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Vatican City's 'Dark' secret revealed: Private tours

By Felicity Long



Dark Rome offers private tours of the Sistine Chapel.

A highlight of any visit to Rome is Vatican City and its Sistine Chapel, but anyone who has done so recently knows the crowds can be overwhelming. In fact, during my last visit, the Sistine Chapel was so crowded that we actually lost a member of our group, and it took almost an hour to find her again. What art lover hasn't fantasized about enjoying Michelangelo's masterpiece without having to compete for oxygen with busloads of other tourists?

Plus, haven't you always wondered what other treasures the Vatican has hidden away that you don't get to see?

Enter Dark Rome, a tour operator that specializes in small, single-language tours throughout Italy, which is offering private, 30-minute, escorted access to the chapel to groups of 10 or less. The tour is part of a three-hour VIP Vatican and Private Sistine Chapel Tour that also includes visits to private rooms and rarely seen collections, accompanied by a Vatican official.

"In 2011, the Vatican Museums attracted around 5 million visitors, so our 'skip-the-line' access became a major benefit to travelers," said Dan Paulsberg, operations director of Dark Rome.

"Plus, since the Vatican is a living museum, the tour schedule and stops are ever changing and adapting, and visitors can repeat the tour with the possibility of enjoying other secret treasures," he said.

So what would you see that others won't? The secret rooms exclusively available to Dark Rome include the Bramante spiral staircase and the Niccoline Chapel, adorned with frescoes by Fra Angelico and gilded with some of the first gold brought back from the New World by Christopher Columbus, according to Paulsberg.

The tour operates Mondays and Saturdays at 3:15 p.m. Prices are about \$280 per person and include a skip-the-line entrance ticket. Tours are commissionable at 15% when booked through the company's customer service team at (011) 39-068 336-0561. For information, visit www.darkrome.com.

Also offering behind-the-scenes experiences in Rome, Tauck features exclusive after-hours tours of the Vatican Museums and Sistine Chapel on every Rome itinerary, included in regular tour prices.

This year, the company is repeating its four-night Roman Holiday exploration of Rome, which includes a private, sit-down gala dinner in the museum's Braccio Nuovo gallery. The tour departs Oct. 25 and is priced from \$4,990 per person, land only.