

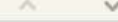
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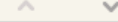
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300,000 expected 'popeful' tourists are blessing for Rome's hotel business

A. Pawlowski NBC News contributor

March 12, 2013 at 1:25 PM ET



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The Holy See is officially "Sede Vacante" for now – vacant until a new pope is chosen. Rome, on the other hand, is filling up quickly as throngs of visitors descend on the city to be a part of history.

Ashley McGuire, a member of the American contingent, arrived in Rome late last week, hoping to be standing in St. Peter's Square when the new pope emerges and greets the crowd.

"I came just because this is sort of a once-in-a-lifetime experience for a Catholic... I view it as a very spiritual experience," McGuire, a senior fellow at The Catholic Association in Washington, told NBC News.

Tuesday marks the first day of the papal conclave, with 115 cardinals holding a series of closed ballots in the Sistine Chapel until the new pontiff is chosen.

McGuire is one of thousands of visitors who have traveled to the Eternal City for this moment. They're curious about the ancient ritual unfolding behind closed doors, eager to stare at the color of the smoke released from the Sistine Chapel's chimney, and ready cheer at the top of their lungs when it turns white.

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Pilgrims, priests, nuns, Catholics of all colors and nationalities and the world's media are filling the city's hotels, with many inns expected to stay busy until the new pope is installed.

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The date for that celebration hasn't been set yet, but Rome is preparing for up to 300,000 people to show up for the spectacle, Mario Vallorosi, an official with the Italian government's Civil Protection service, **told the Associated Press**. He called the number a conservative estimate.

The crowds are a blessing for the travel business.

Expedia.com has seen standalone hotel bookings into Rome grow year over year since Pope Benedict XVI announced his resignation last month, a spokeswoman for the travel website said. The company declined to provide specific numbers.

Hotels have quickly responded to the demand by raising their rates, some by about 20 percent, said Steve Perillo, owner of Perillo Tours, an agency that specializes in travel to Italy.

Some of his clients, however, are disappointed that the Sistine Chapel is closed during their visit, he said.

Rome's tourism industry will likely feel the effects of the conclave for some time to come. Since it's only been a month since Benedict XVI resigned, many people eager to see the new pope won't be able to take time off work or book a trip on such short notice so they are making plans to visit the Vatican later this year or in 2014, several travel agents noted.

The Catholic Travel Centre has seen a noticeable increase in inquiries about trips to Rome in the coming months, said owner Scott Scherer. Priests who had been thinking about organizing a pilgrimage to Ireland, for example, are now deciding to go to Italy instead.

"We're already seeing significant interest in people organizing travel for next year to be in Rome to see the new pope because it's a big deal," Scherer told NBC News. "It's certainly something that animates the entire Catholic world." Back in the Eternal City, McGuire said she's seen people milling around excitedly in St. Peter's Square and she's eager to join them. McGuire has never been to the Vatican when a truly huge crowd filled the square – she's only watched those occasions on TV, she said.

"It's electrifying," she said. "This is my third time to Rome and I've never been here where it's felt like this."

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