



Halls of excellence:
John Hall, 85, and son
Charlie, 57, in Venice

Venice's old Masters

In the Sixties, a Kent teacher set up one of the world's finest cultural education experiences, a crash course in civilisation. He now runs it with his son. Charlotte Metcalf meets them

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In late January a group of about 35 young people from round the world will gather in Venice. It will be the 53rd year of the residential John Hall Venice Course, offering daily lectures on art, architecture, banking, music and opera, literature and poetry, science (including astrophysics, black holes, climate change and evolution), global politics and the Middle East, philosophy, world cinema and the practical realities of working in the art world. Students can learn to cook with Contessa Enrica Rocca, speak Italian, take photographs and do life drawing classes with Geoffrey Humphries, who also throws a party for the students in his studio on the Guidecca. The course is so broad as

to defy all categorisation but it's been described as 'a crash course in world civilization'. One parent has talked of sending off a grumpy, grunting adolescent and receiving back a cultured, opinionated and articulate young man.

John Hall, who chucked in a career as a schoolteacher in Kent to found the course, is now 85. Like his course, he is old but thriving. Charlie, John's son (a fledgling oldie himself at 57) now mainly runs the course but John is still there for the duration, though he doesn't do

'John Hall profoundly believes experiencing Italy is essential in understanding life'

presentations any more because he forgets his words. 'I have to use little triggers to remind me of the word I'm searching for,' he chuckles. Even the word "dementia" is hard enough to remember but I think of demon and then I get there. Otherwise, I'm absolutely bursting with intellectual energy.'

Other than the occasional bout of minor memory loss, suffered by millions far younger than he is, John is as effervescent as he was when he set off with his first batch of students in 1965. 'Back then they arrived by train, all wearing, tweed jackets and flannel trousers,' John remembers. 'Just two years later they were turning up all Strawberry Fields and The Beatles, breaking out from school and into freedom with new attitudes. That was a fantastic year and specially good fun.'

The course was originally conceived for Oxbridge students who needed something to do in the months that followed the seventh term. Back then it was called the Contemporary Europe pre-University Course for Oxbridge students and dealt mainly with politics, economics, social history, philosophy and psychology. Gradually, meeting student demand, it incorporated more art. Art remains at the course's core but, John explains, 'We have kept in of-the-moment issues like terrorism and political upheaval, climate change, the roots of the Arab Spring and relevant science like the astrophysical scale of the universe, space and time.'

Other shorter courses have sprung up in John Hall Venice's wake. 'Parents spend far too much money sending their kids on Gap Years to get off their faces at Full Moon Parties in Thailand or backpack round the Outback or Latin America,' says Charlie. 'What's the point? It's more necessary than ever in this sleek, business-orientated world to learn to appreciate art and beauty. Who else is going to fall in love with our great European cities and sustain them for future generations?'

Students might balk at our crammed timetable but once there, John says they're irresistibly drawn in: 'However late they went to bed, they do turn up at lectures and can't fail to be interested because you've got them captured in such an enjoyable situation. They might have regarded opera as contemptible before they arrived

but after a lecture or two, they're downloading Puccini or emailing their parents and asking them to buy Mozart CD's.'

'Our course is gold standard,' says Charlie.

'Combined, our international experts make a sort of international university experience that is absolutely impossible to get anywhere else. It's not something that any university could pay for. It's a super team of intellectual giants'.

The 'super team' includes: Nicholas Penny, ex director of the National Gallery; Charles Hope, ex director of the

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Warburg Institute; Nicholas Hall, John's son and ex International Head of Old Masters at Christie's; David Ekserdjian, curator of the sell-out Bronze exhibition at the Royal Academy; Peter Phillips, choral conductor, musicologist and founder of The Tallis Scholars; Jeremy Sams, acclaimed opera

director; Fawaz Gerges, Professor of Middle Eastern Affairs at LSE; Simon Conway-Morris, Professor of Paleobiology at Cambridge University; Sarah Quill, photographer, author and Venice expert and Jack Klein, art historian, writer and broadcaster.

This may explain why the course is reassuringly expensive at just shy of £10,000 for six weeks in Venice preceded by a week in London. Two extra optional weeks in Florence and Rome are also offered - for a price. The price may be hefty but being a John Hall

Alumnus is tantamount to life membership of the establishment elite. The list of ‘John Hallers’ reads like a potted guide to Britain’s aristocracy – Armstrong-Jones, Asquith, Bowes-Lyon, Cawdor, Douglas-Home, Fiennes, FitzRoy, Guinness, Hesketh, Moncreiffe, Pakenham, Pleydell-Bouverie, Sainsbury, Somerset, Villiers, Grosvenor - yet the course has also contributed to the cultural education of creative business moguls like Peter Bennett-Jones and Cath Kidston and many a high court judge or high-profile journalist too. The course also welcomes students from round the world.

Several of its lecturers are also John Hallers, including Charlie himself, of course. ‘The course changed our lives radically and all of us come back to lecture because we share an absolute zeal to turn others,’ says Charlie. ‘It’s the same reason that people send their children on the course and why alumni come to our reunions or celebrate birthdays and engagements in Venice’.

From early on, John began receiving requests from parents to join the course, inspired by the lecturers and also the extraordinary access that John has negotiated over the years. For example, students take sole possession of the magnificent church of San Marco for an evening and are treated to a memorable private display that involves sitting in the dark and slowly

having the gold mosaics lit and revealed. Envious of their children, parents wanted John to replicate that feeling of being a Venice ‘insider’.

He started allowing parents to attend some lectures but parents pushed for more. So in 1974 he set up John Hall Italian Journeys, aimed at oldies and other grown ups and offering ‘culture & conviviality in beautiful surroundings.’ In October he led a tour to Rome, which included private visits to Hadrian’s Villa and the Villa d’Este at Tivoli. In April his journey will take in Venice and Vicenza and include the Palladian Villas Malcontenta, la Rotonda and Barbao at Maser and wine tastings in private countryside villas. The tours are so popular that regulars, the odd Duchess among them, go back year after year. John himself lives in Le Marche in

‘culture & conviviality in beautiful surroundings.’

central Italy with his wife, where they cultivate olives and wine. His love of his adopted country remains almost childlike in its intensity. He profoundly believes that experiencing Italy is an essential step

towards understanding and enjoying life. ‘We’re not just about art history,’ he says of both his ventures, ‘We’re about the art of life itself.’

A peek at some of the students’ Instagram feeds and their comments backs up John’s point. One has described Charlie and John as ‘mentors’, opening up a new way of life. A student from India said, ‘The course goes way beyond art and culture – I felt I was on the

‘cusp of something life-changing.’

‘What makes this course unique is the bond between father and son, extrapolating to bonds between pupils too,’ says another student, referring to Charlie and John as ‘adopted father and grandfather’. ‘Charlie your moral guidance and John your charming wit have been indispensable to us’.

‘Charlie, like John, is extremely patient and also caring, offering comfort to anyone with so much as a hint of melancholy,’ another student says. ‘The company and mentoring that John and Charlie provide is an extra comfort to being in a location that you’re not familiar with, as both characters contrast one another providing a vast knowledge on a variety of topics. Charlie was also very good at explaining things when visiting museums and galleries, which was particularly appreciated under the fog of an occasional hangover. So here I would like to make a special thanks to the indomitable Hall duo for being such fun and so interesting – without ever being patronising or school.’

‘Charlie and I get on very well together,’ says John. ‘Unlike me, Charlie has the gift of the gab so he happily takes over in Venice, making all the announcements and introducing lecturers, which I used to do. Now I sit at my desk at the back of the lecture room, watching and listening. I still consider my presence of some value, keeping in touch with the students.’

The father-son combination and the duo's complementary characters help students to feel that they're taking pleasure in learning rather than being at school. 'John presides over the students with a patrician air and leaves most of the day to day running of things to his son Charlie,' says a student. 'Charlie has seen and heard everything and so no excuse, no matter how many twists and turns it carries, will wipe the look of disdain from his face when you show up late for lecture. "But really, you missed the preeminent expert on Mozart because your alarm clock broke? At least be creative."' Charlie is a gentleman and an elocutionist in the tradition of Edmund Burke, using a persistent Socratic method he makes us realise that it is a good idea to visit the Palladian villa, even though it's raining and you've only had a few hours of sleep.'

We know our standard is gold and we're never going to compromise on quality.

It's exactly this kind of endorsement from students that persuades John and Charlie not to fiddle too much with a formula that has stood the test of time. A few years ago the course was shortened but due to student demand, it was lengthened again. 'We will not bow to the fashion for quick, lazy fixes,' resolves John. 'There's far too much rushing around on other courses. We want our students to build a real and lasting relationship with Venice and nothing shorter or less academic will do for us. We know our standard is gold and we're never going to compromise on quality. That way we hope to keep going

another 50 years at least.’

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