

New minibus service allows pilgrims to visit Vatican Gardens

VATICAN CITY - Visitors and pilgrims wanting to escape the hustle and bustle of modern Rome or the crush of tourists in the Vatican museums can now take a ride through the Vatican Gardens.

But, of course, the eco-friendly rides on a methane-fueled minibus will not be offered in the late afternoon or early evening when Pope Benedict XVI takes his rosary beads into the gardens and strolls as he prays.

The Vatican Gardens have been a place of papal prayer, quiet and rest since 1279 when Pope Nicholas III moved the papal residence from St. John Lateran to the Vatican and had workers plant fruit trees, a lawn and a formal garden.

Today, 30 gardeners and laborers care for the trees, flowers, shrubs, shrines and fountains that cover almost half of the Vatican's 109 acres.

The new bus tour is sponsored by the Rome diocesan tourism agency and the office governing Vatican City. Tickets for adults cost about \$20 and include a one-hour ride with an audio guide in Italian, English, French, Spanish or German.

The minibuses leave every half hour between 8 a.m. and 1 p.m. daily, except Wednesdays when the pope holds his weekly general audience, Sundays and Vatican holidays.