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Grand Tour of Italy



Touring the Palazzo Doria Pamphili in Rome



The private rooms at Palazzo Colonna

In the 18th century, the nobleman or scholar, seeking to educate himself about a European country's cultural life, would take a Grand Tour, traveling with a presentation letter from a prominent person to be received in the finest houses—architectural edifices with superb art and antique collections and pedigree. These days, one only need contact Stefano Aluffi-Pentini in Italy to see the great, private historic houses of Rome, Sicily, Veneto or Venice, Florence, Naples, Bologna and Tuscany.

Aluffi-Pentini, a well-connected art historian, is the founder of A Private View of Italy, a company that organizes private tours for groups of people who apply together. His staff has guided trustees of museums and cultural institutions, such as the Frick Collection and the Sir John Soane's Foundation, executives of large corporations, such as Airbus Industrie, members of design and architectural firms, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill among them, and private individuals from political, publishing and general business circles.

The trips, intended for those who already know Italy but want to delve into a particular subject, range in length from long weekends to 14-day sojourns, with anywhere from a few to several dozen participants seeing as many as five or six palaces, villas, castles and other residences a day. For example, the Soane Foundation, which wanted to follow the same route the famous architect



Dinner at a Renaissance palace in Rome

took in the 1780s through Italy, entered Palermo by boat, just as the Englishman did, and heard a concert in the very-private palazzo of the princes Biscari during their two-week "Grand Tour."

Generally, Aluffi-Pentini tries to concentrate the tours in just two regions. In Sicily, guests can take in the vastness of the palazzo Biscari's ballroom, where the British army played tennis during the war. In Sorrento, luncheon tables are set amidst the huge acreage of lemon groves overlooking the bay. "The view is dazzling," says Aluffi-Pentini.

"These houses were created not only to be lived in but to receive guests, and the owners are very proud to show a castle or palace that their family has lived in for hundreds of years to an exclusive group of people who would appreciate the architecture and the masterpieces of art collected by their ancestors," he notes. "At one of the houses once the owner, after lunch, gave a brief explanation of how meals are presented." Indeed, guests are treated to receptions, dinners and performances at some of the magnificent residences, often dining with the resident, more often a person of nobility.

A Private View of Italy plays the role of travel agent, and the company has an art historian, driver and staff assistant with guests at all times. Says Aluffi-Pentini, "Everything, from transportation to hotel reservations is arranged by us."



The Villa Emo Capodilista, a hunting lodge near Padova

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