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‘ITALIAN SPIRIT’ INSPIRES TOURS TO LAND OF DA VINCI

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BOULDER — Renaissance man Leonardo da Vinci lived a life most would envy. The famed artist and scientist learned through experience, used all his senses and struck a balance between science and art, logic and imagination, all with physical activity and grace, according to Boulder resident Barbara Petrarca Hardesty.

In her newly launched business Da Vinci Capers, Hardesty adopts da Vinci’s principles to enlighten travelers through a week of experiential learning in Tuscany, Italy. Her goal is to encourage guests to think like da Vinci: become enthused about delving into the unknown.

“I want people to get sparked, get energized, light a fire in their belly,” Hardesty said. “Leonardo said don’t be scared off by starting something because you are not quite sure about success.”

And Hardesty has taken the advice to heart. While she admits that this is her first foray into the niche of specialized travel, the new venture is the culmination of years working as an artist, manager of a Tuscan cooking school and as an administrator in the business world. In addition, Da Vinci Capers is a welcome return to her family roots and what she calls her “Italian spirit.”

The impetus for the self-financed business came from two significant moments, she explained.

“While working at the cooking school in Italy, I changed the itinerary to include an afternoon of painting with a local artist. A doctor from California told me that the experience changed him. He remembered how much he loved to draw and paint as a child. From that moment, he promised to include painting as a new hobby.”

Her 90-year-old friend and artist John Robbins of Boulder also inspired Hardesty. “He taught me that the secret to a long and happy life is to get up every day with enthusiasm.”

Although she had never managed or even participated in a tourism venture, she developed a 50-page business plan for La Bella Vita, the parent company of Da Vinci Capers.

“For me a business plan is necessary because it gives me clear vision. I tend to be excited about ideas. But I need a detailed plan in order for me to implement them and to clarify what I need to do.”

During the past two years Hardesty researched the market, organized the speakers, scouted locations and honed in on the substance



JONATHAN CASTNER

Barbara Petrarca Hardesty of Boulder treats clients to the sights, sounds and tastes of Italy through Da Vinci Capers, a weeklong tour that includes drawing, sculpting and cooking lessons taught by Italians. The small group of travelers is based at Villa Michaela, a gated, four-star private 19th century villa near Lucca, Italy. Each day is dedicated to exploring new territory around the region. Hardesty here is surrounded by the paintings of Boulder artist Sam Burton.

of the tours. She carefully evaluated the competition and planned her marketing strategy. She recently returned from the fall first tour, which she dubbed a success according to detailed participant evaluations. As a result of her extensive preparation, Hardesty said she feels confident she has a winning formula.

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For example, one day features a trip to an artist's studio to learn drawing. Another includes a visit with a language expert to speak Italian. An all-senses cooking lesson begins with shopping at a local market, creative cooking lessons and enjoying the resulting fare. Then the group journeys to a marble quarry and experiments with a hands-on sculpting lesson. An excursion to the Mediterranean Coast leads the travelers through a series of pedestrian villages. Each participant learns the power of journaling the experience along the way.

The tour costs \$3,595, double occupancy not including airfare. Participants in the premier trip ranged in age from 30 to 70 years old. Hardesty said that her primary market is active retirees and people about to retire. Marketing efforts have been through direct mail, word or mouth and advertisements in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Jody Talbot of Talbot Travel in Vail gave the adventure high praise. "I laughed so much. No matter where we went we were always

learning something. Everyday was packed full of things. The tour is for people who want to stay on the move, for people willing to push themselves a bit. Barb makes it so wonderful, she is so enthusiastic, always wanting to make it better," she said.

Boulder lawyer and business consultant Ira Nottonson agreed. He met Hardesty in a class he taught on developing business plans. "I was most impressed with her plan," he recalled. "I have never gone with a group anywhere, but the bits and pieces in the plan sounded so good. And Tuscany always was a place I wanted to be," he said. "When you travel, you are always skeptical if your expectations will be fulfilled. It was one of the smartest decisions I ever made."

Nottonson particularly enjoyed the trip to the marble quarry and a chance to see how sculptors worked. "It was fascinating. So when I saw the famous statue of David it marveled me even more."

The 2004 programs are scheduled for April 17-24 and Oct. 9-16. For more information contact Hardesty at (303) 284-1383 or barb@davincicapers.com.