

PROFILE Living like da Vinci

by Kathy Catrambone



Baltimore-born Barbara Petrarca Hardesty is helping Americans see Italy through the eyes of the great inventor.

OK, so life won't permit you to leave America, buy an old Tuscan farmhouse and live *la dolce vita* ever after. You can still immerse yourself in a total Italian experience and spend some time trying to think like Leonardo.

That is Barbara Petrarca Hardesty's goal with *Da Vinci Capers — A Personal Renaissance Journey*, her tour company that gives travelers a chance to throw themselves into the art, culture and food of Italy for a magical time in Tuscany.

"I want you to discover yourself and any

Renaissance passion you may have," she says about her tours.

She offers two itineraries. For example, the one-week itinerary begins in Florence, with an emphasis on Leonardo da Vinci before checking into Villa Michaela, a gated 19th-century villa near Lucca. The villa is home base for the week-long trip.

On Monday, attention focuses on *la bella lingua*, the beautiful language. With the help of the director of a language school in Lucca, travelers jump into speaking Italian and practicing it at a market. They tour Lucca both alone and with a guide who tells local tales of strength, riches and *furberia* (foxiness) and, later, learn about Lucca's long history of craftsmen.

On Tuesday, a writer who has published books, screenplays, short stories, plays and poetry in different languages works with the group to show how writing can open the mind to create space for reflection and imagination. In the evening, the group departs for Barga, an

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artist colony and one of Leonardo's favorite villages in the rugged Garfagnana region, to explore the local art and to attend a private session in a professional printmaking studio.

The group drives Wednesday to Fattoria Villa Maionchi, famous for its red and white wines and extra virgin olive oil, and then returns home for a hands-on cooking lesson.

"In the spirit of Leonardo da Vinci, we learn to cook as an artist — using all senses of seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling, plus the sixth sense of intuitive instinct," Hardesty says.

Thursday's itinerary takes the group through chestnut forests on the way to Pietrasanta. Huge mountains of white marble form the backdrop to Pietrasanta, home to sculptors from Michelangelo to Botero. The group gets a lesson in sculpting in marble, and has an opportunity to take a whack or two at the marble. Members of the group also can try their hands at sculpting in terra cotta. The day's itinerary also includes a visit to Pietrasanta's weekly market.

Friday, the last full day of the trip, is spent drawing and painting and tapping into the power of the brain's right side. Friday's meals feature food from Lucca, Garfagnana and coastal regions — peppery oil, porcini mushrooms, a variety of grains and cheeses.

Hardesty grew up in an Italian family outside of Baltimore. She has always celebrated her Italian roots, and the idea for her niche travel business came from two significant moments in her life, she says. She was working for a cooking school in Tuscany, and needed to change the itinerary one day. She brought in an artist to teach art. The experience "was magical," she says.

The light bulb really went off, she says, when she read, "How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci," by Michael J. Gelb.

In his book, Gelb outlines what he calls "the seven Da Vincian principles" for learning how to approach life like a genius. He uses Leonardo's native Italian language to label these principles: "curiosità" (curiosity and continuous learning), "dimostrazione" (learning from experience), "sensazione" (sensory awareness), "sfumato" (accepting and embracing uncertainty), "arte/scienza" (balancing art and science, or "whole-brain" thinking), "corporalità" (physical fitness and ambidexterity) and "connessione" (seeing the interconnectedness of everything).

"People either forgot what they liked to do, or never knew," she says. By putting the book's message into motion, she guides members in her travel groups "to think creatively, have fun learning and become a more balanced person."

When she decided to go into business, she wrote "an awesome business plan," but could not find financial backing. The year was 2002, and the world was still reeling from the events of Sept. 11. So she financed her dream herself, and launched *Da Vinci Capers* with the help of her "loving and supportive husband," Mike.

Four years later, she has a couple of openings for her upcoming October tour, and is working on plans for 2007. She is expanding her *Da Vinci Capers* to the Amalfi coast and little Italian experiences here in the States: mini sessions over four days involving Italian music, art and food. She has tested the idea in Boulder where she lives, and is working on bringing it to New York City.

The human experiences have been incredible, she says. Travelers often do something that wakes up new or long-suppressed desires. "Today we just plow through our day," Hardesty says. "But I hope I can light a fire in many bellies. I have seen men leave with tears running down their faces. They tell me they are leaving being able to reflect better on their lives."

This makes her happy, because it is her way "to help society."

The chicken is the logo for her business, partly because she always has had a fondness for chickens and because da Vinci was known for buying caged chickens in local markets and setting them free. "Da Vinci said, 'Better death than to be without freedom,'" Hardesty says. "And, you can't be caged mentally. I think it is appropriate for me to be doing this work. The whole point of the program is to discover something inside of you that you did not know."

And for Hardesty, life doesn't get much better.

For information, call 303-284-1383 or visit www.davincicapens.com.