

Advisor-Planned Itinerary



Saint Peter's Basilica, Vatican City

INSIDER'S ITALY

ROME • UMBRIA • FLORENCE



ESPECIALLY PREPARED FOR DISTINGUISHED GUEST

Mr. Skip Hollandsworth



Spanish Steps, Rome



Trevi Fountain, Rome

IN LATE FEBRUARY, I TELL A FRIEND THAT I want to take my wife to Italy. She's never been there, I say, and she wants to see everything.

"You need to talk to my travel advisor," he says. "His office is five minutes from your house."

I've been to Italy twice before. Though my last trip there was 25 years ago, I can still remember lots of things to do. Plus, there are guidebooks. There are travel magazines. There's the Internet. "What's a travel advisor going to tell me that I can't find out for myself?"

My friend persists, so a couple of weeks later, I find myself in a conference room with a map of the world on one wall.

And suddenly, here he comes, a big guy, 50 years old, in a polo shirt and khakis, striding toward me confidently. Behind him, his assistant carries files. "Jim Strong," he says in a booming voice as he shakes my hand. Then he walks over to the map, points to Italy, gives me a grin, and says, "Are you ready?"

Barely taking a breath, he begins talking about his love for Italy. He tells me he's been there more than 50 times since 1995. He went for Easter weekend, taking nine people from his office for a 48-hour trip to check out ten hotels in Rome and Florence. Three of his 14 staffers spend a total of 20 to 25 days a year in Italy, establishing relationships with the country's travel professionals, meeting tour operators,

hoteliers, and the top restaurateurs, even seeing the basic tourist sights so they will be entirely knowledgeable when talking to clients.

"Oh, I get it, you focus only on Italy," I say.

He chuckles. "I was on the road 200 days last year, around the world," he says, pointing a finger, almost randomly, at the country of Vietnam on his map of the world. "Maybe someday I'll get you there, to Da Nang, and put you at a hotel called Nam Hai, one of the most exquisite resorts I've ever seen, a sight you cannot even imagine." As his finger slides over to Turkey, he starts talking about the glories of Istanbul, and he keeps talking as his finger hits Marrakech.

He explains that plenty of travel agencies can hand me brochures and print airline tickets. But, he says, the 350 agencies that are part of the Virtuoso network make it their business to understand luxury travel. "We've not only been to all the destinations and stayed at all the best hotels, we've gotten to know just about everyone who works in luxury travel," he says. "We know the executives of the airlines and the cruise lines. We know the guides who do the tours. And we call them directly whenever we need something. You can turn on your computer and book yourself a suite at a nice hotel. But you can't tell that hotel how important you are. We can."

He gives me a look, his eyebrows raised. "You don't

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understand this yet, but when you travel as a Virtuoso customer, other people pay attention."

For the next 45 minutes, he fills my head with at least a dozen potential trips my wife and I could take through Italy. At the same time, he peppers me with questions, wanting to find out what we're looking for. Some of the questions are basic – how many museums do we want to see? How much do we want to relax? – and some seem peculiar. Do we like to eat breakfast? Do we like back roads? What do we think of Vespas? What time do we like to eat dinner?

After a few more meetings, we develop a detailed itinerary. Because it's my wife's first trip, we decide to do the basic swing through Rome and Florence, with a few stops in the countryside. And then we're off. My suitcase is full of clothes that my advisor has recommended I wear so I won't look like a tourist (always one of my great fears). At his recommendation, I've even bought a pair of black ECCO loafers that he describes as "the perfect walking-around shoe, instead of goofy tourist sneakers." When we exit customs, a driver from IC Bellagio greets us, and, to our surprise,

begins to give us a history lesson about Rome on the way to our hotel. The Regina Hotel Baglioni is on Via Veneto, the great, tree-lined avenue that was the center of Rome's café society during the dolce vita days. In one of our earlier conversations about hotels, I had mumbled something about staying somewhere historical yet very up to date – the kind of place where you can get a sense of Rome's past but not be irritated by creaking floors and tiny bathrooms. The Baglioni, built in the early twentieth century, has all the luster of one of those grand European hotels, with a dramatic winding staircase, a tapestry-lined

salon, and a glass chandelier the size of Rhode Island, but it's also just undergone a major renovation. Feeling the jet lag, my wife and I stare at our bed.

Suddenly the phone rings, and the concierge says, "Your Vespa guides are here." My advisor had told me he was going to arrange a four-hour tour of Rome on the back of Vespas, driven by guides who know how to careen through the city's madcap traffic. He

DAYS
1-3

ROME

Day one: Check into your suite at Regina Hotel Baglioni.

3:30 PM: No time for jet lag – your Vespa guides await to whisk you on a private tour of Rome's highlights and hidden jewels, including the city center (no cars allowed).



National Museum of Rome



Veni, vidi, Vespa!

7 PM: Toast your first day in Italy with sunset cocktails and panoramic views at the rooftop bar of Portrait Suites, a chic boutique hotel.

Dinner at leisure this evening ...

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even went so far as to visit a Vespa store in Dallas and sit on one just to make sure we would be comfortable. Initially I wasn't too enthusiastic about the plan, but five minutes into the tour, I recognize it as a brilliant move. For one thing, there's no way you can succumb to jet lag and fall asleep on the back of a Vespa. But most important, it's an amazing way to see Rome: Racing down medieval alleyways and cutting between cars, we see, by my count, 18 major tourist attractions, from the Trevi Fountain to the Baths of Caracalla, from Circus Maximus to the Spanish Steps. What's more, we have plenty of time to stop and soak up the sights. After studying the poured concrete dome of the Pantheon, we wander over to Sant'Eustachio, one of the city's best coffee bars. We linger at the Piazzale Garibaldi, which has one of the loftiest and best views of Rome. We stroll the piazzas and out-of-the-way neighborhoods. By the time we're back at the hotel, I'm thrilled. *Veni, vidi, Vespa!* There's no pressure to see what we're supposed to see. We've already done it.

For the next two days, we experience Rome through gloriously verbal guides who are constantly gesturing to people who get us to the front of the line for the Colosseum, navigate us through the endless maze of art at the Vatican Museums, take us into the great churches built over Roman temples, tell flabbergasting stories about what we're seeing, and then usher us on to the next location. We walk inside a private palazzo and stand alone in the great hall, surrounded by at

least 100 world-class Renaissance paintings that the public never gets to see. We tour the monumental Italian Parliament building, built in the seventeenth century, and talk politics with one of the deputies near a rare portrait of Napoleon. We have a sunset drink at the rooftop bar of Portrait Suites, the boutique hotel brainchild of the fashionable Ferragamo family. Later, we eat a superb meal of pasta and grilled fish at a tiny restaurant in the Trastevere district, Gensola, whose owner, a proud, boisterous Roman, keeps only a table or two open for tourists.

ON A SUNDAY MORNING, WE'RE UP AND OFF TO BEAUTIFUL Umbria a few hours northeast of Rome, visiting the ancient walled hilltop towns with narrow, steeply sloping terraces of vines and olive trees below them. Our driver, Raffaele, takes us to a restaurant in the less-visited town of Porano, where the waitress admits she hasn't seen an American tourist in six months. Because it's Sunday afternoon, everyone is inside watching soccer, and my wife and I

DAYS
4-5

UMBRIA

Day four: Meet your driver for a leisurely transfer to Umbria today, making a stop in the charming hilltop town of Orvieto. Your driver is an expert on off-the-beaten-track places and will be sure to include an interesting stop for lunch.

Check into Palazzo Terranova, a magnificent seventeenth-century villa.

Day five: Explore the town of Montefalco, where you'll visit a cantina to taste a selection of Umbria's finest wines and meet the people behind the craft.



Umbrian pleasures: The drive to Montefalco and (right) a suite at Palazzo Terranova.



basically have the cobblestoned streets to ourselves.

As we drive off, Raffaele says that my advisor has checked in to see how we're enjoying the trip so far. When we arrive at Palazzo Terranova, a magnificent country house built in the late seventeenth century that overlooks rolling green countryside, the hotel's general manager, a stunning woman named Valentina Morriconi, personally welcomes us with double-cheeked kisses. Two days later, after we've hunted for truffles, toured Perugia, and admired the great cathedral of Assisi, we transfer to Tuscany and eventually

WORKING WITH AN ADVISOR

Seven tips for ensuring the perfect trip.

Before the Trip

- Be honest about your budget.
- Be candid about what everyone on the trip desires and needs. Don't feel you have to impress your advisor.
- Consider all options and be flexible to change.

During the Trip

- If something is bothering you, speak up at the time – not days after.
- Make changes to the itinerary

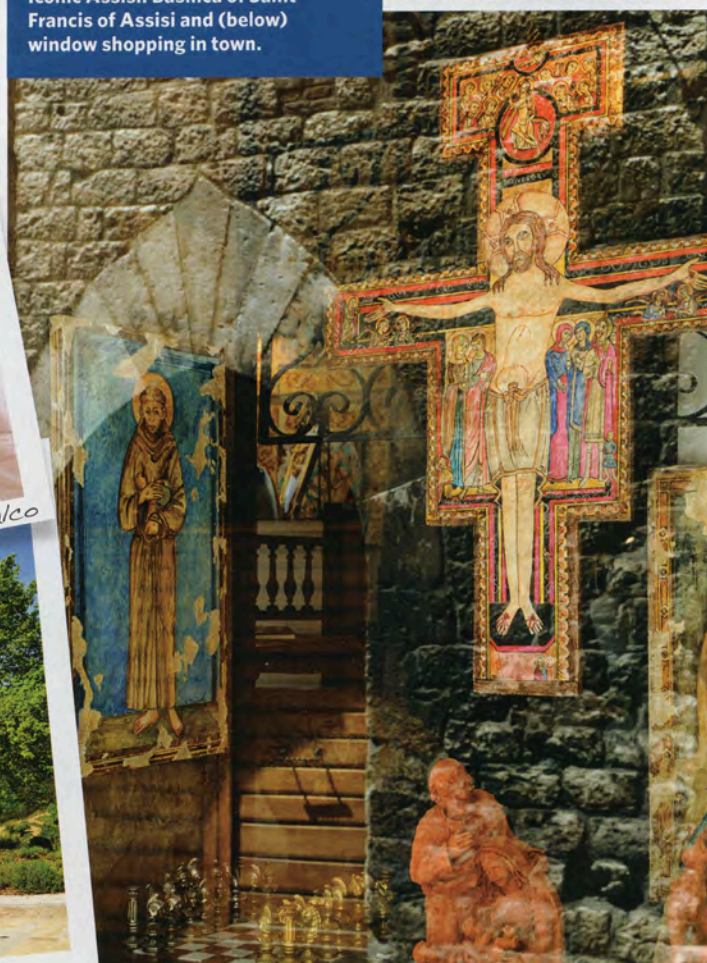
if you want. Your advisor knows changes are not unexpected (though they may incur an additional cost).

After the Trip

- Contact your advisor and review the trip in person. Your insights regarding guides, drivers, hotels, and restaurants are invaluable.
- Discuss your future travel plans. Get the advisor – and yourself – thinking about the next trip.



Iconic Assisi: Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi and (below) window shopping in town.



Montefalco



Caprai Winery, Montefalco



Palazzo Terranova, Umbria

to the Four Seasons in Florence, where the gregarious general manager, Patrizio Cipollini, gives me a hug. Never before this trip have I been kissed or hugged by a general manager upon check-in.

He leads us to the restaurant for lunch as I look around, stunned. The Four Seasons is literally a former Medici palace, with the original frescoes still on the ceilings. It is half hotel and half museum, set in the midst of a private 11-acre garden, with fountains, little classical temples, a large outdoor swimming pool, and a headily scented spa. The hotel's Royal Suite, with its glazed tile floors and gallery of tall arched windows overlooking the garden, leaves me speechless.

"Just say it dazzles," says Cipollini, laughing out loud.

A bottle of Champagne and an antipasto plate wait in our room with a handwritten note from my advisor. "Have a good day exploring Florence," it says. Right on cue, the phone rings and the concierge says our guide is waiting.

Angela, a beautiful Florentine with a wild mane of hair, not only leads us to the Duomo, the museums, and the statue of David – her explanation of David's contemplative gaze, by the way, is pure poetry – but also takes us down a tiny street where, by chance, we walk into a musty workshop to meet a stooped-over 73-year-old man who restores Renaissance paintings and sculptures. He tells us that there are only a handful of old men left who do what he does and then starts tapping away at a small sixteenth-century sculpture of a Virgin Mary that he bought 40 years earlier. "I will always work on my Virgin Mary," he says, studying the face of the sculpture. "It is a passion that fills up my life."

Although my wife has to head back early to the United States, I take another couple of days to explore Tuscany with Raffaele, who stops in one town to introduce me to an elderly lady tending flowers in her backyard garden. Every day, she says, she cuts some of her flowers and takes them out to her husband's grave. There is a long silence. She says something else, and Raffaele translates: "She says it is her honor to put flowers on her husband's grave." I find myself sighing. I've never used a guide before, mainly because I worried about feeling shackled. But now I realize guides open up these little worlds that tourists almost always miss.

Of course, guides don't come cheap. Still, my advisor does lots of little things to reduce costs. My

hotel rates include breakfast, and he often secures free room upgrades, discounts to the hotel spas, and other perks. As he likes to point out, "That's the power of going Virtuoso."

That power becomes even more clear on my last night in Rome, at the famed Waldorf Astoria Cavalieri, built on one of the seven hills overlooking the city. After I check in, I receive word from my advisor that my trip home is delayed because of the volcanic ash floating in from Iceland. Despite the fact that the hotel is filling up with other stranded travelers, he says not to worry, there will be room for me.

He isn't kidding. The hotel's general manager, the debonair Serge Ethuin, tells me I've been upgraded to a nicer room. He takes me to the Planetarium Suite, which goes for a cool \$10,000 a night and features a private terrace with a hot tub that gazes out on Saint Peter's.

For three days, I live the life of a king. I work out in the gym with a trainer cut like a modern-day gladiator. I take Turkish baths. I dine on the hotel's excellent cuisine. Alas, my advisor works his magic and gets me home. As soon as I walk into my house, I see a package in the mail. Inside is a photo of me with the Cavalieri's general manager, chatting on my suite terrace. "Thank you for the opportunity to create a lifetime of memories on this trip to Italy," Jim writes on a card accompanying the photo. "Welcome home and keep the echo alive."

A few days later, I drop by his office. He strides toward me as he always does, smiles graciously as I gush about my trip, and walks over to the map. He gives me a look, his eyebrows raising expectantly.

"Now, about that trip to Vietnam," he says.

DAYS
6-8

FLORENCE

Day six: Check into your accommodations at the spectacular Four Seasons Hotel Firenze.

Day seven: Meet your guide for a stroll over the Ponte Vecchio to the south side of the Arno River, through the streets of a lesser-known part of Florence where tradition survives. The workshops, small boutiques, and little squares make this one of the most delightful quarters of the city.



Michelangelo's David, Florence



Four Seasons Hotel Firenze

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