

Papel Garden Open For Escorted Tours

By Patricia Arrigoni

VATICAN CITY – One of the first acts of Pope John Paul II upon assuming office was to decree that the Papal Gardens would be opened to tourists and pilgrims by escorted tour. The area had been closed to the public since Pope Gregory XI chose this stop to live in 1377 when he returned the papacy to Rome from Avignon, France. It had been the pope's own "secret garden," consisting of 17 square miles enclosed by fortification walls erected in the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

Vatican City is located on the right bank of the Tiber River on the former site of the ancient Vatican zone (hence the name), site of Nero's garden and circus. The circus, a rectangular structure with a semicircular end, was erected by Caligula, but named the "Circus Neronis" from the notoriety which it obtained under Nero. There were exhibitions of gladiators fighting, men fighting against wild beasts (later moved to amphitheaters such as the Colosseum), chariot races, athletic contests, and festivals.

Today this is a quiet holy place with monuments, gardens, fountains, libraries, museums, galleries, archives and chapels.

We bought our tickets and boarded a bus at the Information Center, located to the left (or south) as you face Saint Peter's Church.

The first structure we saw was the Vatican Studio of Mosaics, but we did not stop. Alas, we were only to imagine the thousands of boxes of glittering colored stones, the workshops and showroom. The magnificent mosaic tiles found throughout the ancient Roman world have been copied by the Catholic Church for decorating many of their structures: thus this ancient art is being preserved.

The studio claims the invention of "spun enamels," which can duplicate the tints and enamels of 28,000 different colors. These are used to copy paintings and panels all over the world in Byzantine, classical and modern styles.

Visitors may see samples of the studio's work in the mosaics in Michelangelo's dome in St. Peter's which was done in the second half of the 16th century. There are also altarpieces in the Basilica reproducing paintings by celebrated artists.

Next we were driven to the papal railway station adjacent to the Mosaic Studio. Again we did not leave the bus, but I was impressed by what I could see through the window. This station, big enough for any good-sized Italian town, was built as a gift to the Vatican by Mussolini. It is made of pastel marbles with an attached fountain, but the back is covered with pockmarks. These were caused by shrapnel from aerial bombing in 1942 and never repaired. The railroad is used to bring in food and other supplies for the over 1,000 people who live and work in Vatican City.

Shortly after passing railroad yard, we were let off the bus and for about an hour and a half strolled through the lovely gardens, some very simple and others extremely elaborate. Quite a lot of the walking was in an uphill direction.

The Vatican Radio Broadcasting Station, located in the Papal Gardens, transmits throughout the world: also, it provides the easiest-listening music in Rome along with the Catholic views of the world.

Guglielmo Marconi installed and ran the first station for Pius XI (1922-1933), who often stopped by to visit with him. A second, much larger broadcasting station was built later to include television.

Beyond the radio station are the hidden papal apartments near the West Wall, built by Pope John 23rd, and now used by visiting cardinals and other dignitaries. It was reported that John spent many relaxing hours here with a set of binoculars, watching the people of Rome.

Bringing the Vatican into the 21st century is a helicopter landing pad, an impeccably manicured, yellow-striped ex-tennis court.