

# ITALY FROM THE INSIDE

A coach tour doesn't usually conjure up images of exquisite food and VIP access to art treasures, but that's exactly what *Xenia Taliotis* enjoyed...



## ROME, FLORENCE AND VENICE



I'd always dreamt of seeing Italy by road, fancying myself in Audrey Hepburn shades buzzing down the Via Condotti on a Vespa, arms around the waist of a handsome man, or Catwoman-style on a Ducati

Monster. But life rarely goes according to fantasy and when I finally take my road trip, it's aboard a Mercedes-Benz coach operated by Insight Vacations, a specialist in luxury escorted group tours.

While my younger self might have found the words 'group', 'escorted' and 'coach' about as inviting as the inner rings of Dante's *Inferno*, the older me is unperturbed. Plus, my fellow travellers turn out to be a group of like-minded people, keen to learn and have fun.

Our itinerary – a seven-day taster taking in Rome, Florence and Venice, and visiting Calcata, Perugia and Verona, from the company's Luxury Gold programme – offers culture, fine food and good company. It promises to show me the five-star side to cities I know, and introduce me to places I don't. Above all, it's a unique opportunity to meet

artisan producers and to learn about Italy through the expert knowledge of a 'concierger' (Daniele Nannetti), who'll accompany us throughout, and local guides who'll join us in each city.

Insight Vacations Luxury Gold also promises exclusivity, and after a comfortable night at the Regina Baglioni ([baglionihotels.com](http://baglionihotels.com)) on Rome's Via Veneto, our first 24 hours certainly deliver. By special arrangement with the Vatican, we're allowed into the Sistine Chapel, VIP-style, before it opens to the public, breezing past the crowds already queuing.

I've not been to the Sistine Chapel since the paintings were cleaned and I'm electrified by the vivacity, not only of the colours but also of Michelangelo's luminous figures, which have a physicality I had never before appreciated. I can see them without the crowds and the hurry, and with the time to stop and stare.

The next day, we head for Florence, stopping in Calcata, a medieval hilltop beauty overlooking the Treja river that is now home to a community of artists who spend their days painting the surrounding emerald forests. We crowd into the Rock Café, a cubbyhole covered in



From far left: the Tiber river in Rome; the Bramante Staircase in the Vatican Museums; delicious cured meats

1960s Jim Morrison posters, and knock back thick, grainy espressos. Then we're back on the road.

We drive past hills thick with umbrella pines, acacias and silver olive groves, past deserted medieval villages and fields of wild poppies, as Daniele points out the Apennines in the distance, their jagged peaks like vertebrae along Italy's spine, and Narni, the town that gave CS Lewis the title for one of the bestselling books of all time. In Umbria's star-shaped capital of Perugia, our local guide, Marco, is waiting to gallop us through its ▶



'We gorge on *crostini* smeared with *truffle salsa*, chicken livers, mozzarella and *sweet, garlicky tomatoes*'

history: from the Etruscan period (3rd century BC), through Roman times and then to the medieval period, which bequeathed its famous underground city. In 1540, Pope Paul III wanted to show the insubordinate nobility who was boss by building a castle, the Rocca Paolina, literally on top of their houses, and in so doing preserved them.

We call in on Museo-Laboratorio di Tessitura a Mano Giuditta Brozzetti (brozzetti.com), in one of Italy's oldest Franciscan churches, where Marta Cucchia produces hand-woven textiles on antique jacquard looms. Founded in 1921 by Marta's great-grandmother Giuditta Brozzetti to protect what remained of an industry that was, for centuries, integral to Umbrian life, it has been handed down from mother to daughter, to Giuditta's daughter Eleonora, granddaughter Clara and now Marta.

Our base in Florence is Villa Le Maschere (villalemaschere.it), a hotel about an hour's drive from the city centre. Pulling up outside, our jaws drop. Built in the 1500s, it was immaculately restored after decades of neglect, with many of its 17th, 18th and 19th-century frescoes, stuccos and Venetian terrazzo floors worked on.

We dine like kings, thanks to the talents of head chef Giuseppe Frabetti and his team. Frabetti turns Tuscan cuisine – simple, hearty fare – into an art form. My sea bass is so beautifully cooked it falls off the bone. The beef, a regional speciality, is a tender cut of visceral pink fillet with *salmoriglio* artichoke and pecorino. The herbs

in the *salmoriglio* – mint, parsley and rosemary – smell delicious, heady and aromatic.

Next morning, despite some of us (ie me) being hungover, Daniele manages to get us to the Uffizi in Florence and we gather by a locked door. At 10am, two museum staff arrive, unlock the door and escort us down a flight of stairs to the Vasari Corridor – the strictly-by-prior-arrangement (five months) walkway built for Cosimo de Medici in 1564 to ensure his safe passage from the Palazzo Vecchio and Uffizi to the Palazzo Pitti. Home to the world's largest collection of historic 'selfies', there are self-portraits of everyone from Rembrandt, Velazquez and Rubens to singer-artist Patti Smith.

That night we dine at Rivasud (rivasud.it), a restaurant in a tiny village near the hotel. We gorge on *crostini* smeared with truffle salsa, chicken livers, mozzarella and sweet, garlicky tomatoes; on piquant prosciutto and *finocchiona* – a regional salami scented with fennel; on *tortelli di patate al sugo* (pasta stuffed with potato). And that's just for starters. This is followed by more pasta – with duck for the carnivores and mushrooms for the vegetarians – potatoes and grilled meats, desserts, cheeses.

We should really fast the next day but instead, we're taken to the Villa Dianella (villadianella.it), a 16th-century Medicean country house and vineyard owned by Francesco and Veronica Passerin d'Entrèves, for wine tasting and a cookery lesson. We make *tagliatelle* and chocolate salami, while the chefs prepare *pappa al pomodoro* – a tomato soup made with stale bread, tomatoes and olive oil.

Our final two days are spent in Venice, via a quick visit to Verona – the setting for Romeo and Juliet – where tourists gather beneath Juliet's balcony, to pledge their troth. Verona is incredibly pretty and on the day we visit there is a lovely food market in the square, with towering mounds of sundried tomatoes, voluptuous olives and stalls selling crispy, melty arancini.

In Venice we stay at the five-star Bauer Hotel (bauervenezia.com), on the Grand Canal and a



From far left: Calcata – a 'medieval hilltop beauty'; welcome canapes at Villa Le Maschere; 'idyllic' Burano; Tuscan dishes being prepared; Villa Le Maschere



five-minute walk from St Mark's Square. We spend our time eating gelato and window-shopping – all the fashion houses are here. There are visits to the Murano glass factory and Doge's Palace.

Our farewell meal is on Burano, an idyllic island we reach by water taxi, where each house is painted a different colour. It shouldn't work, pink up against orange and mint green but it does. We eat seafood – caught that day – served first with linguine and risotto, and then coated in a delicious crispy batter.

Over our final breakfast on the canal-side terrace the next day, I am reminded of something one of the local guides told me. She used an expression, 'piu belle che si puo', which roughly translates as 'more beautiful than it's possible to be'. That's Italy through and through. ♦



#### GETTING THERE

Luxury Gold's 12-day Ultimate Italy holiday costs from £4,550 per person and features Rome, Capri, Perugia, Florence, Cinque Terre and Venice. The price includes return flights, VIP airport transfers, 11 nights' luxury bed and breakfast accommodation, select dining experiences, sightseeing with VIP access, dedicated travelling concierge and luxury coach transportation. Departures run from April to October 2017 (luxurygoldvacations.com).

