

Insider's Italy: Oprah's favorite upscale tour company opens doors and makes you feel like family

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Photo: Access Italy, Contributor

On Ponza, a short yacht ride from Rome, colorful stucco houses and friendly cafes set a scene reflecting an Italy frozen in time.

Angelo Amorico is leading me through the throngs at the Vatican at a pace. In the Gallery of Maps, before the Papal Throne, along the gobsmacking spiral staircase, he manages to find a portal of expansiveness, a swathe momentarily free from humanity, where I can commune with a painting, a mosaic, a mummy or a bronze statue without anyone bumping into me.

Those valuable seconds allow me to snap a photograph or simply take the time to immerse in an ancient object, to place it in history, to give it the meaning it deserves.

Darting through the holy complex's 9 miles of lavish nooks and crannies, Angelo receives the attention of a celebrity. As we approach, velvet ropes are lifted, doors unlocked, secret passageways revealed. Touring the Vatican can exhaust and overwhelm tourists, but I feel energized. I've been given the chance to enjoy peace and parcel of this magnificent destination.

"Imagine," says Angelo, "I can get you a private tour next time. We'll come back when the Vatican is closed. We'll have it all to ourselves."

MORE INFORMATION

If you go

You can book Access Italy's custom tours, often led by the owners themselves, directly or through a travel agent. Prices vary depending on activity but start at \$450 - the behind-the-scenes Vatican tour is about \$2,500 for a half day for two people, for example; accessitaly.net or 888-499-5513.

He can do that. In the VIP tour business for 35 years, this Italian wunderkind - Oprah's pal and favorite tour guide - runs Access Italy with his two sons, Marco and Simone. His wife, Eva, and a slew of personally trained and vetted guides across Italy, add to his cast of impossible dream makers.

They can guide you through a Vatican visit after hours, get you a personal audience with the Pope, ensure front-row seats at Vatican events, and - wait for it - take you into secret Vatican rooms usually only accessible to cardinals.

How does Angelo do it? I ask him, imagining he'll tilt his head at a rakish angle and say, "I'd tell you, but I'd have to kill you." He doesn't.

Instead, he leads me down a corridor somewhere near the Sistine Chapel. As if by magic, manifold guards let us pass, until we've entered a normally locked door, now left ajar for Angelo. A treasure trove of papal history awaits. From chalices to vestments to be-jeweled Pope shoes, I see riches and artifacts dating back centuries. This is where the church's elite tends to business.

Being here, alone with Angelo, with the tourists tromping en masse outside the door, with gilt and glory neatly arranged in cabinets, I stop and remember the point of travel: discovery and the willingness to let your mind be boggled. That can't always happen in a crowd.

Here, I have been given the gift of opportunity. I've seen something most people can't even conjure in their imagination. The irony of it is that I'm on oath to not describe it - "I'd tell you, but I'd have to kill you," right?

Writer Miguel de Cervantes wrote the commonly quoted phrase, "When thou art in Rome, do as they do in Rome." Angelo and Access Italy help you live like a Roman - a very, lucky, entitled Roman, perhaps - if just for a day or a week.

So, while I've promised not to describe the Vatican's secret corridors in detail, I can tell you about the ancient, subterranean Jewish catacombs, not open to the public; the gelato-making class that the guides set up for the Obama children; the cooking course held in Angelo and Eva's kitchen (they live in a restored monastery, by the way); the go-straight-to-the-front-of-the-line access to rooftop bars that overlook the Piazza Navona organized by Simone; the fashionista-oriented Milan shopping tour; the truffle hunt in the Piedmont region (an Oprah favorite); the Brunello wine area helicopter tour; a Michael Corleone-themed "Godfather" tour in Sicily; and the afternoon cruise around Lake Como by boat.

That's just the beginning, of course. Angelo seems to know everybody in Italy - the nation is his garlic-infused oyster.

Perhaps my favorite day with Access Italy happens on a boat. Most people don't associate boats with Rome proper. One thinks of gondolas in Venice, rowboats to the Blue Grotto in Capri, ferries to Positano. (Access Italy can make all that happen, by the way.) But rarely does a tourist board a yacht near Rome and take to the sea.

Accompanied by Angelo and his three best friends - who play a mean game of competitive poker - I spend the day on Access Italy's well-appointed yacht, sailing the Van Gogh-blue waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea to Ponza, an idyllic,

volcanic isle about 20 miles from the mainland. Part of the Pontine Islands, this archipelago had once been where banished Christians gathered during the Roman Empire and anti-fascists fled for safe harbor centuries later.

Today, Ponza is the realm of wine growers, fishermen and year-round residents, who watch their population swell as summer revelers anchor their yachts and overtake the perfect beaches. From the water, the small island suggests a castle, with its soaring, bone-white cliffs and craggy, cappuccino-colored rocks. Stucco houses in rainbow colors lie in clusters, and characteristic bars and friendly al fresco cafes set a scene beachside and in the village, reflecting an Italy frozen in time.

After a scenic cruise around Ponza, and the nearby islands of Palmarola and Ventotene, we moor the boat, making our own gin-clear swimming pool from the sea. We dive, frolic and sunbathe for hours, the private cove beyond like a privacy wall, the birds our only interlopers.

On the way back to Rome, Angelo, who is everybody's favorite uncle, makes us a very late, onboard lunch (pasta with tomatoes, Parma ham, strawberries), pours us wine and wonders if anybody wants to play another game of cards. It's a dream. Being a Roman in Rome - or at least the coastal waters near Rome. One of Angelo's friends even lends me his sweater when I get cold.

Back at my hotel, The First Roma, a boutique gem near the Spanish Steps, marveling at the view from the top-floor bar with Simone, Angelo's son, a one-time professional tennis player.

This is the sort of hotel that Access Italy partners with - it colorfully elicits the culture, rooting into Rome's sophisticated style of dolce vita. On this trip, they've booked me, also, into historic Villa d'Este, an aristocratic estate on the banks of Lake Como, a shout from George Clooney's villa. In Milan, I've enjoyed the Four Seasons, ensconced in a re-kitted 15th-century cloister, set in the heart of the city's most fashionable shopping district.

But, as much as I love a nice hotel, travel is about the people you meet. And it's Simone, with his big smile and generous family, that defines Rome for me now, despite how many times I have visited.

He's pointing out the sites from the panoramic terrace, as exhilarated to share what he loves as I am to hear it. That's what a good guide does. They coax you into friendship, welcome you into their world and cajole you into feeling you belong.