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NORWEGIANS COME IN ALL SIZES.

NEWS

Tourism interests seek to capitalize on election of new pope

By Michelle Baran

In the wake of the sudden and surprising news that Pope Benedict XVI will resign at the end of the month, the Italian travel industry is scrambling to get details about the timing of the election of his successor for travelers who would like to be in Rome to witness the momentous occasion.

"Of course there will be a lot of people in Rome, all the Catholic population," said an official with ENIT, Italy's national tourism agency. "However, we don't have anything precise we can give you in terms of expectations."

Opera Romana Pellegrinaggi, the Vatican's travel division, said it, too, was waiting on more details about how the pope's succession will unfold next month.

Following Feb. 28, Pope Benedict's final day as pope, the College of Cardinals will convene behind locked doors in the Sistine Chapel for a gathering known as a conclave to elect a new pontiff. There is no set length of time for this meeting; it could take days or weeks to elect a new pope.

After each vote — there are typically four each day until the new pontiff is elected — the cardinals' secret ballots are burned in a stove in the Sistine Chapel. If the vote did not result in anyone being elected, chemicals are added to the fire to produce black smoke. If white smoke rises, it means that



Vatican City will soon be abuzz in the run-up to the election of a new pope, and officials are awaiting more details.

one candidate received at least the two-thirds majority needed to be elected. Bells are sounded and the senior cardinal deacon steps out on the main balcony of St. Peter's Basilica and announces "Habemus papam," Latin for "We have a pope."

For many Catholics and papal enthusiasts the opportunity to witness the election ritual in St. Peter's Square and to be in Rome during the transition period is a coveted experience. The problem is timing it, especially on such short notice.

"It happened too quickly, and it is so up in the air as to when they're going to announce it," said a travel seller at Worcester, Mass.-based Proximo Travel, a Catholic travel agency.

According to Italy specialist Steve Perillo of Perillo Tours, the other challenge is that the Sistine Chapel will be closed to the public during the conclave.

"We can do the Vatican museum and St. Peter's [Basilica], but not the Sistine Chapel," Perillo said. "During that time, we can take people into the square to wait for the smoke to come out." But, he added, "It could take up to a week for them to come up with a winner."

Another hurdle Perillo and his team have run into is communication. For instance, Perillo said that the Vatican doesn't seem to have a direct response yet to inquiries about whether those who want to attend the new pope's inauguration will need tickets of some sort.

Despite the unpredictability of the event, faith-based travel companies are expecting to see an increase in interest from pilgrims who would like to be in Rome next month.

"I am sure there will be questions and inquiries from many Catholic groups," Mike Schields, managing director of groups and emerging markets for the Globus family of brands, wrote in an email.

Globus has a strong religious travel program, but the suddenness of Pope Benedict's resignation means the company has to work with whatever inventory it already has under contract or contend with hotels that could push up rates if they see an increase in demand.

"One advantage is that we have existing inventory, contracted in attractive, pre-negotiated rates for our 2013 Italy Reli-

gious programs, but those may lock us into specific dates," Schields wrote. "And, ultimately, it may be the hotels in Rome that anticipate this upcoming demand, tighten up their inventory and increase the rates."

Another challenge, according to Joann Keane of Charlotte-based Keane Travel, a Catholic travel specialist, is that the election of the new pope will likely be taking place the same month as Easter, which falls on March 31 this year.

"We would love to take a pilgrimage tour over there, but we can't get a priest [to accompany the group] that week," Keane said. "It's Holy Week. For the pastors, it's one of the busiest times of the year for them, and they cannot be away."

Nevertheless, Keane acknowledged what a special occasion the election of a new pope will be.

"I think it would be great to be in St. Peter's Square when the smoke comes up," Keane said. "I really want to get a group over there as soon as we can in April."

Perillo and other religious and Italy travel specialists noted that this spring will be an exciting time in Rome as all eyes turn to the Vatican to observe the transition. From a marketing perspective, the events are going to put Italy front and center, Perillo said, which will be good for Italy business.

"You just start seeing it on the news. All the morning shows will go to Rome," he said. "It's not like the Olympics in London where it scares away people because of the crowds."