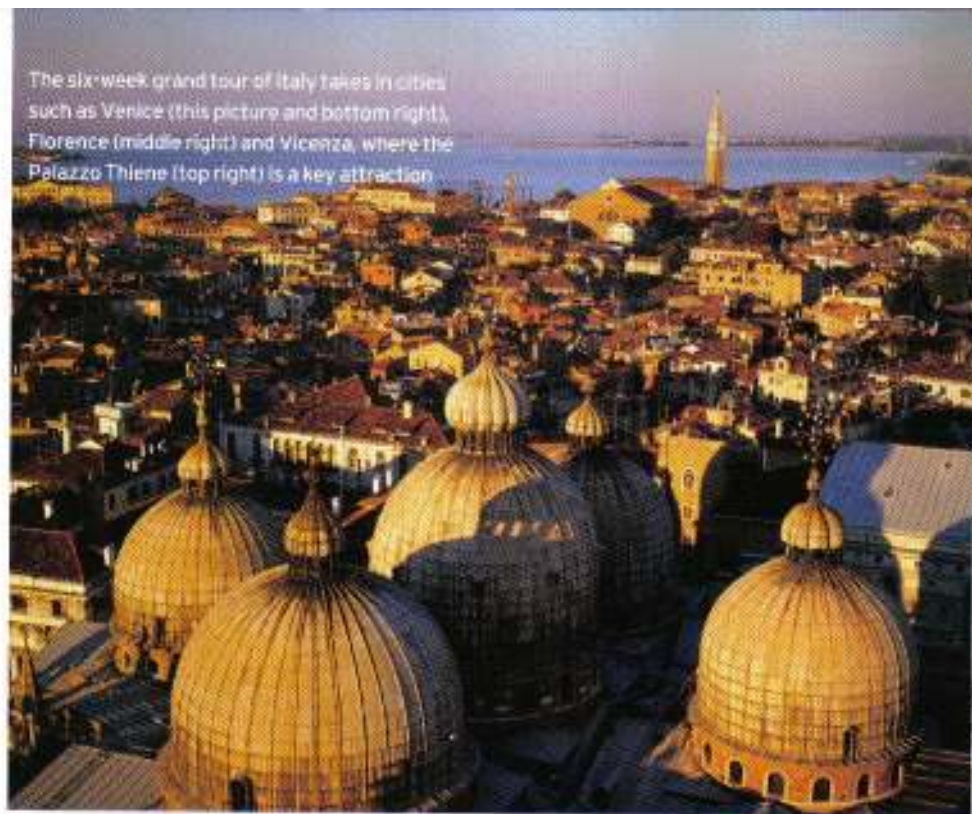


The six-week grand tour of Italy takes in cities such as Venice (this picture and bottom right), Florence (middle right) and Vicenza, where the Palazzo Thiene (top right) is a key attraction



BRIDGING THE GAP

Kate Patrick is enthused by a fresh perspective on Italian art history, and offers suggestions for other, constructive ways to spend a gap year

It is dazzling early summer, and I'm sitting on the steps of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome watching artist Simon Gallery quietly hold eight teenage students in the palm of his hand. He's discussing why Caravaggio's work in the church behind them is still so arresting after 400 years. 'It's visceral,' he hisses intensely; 'it goes straight into your nervous system. You can't not look at it. He suits our appetite for imagery, for instant gratification, for telling something the way it is.' The students generate an animated buzz, each on a journey of discovery. Later, he says to me: 'There are facts. And there are attitudes to facts. It's like turning a light on in someone's head. I want to give them the confidence to look, and to respond to what they are feeling.'

Sixteen students, post-school, are nearing the end of a six-week grand tour of Italy, as remodelled by the art historian Nick Ross and his company, Art History Abroad. They've been immersed in the churches, museums, galleries and ruins of Venice, Verona, Florence, Siena and Naples. Now, released from the drudgery of note-taking, they are learning how to look, listen, think and articulate independent thoughts – all constructive preparation for university.

Earlier that day, I watched another tutor, an encyclopedically knowledgeable young art historian called Tom Nickson, discuss the 'appropriateness' – rather than, say, the architecture – of St Peter's, while walking backwards in the entry queue. His words

spark a debate – dissent, even – which, he says, is the intention. The previous day he had rushed up to the Pantheon and hugged one of its massive columns. 'I love to get tactile with the buildings,' he enthuses, and gets us to engage with a baroque Borromini church by feeling our way around its curvaceous walls.

This approach – so alive, so much more potent than a dreary classroom – means that it doesn't matter if you've never done art history before. One who has, however, says he's glad to have the 'scaffold' of facts. Teaching occupies around five hours a day, and is interspersed with picnics in parks, concerts, gallery openings and, of course, nightlife. 'Sometimes you need time out just to sit on a rock and eat pizza,' comments Simon Gallery. The students are a bit jaded after a month and a half; but are enjoying each other's company, and their new independence. The downside? It's an expensive way to fill a mere six weeks, but, seeing the tutors in action – expert, resourceful, patient – it looks like value for money. One student wrote in after the trip, saying it had been life-changing.

The climax is a private visit to the Sistine Chapel (a coup by Art History Abroad). The door swings open and suddenly there are just 20 of us in the room, with the time and space to look properly, even to lie on our backs to scrutinise the ceiling. The tutors say very little. The students – however clued-up, cynical or tired – are re-energised, humbled, inspired. It is an unforgettable experience. □

Ways & means

A six-week course with Art History Abroad (tel: 01284-774772; www.art-historyabroad.com) costs from £6,100, including flights, B&B in guest houses with shared rooms, tuition throughout, and private tours of St Mark's in Venice and the Sistine Chapel in Rome.

