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The Eternal City and the Omnia Pass: Fast-tracking Rome

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ROME — The Roman Empire may be history, but Rome is still the eternal city, a larger-than-life destination on every traveler's wish list. Will the Omnia & Roma Pass, the city card that fast-tracks pass-holders through the experience, make a difference?

A better question is whether Rome can cope with the 5 million travelers that visit the city annually. Sightseers, retirees on holiday, historians, pilgrims, nuns in habits, school kids in matching shirts and eager fans weaned on the movies, everyone's there to see where it all began.

That means jostling crowds, straggling groups and massive lines. But flash your Omnia & Roma Pass and you're through the gate and into the Coliseum, where gladiators really did bludgeon each other to death. Or into the Vatican rooms, once palatial living quarters, where Renaissance popes plotted to poison their rivals. Or to the Sistine Chapel to see Michelangelo's frescoes. Or the Roman Forum and St. Peter's Basilica.

When I was there not long ago, the streets were so crowded and the sidewalk cafes so full that I wasted most of my first day standing in line. Then somebody, a guy who zoomed past, slowed down long enough to show me his Omnia & Roma Pass, or ORP, two separate passes sold as a single package, good for three days and priced at 98 euros.

The next day I went to the Omnia office next to St. Peter's and bought the pass. It was just two cards, a guidebook and a map, but they felt like the keys to the kingdom. For the next few days, I whizzed past ticket offices, around long noisy lines and through dedicated turnstiles.

The pass was pricey, but it cost me less than the price of buying the same tickets individually. I didn't have to carry a lot of cash - only enough for lunch - or to take my wallet out to make change. And the two passes, which do different things, complement each other.

Here's how it works. The Roma Pass card is the transportation portion, good on all city buses and the subway. You swipe it on the electronic reader in the bus or in the subway station and you're good to go. You can get on and off on a whim, take as many rides as you want, go anywhere within the city and not incur an extra fare. As a bonus, the Roma Pass also includes free entry to two of Rome's most significant monuments, museums and palaces.

But the Roma Pass won't get you into Rome's "Big Three," the Vatican Museum, Sistine Chapel and St. Peter's Basilica. That's the job of the Omnia Pass, which does and even more important, at a specific time. The ORP office near St. Peter's issues the tickets and makes appointments, an arrangement that saves hours wasted standing in line. And with a specific tour time, you can plan the rest of your day.

The Omnia Pass also includes entries to the much older and equally historic Basilica of St. John in the Lateran, and to St. Peter's Prison. And it includes free or discounted entries to most of Rome's other major attractions: monuments, museums, Renaissance palaces, archaeological sites and current exhibitions. Additional benefits include a detailed street and tour map and as many sightseeing tours on Omnia's Roma Cristiana double-decker sightseeing bus as you want or your tired feet demand.

Lastly, the ORP's pocket-sized guidebook is an essential part of the package, explaining how to use both passes to best advantage. It also lists Rome's top attractions, describing each one briefly and giving a street address, opening hours, phone number, nearby bus and subway stops and website. The guide is keyed to the map, a quality production that shows city streets, neighborhoods, a subway map, numbered attractions (keyed to a list), and route maps of four, neighborhood-themed, self-guided walking tours.

Since I was hoping to see the Vatican Museum early, I arrived at the ORP office (adjacent to St. Peter's) at 8:30 a.m. People were already gathering, but I was up to the counter in 10 minutes, and had the Omnia Pass package in hand in another five. With a Vatican ticket and an appointment to join the next group out, I was set to roll. Fifteen minutes later, a guide with a flag appeared, waved us over, led us across the plaza, and around the corner to the museum. Forty minutes total - count them - and we were inside.

We still had to get in a line behind two earlier groups; tours get preferential treatment so you'll never avoid some lines. And by the time I arrived, the galleries were already crowded. The rule here - and at most of Rome's other museums - seems to be that once your group is through the door, you're on your own. You can go at your own pace, hurry through some galleries, linger in others or stay all day.

But that meant that the most popular galleries, the so-called Raphael rooms, for example, which were once the private apartments of Pope Julius II, were also the busiest. By the time I got there the place was so jammed that I couldn't see Raphael's frescoes without wriggling and wangling.

Some visitors who'd come specifically to see the famous "School of Athens" fresco, never really did see the entire wall, or the painter's self-portrait in the lower right corner (he's the young man wearing the black cap). And the Sistine Chapel, said to hold a maximum of 2,000 people, was equally crowded. We were like fish in a net, slowly sliding forward and trying to look at the ceiling.

(A tip: A kindly guard, instead of directing me toward the left side exit where a long line wound out, around and all the way back to St. Peter's Basilica, waved me toward a closed, unmarked door on the far right side, installed, apparently, for wheel chairs. From there it was 10 steps past the elevator and 20 more down into St. Peter's.)

With the afternoon free, I bought an ice cream cone and strolled around Bernini's Four Rivers Fountain, toured the Pantheon (where a guard warned everyone to watch for pick-pockets), and spent a peaceful hour sitting on the Spanish Steps.

And since it was Rome, and when in Rome you do what the Romans do so well, I quit early enough to sit at a sidewalk cafe with a glass of red wine and a plate of pasta and watch the world go by.

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For the Omnia & Roma Pass: For details or to purchase on the internet, go to www.omniavaticanrome.org. The Omnia Pass package costs 98 euros for an adult, 65 euros for children 6-12, and free for 5 and under. To purchase it in Rome, or to reserve a time to tour St. Peter's and the Vatican, go to the ORP St. Peter's Office, Piazza Pio XII, 9, in Rome.

For the Roma Pass: For details or to purchase the Roma Pass separately, go to www.romapass.it. The cost is 28 euros for two days; 36 euros for three days.

For additional information about touring Rome, go to www.turismoroma.it.

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