
Navona Square Rome

Piazza Navona (Navona Square) Rome.

Lined with Baroque palaces, the vast and beautiful Piazza Navona (Navona Square) was laid out on the ruins of a stadium built by Domitian in 86 AD, ruin of which can still be seen at the north end of the piazza. The stadium had seating for around 30,000 spectators. Originally called the "Circus Agonalis" (circus of the Agonalia), it became known in the Middle Ages as the Campus Agonis, which in time became 'n'agona' and eventually 'navona'. The arena was used for festivals and sporting events, including jousts, until the late 15th century, when it was paved over and transformed into a market place and public square. The ruins of the stadium can be visited by appointment only. Piazza Navona is a popular gathering place for Romans and tourists alike. Take time to relax on one of the stone benches and watch the artists who gather in the piazza to do their work, have your "tarocchi" (tarot cards) read, or pay top prices to enjoy a drink at one of the outdoor cafés, such as Tre Scalini. The piazza is best avoided from early December until 6 January when a gaudy market and mini funfair take over. There are three fountains, the central one being Bernini's masterpiece, the Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi (Fountain of the Four Rivers) depicting the Nile, Ganges, Danube and the Rio Plata. The fountain took four years to build and was completed in 1651; funds to build the fountain were raised by an unpopular tax on bread. Bernini designed the figures, but the actual carving was done by assistants. The obelisk once stood in the Circo di Massenzio on the Via Appia Antica. The Fontana del Moro at the southern end of piazza was designed by Giacomo della Porta in 1576. Bernini altered the fountain in the mid-17th century when he designed the central figure of the Moor holding a dolphin. The surrounding tritons are 19th century copies.

The fountain at the northern end of the piazza dates from the 19th century and has a central figure of Neptune fighting with a sea monster, surrounded by sea nymphs. In the centre of the piazza facing the Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi is the Chiesa di Sant'Agnese in Agone, its façade designed by Bernini's bitter rival, Borromini. The tradition is that the statues of Bernini's Fontana dei Fiumi are shielding their eyes in disgust from the sight of Borromini's church, but the truth is that Bernini completed the fountain two years before his contemporary started work on the façade and in fact the figure is shielding its face to indicate that the source of the river at that time had been undiscovered.