

# TRAVEL WEEKLY

BY NORTHSTAR

TOUR OPERATORS

## With Pope Francis' death, there will be travel adjustments and historic opportunities

By [Brinley Hineman](#) | Apr 21, 2025

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Pope Francis waves to the crowd in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on Nov. 13, 2024. Photo Credit: Riccardo de Luca - Update/Shutterstock

The death of Pope Francis will usher in the start of a centuries-old tradition in selecting a new leader of the Roman Catholic Church, and tour operators are prepared to adjust itineraries for closures while enabling travelers to witness the historic event.

Pope Francis died on April 21, a day after Easter Sunday. He was 88.

After a pope's death is confirmed, his body will be on display for the public to pay respects before a funeral is held and he is buried. The Rev. Eminence Cardinal Kevin Joseph Farrell, Camerlengo of the Holy Roman Church, will preside over the rite of the declaration of death and the placement of Francis' body in the coffin on Monday night.

The official mourning period will last nine days, during which [Perillo Tours](#) president Steve Perillo said St. Peter's Basilica is expected to remain open, though the company was awaiting official confirmation from the Vatican. Perillo, a tour operator specializing in Italy, will host "many travelers in Rome over the coming weeks," Perillo said.

A papal conclave, a gathering of the most senior leaders in the Church called the College of Cardinals, will select the next pope. It was not immediately clear when the cardinals will meet, but the conclave is typically held within 15 to 20 days after the papal seat is vacated, though it could be sooner.

The cardinals will sequester themselves inside the sealed doors of the Sistine Chapel until a new pope is selected, a process which often takes days. Access to the chapel is "very likely" to be restricted in the coming days, said James Ridgway, CEO of Christian travel specialist [ETS](#).

"Historically, during the passing of a pope -- as we experienced firsthand in April 2005 during the death of Pope John Paul II -- travelers witnessed a profound moment of history," Ridgway said. "While some sites around St. Peter's Basilica and Vatican City experienced closures or restricted access, many travelers were able to participate in public gatherings, memorials and prayer services, creating a deeply meaningful experience."

Ridgway said he expects similar opportunities for participation in events held in honor of Pope Francis. He warned that while he doesn't expect full closures outside of Vatican City, travelers "should prepare for possible disruptions or increased crowds in surrounding areas."

EF World Journeys said that the Sistine Chapel would be "100% closed during the conclave."

EF, which offers guided group tours across several brands, has "been preparing for this moment given the Pontiff's health in recent months," a company spokesman said. Despite the historic nature of the pope's passing, the company expects minimal disruption to itineraries.

"Rome is typically busy around Easter, and we anticipate increased crowds in the coming days," the spokesman said. "It's possible a national holiday may be declared, and we are staying in close contact with our suppliers in Rome to monitor any further developments."

Perillo Tours is in contact with local staff and partners to better understand the impact Francis' death will have on the company's operations, Perillo said. He said the Vatican museums are expected to remain open during the conclave.

"While this is a unique time, we're closely monitoring the situation and working with our local team to maintain the planned itineraries as much as possible," Steve Perillo said.

### **Vatican crowds to be expected**

Travelers should prepare for significant crowds around St. Peter's Square, Via della Conciliazione and central Rome. Access to the Vatican museums, St. Peter's Basilica and potentially the Colosseum and other landmarks nearby could be impacted for several days, Ridgway said.

"However, during previous papal transitions, Rome remained very accessible overall, and many travelers found it to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience the spiritual heart of the Catholic faith in a profound way," the CEO said.

Pope Francis' death comes during the Catholic Jubilee, a once-in-a-quarter-century tradition marking a special time for spiritual renewal among Catholics. The theme for the 2025 Jubilee, which began on Christmas Day and will end on Epiphany on Jan. 6, 2026, is "Pilgrims of Hope."

The Vatican said in a statement Monday that it would suspend the Eucharistic celebration scheduled for April 27 for the Jubilee of Teenagers, an event for young Catholics.

Around 60 million people visit Italy each year, and the Jubilee is expected to draw 32 million visitors to Rome alone, according to the U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Italy. Pope Francis' death will likely contribute to a spike in visitors wanting to pay respects to the late pope and also observe the traditions and rites associated with the death of the Roman Catholic Church's leader.

The last pope to die was Pope Benedict XVI, who died Jan. 31, 2022, but he had vacated the papal seat prior to his death. Pope John Paul II was the last to die while in the papal seat in 2005. His funeral drew some 4 million mourners to Rome and Vatican City.

Rather than be buried in the Vatican Grottoes beneath St. Peter's Basilica, Francis expressed his desire to be interred at the Papal Basilica of Saint Mary Major, a break with tradition.

Maria Jose Merino, the vice president of operations and product development at **Central Holidays**, said churches such as the Basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano and the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside The Walls will likely see increased crowds. Central Holidays has made no changes to its itineraries at this time.

## **Communication with clients is key**

Steven Gould, the chief innovation officer at the Travel Advisor Resource Center and the president and CEO of **Goulds Travel** in Clearwater, Fla., posted information about Rome travel in the coming days and weeks to his Travel Advisors Selling Europe group on Facebook.

"Whether your clients are religious or not, if they're traveling to Rome (especially in the next 40 days), please remind them that there will be an influx of travelers ... likely more than originally expected from the Jubilee," Gould said.

The pope's death is expected to draw thousands to Rome, Gould said, tourists and locals alike.

"Vatican Square will be full, but for those who are interested, this could be a once-in-a-lifetime experience," Gould said.

Gould recommended proactive communication with clients.

"Don't stress or panic your clients, but educate them," he said.

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