

STYLE AND TRAVEL

The art of life

Gap-year students, try Italy, not Vietnam, says **Charlotte Metcalf**

A wise friend once said that you only regret what you don't do. Until I met John Hall and Nick Ross, I had never really thought about it but ever since I have been regretting that I didn't spend my time between school and university on one of their courses in Italy.

John Hall formed his Pre-University Course in 1965 when he decided he was bored being a schoolteacher and fled Kent for Venice. Over 40 years on, his passion for all things Italian, from sculpture to wine, remains undiminished.

At 16 a rugby accident left Ross paralysed from the neck down. While in hospital, he found he could turn pages with a straw in his mouth and started reading about art history as he slowly began to recover. Now a glamorous, floppy-haired 43-year-old in a flamboyant cape, he grins and says, 'It's ironic that I now walk around Italy for a living.'

Despite the difference in age and approach, both Hall and Ross specialise in boosting their students' souls by exposing them to the wonders of Italian culture. They are both persuasive enough to have seen off any other serious competition and remain undisputed leaders in their field.

'Transcapillary transmutation' is Ross's phrase for the feeling when the hairs on the back of the neck rise in the presence of something awesome. 'Transcapillary transmutation' is particularly crucial to a man who nearly ended up with no ability to feel at all. Ross's driving passion is to make education less of a chore, more of a lifelong interest. 'We're really using art history as a springboard to big ideas,' he explains. He's as likely to take his students to Venice's Redentore church to look at pickled Capuchin monks' heads as to the Accademia to look at Bellini's paintings. 'It invariably sparks a lively conver-

sation about the nature of mortality,' chuckles Ross. One father of a previously monosyllabic teenager told Ross with astonishment that since completing the course his son was 'conversational and charming at dinner'.

Ross's offers four six-week courses annually that take in Venice, Florence, Rome, Siena, Verona and Naples: 27 students are taught

tion and the world-class calibre of his 30 lecturers, who have included Nicholas Penny, the new director of the National Gallery, and artists like Gavin Turk, Dinos Chapman and Antony Gormley.

Hall may be old enough to be Ross's father, but his enthusiasm for Italy remains almost childlike in its intensity. He profoundly believes that experiencing Italy is an essential step towards understanding and enjoying life. 'We teach everything from music to cinema and wine. We're not about art history,' he insists, ordering chilled Pinot Grigio. 'We're about the art of life itself.'

Hall is proud that many of his current students' parents attended his course. His formula has stood the test of time. As Sophia Seymour, a recent student, says, 'Whether you love art or cinema, food or poetry, the John Hall course has offered us a rounded knowledge that is hard to come by... we have all taken something away from this course which we will always remember and treasure.'

I think of my various godchildren trudging rather aimlessly round India and Vietnam, looking for meaningful experiences. Thirty years ago such a trip would have been extraordinary. Today, travel is so affordable and accessible that

a gap-year trek round Namibia has become almost commonplace. What Ross and Hall are offering is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. They are united by a conviction that true education is about opening young souls and minds to life's wonders and potential — in a safe, clean environment. What more could a parent want? If I were you, I'd confiscate that dreary rucksack immediately. Lest she have regrets later, I'm signing my three-year-old up now to ensure a place.



in groups of nine.

There are no formal lectures — teaching is done on site with emphasis on experiencing rather than learning. Students carry sketchbooks and are expected to draw, so that they look at things more closely.

When I enthuse to John Hall about Ross's relaxed, democratic approach to learning he is rather breezy. 'Far too much rushing around,' he says. 'What we do is give our students an opportunity to live in Venice and form a real relationship with the city.'

Hall offers one course a year to around 45 students. It begins at the end of January in London, taking in the major galleries, moves on to Venice for six weeks and ends with a week each in Florence and Rome. At around £7,000 it is the more expensive course but Hall justifies it, pointing out the longer dura-

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