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Two Must-Visit Tourist-Free Neighborhoods in Rome

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by MONA GABLE



Photo: Alamy



There is so much to see in the Eternal City—the history so vast, the traffic so crazy, the food so enticing—that it’s tempting to do what’s easy and stay in a well-trod neighborhood steps from the Forum or the Trevi Fountain. . . and legions of tourists. But then you’d be missing the flavor of Rome, with all its messiness, beauty, and surprise. For a more authentic experience, plunk down in one of Rome’s less-frequented neighborhoods and savor the local culture, and then venture out from there.



A street in Monti rione in Rome

Photo: Alamy



MontiTucked in the hills above the Forum, Monti is one of Rome’s oldest and most colorful neighborhoods. And most importantly, still largely free of tourists. Centuries ago, this working-class enclave—one of Rome’s 22 neighborhoods, or *rioni*, was notorious for its brothels and shady characters. Today its pretty cobblestone streets are packed with young people in jeans, old men in suits, vendors selling flowers, and families who’ve lived in Monti for generations. Monti is so lovely, with its jasmine-draped, gold and apricot apartment buildings, that Woody Allen apparently filmed on a corner of Via Baccina.

Since fountains are the lifeblood of Rome, you’ll want to linger in Piazza Della Madonna dei Monti, where Italians of all ages gather at the Renaissance fountain to chat, smoke, and people-watch, especially around dusk. In the heart of the small piazza is La Bottega del Café, a lively outdoor café sheltered by ivory umbrellas, where you can sip an espresso or a glass of prosecco. Bottega also serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

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One of the many advantages of Monti is its location, and its easy proximity to historic sites like the Colosseum, Palatine Hill, and Capitol Hill, with their spectacular ruins, mighty temples, and sweeping views of Rome. Head down busy Via Cavour, or slip through a walkway on Via Tor de' Conti, a narrow street that borders Monti on the west. At night the ruins are often lit up, making their silhouettes particularly haunting and beautiful. You'll want to walk for hours, so be sure to bring a comfortable pair of shoes.

Monti may be ancient, but the neighborhood has an array of hip restaurants, specialty shops, boutiques, galleries, and small hotels. There's even a popular flea market—the Monti Vintage Market—where you can find clothing, jewelry, and a selection of unusual gifts.

As for restaurants, Urbana 47, a favorite in Monti, is known for using seasonal, local ingredients. Although they change the menu often, they typically offer a choice of pasta, meat, and fish every night—and thin-crust pizza, of course. Everything is incredibly fresh. The atmosphere, with its painted metal tables and chairs, white-and-black decor, and concrete walls, has an industrial feel. But it's also cozy, with candles on the tables, and bags of artisanal pasta and cans of tomatoes on display. If you simply want an espresso and Italian pastry, head to Café de Brasil (Via dei Serpenti 23). Beloved by locals, this stand-up bar is also known as “The Pope's Bar” because Pope Benedict used to amble in. Monti also has an excellent wine bar called Al Vino al Vino. You can sit and enjoy a glass from their vast selection of Italian and French wines or pick up a bottle to go. Finally, there's a gelateria on practically every block in Monti, with flavors ranging from lemon and pistachio to green tea. Start with Il Gelatone, but if you really love gelato, why not try the others, too?



Giardino degli Aranci in Testaccio rione, Rome

Photo: Alamy



Testaccio Testaccio, another mostly working-class neighborhood in Rome, is nestled below divine Aventine Hill. Which makes it a perfect location for exploring Aventine's romantic Giardino degli Aranci, or Orange Garden, and its magnificent views of the city.

Like Monti, Testaccio is still inhabited mostly by Italians, with a sprinkling of European and American expats who've discovered its hidden allure. At first glance, you might be put off by Testaccio's industrial veneer, its giant former slaughterhouse, ancient hill of cracked terra-cotta pottery, and wacky monuments. But don't be.

That hulking stone triangle shooting out of the ground near the train tracks? It is the Pyramid of Cestius, built sometime between 18 and 12 B.C., after Rome's sacking of Egypt, when Romans were agog over all things Egyptian. That disheveled stack of broken pottery? It dates to the Roman Republic, and was collected and painstakingly built over nearly 500 years. That abandoned slaughterhouse, once Europe's largest, helped the neighborhood become a food mecca. Indeed, Testaccio is where the classic Roman dish oxtail stew was cooked up. When Mattatoio closed in the early 1970s, the cavernous space was eventually revitalized. Today, it contains a music school, a fair trade supermarket, a variety of unique shops, and a branch of Rome's Museum of Contemporary Art.

History in Testaccio runs deep. If you walk near the pyramid you'll see the graves of English poets John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, buried in the Protestant Cemetery. But Testaccio is also decidedly modern, and the ancient district is where many of Rome's young creative and professional types have settled. In turn, they've inspired a thriving music, arts, and food scene. In Testaccio, you'll find many of Rome's best eateries, bars, and culinary experiences.

To start, wander through the city's most popular market, Mercato Testaccio, where Romans flock for its fresh fruit and produce and authentic cuisine. Housed in a sprawling glass and metal building, the market has a dazzling selection of food stands, delis, cafés, and shops. Of late, well-known Italian chefs like Cristina Bowerman and Marco Morello have opened gourmet take-out places here. Another day have lunch at Flavio al Velavevodetto, the neighborhood's excellent osteria. As it happens, the restaurant is tucked inside Monte Testaccio, the ancient hill of broken terra-cotta, so it has a

spectacular setting. If you want to enjoy an aperitivo before dinner like Italians do, head to Ketumbar, a fun bar that's also inside Monte Testaccio. With its wide variety of artisanal beers and cocktails, it's a favorite spot of locals.



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