

Five Roads to Rome:

Walking Lazio's Great Pilgrim Routes

The Via Francigena gets the headlines, but four other historic walking routes converge in the same Roman countryside. Together they form one of Europe's richest networks of slow travel, and it is in Lazio, the region surrounding Rome, that they all come into their own.

Most people who walk to Rome do not walk the whole way. Italy's most famous pilgrimage route, the Via Francigena, stretches roughly 3,200 kilometres from Canterbury, and even a month is not enough to cover the Italian section alone. So walkers do what walkers do: they choose a stretch. The stretch they remember, almost without exception, is the final one, the one that runs through Lazio. There is a reason for that, and the reason has now become a wider project.

Five different starting points; five different European traditions; one shared finale.

The villages, the lake, the gradual descent through the Roman countryside, the first glimpse of the dome of St Peter's from a hilltop; these are the things walkers remember afterwards.

The long approach across northern Italy tends to blur.

It is the Lazio leg that leaves the lasting impression

Under the name «**Antichi Cammini d'Italia**», a project launched by Italy's Ministry of Tourism and ENIT S.p.A. (the Italian National Tourist Board), the country has begun presenting its walking routes as a unified system rather than as five separate stories. The five routes are the **Via Francigena**, the **Way of Saint Francis**, the **Way of Saint Benedict**, the **Romea Strata** and the **Via Romea Germanica**. Each carries its own European history; three are certified Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe. All five share one defining feature: they converge in Lazio. It is there, on the final approach, that a pilgrim road stops being a line on a map and becomes a walking experience.

The **Via Francigena** is the best known. The Council of Europe certified it as a Cultural Route in 1994, the same year as Santiago de Compostela. Its credentials are remarkable: the route follows the diary kept in 990 by Sigeric, Archbishop of Canterbury, who recorded the 79 stages of his return from Rome in a manuscript now held at the

British Library. From the Great St Bernard Pass to Rome, the Italian section runs for about 1,000 kilometres across 45 stages, but its character changes when it enters Lazio at Acquapendente, near Lake Bolsena, and crosses the Tuscia of Viterbo, a landscape of tufa villages, papal fortresses and Etruscan tombs. In Bolsena the church commemorates a 13th-century Eucharistic miracle that gave rise to the feast of Corpus Christi. Montefiascone includes the papal Rocca and an arch announcing that Rome is exactly 100 kilometres away. Viterbo, once a papal seat, preserves the medieval quarter of San Pellegrino. Then come Sutri, with its Roman amphitheatre carved into the rock, and La Storta, the last stop before St Peter's.

The **Way of Saint Francis** retraces the life of Francis of Assisi (1182–1226). Its southern branch, roughly 300 kilometres in 13 stages from Rome to Assisi, passes entirely through Lazio, and the heart of it lies in the Sabina hills and the Valle Santa Reatina, a small mountain valley where the four great Franciscan sanctuaries stand within a few kilometres of one another. Greccio is where, in 1223, Francis is said to have created the first Nativity scene. Fonte Colombo is where he dictated the rule of the Franciscan order. La Foresta is associated with the miracle of the grapes. Poggio Bustone is where, according to tradition, he received the revelation of forgiveness. Pilgrims completing the route receive a Testimonium at the end of the journey in Assisi.

The **Way of Saint Benedict** is the more austere of the two religious routes. It links Norcia, Subiaco and Montecassino, the three places most closely associated with Benedict's life across about 300 kilometres and 16 stages, most of them in Lazio. Subiaco, in the upper Aniene Valley, is home to the Sacro Speco, the cliffside monastery built around the cave where Benedict spent more than thirty years as a hermit. Nearby, the Abbey of Santa Scolastica is regarded as the birthplace of Italian printing, having hosted the first active press in the country in 1465. From there the route winds south through Casamari, Arpino, Roccasecca, the Melfa gorges and on to Montecassino, where Benedict founded his abbey around 529. The Patron Saint of Europe is buried there.

The **Via Romea Germanica**, certified in 2020, was first described in 1236 by Albert, abbot of Stade, in his *Annales Stadenses*, a Latin dialogue between two friars debating the best route to Rome that became, almost accidentally, one of the most detailed medieval travel accounts to survive. The Italian section covers about 1,050 kilometres from the Brenner Pass to Rome. It joins the Via Francigena at Montefiascone, and from that point the two routes become one: together they cross Bolsena, Viterbo home to the Macchina di Santa Rosa recognised by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage, Vetralla, Sutri, the Veio Regional Park, and finally La Storta. A northern variant within Lazio also takes in Civita di Bagnoregio, the "dying town" perched on a tufa pinnacle in the Tuscia landscape.

The **Romea Strata** is the newest edition. The Council of Europe certified it in June last year. It reconstructs the network of medieval roads that for centuries brought pilgrims to Rome from central-eastern and Baltic Europe, including Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic and Austria. Its full development extends for more than 4,700 kilometres and connects over fifty UNESCO sites. A sweeping remapping completed in 2024, carried out by a volunteer network, redefined the final approach to Rome, giving the Romea Strata its own dedicated gateway into the capital. For the pilgrim setting out from the Baltic, it is here that thousands of kilometres culminate in a uniquely personal finale, forging a distinct identity within the broader tapestry of Europe's ancient trails.



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Project funded by the European Union - Next Generation EU «Antichi Cammini d'Italia», PNRR - Mission M1C3 Investment 4.3 Measure 274 - the ITALIAN MINISTRY OF TOURISM is the subject operator, ENIT S.p.A. is the subject agent

