



ON FOOT

In Search of Jewish Rome

Explore the meeting of two ancient cultures, Roman and Jewish, in this walk of Rome's ghetto. By AMY E. ROBERTSON

Rome was already a bustling metropolis when the first Jews arrived in the second century B.C. (making the city's Jewish population the oldest in Europe). Those who followed settled in the Trastevere neighborhood, then moved across the river in the Middle Ages to occupy a corner of what is now the Sant'Angelo district. In 1555, Pope Paul IV enclosed some 3,000 Jews into a tiny, walled ghetto within the quarter. While most of the wildly overcrowded buildings

(as well as the confining walls) were demolished long ago, the ghetto remains the heart of the Jewish community in Rome, its shops and restaurants modern-day ambassadors of Jewish-Roman culture, wedged in with ancient Roman ruins and

centuries-old Catholic churches. Tuesday through Thursday is the best time for this half-day walk, when more sites are open to the public.

Start your walking tour at **1 Teatro di Marcello** (Via Teatro di Marcello 2), a

2,000-year-old amphitheater that jammed in as many as 15,000 spectators at its games, and part of which was converted into a palace for Roman nobility in the early 1500s. Wander among the crumbling amphitheater columns (and if your visit is in the summer, come back in the evening for one of the frequent open-air concerts) to arrive at one of Rome's oldest churches, the eighth-

century **2 Sant'Angelo in Pescheria**, which overlooks the western end of the ruins. The highlight within is the fresco in the second chapel on the left, dating from 1450 and attributed to Renaissance painter Benozzo Gozzoli. (If closed, which is often, try sweet-talking the caretaker after ringing the bell in back.) *Pescheria* refers to the fish market that once stood in the remains of the **3 Portico d'Ottavia**, dating from 33 B.C. The church was built within the portico's columns.

From here climb the stairs back up to street level and head south two blocks to the river. Walk across **4 Ponte Fabricio**, the oldest bridge in the city (circa 62 B.C.), to Tiber Island, home to a hospital, gelateria, church, and, within one of the 13th-century buildings, the tiny synagogue **5 Tempio dei Giovani** (Piazza San Bartolomeo all'Isola 24; open only for prayer services). It was the sole temple to continue services throughout the Nazi occupation of Rome.

Back on the northern river bank is the entrance to the **6 Tempio Maggiore** (Lungotevere de Cenci), Rome's great synagogue, a relatively modern construction with Roman, Greek, and Assyrian motifs. To get a peek inside, buy a ticket to the Museo Ebraico di Roma, the Jewish Museum of Rome, which is onsite. The tour points out the diversity of Rome's Jewish community, which had attracted Jews expelled from Spain, Sicily, Calabria, and Sardinia under the reign of Queen Isabel and King Ferdinand of Spain. A tour highlight is a stop in the Spanish Synagogue, a mini-synagogue on the lower floor of the Tempio Maggiore.



Rome's domed main synagogue looks onto Ponte Fabricio (above). Da Gigetto serves typical Jewish-Roman dishes (right).



City Life

Back outside, return north on Via Portico d'Ottavia, arriving at **7 Leone Limentani** (Via Portico d'Ottavia 47), a 189-year-old high-end housewares shop popular with young Jewish couples registering their wedding wish lists. Just across the street is **8 Saray** (Via Portico d'Ottavia 15), often tended by owner Sandra Moreschi, who designs many of the store's exceedingly beautiful ritual objects and trinkets of glass, ceramic, pewter, and silver.

The imposed isolation of Rome's Jewish population meant that culinary traditions remained vibrant over the centuries. A classic Jewish-Roman restaurant is **9 Da Giggetto**, right on Via Portico d'Ottavia. Specialties include stuffed zucchini blossoms, salt cod, and fried *carciofi alla giudia* (Jewish-style artichokes). Newcomer **10 Nonna Betta** (Via Portico d'Ottavia 16), named after the proprietor's late grandmother, a lifetime ghetto resident, is as authentic as any, and kosher to boot (meat is not served). For a lighter snack, stop by **11 Boccione** bakery (Via Portico d'Ottavia 1), where yarmulke-capped men line up on Friday mornings to buy bread for the Shabbat. Despite an odd burnt appearance, the ricotta-chocolate cake is highly recommended, while Pope Benedict XVI is reportedly a fan of the almond-raisin "Jewish pizza." If you want to re-create those Jewish-Roman crispy artichokes in your home kitchen, stop in the **12 Menorah '85** bookstore (Piazza delle Cinque Scole 36), which carries books on Jewish history and religion, as well as a few cookbooks, some in English. Across the piazza is the side entrance to **13 Santa Maria del Pianto** church, built in the 17th century to commemorate a miracle one hundred years prior, when a man was beaten to death and an image of Mary was seen weeping after the murder. Peek in at the fresco above the main altar memorializing the event.

There's nothing like a good soak in the tub after a day pounding Rome's cobbled streets. A dip in the mikveh, the ritual bath in the synagogue, is not an option for most, but a visit to the Turkish-Roman baths of **14 Acqua Madre Hammam** (Via di Sant'Ambrogio 17) makes for a fabulous alternative. Massages and treatments with mud or salt from the Dead Sea are also available.