

10 SECRET PLACES

IN ROME, VENICE & FLORENCE



Kathy McCabe, Dream of Italy

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INTRODUCTION



With 46 million people visiting Italy each year, sometimes it is hard to escape the crowds, especially in Italy's major cities. We asked our friend Kathy McCabe, editor and publisher of the award-winning newsletter *Dream of Italy* (www.dreamofitaly.com) to share some of her favorite lesser-known or secret places with us.

Kathy's newsletter, recommended by everyone from *National Geographic Traveler* to ABC News, provides a wealth of other ideas on authentic places to visit in Italy.

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Special thanks to Karen Henderson and Judy Witts Francini.

ROME





The Capuchin Crypt

I spent years passing the Church of *Santa Maria Immacolata Concezione* on Rome's popular *Via Veneto* before realizing the spooky treasure that lay inside. This is the final resting place of more than 4,000 Capuchin monks, except they're not dead and buried, they are dead *and on display*.

While you will see full skeletons (you will be surprised at how tiny folks back then were), mostly specific bones are separated out to create artful if eery mosaic-like displays. There are six rooms in the crypt: The Chamber of the Resurrection, The Mass Chapel, The Chamber of the Skulls, The Chamber of the Pelvises, The Crypt of the Leg Bones and Thigh Bones and The Crypt of the Three Skeletons.

The bones come from monks who died between 1528 and 1870 and most of them knew that their earthly remains would be used for this purpose. Post death, the corpses were interred for about 30 years before being used for the crypt. The Capuchins saw the crypt not as something macabre but as a reminder that life on Earth is short and that the true life is Eternal.

In the Crypt of the Three Skeletons, there's a card with a quote that sums up the true message of a visit to the crypt:

*"What you are, we used to be
What we are, you will become."*

THE CAPUCHIN CRYPT

Via Veneto, 27

(39) 06 88803695

www.cappucciniviaveneto.it

Open daily, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Tickets: 6€

Includes visit to a museum about the Capuchin order.

Pizzarium

There's pizza and then there's pizza from *Pizzarium*. This non-descript, hole-in-the-wall pizza shop in a residential neighborhood near the Vatican attracts in-the-know foodies from around the world.

They come here for the pizza magic of *Gabriele Bonci*. Bonci's secret weapon is the flour from *Mulino Marino*. This 60-year-old family-run flour mill uses natural stone to grind the flour without sacrificing its nutritious characteristics. The high-quality flour is mixed with natural yeasts in a long fermentation process and you can taste the depth and contours of the dough. (The same process is used to make the bread that is sold here and you can even buy the flour here if you want to make some at home.)



The toppings also combine to make this the most luscious pizza in all of the Eternal City – think *prosciutto*, potatoes, broccoli rabe, radicchio, etc. But Bonci's rule is never more than three toppings at a time. Pizzarium serves their pizza *al taglio* or by weight. You should the person behind the counter the size of the slice you would like.

It isn't all about pizza here. Don't miss the *suppli* or rice balls. Equally delicious.

Take Metro Line A and get off on the Cipro stop.

PIZZARIUM

Via della Meloria, 43

(39) 06 39745416

www.gabrielebonci.it

Open Monday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Sunday, 1 to 10 p.m.



Keyhole View

Entire books could be written about where to find the best views of the Eternal City, but the one to be taken in from *Piazza dei Cavalieri di Malta* is quite unique and worth the effort to get there. It provides a “keyhole” view of the Vatican.

The Aventine Hill is the southernmost of Rome’s famous seven hills. It was once home to the knights of Malta. In the piazza named for the knights is a large wooden door with a small keyhole that looks into a vast garden and square that was designed by the architect *Giovan Battista Piranesi*. Looking through the keyhole, you will notice specially sculpted shrubbery providing the perfect view and framing for the dome of St. Peter’s Basilica.

Getting here takes a little bit of effort. Take the metro to the *Piramide* or *Circo Massimo* stations and follow the directions for a 15-minute walk up Aventino Hill. The photo you take at the keyhole may turn out to be one of your favorites on your entire trip.

FLORENCE





Vasari Corridor

The *Ponte Vecchio* is one of the most recognizable landmarks in Florence. But the people gazing at it have little idea of the treasures housed above the little shops that line the bridge. They may see a line of windows along the top of the bridge but have no idea that they are part of an old passageway called the Vasari Corridor.

The secret corridor was built in 1564 by order of *Grand Duke Cosimo I de' Medici* connect Florence's *Palazzo Pitti* (now home to the Uffizi Gallery) and the *Palazzo Vecchio*. It is named for Giorgio Vasari, who designed it.

Today, the corridor is a quiet and peaceful place to experience a collection of artwork from the 16th and 17th centuries, mostly self-portraits. It is also a very cool place to feel like you are hidden away from the rest of the world as you spy on the city from the windows along the *Ponte Vecchio*.

The Vasari Corridor is closed to the general public and is only accessible via a tour: http://www.italiadeals.com/region_florence.html



Farmacia Santa Maria Novella

Those arriving in Florence's train station often walk right through neighboring *Piazza Santa Maria Novella*. They might admire the church of the same name but may not realize that it boasts something most Italian churches don't – a pharmacy, and one of the oldest in the world at that.

In 1221, Dominican monks began making herbal tonics here for use in the church's infirmary. Centuries later the doors of the *Officina Profumo-Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella* officially opened to the public. Many of the original recipes – particularly one for Seven Thieves Vinegar (originally to protect from the Plague, now used to boost the immune system) are still in use. Today, the pharmacy is known world-wide for its perfumes, toiletries and beauty products. In fact, *Catherine de' Medici* was a huge fan.

Whether or not you plan to buy anything, you simply must step inside and step back in time. The pharmacy features vaulted ceilings, glass-stained windows marble floors with walnut cabinetry wherever you

turn. It is a work of art just as any painting you will see in a Florence museum. The walnut cabinetry displays colorful antique bottles and tools of the trade.

This is a great place to buy some lovely soaps for the folks back home.

Farmacia Santa Maria Novella

Via della Scala, 16

(39) 055 216276

Open daily, 9 a.m to 8 p.m.

The Stibbert Museum

Competing with some of the world's most famous museums, Florence's smaller, more eclectic museums get lost in the mix. But they are delightful and uncrowded - an attribute which is much appreciated after standing in line at the *Uffizi*. One of these museums is the Stibbert Museum (*Museo Stibbert*), which is also less visited because it is slightly outside the center (but can be reached by taxi or the #4 bus).

The Stibbert will appeal to anyone who loves the Middle Ages or who has fantasies of knights in shining armor. The 60-room villa that is now the museum was once to home of British aristocrat Frederick Stibbert who was an enthusiastic collector of armor and weaponry. We should say uber-enthusiastic collector as he accumulated thousands of suits of armor from around the world.

Many of these are proudly on display in the museum's Calvacade room. This room features a procession of 10 16th-century armored horsemen riding armored horses, a dozen armed soldiers on foot and four Islamic

horsemen. They are marching under the gaze of a statue of St. George and the defeated dragon.

If armor isn't totally your thing, have no fear. Mr. Stibbert, who died in 1906, collected lots of other treasures, including fans, dishes, umbrellas, furniture, paintings and more. They are on display too. This is a nice place to visit to get a break from the traditional art for which Florence is famous.

The Stibbert Museum
Via Federico Stibbert, 26
(39) 055 486049
www.museostibbert.it

Open Monday through Wednesday, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Friday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

VENICE





The Hunchback of Rialto

When walking through *Campo San Giacometto di Rialto*, just over the Rialto Bridge on the *San Polo* side, most tourists don't even notice a most interesting statue along the way. Across from the church is *Giobbo di Rialto*, or the "Hunchback of Rialto."

Sculpted by *Pietro da Salo* and unveiled in 1541, the hunchback is naked and crouched over, supporting a small flight of stairs on his back. Local officials used him as a podium for official proclamations and to read new laws and statutes. Also, this is where the names of those who committed misdemeanors would be announced. Some of the guilty would be forced to strip naked, run around nearby and finally kiss the statue in the hopes that they would not cause further trouble.



Casino Venier

Walk up to entrance of what is now the Alliance Francaise at San Marco 4939. Look up. Is someone looking back at you? There's a round hole in the ceiling above you. On the inside of the building, at this spot in the marble floor, is a black marble circle that can be lifted up, so those inside could see who was down in the street below.

The building was once a private casino, where Venetian aristocracy met for gaming and conversations. If they saw someone downstairs was unwelcome or a threat, the aristocrats could quickly flee by a secret concealed stairway.

If you have a chance to peek inside do so. The opulent interiors have been perfectly preserved.



Coffee with a View

My friend Jill Weinreich has been living in Venice for 18 years recently let me in on her “secret” place to enjoy coffee with a view. Sure you can enjoy a coffee standing up at any of the bars in *Piazza San Marco* (*Caffè Lavena*, *Quadri*, *Florian*) and take in the scene. (If you sit down, you will pay a fortune).

Instead, Jill suggests a spot just outside the piazza. Heading towards the Grand Canal, turn just after the Louis Vuitton store. On the ground floor of *Ca' Giustinian*, where the *La Biennale di Venezia* offices are located, you will find the *L'Ombra del Leone* bar and restaurant. Around town, it is unofficially The Biennale Bar.

Sit on their canal-side terrace and enjoy early morning coffee or afternoon drinks in addition to full-service lunch and dinner. The panoramic view is one of the best in Venice. You can see from *San Giorgio Maggiore* to the *Punta della Dogana* and the Salute



Church of San Pantalon

Each of Venice's numerous churches offers a unique reason to go inside but the most famous churches in Venice get most of the visitors. The *Frari* (officially *Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari*) is one of these well-known churches and certainly worth a visit but when you're done, don't miss the other church behind the Frari.

San Pantalon is home to the world's largest painting on canvas – on the ceiling. The large and riveting work is entitled *The Martyrdom and Apotheosis of Saint Pantalon*, and not only is the content of the work tragic, the fate of its artist is as well. It was painted by *Gian Antonio Fumiani* between 1680 and 1704, when he fell to his death from the scaffolding he was on while working on the piece.

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