



Great Cities of Italy

Venice, Florence, Rome and Naples – with Pompeii

18 March–1 April 2026 (MM 901)

£7,690 • 15 days

Speakers:

Desmond Shawe-Taylor (*days 1–8*);

Dr Michael Douglas-Scott (*days 8–15*)

A sweeping introduction – or reintroduction – to Italy, through four of its most significant cities.

Vast spectrum of history and art, from Roman antiquity to the Baroque and Renaissance.

Several private visits by special arrangement, including to the Basilica of San Marco, and the Sistine Chapel.

Two eminent art historians dovetail as lecturer, and an experienced tour manager accompanies throughout.

For centuries Italy has proved an irresistible draw to travellers; from its place at the apex of the Grand Tour, to the romantic poets and artists who felt the pull of its landscapes and cities, to the immortalisation on film in the 20th century of the land of *la Dolce Vita*. All have helped cement Italy in the global cultural imagination like no other country. Indisputably, it has everything: history, art and archaeology; food and wine; cities, countryside, mountains and sea. It was the centre of the Roman Empire and the cradle of the Renaissance.

But where to start? While it would be foolish to try and ‘do’ the whole of Italy, its most important cities do offer an excellent introduction. The four we visit are major cultural touchstones, yet strikingly different from each other, and all home to sites of incomparable historical importance – Italy currently holds the highest number of UNESCO World Heritage sites in the world.

Venice, *La Serenissima*, is largely unchanged from when it was the seat of a vast and powerful Mediterranean empire, fiercely independent from the rule of the Vatican, and a magnet for artists, musicians and thinkers. The sheer quantity of art in Florence is unrivalled; here the foundations of the next 500 years of western art were laid. The works of the great Renaissance rivals, Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael, feature heavily, but there is a wealth of others too. Rome has been known as the Eternal City since the poet Tibullus in the 1st Century BC, and so it remains; here we span millenia and cover vast swathes of the



Venice, Rialto Bridge, aquatint c. 1830.

city, seeing the major monuments, buildings, and works of art, from the Colosseum to Caravaggio. Finally Naples, synonymous with cacophony and noise, is brimming with life, and, from a storied and frequently difficult history, is pushing heartily upwards.

Itinerary

This tour takes place at a (comparatively) quieter time of year. In each of the cities, we see the essentials but also visit many lesser known treasures where visitors are far fewer. We include private arrangements to places not normally open to the public, or, for some of the busiest sites, outside of usual opening hours. We have longstanding relationships with hotels and restaurants who prioritise the local area and its economy.

Day 1: Venice. Fly at c. 8.30am (British Airways) from London Heathrow to Venice. From the airport a *motoscafo* (water-taxi) takes you across the lagoon. The tour begins with an introductory walk to see Palladio's great church, S. Giorgio Maggiore, and S. Zaccaria, an Early Renaissance architectural masterpiece which houses an outstanding altarpiece by Bellini. First of three nights in Venice.

Day 2: Venice. Piazza San Marco is followed by the Doge's Palace, beautiful in its pink Gothic revetment and containing rich Renaissance interiors. In the afternoon, see S.ta Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, the great Franciscan church which houses artworks such as Titian's *Assumption* and Canova's tomb, and the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, adorned with a magnificent cycle of dramatic paintings by Tintoretto.

Day 3: Venice. Start with a visit to S.ta Maria della Salute, the splendid Baroque church at the mouth of the Grand Canal, built in thanksgiving for deliverance from the 1630 plague. The Accademia is the major art gallery in Venice, where all the Venetian painters are represented. The afternoon is free before a special after-hours private visit to the Basilica di San Marco, an 11th-century Byzantine church enriched over the centuries with mosaics, sculpture and various precious objects.

Day 4: Venice, Florence. Take a morning train to Florence, where the next four nights are spent. In the late afternoon visit the chapel in the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, which has exquisite frescoes by Benozzo Gozzoli.

Day 5: Florence. See Michelangelo's *David*, the 'Slaves' in the Accademia, and the Bargello,

Great Cities of Italy
continued

home to Florence's finest sculpture collection with works by Donatello, Verrocchio, Michelangelo and others. Walk to the vast Franciscan church of S.ta Croce, abundantly furnished with sculpted tombs, altarpieces and frescoes. The cluster of cathedral buildings occupies the afternoon; the museum, the baptistry with its Byzantine mosaics and Renaissance sculpture, and the polychromatic marble Duomo itself, capped by Brunelleschi's massive dome.

Day 6: Florence. Follow Michelangelo from his Laurentian Library, whose architectural components would herald the onset of Mannerism, to S. Lorenzo, the Medici family parish church designed by Brunelleschi, in whose burial chapel in the contiguous New Sacristy is Michelangelo's enigmatic sculptural ensemble. The afternoon is free.

Day 7: Florence. Avoid the busiest of the daily crowds by heading early to the Uffizi, Italy's most important art gallery, which has masterpieces by every major Florentine painter as well as international Old Masters. In the afternoon visit the redoubtable Palazzo Pitti, which houses several museums including the Galleria Palatina, outstanding particularly for High Renaissance and Baroque paintings. Dinner is at a private palace.

Day 8: Florence, Rome. Before leaving Florence, see S.ta Maria Novella, the Dominican church with many works of art (Masaccio's *Trinità*, Ghirlandaio's frescoed sanctuary). Take a lunchtime train to Rome, and check into the hotel. There is a late afternoon visit to the delightful Villa La Farnesina, which has frescoes by Raphael in the Loggia of Cupid and Psyche. First of four nights in Rome.

Day 9: Rome. Today is largely devoted to Ancient Rome, beginning with the Colosseum, largest of all amphitheatres, completed AD 80. The Forum has evocative remains of the key temples and civic buildings at the heart of the Roman Empire. The present appearance of the Capitol, first centre of ancient Rome, was designed by Michelangelo, and the surrounding palazzi are museums with outstanding ancient sculpture and a collection of paintings.

Day 10: Rome. A morning walk includes the Pantheon, the best preserved of Roman monuments (whose span was only twice exceeded in the next 1,750 years) and the lively and wonderfully adorned Piazza Navona, as

well as several churches around it. Spend time in the lovely Trastevere neighbourhood, where the church of S.ta Maria in Trastevere is said to be one of the first churches in Rome in which Mass was celebrated, and has impressive 13th-century mosaics by Pietro Cavallini.

Day 11: Rome. Rise early for a private visit to the Vatican to see (in peace) the most precious assemblage of painting in the western world; including Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel and Raphael's frescoes in the adjacent Stanze. Breakfast follows in the Cortile della Pigna, and there some time to visit more of the museum either independently or with the lecturer. In the afternoon, S.ta Maria del Popolo is followed by a pleasant *passeggiata* through the Pincio Gardens, which have an excellent view across Rome, to the Spanish Steps.

Day 12: Rome, Naples. The Palazzo Barberini is a great palace which became Rome's National Gallery, with paintings by most of the Italian Old Masters. Take a train to Naples, where the final three nights of the tour are spent.

Day 13: Naples. A first walk through the teeming old city centre includes the Cappella Sansevero, a masterpiece of Baroque art and craft with multi-coloured marbles and virtuoso sculptures, and S.ta Chiara, an austere Gothic church with a delightful Rococo tile-encrusted cloister. Also among the other treasures seen are the churches of Il Gesù Nuovo and S. Domenico Maggiore. Drive into the hilly suburbs to visit the palace of Capodimonte, originally a giant hunting lodge. Here is located one of Italy's greatest art galleries, with a magnificent range of art from the Middle Ages onwards.

Day 14: Pompeii. Since its first exploration during the 18th century, ancient Pompeii has been one of the world's most famous archaeological excavations, and where fresh discoveries continue to be made. The fascination of the site lies not only in the major public buildings such as the theatre, temples and the forum but also in the numerous domestic dwellings, from cramped apartments to luxurious houses with their mosaic pavements and gaudily frescoed walls.

Day 15: Naples. The National Archeological Museum is one of the world's greatest collections of Greek and Roman antiquities. Many items come from the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum. Fly from Naples to London Heathrow, arriving at c. 5.00pm.

Lecturers

Desmond Shawe-Taylor (days 1–8).

Distinguished art historian and museum administrator whose posts have included Surveyor of The Queen's Pictures and Director of Dulwich Picture Gallery. He studied English Literature at Oxford and took an MA in History of Art at the Courtauld Institute. He has written extensively on English eighteenth-century portraiture and other subjects, and curated a series of exhibitions at the Queen's Gallery in Edinburgh and London, dealing with Dutch and Flemish 17th-century art.

Dr Michael Douglas-Scott (days 8–15) mixes scholarship with accessible discourse, wit with reasoned opinion, and is highly sought-after as an art history lecturer. He has lectured for York University (London campus) and Birkbeck College, University of London, specialising primarily in 16th-century Italian art and architecture. He studied at the Courtauld and Birkbeck College and lived in Rome for several years. He has written articles for *Arte Veneta*, *Burlington Magazine* and the *Journal of the Warburg & Courtauld Institutes*.

Practicalities

Price. Two sharing: £7,690 or £7,460 without flights. Single occupancy: £ 9,190 or £8,960 without flights.

Included: flights (Euro Traveller) with British Airways (Airbus 320); travel by rail (business class); travel by private coach or minibus; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts (including one in the Vatican); 3 lunches (including two light lunches on trains), and 6 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturers, tour manager, and local guides; a donation to the Venice in Peril Fund.

Accommodation. **Hotel Palazzo Sant'Angelo, Venice** (palazzosantangelo.com): 4-star boutique hotel in an excellent location on the Grand Canal near Campo Sant'Angelo and the Rialto Bridge. Rooms with a canal view may be available on request and for a supplement. **Hotel Balestri, Florence** (whythebesthotels.com): a delightful 4-star hotel on the bank of the River Arno. **Donna Camilla Savelli, Rome** (vretreats.com/donna-camilla-savelli): a pleasingly restored former baroque monastery, now 4-star hotel, set at the foot of the Janiculum hill in Trastevere. **Grand Hotel Santa Lucia, Naples** (www.santalucia.it): a

Great Cities of Italy continued

4-star hotel on the waterfront about 15 minutes on foot from Piazza Plebiscito, with spectacular views of Mount Vesuvius and the island of Capri. Rooms with a sea view are available on request and for a supplement. *Single occupancy rooms are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? This is a particularly strenuous tour. All four cities involve a lot of walking and coach access is non-existent or restricted in the centres; in Venice you must be able to confidently step on and off boats. There is also a lot of standing in museums, churches, and sites and uneven ground and irregular paving are standard. You need to be able to lift your luggage on and off the trains and wheel it within stations. Unless you enjoy entirely unimpaired mobility, cope with everyday walking and stair-climbing without difficulty and are reliably sure-footed, this tour would prove difficult.

Group size: between 8 and 19 participants.

Venice in Peril. The Venice in Peril Fund is a British charity dedicated to preserving the art and architecture of the city. Your donation (included in the price of the tour) will go towards supporting various projects in the city. www.veniceinperil.org

