



It seems Robbie Williams and the Pope are interchangeable



**I'M A BELIEVER: A Vatican Christmas.** Pictures: AP; Reuters

### ► TRIP NOTES

■ Tickets are required for midnight Mass on Christmas Eve in St Peter's Basilica, though not for Mass on Christmas Day in St Peter's Square. Fax your request for tickets to the Prefettura della Casa Pontificia (+39 06 69 885 863). If the response is positive, take the confirmation to the Vatican two days before Christmas Eve to pick up your tickets.

■ Emirates flies direct to Rome from Sydney via Dubai daily. See

# Heathen's divine intervention

Thanks to the local chemist, **Rachel Oakes-Ash** elbows onto hallowed turf.

**D**RUG dealing is best done behind closed doors, and even Don Corleone couldn't blast through the door behind me. It is thick and hinged with ancient brass and it is behind the walls of the Vatican.

A chance meeting with a nun over dinner in Sydney led me to the annals of Vatican City to the official papal drug den known simply as "the pharmacy".

It is tickets I want, to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, but they're hot property; destiny would reveal it to be Pope John Paul II's last.

Making small talk with a nun wasn't easy. I mentioned I was going to Rome and a week later an email arrived from the nun in question; turns out heaven has wireless but the Vatican doesn't deal in eBay, meaning if I wanted tickets I had to present myself in person. She knew someone who knew someone who had the keys to the ticket drawer; I just had to find him.

Pilgrimage travel is big business regardless of your religion. Mecca attracts 2 million Muslims annually, Hindus travel to the Ganges to dip in the water and Buddhists head to Nepal. In the Vatican, 30,000 tourists visit St Peter's Basilica daily to get a

glimpse of Catholic history.

The inner private city of the Vatican is guarded by mercenaries. No Italian male would be seen dead in striped pantaloons, stockings and ostrich plumes, which is why they have to get the Swiss to wear it. The Swiss Guard sign on to fight to their death to defend the Pope but it's not the Pope I'm after, it's his drug dealer, whom I am told has my tickets.

I present my letter of introduction on papyrus paper and sealed with a wax stamp to the guard on the gate and I am taken blindfolded in the back of an Alfa Romeo to the dealer's office (OK, I embellish, but I blame *The Da Vinci Code*).

Entering the Vatican pharmacy through the back door, I see men slaving over brass scales weighed down with mounds of white powder and surrounded by clear jars housing unmarked pills in every colour of the pastel rainbow.

"So you want tickets," says a silver-haired priest as he leads me from the back chemical lab through to his office. His door says "director of Vatican pharmacy", which means he dispenses life-giving drugs to the Vatican's citizens, and that he is the dealer I've been looking for.

He unlocks the third drawer down

in his mahogany desk to reveal my ticket to midnight mass. If I were religious, God's choir of angels would be rejoicing as I pocket my entry pass.

No one mentions the queue, half a kilometre long wrapping its way around St Peter's Square. It's nine o'clock, three hours before the mass begins and they have all arrived early, waiting for the doors to open.

These folks, too, have tickets, though they went through the normal channels - faxing the Vatican Prefettura della Casa well in advance, receiving a confirmation letter, presenting themselves two days before mass to the official ticket office, and now queuing. My supposed VIP tickets look suspiciously like everyone else's.

All around are young novices, fresh-faced girls aglow with religious fervour. Schoolgirls in uniform chant "John Paul Two, we love you", holding homemade placards above their heads. It seems Robbie Williams and the Pope are interchangeable.

We are frisked at the doors by Italian security in uniform, our bags searched and bodies scanned. Once through it's every man and woman for themselves.

Surrounded by Spanish sisters of

every order, by the walking wounded searching for spiritual healing, by parents with newborns in tow, I am swept up in a wave of people heading for the basilica. Should I choose to stop and turn back I would surely be trampled to death.

I hip-butt and elbow-punch my way through, stopping to grab those who have fallen along the way as if I am their saviour and they my following. Together we can take on the basilica - three, four, five, six is better than one as I push them in ahead of me, knowing they'll save a seat for me in the process.

More fool me. We enter the back way, the seats are gone and so are my people. Instead I am left to stand behind the last row of seats, our view blocked by ancient architecture that I would gladly disassemble and a young family with a vomiting child who fell in the rush to score the seats in front of me.

Surely, they'll leave, I think, the smell now severely pungent. Speaking with the mother, I drop in "concussion", but they are not budging. They have travelled from London for this event and want their children to see the Pope within St Peter's walls. I try not to point out that both of the children are now asleep,

and that I suspect one is in a coma.

I know Michelangelo and Bernini have stood here before me. I only have to look up to see their mark. The sheer history and architecture of St Peter's is a religious experience even to the unworthy, but my tolerance is wearing thin. When the doors shut on the basilica we know we have reached capacity and La Papa, as the Italians call him, will not be far away.

The crowd collectively inhales when he finally arrives, flanked by cardinals in white and purple. I know it's him for I can see the top of his head and he is far shorter than the other heads walking in, which means he's in his wheelchair.

One glimpse and he is no longer in sight, and we are to be content knowing we are breathing the same air as the Holy One.

Ten minutes is all I last. After two hours on my feet, the prospect of another hour followed by a mass exodus fills me with dread.

I realise it makes me a heathen but I know a nun who knew the director of the pharmacy who now knows me - which will surely help me to get on the door list when it comes time to hit the Pearly Gates. It's not what you know in this world, it's who you know in the next.

www.emirates.com or phone 1300 303 777.  
■ Hotel Columbus is 200 metres from St Peter's and is a 15th-century palazzo once home to princes, priests and cardinals. Rates start at €110 (\$185) a night. See [www.hotelcolumbus.net](http://www.hotelcolumbus.net).  
■ More information: [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).