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Roman Countryside, the Castles, Pope's Summer Residence and Wine Tasting Private Day Tour



Tour description

Dear friends, this tour has been planned for those who love the countryside and want to discover the beauty of the famous **Roman castles** in combination with tasting of typical local products such as porchetta and bruschetta, salami, cheese and olives in addition to an excellent wine tasting.

What's the Castelli Romani or Roman Castles area?

The area of Castelli Romani indicates the entire geographical area located south-east of the city of Rome, **around the Colli Albani- Alban hills**, made up of a group of villages and towns, in part of the territory of Latium Vetus, Ancient Lazio region, surrounded by the roman countryside. As the historian Giuseppe Tomassetti (1848-1911) reconstructed, the name dates back the 14th c. when many inhabitants of Rome, to escape the economic and political difficulties deriving from the Avignonese Captivity, took refuge in the **Castles of the Roman feudal families** of the **Savelli** (Albano and Castel Savello, Ariccia, Castel Gandolfo, Rocca Priora), of the **Annibaldi** (Molara, Monte Compatri, Rocca di Papa), of the **Orsini** (Marino) and of the **Colonna** (Monte Porzio Catone, Nemi, Colonna, Genzano and Civita Lavinia).

The territory of the Roman Castles is a volcanic area, originating from the collapse of the Lazio Vulcano a few hundred thousand years ago. The main mouth of the Lazio Volcano occupied the entire area of the internal belt of the castles; it later collapse giving rise to various secondary mouths of which the most important was the current Monte Cavo, 949m above level sea. The other minor mouths of the volcano became lake basins between 100.000 and 20.000 years ago, and most of them have been dried up over the centuries.

According to the classification given by Geological Survey of Italy, most of the Roman Castles territory is made up of land classified as "final eruptive material" which gave rise to the famous peperino stone. The best know areas of extraction of peperino stone are in Marino, Albano, Ariccia and some areas of Latina valley.

The Castles can be divided into various sub-zones: **the Tusculan area** (Colonna, Frascati, Grottaferrata, Monte Porzio Catone, Monte Compatri, Rocca di Papa, Rocca Priora) basically rotating around the village of Frascati, **the Appian or Alban area** (Albano Laziale, Ariccia and Castel Gandolfo) pivoting on Albano Laziale and **the Lanuvina area** (Lanuvio, Genzano di Roma, Nemi) pivoting nominally on Lanuvio but actually on Genzano di Roma. The towns of Velletri and Lariano, which we could call the artemisia area, are an area in their own right (a se stante), as is Marino, which represents the link between the Tusculan and Alban areas. A heated debate is still ongoing on the exact determination of the boundaries of the Castelli Romani. Elio Migliorini lists fourteen municipalities also including the two localities of Colonna and Lanuvio, indicating them as peripheral extremities which already present elements of separation; Lidia Piccioni also lists fourteen municipalities. Both authors exclude Velletri which nevertheless shares some prerogatives of the Castles, despite having a substantially different history. Armando Ravaglioli instead lists thirteen municipalities also mentioning Velletri and Lanuvio due to the contemporary tendency to include them. In any case, the historical municipalities of the Castelli Romani are fourteen.

The first stop of this fascinating experience is the small medieval town of Castel Gandolfo which is located just 30/40 minutes from Rome, in the south-east area, reachable via the **Via Appia Nuova**.

This road was opened by Pope Gregory XIII to replace the traditional **Via Appia Antica**, which at the time, given the state of neglect it was in, was no longer practicable. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, an important reclamation of the ancient Appian way was undertaken regarding the first section up to Boville. The next part was left to its fate aggravated by the construction of the ring road that broke it; only in 2000 was continuity restored.

-CASTEL GANDOLFO-

Castel Gandolfo according to an ancient historical hypothesis, could be the ancient city of **Albalonga**, capital of the Latin peoples. It is said that it was founded by Ascanio, son of Aeneas in the 12th century b.C.

immediately after the destruction of Troy. The city, in the archaic period, rivaled Rome until it was conquered by the latter.

About 700 years after the end of the Roman Empire, the town was reborn in the Middle Ages as "Castrum" or better to say Castle founded by the Gandolfi family, of Ligurian origin, hence the name of the town, and then handed over to the Savelli family. When in 1608 Pope Clement VIII declared the city property of the Holy See, he gave way to interventions that reshaped its appearance.

The architect Carlo Maderno completed in 1626 the current apostolic palace which took the place of the medieval Savelli castle and which is still the central nucleus of the papal complex. On the façade there is the loggia of benediction; the grandiose throne room extends inside and the two domes of the astronomical observatory rise up. Also in the palace stands villa Cybo, purchased in 1773; it is noteworthy above all for the spectacular garden and for the audience hall built in 1959, capable of holding 8 thousand faithful. An overpass connects the building to the adjacent Villa Barberini, donated by the Italian State to the Holy See following the agreement of 1929. The vast gardens, developed with a triple terracing over the area occupied in Roman times by the splendid villa of Domitian, were deeply remodeled in 1932; inside, in 1989, an Antiquarium was set up which collects sculptures and artifacts from the same villa of Domitian and other sites

-Pope's summer residence-

The papal palace was built between 1624 and 1629 by the architect Carlo Maderno on the ruins of the Savelli castle (formerly Gandolfi) by order of Urban VIII and enlarged and restored by Alexander VII and Clement VIII. It was almost totally rebuilt by Pius XII (first half of 20th) with the exception of the facade. The papal residence has expanded over time by merging the neighboring properties with the palace; in 1773 Clement XIV bought the villa Cybo and in 1929, with the Lateran pact, the Barberini villa was also purchased.

Palazzo and ancient garden of the Moor, Villa Barberini, Villa Cybo with adjoining parks and gardens are property of the Holy See.

The interior, radically changed at the behest of Pope Pius IX Mastai Ferretti, no longer retains anything ancient except the distribution of the main rooms, the grand staircase, and some rooms decorated with ancient paintings. Since 1936 the complex has housed the Vatican Observatory, one of the first astronomical observatories in Europe founded by Gregory XIII.

The park of the Pontifical Villas extends between the municipalities of Albano and Castel Gandolfo and has an area of about 55 hectares. The garden of the villa, formerly Barberini, occupies most of the surface of the ancient villa of Domitian. Of the latter, the ruins of a large Cryptoporticus, Substructions with Terraces, Niches and Nymphaea, Theater, Baths and Cisterns still survive. During the renovation works, sculptures were found including an Equestrian Statue of Domitian. The finds are collected in the Antiquarium of the Villa Barberini.

-The town-

On the main square, Piazza della Libertà, there is a fountain attributed to the sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini and the church, with a greek cross plan, built by the latter too between 1658 and 1661, at the behest of Pope Alexander VII Chigi, dedicated to St. Thomas from Villanova. Inside there are valuable paintings by Pietro da Cortona and Carlo Maratta while the stucco decorations are the work of Antonio Raggi. Inside, the dome, with drum and lantern, is decorated with eight stucco roundels representing scenes from the life of St. Thomas of Villanova; in the pendentives instead there are the four evangelists. In each of the two arms of the transept there is a marble altar; the one on the left, dedicated to the Madonna houses the altarpiece of the Assumption of Mary, while the one on the right is dedicated to San Tommaso da Villanova. In the apse there is the high altar with the crucifixion altarpiece by Pietro da Cortona.

From this enchanting and peaceful town, breathtaking glimpses of views of Lake Albano open up: this was once one of the several craters of the great Lazio Vulcano, now extinct, but not definitively !!!

The ridge as you can see is occupied by some villages but above all by a dense vegetation made up of trees such as oaks, beeches, helms, chestnuts and others.

During the summer season the lake becomes one of the main attraction for tourists looking for fun and relief from the summer heat of the cities.

-Frascati, the town of the white wine-

The time has come for the wine and olive oil tasting so we head towards Frascati, another town in the so-called area of the Roman castles.

Documents of the 9th century (Liber Pontificalis- it is an official memory of the bishops of Rome consisting of a collection of biographies of the popes, presented in chronological series starting with St. Peter's, and compiled at various times and by various authors) define Frascati as a small urban agglomeration, but after the destruction of Tusculum (Tuscolo) in 1191, the resident population increased and the seat of the diocese moved from Tusculum to Frascati. The name of the city perhaps derives from a local tradition in the use of branches "frasca" as timber or from their use to build makeshift shelters after the destruction of Tusculum. The most modern tradition associates the name with the custom that the wine sellers had of hanging a vine branch outside their stores to announce that the wine from the last harvest was ready to be sold.

Frascati is famous for the Tuscolan Villas: built by the papal nobility since the 16th century, they were a status symbol of the Roman aristocracy and were intended for representation activities and the summer residence of the papal court. From initial "country houses" surrounded by cultivated land and woods, they became real noble palaces, castles, the result of the commitment of the most talented architects and artists of the 16th and 17th centuries. They resemble to the setting of the Roman villa of the imperial era as a meeting place and meditation, with the use of the "nymphaeum" as a decorative apparatus of the layout of the castle garden. Seven of the twelve Tuscolane Villas fall within the

current municipal territory of Frascati, the other five in the bordering ones of Monte Porzio Catone and Grottaferrata. Some can be visited through the Castelli Romani Regional Park as part of the guided tour program offered annually by the Park-

Among the many interesting religious buildings we want to underline:

-the Cathedral (Cathedral Basilica of St. Peter Apostle) that was designed by Ottaviano Nonni, known as "Mascherino", and the original structure was completed in 1598. A new high façade was added between 1698 and 1700 by Gerolamo Fontana. The cathedral was demolished by bombing in 1943, and the reconstructed interior appears bare. On the inner side of the façade is the tombstone of Charles Edward Stuart;

-the Church of the Gesu (Frascati), designed by the Jesuit architect Giovanni De Rosis, was built at the end of the 16th century, and it has niches on the façade with statues attributed to Pietro da Cortona. The most significant feature of the interior is the trompe l'oeil false dome and other architectural features. These were created by Andrea Pozzo and are copied from models developed for the church of Sant' Ignazio in Rome. In 1773 Cardinal Henry Benedict Stuart, Duke of York, reconsecrated the church to the Holy Name of Jesus and to St. Gregory the Great.

We will visit, according to the availability, one or two of the five best wineries in the area, Santa Benedetta or Casale Marchese, Villa Simone or Casale Mattia. You will be instructed on everything related to wine, namely the various grape varieties, their characteristics, the way of knowing how to recognize a full-bodied wine from a soft one between a bruschetta with tomato and some salami sausages with cheese!

Nemi and Ariccia

From the Frascati vineyards we will head to another town in the Roman castles called Nemi. In addition to visiting it, we could also eat a dish of typical homemade pasta or grilled meat in one of the local restaurants.

-NEMI-

As soon as we arrive there is a statue of Diana the huntress who welcomes us, the work of a local artist at the beginning of 2000.

The name comes from the latin "nemus" that means "wood", the one around the lake and that has always been, from centuries, dedicated to Goddess Diane.

The city of Nemi began to exist around the 9th century, when the Counts of Tuscolo, the nearby oldest town, took possession of the area and built a castle (Castrum Nemoris) in the upper part of the lake. Consequently, the population of farmers and fishermen who lived scattered in the valley of the lake, found it safer to approach the fort of Tuscolano, and the part of the city that today is the oldest in Nemi, that is the small area called "Pullarella", began to be built.

The castle, or tower-palace, was built by the Counts of Tusculum as we have already mentioned and then passed property to several families who changed its appearance, transforming it into a noble palace: the Frangipane, the Orsini, the Braschi, the Cistercian monks, to gradually arrive at the fifteenth century to the powerful Ruspoli family. The palace has a cylindrical tower about 40 m high, imposing, beautiful and daring called "Torre Saracena"; it should date back to the 12th century when the structure was owned by the Cistercian monks and who had it made build by the Saracens, who were at the time prisoners.

According to another historical version, the story of Nemi begins between the 9th and 10th centuries when the tower later called "Saracena" was built in the current Piazza Umberto I, around which in the 12th century the nucleus of the medieval castle which belonged with all probability to the Tuscolo Counts.

-Fontana della Gorgone Medusa-

Built by the local artist Luigi Mastrolorenzi, born in 1929, in 2008 on commission from the Municipality itself. Between the two water mouths there is an inscription which certifies it, forged by the Master himself, in an alphabet that is understandable only to a few people and whose reason is unknown because it is from an ancient German of the second century a.D., that is the so-called Runic alphabet.

The translation would be as follows:

a.D. 2008

Lusius Mastrolaurentii	Luis Mastrolaurenti
fusa rame e stagno	melt copper and tin
donò per il paese	donated for the villages

Even the statue at the entrance to the town, representing the Goddess Diana, is by the same sculptor and inaugurated on January 30, 2000. The artist used different materials for its realization: bronze for the statue, trachyte for the fountain, travertine for the columns, iron for the railings, brass for the knobs and silver for the eyes.

The work is dedicated to Diana Nemorensis, the goddess worshiped in a monumental shrine on terraces in the lake valley.

-Sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis-

We can certainly say that the area was already frequented in the fifteenth century b.C. as one of the two centers of maximum religious importance, together with the Temple of Jupiter Laziale on Mount Cavo, of the Latin League.

The complex, which covers an area of 45,000 square meters, with a perimeter of 200m by 175m, took on a monumental form in the third century b.C. The structure was supported downstream by imposing triangular substructures, upstream by semicircular niches which in all probability housed statues, and provided with an upper terrace. Inside the platform ran two Doric arcades, one with red plastered columns and the other with dark gray peperino columns; there were statues, rooms for priests, accommodation for pilgrims, offering cells, a temple, hydrotherapy baths and even a theater. Of all these rooms only a part of

large niches are visible, a part of the portico with a votive altar, and some columns.

-The Lake of Nemi-

Lake Nemi is one of the several craters of the Lazio volcano, it is one of the two, together with Lake Albano, of being occupied by water. On the banks stands the Caligula Ship Museum, built between 1933 and 1939 by the architect Morpugo. It was intended to house the ships of Emperor Caligula recovered from the lake bed in the late 1920s, but a fire caused by the retreating Germans destroyed the precious findings.

After the war, the museum was reopened hosting 1: 5 scale reproductions in addition to the surviving findings. In front of the museum is the faithful full-scale reconstruction of part of the structure of one of the ancient hulls; the work was carried out by the shipwrights of Torre del Greco respecting the original construction technique. It seems that these ships were real floating palaces, paved with mosaics and equipped with hydraulic and thermal systems. According to some sources, the ships were connected to the cult of Goddess Diana, or else, they were pleasure boats, intended to host the sovereign's wild parties. They were then sunk when the emperor, after his death, was condemned with the "damnatio memoriae", that is the cancellation of emperor's memory! The recovery of the ships began as early as the 1400s but the interventions were mainly aimed at looting. The various artifacts recovered are now scattered throughout the museums of half of Europe.

The lake is equipped with an emissary that flows into the Ariccia valley, another of the craters of the great Lazio volcano that was previously occupied by a lake which was then reclaimed. It seems that the emissary and the temple of Diana are directly connected, in the sense that the temple itself is placed in an area easily affected by flooding were it not for the presence of this emissary.

-Special events and culinary tradition-

The town of Nemi houses the "festival of strawberry" that takes place the first Sunday of June since 1922. The village becomes the perfect scenery to celebrate this sweet and famous seasonal fruit.

With the strawberry you can make jams, syrups, ice creams and liqueurs, the equally famous "fragolino", recipes linked to tradition and made following ancient recipes.

-ARICCIA-

In a few minutes we reach another beautiful town of which we will appreciate some architectural works of great value and great importance.

The "viaduct" or bridge, is one of the outstanding engineering and architectural work of the entire region. Artwork of the nineteenth century at the behest of Pope Pius IX, it was built above the "Vallericia", that is, one of the many craters of the Laziale Volcano, where Roman town of Aricia was located.

The feud of Ariccia belonged to the Counts of Tusculum, like that of Nemi, in the 12th century.

Then it decayed and remained under the authority of the Holy See until 1473.

In the seventeenth century Ariccia passed to the Chigi family, of which Alexander VII was pope, who entrusted to the genius Bernini, the scenographic Court square. He came up with a plane that resembles the vatican church: the square is now bordered by the curved arcaded wings of the church of Santa Maria Assunta, that recall the colonnade of San Pietro at the Vatican. The line of the portico blends perfectly with the round plan of the church which, with the flattened dome and the rectangular portico, recalls the Pantheon. On the opposite side stands the solemn facade of Palazzo Chigi, bordered by four square and corner towers and animated by the plastic central portal surmounted by the balcony. Behind the palace extends the dense expanse of trees of the ancient Aricino forest sacred to Diana up to the city of Nemi. This wood was already admired in Roman times, Martial defined it wood of the

Muses, celebrated by Stendhal in 1829 as "the most beautiful forest that exists in the world", the park is full of centuries-old holm oaks, oaks, elms, beeches, chestnuts and other plant.



The church of Santa Maria di Galloro was also built by Bernini in 1624, to house the image of the Madonna painted on a block of peperino. Each year it is half of the procession of 8 December called "della signorina" because a young girl from Ariccia is chosen to direct it.

-Special events and culinary traditions-

The festival of "Porchetta" takes place every first week-end of September: it is a typical product of the Lazio gastronomic tradition of the Castelli Romani, but the place of birth is Ariccia, where the processing of pork was known since the times of the first Latin settlements.

In fact, it seems that the priests of ancient Aricia used to prepare spiced pork meats to be offered as a sacrifice to Jupiter Laziare and that in the following centuries the recipe satisfied the requests of the Roman nobility who went on holiday to the hospitable lands of Ariccia, as is the case today. for tourists attracted to this gastronomic delight.

The families of local butchers contend for the primacy of the oldest processing but to each belongs a genuine preparation method that has made the porchetta di Ariccia famous all over the world due to the exquisite crunchy crust that surrounds the tender flavored meats.

-THE APPIAN WAY-

On the way back to Rome, you will be shown the oldest roman road, and given a preatty deep explanation about its historical features!

Opened up by the roman magistrate Appio Claudio Cieco in 312 a.C. as a connection between Rome and Napleas, then a further addition was made in 190 a.C. the get the town of Brindisi, south east of Italy, where the roman war ship weighed anchor to minor Asia and Egypt.

Nowadays, the Appian way is well known all over the world for the presence of Catacombs, early Christian cemetery.

Tripadvisor Restaurant at Nemi

Ristorante Pizzeria Le Scalette, Salita Garibaldi 8, Nemi.

-Local cuisine, home made pasta, home made suppli (fried rice ball), all year round Porcini mushroom-

Phone +39 06 9368110

Ristorante Le Colombe da Tiziano, piazza Pietro de Sanctis 6, Nemi

-Italian and Roman cuisine, Pizza-

Vegan, vegetarian, gluten free.

Phone + 39 06 9368156

Tripadvisor Restaurant at Ariccia

Osteria di Corte, via Uccelliera 30, Ariccia

-Italian and Roman cuisine-

Phone +30 334 9084779

Osteria deGusto bistrot, via Antonietta Chigi 16, Ariccia-Italian,
Contemporary and Roman cuisine-
Phone +39 06 9348220

Chiosco Pepparone Porchetta, via Villini 12, Ariccia
-Italian, Street Food, Roman-
Phone +39 349 976 3481