

OFF THE WALL

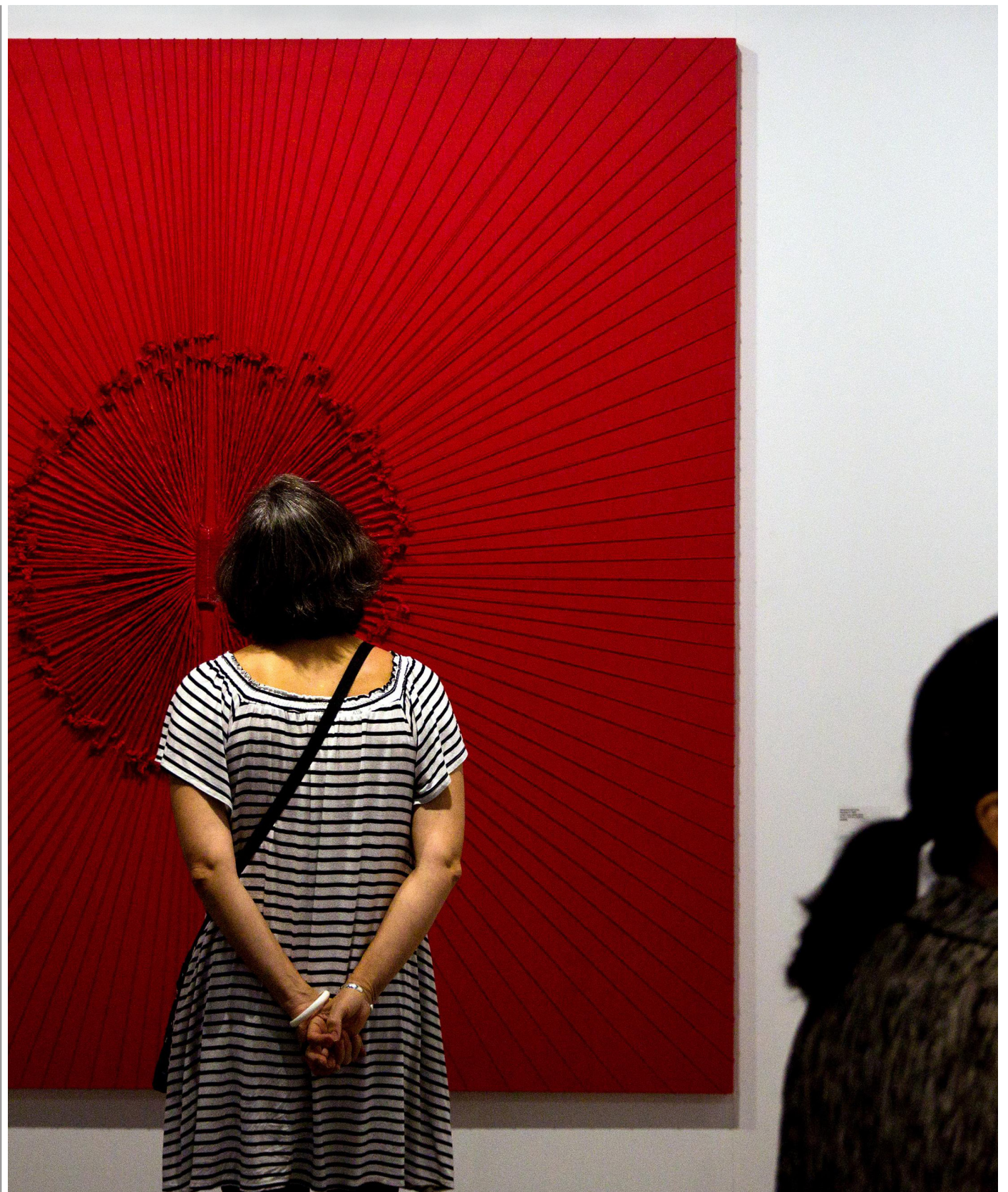
An expert-led art break gives you A-list access and brings great works to life, says **Adriaane Pielou**

Autumn is forever imprinted on us as time to go back to school and start studying again. Energising cooler weather, fewer crowds, and the absence of those screeching small people who can be such disruptors of summer trips – they’re actually back in the classroom – all further justify an educational autumn trip. And with art tours, whether you’re a novice or keen to build on an existing interest, the number one rule is to book with the best. A company specialising in cultural travel can open eyes as well as doors, but what really justifies their often hefty charges is the art historian, curator, or artist they will have hired to lead your trip, an expert guide – often multi-degree-bearing – who will be able to elucidate, educate and explain what you are seeing and where it fits into the story of art. As so many of us have come to understand, a good guide who knows their subject inside out and can communicate their knowledge so engagingly you’re left wanting more, more, more, is one of the greatest luxuries of luxury travel. That’s true whether you’re going around an exhibition at New York’s MoMA, peering at palaces in Rajasthan, or gazing upon the Getty-amassed art treasures in LA.

1. Art Basel Miami with The Biltmore’s Art Concierge, December 7-10

Art Basel is the highlight of Miami’s cultural calendar, and for an outsider a lot more fun to visit with someone who knows their way around the art world. Judy Holm, for instance – a renowned art expert who with 25 years’ experience can make all sorts of useful and entertaining introductions to Art Basel artists and dealers. Joining the four-night package The Biltmore has devised around her provides a good way to catch up with the US art scene – and maybe with family, too, given how many students from the UAE enrol at university in Miami. As well as the company of Judy Holm, a private chauffeur, all-day VIP access to the galleries, private receptions, staying in the old-world hotel adds to the pleasure of the package. With large rooms and ►

‘Mandala XI’ by Alexandra da Cuhna on display during Art Basel Miami Beach, Florida, in 2016
Scott McIntyre/Bloomberg





Left and below:
an Art Smart
tour in NYC Judith
Walsh / Art Smart;
The Metropolitan
Museum of Art in
New York AP Photo

► excellent service, it's agreeably grand, and in dating back to the 1920s, when the invention of air-con was making Florida a place to visit rather than avoid, counts as an artistic exhibit in its own right.
A four-night Art Concierge package from December 7-10 includes breakfasts and daily private tours with Judy Holm and costs US\$30,448 (Dh111,825); biltmorehotel.com.

2. THE 2017 VENICE BIENNALE AND A PALAZZO APARTMENT

The 57th iteration of the world's most prestigious exhibition of contemporary art, first staged in 1895, runs until November 26. It's huge, too large to see in its entirety, and one good thing about going near its closure is that the art guide who will talk you around the Giardini and Arsenale housing the 86 national pavilions that form the bulk of the Biennale, will be able to guide you to just the most interesting work – and usefully condense the critical take. Another bonus is the reduction in lumbering



cruise ship crowds clogging the exquisite streets and squares compared to summer. Even so, the best place to stay remains the peaceful little island of Giudecca, a four-minute boat ride from Piazza San Marco. Close to the famous Cipriani hotel, La Residenza, a 16th century palazzo, has 11 one- and two-bedroom serviced apartments offering ballroom-sized rooms, frescoed walls, antique furnishings, and the largest private garden in Venice. If you can tear yourself away, the art historians Luxury Travel Book charge €360 (Dh1,555) for a three-hour whirl around the Biennale for up to six people.

The 20-bedroom La Residenza costs €20,000 (Dh86,415) a night to rent in its entirety and from €1,200 (Dh5,185) for a one-bedroom apartment; theluxury-travelbook.com.

3. THE PAINTED PALACES OF RAJASTHAN WITH MARTIN RANDALL TRAVEL, NOVEMBER 7-19

"No people has had greater influence on western civilisation than the Ancient Greeks; nor have many cultures left such beautiful remains," begins the pulse-quickenng description of one autumnal tour. But don't get too excited. It's fully booked. "Japan has one of the richest art traditions in Asia", you read next. Tempting! But the October trip to Kyoto is fully booked, too. "Art in the Netherlands"? Lovely to explore Amsterdam as the weather chills. No chance. Fully booked. Cultural-tours specialist Martin Randall has a global reach and such a peerless line-up of guides – lecturers, writers, broadcasters, curators – that the main lesson you learn from browsing their intellectually mouth-watering site is to book well ahead. But there are still places on the

Above, 'Mirrored',
at the 2017 Venice
Biennale Getty Images;
right: Mehrangarh
Fort in Jodhpur Getty
Images; left: the
Chilean pavilion at the
2017 Venice Biennale
Getty Images



Rajasthan tour, and by the time Dr Giles Tillotson, leading expert in Rajput and Mughal history, has talked you around Jaipur's 15th century Mehrangarh Fort and explained just why Laxmi Vilas Palace in Bikaner is such a masterpiece of Indo-Saracenic art, you will be primed to sign up for anything and everything in 2018.
The 11-day tour Rajasthan tour starts in Delhi and costs £5,710 (Dh26,997) per person (martinrandall.com).

4. ARTSMART GALLERY TOURS IN NYC

As the Metropolitan Museum of Art is the world's leading art museum, its vast collection allows study of almost

any school of art you could name, from Etruscan wall paintings to Renaissance sculpture or the contemporary art on show at its new(ish) offshoot, the nearby Met Bauer, in the former Whitney, for which the Met's new director is getting much criticism. (Critics say in a city packed with contemporary-art galleries the Met's focus should remain on the past.) New York also has dozens of alternative art galleries and museums, and no shortage of companies selling you guided tours, but it's only when you start asking questions, mid-tour, that you discover many of the city's art guides are actually actors reciting a script. ArtSmart guides are all art historians, many with ►

top 10 luxury art tours

► a PhD, and for US\$360 (Dh1,322) for two hours these fact-stuffed people will create a bespoke tour of whichever gallery or art theme you please (artsmart.com). As a base, on Fifth at 55th The Peninsula makes sense, wherever you roam. MoMA is nearby and The Peninsula's Academy programme offers guests an hour's private out-of-hours tour there for up to six with a PhD art historian for \$650/Dh2,387. Autumn's exhibitions feature Max Ernst and Louise Bourgeois. **Doubles at The Peninsula cost from \$792 (Dh2,908) per night; newyork-peninsula.com.**

5. BESPOKE ART WALKS IN HONG KONG Its crowds and tempo can make even New York look sluggish, and with sky-high rents making it hard for local artists to set up studios anywhere central, Hong Kong is definitely a place where anyone with more than a passing interest in art will benefit from a guiding hand. Sure, the outpost of London's famous White Cube gallery and the new PMQ arts on gallery-lined Hollywood Road are easy enough to discover. But having a plugged-in connoisseur of the art scene leads you to galleries you might not come across on your own, such as the Spring Workshop, Plum Blossoms, or the Ooi Botos Gallery in Wanchai, "one of the last slivers of old Hong Kong," where a photographic collection chronicles China's stratospheric growth in the 20th century. Concierges at the famous Mandarin – the founding hotel of the group – work with the excellent local cultural-tours

specialist CdD, whose "Bespoke Art Walks" take in all these galleries and more. The CdD guides particularly excel themselves in talking visitors through China's art history at the great Asia Art Archive. **Bespoke walks cost HK\$2,000 (Dh940) per hour for up to six people (mohkgc@mohg.com). Doubles at the Mandarin cost from HK\$4,500 (Dh2,115) per night including taxes; mandarinoriental.com.**

6. AN ARTFUL DINNER PARTY IN A ST PETERSBURG HOTEL Besides the Hermitage Museum, the largest, oldest museum in the world, built for Catherine the Great in 1764, there is a slew of new contemporary art galleries to see in Russia's second but most beautiful city. But it's hard to imagine anything more thoroughly agreeable, informative and romantic, in a city where snow can be falling by October, than one of the Artful Dinners the Four Seasons Lion Palace has devised. With the hotel's chefs cooking, leading Russian artists at the dinner table, and fashionable interior designer Marina Gisich hosting, the setting is Gisich's conceptual-art gallery and her apartment upstairs. And if ever there were reason to buy yourself a Dr Zhivago hat and tall boots for your arrival at the hotel – built in 1820 and possibly the most glamorous space in the city – and then chez Gisich, this is surely it. Artful Dinners cost €1,000 (Dh4,300) for up to 10 people, minus the catering charge. **Doubles at the Four Seasons St**

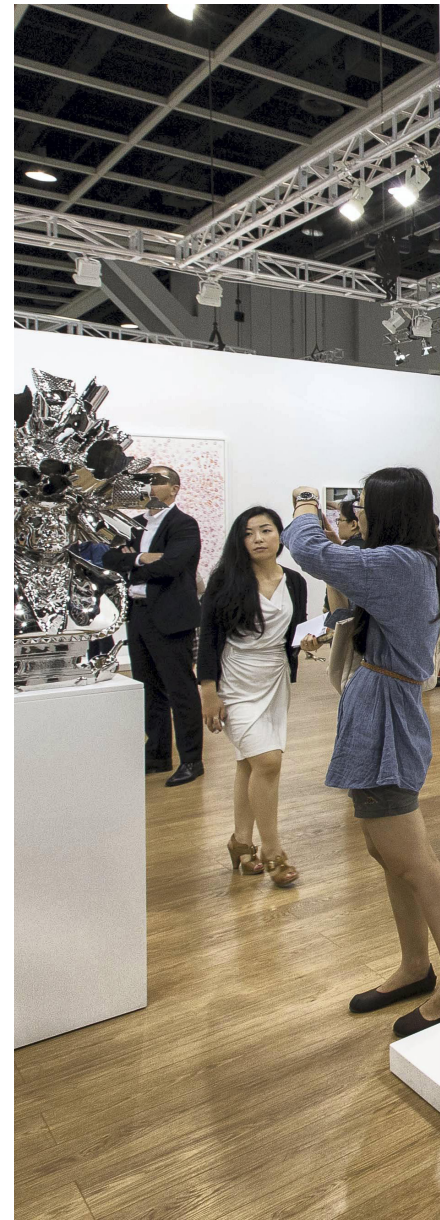


crowds you'll be ready for one of the private Louvre tours, such as the €100 (Dh430) a head small-group evening visits organised by ArtJourneyParis.com. And it's a special joy to experience having one of the city's jewel-box smaller museums all to yourself. The Musee Rodin is the most celebrated of these, located in an 18th-century mansion with Rodin's famous Thinker dominating the main courtyard. Private entry is permitted each Monday, when the museum is closed to the public, and after 7pm from Tuesday to Sunday, when you may do as many smart Parisians with €15,000 euros (Dh64,800) to spare do and host a reception or small dinner against the backdrop of the grand staircase. Concierges at any of the top hotels will be happy to help – but the place to stay now, with its reopening after a four-year overhaul, is Hotel de Crillon. **Doubles at Hotel de Crillon cost from €957 (Dh4,135) per night including taxes; rosewoodhotels.com.**

9. "ART ON THE COTE D'AZUR" WITH ACE CULTURAL TOURS, OCTOBER 16-23 In the company of an art expert and tour companions as eager to drink in information as you, a trip somewhere you think you know well can prove a marvellous source of education and revelation. One of the longest-running companies specialising in art tours led by specialists (rather than glib students adept at reading up on what you're going to see the night before, which is what happens when you slink down-market) is Ace, set up in 1958. "Our tours are very full-on – we attract a lot



Right and below, the Four Seasons Lion Palace St Petersburg Four Seasons; Art Basel Hong Kong Jessica Hromas / Art Basel



Petersburg cost from RUB30,325 (Dh1,895) per night including taxes; fourseasons.com. **7. PRIVATE TOURS OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY** London's galleries and museums are some of the very best in the world. Commendably democratic as it is that most are free to visit, this does mean they're crowded. Private tours have thus become a favoured way to view their various collections and exhibitions. At the National Gallery, whose autumn blockbuster is Van Eyck and the Pre-Raphaelites, a one-hour private-group tour with a gallery historian costs £230 (Dh1,087) for you and up to 24 friends (www.nationalgallery.org.uk). At Tate Britain, a private lecture costs £200 (Dh945), for a maximum of 20 people (0044 20 7887 4946; tour.boookings@tate.org.uk). For instant access to upmarket arty London, becoming a Patron of the Royal Academy – celebrating its 250th birthday in 2018 – brings private pre-launch exhibition tours with the curator plus numerous party invitations and studio visits for an annual £1,750 (Dh8,274). But perhaps the most fun to be had on a Saturday morning in London comes from Browns Hotel, with its two-hour tour of Mayfair galleries with witty art curator Maeve Doyle followed by lunch in Hix, the hotel's excellent restaurant, all for a bargain £65 (Dh310) a head. **A Mayfair Art Lovers Weekend at Brown's including the above tour costs from £636 (Dh3,007). Call 0044 207493 6020; roccofortehotels.com.**

8. A PRIVATE P-PARTY AT THE MUSEE RODIN, PARIS Paris is at its loveliest in autumn, when the chilly weather sharpens the beauty of the buildings and makes it a delight to stroll to the galleries and museums. The Louvre is always a must, but after pushing your way through the inevitable



of academics," says an Ace representative in somewhat warning tones. The emphasis is more on learning than luxury, so while their hotel in Nice is a four- rather than five-star, the guide is a PhD, art historian, university lecturer and former curator at Liverpool's Walker Gallery. The itinerary includes delightful little museums dedicated to Jean Cocteau, Matisse and Chagall as well as the Fondation Maeght in St Paul de Vence. **Seven nights in Nice plus daily gallery visits costs £2,095 (Dh9,905) per person; aceculturaltours.co.uk.**

10. CICERONI'S ART COLLECTIONS OF LA, NOVEMBER 7-14 Art tours peaked during the 18th century, when every wealthy young thing with any pretence to being cultivated would embark on a Grand Tour of Europe. A ciccone was the knowledgeable person who would accompany them, bringing each site alive. It's that kind of travel that Ciccone Tours aims to recreate. Today LA is firmly on the map of worthwhile stops on a global art tour, thanks largely to the competitive, bottomless-pocketed buying by 20th-century tycoons such as John Paul Getty and Henry Huntington, who aimed to amass collections to rival the great European museums. Cicconi's LA tour focuses on the Getty Centre in LA, devoted to European paintings and sculpture and superb decorative arts, and the Getty Villa in Malibu, designed to resemble the Roman Villa of Papyri at Herculaneum and dedicated to the art of Ancient Greece and Rome. Private visits to houses and gardens in Bel Air and Hollywood and the Huntington gardens in Pasadena are also on the itinerary. **Seven nights, staying at the Millennium Biltmore, including some meals**



Top, above and left: Musee National Marc Chagall Alamy Stock Photo; The Getty Centre, Los Angeles Arco Images GmbH / Alamy Stock Photo; The National Gallery in London Alamy Stock Photo