

BELLA ITALIA

Presented by Aurora University

Italy dangles from the center of Europe like a Christmas stocking, stuffed to the brim with marvels, some as soaring and grand as a Verdi opera or Brunelleschi's dome over the Florence Cathedral, some as weird and unexpected as the pagan tombs buried underneath St. Peter's in Rome. We soon become aware that for every Italian cliché, every Mt. Vesuvius, St. Marks Basilica and Leonardo's Last Supper, Italy has a hundred other natural wonders and artistic showpieces that any other nation would die for. For every Italian dish or wine you've been craving to try on its home turf, expect dozens of other delights you've never heard of before.

Even the common, everyday Italy that co-exists next to an overflow of museums, art cities, ruins and rivieras is an extravagant, daunting place to digest. It is a country that operates on rules entirely unlike those in force back home, full of contradictions and paradoxes, depths and shallows. As a Roman friend once told us, you cry twice in Italy: when you first arrive and when you have to leave. In the meantime, pack your intellect; gird your senses and watch out, not only for pickpockets, but for a country that might just pick your heart!

October 13 CHICAGO/ROME: Depart O'Hare International Airport in the afternoon on our non-stop flight to Rome, the Eternal City.

October 14 ROME/SIENA/FLORENCE: Our flight arrives early this morning in Rome, where we are met by our chartered deluxe motor coach and begin the ride to Florence. Dinner is included tonight.

We'll have lunch in Siena and meet our local guide, who will show us the highlights of this marvelous medieval city. Siena's historic centre is enclosed within the city walls. It must be explored on foot, as the city is closed to all traffic.

We see the main attraction, Piazza del Campo, where the annual Palio (historic horse race) is held. It is dominated by the medieval Palazzo Pubblico, home to the main city museum (Museo Civico) and the Torre del Mangia, a 102-meter (334-foot) tower. Around this radiate the terzi, the three districts into which the city is divided. The oldest, the terzo di Citta, is linked to the Campo by Via di Citta, and is the tourist hub containing the Duomo (Cathedral), the museum of Spedale di Santa Maria della Scala, and the Pinacoteca (Art Gallery), which contains a fine collection of Sienese paintings. North of the Campo is the terzo di Camollia, home to Siena's smartest shopping street, Via Banchi di Sopra. Southeast of the Campo is the terzo di San Martino, which contains the city's Renaissance buildings.

SIENA: Surrounded by olive groves and the vineyards of Chianti, Siena is one of the most beautiful cities of Tuscany. Set on three hills, the city is drawn together by

winding alleyways and steep steps, while the Piazza del Campo stands at its heart, and the Duomo and St Maria della Scala serve as additional cultural landmarks. Famed for the "Palio", the annual historic horse races, it is also home to one of the oldest universities in Europe, which ensures a vibrant Italian student atmosphere throughout the academic year. Few geographical areas in the world can boast of the variety of environment that surrounds Siena. To the north, there is the richness of the Chianti landscape, woven with vines and olive trees throughout the hills. Here also are beautiful towns like San Gimignano and Monteriggioni with old walls, winding streets and incredible views. South of Siena, the Arbia valley leads to the hilltop town of Montalcino, home to the famous Brunello wine. And the area La Crete stretches out, amazing visitors with its harsh rock formations and unique landscape. Westward is the coast, and captivating coastline towns like Castiglione della Pescaia, and nature reserves like the area called Maremma. The Chianti area, between Siena and Florence, is one of the most beautiful country sides in Italy and a famous wine production area.

The face of Siena has changed little since the 14th century. From the center, the famous piazza simply called Campo, the city unfolds like a three-petal flower along three ridges. Cars are banned from most of the center.

We arrive in Florence, and have the remainder of the afternoon at leisure.

FLORENCE: Small and immense and at the same time, an open-air museum grown more beautiful over the centuries; a treasure chest enclosed by ancient walls that safeguard grandiose masterworks of art and architecture so close that you can almost touch them. From its magnificent position, the city sits at the feet of the Apennine Mountains in a valley that opens onto the Arno Plain. Its buildings and monuments tell stories of art, war and life. Its streets today are the same ones through which Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Dante and many of the most illustrious minds of all time, threaded their way.

October 15 FLORENCE: Dinner is included tonight. We will spend the morning with our Florentine guide, who will lead us to the highlights of this outstanding center of art. We visit the Academy of Fine Arts, the Galleria dell'Accademia, established in the 18th century to hold masters' works so young artists could study them, and remains an important center of art education to this day. It is also home to a number of famous masterpieces by Michelangelo, including his renowned sculpture David, who stands about 10 feet tall, on a pedestal beneath a skylight. In the entrance hallway are Michelangelo's four Prisoners, extraordinary marble sculptures intentionally left unfinished by the artist, and adjacent first-floor rooms hold marble statues and plaster casts by important sculptors, including Bartolini and Pampaloni, precious Late Gothic Florentine art, rare Russian icons, and in the Byzantine Rooms are a collection of gold panels and Florentine paintings.

We go on to the Cathedral and Duomo, where Brunelleschi's stupendous architectural monument dominates the cityscape. The close-up view is even more

brehtaking, with the multicolored Duomo rising behind the marble-clad baptistry. Its construction, particularly the cupola, was one of the most impressive achievements of the Renaissance, requiring a special technique that made it possible to create the curves of the huge cupola without a supporting framework. This contribution took most of his life and formed the basis of Renaissance architecture. Other examples of Brunelleschi's architecture can be seen in the churches of San Lorenzo, Santo Spirito and the Cappella dei Pazzi.

The Uffizi Gallery, the famed Florence museum, is as much a work of art as the many masterpieces it contains. The elegant proportions of its architecture and its painted ceilings are just the treasures inside. The Uffizi Gallery is enormous and houses one of the most important collections of art of all time. Over the years, parts of the palace evolved into exhibition space for artwork commissioned by the Medici family. The Uffizi's collections are so large that many pieces are now housed in other Florence museums.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization estimates that 60 percent of the world's most important artworks are in Italy, with more than half of those located in Florence! The city attracts rapture and frustration in equal proportions. Few can dismiss the image of Brunelleschi's cathedral dome bursting through the morning mist – a terracotta balloon hovering above the medieval rooftops. It seems every building holds a masterpiece, demanding attention. Often called the cradle of the Renaissance, Florence owes much of her wealth to the Middle Ages. Banking became big business on the back of the city's profitable wool trade and, in 1235, Florence minted the florin, the first gold coin to become standard currency across Europe.

In their turn, these bankers commissioned some of the finest art and architecture in the city. The names Strozzi, Rucellai and Pitti can be found all over Florence, but it was the Medici family (who led the city for over 300 years, off and on) that nurtured the greatest flowering of Renaissance art. The paintings of Botticelli, the sculptures of Michelangelo and the palaces of Michelozzo all flourished under their rule.

PISA (optional excursion): The afternoon will be at leisure to re-visit some of the highlights or perhaps do some shopping. There will be an optional excursion through the fertile and picturesque Tuscan countryside to the historic university city of Pisa, famous for its architectural beauty. Nothing has captured imaginations like the Leaning Tower, probably the most recognizable structure the world, but there's far more to this historical city.

The cathedral where Galileo observed the swaying chandelier and conceived the law of the pendulum, and the baptistry with its truly remarkable acoustics. The entire Piazza dei Miracoli rests on highly unstable sandy soil, which accounts for the tower's lean; take a look at the baptistry and you'll see that it leans the other way from the tower. The rest of the city center makes for some fine wandering, too, with alleys that have largely retained their medieval appearance. Upon arrival in Pisa,

guided walking tour of Piazza dei Miracoli, with the celebrated Leaning Tower (exterior), the baptistery (exterior) and other important monuments. This is followed by a visit to the interior of the Cathedral, an unrivalled masterpiece of Romanesque art constructed between the 11th and 12th centuries. Those who are interested, can take a pleasant walk with our tour escort and reach Piazza dei Cavalieri, where you can admire the historic Scuola Normale, one of the most famous universities in the world.

October 16 FLORENCE/RAVELLO/AMALFI DRIVE/SORRENTO: Our charter coach takes us Ravello, along the famed Amalfi Drive on the Mediterranean coast to Sorrento. Dinner is included this evening.

RAVELLO: Serpentine roads take us to the picturesque town of Ravello, which is located on a mountain ledge 1000 feet above the sea. There, we enjoy countless gorgeous panorama views of the Amalfi Coast, the sea and the surrounding vineyards. It's a popular vacation spot due to its beautiful mountain location and remoteness. The mostly car-free little town has retained its tranquility. Ravello's romantic cityscape is characterized by Moorish style elements and is defined by medieval alleyways, stylish villas and blooming gardens. The market square with San Pantaleone Cathedral is Ravello's heart. The cathedral is consecrated to the city's patron of the same name. Its beautiful bronze doors were built by Barisanus of Trani from Apulia in 1179.

THE AMALFI DRIVE: "The sun, the moon, the stars and Amalfi," Amalfitans used to say. During the Middle Ages, Amalfi was an independent maritime state with a population of 50,000. The republic also brought the art of papermaking to Europe from Arabia. The drive is generally acclaimed to be the most beautiful stretch of scenery in the entire Mediterranean. Along this coast where one mountain after another plunges sheer into the sea, there is a string of towns that not long ago were accessible only by boat! Today, a spectacular cornice road "of a 1,000 bends" covers the route, climbing in places to 1,000 feet above the sea. Nature here has created a vertical landscape of sharp crags and deep green forests. The largest town is also named Amalfi. Overlooking the Bay of Salerno, it rests spectacularly on steep hills surrounded by cliffs. Amalfi's 11th-century duomo, the Cathedral of Sant' Andrea, is at the top of a steep flight of steps, and dominates the town's main piazza. Its architecture is an amalgam of eras and styles, with bronze doors from Constantinople, dating from 1066, and a mixture of Saracen and Romanesque styles, now all heavily restored. The cloister is oddly Arabic in feel, with whitewashed arches and palm motifs.

SORRENTO: This small town is wonderfully located over white steep cliffs and offers a fantastic view over the Bay of Naples. Sorrento lies on a Tufa terrace and is enclosed by impressive rocks of the limestone mountains. For 2,000 years, visitors from all over the world have been attracted to Sorrento by breath-taking sunsets and fragrances of orange and lemon gardens. Sorrento and the Amalfi Coast are well known for its splendid big lemons. Typical products from Sorrento are produced

with these "Limoni": Limoncello, a very tasty lemon liqueur, and lemon chocolate. Try the more than 70 different ice cream flavors of Gelateria Bougainvillea. Shop by the small street Via S. Cesareo, the heart of town.

October 17 SORRENTO/POMPEII/ROME: This morning, we visit Pompeii and Herculaneum as we wend our way up to Rome arriving in the late afternoon. Dinner is included this evening in Rome.

POMPEII: In the year 79 A.D., Mount Vesuvius erupted so suddenly that most residents didn't have time to escape. The fiery mountain buried all living beings under 20 feet of ash, pumice and lava, and forever captured in a fossil-like state. It was nearly 1,700 years before the city was rediscovered by workmen building the foundation of a summer palace for the King of Naples, Charles of Bourbon. The ongoing excavation continues to this day, and has revealed ruins of the city as well as ghostlike casts of the people who lived and died there. The excavation gives extraordinary insight into Roman life in the 1st century, the height of the Roman Empire, with buildings, frescoes, signage and even people caught as they were, seemingly frozen in time. Today, it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The streets are paved with large polygonal blocks of stone, raised stepping stones at intervals and high curbs – the streets were regularly flooded to wash dust and debris away. The streets were busy, lined with shops, houses, bars and brothels, many highly decorated with mosaics and frescoes, and a protective wall with fortified gates surrounded the city. Pompeii's aqueduct is a marvel of engineering, with public water divided into three channels: one for the public fountains, one for the public baths and the third for the most affluent citizens. Blocks in the channels diverted the flow as needed, and in event of drought, the rich would lose their water supply first, then the baths, in an effort to keep water flowing to the public fountains.

Romantics, however, prefer the well-preserved Herculaneum, where you can feel the atmosphere of the past until today. The town with its many villas is situated at the sea and has beautiful gardens and flowers. In some cases, even the upper floors of the villas and the wooden furniture were preserved.

ROME: The Eternal City is romantic, mysterious and unforgettable, the splash of a thousand fountains, the slow and silent flow of the Tiber, the scent of old stone in the ruins, yet it is also a modern, bustling metropolis. No place blends old and new like Roma! Defined by the traditional "Seven Hills of Rome" and the Tiber River, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Legend has it that Rome was founded by the feral twins Romulus and Remus in the 8th century BC. The city grew and developed into the capital of the Roman Kingdom, the Roman Republic and finally the Roman Empire in the 1st century BC. Once the seat of a great empire, and later the home of the papacy, it's still seen as different, and yet quintessentially Italian.

For the visitor, the most astonishing thing about Rome is the sheer weight of history that the city supports. There is an almost uninterrupted sequence of monuments, from ancient Roman ruins, early Christian basilicas, Romanesque churches and

Renaissance palaces, to the Baroque fountains and churches. And, it's all built one century on top of the other.

Important sights of Rome include the Museum of Castel Sant'Angelo, National Museum of Rome, the Borghese Villa and Gallery, the National Gallery of Modern Art and The Vatican.

October 18 ROME: Our all-day guided tour will cover much of this ancient city, including the Arch of Constantine. Between the Colosseum and the Palatine Hill sits one of the best-preserved monuments of ancient Rome; the Arch of Constantine is the largest of three that still stand today. Built by Constantine to celebrate his victory over his rival Maxentius in 312, the triple arch is on the road taken by the triumphal processions. The arches are built using recycled remains of older Roman monuments.

The Colosseum is probably the most iconic symbol of Imperial Rome, as well as one of the great works of Roman architecture and engineering. The first permanent amphitheater to be built in Rome, this enormous amphitheater was inaugurated by Titus in the 1st century. Although it is now near ruins, the Colosseum was used for almost 500 years for gladiatorial contests and public spectacles, including mock sea battles, executions, re-enactments of famous battles, and classical dramas. With a capacity of an extraordinary 50,000 spectators, it is one of the great ancient Roman architectural monuments. The plan is an ellipse, 615 feet from end-to-end, covering about six acres, with about 80 entrances.

Pantheon means "Temple of all the gods." Accordingly, the Pantheon in Rome, which dates back to 27 B.C, was built as a temple to all the gods of ancient Rome. Partly destroyed and rebuilt between 118 and 125 A.D., it is one of the best-preserved ancient Roman buildings, and perhaps even the best of its age in the world. The height of the dome and diameter of the interior circle are the same, at an impressive 142 feet. The Pantheon has been used as a Christian church since the 7th century, and has been in continuous use throughout its history. It has also been used as a tomb since the Renaissance, with Raffaello, Vittorio Emanuele II and Umberto I entombed here.

The Roman Forum, along the Via Sacra, the oldest street in Rome, includes remnants of ancient buildings and arches such as the Senate House, the Basilica, and the Arch of Septimus Severus. Also still standing are the assembly place and Caesar's platform, where senators and commoners could publicly voice their opinions.

October 19 ROME: We begin the morning tour at St. Peter's, officially known in Italian as the Basilica di San Pietro in Vaticano, this 16th century Vatican City cathedral is considered to be the greatest church in Christendom, covering almost six acres and with a capacity of more than 60,000 people. Believed to be the burial site of Saint Peter, one of the 12 disciples of Jesus, it is also one of Catholicism's holiest sites. Many popes and saints are buried in the grottos below. Moreover, it is

considered architecturally to be the greatest building of its age. Fittingly, it contains some of the premier masterpieces of Italian art history, including Michelangelo's poignant Pietà, and many works by Bernini.

The afternoon is at leisure.

October 20 ROME: Today we tour the Vatican Museums and Sistine Chapel. The Vatican Museums, a series of art museums in Vatican City, are a treasure trove of sculptures, paintings and tapestries. They house more than 9 miles of the most extensive art collection in the world. There are now at least 24 museums and collections housed in the Vatican, including a number of masterpieces by Caravaggio, da Vinci, Giotto, Raphael, Poussin, Titian and, of course, Michelangelo's heroic Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes.

The Sistine Chapel, where the Pope is elected and home to Michelangelo's famed fresco ceiling was complete by 1483. But it was Michelangelo's ceiling frescos, painted a quarter century later, that brought true immortality. Commissioned by the Pope in 1508 to decorate the chapel, Michelangelo used a network of scaffolding to reach the high vaulted ceilings. He divided the ceiling into nine panels, each showing a scene from Genesis. Contrary to legend, although he did do much of the work himself, Michelangelo also had assistants to help with the paintings.

Scholarly evidence suggests, too, that he painted mostly while standing. Nevertheless, it was an arduous task and remains a compelling story. The chapel ceiling has been cleaned, and the frescos restored to their original brilliance.

October 21 ROME/CHICAGO: Our non-stop flight departs Rome late this morning, and with the time change, arrives Chicago O'Hare in the early afternoon.