based on a true story? Possibly. On the morning of September 29, 1978, Pope John Paul I was found dead, sitting up in his bed, after only 33 days in office. Although Vatican officials claimed the 65-year-old pope died of a heart attack, there was never an autopsy, and at the time, the Vatican definitely had ties to organized crime. Sure enough, in 1982, Vatican Bank president Father Paul Marcinkus resigned from his post after a series of scandals exposed the bank's ties to the mafia. Eventually, the bank had to repay more than $200 million to its creditors. But Marcinkus was never indicted of a crime. And though he was suspected of being involved in several mysterious deaths, including Pope John Paul I's, Marcinkus successfully claimed diplomatic immunity in the United States and retired to Arizona in 1990.
8. There's No Vice-Pope

Once a cardinal becomes the Pope, he's the designated leader of the Catholic Church and God's representative on Earth for the rest of his life. As with Supreme Court justices, he can resign before his death, but that's unlikely. (It's been more than 500 years since the last papal resignation.) Further, as modern medicine improves, even seriously ill people tend to stick around longer, meaning that a Pope could be alive but unable to perform his duties for years, as was the case with John Paul II. What happens then? Well, no one is really sure. A cardinal can take over the Pope's responsibilities as the Vatican's head of state, but no one else is allowed to carry out his ceremonial duties. In the end, many masses and benedictions simply go unperformed until the Pope either passes away or recovers.

9. Faith-Based Economics

The Vatican needs several hundred million dollars per year to operate. Its many financial responsibilities include running international embassies, paying for the Pope's travels around the world, maintaining ancient cathedrals, and donating considerable resources to schools, churches, and health care centers. So where does that money come from? Catholics pay tithes to their local parishes and donate about $100 million every year to the Vatican itself. But collection plates aren't the Vatican's only source of money. The city-state also gets cash from books, museums, stamps, and souvenir shops. (Get your limited-edition Vatican euros here!)

But that's not always enough. By the end of 2007, the city-state was $13.5 million in the hole. Part of the problem was the weakened American dollar, which translated into less purchasing power. Another contributing factor was the lackluster performance of the Vatican's newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano. To boost subscriptions, the Pope has asked the editor to spice up the layout with more photos and allowed him to cover world news stories in addition to the traditional religious fare.

10. Even the ATMs Are in Latin

The Vatican Bank is the only bank in the world that allows ATM users to select Latin to perform transactions. That's just one symbol of the Holy See's continued devotion to the language. Pope Benedict XVI has been particularly passionate about reviving the language and purportedly holds many informal conversations in Latin. (Pope John Paul II generally spoke Polish.)

The Vatican's Latin Foundation tries to keep the language relevant by translating modern phrases into the ancient tongue. In 2003, they released an updated dictionary that included the terms "rush hour" (tempus maximae frequentiae) and "dishwasher" (escariorum lavatory). Interestingly, the translations can have serious consequences. A recent U.S. lawsuit was brought against the Vatican for conspiring to protect a child-molesting priest, and it was held up for months as the Church's experts rejected the prosecuting team's Latin translations of terms such as "conspiracy to commit fraud."