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# *VATICAN CITY, THE WORLD'S SMALLEST KINGDOM*

***Vatican City is a walled enclave within the city boundaries of Rome, the only existing example of a country within a city. Entirely designated as UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is home to three of Rome's most visited tourist attractions: St. Peter's Basilica (a gem of High Renaissance architecture), the Sistine Chapel (decorated by Michelangelo) and the Vatican Museums (featuring some of the world's most celebrated classical sculptures and Renaissance treasures).***

Besides being the only existing example of a country within a city, **Vatican City** is also the only **UNESCO World Heritage Site** to consist of an entire state; ruled by the **Pope**, it was originally marshland on the west bank of the **Tiber River** until it was drained by **Agrippina the Elder** sometime

around the 1st century AD. In AD 40, **Emperor Caligula** – Agrippina's son – built in his mother's property a *circus* which was later completed by **Nero** and named the *Circus Gaii et Neronis*; according to interpretations, both ancient and modern, the *circus* was aligned on a similar east-west line to that of the present St. Peter's and lay to the south of its axis. Tradition bears that the **"Prince of the Apostles"** was crucified head downwards right in this *circus*, hence the name given to the first Basilica constructed on this site, which was ordered by **Constantine the Great** after the **Edict of Milan** (AD 313).

In the centuries following the building of **Old St. Peter's**, the population grew meaningfully; the **Leonine Wall** – which still defines the boundaries of the *Civitas Leonina* – was erected between AD 848 and AD 852 to enclose the expanding city. In 1309, the papal court was transferred to **Avignon** and Rome and St. Peter's were basically abandoned; **New St. Peter's** was begun by **Pope Julius II** in 1506 and completed under the pontificate of **Urban VIII** (1626). Meanwhile, the popes had moved into the **Quirinal Palace** and there would remain until the **Capture of Rome** (1870). Thereafter, they returned to the Vatican and refused to leave it until the **Lateran Treaty** established the modern and independent State of Vatican City and reaffirmed the special status of Catholicism in Italy (1929).

Vatican City is home to two of Rome's most visited tourist attractions: **St. Peter's Basilica** and the **Vatican Museums**, which in turn boast the **Sistine Chapel**. Here below is a brief description of each of them.

A monument to centuries of artistic genius, St. Peter's Basilica dates back to the 16th century and was erected over the old Constantinian church; like many ancient churches, **Old St. Peter's** had fallen into disrepair and a new building was needed. The task of constructing this huge basilica involved some of Italy's greatest Renaissance masters, including **Donato Bramante**, **Raphael** and **Michelangelo**.

Besides being world-renowned for its **breath-taking dome** (Michelangelo's proud architectural achievement), St. Peter's also houses what the Vatican believes to be the **bones of the "Prince of the Apostles"** and two of the country's most celebrated masterpieces: Michelangelo's **Pietà** (carved from a single marble slab coming from the quarries of Carrara) and **Gian Lorenzo Bernini**'s enormous **baldachin**.

The Vatican Museums were established by Pope Julius II at the beginning of the 16th century and hold one of the world's most significant art collections built up by the popes throughout the centuries. Besides the wonderful **Sistine Chapel** (best known for **Michelangelo's frescoes** of the **Genesis** and the **Last Judgment**), visitors can explore a multitude of sections, from the **Gregorian Egyptian Museum** (home to monuments and artefacts taken from Egypt in Roman times) to the **Collection of Modern Religious Art** (containing nearly 800 works of 250 international artists). This never-ending exhibition (7km-long!) also includes **findings from Southern Etruria**, amazing **classical sculptures**, **Raphael's School of Athens** and many other wonders.

**Did you know?**

**Michelangelo's Last Judgment** was an object of a heavy dispute between **Cardinal Carafa** and the High Renaissance Master; because Michelangelo had painted naked figures, he was accused of being immoral and obscene. **Biagio da Cesena** – the Papal Master of Ceremonies – added fuel to the fire by declaring that "*it was mostly disgraceful that in so sacred a place there should have been depicted all those nude figures, exposing themselves so shamefully, and that it was no work for a papal chapel, but rather for the public baths and taverns*". In response, Michelangelo depicted him as **Minos** – Hell's evil judge of sinners – with donkey's ears and a snake biting his penis!

P.S. Afraid of queuing? Then book ahead and join a small group walking tour of the Vatican Museums and St. Peter's Basilica. Tours leave Monday through Saturday (morning and afternoon).