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FREE GUIDE · VATICAN CITY (ROME)

Vatican Museums and Sistine Chapel

Michelangelo, Raphael, the Laocoön, Caravaggio, Leonardo… — the 7 must-see stops of the Vatican Museums and the Sistine Chapel, explained one by one

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Your visit at a glance

The Vatican Museums are one of the largest art complexes on the planet: five centuries of papal collecting gathered along some seven kilometres of galleries that flow, like one great crescendo, into the Sistine Chapel. Seeing it all is impossible, and that's exactly the mistake that wears almost every visitor out: trying to. This tour brings together the seven must-see stops —from the classical Laocoön to Michelangelo's ceiling—, with the context to understand why they're brilliant and 1, 2 and 3-hour routes so you can choose according to the time you have. The building is designed as a one-way route towards the Sistine: let it carry you and you'll walk out amazed, not wrecked.

At a glance

PRICE
€20 general · €8 reduced

FREE ENTRY
Last Sun of month · 9am–2pm

HOURS
Mon–Sat 8am–8pm (last entry 6pm)

TIME
1-3 h (about 3 h for all 7)

WORKS HERE
The 7 must-see stops

METRO
Ottaviano-S. Pietro (line A)

TV

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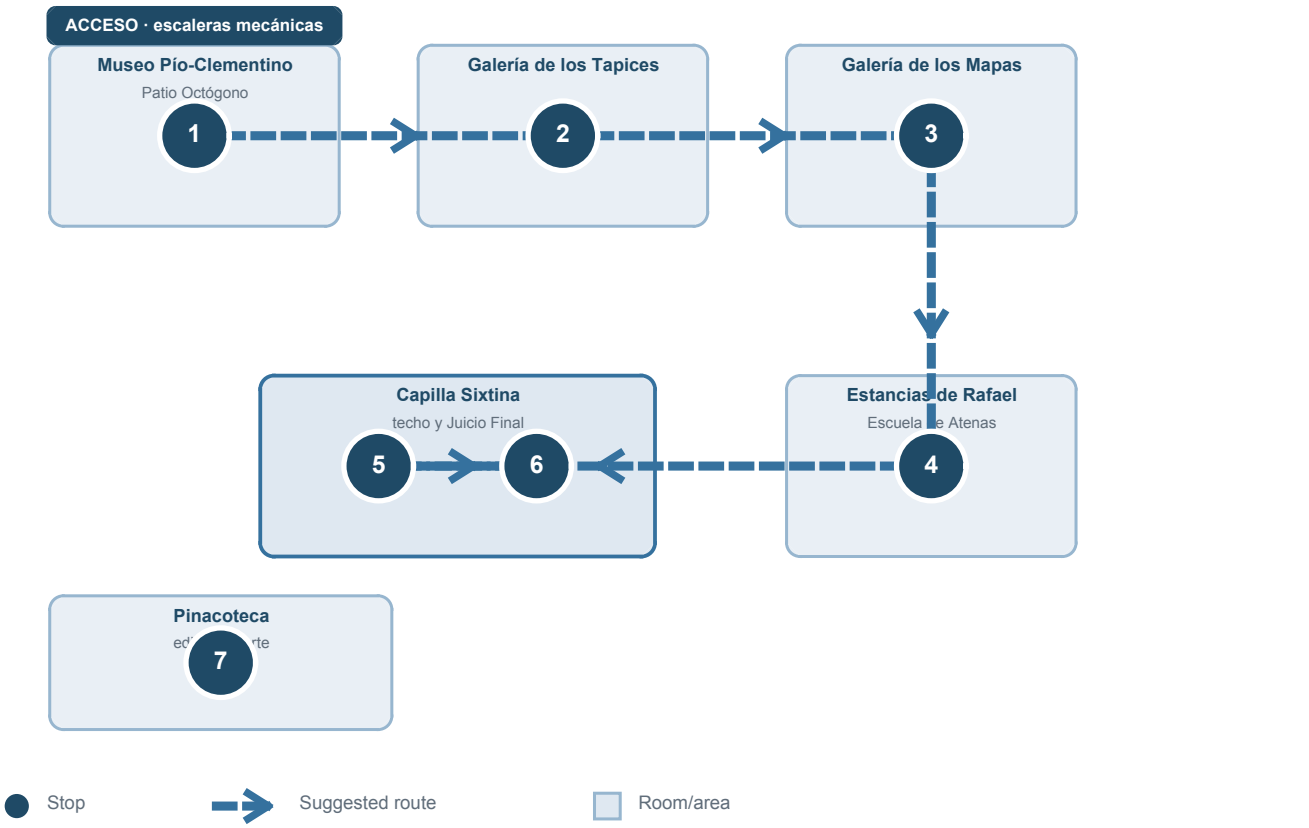
With this free guide you already do a great visit: the essentials, with a route. If you want to make the most of it, at the end I'll show you the complete version.

Before you go in: book your skip-the-line ticket
On Civitatis, with free cancellation. Skip the ticket-office queue.
» **Buy your ticket**

The map and the route

The route works largely as a one-way flow that channels the crowd towards the Sistine Chapel, the grand finale. From the entrance you ride the escalators up to the Cortile della Pigna and from there you string together the PIO-CLEMENTINO MUSEUM (the classical sculpture of the Octagonal Court), the long GALLERIES of the Candelabra, the Tapestries and the Maps, the RAPHAEL ROOMS and, at last, the SISTINE with the ceiling and the Last Judgment. The PINACOTECA sits somewhat off the flow: it's best seen at the very start or the very end. Follow the 'Cappella Sistina' signs and don't exhaust yourself in every room; the building is designed to carry you along.

MUSEOS VATICANOS · ITINERARIO DE SENTIDO ÚNICO (ESQUEMA, NO A ESCALA)



Es un recorrido de más de 1 km en una sola dirección que termina en la Capilla Sixtina (parada 5-6, la misma sala). La Pinacoteca (7) es un edificio aparte junto a la entrada: se visita como desvío. No a escala.

Visiting order: PIO-CLEMENTINO MUSEUM: 1 Octagonal Court (Laocoön and Apollo) — GALLERIES: 2 Tapestries and Candelabra › 3 Gallery of Maps — 4 Raphael Rooms (The School of Athens) — SISTINE CHAPEL: 5 The ceiling (The Creation of Adam) › 6 The Last Judgment — 7 Pinacoteca (Raphael, Leonardo, Caravaggio)

Schematic layout by area; the number shows the visiting order. Not to scale: follow the museum's own floor plans and signs on the day.

THE STOPS, ONE BY ONE

1 The Octagonal Court: Laocoön and Apollo

Pio-Clementino Museum · 20 min

The courtyard where the museum was born: here Julius II gathered his collection of marbles. The Laocoön, unearthed in 1506, and the Apollo Belvedere set the classical ideal that inspired the Renaissance artists.



The Laocoön group, Hellenistic sculpture, Pio-Clementino Museum.
Photo: Wilfredor · CC0 · Wikimedia Commons

WHAT TO LOOK AT

The serpents and the muscular tension of the Laocoön; the perfect contrapposto of the Apollo; and in the neighbouring rooms, the muscular Belvedere Torso.

» IN THE PREMIUM GUIDE

The day the Laocoön emerged from the ground, the pope sent one very particular artist to examine it, and that spark shows even in the Sistine. In the premium guide: who he was and which famous marble in these rooms he later refused to 'complete'.

THE STOPS, ONE BY ONE

4 The Raphael Rooms: The School of Athens

Stanze di Raffaello · 25 min

Julius II's apartments, decorated by Raphael from 1508. Its jewel is 'The School of Athens', a synthesis of the High Renaissance: the Greek philosophers beneath a classical architecture, with Plato and Aristotle at the centre.



'The School of Athens', Raphael, around 1509-1511.
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WHAT TO LOOK AT

The opposing gestures of Plato (to the sky) and Aristotle (to the earth); Diogenes on the steps; and the hidden portraits of Leonardo and Michelangelo.

» IN THE PREMIUM GUIDE

One of the portraits in this fresco wasn't in the plans: Raphael added it after sneaking into a neighbouring chapel. In the premium guide: who he portrayed that way, in which exact figure and why it was a tribute with a pinch of rivalry.

5 The Sistine Ceiling: The Creation of Adam

Sistine Chapel (ceiling) · 25 min

Ceiling frescoed by Michelangelo (1508-1512): nine scenes from Genesis with prophets, sibyls and ignudi. Its centre is 'The Creation of Adam', the two hands about to touch.



'The Creation of Adam', Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel ceiling, around 1512.
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WHAT TO LOOK AT

The near-contact of the two hands; God's cloak shaped like a brain; the ignudi and the Delphic Sibyl.

» IN THE PREMIUM GUIDE

The full story of this stop (twice the text), its «ONE FACT» box and all 7 stops of the route, one by one.

THE STOPS, ONE BY ONE

6 The Last Judgment

Sistine Chapel (altar wall) · 20 min

Fresco on the altar wall (1536-1541), by a mature Michelangelo. A Christ the judge surrounded by more than 300 souls rising to heaven or falling to hell; darker and more dramatic than the ceiling.



'The Last Judgment', Michelangelo, altar wall of the Sistine, 1536-1541.
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WHAT TO LOOK AT

The beardless central Christ; Saint Bartholomew with his flayed skin (the artist's self-portrait); the 'braghettoni' that covered nudes.

» IN THE PREMIUM GUIDE

The full story of this stop (twice the text), its «ONE FACT» box and all 7 stops of the route, one by one.

Practical tips

Best times

Come first thing (they open at 8:00) or in the mid-afternoon, when the groups thin out; avoid midday. Go with shoulders and knees covered: the dress code is strict throughout the visit, including the Sistine and St Peter's, and there are no exceptions at the door.

Buy your ticket in advance

The Vatican Museums are among the most visited in the world and the queue on the forecourt can run over an hour in high season. Booking your ticket online and choosing a time slot gives you fast-track access, with almost no wait; it costs around €5 more and it's worth it. Arrive a few minutes before your time.

Getting in free

On the last Sunday of each month entry is free, with reduced hours (9:00-14:00, last entry at 12:30) and no booking. In return, the queues are enormous: get there well before opening. It doesn't apply if that Sunday falls on certain feast days; always confirm on the official website.

With children

It's a long visit: prioritise a few highlights —the courtyard sculptures, the Gallery of Maps and the Sistine— and bring water. Turning it into a game ('find Adam's hand', 'spot the ships on the maps') keeps them interested. Better a couple of intense hours than a marathon.

Accessibility and services

The museum offers accessible routes and lifts and wheelchair loan (best booked in advance); there are cafés, a cloakroom for leaving backpacks and toilets along the route. Near the exit is Momo's spiral staircase, a good spot for one last photo before you go.

Combine it

Many guided tours leave the Sistine straight for St Peter's Basilica through a side door, saving you the queue in the square; even if you go on your own, cross over to see it when you finish (it's free, with the same dress code). If you have time left, the Castel Sant'Angelo and the centre of Rome are a stroll away across the Tiber.

Practical info

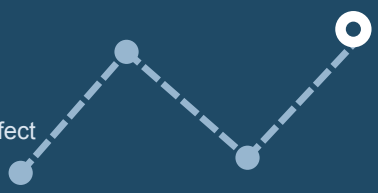
Getting there: metro line A, Ottaviano-S. Pietro or Cipro stations (about 5-10 min on foot); also bus 49 (stops in front of the entrance) and tram 19. Admission: general €20 (reduced €8); +€5 for online booking (highly recommended) on the official site. Usual hours: Monday to Saturday from 8:00 to 20:00, with last entry at 18:00; closed almost every Sunday except the last of each month (9:00-14:00, free, last entry 12:30; suspended if it coincides with certain feast days). Strict dress code: shoulders and knees covered (no shorts, miniskirts or vest tops), throughout the visit, including the Sistine and St Peter's. Confirm prices and hours on the official website before you go.

Official website: www.museivaticani.va

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THE COMPLETE VERSION

Take the complete visit

With this free guide you already cover the essentials. The PREMIUM is your complete visit to Vatican Museums and Sistine Chapel: every work with its story, a 3-step looking guide for every painting, the cheat-sheet for your phone and the tips to skip the queues. For less than the price of a coffee.

In the free guide you miss out on:

2 **The Gallery of Tapestries**
Galleria degli Arazzi · 15 min

3 **The Gallery of Maps**
Galleria delle Carte Geografiche · 15 min

7 **The Pinacoteca: Raphael, Caravaggio and Leonardo**
Vatican Pinacoteca · 25 min

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» **Check availability and prices**

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