

Magical Medici Tour

IT'S GOOD TO GIVE—BUT THE UNEXPECTED REWARDS ARE EVEN BETTER.

By Laurie Benenson

Two of our most recent stipends went to the city of Florence: to repair a sculpture in the Niobe Room of the Uffizi Gallery, and to restore a painting in the Galleria dell'Accademia, Allori's *The Crowning of the Virgin*. So when we were invited to spend a week in Florence to mark the 500th anniversary of Michelangelo's *David*, we couldn't say no.

Our hosts were the Friends of Florence, an international group devoted to preserving the city's rich trove of artworks. Its members include Mel and Robyn Gibson, Sting and Trudie Styler, and Franco Zeffirelli. The Foff had a special interest in the *David*—they had helped underwrite its yearlong cleaning and refurbishing.

In 1501, the city commissioned Michelangelo, just 26 years old, to sculpt the block of marble. He finished in 1504, and the six-ton *David* was soon placed in the the Piazza Signoria, the courtyard of the Florentine city hall, where for four centuries it endured such indignities as a broken left arm during an uprising against the Medici in 1527, a coating of hot wax (a misguided cleaning attempt) in 1808, and a bath in hydrochloric acid (ditto) in 1843. It was moved inside to the Accademia in 1873. After 500 years, *David* needed a major makeover. (Don't we all at 500?)

With the work completed, how better to celebrate than a weeklong Florentine *fiesta*? That's how I found myself dining on truffle-studded tagliatelle at the centuries-old palazzo of the Marchese Ferdinando and Marchesa Rosaria Frescobaldi. Tucked away on a side street, the palazzo conveniently has a window that looks right into the nave of the Santo Spirito church, so the Frescobaldis' ancestors didn't have to leave home to attend Mass.

It was one of those places you see as you prowl the cobbled streets of Florence or Rome or Paris, guidebook in hand, wondering who lives behind those enormous bronze doors. Now here we were, listening as the marchese, a dashing, silver-haired type in the Gianni Agnelli mold, reminisced about his Formula One racing career while we sipped Frescobaldi reds—the family has been producing wine for 700 years—and studied framed pictures of his wife, a ravish-

THE MORE YOU GIVE, THE MORE you get back. We all know it in our hearts, but it's one of those truths that seems counter-intuitive. If I give more, won't there be less for *me*?

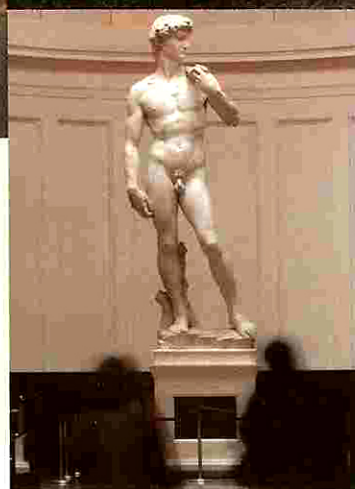
As I discovered when I joined a group called the Friends of Heritage Preservation, there are all sorts of rewards for philanthropic largesse. Founded by my pal Suzanne Booth, an arts powerhouse whose résumé would make anyone feel inadequate, the FoffHP gives grants to restore or conserve works of art all over the world. In return we enjoy the warm glow of knowing we've done our bit for posterity.



HOSTED at a weeklong *fiesta* in Florence (top), Friends of Heritage Preservation donors (above, clockwise from top left) Peter Norton, Denise Fractious, Suzanne Kayne, Suzanne Booth, Allison Crowell, Gay Browne, and the author had the tour of a lifetime.



Clockwise from top left: Villa di Triboli's grounds, the view across the Arno, alfresco lunch at Villa di Triboli, the restored David, the author at Boboli Gardens.



hunt for the errant ruby. But this was a big villa (are there little ones?), surrounded by gravel driveways. Besides, I think it fell out in the quarry. As we wandered amid all that mute marble, my ruby had made a break for it.

ing young brunette who unfortunately was under the weather, and their *Italian Vogue*-perfect children.

Earlier that day we had climbed the dizzying spiral staircase to the roof of the Duomo under the tutelage of Monsignor Timothy Verdon, a brilliant American priest who runs Stanford's Renaissance history program. As we scanned the tower-dotted cityscape, he spoke evocatively about the *David's* role in the context of 16th-century Florentine politics. The following day began with a trip to the marble caves of Carrara. In the cold, slippery quarry where the stone for the *David* had been hewn, pallets held gigantic slabs of marble to be turned into garden seats and memorial cherubs and bathroom floors for fancy hotels. Marble dust clung to our clothing as we returned to the vans, which took us a few miles away to the villa of the Duca Forese and Duchessa Grazia Salviati, where lunch was waiting.

The Salviatis go way back with the Medicis; their estate was a gift from Lorenzo the Magnificent in 1480, as a token of gratitude to the Salviatis for conquering Pisa and giving it to the Medicis. Maria Salviati was the mother of Cosimo di Medici. Considering their aristocratic pedigree—and this seemed true of all the titled Italians we met on this magical Medici tour—the Salviatis were warm and gregarious. As we devoured the ravioli with ragu of rabbit and the pecorino dipped in chestnut honey on the terrace overlooking a vast lawn, the duca and duchessa amiably made their way from table to table, relating tidbits about Villa Salviati and asking us about ourselves.



After lunch we wandered onto the lawn, where several large pieces of marble were set up and the expat English artist John Taylor was giving sculpting lessons. Taylor showed us how to wield the chisel and mallet, and after a few whacks, my hands started to ache. I returned to the villa relieved that I could cross "marble sculpting" off my list of things I'd like to try.

The buffet table was now groaning with berryed pastries, a rainbow of gelati, and platters of chocolates. We forced ourselves to retrieve some dessert, and then retreated to the terrace. As we sat there sipping the last of our espresso, my friend Gay Browne gave a little yelp.

"What's wrong?"
 "Your ring!" she said. "Is there a stone missing from your ring?"

Seeing us on our hands and knees under the table and hearing what the problem was, the duchessa dispatched several servants to

ting across the table and down from me, but unfortunately not close enough for me to hear him do a bit on the *David's* private parts, but I understand it was hysterical.

But the highlight of the evening—possibly even better than Robin's riff—was our first glimpse of the *David* itself, high on its pedestal beneath the domed skylight of the Accademia. There it was, the timeless embodiment of grace, beauty, and strength, all spiffed up and ready to dazzle for another 500 years, thanks to a little help from Friends of Florence. Michelangelo and his fellow artists did the heavy lifting; now all we have to do is sprinkle their work with some money every now and then.

It seems like a very good deal.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SUZANNE BOOTH, LAURIE BENENSON, SUZANNE