The Prince of Venice

Viewing Titian’s paintings in their original basilicas and palazzi reveals a Venice of courtesans and intrigue. Pulitzer Prize—winning critic Manuela Hoelterhoff’s walking guide to the city amplifies the experience of reliving the tumultuous times of the Old Master—and finds some aesthetically pleasing hotels and restaurants along the way. (Trail of Glory map on page 5)

Tuscan Coast

Tuscany by the Sea

Believe it or not, Tuscany has a shoreline—145 miles of it, with ports large and small, hidden beaches, a rich wildlife preserve, and, of course, the blessings of the Italian table. Clive Irving discovers a sexy combo of coast, cuisine, and Caravaggio—and customizes a beach-by-beach, harbor-by-harbor map for seaside fun.

Rome

Treasures of the Popes

You’re in Rome, but the Vatican is a city in itself. (In fact, a nation.) What should you see? John Julius Norwich picks his masterpieces, and warns of the potency of Vatican hospitality.
A rich, luminous city, her beauty reflected at every turn, Venice was the perfect muse for an ambitious Renaissance artist. Only if he’d lived to be 100—and he did—could Titian have hoped to enhance her glory. Manuela Hoelterhoff traces his genius.

Photographs by Robert Polidori
The Pietà is the work of a man who knew he would meet his Maker shortly and was filled with feelings of terror and awe.
Important paintings were lost to fires in the 1570s, but the Presentation of the Virgin survives in the Accademia as one of Titian’s greatest works. Titian liked to downplay his wealth, hoping to pull at the heartstrings of patrons, who included kings and popes.
Trail of GLORY

The hunt for Titian's treasures takes you through the doors of the churches and palazzos that define Renaissance Venice.

The weathered frescoes are now barely visible in their new home in the Ca’ d’Oro palazzo. But their history is interesting, and we will visit them and the other works Titian painted during his long life in Venice.

Nobody seems to know just how old Titian was—maybe 103!—when he died in his house, a handsome mansion that had a garden down to the lagoon where he liked to entertain. He had several children and many friends, but little else is known about his domestic life. He often teamed up with Jacopo Sansovino, the sculptor and architect, and made sure the projects were publicized by their mutual friend Pietro Aretino, a fat gourmand and pornographer who served as his press agent and secretary. (We loved your gift of pickled fennel and spice cakes, he wrote on Titian’s behalf.) Titian seems to have lied to exaggerate his age and, notably avaricious, liked to down-
the heartstrings of patrons, who included kings and duchesses, bishops and popes. His seductive brush and opulent palette could turn even a tortured runt like Philip II into a brooding prince of stature. A beloved anecdote has Philip's father, Charles V, bending down to retrieve a brush that had fallen from the hand of his revered painter.

Because Titian lived so much longer than Giorgione, his style changed more over the decades. In the church of Santa Maria della Salute, the altarpiece St. Mark Enthroned with Saints shows the poetic young master still under the influence of the precocious Giorgione and the legendary Raphael. In the gallery of large pictures in the Accademia is his last painting, the Pietà. Is it finished? Titian's brushwork became increasingly loose and suggestive with age, so perhaps it is. It is hard to imagine how it could be more expressive. It is the work of a man who knew he would meet his Maker shortly and was filled with feelings of terror and awe. When I recently stood in front of this amazing painting, I felt the clock ticking and took myself outside.

Many of the pictures Titian painted especially for the Doges' Palace perished in a fire. And the museums of the world are, of course, filled with masterpieces by him (and his hardworking studio). Today, Venice holds only a portion of his vast artistic output. In other towns you will find the great portraits, the mythological paintings, the lyrical nudes, the political allegories. However, an understanding of Titian's art—and the way it was intended to be seen in his time, in its original setting—is offered only in Venice.

**Trail of Glory**

**COME TO THE PIAZZA**

San Marco [1] in the very early morning (or very late at night), before the moving masses of backpackers mow you down and the café orchestras start playing “Memory.” Napoleon ripped down a church at the far end because he needed a ballroom, but otherwise the piazza hasn’t changed dramatically since the late sixteenth century, when Titian last set eyes on the basilica, the Doges’ Palace, the campanile, and the stately library built by his friend the architect Sansovino. The basilica took shape in the ninth century along with the bell tower. The exterior of the ducal palace dates to the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

While the basilica—the doges’ private if capacious chapel—does not include works by Titian, there are two contextually interesting pieces in the Doges’ Palace [2]. The palazzo, which combined the functions of our White House, Capitol,
In 1630, a plague wiped out a third of the city. When it was all over, Santa Maria della Salute was commissioned in thanksgiving and Supreme Court, has an unusually graceful look. Unlike most other public buildings of Titian’s time, it is not a fortress to be defended, like the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. Instead, the gracefully arced structure demonstrates wealth and supreme confidence. In an age of despots, Venice was a constitutional republic with a carefully calibrated system of checks and balances designed to keep control out of the hands of upstarts and megalomaniacs. The doge, an elected position with limited power, was typically an aging noble who was expected to die in office. The job came with an exotic hat called a corno and fine robes and an apartment in the palace. You see the costume nicely modeled by Antonio Grimani—who was eighty-seven years old when he was elected doge, the oldest ever in Venetian history—in The Faith of Doge Antonio Grimani. Titian’s commemorative portrait was painted long after Grimani expired in 1523. Such portraits are typically Venetian, and they fill the formal halls of the Doges’ Palace. Venice liked to flaunt its superior and quasi-democratic ways to the visiting emissaries of whimsical potentates.

The doge job did not always work out for the wearer of the corno. One doge was hacked up for stealing, another skipped off in the night, and still others either begged to be relieved of their chores or lived on in rage. Verdi’s opera I Due Foscari is based on the true story of an embittered doge who was forced by the Council of Ten, a
ruling body as powerful as the Senate, to send his ailing son into exile (there is a portrait of the dog in the Museo Correr). It was not an easy job and often a dangerous one. With that in mind, the strange painting of Saint Christopher in the private quarters of the doge Andrea Gritti becomes more intriguing. It was believed that viewing an image of the saint would keep you from sudden death (or assassination) that day—and the doge would have looked at Titian's St. Christopher every time he left his apartment for public duty. Even so, Gritti died one day after consuming a large dinner of little eels. Did he order it in?

Before leaving the palace, see its most astounding painting and one of the largest in the world, Paradise, by Jacopo Tintoretto, in the Sala del Maggior Consiglio.

Gritti also patronized the architect Sansovino, naming him proto, or buildings supervisor, for the Piazza San Marco. Preservation was an issue even then, and Sansovino was responsible for keeping the mosaics and tiles in good order. He was less fortunate with one of his own buildings in the piazza. When an ape collapsed in 1545 during the construction of the Libreria Sansoviniana [3], the city bosses put him in jail. He was finally extricated with the help of Titian but still had to pay for the new ape despite some fairly convincing excuses (a cold snap, tremors, stupid workmen). The ultimately imposing library was the centerpiece of a campanile, a philologically significant W.

Take the vaporetto to the Accademia [8]. This is Venice's paintings gallery, established after the French invasion that ended the Venetian Republic. The museum's collections include many works from churches and other public buildings subsequently lost or destroyed. The Accademia was once the grand home of one of Venice's most important charities, the Scuola Grande della Carità. Called scuole, such lay confraternities provided a counterweight to the political power of the nobility, functioning as enlightened welfare agencies, caring for widows, orphans, and the poor. To demonstrate to the outside world of prosperity and power.

In 1630, a plague as virulent as the one that killed Titian wiped out a third of the city. The upside, when it was all over, was Santa Maria della Salute (Our Lady of Good Health) [7], across the Grand Canal, commissioned by the Senate from the architect Baldassare Longhena in a gesture of thanksgiving. He was still adding a few more scrolls and domes when he collapsed after fifty years of devoted labor. The Titians were brought here from the abandoned church of Santo Spirito on the island of Isola. Especially appropriate to the setting is the altarpiece in the Great Sacristy, St. Mark Enthroned with Saints, which evokes the concerns and hopes of the faithful in a time of pestilence. Saint Mark, the patron saint of Venice, is shown in partial shadow, accompanied by medical doctors (Cosmas and Damian) and the two saints especially associated with the plague, Saint Sebastian and the wretched Saint Roch, who has plague sores, called buboes, on his leg. Soaring overhead are three ceiling paintings—done some thirty years later, in the 1540s—that show the influence of Michelangelo: Cain and Abel, David and Goliath, and Abraham and Isaac.

The library also offers an introduction to Tintoretto and to Titian's other younger rival, Veronese, of whom he was much fonder. When he was not yet thirty years old, Veronese received a gold chain from Titian's hand for the luminously beautiful Music.

Outside is the Grand Canal, which is, of course, the city's grand avenue, an incomparable demonstration to the outside world of prosperity and power.

At a later date, this room, the Sala dell'Albergo, is the way it was when Titian embellished it with the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple in 1539. The painting describes an early miracle from the life of the Virgin. The tiny child, surrounded by a halo of light, has chosen all by herself to climb the steep stairs to the temple, to the astonishment of the crowds and the high priest at the top of the stairs. Despite a few biblical-looking costumes, the scene could be taking place in Renaissance Venice: indeed, the four men in the foreground—one dressed in red and the others in black robes—are undoubtedly portraits of important members of the Scuola Grande della Carità. People look down from Venetian-style windows and balconies over a columned portico, a child plays with a dog, the distant landscape recalls the mountains of Titian's birthplace near the Alps. In one of the most notable elements of the picture, aicone huddles beside the steps to the temple with her chicken and basket of eggs, wondering what's the big deal.

Deeper within the museum is one of the great halls of Venetian painting, dominated by Paolo Veronese's Feast in the House of Levi. Veronese painted it as a Last Supper but understandably rethought the title after the Inquisition, when he was interrogated extensively about certain low-life vignettes featuring unsuitably humorous dogs, drunks, and dwarfs. In the same room is Titian's Pietà, which shows the sorrowful Virgin supporting the body of Christ in her lap, lamenting his death, attended by Mary Magdalene and a kneeling figure of Nicodemus who may represent Titian himself. The light catches a golden mosaic with an image of a pelican pecking her breast to feed her young, a symbol of sacrifice. The open brushwork characterizes his late work. The small kneeling figures are most likely the aged painter and his son Orazio. This was the painting Titian expected to have placed on the altar above his own tomb in the church of the Frari: a beautiful image of piety and humility, of Christian faith in Christ's sacrifice. Instead, the plague claimed him and he left it unfinished. The admiring Palma Giovane added
the angel with a funerary torch.

From an earlier period is Titian’s St. John the Baptist, in which the saint looks more like a muscular god than an emaciated hermit. Draped in animal skins, holding a cross, he lifts his right hand to invite others to follow him into an Italianate landscape rather different from the arid lands of the Bible. The painting comes from a chapel in Santa Maria Maggiore, where it stood on the right of the high altar, flanked by a statue of Saint Francis.

Judging by its modest exterior, the Church of San Sebastiano [9] looks like it might house at most a handful of moldy scenes of torture and triumph. Hold on to your socks. The entire church glows with the work of Veronese, who decorated it with frescoes and oils, even painting the organ doors, and was finally buried here in 1588. The ceiling alone is a stunning example of technical brilliance—especially the radiant depiction of the Crowning of Esther. Apparently, his irresistible humor was not dampened by his encounter with the Inquisition over the Last Supper: The exalted queen hovers just above the fat butt of a sturdy Francis of Assisi, in which the saint looks more like a wisp of light than a holy man.

When Titian presented the Assumption to the church on May 19, 1518, he brought Venetian painting to a new plane. Nothing like it had ever been attempted before—the movement and light, the simple, open wonder of the barefoot Virgin, the sturdy figures of the Apostles (which dismayed the friars). But exactly those human qualities of the sacred figures made it the most important sight in Venice, securing Titian’s role as the city’s supreme painter.

The Venetian Republic forbade all statues of individuals in public places, with such rare exceptions as the equestrian portrait of the rich con-dottiere Bartolomeo Colleoni, who left the city a huge bequest of money to raise a statue at St. Mark’s Square. Wily elders took the loot and sent his monument to the distant campo of the Scuola Grande di San Marco. But self-presentation was a typical component of the religious altarpiece, and Jacopo Pesaro appears with his family in the Pesaro Altarpiece that he commissioned for the family tomb. It breaks with tradition by replacing the symmetry and atmosphere of quiet repose with a Virgin holding an energetic infant Christ who kicks his foot and plays with her veil. A bald Saint Peter intervenes with the Virgin, and Franciscan monks present other males of the Pesaro family, including a young boy who is the only figure in the picture to gaze at us. The painting breathes movement and vitality. Most dramatic of all, two huge columns carry our eyes upward to a cloud high overhead, where two infant angels hold a cross, foreshadowing the sacrifice to come.

During World War I, the altarpiece barely escaped destruction when an Austrian bomb failed to explode; the ordnance is now on display nearby.

That leaves the other bomb, the monument to Titian, a stiff monstrosity from 1853. Across the aisle is the elegantly sorrowful tomb designed by Antonio Canova and intended for Titian. A subscription campaign failed to raise the required funds, and when the star sculptor died in 1822, the monument became his, instead. In a macabre disposition of body parts appropriate to an art saint, Canova’s heart is here, his right hand went to the Accademia, and his body to Possagno, his birthplace. The Museo Correr has the model for the tomb.

Before you leave, visit the sacristy to see Giovanni Bellini’s Virgin and Child with Sts. Nicholas, Peter, Mark, and Benedict. Painted twenty years before the Titian Assumption, it is an example of the old style, in its jewellike repose and piety.

The Rialto Bridge [12] was the city’s commercial heart in Titian’s time. “What news on the Rialto?” Shakespeare’s merchant asks even decades later. Right by the bridge and market, on the Academia side of the canal, is the Church of St. Giovanni E imminent, whom Titian painted in the act of dispensing a coin to an outstretched hand. Because too few have followed his example, the church is rarely open.

The Ca’ d’Oro [13] is the most spectacular Gothic palace on the entire canal, a dreamy jewel box whose collection includes a Carpaccio, a Mantegna, and a fine assortment of Venetian bronzes and statues, including a Madonna and Child by Sansovino. The views over the canal are terrific. Titian’s casually draped Venus, a popular image that kept his workshop on overtime, shares a room with a fully clothed Van Dyck nobleman. Note the fresco remnants from the outside walls of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, where the German traders gathered. The warehouse is now the main post office and just up from the bridge. There is some dispute as to whether these frail leftovers are by Giorgione or his young assistant Titian.

Within easy walking distance is the Church of the Gesuati [14], built by the Jesuits in the early eighteenth century on the Fondamente Nuove, where the boats leave for the cemetery and the islands. The contrast between the lighthearted blue-and-white architecture by Domenico Rossi and the repellent subject of the Church of the Gesuati—within, the Martyrdom of St. Lawrence (1548–54), couldn’t be more dramatic. But what technical skill! Look at the remarkable variety of nocturnal light and the dramatic placement of a mysterious palace looming over the saint and his half-lit torturers.

Loop back toward the Grand Canal and the Church of San Salvador [15], designed by Sansovino in the style of the Venetian High Renaissance. The architect also did the tomb for the doge Francesco Venier. Titian’s Transfiguration of Christ is not a masterwork but an awkward depiction of a large Savior levitating past Old Testament prophets in a blinding burst of light. The Annunciation to the Virgin of 1565 is more complexly conceived and shows the fascination with color and light of his later years. Looking like a cousin of the Louvre’s Nike of Samothrace, the angel rushes into Mary’s house as the Holy Ghost, in the form of a dove, descends in a flash of glorious light. The vase of Murano glass in the foreground is a tour de force of artistry. There are also paintings by Titian’s brother Francesco Vecellio; all the painting genes went into one babe.
Tuscany by the Sea

Take all of the Italian heartland's usual objects of desire and add water. Very blue water. Clive Irving revels in the rich bounty of a discreet and luminous littoral.

Photographs by Melanie Acevedo

The abundance of a Tuscan summer table awaits guests at La Parrina, a farm and hotel that has its own cheeses and wines.

Porto Santo Stefano, the main harbor of the Argentario peninsula.
HERE’S A TALL STORY: A DASHING AVIATOR leaps from a crashing plane without a parachute, lands in a tree in Africa, and escapes with his life. A couple of years later, he’s at a party at Pelican Point in Orange County, California, and meets a socialite. She had read of his African escape and admired him from afar and now, up close, admires him even more. He’s working for Porsche in the United States, but they elope to Europe, marry, and start looking for a place to build a new home.

In Rome, they meet a plutocrat from the Borghese family who owns a chunk of real estate on the coast a couple of hours north of Rome. Plutocrat suggests that the aviator build a small hotel on his new coastal property and that aviator and bride run the place. It happens to be the time, in the early 1960s, of the great Roman Dolce Vita, and the small hotel fits right into the time, convenient for the Dolce Vita crowd, some of whom build villas for themselves on the rock face of a dramatic natural amphitheater above the hotel. Aviator and bride become legendary hosts. In honor of the place of their meeting, they call the hotel Il Pellicano. Can it be true? Bear with me . . .

MUCH OF THE INNER TUSCAN landscape is so exquisite in an ordered, natural way that just to drive through it leaves you feeling ecstatic. For example, the road from Florence to Siena and then south toward Rome passes through a succession of short tunnels. As you near the end of each, you see a vignette of landscape framed in the tunnel mouth, a vignette that begins like a small, lapidary watercolor and ends, just before you break free, like a large, brilliant pastoral fresco. In mid-June, when I drove this route, the land had the full intensity of summer pigments: Lower levels were golden with swaths of barley and wheat, the foothills were interspersed with the silver-flecked trees of olive orchards and the emerald canopies of vineyards, and the conical summits were ringed with cypress and usually capped with a large villa or castle, terra-cotta against the azure sky.
The Argentario, really a 2,000-foot mountain, has precipitous rock faces like this one at Punta Calagrande, overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Whatever the truth of the story about the way the Borghese fat cat invited the aviator to found a hotel here, there is no doubt that the virgin site must have been an irresistible eyeful.
La Parrina estate, in the coastal foothills, yields the epitome of the terroir principle—eating the best and freshest directly from the land.

Although landlocked, this Tuscany seems to want for nothing to complete its spell. Least of all does it need a coastline or a sea or a beach. And yet, of course, there is a Tuscan coast bordering the Tyrrenian Sea that stretches 145 miles from Viareggio in the north to Tarquinia in the south. I already knew Viareggio but not with much affection. It has a few vintage grand hotels and one of those beaches organized in blocks of packed loungers and parasols reserved for hotel guests, and although some of the hotels have been spruced up, Viareggio is indistinguishable from a lot of other resorts. Moreover, it has hardly anything to signify that it is in Tuscany—no trace of that ineffable Tuscan style.

On this drive, I was headed from Florence to the southern Tuscan coast, which has an altogether different cast. The terrain is starker, more sharp-edged and rugged, and dominated by a geologically distinct coastal belt called the Maremma, which extends all the way from the southern fringes of Pisa to the northern fringes of Rome. The upper part of the Maremma, called the Colline Metallifere (Metalliferous Hills), is spooky—scabby and tinted with iron ore and tapped for its mineral reserves of lead, copper, and pyrite. Parts of the coast are, consequently, blighted with processing plants.

I first hit the Maremma at its center, where the hills are interrupted by a widening alluvial fan created by the Ombrone River. This was once malaria-ridden marshland; in the Middle Ages, Dante, he of the Inferno, took one look at it and called it hell on earth. In fact, it had not always been so. First the Etruscans and then the Romans drained the marshes and made the area habitable, but the place regressed in the Dark Ages, and not until the early nineteenth century was another attempt made to reclaim it. Work accelerated under Mussolini but was finally completed only in the 1950s. Now it is a model of fertility and irrigation in a rather monotonous landscape.

South of this delta, the Maremma rears up again into a commanding mountainous rump that pushes right to the sea.
most of it now a natural park of nearly ten thousand acres. Hiking and riding trails lead up from Mediterranean scrub forest to bleached, bare outcrops of rock.

Beyond this rump I finally saw the sea, and my objective. It looked like an island sitting just offshore, and indeed an island it once was, but now it’s a promontory called the Argentario, linked by three sandy causeways to the mainland. Inevitably, approaching the western Italian coastline conjures certain stereotypes of desire: The relatively isolated villages of the Cinque Terre, the burnished glamour of Porto Ercole or Positano and the Amalfi Coast, the chic social density of Capri. From these, the Argentario stands apart, far less well known.

There is, for a start, the name to play with. One explanation attributes it to the silver glint of its rocks; when I first set eyes on it, Monte Argentario certainly had the luster of its rocks. It is also possible—less subtly—simply to money. In French the name has no ambiguity: La Côte d’Argent. The Argentario loop is that it refers to bankers (argentarii) or—less subtly—simply to money. In French the name has no ambiguity: La Côte d’Argent. The Money Coast.

The queen of Holland discovered the Argentario long ago and built a summer retreat in a rocky cove, reached by a road that loops around the back of Porto Ercole, the prettiest of two harbor towns. Beyond the royal compound, I found, the road led to the object of my own desire, Il Pellicano.

The first sight of Il Pellicano is of a colony of terra-cotta villas rising up the slopes of the natural amphitheater, and it comes as the road takes a sudden and steep descent. Whatever the truth of the story about the way the Borghese fat cat invited the aviator to found a hotel here, there is no doubt that the virgin site must have been an irresistible eyeful. The oldest core of the hotel is on a final rock shelf about a hundred feet above the water. With the amphitheater behind it and the pellucid Tyrrhenian waters stretching beyond, two qualities were immediately gifted to the hotel’s creators: beauty and privacy. This was never going to be like Portofino or Positano. There was no intermingling of town and visitors, none of that wash of daily energy that animates a Riviera.

If not exactly a secret place, it was bound to be a discreet enclave.

Which brings us back to its founding couple.

**THE AVIATOR’S NAME WAS MICHAEL GRAHAM.** Pictures of him show a dead ringer for Ian Fleming, the begetter of James Bond: hair slicked back from a tanned, finely chiseled face and a cigarette jutting from a holder like a dart about to be fired. Definitely a raffish type, probably short-fused and with that assurance of social entitlement that Brits can assume like a dart about to be fired. Definitely a raffish type, probably short-fused and with that assurance of social entitlement that Brits can assume better than anyone—even if it is counterfeit. Just the kind of guy who would be taken for a class act by the assorted hustlers, stars and starlets, celebrity-loving aristos, bankers, and gigolos whom, in 1960, Fellini melded into a contemporary circus of lust and stylish decay. You can imagine Marcello, Fellini’s alter ego in *La Dolce Vita*, played with suave dissipation by Marcello Mastroianni, not only weighing to a character like Michael Graham but also becoming Graham’s model for the kind of people he wanted to prop up the bar at Il Pellicano. Art, life, money, and discretion would find an ideal home with him.

The hotel opened in 1965. Charlie Chaplin was the guest of honor. There were only eight rooms and, given Graham’s connections, the place was usually full of big names. Graham’s wife, the Californian Patsy Daszel, also had a little black book she could dip into to attract celebrities. It was said that before she was swept off her feet by Graham, she had been dating Clark Gable. She seems to have been a gentler, graceful foil to Graham’s more rampant ego. Il Pellicano, run more like an English country club than a hotel, also served for the Borgheses as a kind of bait for real estate deals. Gradually, the hillside filled with villas built by hotel guests who couldn’t get enough of the idyll. The hotel became the social center of an international set drawn from the worlds of show business, the arts, publishing, banking, industry, and royalty.

But after a decade or so, Graham began overplaying the role of the English eccentric. If he didn’t like the looks of arriving guests, he would turn them away—even if the place was empty. In 1979, one of the Italian partners in the venture, Roberto Sciò, acquired controlling interest in Il Pellicano. Graham’s personality was still pervasive, but the hotel was run on more professional lines. Sciò began a policy of buying villas back when their owners made them available, and the villas were then converted into generously sized suites and rooms to build up the hotel’s accommodations.

Patsy Graham died in 1988 and Graham himself in 1993. Since then, Sciò has spent heavily on the property. In fact, only two villas remain in private hands. The property consists of fifty accommodations, all recently renovated. The original hotel was more or less torn down and rebuilt, adding new kitchens and a beauty spa.

Little of the Graham zeitgeist remains today. Guests, however well-heeled, dress down in a way that tends to blur nationality. After all, those signals sent by a little casual detailing courtesy of Chanel, Prada, Hermès, Ferragamo, are universal now, and the combinations are egalitarian. A polo shirt from the Gap is likely to be mixed with Paul Smith loafers. Certainly, flashy ostentation was not the thing at Il Pellicano. So it’s hard, sometimes, to tell who the really rich are. One morning, I saw a plump middle-aged couple, eschewing valet help, hoisting down their own car outside the reception area. It was a brand-new silver Ferrari 550 Maranello, list price about $213,000, with British plates. They told me that they had just bought it, on impulse, to celebrate their thirtieth wedding anniversary. In a jocular Cockney lilt, the woman said, “I asked me mum if she liked the color. She said it was okay, so we went and bought it.”

I doubt this pair, despite the car, would have passed muster with Michael Graham. He liked cliques. The chosen hung out with him at Patsy at the bar and could obviously become a rowdy crowd. The Sciòs run things with a lot more subtlety. Even when full, the hotel never seems crowded. There is some very discreet manipulation of the guest list. The Anglo-Saxon contingent—meaning Americans and Brits—never exceeds about thirty percent. Sciò’s snap pistol dressed son Roberto Francesco told me, “Nobody wants to flee from Manhattan only to find the same people here.”

I WOULDN’T SAY THAT THE appearance of the Argentario felt to me particularly Tuscan—I missed the fragrant somnolence of the valleys and the villages. The Argentario, like a lot of the coast, seemed peppered not with hilltop villas but with fortifications. That is its history.
It was part of the Republic of Siena when it fell to the Spanish in 1555. They built a chain of castles to defend against the ever-rapacious Turks. Signals of impending invasion could be sent to Siena in ten minutes by a system of smoke and mirrors. This state of paranoia continued when the coast fell under the rule of, in turn, the French, the Austrians, and the Bourbons. It finally reverted to the Tuscans in 1815, and by then, the littoral had more military architecture than it knew what to do with. Unending rape and pillage tend to harden skylines.

Tuscany did, however, reassert its hold in the kitchen at Il Pellicano. I met the chef, Stefano di Salvo, at the start of a day. He had just been down to the fish market in Porto Ercole. I spotted a heap of plump sardines, one of my favorite fish. They would appear later in a marinade. Everything in the kitchen was local—zucchini flowers ready for stuffing, those matchless tomatoes, a rare kind of wild wheat called emmer, which makes a wonderful bread or cereal.

But it was the cheese that I was pursuing, because of an experience the night before involving the restaurant’s cheese board, not something that usually is a particular strength of the Tuscan kitchen. It had presented a succulent symphony of flavors, ranging from a rough-hewn blue of the entire Italian coastlines, west and east, and mayor of the Argentario administrative region, clamped down on the development of Porto Ercole, just as the Dolce Vita–inspired wave threatened to kill the very thing it claimed to love, in the way of such modish tides. The beach, of course, isn’t exactly as it was when, in July 1610, a former fugitive from papal justice, returning after being pardoned for a suspected murder, came ashore only to expire on the sand. Michelangelo Merisi, a.k.a. Caravaggio, who took young ruffians of the street and tavern and made them saints on canvases, thereby transforming Baroque religious painting, had his last gasp in the embrace of the Argentario shore. We should all be so lucky.

Although the Borgheses and Corsinis have sold off chunks of the Argentario—a large piece adjoining Il Pellicano was recently sold to a New York real estate mogul for his own use—it’s one of those places where, after a few days, you sense the presence of exclusive wealth. With such wealth goes a subtle, coercive control over the whole place. Nobody is allowed to trash it up. Advertisements of wealth are regarded as bad taste, and the Argentario has not become a Roman version of the Hamptons or St-Tropez. Porto Ercole, endowed with the physical appeal of a Riviera fishing port, remains a fairly funky, unflashy place despite a brief celebrity appearance in The Talented Mr. Ripley.

In the 1980s, a member of the Agnelli industrial dynasty, Suny Agnelli, a local resident and mayor of the Argentario administrative region, clamped down on the development of Porto Ercole, just as the Dolce Vita–inspired wave threatened to kill the very thing it claimed to love, in the way of such modish tides. The beach, of course, isn’t exactly as it was when, in July 1610, a former fugitive from papal justice, returning after being pardoned for a suspected murder, came ashore only to expire on the sand. Michelangelo Merisi, a.k.a. Caravaggio, who took young ruffians of the street and tavern and made them saints on canvases, thereby transforming Baroque religious painting, had his last gasp in the embrace of the Argentario shore. We should all be so lucky.
In a burst of inspired patronage, the Renaissance Papacy gave the Vatican a collection of sumptuous artworks. **John Julius Norwich** picks his masterpieces, and warns of the potency of papal hospitality.
M Y F I R S T V I S I T T O T H E V A T I C A N, I N February 1956, was impressive indeed: a private audience given to my mother and me by Pope Pius XII in person. I well remember the invitation—really more of a summons—inscribed in fine copperplate beneath the insignia of the Triple Crown and Crossed Keys; my mother was referred to by name, simply as “The Son”—which, in the circumstances, I found distinctly flattering. On reaching the papal apartments we were received by a black-cassocked, pink-buttoned monsignore and led through an apparently endless succession of state rooms, each of which appeared to belong to a different century: One room was occupied exclusively by Swiss Guards, resplendent in that glorious slashed costume of red, blue, and orange stripes, designed—whatever the guides may tell you—by neither Raphael nor Michelangelo; the next, by people dressed as we were; a third, by several immensely tall army officers in braid-encrusted uniforms that were pure nineteenth-century Rutania; a fourth, by a dozen or so elderly gentlemen in inky black doublets and hose and white ruffs, for all the world like Hamlet’s father’s court in a rather old-fashioned repertory production. In the last room we were ceremonially handed over to a bishop, who told us to wait while he informed His Holiness of our arrival; fortunately he left the door very slightly ajar, and peeping through the crack I was astonished to see a pool of purple on the floor as he prostrated himself on the ground before his master.

We went in, and a tall, emaciated figure advanced across the carpet to meet us, his scarlet slippers almost incandescent beneath his snow-white soutane. Carefully briefed in advance, we had been assured that the Holy Father spoke perfect English; this, however, proved something of an exaggeration. After a few halting words of greeting, he left most of the going to us, only occasionally interjecting a positive comment (“Very fine, very fine”) or a negative one (“Very difficult, very difficult”), from which it soon became clear that he had not the faintest idea of what we were talking about. Not surprisingly, the conversation began to flag. We had been warned to bring some religious object for him to bless; all my mother had been able to find was a glass cross containing locks of hair belonging to King William IV, his mistress—the enchanting comédienne Mrs. Jordan—and five of their illegitimate children, from one of whom I am descended. “Don’t let me tell him the story,” she had implored me earlier that morning; but tell it—out of sheer desperation—she did. “Very fine, very fine,” murmured His Holiness, and blessed the object without hesitation. He then asked me whether I had any children and whether they were boys or girls; on learning that I had one of each, he handed me a white rosary for my daughter and a black one for my son and blessed them, too. (Sometimes, we were told, he forgot the second question and absentmindedly murmured, “Black or white?” instead; this had on occasion given rise to misunderstandings.) Finally—and not, we felt, a moment too soon—there arrived a white-tie-and-tailed photographer. The camera flashed; and the audience was over.

Seven years later the telephone rang on my desk in the Foreign Office with the news that I was to serve as general dogsbody to the Duke of Norfolk at the coronation of Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini as Pope Paul VI—at which ceremony, as the senior Roman Catholic of England, the Duke was to be the Queen’s personal representative. This second visit to the Vatican was even more memorable than the first: three days of functions and festivities, reaching its climax with the coronation mass itself, which was held—since it was July and, even by the standards of a
Roman summer, stiffly hot—outdoors, on the steps of St. Peter’s. A reception for the Commonwealth cardinals, given by the British Legation to the Holy See on our first evening, set the scene magnificently: In those days—as today, for all I know—any cardinal attending such a gathering would be in full scarlet-and-magenta robes and preceded by two men carrying enormous lighted candles; the effect, particularly on the dark skin of Cardinal Gracias of Bombay (who spent most of the evening with the Duke talking about cricket) and the immensely tall Cardinal Rugambwa of Tanzania, was breathtaking.

I remember too another, still more splendid reception given by the Vatican itself in the Borgia Apartment (of which more later). As we queued on the stairs in the hundred-degree heat, the British Minister tapped me on the shoulder and whispered, “Watch the drinks, they’re lethal.” Assuming this to be a reference to the Borgias’ distressing habit of poisoning their guests, I laughed heartily and thought no more about it. A few minutes later we were ushered into the first of that glorious enfilade of rooms, in which a long table groaned under the weight of immense wineglasses, each of them filled to the brim with the nearest, drained it at a gulp—and very nearly of their lives.

It was then that I felt, in a way I had never felt before, the full majesty of the Papacy. This elderly, undistinguished-looking little man with the bald head and the huge ears was the successor in direct and unbroken line to Saint Peter himself—and who had been chosen by Christ as the Rock on which the Church was to be built; who, if tradition was to be believed, was himself crucified (upside down, at his own insistence) within yards of where I was sitting; and whose tomb, discovered as recently as 1949, lies in the Vatican Grottoes immediately beneath the Basilica. What other human being, I asked myself, enjoyed such prestige and exercise such immense spiritual authority over so many people? What other institution could boast nearly two thousand years of history and still pack so powerful a punch?

All these things—the prestige, the authority, the history, and the punch—are most perfectly illustrated by the Basilica itself. Like all successful churches, it knows the value of drama. This begins long before we even reach it, with the approach across the piazza between the sweeping arcs of Bernini’s colonnade, and increases steadily as we pass the obelisk—moved here from Nero’s Circus in 1586 by Sixtus V, who thus set a fashion for obelisks—and mount the broad, shallow steps to what in any other major ecclesiastical building would be the west front but which, in fact, faces east. (It is one of the eccentricities of St. Peter’s that it is built, liturgically speaking, back to front, with the altar at the west end.) Yet even now we are not entirely prepared for what lies ahead. The first object of St. Peter’s is to impress, and it succeeds. That vast space, those gigantic fluted pilasters that look as if they could hold up the universe, that extraordinary baroque sugar Baldacchino (Bernini again, with his great bronze sunburst in the apse behind it), the sculptures, the mosaics, that immense gilded dome soaring up to heaven—everything comes together in a single explosion of glory so tremendous that you can almost hear the trumpets. Here, unmistakably, is the Church Triumphant.

It is not a lovable building; but then, the Roman Catholic Church has seldom (if ever) been a lovable institution. Many people—particularly British and Americans, in whose native lands the full-blown Baroque is relatively unknown and thus almost invariably misunderstood—find it almost shocking: This, they argue, is not a house of God, like Durham or Chartres; it is merely a drawing room for his ministers. As it happens, they are wrong: Despite today’s tourist hordes, there is as much genuine devotion in the world’s second-greatest Christian shrine as in any religious building on earth. But sanctity lies, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder; and it is hard indeed for people brought up to expect places of worship to be Romanesque, Gothic, or eighteenth-century classical—let alone anyone with the faintest of Low Church leanings—to feel entirely at ease amid such shameless opulence.

Although the decision to replace old St. Peter’s (which had already stood for almost a thousand years and was beginning to crumble) was taken by the first of the great Renaissance popes, Nicholas V, in 1450, nothing much was done for another half century; it was only on April 18, 1506, that the formidable Julius II laid the foundation stone for the new great basilica, entrusting the work to the leading architect of the day, Donato Bramante. But Julius died in 1513, Bramanate a year later, and Raphael—who the architect nominated as his successor—in 1520; and work was interrupted yet again by the Sack of Rome, by German and Spanish troops, in 1527. At last, on January 1, 1547, the seventy-one-year-old Michelangelo was summoned by Pope Paul III to take charge; and St. Peter’s was to prove perhaps his greatest achievement—one on which he labored, refusing all payment, for the last seventeen years of his life. Most of the interior architecture we see today is his, including the basic plan in the shape of a Greek cross (the nave was lengthened early in the following century), the giant Corinthian pilasters, and, crowning all, the breathtaking dome—which he never saw, since it was still uncompleted at his death.

Michelangelo’s St. Peter’s is the work of an old man; but in the first chapel on the right—that now, sadly, behind a toughened glass screen since an attack by a lunatic some twenty years ago—stands the greatest monument to his youth, the Pietà. There are several other superb sculptures in the Basilica—Arnolfo di Cambio’s bronze statue of Saint Peter, his right foot worn and polished by the kisses of the faithful; Bernini’s tomb of Alexander VII and Pollaiuolo’s of Innocent VIII; even Canova’s monument to the last of the English Stuarts—but none of them can bear a moment’s comparison with this sublime mas-
The names of these tremendous pontiffs crop up again and again as we go through the palaces. The names of these tremendous pontiffs—succession of Renaissance popes who reigned—and gaze down over the Eternal City. Alternatively, we can descend to the Vatican Grottoes and another group of papal tombs—including that of John XXIII, always covered in flowers. More fascinating than either, however, is what is known as the Pre-Constantinian Necropolis. It was discovered only in 1940, when engineers digging out the tomb of Pius XI accidentally hit on what proved to be part of a Roman mausoleum. The new pope, Pius XII, immediately ordered a full-scale excavation, and nine years later there was revealed a complete cemetery of the first and first centuries A.D., together with a rudimentary tomb that there is good evidence to believe may be that of Saint Peter himself. What the poor Galilean fisherman would say of the extravagant building above him that bears his name has for centuries been an irresistible subject of speculation—though my own guess is that he would be absolutely delighted.) The necropolis can be visited only by special permit (obtainable through the Ufficio Scavio on the south side of the Piazza), but this is well worth the trouble.

And so to the palace and museums. I find, after a good many visits over the years, that my favorites in the Vatican are not so much individual objects but intrinsic parts of the palace itself. Unlike most of the contents of the museums, all these rooms (or suites of rooms) were inspired or commissioned by one or another of that magnificent succession of Renaissance popes who reigned between the mid-fifteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries. The names of these tremendous pontiffs crop up again and again as we go through the palace and museums, and since they were not only among the most colorful in the whole history of the Papacy but also did more than anyone else to restore Rome to her ancient glory, it might be a good idea to introduce the most important of them, very briefly, here.

First was Nicholas V (1447–55), the best and most enlightened of all the Renaissance popes. A passionate lover of the arts and sciences, he founded the Apostolic Library and restored many of Rome’s ruined churches; it was he who had the original idea of rebuilding St. Peter’s and the Vatican Palace. His successor, Calixtus III, was the first pope of that Spanish house of Borgia which was later to become a byword for papal infancy; but apart from making one of his nephews cardinals—the future Alexander VI—he did no serious harm and can at least claim the credit for annihilating (unfortunately rather too late) the sentence on Joan of Arc and declaring her innocent.

Next came Pius II (1458–64), whose life is so sumptuously illustrated by Pinturicchio’s paintings in the Piccolomini Library of Siena Cathedral. He was an indomitable traveler (he got his toes frostbitten in Scotland) and compulsive writer, and his works include not only a brilliant autobiography but—surprisingly—a love story, *Euryalus and Lucretia*. Pius’s second successor was Sixtus IV (1471–84), who created—and gave his name to—the Sistine Chapel and Choir, restored countless churches all over Rome, broadened streets, paved piazzas, andspanned the Tiber with a fine new bridge, the Ponte Sisto; in other respects, however, he was a worldly and ambitious ruler who enriched his family and embroiled himself deeply in those endless intrigues that made up so much of Italian political life.

After the brief and unremarkable reign of Innocent VIII came the second Borgia pope, Alexander VI (1492–1503), who was to make five of his family cardinals (and was said to keep a whole harem of young girls and boys in the Vatican for nocturnal orgies) but who also rebuilt much of the ancient city. Then—following a few months under another nontentity—came Alexander’s sworn enemy Julius II (1503–13), as much a soldier and statesman as he was a pope. Julius was succeeded by Leo X (1513–21), the thirty-eight-year-old son of Lorenzo de’ Medici (“the Magnificent”) who will always be remembered for his exultant words to his brother when he became pope—“God has given us the Papacy, now let us enjoy it”—and who was to prove one of the greatest patrons of the arts that even papal Rome ever produced. Finally, after the Dutchman Hadrian VI and another Medici pontiff who took the name of Clement VII (1523–34), there was Paul III (1534–49), who boasted at least four illegitimate children but in whose reign Michelangelo painted the *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel and assumed responsibility for the completion of the Vatican Palace and the new St. Peter’s.

### The Earliest of the Really Great Masterpieces in the Palace

In all Italy there are few things lovelier than this tiny room. Painted by Fra Angelico between 1447 and 1449, it is suffused with the spirit of the early Renaissance, a world of purity and simplicity and innocence that seems infinitely far removed from that of the darker, sterner century which was to follow. Next in date comes the Bor gia Apartment, so called because it was chosen by Alexander VI for his own personal use on his accession in the fateful year of 1492. Its decoration he entrusted to a certain Bernardino di Betto, called Pinturicchio, who had been assistant to Perugino in the Sistine Chapel some fifteen years before. The first two of the six rooms are relatively austere, but Room IV (Alexander’s former study, which is dedicated to the sciences and liberal arts), Room V (which portrays the lives of the saints and carries a strong Egyptian flavor), and Room VI (the pope’s dining room, which explores the mysteries of the faith) are—with their richness of color, exuberance of stucco, and extravagant use of gold leaf—as sumptuous a celebration of the glory of a single family as can be found anywhere on earth. Alexander himself appears in the fresco of the Resurrection, affecting a degree of piety that was conspicuously absent from his life; his infamous son Cesare Borgia stands nearby, together with the brother he murdered; the pope’s daughter Lucrezia appears in Room V, inappropriately disguised as the virgin saint Catherine of Alexandria; while, again and again, the splendid ceiling features the bull and crown that were the Borgia emblems. Only Room VII, the so-called Sala dei Pontifici (“Room of the Popes”), though by far the largest of the series, is something of an anticlimax. Its ceiling collapsed in 1500, nearly killing Alexander—who was in the room at the time—and largely destroying the original decoration, which was replaced by lesser artists under Leo X. Immediately above the last Borgia rooms are the Raphael stanze. Essentially, these consist of the four rooms that were used as the official apartments of the warrior-pope Julius II (1503–13)—who he commissioned the Sistine Ceiling—and his ten successors until Gregory XIII (1572–85). In the previous century the rooms had already been frescoed by a group that included Piero della Francesca and Andrea del Castagno; to Julius, however, such painters seemed boring and old-fashioned. He first decided to call in a new team consisting of Perugino, Baldassare Peruzzi, Sodoma, and Lorenzo Lotto; then, in the autumn of 1508, he heard Bramante speak of a prodigiously talented patriot of his from Urbino, a young genius of twenty-six named Raffaello Sanzio. Raphael was summoned to Rome, shown the rooms in question, and given carte blanche.

Only the two central stanze are entirely by his hand. The first, the Stanza d’Inciendo—named after the great fire of 847, which, we are told, was quelled when Leo IV made the sign of the cross before it—has a ceiling by Raphael’s master, Pe-
Michelangelo. The walls, frescoed for Sixtus IV between 1475 and 1480, are themselves an art gallery of the early Renaissance, with glorious work by Perugino, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, and Rosselli, to say nothing of Pinturicchio, Piero di Cosimo, Bartolomeo della Gatta, and Lucia Signorelli. Thus the chapel would have been world famous even if Julius II had not called on Michelangelo to paint the ceiling some thirty years later, in 1508. It took him four years. The result was nine monumental panels telling the story of the Book of Genesis from the Creation to the Flood, supported by naked youths (so-called ignudi) of uncertain significance, with prophets and sibyls below them. But this was not the end. Nearly a quarter of a century later, in 1536, at the age of sixty-one, Michelangelo began work on the western end of the chapel. His Last Judgment was unveiled on October 31, 1541, twenty-nine years to the day after the unveiling of the ceiling; but during those years the painter’s world had changed out of all recognition. Papal Rome had watched in impotent dismay as the baleful influence of Martin Luther and his heretical Protestant doctrines spread relentlessly across much of northern and Central Europe; in 1527 the Sack of Rome had provided still further confirmation of the wrath of God. Was this the penalty exacted by the Almighty for the confident humanism of the early Renaissance? It certainly seemed so. By the 1530s a new austerity was in the air—grim, militant, and unforgiving. It is known as the Counter-Reformation, and it certainly seemed as if it were the end of the confident humanism of the early Renaissance. The astonishing variety of its collections—quite apart from the world-famous Chiaramonti and Pio-Clementino museums, there is an Egyptian Museum, a Papal-Historical Museum, an Etruscan Museum, a Missionary-Ethological Museum, even a Profane Museum, to say nothing of the superb art gallery (the Pinacoteca, with its roomful of Raphaeli and one of the greatest libraries in the world) cannot be attributed to any one pope or even a group of them. Its possessions have been acquired over nearly two thousand years and in every conceivable way: by accident, by design, by inheritance, and by pure good luck. They have been bought and borrowed, begged and bequeathed, seized and stolen; paid in tribute or given in homage to saintly popes, demanded in ransom and extorted as blackmail by villainous ones. The result, inevitably, is a hodgepodge—but a hodgepodge that has been touched by magic.

The Vatican, with its total area of just 109 acres, is not only the smallest but, in terms of art, far and away the richest independent state on earth. No single article—a single book, even—can hope to cover all the treasures it contains. The astonishing variety of its collections—quite apart from the world-famous Chiaramonti and Pio-Clementino museums, there is an Egyptian Museum, a Papal-Historical Museum, an Etruscan Museum, a Missionary-Ethological Museum, even a Profane Museum, to say nothing of the superb art gallery (the Pinacoteca, with its roomful of Raphaeli and one of the greatest libraries in the world) cannot be attributed to any one pope or even a group of them. Its possessions have been acquired over nearly two thousand years and in every conceivable way: by accident, by design, by inheritance, and by pure good luck. They have been bought and borrowed, begged and bequeathed, seized and stolen; paid in tribute or given in homage to saintly popes, demanded in ransom and extorted as blackmail by villainous ones. The result, inevitably, is a hodgepodge—but a hodgepodge that has been touched by magic.

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