

## Chapter V. Rome

Our original plan did not have us driving from Venice to Rome in a single day. However, when we decided to shorten the vacation that's how it turned out. By the quickest route it's about 550 kilometers, five and a half hours of driving according to MapQuest. It takes us about eight hours when the stops are added. Part of the drive is a through the picturesque Tuscan hills.



A [Tuscan hill town](#) in the distance



NOT a [roll-in shower](#)

We have just unpacked the car when we discover that the hotel room is completely wrong. We booked our lodgings through an outfit called Accessible Italy, who assured us that each hotel had an accessible room with a roll-in shower. The rooms in Milan, Bologna and Venice have all been good in that regard; the room in Venice was excellent. Not here, though. This room is small, about 8.5 feet side to side and maybe 12 feet long. Dee calls it a “cell.” The sleeping area has two beds, each narrower than a standard twin. The space between the beds is not wide enough for Paul’s wheelchair without lifting the mattress on one of the beds. The bathroom is unworkable. There is a 3-inch step up into a shower that is too small to hold Paul’s shower chair anyway. The only thing remotely accessible about the room is some grab bars on the wall near the toilet; other than that it is a room for people who can walk. Even the room where the hotel serves breakfast isn’t accessible to wheelchairs!

We have already unpacked the car by the time we discover the room's problems. We contact Elodie, our booking agent, and tell her the story. She is shocked as she had been assured that the room was accessible with a roll-in shower. Someone had lied to her, or more likely had no idea what “handicap accessible” entails. She offers to try to find a different hotel, but we really don't want to repack and unpack the car an extra time – it's a lot of work. After some time knocking ideas back and forth we decide to tough it out here but to leave Rome a day early. We check with the hotel in Florence and they will be able to get us into our room one day sooner, so we make the switch. The people of the Rome hotel really do their best to help us, but there is not much they can do to make up for the inadequate room. For example, each morning they deliver a full breakfast menu of coffee, rolls, cheeses, fruit, cold cuts and eggs to the room because Paul can't get into the breakfast room.

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This leaves us with only two full days in Rome so we try to make the most of them. The one good thing about the hotel was its location -- we can walk to the Vatican museums entrance. Day one is spent at the Vatican, looking through some of the museums and the Sistine Chapel. The museums are full of art and treasures from several centuries, going back nearly to the time of Jesus. Items from that time were excavated from the Roman catacombs, where the early Christians had to worship to avoid persecution. Later stuff was either donated to the church or was commissioned by the Vatican. Here are some examples of the museum's collections. There are hundreds and hundreds of these things.



[Paintings](#) – this is of Jesus' ascension to heaven



[Sculptures](#) – a copy of Michelangelo's *La Pietà*



Inlaid Marble [Floors](#)



[Tapestries](#) - This one is a copy of *The Last Supper*



[Painted Ceilings](#)



[Porcelains](#) – this Robin is a gift from Richard Nixon.

Not pictured are things like artifacts from the Rome catacombs; gold and silver objects such as plates, oil lamps, scepters; carvings in ivory, jade and other precious stone; and hundreds of other types of treasures and artifacts on display.

The route to the Sistine Chapel includes one short flight of stairs, then a very narrow passage into the chapel itself. A wheelchair lift has been installed on the stairs, and an operator is there full time. When we arrive they are lifting folks in chairs up, then sending the empty lift down to bring up the next person. Dee asks why not send one chair down each time instead of lowering the empty lift. They explain that the passageway into the

chapel is very narrow so we have to wait until all chair users who are coming out have been lifted up before we can go down. Not a big deal. There is trouble on the way out, however. Paul is the last in line to go back up the stairs and the lift breaks just as it is his turn. There is a lot of discussion, several phone calls, and people show up and fiddle with the lift, all to no avail. In the end four strong guys literally pick the chair up, with Paul in it, and carry him up the steps.

Most of you will be familiar with the chapel ceiling's most well known painting; Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*. God is depicted as a grey-bearded old man reaching out to touch Adam and give him life. Actually seeing the ceiling was a bit of a surprise. It's way up there; over 20 meters away. The chapel is not a big building, a simple rectangle about 40 meters by 13 meters, but they went in for high ceilings



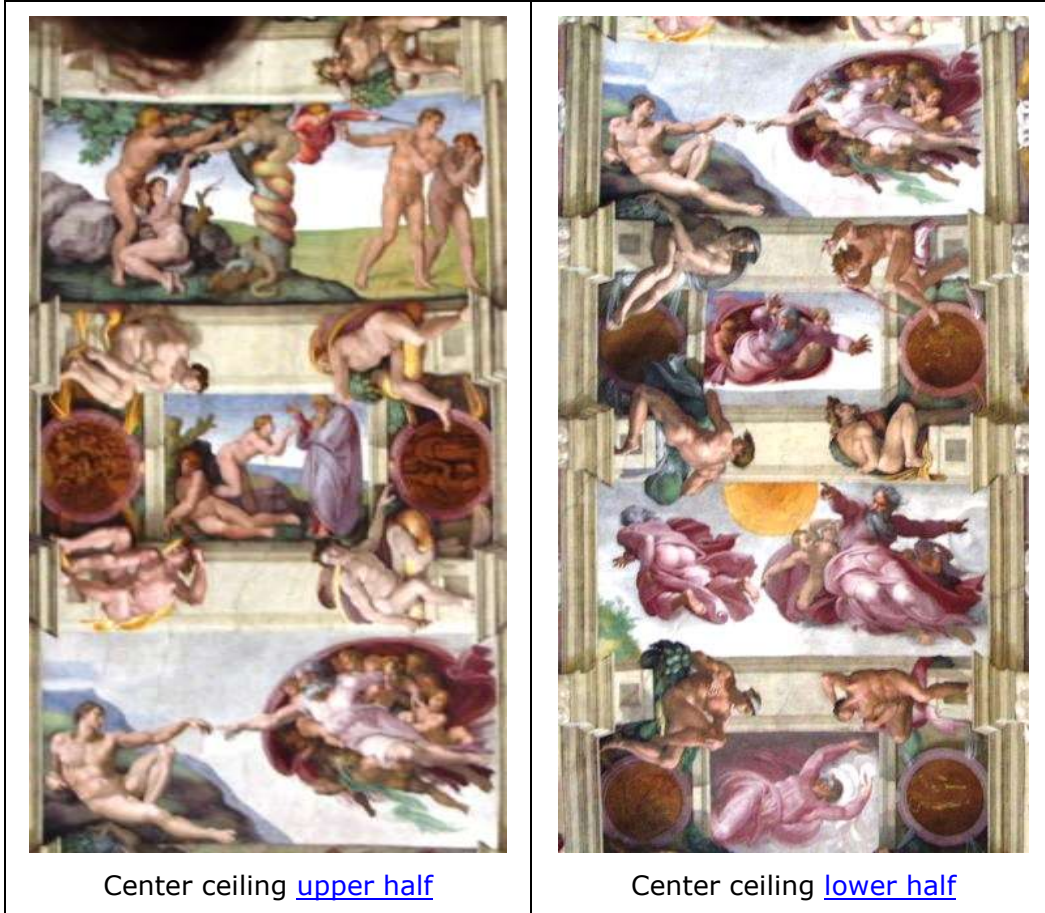
[Chair lift](#) down the steps



Not even [1.5 chairs](#) wide

back then. You can't get very close to the paintings. Secondly, the *Creation of Adam* is only one of 39 paintings on the ceiling, all by Michelangelo (no we didn't count them; the bookshop literature lists them). Adam is in the center place but there are three others of the same size and many smaller paintings. Some are pretty impressive in their own right. The *Creation of the Sun and Moon* is one that we like. God is positioned center right, with the moon at His left hand and the sun at His right. Next to the sun is an angel or a cherub who is losing his pants. Two moons! Was Michelangelo painting a pun?





Here's most of the ceiling center in two images. In the left we have, from top to bottom, *The Fall and Expulsion from Eden*, *The Creation of Eve*, and *The Creation of Adam*. In the right side we have Adam again, then *The Separation of Land and Water*, *The Creation of the Sun and Moon*, and *The Separation of Light and Darkness*. This is just the center portion; there are many more paintings along the sides of the ceiling. The roof is a barrel vault so the ceiling actually starts at the top of the walls and curves up to meet in the center.

Not only the ceiling but also the walls of the chapel are painted. Three of the walls contain paintings by artists such as Perugino, Botticelli, Van den Broeck, Rosselli and others depicting events from the life of Moses and biblical scenes of Jesus. The lower part of the wall looks like it has hanging tapestries, but the curtains are actually painted on the wall. We assume that draperies once hung on the walls but were removed to preserve them.



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The fourth wall has Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*. This one painting covers the wall from the ceiling down to just short of the altar. We're talking 40 feet wide by 55 feet tall, approximately. The altar area is roped off and you can't get very close to that painting either, but it's so big it's better viewed from a distance. The painting is FULL of images.

Another thing that surprised us was the tourists' disregard for the fact that this is, after all, a church. There are signs requesting quiet and that *no* pictures are allowed. The place is full of people and many of them are ignoring the signs. There is an attendant who repeatedly calls out, "Silenzio! Silence!" in a booming voice. Everyone shuts up for a moment, but then the volume starts to rise. Soon it is loud again and people are snapping flash photos. We manage to sneak some non-flash photos – quietly.

On day two we take a bus toward the old city. We wanted to see the remains of the Forum and the Coliseum but the direct line to that area is not accessible. There was one accessible line that went part of the way so we took it. When Paul spotted some ruins we got off the bus, thinking we were near our objective. Wrong. It turns out that there are ruins all over that part of Rome. Sometimes the ancient building facade has been kept and a newer building constructed behind it, one type of historical conservation. Cool stuff.



Michelangelo's [The Last Judgment](#) on the front wall. This shot shows the curvature of the ceiling.



The façade of an ancient building has been incorporated into a newer building. This particular building is a [theater](#).



This is a working [church](#) that has preserved four ancient columns and part of a wall into a newer bell tower.



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We stroll from the bus stop over to the Forum area and then walk along the ruins toward the coliseum. The ruins in the old forum area are pretty interesting.



The [Palatine Hill](#) with restoration activity in front and below. One of the seven hills of the original ancient Rome.



Old [columns](#) near the Forum -- The church in the background is still in use.

[Details](#) of the carving on the top of one of the columns. Doric, Ionic or Corinthian?

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Another example of [preservation](#). The new built upon an old wall and three columns.



A [gate](#) in the old city wall. Sidewalk passes beneath

It's not easy to get around in a wheelchair here; you can't depend on curb cutouts at the intersections. Sometimes there are some, sometimes not. To make matters worse the Italian army is setting up for a parade and is putting up bleacher seats over the normal sidewalk, re-routing pedestrian traffic to a gravel path. It's a tough choice -- Paul's wheelchair tends to sink in gravel instead of floating across the surface, but the alternative is to travel in the street. With what we've seen of Italian traffic we opt for the gravel. It's tough going, but whenever we get stuck other tourists come to our rescue and push and/or pull Paul to firmer ground. We meet an exuberant family of Texans this way.



[Paul](#) with Coliseum behind.



[Dee](#) strikes a pose

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[The Coliseum](#). Construction completed around the year 82 C.E. That's **old!**



The [Arch of Constantine](#), next to the Coliseum, built in 315 C.E. That's pretty old too.

We make it to the coliseum but not in time to take a tour inside. Nevertheless, we go all the way around it, across large cobblestones that may have been trod upon by Julius Caesar. Constantine's Arch is behind the Coliseum and well worth walking around to see. It is a bit ironic in a way. It's commonly believed that early Christians were fed to the lions in the Coliseum to entertain the crowds, yet next door is a tribute to the Roman Emperor who is generally considered to have been the first Christian Roman Emperor (although he didn't actually get baptized until late in his life). A lot can change in 300 years!

We have dinner at a sidewalk table in view of the Coliseum and the Palatine hill and watch the sun set as we eat. Good food and a great bottle of wine.



We eat at this [sidewalk table](#) while...



...watching the [sunset](#) behind the coliseum



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The upper part of the coliseum is light colored stone and it makes a reasonable projection screen. Somebody has a permit to project ads onto it after dark! The world's oldest billboard?



Another [Coliseum](#) view. The wall of the top tier and on the left is a restoration.



An [old billboard](#)? A car advertisement projected onto the coliseum's top tier

We see a lot in Rome but leave much more unseen, partially because we lost a day. The two items at the top of our list were the Sistine Chapel and the Coliseum, so we did all right under the circumstances. However, a day lost in Rome means we get an extra day in Florence. Not a bad trade, it turns out.