

# Untold Italy Episode 98 - Vatican Museums: Tips and Highlights for Your Visit

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 98.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

## Katy

Ciao Benvenuti! Hi everyone. Hope you've had a wonderful week so far and are ready to take a peek inside one of the world's largest and most beautiful collections of art and antiquities - the Vatican Museums. This immense series of galleries in fact houses 22 separate collections, each on its own priceless but as a collective, they are almost mindblowing in importance and value. Of course, they culminate in the incomparable Sistine Chapel adorned with frescoes painted by Michelangelo and acknowledged as among the greatest pieces of art ever created.

I thought we'd take this virtual visit to the museums because they are one of the most important and most visited attractions in Rome. In fact, in 2019 almost 6.9 million people walked through those corridors - and I was one of them! It's a rare visit to Rome that occurs without me paying a visit to this site because, as you will learn, there is a lifetime of exploring to be done inside these museums. And You really need to allocate at least half a day to exploring them if you have even a passing interest in art and history. So let's find out what is so special and what not to miss when you go there in person.

Joining us today on the podcast is Stephen Oddo, former licensed tour guide and co-founder of WalksofItaly.com, an online travel company for visitors to Italy focusing on unique and intimate experiences. Now Take Walks, the company is well known for their engaging tours inside the Vatican Museums including the recently launched Key Masters tour where guests have the opportunity to open the doors to the Sistine Chapel.

## Katy

Benvenuto Steven, welcome to the Untold Italy podcast.

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**Stephen**

Grazie!

**Katy**

I'm thrilled to have you on the show today to talk about the Vatican museums, and it's one of the most - obviously one of the most major sites that visitors love to visit in Rome. Before we start doing that, would you mind sharing your story, your connection to Rome, Italy and Vatican?

**Stephen**

Absolutely. So I'm the President and co-founder of Take Walks. We started actually as Walks of Italy back in 2009, and really our first product was the Vatican Museums, where I had been guiding for quite a while. And so had my co-founder and we met there in St. Peter's square, and we were talking about what are some of the great elements of a tour and what defines quality tour versus not quality tour at the time, group sizes were all over the place. The types of experiences you can have at the Vatican were very diverse, and it was really hard to filter all that from the internet at the time. There wasn't a lot of websites specializing in guided tours and activities, so that's what we decided to do and started Walks with really a love of trying to create great experiences out of places that are complex. The Vatican is a great example of a place that's immense, and there's a lot of different ways to tackle it. There's a lot of things people want to see there. And as I'm sure you know, it can take quite a long time if you're not sure where you're going and you might not see what you want to see. So that was sort of the impetus behind starting Walks and focusing on smaller groups and higher quality guides. And we've been growing ever since. Walk of Italy grew to become one of the biggest operators in Italy for those types of experiences. And then we've now grown around the world as just Walks and takewalks.com is where you can find all of our tours.

**Katy**

And you were a guide in the Vatican Museums yourself. You actually took people for quite a long time, didn't you?

**Stephen**

Yeah. For about five years. And so I had a lot of experience firsthand. Guiding was really wonderful, and I loved it. But it wasn't my life passion. I really wanted to work in business and develop a startup. And so Walks was my way of kind of marrying those two things that I had direct experience with. And I had met so many great guides and really wanted to have them tell their stories and be able to give a direct line to some of the best guides in Rome. And then eventually all over the world and kind of hand pick the best people to work with. The tourists themselves are really the core of what we started back all the way at the launching of the company. And when Walks of Italy started, the Vatican is so near and dear to our heart.

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It's still one of our biggest partners today. So I still get to go through there a few times a year, not as many as I used to. I think I did over 1000 visits in the period that I was guiding there.

### **Katy**

To actually become a guide in the Vatican Museum is not easy. Like you have to sit a really hard test. So everyone that is guiding around the museum is really highly qualified, and I think it really comes down then, if you're doing a tour, it's really the style of how people approach telling the stories around the different artworks and galleries that you see that makes a difference.

### **Stephen**

Absolutely. The storytelling is the center of what we do. And we definitely work with the best guides, who we're constantly keeping our eye out for, who we can continue to work with and where we need to grow. Guide talent is just like any other kind of talent, right? There are some who have been doing it for years. They're passionate it's their career. And then there are others that are kind of more of a cyclical - you know you get new people coming in and kind of give it a fresh perspective. So it's nice to be able to see that change. And definitely the types of tours I've been on span everything from a lot more of the professorial kind of a docent lead type of experience versus somebody who's a lot more conversational and can just have a fun chat about the different stories. And there's room for both. And both ways are great ways to explore the Vatican, but there's a lot of logistics, too, and people don't necessarily know kind of the different ways you can approach the Vatican, what you can do to get behind the scenes or get in when the crowds are fewer. So hopefully we can talk a little bit about that today, too.

### **Katy**

Yeah, sure. So how about we take a little virtual walk around the museums? I know you could really spend a lifetime exploring them, but are there some highlights that we definitely shouldn't miss.

### **Stephen**

Absolutely. One of the most common questions I would get is at what point are we in the Vatican? What is the Vatican and are we in it now? Is it a part that we don't see? And so a lot of people come to the Vatican City, which is a city state or independent country with its own passports, its own currency. So it is a separate territory from Italy. There's a lot of asterisks and caveats with that. But as far as the UN is concerned, they are independent, and most people come onto it at St Peter's square, which is a kind of a middle ground. So you're kind of officially in the Vatican City state when you're in St. Peter Square, but you're not in the Vatican museums. And the Sistine Chapel, while visible from St. Peter Square, cannot be accessed from St. Peter's Square. So that's just the beginning of what I mean by logistics, right? In fact, you might walk 20 minutes from St. Peter's Square to get to the entrance of the

Vatican Museums and make your way through, as we might know, immense galleries to find your way to the Sistine Chapel, which is in the Vatican Museums. So first of all, understanding what's the difference between the museums, the Church, the square, and the rest of the Vatican City state, the gardens. That's a lot to understand already before you've even started guiding through the Museum.

### **Katy**

It's so true. I've actually been guilty of running late for a tour because I didn't actually know - I went to St. Peter's Quarter, and I didn't know that you had to go around the side to get into the entrance of the Vatican Museum. So that's an excellent, excellent point. Okay. So when you finally make it there like I did with a lot of running. I ate my gelato that day. Yes. How do you approach these galleries? Because I think there's over 22 galleries, right?

### **Stephen**

Yeah. It's pretty immense. And that's why it's called the Vatican Museums - plural. It's not a single museum. And many things in the museum aren't really museums, such as some of the chapels that are in there. And the Sistine Chapel is one. But it's not the only Chapel. The Nicoline Chapel is another. So you have museums and you have art galleries all within it. And then obviously, hopefully, you've decided to take a tour, at least for your first visit, because you really want to make sure you see the highlights.

### **Stephen**

So what are the highlights? I mean, people are obviously coming to see the famous painting of Michelangelo ceiling in the Sistine Chapel. And so that alone is a significant amount of time just to break that down and learn about it. But there's no way you can visit the museums, truly and not see that. So you're definitely going to pass by the Sistine Chapel. You're going to make it in there, but just going in there without the context. I think a lot of people they save up - they take this big trip. They're really excited to get to the Vatican and see the Sistine Chapel. But they would miss out if you didn't take the tour because you wouldn't have the context for what you're looking at and why it was so important. And why is the image so iconic of God and Adam and the creation of Adam there? So it's important to get that background. But by no means is that the only thing to see. There's many museums and some of the ones that we visit on the tour are the most important museums, the major courtyards and most famous pieces of art. We can talk about those in a minute. But most of the experiences culminate in the Sistine Chapel. Some tours visit St. Peter's Basilica, after, which is a separate attraction, separate site. It's a Church. It isn't a museum. There is a small museum inside of the Church many tourists visit that many tourists don't. So definitely when you're looking at planning your day, you want to decide because it's all about time. Do you want to spend your time and get a full overview of the museums? You want to focus just on the Sistine Chapel?

## Stephen

Do you want to make sure you get that time in St. Peter's Basilica with a guide as well? So those are some of the decisions you have to make while you start to approach the museum and how you're going to visit it. Walks tours are anywhere from two to two and a half hours on the shortest way to visit the museums to 5 hours. That's a big jump. Now, could you do 8 hours at the Vatican City? Sure, of course. But I don't think that most people are approaching it that way as much as it may warrant it.

## Katy

It certainly warrants it. I think, for me, even as an art and history lover, I get a museum and art fatigue, because for some reason, I'm just surrounded by all this amazing beauty. It's always too much to take in this sensory overload, actually. And that's why I really enjoy going with a guide, because not only do you get the context, but they help you focus on some of those smaller details that you just wouldn't see at all if you went on your own. Absolutely.

## Stephen

There's actually something that we used to talk about on our tours referring to that. It's called Stendhal Syndrome and Stendhal was this writer in the era of the Grand Tour, and he would talk about just being affected in a psychological way by overabundance of art. At a certain point, it's too much. You're literally your kind of brain is spinning and places like the Vatican or the Colosseum. It does you see that a lot of people are just like they hit a wall. This is too much for today. And so there's actually a name for that.

## Katy

I knew I had a syndrome. That's excellent. So maybe we can talk a little bit of the story of the Sistine Chapel because it is in the heart of the museums. And so when you go in there, it's like I definitely have that Stendhal Syndrome. I have to say, because it's just so beautiful and you can appreciate it as an artwork and all the colors and the imagery and all the cheeky little faces that are popping out at you from the painting. But it's really the brilliance of Michelangelo and why it's there in the first place. It really brings it to life for me anyway.

## Stephen

Yeah, absolutely. As you mentioned, the Vatican museums are immense, and the Sistine Chapel is one of the major buildings in a collection of buildings that make up the museum. The museum was historically the Apostolic Palace of Popes that go pretty far back 14th century and certain buildings even earlier than that. But much of it in the 14th to 15th century. So these are where various Popes, including some of the more interesting, colorful Popes like the Borgia family, who did live there in the Borgia apartments, which were still visitable. And so the Sistine Chapel was one of these highly decorated chapels, private chapels that the Pope would have ceremonies. And so essentially, this was built as another great chapel to eventually to host the conclaves of the elections of the Pope. So conclaves

are what are now some of the more famous imagery we get from the Vatican every once in a while when a Pope is chosen after the passing or abdication in the very rare circumstance of the previous Pope. So passing the baton to a new Pope while still being in office. So that's pretty rare. But anyway, so the Sistine Chapel is a late 15th century building built by Pope Sixtus is the fourth, right. So Pope Sixtus is what gives it the name Sistine. In fact, it's not the only Sistine Chapel in Italy or in Rome. Any chapel built by Sixtus could be referred to as the Sistine Chapel. In fact, there's one in Santa Maria Maggiore for a later Pope. So really that you got to kind of break it down by. All right. So we have this building. It's a freestanding structure. It was used for services and used for private ceremonies and then eventually used for the conclave and the election when the Cardinals would gather inside. In fact, that's where we get the name conclave. It means with the keys. So the keys both to the Kingdom for St. Peter is given the keys to the Kingdom by Christ. And so the Chapel is sort of the place where the passing of the keys takes place, as the Pope is the inheritor of that tradition of Peter, right? So he's the representative of Peter. It's being passed on the Catholic Church. That's what's there, right? And also with the key could potentially refer to the fact they locked the Cardinals or did for some for a long time, locked the Cardinals in the Chapel to make that decision. So you're really in that place where that all happens when you're inside the Sistine Chapel and they put in a little stove and they burn the ballot, that all still happens. And the smoke comes out and they add a little chemical to change the colors of the smoke in the stove. So that's how it happens now. You can see pictures of that on the tour. They often will show you pictures or videos of what that would look like. And then you're in this incredible building which has been decorated over the course of a long period and not just by Michelangelo and not just on the ceiling. So you have the famous ceiling of Michelangelo, which is the creation stories and the creation of Adam, Genesis and so forth. And then you also have the later painting by Michelangelo much later on in his life of the Last Judgment. So you have these two paintings from different points in the artist's life. And then on the sides of the Chapel, you have earlier paintings from other greats, including Sandro Botticelli, Perugino, Pinturicchio, Ghirlandaio. And these paintings represent sort of a juxtaposition of the Old and New Testament. So you have this earlier Renaissance all the way through High Renaissance and Quasi-mannerist paintings, all represented in a single place, which has so much meaning for the Catholic Church and the election of the Pontiff. So a lot to unpack there.

## Katy

Yeah, that is such a great summary. But I think what it goes to show is that you can go delving into so much detail around this. And so we can just truly scratch the surface of what it's all about when we're just having a chat today. But when you go there, the guide can point out things you wouldn't notice without knowing. And I think that's really (to me) it brings it alive.

## Stephen

It does. And it's not easy to come across that information inside these museums. I mean, they don't have a lot of context cards and descriptions. But inside the Sistine Chapel, there's tons

of portraits of contemporaries of the artists and some of the political disputes that were going on. One of the most known stories about the Sistine Chapel is, of course, from the film *Agony and the Ecstasy* and the relationship between Julius II and Michelangelo often antagonistic relationship. And some of that's real. Some of the imagery in the movie is a little bit - been debunked a bit. How much was Michelangelo laying on his back, actually, while he was painting versus standing up? There are things like that where we actually have sketches of what Michelangelo, what he built to be able to get on the scaffolding to paint in there, and he sketched himself standing there making the painting. So we know some of these stories have been kind of modified for intrigue over the years, but certainly finding the face of a Cardinal who made a side comment about the quality of Michelangelo's work getting placed *Inferno* in the Last Judgment, those types of things.

### Stephen

How do you find this Cardinal Biagio da Cesena and was it about the relationship they had at the time that caused that to take place? So there's lots of references as well in the paintings of the actual art from the museum, so again, it's great to bring the museums to life and to kind of bring it all home there because you'll see elements of the Apollo Belvedere of the Laocoön and of the Belvedere Torso, which you'll see through the museum and they'll actually come out in the paintings because the artists were ruminating about the artworks themselves because they were there at the time, and they had been discovered at the time by Popes that were collecting art in the nearby area.

### Stephen

So being able to bring it all together and make sense of what you're seeing. There are hundreds of figures inside of the Sistine Chapel and from all different stories in the Bible, from different contexts of things that were happening at the time. And so to bring it all together, you really want to kind of have that base understanding and context before you even step in there.

### Katy

I totally agree. You made a really good point about the lack of signage and explanation. There might be a tiny little plaque, and you have to find it. And when it's in a crowded situation, you won't find it. I remember my first visit. I was just, like, literally walking through just kind of in awe but had no idea what was happening around me. And so one of my favorite parts of the Vatican museums is the Hall of Maps, which is absolutely spectacular. But I had no context around what it was back then. So it was just sort of like a beautiful space, but it didn't have any real meaning. And so I made a vow to myself that when I went back, I would definitely go with a guide because I just wanted to know more. .

### Stephen

Yeah, and the Hall of Maps is a great example - Gallery of Maps is a great example of one of these rooms, which is overwhelming. There's so much there so many figures, so many different areas of painting that are placed in there. And the maps themselves are of historical importance and commemorating a lot of things that took place in the world at the time and discoveries that were being made in the late 16th century when they were painted. And so they are themselves a masterwork. And then you're in this awe-inspiring long Gallery. Interestingly, one of our new and very special access tours that we do in partnership with the Vatican - you get to go into that Gallery while the Museum still haven't fully opened yet. So we have this Key Master tour. One of the great things that happens is you get to go into some of these rooms when they're pitch dark and you don't know what you're going to see. And then they turn on the lights, and after they unlock the doors and then all the whole light shines down the hall and illuminates all these paintings. And it's just awe-inspiring. So those type of experiences, you can only imagine what it's like to be standing there and having that access.

### **Katy**

That sounds incredible. Definitely on my list of things to do when I get back to Rome, because as I said, it's one of those things that I like each time I've been. I think I've been to the Vatican museums about five times now, and I think every time I get something new, but every time I wish I was there on my own - or with a lesser amount of people, just because it's a very special place and to be able to appreciate it just in its own kind of glory, it's a very exclusive and special experience that I think is definitely - if you're into art and history - then it's something that's worth investing, in my opinion.

### **Stephen**

And you're already going to be all that way. You're going to make your way to Rome, you're going to be staying there. You're going to be seeing a lot of things and you're going to pay the entry fee. So for me, it's really like, how much do you want to see? How much does it interest you? You can go really deep in history and stories, but there are some things you just don't want to miss, and you could miss. For example, a huge percentage of our guests are so happy and kind of overwhelmed with the fact that we get to go see the Raphael rooms, and many who have been for the second or third time, they had never seen them before. And a lot of groups, a lot of individuals don't make their way through the Raphael rooms. And of course, Raphael is sort of this great counterpart figure contemporary to Michelangelo. Much shorter life so produced a lot less. But some of the best paintings in Rome are Raphael's by a lot. And you see him in the Pinacoteca. But there's a whole series of rooms painted by Raphael and Raphael's followers in his workshop called the Raphael Rooms. And probably the most famous painting in there is the School of Athens and the Stanza della Segnatura. And that's the painting where - you'd immediately recognize it, but a lot of people don't place it at the Vatican because the Vatican is so tightly intertwined with the Sistine Chapel. And so you kind of know those images. But when you see the School of Athens, you kind of go "oh, that's the painting and it's right there". But so many people miss it, even tours. A lot of tours don't go through it because it adds a whole other wing of the museums. So definitely keep your eye

out to make sure that you're going to get a chance to see that because you'd be disappointed if you again - went all that way, got there and you missed one of these great experiences that you could have in the museums.

**Katy**

Yeah. It's pretty easy to get lost in those corridors, I've got to say.

**Stephen**

Oh yeah

**Katy**

It is a huge complex. And start to wonder what happened - they collected all this art over the centuries, obviously. But even the idea that they would be collecting art is quite fascinating to me, and that you don't really understand that until you see just how immense the collection is.

**Stephen**

Yeah. It was the build up of these families, right? These wealthy families who had begun to kind of use the papacy as another way to extend their influence. And someone in their family would go into the Church and make their way up the ranks. And then that could help to extend the holdings of the families. But because of that, it was sort of an arms race to see who could collect the greatest collections who could produce the greatest paintings, obviously had figures like the Medicis in Florence. Everybody was competing for who had the best, who had the most lands, the most sumptuous palaces. This is sort of a reflection of that. And in an attempt by the Renaissance Pope to recenter the Renaissance around Rome, which, of course, kicked off in Florence. So you have this juxtaposition of Florentine artists in Rome. You have ancient artworks that are being collected as the Pope's and their families are building villas outside of Rome and finding these art pieces - they're trying to rebuild churches with pieces that they find from the Roman Forum. And in fact, you find a lot of this art in the Vatican directly with some of the art that would have been found around Rome is some of the most famous art that you find, for example, the Laocoön - the priest whose arms are twisted around his body as a snake intertwines him. And so if you know those stories about the Trojan Horse and all of that, these are those stories encapsulated in sculpture. And so some of the greatest sculptures, some of the greatest paintings and frescoes and incredible architectural works all here in this one small space there in Rome at the Vatican City state. Yeah so much to see and easy to get lost, but all very worth taking the time to do it right. That's what I recommend anyway. Decide what you want to see. Are the gardens important to you? Is the Church important for your visit? The Church of St. Peters? Are you interested in getting off the beaten path? And there's some kind of private areas, closed areas that are only accessible on certain tours. So it's really kind of open. Your experience could be vastly different depending on how you choose to go.

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## Katy

Yeah. One of the places that I really missed the first couple of times that I went was the Bramante Staircase, which is the double helix staircase, which is not even - well, it is a piece of art, if you ask me, but it's more of an architectural feature of the museums that you might not know even existed. So it's always something to unravel and uncover when you go there?

## Stephen

Absolutely. And the Bramante Staircase - this is something that Da Vinci - is near to where Da Vinci's apartment was. He had an apartment at the top of this tower, and the staircase is actually just off behind it. And many people walk right by where the Bramante Staircase access is. It's not accessible to the public. So there's actually a few tours that you can take to get into the Bramante Staircase and other areas, like the Gallery of Masks or the Niccoline Chapel that I mentioned earlier. And so it's not on the normal visit, but it is an iconic and impressive site to see. And it's this double helix that inspired later the exit to the museum. You'll probably see it on pictures or often the tickets. The Vatican Museums have the image of this beautiful bronze double helix staircase that actually is taken from the Bramante Staircase and that was done in 1930s - the exit staircase. But definitely, we're seeing and again, only on certain tours can you see that? But, yeah, I definitely recommend trying to get in there. It's beautiful and great views from up at the top there over the city.

## Katy

Absolutely. And one thing is really fascinating to me, and it gives me the biggest thrill is that you're literally walking in the footsteps of people, these absolute greats of history and art. So Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Raphael - you're actually walking the same path that they walk because it doesn't give everyone that sort of thrill. Well, I'm a bit of a history nerd, but it does give me that thrill just every time I go there, I love it.

## Stephen

Yeah. Absolutely. The people that walk through there, I mean, the people that still walk through there - right now, the Apostolic Palace, where the Pope currently lives is right there, literally attached to the building that you're in when you're in the Sistine Chapel and you'll see the Swiss Guard, and they're actively guarding the Vatican property now. And it's actually funny when you're walking through, if you look closely in the paintings, you'll see Swiss Guard in the Raphael rooms, and they look pretty much similar to the Swiss Guard, you see now - their uniforms - they haven't changed significantly. It's really a time capsule of the past, and it's still a beacon of art and culture for the world. Like it was in the 15th century. I think that's what makes it so special is that you can have these things that you would see in museums anywhere, right. Like great pieces of art. Great. But where you don't see and what's so unique to the Vatican is that it is also all of these other things. It is the current center of the Catholic faith and where they elect a Pope. And it is also where the most important

masses happen. And it's also where the Pope lives. And then you also have the buildings themselves are historically important, connected to all of these important artists like you just mentioned and housing these artworks, in some cases, 500 or more years. And artists have been coming there all the way up to today to paint and draw those artists and be inspired. You could go back and go hundreds or thousands of times, and it'll take your breath away every time. In fact, I was just talking to my co-founder, Jason, who went out there recently for his first time back since the Pandemic. He lives here in the US now, and he gave thousands of tours of the museum but hadn't been in there in a while. So it was still an emotional experience going to the Vatican Museum again. He was actually going on our new Keymaster Tour I was just telling you about where you go before the museum's open. And that was - he said he was literally tearing up in the Sistine Chapel again, just like his guests used to do all those years ago.

**Katy**

Yeah, I can imagine. So with that tour, let's explore that a bit more deeply because I really want to do this when I get there, but it starts very early, doesn't it?

**Stephen**

Yeah. It's just after 06:00 a.m.. And you're really waking up the Vatican museums with the first person who does the first set of rounds and with the keys - that many of those keys are hundreds of years old, and you actually get to hold the keys. Somebody in the group opens a different door. As you go through, you turn on the lights. And again, you yourself can be the person to turn on the lights in the hall of the Maps or the Sistine Chapel. So it's more interactive in that to that extent. And you're literally alone. We sell tours that enter early that have stayed late to visit special areas that include breakfast in the Pine cone courtyard - we operate all those tours. This is really one of a kind, and it is more expensive in the sense that compared to what a traditional tour would be. But it's not crazy. It's not like Justin Bieber is renting out the Sistine Chapel for himself situation, which happened apparently. But this is accessible and that's important to us as an operator, like, there are companies who offer private, exclusive experiences - that's not what we're doing - we want to be able to bring something to people, make it more accessible. So you're going through with one of their Key Masters, the Clavigero, as it's called an Italian, and he'll unlock the doors and you get to be the first one stepping into the Sistine Chapel. And then by the time you finish touring the whole museum, the museums are just opening to the first groups. So you've been in there the whole time on your own, much of it in the dark, turning on the lights. So, I mean, you can't imagine the difference of that versus in the high point of summer when it's super crowded and look in 2019, it was super crowded. No question. If you went between late May to late September 2019, it's tough. It's a lot of people in there, no questions. It's shoulder to shoulder. You have the fortune right now of - part of the unfortunate side effects of the pandemic - it's fortunate for travelers is that you can go and visit the museums. And it's not like that right now. But we can all expect it will get back to that as it very rightly is this

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important place to visit. But these tours are there to give you another way to experience it and not to have that crowd, long lines and so forth.

### **Katy**

Yeah. I was reading that there was almost in 2019, almost 7 million visitors to the Vatican museums. So that's all that's a lot of people.

### **Stephen**

Yeah. I mean, it gets over 20,000 people a day. And while they are immense museums, they're not taking immense paths through them, right? Because the way that people are funneled through and to get to where people want to go, just like with the Louvre, everybody congregates around the Mona Lisa and the Venus of Milo. And it's like everybody's trying to go to those things and follow those arrows. And so people all end up on sort of the same path. So even though it's a lot of corridors you'll find in the Vatican museums, a lot of empty corridors, even in the high point of summer. Why? Because everybody's trying to get to the same place, not knowing that they might be missing things along the way, which is again, an important opponent because you can take a tour who might take you into one of those spaces to show you something incredible. You would have walked by and you get a break from the crowd. So it's kind of a win win. And a lot of our tours are trying to avoid crowds where we can to improve the experience for the guests. Whether that's going early in the morning before it opens, whether it's going super early, at dawn- literally before anyone is in there, which is even more early or doing later in the evening.

### **Stephen**

Friday evenings, for a big part of the year, you can access the museums and they're far less crowded. It has gotten busy and more interesting and popular for people to do that. And it's a different visit. There's fewer things open. But that's another great way to kind of get away from the crowd. So you have some different options, and it's going to depend on when you schedule your visit, right? For example, a lot of people don't know that because it's closed on Sundays. Mondays and Saturdays are the two busiest days to go. So if you're going to go in the summer and you have the choice to go to Sunday, Monday or Tuesday, go on a Tuesday because you can't go on Sunday is closed and Monday is going to be busier. So do the Forum and the Colosseum on Monday. That's sort of how you can do little things like that to improve the experience.

### **Katy**

Yeah, absolutely. But I would highly recommend and I do recommend in normal tourist times or travel times, is to definitely go at one of the non-peak times, because when even in summer, I don't believe there's any air conditioning in the galleries, most of the galleries except the Sistine Chapel, and it can get very hot in Rome and uncomfortable.

## Stephen

Yeah, there's like, three rooms that have it. There's a modern museum that has it and a few others - in the Pinacoteca, but yeah, it's mostly not mostly just open windows and some of the halls or not.

## Katy

It's just such a beautiful, amazing place that it is really worth spending a little bit extra. And now some people will say, oh, you can go with the Vatican Museums - they obviously run their own tours. What would you say the difference is between your tours and the Vatican Museums tours?

## Stephen

Yeah, they don't offer as frequent of tours in many cases, or they offer a lot of private tours. It's a totally different approach. They have different guides. In some cases, they're very similar. Sometimes they book out because they only have a certain number of guides on staff, and they may not book as far in advance. They may not be available. So it's a different approach. We're kind of structuring tours to be accessible to our guests, which is a predominantly American audience that we reach. We also have group size limitations, and in many cases, we're the only way that you can purchase what we're selling, because we're working together to try to create something that is the best for the guest and from a guided experience perspective. So the Vatican offers it, too. We might partner with them on what they're doing, or we might do something different. And this is true of a lot of museums around the world, right? where they might have guides who are there or docents who are doing regular departing tours of various wings. But it isn't the general highlights of the whole museum or museums tours that they're selling. It might be more niche kind of let's focus on this art period or as opposed to like a 'general highlights of the whole museum' and a more extended itinerary. And that's the other thing. The museums start and stop, but there's a lot more to see and on the group tours, as I said, we visit St. Peter's Basilica or St. Peter's Square, so there's more it can incorporate. We do full day tours that include the Colosseum and some of the special access experiences you can do there, like the arena floor and the underground. So it can be many different things. Whereas, yes, you can also book tours of the Vatican Museum through the Vatican's guides. And that's great, too.

## Katy

Definitely. I think if you understand to a matter of style and what you prefer and the information that you want/or experience that you want to have and then also group size, because the museum's official tours can be quite big. And it becomes, I found, in the past more of a logistics exercise, which, as you mentioned, is very important anyway, because it's actually quite difficult to navigate around this huge complex. But really, when people are trying to plan their tours, it's really good idea to just really have a think about the experience that you want to have. Do you want to have that experience of turning on the lights in the

Sistine Chapel? I know I do! What is that experience that you want to have? And how can you find that offering that best suits your needs?

### **Stephen**

Yeah. And the thing about it, as I mentioned before, the heart of everything we're doing is storytellers, right? And so the walks guides that we look for and that we work with and that we're constantly trying to improve on is how do we make sure we're telling the right stories with the right people? And so we have a certain style. And as you mentioned, there's a lot of styles you can do here. And our style is more approachable. It's more story based. It's not didactic lessons given by professors trying to teach a seminar. And there are those right. So we try to stick to a storytelling approach that works well for Walks. And that's universal that's not unique to the Vatican Museums. And that's the other thing that's great about when you take Walks is that you have a style of tour that you can know is going to include the best things we're going to have, the partnerships, we're going to have the guide to reach a certain level of that we've kind of identified as the quality that we think fits with our brand and our consumers. And those are the things you know, we're thinking about. And wherever you go, that's what you should find. Great itineraries that have been really thought out and the best guides. And if there's anything we do, it's that - we really reflect on how we can be constantly improving that mix.

### **Katy**

Yeah. I think even my mum actually is a history teacher. She actually went on a Walks tour many years ago now, and she just absolutely loved that element of the storytelling. So even though she was very interested in very specific historical elements, she still really loved those tours. And that's how I found you. It was through my mum.

### **Stephen**

Great. Well, now we got to have you come join us.

### **Katy**

I've done many, many of your tours, and I enjoy them very much. And the last one that I went on was through that Gallery of Maps, and I was able to go very early, and I put a great video of me just walking through there just without anyone around me. And I just love it. I watch it just for kicks.

### **Stephen**

Is that our Pristine Sistine tour?

### **Katy**

Yes, it was.

## Stephen

That's been one of our first tours we started and still running now and again. It just kind of covers everything. As I said, all the stuff we talked about, you see the right galleries, you get there early, you avoid crowds, you have the full experience, you end with the Basilica. And that's a complete experience. We run a lot of different experiences at the Vatican, and I know that's what we're trying to cover today, and it's a lot to get through. But the Pristine Sistine is sort of our flagship experience. And actually, the story from that comes from when I was first visiting Rome in 2004, and I was really fascinated with - I kind of did the tourist thing I wandered through, not knowing anything other than what I studied in school, and it was just super crowded and hot. And then I get to the Sistine Chapel is like, amazing. But what I really want to do is get here when it's empty and pristine and that kind of stuck with me. Even though later I ended up becoming a guide and doing all that throughout all that, it just kind of stuck with me. I'm like, I'd love to be able to figure this out. And it wasn't until we were going to launch Walks of Italy that kind of resurrected that concept. I was like, "well, what if that's what we did? What if we just do the museums in such a way to where you presented the Sistine Chapel in its best possible light?" And at the time, there weren't companies going super early in the morning. Of course, that's changed. Now, at the time, there weren't companies that were going directly to the Sistine Chapel. There weren't guides or guests that were doing that. And so we kind of devised the route to do that to get you there first to have that wow moment, and then you work your way back through the museums as they get more crowded through the day. And then you would end in the Chapel the second time and understand the difference between what it's like to go early and what it's like to go when it's regular opening hours. And it makes all the sense to you. And so we try to kind of present that to our guests when we can, as we want to present this in the best light. We also want you to realize if we can, what was the difference, like, what would have been the other way to do this? And now you realize the value of what you've done, and we do that as well over at the Louvre with the Mona Lisa, where we stay there at closing time, and we end with the Mona Lisa as the room empties out, and we stay and we stay and we stay and you can see the total change of the room from when we enter into when we leave by kind of making that the key moment. But a lot of our tours are designed around these kind of wow experiences that aren't going to be found on the way other tours are designed.

## Katy

Yeah. It's definitely an eye-opening experience. I've been very fortunate to be to the Vatican Museum several times. And so I've managed to have those different experiences. And all I can say is if you do love art and history, then really do make the time to go earlier or later, just because you will have a totally different experience. Now, Stephen, listeners aren't really museum and art people. Do you think the Vatican museums are worth visiting?

## Stephen

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Okay, look, yeah. It is an immense series of galleries filled with art. So I'm not going to say there's no way around that if you're going to go to the Vatican. You're going to see that there's historically important stories that took place. There's architecture that's there. So usually there's something that can everybody can find - famous films that have been incorporated. There's myths and legends that people like. There's crypts and catacombs underneath the museum, both in the Museum and the Church. There's the Dome climb, right? I mean, a lot of people, it might not be easy for all people, but they want the best view of the city will climb the Dome of St. Peters. And you can do that at the end of the tour. In fact, we also run St. Peters tours that just focus on the Church and the Dome. And you can climb up as well overlooking the St. Peters Square. So there's a lot in there. But yeah, if you're not really an art person, maybe the Vatican Museum Pristine Sistine, four and a half hour tour is not for you. Maybe it's the Sistine Chapel express. Get through, see the Sistine Chapel, maybe have a walk through St. Peters at the end. And that's more your jam. Or you might do an audio tour around St. Peters Square and then go over to the Castel Sant'Angelo, which is a short walk from the Vatican. So there are other things to do in that area across the river to get you over there to where you can see the church, see the square. And if the Sistine Chapel is not on your hit list, for whatever reason, there's so much more over there. The Borgo has great restaurants, and a lot of people don't find them. In fact, some of my favorite restaurants are over there in Prati in the area not too far from the Vatican museums. And you can find more of the local flavors over there. And the kind of medieval area of the Borgo has some great ones, too. There's a lot to it. One of the most popular places in Rome for pizza. Taylor is by the famous chef Gabriel Bonci. And that's right by the Vatican Pizzarium. So go over there for the pizza. A lot of people wouldn't say go to the Vatican for pizza, but in fact, you can get some of Rome's best pizza over there, too.

**Katy**

Love it. Pizza on the side of your Vatican adventure. Sounds good.

**Stephen**

Pizza on the side of everything in Rome, hopefully.

**Katy**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Stephen**

And gelato, like you said.

**Katy**

And gelato, that's my favorite. Now, what about some people like me have been many, many times. Do you think there's always something new to discover there? Like new experiences

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that you can have at the Vatican that have sort of evolved, maybe out of the last year of being locked down.

## Stephen

Yeah. There's something I've been trying to get to, and we were actually going to launch it in 2020. I just actually sort of referenced it there - here was a big discovery made when they were rebuilding some of the areas of the Vatican museums and kind of this entrance area that they found a huge necropolis, a city of the dead from the Roman period. And it's really well preserved. And it's just a bit away in Vatican City from the museums. But the museums are kind of creating an opportunity to go there. And we have been wanting to kind of incorporate it on an experience that has that special access component, because one of the things you don't get with most Vatican experiences is the connection to the ancient world, which was there, and it's right under your feet. And it's where St. Peter was crucified in the area where St. Peter's Square is where St. Peter was crucified upside down on the cross. And so you can actually visit the early Christian Cemetery under St. Peter's Basilica. And that's called the Scavi - tour of the Necropolis. Those are very hard tours to book. They get booked out very far advanced by enthusiasts and underground lovers and Christian pilgrims and so forth. So this other necropolis is right there very close to that necropolis at St. Peter. And it's something that I really want to bring people to. It's not on the typical - you can't just buy a ticket to it. So that's something we're working on should be coming in the next year or so. If you don't see a tour that includes a necropolis early this year, that means it didn't happen just yet, but we're hoping to get it up there in the near future. But you mentioned other ones, like the Bramante staircase. There's a Gallery of the Masks, which is a beautiful little niche off of the side of one of the main galleries that has the three muses, incredible mosaic - floor mosaics. So there's a lot of these kind of offshoot rooms that you can go see. I mentioned they just renovated the Borgia apartments. And so I mentioned Rodrigo Borgia - his family earlier the 15th century Pope from the Showtime television show - if you haven't seen that. Lucrezia Borgia, Cesare - all these crazy characters, so go learn about them and see the Pinturicchio paintings that were restored. And they did an incredible job, part of what Pope Julius and Sixtus were doing in the Della Rovere family, which is a competing family to the Borgia, was trying to outdo him. So that's how that stuff ended up there. So go see those things, which are literally beneath the apartments that were built later under the Della Rovere family. So you can get these experiences by if you know where you're going and where to look and follow the signs, do some research - there's more there. And I love the Niccoline Chapel, which is another special access tour that you can visit, along with the Bramante staircase and the Niccoline Chapel, Pope Nicholas the fourth or fifth (it's been a while). That painting, that Chapel was painted by Fra Angelico. And for early Renaissance, it's just a masterpiece, and it's so well preserved. And it's in this medieval area of some of the oldest areas apartments of the Vatican. So, yeah. I mean, the Vatican. You could have been five times, ten times, I promise you, there's something you haven't seen, whether it's in the Carriage Pavilion, whether it's in the Pinacoteca. There's various tapestry collections you can visit or the Etruscan collection - something is there that you haven't seen, so it's always worth going back.

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**Katy**

Wow. So would you say the Niccoline Chapel is their favorite part of the museums?

**Stephen**

It's been years since I've been in there. I need to go back. Probably one of the most awe-inspiring moments is when I saw it for the first time. I couldn't believe that it wasn't something that's regularly accessible. It's small, but the quality of work is potentially greater than what you see from the average panel in the Sistine Chapel on the walls. Fra Angelico was a true master. I mean, he's literally like a sainted artist. Unlike some of these other artists. 'Fra' means brother. He's also the Beato Angelico, right? So he's beatified in the process of becoming Saint. He's not canonized, so he's not Saint Fran Angelico. But he's Beato Angelico, which is the beatified artist. So really high honor bestowed upon him. And many of the things you see in the Niccoline Chapel are immediately and very obviously lifted and used in some of the especially the side panel works in the Sistine Chapel. So they're very connected. They're very well preserved. And it's a shame it's not accessible for everyone, but it's something that we want to incorporate on more of our tourists, too. So we're working to try to figure out what the right mix of things are for 2022. I think a lot more of this will be about 23 at this point. Some of these plans we had to get some of this stuff to be on our more traditional tours for 2020 were, of course, upended by the Coronavirus Pandemic. The volumes of customers that are looking to go are way down. But once those things get back up, that's the first thing we want to do is try to look for unique ways and unique opportunities for our guests to see things the best possible way.

**Katy**

Wow. Well, fantastic. Steven, I know I can't wait to get back there. And I know our listeners will have loved hearing how to make the most of their time at the Vatican Museums, from you. And no doubt they're keen to stay in touch and learn more about how to join, Take Walks tours and follow you guys on social media. How can they do that?

**Stephen**

Yeah. So you can still book us at [walksofitaly.com](http://walksofitaly.com) which is our original site that we launched back in 2010. And we're at [takewalks.com](http://takewalks.com) for all our global experiences across the world, everywhere from Rome to New York City to San Francisco, New Orleans, London - you name it. We're doing great tours around the world. You can find us on Twitter @walks just @walks and Instagram @walktours. Facebook is also @walkstours, so we're pretty heavily active on social media. You can find our YouTube channel, /WalksTours as well. It's full of a lot of videos from some of our tours, and you can get a kind of taste of what the tours would be like. So we're continually expanding. We're launching new cities, new products, new tours, and that's what we love to do. We actually now just partnered as of 2021 just to announce a few weeks ago with one of the top food tour companies in the world, Devour Tours. So they're now kind

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of in the Walks umbrella. And so we're doing food tours of Spain, France, Italy, tasting tours, day tours of markets, and even a little bit of flamenco. So there's really everything. We're an experienced company at our heart, and I hope you can join us on one of our tours somewhere in the world, too.

### **Katy**

Well, I did not know that about Devour Tours, so I'm very excited about that because they're one of my favorite food tour companies as well. So congratulations on that collaboration. Oh Stephen, every time I go to Rome, I can't resist visiting the Vatican museums, and you've really shown us how special they are and how to best get around them. And I really appreciate it and sharing that with our audience. Grazie Stephen, thanks so much for joining us on Untold Italy today.

### **Stephen**

It's my pleasure. Thanks again.

### **Katy**

You know when I first visited the Vatican Museums many moons ago, I went mid-afternoon with about 5,000 other people and couldn't really see much at all, or understand what was important or special about any of the things I was seeing. But even with this less than optimal experience, I knew I had to go back and explore some more.

Imagine that Stephen, who's been into the museums well over 1000 times thanks to his time as a licenced guide, still finds unique and special places to see inside those walls. It really is one of Rome and the world's greatest treasures for those who are interested in history, art, and culture.

I encourage you to do some investigations of your own before you go ahead and book any tour or experience within the museums so you can find the tour or approach that's best for you. As Stephen mentioned, if you've got an academic interest in the collection then you'll probably want to explore on your own and take your time with specific pieces. Or for your first visit, you can take an extended half-day tour as the perfect introduction. Those who simply want to take a fast-track approach straight to the Sistine Chapel can do that too.

But for the ultimate unique and truly unforgettable Vatican Museums experience do take a look at the Take Walks Key Masters Tour. My colleague Olivia joined Take Walks on this experience just this past weekend and was awestruck. The tour starts early with the master of the keys as they walk through each gallery of the museums, unlocking the doors and turning on the lights in readiness for the visitors to come. This centuries-old ritual follows in the path of great leaders and even greater artists and culminates in the opening and illuminating of the Sistine Chapel before the crowds arrive for the day. Olivia said it was "Honestly the BEST experience ever, you have to do it!!"

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If you want to see some highlights from the tour you'll find them in our Instagram highlights at @untold.italy and we'll put the details of the tour and other highlights and tips mentioned into the show notes at [untolditaly.com/98](https://untolditaly.com/98)

Thanks for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. I hope you enjoyed today's show. If you did we would love it if you shared it with your Italy-loving friends and family. Grazie to those of you who have already done this. Untold Italy is now in the top 15 travel podcasts in the United States, Canada and Australia which is so exciting. And it's all thanks to you. Grazie Mille! Thank you

That's all for today, next week we're heading back to one of my favorite Italian cities Milano! in search of good times and even better coffee

But until then it's "ciao for now"