

The secret side of Italy you can only discover on foot

There's a moment, somewhere on a road outside Rome, the noise fades away, and nobody's in a rush. An old man waves from a vineyard, and a church bell rings somewhere in the distance.

Up ahead, a tiny hilltop village appears filled with stone houses, flower boxes and laundry fluttering between windows.

This is Lazio, the region around Rome where ancient walking routes still thread through forests, vineyards, monasteries and medieval towns. For centuries, pilgrims travelled these roads on foot towards the Eternal City, and the atmosphere hasn't changed all that much.

But that's exactly the appeal. More travellers are looking for something slower, with less rushing and more wandering.

Italy's best-kept secret

For centuries, pilgrims, merchants and travellers crossed Europe on foot towards Rome. Today, those same ancient routes are enjoying a revival among people searching for a more authentic kind of holiday. The routes are part of Italy's "Antichi Cammini d'Italia" – Ancient Paths of Italy – and are centred around Lazio, where all five historic routes converge before reaching Rome.

The star of the show is the Via Francigena, one of Europe's oldest pilgrimage routes.

Walkers pass through Montefiascone overlooking Lake Bolsena, walk into the cobbled medieval streets of Viterbo, and stop in Sutri, where an ancient Roman amphitheatre is carved directly into volcanic rock.

Then comes the final approach to Rome itself, a moment many walkers describe as emotional, even if they didn't expect it to be.

The magic isn't only in the big sights. It's in the little things, such as fresh pasta after a long day's walk and tiny cafés where locals still stop for an afternoon espresso.

Suddenly, travelling slowly starts to make perfect sense.

Following Saint Francis through Lazio

If the Via Francigena feels grand and historic, the Way of Saint Francis feels quieter and more peaceful.

The route crosses the beautiful countryside of the Rieti Valley and the Sabina hills, areas forever linked to Saint Francis himself.

Here, monasteries seem hidden among forests and mountains. In Greccio, Francis created the world's first Nativity scene in 1223. In Fonte Colombo, he wrote the Franciscan Rule. Every so often, a tiny stone sanctuary pops up from the forest like a secret somebody forgot to tell the world about.

Even non-religious visitors say these places leave a lasting impression. There's a calmness here that's hard to explain, and it's even harder to forget.



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The road to Rome

Monasteries on cliffs and villages frozen in time

Another incredible route through Lazio is the Way of Saint Benedict, linked to the founder of Western monasticism and one of Italy's most peaceful walking experiences.

The trail winds through forests, mountain villages and quiet valleys east of Rome, connecting places closely tied to the life of Saint Benedict himself.

Its standout moment is Subiaco, where the extraordinary Sacro Speco monastery clings to the side of a mountain. Built around the cave where Saint Benedict once lived in solitude, it's the kind of place that makes you stop mid-sentence and just stare.

Nearby, the Abbey of Santa Scholastica has a gentler atmosphere with peaceful cloisters, ancient libraries and quiet gardens among the hills.

Then there are the lesser-known routes – the Via Romea Germanica and the Romea Strata – both of which cross Lazio on their final approach to Rome. While their stories begin far beyond Italy, bringing pilgrims from places like Germany, Austria and Central Europe, the mood changes once the routes reach Lazio.

Here, the journey slows into the countryside and ancient volcanic landscapes dotted with hilltop towns and old pilgrimage churches. Walkers pass through places like Montefiascone and Viterbo before eventually following

centuries-old roads towards Rome and the dome of St Peter's Basilica appearing in the distance.

It's this final stretch through Lazio that many travellers remember most.

The joy of going slowly

What makes these routes so appealing right now is that they offer the exact opposite of stressful modern travel. There's time to actually experience places properly.

To sit in a piazza for an extra coffee and chat with fellow walkers. To arrive somewhere tired, hungry and completely happy.

And maybe that's why Lazio leaves such a strong impression. The magic here is in the food, the scenery, the people you meet and the small moments you almost miss.

By the time Rome finally appears, the journey already feels like the destination.

Walk your own way to Rome

Ready to discover Italy at a different pace? Whether you choose to walk the ancient Via Francigena towards Rome, follow the footsteps of Saint Francis through the valleys of Lazio, or explore the historic routes that have connected Europe to the Eternal City for centuries, Italy's ancient walking paths offer a journey unlike any other.

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