

Jim and Emmy's Travel Journal

The Vatican

1970, 1980, 1985, and 1989

1970

The Vatican is completely surrounded by Rome so there really is no way to know when we entered or left this little country. We visited here each of the four years we visited Rome.

We finally gave up and drove to the Vatican, planning to see the museum and the Sistine Chapel.

We found a parking place easily, next to a barber shop and a beauty parlor. Jim had carefully purchased a device that would permit the use of his electric shaver by plugging it into the camper cigarette lighter, only this camper doesn't have a lighter. Every couple of days he gets shaved in a barber shop.

While Jim was getting shaved, and the Lindas were having their hair washed and dried for about \$1.25 each, Emmy found a laundromat a block from the Sistine Chapel, and went to work. Emmy also found some white sandals to buy. We solved all those problems in one stop.

Instead of waiting for the Sistine Chapel to open after their lunch hour as we thought we were doing, we discovered it had just closed for the day. Good thing we travel with the attitude, "It will still be here the next time we are in town."

Linda S. decided she should put on a clean dress before we went into St. Peter's, then found the heat of the clothes dryer had shrunk her dress. The guard at the door to St. Peter's would not let her in, because it was too short. After pulling and tugging and stretching for awhile, then going to another door, she made it inside.

St. Peter's Basilica is an exceptional building. It does not compare to any Cathedral or other building we may have seen elsewhere. It's so very large it really does not give the feeling we are in a church at all. Everywhere we look in St. Peter's, there is marble of all colors, and there are statues throughout, including the beautiful sculpture, "Pieta" created by Michelangelo.

We walked up the 305 stairs between the inside and outside walls of the dome. We must walk leaning at the same angle as the curve of the dome as we cannot stand straight as we climb these stairs. But once we are there, can we ever see Rome, from this very tip top of St. Peter's! From there we can look down into St. Peter's Square, and even with the haze, we could see the Colosseum in the distance, the curve of the Tiber River, and the Vatican gardens behind St. Peter's.

1980

Drove to the Vatican and visited the Sistine Chapel and the Vatican Museum. Found the Sistine Chapel ceiling more interesting than expected, and the walls were also painted in a similar manner. They had a scaffolding in one corner of the room, and were trying a new method of cleaning the art on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Wish them luck.

Later went into St. Peter's. The Pieta is not as easy to see as it was in 1970, they have now erected a plastic shield to protect it from vandals. (Someone had attacked it with a hammer.) When St. Peter's closed at 2:00, we drove across town to tour the catacombs at St. Agnes. There we met a group of girls from the US, then took them with us back across town to the Vatican.

We visited the Mamertine Prison of Peter and Paul again, then back to St. Peter's to see the Pope, he was expecting us (and 10,000 others). Parking was almost impossible, but we managed, then walked to St. Peter's square. We managed to park in the Vatican by driving over the curb, and parking on the sidewalk with the front of the camper sticking into a park, and the remainder across the sidewalk and out into the street, just like everyone else nearby, but it had nothing to do with being legally parked. Can the Pope fix a parking ticket?

As we stood a long distance from where the Pope would be, an English speaking priest from Czechoslovakia offered us tickets to get closer. The Pope was supposed to speak in many different languages, but we gave up and left before he got to English. (Pope John Paul was shot and wounded right here, during this ceremony, just a few months later.)

1985

The Tiber River is lined with huge sycamore trees. The river channel is lower than the street level, and the tree limbs on both sides extend down into the channel. For a short distance, before it curves again, we can look down the Tiber River between the trees and see St. Peter's in the distance. It's a shame it's too hazy to get good pictures today.

After we toured St. Peter's, Emmy stayed at the Vatican Post Office writing postcards, while Jim again climbed to the the very top of the dome, like we (Emmy, Jim, and the two Lindas) did in 1970. Jim had to lean at the same angle as St. Peter's dome, as he climbed the narrow staircase that's between the inside and the outside dome structure. A long climb, but well worth the effort. Again the haze and smoke (smog?) restrict vision and picture taking, but what a fantastic view, anyway!

1989

We visited the Vatican museum for the second time (8,000L, \$6 each). We mainly wanted to see the Sistine Chapel again, and we found the 2,732 square-foot ceiling restoration is nearing completion, and is to be finished later in 1989. The last time we were in the Sistine Chapel they were just experimenting, trying to decide what they would be able to do, and how to do it, without destroying the original.

A rail has been installed on each side of the Sistine Chapel near the ceiling. They have mounted a platform to roll to and fro, fifty feet above the floor. The ceiling can be renovated from the platform while tourists continue gaze and gasp from below. The ceiling and the top part of the wall are now over 80% complete. We could see part of the aged ceiling, the platform, and the beautifully restored, brightly colored and fully detailed, renovated ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Wonder if they just removed dirt, or did they do something to brighten the colors of the Sistine Chapel. The stories we hear and read, seem to disagree on this point. (We really wonder about the "Last Supper" picture in Milano, it's in much worse condition.)

There are still cracks in some of the plaster, wonder if they will do some more with that. The lower 3/4 of the walls have not been restored at all, yet. This whole job is expected to take much longer, and cost thousands of times more than it did to create the paintings in the first place.

Each of the lunettes (semicircles on the upper walls just below the Sistine ceiling) were painted by Michelangelo in just three days. Each lunette is approximately 6 by 11 feet, and it's known that one of the three days was just spent on the inscription. A major effort remaining, is to clean "The Last Judgment," a fresco on the wall above the massive altar. It's coated with centuries of candle smoke, charcoal-heater residue, and smudge from torches, used to light the Sistine Chapel until early in the 20th century.

There is a constant problem with this effort. There are plenty of "famous" art experts who say they are doing the right thing, and an equal number who say they are destroying the art in the Sistine Chapel. It's our opinion that it's better to see it as it was intended, rather than as it has deteriorated. A Japanese Television Company paid many millions of dollars to partially pay for the Sistine Chapel renovation, and to have the exclusive right to record a TV special of the effort over the several years. Because of that contract, there is just not much information and pictures available for the public yet.

We didn't spend a lot more time in the other parts of the museum, but walked to, around, and through St. Peter's, next door. We mailed a bunch of postcards at the Vatican Post Office, and visited the lower level of St. Peter's to see Peter's tomb, and those of many Popes, including Pope John XXIII. In addition to the regular Post Office located to the left of St. Peter's, they have a very ugly trailer-type thing used as a temporary-overflow Post Office, squatting on the right side of St. Peter's square.

Since there are no campsites in the Vatican, we did not spend a night here.