

Center stage: Go backstage—and up close and personal—at St. Petersburg's famed Mariinsky Theatre.



**THEATER IN
ST. PETERSBURG**

Russia

The Hermitage Gala is a mind-blowing, intimate affair—and you'll be there



THE SPECIALIST: Greg Tepper, Exeter International; Tampa
FIRST TRIP TO RUSSIA: "1989. I'd majored in Russian studies and found one of the few summer study programs still going after Chernobyl, at the Polytech University in what was then Leningrad."

“The exclusive Hermitage Gala, in **St. Petersburg**, an annual event that benefits the museum, is held during the White Nights—the period around the summer solstice in June when it's light all night long. It's a mind-blowing, intimate affair: an invitation-only, sit-down dinner in one of the imperial rooms, with only 100 to 200 guests. The

galleries are open, and the best of the best perform—top ballerinas and opera singers from the Mariinsky companies. After the party, it's off to the Taleon Imperial, the only hotel in the city that's in a former palace. You've got to stay in the Eliseev Suite, which has original furnishings and restored paintings [invitation to the Hermitage Gala, including hotel room, \$12,200 for two].

“While in St. Petersburg, you must set aside some time for a backstage tour of the Mariinsky Theatre—better known to Americans as the Kirov, its name during Communist times. What exactly you get to see backstage depends on the day of your visit, but it might be the prop area, or the costume area (which is extraordinary), or sometimes the set-design area above the theater, where they paint the backdrops and then lower them onto the stage. The rehearsal rooms are often the best part, because you can see classes being held or hear the singers warming up an hour or two before a performance [90-minute backstage tour of the Mariinsky, \$450 for two].”

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**ART IN ASTI,
VINEGAR IN MODENA**

Italy

There are millions of dollars' worth of relics from the Sistine Chapel laid out, stacked up, suspended—literally a breath away from you

THE SPECIALIST: Andrea Grisdale, IC Bellagio; Bellagio, Italy
FIRST TRIP TO ITALY: "1991. I came that winter to act as overseas representative in the Dolomites for a British tour operator... and never left."

“Italian culture is all about celebrating some of the greatest artists to have ever lived. If you ask Italians what they love about being Italian, they'll tell you about works of art created hundreds of years ago. A lot of the most treasured pieces were commissioned by the Church, and their preservation is of the utmost importance. I can arrange for a

member of the Nicola family—internationally acclaimed for their restoration of the Sistine Chapel—to take you into their workshop. It's in a tiny hamlet in **Asti Province**, in the Piedmont region, but you have millions and millions of dollars' worth of relics from the Sistine Chapel and the Vatican laid out, stacked up, suspended from the ceiling—literally a breath away from you. You'll

meet the workers and watch as they clean and retouch paintings or reapply gold to ornate frames. One of the most interesting things for me was the X-ray machine that can see multiple paintings on the same canvas. You're in the heart of truffle country, so if you visit in October, we could arrange a truffle hunt for the afternoon [\$1,050 for two, including transportation from the city of Asti].

“Traditional balsamic vinegar is up there with the most prized elements of Italian culture. The syrupy brown liquid can only be produced in a particular microclimate around **Modena**, in Emilia-Romagna. You can go behind the scenes at one of the smaller high-end producers, which has passed down both the technique and the prized barrels in which the vinegar slowly matures for almost a century. Not only will you see where and how the vinegar is made but you'll be invited into the family's private villa—where the film *Novecento* was shot—and enjoy ice cream topped with balsamic vinegar. You'll never look at salad dressing the same way again [\$840 for two, including lunch and transportation from Bologna].”

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Photograph by Rob Howard