

# WHAT LIES BENEATH

You might think you know the Eternal City, but have you travelled underground to see its hidden treasures?

WORDS Josephine McKenna  
PHOTOS Klaus Heiss

its most famous landmarks - and the unsuspecting visitor never discovers them.

"There is always a new, hidden place to be discovered in Rome," says Professor Corrada Biazzo Curry, who specialises in literature and cultural studies at the American University in Rome.

"Wherever you go, you have history. For example, the Roman houses under the Celio hill, the excavations under the Church of Santa Sabina, and the infinite number of beautiful scenes around the narrow streets in Trastevere and Piazza Navona."

So, have you ever wondered what's hiding inside the palace of one of the city's most powerful families, under a centuries-old cathedral or inside Rome's last remaining ancient pyramid? If you've already scoured the Vatican or crisscrossed the Forum, it might be time to discover something different on your next visit.

The pyramid of Caius Cestius was built at the height of the Roman empire

between 18 BC and 12 BC as a tomb for Gaius Cestius Epulo, a local magistrate and powerful religious leader. It is one of the best preserved ancient monuments and a tribute to the ingenuity of the Romans. The white marble structure sits outside the ancient walls of the city on the edge of Via Ostiense, an ancient thoroughfare that connected the city with the port of Ostia, to the south. Nearly 30 metres high, pyramid is beautifully preserved.

There we were, ten metres underground, staring at a pile of rubble. It was the wrong end of the working day in the middle of a stifling summer and, alongside a dozen ancient history enthusiasts, I gazed at a tiny fragment of mosaic floor and some crumbling bricks inside a 2000-year-old fire station.

"For most people who live in Rome it's like the Catholic religion," says one breathless fan. "It is not a choice, this is an open air museum."

There are many in Rome who are discovering their city."

And it is not just the locals. When you think of Rome, it's tempting to focus on the Eternal City's sizeable buildings (from the Colosseum and Pantheon to the mighty Vatican) and its vast panoramas. But many of the city's treasures are hidden beneath

**WHETHER YOU HAVE LIVED IN ROME YOUR WHOLE LIFE OR DISCOVERING IT FOR THE FIRST TIME, YOU WILL NEED MORE THAN A POCKET BOOK GUIDE TO DISCOVER ITS HIDDEN TREASURES.**

According to the Latin inscription on the side of the monument, it was built in less than 330 days at a time when Rome was fascinated by the art and culture of Egypt after its military conquests there.

Inside is a small burial chamber which is usually closed to the public. But what many tourists don't realise is that you can enter with a guide. The burial chamber is a tiny barrel-vaulted cavity and the walls are lined with the remnants of delicate frescoes of dancing maidens.

Santa Maria Maggiore is one of the four great pilgrimage churches of Rome and a popular tourist attraction. While the exterior is a fine 18th century tribute to the Baroque period, the church is actually one of the oldest in Rome. It was built by Pope Sixtus 111 in around 440 AD and still retains delicate 5th century mosaics that depict scenes from the old testament on the walls of its nave.

The cathedral's chapels are filled with tombs and artistic treasures, but its oldest assets lie hidden beneath it. Down below you can see an old Roman road, a mosaic floor, and two wells. It's hard to say whether the structure was a private home or a public building, but one of the walls has the remnants of a stunning fresco that depicts a finely painted harvest scene that appears to be part of some kind of seasonal calendar.

Rome is filled with churches that hide a myriad of ancient ruins. Some of the best are found near the Colosseum. The Church of San Clemente is a tiny gem with a schizophrenic personality. It is a 12th century church built above a 4th century church which was built above a 2nd century pagan temple that honoured the god Mithras. The pre-Christian cult of Mithras began in Persia and gained widespread popularity in Rome during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. Given many shrines were destroyed, it is a bit



For Professor Corrada, a native of Sicily who lived in the US before moving to the American University in Rome a decade ago, a visit to these ruins is one of the city's highlights.

"It's a touching experience," she says. "The fact that they were actually the homes of the two martyrs, two Roman soldiers, plus the fact that you are heading underground.... You have complete apartments here, I think it's fascinating."

There are plenty of other ways to explore Roman history. The four frescoed rooms of Emperor Augustus' two-thousand-year-old home are now open to the public on the Palatine Hill, while remnants from the forums of three emperors are now showcased inside a dynamic new museum surrounding Emperor Trajan's markets from the 2nd century A.D.

of a thrill to discover remnants of the temple when you descend to the dark, damp basement beneath the church and wind your way through narrow corridors until you find the temple where ancient sacrifices took place.

On Celian hill, a tranquil haven only a short stroll from San Clemente, is another mostly undetected delight. The Church of Saints Giovanni and Paolo sits on an historic piazza dominated by a magnificent bell tower. Beneath the church, however, are its greatest assets: a collection of beautifully restored Roman buildings that will simply take your breath away.

**IF YOU FIND IT HARD TO IMAGINE HOW LIFE REALLY WAS AMONGST THE RUBBLE OF THE ROMAN FORUM, THESE RUINS PROMISE A TOTALLY DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE.**

Here you can see the remains of beautifully restored homes and taverns complete with frescoes that date back to the time of the Emperor Hadrian. The best preserved house is below the church's central nave and has walls covered in lavish frescoes featuring still-visible sea monsters. There are also frescoes dating to the 4th century depicting Christian martyrs.



But if ruins and rubble are not for you, there are plenty of other things to discover that many tourists miss. Perhaps you have a passion for architecture or art, or both. More than one church houses a masterpiece by famous Renaissance artists including Caravaggio and Bernini.

# INSIDE THE CHURCH OF SAN PIETRO IN VINCOLI YOU CAN ADMIRE MICHELANGELO'S MONUMENTAL MOSES SCULPTURE, A COMPLEX MARBLE MASTERPIECE WITH A HINT OF THE MASTER'S SELF-PORTRAIT.

Palazzo Colonna is among Italy's finest artistic treasures and few people know you can actually step inside. Once home to one of Rome's most powerful families, the palace is only open to the public on Saturday mornings but you can also see its sumptuous private apartments if you book a private visit. Built in the 17th and 18th centuries, it is a vast building that sits just beneath Quirinale Palace, where the Italian president, Giorgio Napolitano, now resides.


While the Colonna's picture gallery is an impressive private collection, nothing prepares you for the moment when you see its lavish Sala Grande for the first time. Above the enormous room is a magnificent ceiling fresco that depicts the famous battle of Lepanto in which Marcantonio Colonna led the papal forces to victory in 1577. It was painted by Giovanni Coli and Filippo Gherardi in 1675 and is complemented by opulent furnishings including four large gilt mirrors, sandalwood chests and a 17th century carved gold console. Here you will find a beautiful art collection including works by Flemish masters, Tintoretto and Veronese. One of my favourites in the collection is a finely etched map of the Medieval world.

The art collections of the Galleria Borghese and the Palazzo Doria Pamphili are much better known and also give

visitors some kind of personal snapshot of Rome's aristocratic past. If you prefer a more intimate experience, however, why not consider a private dinner or a personal tour inside the elegant Palazzo Patrizi Montorio. This palace, located in the historic centre, is only open to the public by private appointment or for exclusive functions. It is well worth a visit and it, too, hides a treasure trove of family paintings, Chinese porcelain and other heirlooms.

Ginevra Lovatelli, an art historian who was born in Rome, is one of the city's most original tour guides. She offers personalised tours which will takes the visitor inside private palaces (including the grand salons of some of her friends), little known churches and other architectural treasures. She has also produced a fabulous pocket guide, aptly titled 'Secret Rome'.

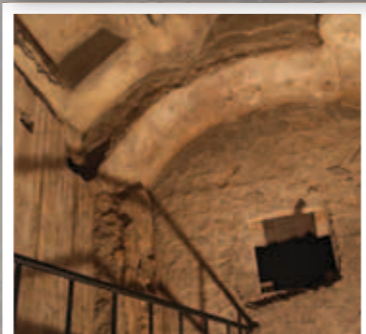
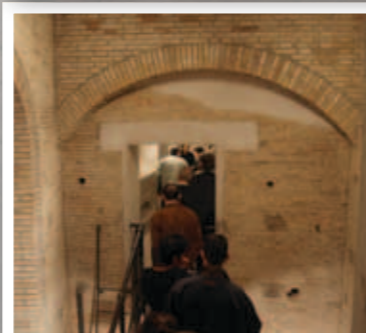
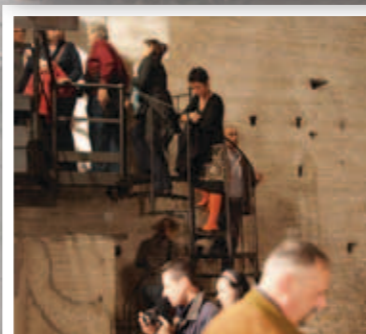
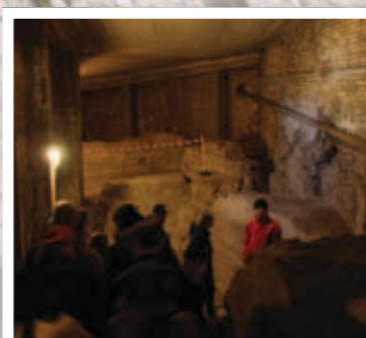
"Even if Rome is one of the world's major tourist destinations and there are dozens, even hundreds of guides to the city, the inhabitants of Rome have practically no guide available to them that would allow them to continue exploring their city in depth," she says. "This guide is intended for them, as well as visitors who already know the Italian capital quite well."

Whether you have lived in Rome your whole life or discovering it for the first time, you will need more than a pocket book guide to discover its hidden treasures. 

*For further information try the following websites:*  
[www.pierreci.it](http://www.pierreci.it)  
[www.romasotterranea.it](http://www.romasotterranea.it)  
[www.beniculturali.it](http://www.beniculturali.it)

**PREVIOUS PAGES:** Main photo – in front of the Pantheon, **small images (clockwise from left)** – a fresco at Piramide, the Pantheon Rotunda, and people underground at San Giovanni in Laterano, **second page (top to bottom)** San Clemente Mithraic, a fresco at San Giovanni, The Pantheon at night.

**THIS PAGE (top to bottom):** San Giovanni undergrund, and Santa Maria Maggiore underground.



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10	Manila (Philippines)	8am	7pm
11	cruising		
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