

The SIGHTSEEING SOONERS

OU alumni are discovering that it's never too late to explore the world, especially with fellow Sooners at your side.

By LYNETTE LOBBAN

On a sunny afternoon in Ravello, Italy, a group from the University of Oklahoma scatters across the hilltop city, giddy from the sea air and the spectacular views of the Amalfi Coast 1,100 feet below. In the past 15 years, thousands of OU students have had similar experiences as they delve into study-abroad options in more than 80 countries. These energetic Sooners, however, are not college students. They belong to a growing number of parents and alumni asking, “Why should the kids have all the fun?” as they take part in educational travel opportunities with OU’s Sightseeing Sooners.

The program has been around since the 1960s, but tours offered through the Alumni Association have shifted into high gear in the past decade — with more than 30 destinations offered annually from the Australian outback to a luxury cruise down the Danube. Many trips include OU faculty hosts, who enrich the experience with their expertise from architecture to classical music. This past October, a group of 23 alumni, friends and spouses joined OU hosts Clive and Hope Mander in a “Portrait of Italy,” which explores the country from Naples to Venice over 17 days.

Alumna Judith Barnett says she was attracted to both the

itinerary and traveling companions. “If you are going all the way to Italy, you might as well stay for a while,” she says. “The itinerary covers so much more of the country than I would get to see on my own, and it was nice to have the company.”

For three nights, the Marmorata, a four-star hotel nestled into the rocky coast of the Tyrrherian Sea, was home base as the Sooners took in Pompeii, Montecassino and the breathtaking coastline drive from Sorrento to Salerno. At most sites, the group was met by a local guide and given a private tour of the area. Armed with insider information from where to find the best shopping to hidden historical sites, the travelers were free to explore independently, or in the company of others, regrouping at dinner to compare adventures over a glass of wine.

“We wanted to build something that alumni would want to be a part of and feel special in that group,” says Lea Ann Quirk, director of Alumni Programs. “We want them to know that this is an OU trip and that they will be taken care of.”

continued

An umbrella tree stands in stark relief against the blue waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea along Italy’s Amalfi Coast. The Ravello Tree, as it is known, is one of the most photographed botanical celebrities in the world and welcomes travelers to the Villa Rufolo gardens, which date back to the 13th century.



Since Quirk became director in 2011, the number of participants has tripled and frequently includes repeat travelers. A large part of customer satisfaction is tied to behind-the-scenes preparations by the director and the Alumni Association staff. Each trip is carefully curated long before guests set foot in an airport, beginning with email correspondence and a pre-travel “thank you” packet, that includes a detailed itinerary, basic language translations, contact numbers, travel tips and a guide book or history of the region.

“We went to Ireland with Sightseeing Sooners,” says Linda Hutchins of Wichita, Kan., who travels with husband Frank. “Our guide [OU professor Jonathan Stalling] was incredible. The accommodations were great; the meals were great. We bonded so well with the other travelers, we thought, ‘We can’t replicate this.’”

“And then ‘Portrait of Italy’ came along and took it to a whole other level. The trips were totally different, but both were exceptional. We are already talking about where to go next.”

The Alumni Association partners with established travel providers, who have special knowledge of their region for the most intimate, “non-tourist” experiences. One evening, the “Portrait” group was invited into the subterranean lair of master chef Lorenzo Polegri for a private cooking class. The Sooners tackled pasta making with the determination of an OU linebacker at the Sugar Bowl. After mixing, rolling and slicing, they sampled their handiwork in an elaborate seven-course meal prepared by Polegri.

Traveling with fellow Sooners has other perks. Anyone needing a USB cord, cold medicine, a hair straightener or umbrella need



Mark Landt

A night view of the Colosseum gives visitors a glimpse into centuries past when it was Rome’s largest entertainment venue. A marvel of architecture and engineering, construction on the amphitheater was begun in 72 A.D.



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OU hosts Hope and Clive Mander enriched the experience for Sooners on the “Portrait of Italy” tour with their friendship and knowledge on a variety of subjects. Hope is the associate director of OU’s Institute for Quality Communities and Clive is OU’s Chief Audit Executive.



A ceiling fresco at the Vatican Museums depicts Apollo and the Muses. There are nearly 4.5 miles of exhibition space at the museums, making the collection one of the largest in the world, from Egyptian mummies to old masters and modern paintings.

look no further than their elbow for someone willing to help. Italian-based Odysseys Unlimited guide Cathy Cauwelier soon learned that if she needed the group's immediate attention, all she had to do was yell, "Boomer!" and 23 heads would swivel in her direction, calling "Sooner!" in reply.

Cauwelier kept the travelers on course and on time with good humor and endless patience. The Sooners cruised like rock stars from chartered bus to the front of lines at some of Italy's most popular destinations. When I joined the group on its first full day in Rome, we were amazed to find the Colosseum laid out before us, nearly uninhabited, with a local guide and historian ready to share her insight and answer every question.

After learning that, in its heyday, the amphitheater held nearly 80,000, the Sooners mentally superimposed that count over a stadium near and dear to their hearts and were impressed that the Roman facility could disgorge all 80,000 fans in less than 30 minutes.

Not far from the Colosseum, amid the ruins and temples that once were the seat of Rome's political power, Sooner hands touched the shrine where Julius Caesar's ashes were placed after his assassination at the hands of Roman senators in 44 B.C.

"Where we live, anything built 100 years ago is old," says Mike Adams, an OU alumnus from Norman. "Here, people are using the same streets that have been here 1,000 years or more. It broadens your perspective."

Today, Rome is a mixture of ancient and modern, where glass and steel office buildings coexist with statues of gods go-

ing about their business as they have for thousands of years. Turn a corner and you may find Fame driving her quadriga atop the Courthouse Palace; Neptune, naked and barrel-chested rising from a fountain; and lesser known deities carrying a virgin or an uprooted tree like briefcases on their way to work.

"The 'Portrait of Italy' tour was like an Italian painting," says Oklahoma City neurologist Farhat Husain. "A collage of the entire country, not just one part. We got to feel the range and intensity of life here."

Harmony and balance — the hallmarks of Italian art and architecture — also describe the blend of OU travelers. Each member of the group, made up of doctors, teachers, accountants, attorneys, social workers and energy consultants, contributed something unique to the tour, as did the OU hosts. Clive Mander, a native Londoner who is now OU's Chief Audit Executive, and his Turkish wife, Hope, associate director of OU's Institute for Quality Communities, were always up for a late evening walk, impromptu shopping or a quest for the perfect gelato. Ranging in age from 40s to 80s, most of the Sooners were accompanied by spouses, friends or family, but nearly a fourth came solo.

There was also a wonderful variety and balance in how the days unfolded. Generally, mornings were reserved for guided tours or travel, and afternoons were free for exploring an entire city or savoring one special place. After a visit to the Sistine Chapel, Hope Mander recalls, "I didn't want to see anything else that day. I just wanted to absorb it with every pore."

Some places required a second look. When daytime crowds obscured the view of the famous Trevi Fountain, a few Sooners walked back that evening and were rewarded by a nearly empty square, the white stone of the Baroque masterpiece creamy smooth and lustrous under the night sky. In keeping with the legend, coins were tossed over shoulders to ensure the visitors' return to Rome.

After Rome, the next home base was Orvieto, a former Etruscan city in Umbria. Built on a natural plateau and fortified by city walls, Orvieto was the last Etruscan city to fall to the Roman Empire. The Etruscans were a resourceful bunch and dug private wells in the soft volcanic stone beneath their homes. The cooler temperatures also allowed them to store food in the roomy caves, giving them the closest thing to indoor plumbing and refrigeration available in 700 B.C.

During the Middle Ages, Orvieto residents added small rectangular holes in the cave walls for pigeon coops. A high window allowed the birds to come and go and provided a staple food supply should the city come under siege.

Orvieto is also home to the soaring Italian Gothic cathedral, St. Mary of the Assumption. Built over three centuries beginning in 1290, the Duomo is a masterpiece of Italian ar-



Frank Hutchins of Wichita, Kan., gets some pointers from Chef Lorenzo Polegri on how to cut pasta dough into perfect shapes during a private cooking class for the Sightseeing Sooners in Polegri's Orvieto restaurant.

chitecture and craftsmanship. While the sides of the cathedral are garbed in the black and white stripes popular in Byzantine architecture, the exterior façade of the cathedral shimmers with gold mosaics and rich colors portraying the lives of saints and other Biblical stories, including the Creation and the Last Judgment. Between such towering landmarks as the cathedral and the city clock tower, it's nearly impossible to get lost in this town of winding narrow streets and charming shops.

From Orvieto, the Sooners traveled to Assisi, the birthplace of St. Francis. When the Romans conquered the city in 295 B.C., they erected walls and a city gate that was closed each night until the 1970s. While both the legend and the Basilica of St. Francis are more famous, the surprise to many visitors was the story of Santa Chiara, or St. Clare. As a young woman of privilege who joined the Benedictines after hearing Francis preach, Clare did everything the monk did, only "backwards and in sack cloth" as one of the Sooners noted. She established her own order, the "Poor Clares," after the Franciscans and was the first woman to write accepted monastic guidelines. A former monastery named for Santa Chiara is now OU's flagship study-abroad campus in Arezzo.

The winding road leaving Assisi gave many Sooners their first glimpse of Tuscany. The green terraced hills boasting vineyards, pastures and olive groves so often captured in cinematic glory were suddenly before our eyes, awash in golden light. Even multiple views of *Under the Tuscan Sun* could not have prepared us for our home at the Villa Lecchi, a sprawling 18th-century hilltop estate with postcard views in every direction. The original patriarch, depicted in frescoes in the villa's central hall, was Ventura di Iacopo, born in 1264 and a resident of Florence for most of his life.

Breakfasts at the villa were enough to last through dinner. Each morning a table in the dining room was laden with

cheeses, pastries, fresh fruit, meats, porridge, bread and eggs, all from the area and offered with steaming cappuccino or espresso.

From our base at the villa, the group day-tripped to Siena, Florence and Arezzo. In Siena, our local guide, Camilla, explained the fierce competition between her city and Florence as the cradle of the Renaissance. The city flourished in the Middle Ages as wealthy merchants capitalized on its proximity to Rome and as a major trading stop between Paris and Istanbul.

Siena is home to Palio, the famous horse race held twice a year around the

central piazza. But even without the equestrians, the city has plenty to offer. The Siena Duomo boasts the first stained glass in Europe. Michelangelo was commissioned to do 15 statues for the Duomo, but only completed St. Paul. The others, left in partial states with only an arm, leg or face, became known as "The Prisoners," locked forever in their marble slabs.

At the time of the Siena project, Michelangelo was being lured to rival Florence, challenged by an enormous block of marble that would become the most famous sculpture in the world. *David* stands imposingly inside the Galleria dell'Accademia, a wonder of artistic form, balance and faith — not necessarily in a god, but in the artist's belief that perfection could be extracted from a flawed stone.

One could contemplate *David* for hours, but another artist's rendering of the shepherd boy turned giant-slayer had tugged at me since Victor Youritzen's art history class my freshman year at OU. Donatello's *David* is much younger and less muscular than Michelangelo's. Clad only in boots and a helmet that could double as a gardening hat, this vulnerable version of David summoning the courage to face Goliath has always been inspirational. Commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici, Donatello's work was the first freestanding bronze of the Renaissance. And I had to see it.

When I told fellow traveler Jane Bias, a docent at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, about my plan, she grabbed her husband, Jerry, and off we went in search of the Museo Nazionale. We navigated the curving, narrow streets of Florence by feel and the assistance of several locals and arrived just before closing time. We stormed the museum like a S.W.A.T. team on a mission to find the boy in the garden hat. The moment we entered a second-floor gallery and saw him waiting quietly for our private audience, we could not have felt more triumphant. I was rewarded by his slight smile and his self-con-

scious stance, one foot on Goliath's head, as if unsure how to pose as a hero.

That moment distilled the essence of Sightseeing Sooners. It was more than a trip abroad — it was an awakening, an education. While we were meeting *David*, the rest of the Sooners were having their own epiphanies crossing the Ponte Vecchio, roaming the long halls of the Uffizi, or people-watching in the Piazza della Signoria. In nooks and crannies throughout Italy, beauty was placed in our proximity, but left for us to discover.

On the road to Arezzo, we were treated to a “Clive Talk” as Mander explained that the city of OU's largest international campus (OUA) was also the birthplace of the modern musical scale. Around 1025, Benedictine monk Guido de Arezzo created the musical staff and the use of the “ut-re-mi-fa-so-la” to help teach fellow monks Gregorian chants. Like happy Von

Trapp children running amok, we spontaneously sang “Do Re Me” as we entered Arezzo.

Kirk Duclaux, director of Italian programs for OUA, and his wife, Charlotte, OUA's on-site director of student affairs in Italy, met us downtown and let us stretch our legs while pointing out the sites. Arezzo, Kirk explained, has existed since the 9th-century B.C. and many structures are not only standing, but also in service.

“It's like a time machine,” says Duclaux, who also teaches art history. “Turn a corner and ‘poof,’ you're back in the Middle Ages. And we have such easy access from Arezzo to the best museums in the world. I don't lecture on a work of art unless we are standing in front of it.”

We walked the short distance to the campus, the beautifully renovated Santa Chiara monastery. The 30,000-square foot



Mark Landt

The walled city of Orvieto was built on a natural plateau, giving inhabitants an advantage over marauding armies, not to mention spectacular views.



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After a full day of museums, cathedrals and piazzas, the travelers bid farewell to Florence as they return to the Villa Lecchi for the evening. One advantage of the Sightseeing Sooners, says traveler Judith Barnett, is how easy it is to navigate many different regions of the country.

facility now hosts 48 OU students and features classrooms and various conference rooms. Photographs of OU share wall space with restored frescoes from the 17th and 18th centuries. Students live beside faculty members, and enjoy a full kitchen and cafeteria, library and study spaces, with access to video-conferencing and teleconferencing.

The mutual admiration between alumni and students on the Arezzo campus was immediate and genuine. We were visitors from the mothership and perhaps more important, some of us were actual mothers, who gave surrogate hugs all around from the ones back home.

“I was blown away when I first got here,” says Billy Ramsey, a Norman engineering major who completed his capstone at Arezzo. “And, I still am. Every day, just walking to class, I can’t believe I’m really here.”

We approached Venice, our last stop on the tour, with mixed emotions. We were all anxious to see “The Floating City,” but knew our Roman holiday was coming to an end. The weather matched our mood as we arrived by water taxi under stormy skies. The rain did not stop us from heading out immediately to see St. Mark’s Square, led by Cathy, our faithful guide.

The city, spread over 117 islands and linked by canals and bridges, is a testament to human ingenuity. The massive palaces of wealthy merchants built centuries ago rest on submerged



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Kirk DeCloux, art historian and director of Italian programs for OU Arezzo, takes the Sooners on a walking tour around the town that many OU students now call home.



Photo provided

The OU flag accompanied the Sooners from Naples to Venice. Here, the group proudly displays the Crimson and Cream on the steps of Saint Andrew's Cathedral, a 9th-century Roman Catholic church in Ravello.




Lynette Lobban

A sunny day in Venice gave Sooners a chance to investigate the canals and curving narrow streets of the famous "Floating City." The city is made up of 117 islands linked by 119 bridges.

wooden piles topped by limestone. Every brick, every stone had to be delivered by boat, a system that exists today. No motorized vehicles are allowed on the streets, some of which are so narrow, one can touch the buildings on either side at the same time.

On our final night as a group, we gathered one last time for a farewell dinner at a local seafood restaurant, complete with wandering accordion player. Hope Mander asked us to give our interpretations of "sense of place" as it related to Italy. Some cited the countryside of Tuscany, others the spirituality of the cathedrals or the art. Even the pigeon coops got a mention.

Whatever the highlight, the takeaway was the same. Humans only have one big, round place to call home, and we might as well get to know each other. Sightseeing Sooners is a great place to start. 

For a 2017 brochure of *Sightseeing Sooners destinations*, visit <http://www.ou.edu/alumni/travel.html> or call the Alumni Association office at 405/325-1710 for more information.