

8 of the best... Italian experiences

From painting and opera to truffle hunting and gelato making, tours can give clients a taste of traditional Italy, writes **Joanna Booth**



TRUFFLE HUNTING IN PIEDMONT

A dog's sense of smell is 100,000 times more powerful than ours. While your pooch may emerge from the undergrowth with nothing more valuable than a rotting tennis ball, a well-trained Lagotto Romagnolo could bring back white gold – the knobbly yet fragrant Alba white truffle. Cox & Kings' guests will accompany chef and specialist guide Valentina Harris, and a professional *trifolau* (truffle hunter) and their dog through the rolling, red-hued hills of Piedmont in autumn, on the hunt for these prized underground fungi, which can cost between £200 and £700 per 100 grams. Once carefully dug up and cleaned, they'll be served for lunch, finely shaved, over pasta or risotto.

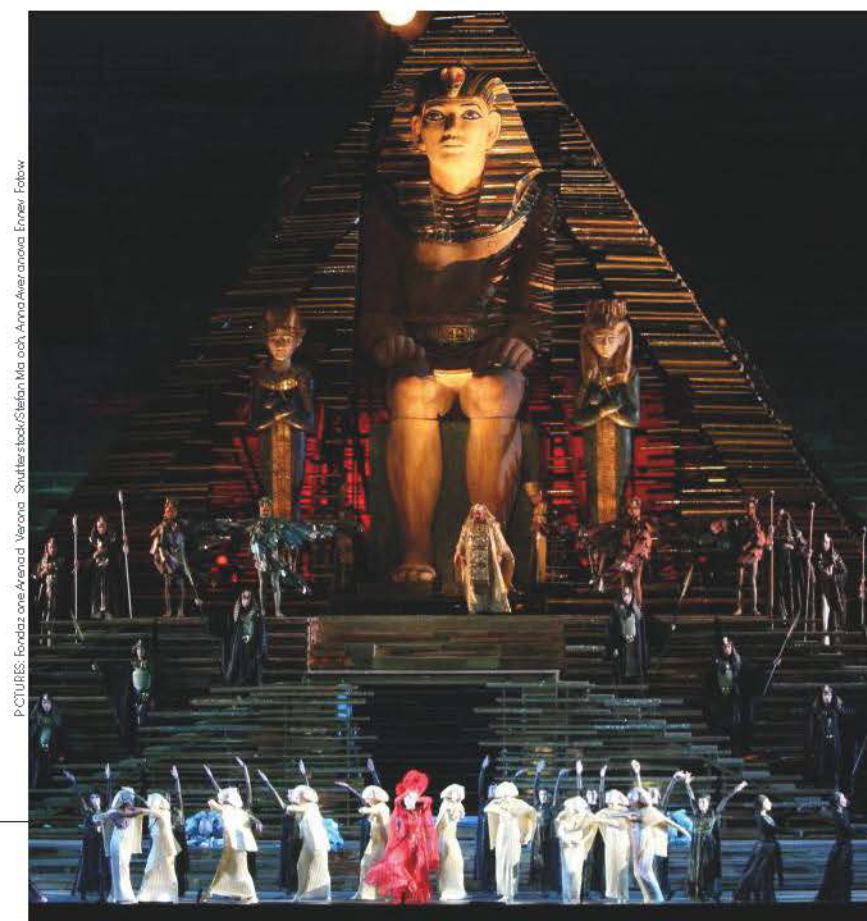
Book it: Cox & Kings' five-day Piedmont with Valentina Harris starts from £2,445 including flights. coxandkings.co.uk



GLASS BLOWING IN VENICE

The ceiling is the giveaway. While the rest of this historic workshop in Venice is all practical brickwork, pipes and furnaces, suspended overhead are constellations of bright colours and flowing shapes made of quintessential Murano glass. Artisans have worked their magic here since the 13th century, but now only a handful of businesses remain, so a trip to see these masters at work is not only fascinating but also supports a centuries-old tradition. Trafalgar's guests marvel as the glass is heated, rolled, moulded and – most dramatically of all – blown. These skills have been handed down through generations, and now a few women have also joined the ranks of what was once an all-male industry.

Book it: Trafalgar's seven-day Italian Holiday visits Venice, Florence and Rome and starts from £1,436 excluding flights. trafalgar.com



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OPERA IN VERONA

When the prima donna's high note rings out across the Roman amphitheatre in Verona, there won't be a dry eye in the house. Opera was born in Italy at the start of the 17th century, so there's nowhere better to experience this most passionate and dramatic of musical styles. Guests on Kirker Holidays' tour have prime Poltronissime Gold seats to watch two celebrated Verdi operas – a modern staging of *Aida* and a classic production of *Rigoletto* – plus guided daytime sightseeing. Or if clients prefer Puccini, they can attend open-air performances of *Turandot* and *Manon Lescaut* on a floating stage on Lake Massaciuccoli near Lucca, then visit the composer's birthplace.

Book it: Kirker Holidays' five-day Verona Opera Festival starts from £3,546, while the four-night Puccini Opera Festival in Lucca starts from £2,998, both including flights. kirkerholidays.com

ITALY



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GELATO MAKING IN SORRENTO

If life gives you lemons, make... gelato. That's what Intrepid Travel clients do in Sorrento at family-run Gelateria David. Opened by the current owner's grandfather in 1957, this artisanal gelato shop in the heart of the city runs classes where you can discover the history and techniques of Italian ice cream making and the importance of high-quality ingredients before getting involved yourself in creating a batch of lemon sorbet – a classic flavour that uses the local area's famous fruit, prized for their size and intense aroma. You then hit the road with two scoops of your choice – perhaps a classic such as pistachio or cherry, or something more experimental, from olive oil to parmesan cheese.

Book it: Intrepid Travel's eight-day Rome to Amalfi starts from £1,369, excluding flights. intrepidtravel.com

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PAINTING IN FLORENCE

If you're looking for artistic inspiration, Florence is full of it. Leonardo, Donatello, Raphael and Michelangelo – the Renaissance artists, not the Ninja Turtles – all gathered here, and while some visitors will be happy to simply view the masters' works, others may feel inspired enough to want to have a go themselves. On this holiday, a tutor will guide guests through all the technical tricks of watercolour painting, from laying a wash and spattering to running in and scraping back, with gorgeous views of this historic city as suitable subject matter. Tuition and materials are included, plus some sightseeing, and guests will have their own sketches of highlights from the Ponte Vecchio and the Duomo to the Boboli Gardens as souvenirs.

Book it: Not In The Guidebooks' six-day Watercolour Painting in Florence itinerary starts from £2,085, excluding flights.
notintheguidebooks.com



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COOKING IN SICILY

Did you know that you can tell where arancini come from by their shape? After a cooking class with G Adventures, clients will know that these typical Sicilian snacks are round like an orange in Palermo, but cone-shaped like Mount Etna in Catania. This delicious lesson takes place in the courtyard of a peaceful, white-stone palazzo in Syracuse, where host Alessia brings olive oil from local groves and ricotta sourced from nearby shepherds to the table. Guests learn to make the signature deep-fried rice balls with a crispy shell while hearing about their history and sipping glasses of Nero d'Avola, its bold terroir down to the island's volcanic soil. They then finish up by filling their own cannoli with cream laced with local pistachios and candied orange.

Book it: G Adventures' eight-day Explore Southern Sicily starts from £1,529 excluding flights.
gadventures.com

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MOSAICS IN SPILIMBERGO

The Romans might not have invented the art of mosaic making, but they certainly popularised the form, as any tourist who has ever visited Rome, Pompeii or Ravenna knows. Fewer visitors are aware that Italy is still the worldwide centre for this jigsaw-like art, but those travelling on Newmarket Holidays' exploration of the lesser-visited Friuli-Venezia Giulia region are let into the secret in Spilimbergo, with a behind-the-scenes tour of the Friuli Mosaicists School, led by a former pupil. They'll see examples of both classic and modern techniques, and learn how the school, which dates back to 1922, attracts artisans from around the world to learn the mastery of this precise but creative practice.

Book it: Newmarket Holidays' eight-day Hidden Italy – Trieste and Friuli-Venezia Giulia tour starts from £1,643 including flights.
newmarketholidays.co.uk



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PIZZICA DANCING IN PUGLIA

Forget paracetamol – dancing was the historic cure for a fever, with the illness induced by a tarantula bite leading to a family of dances called *tarantellas*. In Salento, Puglia, there is a variation known as *pizzica*, and Riviera Travel guests can witness this traditional folk dance. Over dinner in a local restaurant, a band strikes up, playing fast-paced, hypnotic rhythms on the tambourine, violin, accordion, guitar and mandolin. A female dancer with a red handkerchief, her wide skirts whirling, performs rapid steps and swirling movements as the man circles her making expressive gestures. While the dance no longer has a medicinal purpose, its fervour will leave spectators elated.

Book it: Riviera Travel's eight-day A Taste of Puglia & Basilicata starts from £2,359 including flights.
rivieratravel.co.uk