

EXPLORING TRAVEL FAVORITES AND FRONTIERS

# TRAVEL AGE WEST

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AWARDS

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# An Abundance Of Beauty

Navigating Italy's culture-rich territory

BY SUSAN VAN ALLEN



Smithsonian Journeys' Italian portfolio includes the Popular Hidden Venice tour.

"IF YOU SPENT ONE MINUTE viewing each object in the Vatican Museums, it would take you 12 years to see everything," Jeannette Pena, a tour guide with Enjoy Rome, told me the last time I was in the Eternal City.

That's just one example of the abundance of beauties that Italy holds. So, how does a traveler navigate such rich territory without becoming overwhelmed?

Many who aren't prepared end up suffering some version of Stendhal's Syndrome — a condition first written about in the 1817 by the French writer Stendhal, describing how he fell into a debilitating state of dizziness after a visit to the Uffizi galleries in Florence. Though most travelers aren't stricken as melodramatically as the Frenchman, comments I've heard from return visitors often range from, "... then all those churches started blurring together," to "By day three, our 13-year-old refused to set foot in another museum."

Clearly, travelers need assistance to focus their explorations of *bell'Italia*. Here are just a few experts who can customize itineraries according to your clients' tastes, ages and budgets.

## TourCrafters

"No other country has as much to offer as Italy," said Mauro Galli, of TourCrafters. The 28-year-old company is based in Libertyville, Ill., and also has an office in Rome, where agents can send clients to book day trips or guided art tours.

Though the TourCrafters Italy brochure consists of 80 information-packed, Galli and his cousin, Piero,

run the operation on a very personal scale.

"We cut out the middle man," said Galli.

The result is that everyone, from hotel owners to tour guides and travel agents who have worked with TourCrafters, feels closely connected to the Galli family. They are excellent providers of value FIT and escorted options for every region of Italy. Their low prices and flexible itineraries make their programs

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even more attractive in these budget-crunching times. And their Web site for travel agents is especially user-friendly.

What's really unique about TourCrafters is that it provides support in areas off the typical tourist itinerary — such as Le Marche region, known for its year-round music festivals in the area's enchanting mountain and seaside villages.

"I always encourage travelers to explore new places, such as the town of Ferrara, between Milan and Bologna," says Galli. "It's a medieval walled city, with a

Renaissance palace, Palazzo Schifanoia, which is beautifully frescoed. They also make extraordinary bread there — once you taste it, you'll crave it forever!"

## Smithsonian Journeys

Smithsonian Journeys (a branch of the institution) has been offering educational tours to travelers for 40 years.

"The Smithsonian brand is highly respected around the world," said Smithsonian Journeys director, Amy Kotkin. "Because of this, our tour groups are always treated very well, and we can get access to private collections, restoration labs and certain museums that aren't open to the general public."

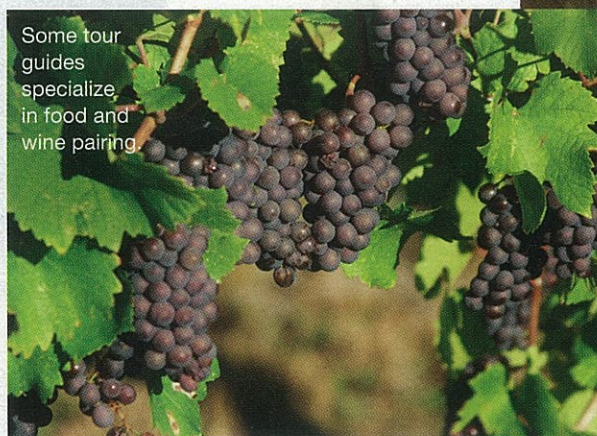
Currently, there are 14 Italian itineraries in its brochure, including the popular Hidden Venice and Insider's Florence tours, which treat participants to exclusive visits to the cities' masterpieces. They are wisely scheduled in off-season November, when these cities are less crowded with tourists. Like all Smithsonian tours, they are designed for small groups, with study leaders providing scheduled lectures and insightful commentaries along the way.

A new offering this year is an Opera Lover's Tour of Italy with Smithsonian veteran study leader Fred Plotkin. Plotkin is an expert in not only opera and classical music, but also Italian food and wine. He has written many books on these topics, including "Opera 101" and "The Gourmet Lover's Guide to Italy."

The July 2010 itinerary designed by Plotkin includes



places travelers may not typically get to on their own — such as the town of Martina Franca in Puglia, as well as Matera and Ravello. Plotkin is very hands-on in planning the tour, even selecting wines, menus, restaurants and music, giving travelers a comprehensive, authentic experience of each locale's cuisine.



Some tour guides specialize in food and wine pairing.

### Visit Italy Tours

This company's slogan is: "A wise man once said if you have a heart and a shirt, sell your shirt and go to Italy." The Visit Italy (VIT) staff of native Italians and Americans who have lived in Italy bring heartfelt passion and great dedication to their work, which is primarily designing customized trips for groups of all sizes.

Besides standard art tours, they have set up itineraries for groups of painters or photographers.

"We've done wonderful trips for painters in Tuscany," says VIT's Barbara Crawford. "We'll set them up in an agriturismo with a van and driver, making

sure they're close to locales that offer varying inspiring landscapes."

Recently, VIT has had an increase in requests from religious groups and create guided tours through selected churches in a city or region.

"We're very particular about choosing just the right guide," said Crawford. "For some travelers, an art historian is best, others need an archaeologist or a children's tour guide."

The company, which has been in business since 1991, also has an office in Rome. "We have lots of repeat business," said

Tours help ensure clients won't get too overwhelmed by Italy's stunning museums.



Crawford. "And this year, bookings are really picking up, particularly among our high-end clients." ■

**THE DETAILS:** *Smithsonian Journeys* ([www.smithsonianjourneys.org](http://www.smithsonianjourneys.org)); *TourCrafters* ([www.tourcrafters.com](http://www.tourcrafters.com)); *Visit Italy Tours* ([www.visititalytours.com](http://www.visititalytours.com))

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For a variety of tour options that focus on arts and culture, visit this story at [TravelAgeWest.com/ItalyArts](http://TravelAgeWest.com/ItalyArts)

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