

SHEER SPLENDOUR — The Palazzo Colonna is one of the most extravagant palaces in Europe. Stefano Aluffi-Pentini is one of those who has access to the private apartments.



OASIS OF CALM — The Orto di Santa Croce in Gerusalemme (above), in an ancient Roman amphitheatre, has recently been restored.



SPECIAL PLACES

STEFANO ALUFFI-PENTINI

THE MAN WHO OPENS DOORS

THE CITY IS FULL OF PRIVATE PALACES, GARDENS AND GALLERIES THAT REMAIN HIDDEN FROM THE GENERAL PUBLIC. ONLY ONE MAN CAN OPEN THE DOORS TO VISITORS

BY — Elisabeth Minchilli PHOTOS — Davide Monteleone, A Private View of Italy (1)



PURELY PRIVATE — Rare antiquarian books on the history of art form the basis for the very private tours run by Stefano Aluffi-Pentini. It is here that he discovers the secret Rome.
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— THE ATTRACTION OF ROME consists largely in the fact that much of it remains a secret. The heavenly scent of jasmine bushes hidden behind a high stone wall, the splashing of a fountain glimpsed behind wrought-iron railings. Rome is a world that has existed for centuries and, after you have chanced to stroll through, will live on for a long time to come. In the 18th century, before setting off on the Grand Tour, the nobility of Europe obtained letters of recommendation in order to secure admission to some of these many villas and palaces, which to this day have remained in the same private hands.

Aluffi-Pentini, with his firm A Private View of Italy, makes such delights rather more accessible than before and opens the doors to a number of the grandest and most private residences in Italy.

"I want to create a kind of rebirth of the Grand Tour," explains Stefano Aluffi-Pentini, founder and head of the company. His youthful charm, and a manner that is as casual as it is unpretentious, belie his age (he is 41). The idea for an altogether exclusive programme of visits came to him because he wanted to share with others his immense knowledge of Rome and his excellent social contacts.

"I had the good fortune to see Rome through the eyes of my grandfather and my uncle," says Aluffi-Pentini. "Bruno Maria Apolloni-Ghetti, my grandfather, was one of the country's best known archaeologists and architectural historians. Among other things he was a member of the excavation team that succeeded in rediscovering the tomb of St Peter. I was often allowed to go with him to his excavations, and many of those took us to places in Rome which scarcely anyone knew about: palaces, villas and churches."

ART HISTORY MADE TO MEASURE

After studying the history of art, Aluffi-Pentini decided, with his newly founded agency, to create a sort of link between culture, commerce and a hand-picked clientele. "We are fortunate that our customers are among the absolute elite," he states, and by that he means not only people such as the governors of the American Academy of Rome, or the World Heritage Fund, but also stars like Madonna. Aluffi-Pentini and his team of expert art historians work out tours and historically inspired events at the original locations, each of them tailored to the interests of the client.

“WE HAVE ACCESS TO THE TRULY PRIVATE PALACES.”

Visitors normally see only the Rome that is accessible to the public, but Stefano Aluffi-Pentini opens doors which only a handful of the select may enter: “I have the advantage of having grown up in the Roman aristocracy and having access to many art collections, palaces and villas which are otherwise strictly off limits.” Both sides of his family – the Apolloni-Ghetti on his mother’s side and the Aluffi-Pentini on his father’s – can trace their blue blood back for centuries and are among the “black” aristocracy who stood staunchly on the side of the Popes.

The programmes that Stefano Aluffi-Pentini works out for his clients are individually tailored. They can last from one to ten days. The price (on request, needless to say) is based on what is provided in each case: “We can offer our clients extraordinary adventures, to suit whatever taste.” Only recently, his firm organised an event for a group of financial experts that began with a boat trip to a cave on the Amalfi coast which, back in ancient times, had been fitted out with bridges and stairways. They were then taken to a private lemon grove, where lunch was served: with a limitless view over the Gulf of Sorrento.

Though Stefano Aluffi-Pentini’s programme now includes tours throughout Europe, he retains close ties with the city in which he grew up. Rome, he says, differs from all other capitals, in which the great houses and collections with resounding names have long since been turned into public museums. “Rome is the only city in Europe whose historic palaces and villas have remained, to a large extent, in private hands. The reason for this is the elective monarchy of the Vatican: with every newly elected Pope a different family achieved supreme power, a fact which enabled them to commission incredibly grand buildings and the most exquisite works of art. And astonishingly, to this day, many of their descendants still live in their family seats.”

CONCERT WITHIN HISTORIC WALLS

Not long ago, Stefano Aluffi-Pentini accompanied a group of museum patrons from the USA into the Palazzo Colonna, one of the most magnificent palaces anywhere in Europe. The imposing collection of paintings can now be viewed twice a week by the public. However, Aluffi-Pentini arranged a sumptuous candle-lit dinner in the baroque Hall of Mirrors, whose grandeur and gilt stucco are in every way a match for its famous model, the Sun King’s palace at Versailles. Before this, his guests attended a concert in the Sala della Musica: “The quartet, whose instruments included a historic harpsichord, played an 18th-century piece by Pergolesi which might have been given its first performance in that very room.”

“What we offer is a ‘private’ visit in the truest sense of the word,” adds Aluffi-Pentini. “And not merely ‘private’ because it is a programme that is being offered exclusively to that particular client, but also because we can obtain access to some of the ‘most private’ buildings in the whole of Italy. Only in this way can people grasp something absolutely essential which has shaped not only the history and culture, but above all the soul of Italy.” ☺

Five must-see destinations in Rome – at least in the eyes of Stefano Aluffi-Pentini:

GALLERIA COLONNA

Via della Pilotta

Opening times:

Saturdays 9 a.m. – 1 p.m., closed August

The collection of paintings is open to the public, but Stefano Aluffi-Pentini also organises visits to the private apartments of the palace.

GALLERIA SPADA

Piazza Capo di Ferro

Opening times: Tuesdays to Saturdays, 9 a.m. – 7 p.m.; Sundays and holidays 9 a.m. – 1 p.m.

This jewel of a private collection is open daily to the public.

GALLERIA DORIA PAMPHILI

Piazza del Collegio Romano 2

www.doriapamphilj.it

Opening times:

Fridays to Wednesdays 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.

Guided tour through the palace apartments each day at 10.30, 11.00, 11.30 and 12 noon.

The collection of the Doria Pamphilj family is one of the best private art collections not just in Rome but in the whole of Europe. The guided tours also take in the private apartments.

ORTO DI SANTA CROCE IN GERUSALEMME

Situated right next to the Basilica di Santa Croce in Gerusalemme; opening times vary and it is best to enquire by ringing +39 06 7014769.

This monastery garden has recently been completely restored and is a rare oasis of quiet, set in the middle of an ancient Roman amphitheatre.

STUDIO BIBLIOGRAFICO “LA LINEA D’OMBRA” DI ANTONELLO FRANCESCHI

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Stefano Aluffi-Pentini designs his tours on the basis of intensive research. In this extremely well-stocked antiquarian bookshop he finds many of his rare guides to art, old travel accounts and essays from earlier centuries.