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Why now is the perfect time to visit a more 'exclusive' Rome

For once the Italian capital is embracing slow tourism, with usually off-limits attractions now open to the general public

By Julia Buckley, TRAVEL WRITER

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Crowds have disappeared from the Spanish Steps | CREDIT: Kathrin Ziegler/Digital Vision

The rooftop terrace of the Hassler hotel is usually one of the most exclusive places to be in [Rome](#). It's reserved for clients of the five-star hotel, where rooms cost upwards of £750 a night, so it's normally only the wealthiest visitors who get the chance to see its 180-degree views of the Eternal City, or peep into the cloister attached to Trinità dei Monti, that famous twin-towered church at the top of the Spanish Steps.

For more than a century, the Wirth family have made this hotel one of the most exclusive enclaves of Rome. Everyone from Audrey Hepburn and Tom Cruise to Diana, Princess of Wales and the Kennedys have stayed here. It is to protect the privacy of these sorts of guests that it remains exclusive... until now. This summer, for the first time in history, they opened it up to the public.

"They're Roman," Roberto Wirth, the owner, says, grinning as he points at the different groups on the terrace. "Italian. Local again. Oh – those are Californian." As visitors trickle back to Rome – including Brits, since Italy dropped its quarantine for us – a new city awaits. The Colosseum has opened its underground area; the Mausoleum of Augustus has been done up for the first time in centuries.

And yet it's this area around the Spanish Steps that seems to have undergone the most profound change. Before the pandemic, it was swarming with tourists, plus behaviour-monitoring officials who would quickly swoop in if anyone dared to sit – or, heaven forbid, eat – on the famous steps. But now, bone white and glowing in the sunshine, the steps are stripped of visitors.



The Colosseum's long-hidden gladiator tunnels have opened to the public | CREDIT: Paola Leone/iStock Editorial

The past 18 months have been “crazy”, says Giuseppe Albano, the curator of the Keats-Shelley House – the final home of John Keats, the Romantic poet, which sits at the bottom of the steps. “Sometimes, I see photos from before 2020 and it’s surreal, because it doesn’t look like the same place.”

Albano predicts the scrum will return – but not yet. Which is why, now, there’s space for local businesses to take a more homely approach. Right now, you can pop in for a leisurely lunch at Ciampini, near Trinità dei Monti, without a reservation. At the nearby Villa Medici, there’s a socially distanced exhibition of works by the photographer Martin Parr in the 16th-century gardens (until October 31).

All that, along with the Hassler, is at the top of the steps. At the bottom lies something equally exciting. Not only did the famous Babingtons Tea Room start outdoor seating last year; this year, it’s offering a genteel afternoon tea on the pergola-shaded terrace of the Keats-Shelley House.

Visitors get a personal guided tour of the second-floor flat where Keats lived and died, then enjoy a high tea from home – sandwiches, scones, even champagne – on the terrace where Keats took so much inspiration, cantilevered over the Spanish Steps. It is, Albano says, the only place in the area where you're actually allowed to sit down.

"It's a slow kind of tourism," he says. "We want to show the dolce vita isn't dead yet." Not around Piazza di Spagna, it isn't.