

Papal Resignation May Be Tourism Boon for Eternal City

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By GENEVIEVE SHAW BROWN | ABC News – Wed, Feb 27, 2013 12:42 AM EST



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The members of the College of Cardinals aren't the only ones making travel plans to Rome. Massive crowds are expected to descend upon the Eternal City in the coming weeks as tourists scramble to catch a glimpse of Pope Benedict XVI before he steps down Thursday. And many more may be in Rome during the conclave, possibly when a new pope is chosen.

The AFP reported an expected 200,000 people for the pope's final general audience in St. Peter's on Wednesday.

Keane Travel, a Catholic travel agency that's organized trips to Rome during canonizations and beatifications said the crowds "will be immense." Joann Keane, the company owner, said the people would be "spilling out of St. Peter Square, down the Via della Conciliazione to the Tiber River."

The pope's unexpected resignation has led to an increase in hotel bookings in Rome. Expedia.co.uk reported a 35 percent spike -- a trend, the online booking agent said, that began within 24 hours of the pope's resignation announcement. The site attributed the increase to "eagerness to see the pope before his final departure or anticipation of the new papal appointment."

Lastminute.com also reported a spike in hotel bookings, with Germans – perhaps not surprisingly, given the pope's heritage – leading the way of those booking trips to Rome. The website specializing in last minute deals said in the week following the pope's announcement, hotel bookings in Rome among Germans rose 80 percent from the week prior. Bookings in Spain and France followed at 44 and 46 percent, respectively.

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There was also an increase in flights booked from the United Kingdom, to the tune of 26 percent. "Ever since the pope announced his resignation we've seen a surge in last minute bookings to Rome as people rush to see the pope's big farewell," said Mark Maddock, Managing Director of lastminute.com UK and Ireland. "This is clearly a historic event that many want to be a part of."

Interest in vacation rentals in Rome is also on the rise. HomeAway.co.uk said inquiries on Roman properties have increased by 23 percent since the pope's resignation when compared to the two weeks prior.

"Right now, interest is still relatively steady since no dates have been set," said HomeAway senior vice president of the Americas, Jon Gray. "I would anticipate these numbers to be even higher once the conclave dates are known and, again, surrounding the papal inauguration."

Some experts think the demand will grow even greater once a new pope is in place.

"We have seen a huge increase in interest in the country and people are quicker to close their bookings, and we are getting more requests where people want to attend papal audience, private Vatican tours and Sunday Mass," said Karishma Kaul, Kensington Tours Italy manager.

Kensington Tours leads privately guided travel to more than 90 countries, including Italy.

"We imagine that once the new pope is in place, even more people will want to visit Italy," Kaul said.

But travelers worried about being priced out of witnessing this world event may be in luck. Travelocity reported the average price from the U.S. to Rome this spring is \$1,220 -- a 20 percent decrease from the same time last year.

In more good news for potential visitors, hotel prices in the Eternal City are also down since last spring -- 26 percent lower, averaging \$145 per night.

Packages that combine flights and hotels may yield savings. On Tuesday, a search by ABC News found 10 packages from New York City departing March 9, including a round-trip flight and six nights hotel stay in Rome, available for less than \$1,200, including taxes, when two adults traveled together.

The biggest problem for travelers may not be price, but instead timing the trip just right. It's impossible to know now how long the conclave will last before the white smoke is released from the Sistine Chapel and a new pope is chosen. Without that information, there's no way to know when the papal inauguration will take place.

Because this is the first time in 600 years a living pope has retired, the process surrounding the events over the coming weeks and the effect on tourism is a bit unclear.

However, Perillo Tours, a leading tour operator in Italy, notified customers on its website that the Sistine Chapel would be closed during the papal conclave.

Dark Rome Tours said its tours would carry on during the closure.

"We have been working with the Vatican authorities to ensure that disruptions to our customers are minimal," said Larry Millard, director of operations. "Although the Sistine Chapel will obviously be closed several days during March, our message is that the rest of the Vatican museums and Dark Rome tours are open for business."

In any event, the Sistine Chapel will be around for awhile.

However, no one knows how many years it will be from the current conclave before another new pope will be chosen.

"Without question," said Keane, "being in St. Peter Square when the smoke rises would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience."



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