

TRAVEL

Edited by Nick Walton
nicholas.walton@scmp.com

In the classroom of a Venetian palazzo, Fabian, our sculpture teacher is appraising our attempts at recreating a reclining figure. After a while, he gestures to the figurine's breast area. "What's this?"

Naturally, it's a breast, but as Fabian is quick to point out, she only has one of them. I'd been so focused on the photo of the Henry Moore sculpture on my desk that I'd forgotten to stand up, walk around it and sculpt my figure as a three-dimensional object. But her odd anatomy was the least of her problems. With her rabbit-paw hands, fused legs and freakish proportions she was less work of art than insult to the sisterhood. "Think of it as a stepping stone," says Fabian, sensing my disappointment.

With that, the bells of the neighbouring Carmini church ring out and four aspiring sculptors put down their tools and head to a canal-side bar to sink a round of those classic Venetian aperitifs – the blood-red spritz. Tucking into small doughy discs of pizzette, we agree that the 5.30pm spritz is obligatory. And as Fabian points out, the extra-long cocktail stick makes an excellent sculpting tool.

Venice is a magical city, full of life, history, art and culture – so what better way to experience it than by combining the sights with on-site education? For three weeks each June, the Academy of Creative Arts takes over a rambling palazzo in the residential neighbourhood of Dorsoduro, where it offers budding creative writers, filmmakers, photographers, sculptors and musicians the perfect excuse to linger in one of the world's most touristy cities at a relaxed pace.

Launched in 2006 by Vienna-based artist Wolf Werdigier, the academy draws a large German-speaking contingent, but last year's intake also included Australians, British, Americans and an Iranian, whose ages ranged from 18 to 85. I can't paint and my first choice, piano, required a minimum two-week course, so I signed up for the week-long sculpture course.

Not even July's cloying humidity can dull the thrill of my daily commute up and over the Grand Canal via the Ponte dell' Accademia, past the floating green grocer moored by a bridge off San Barnaba, and across the buzzing student haunt of Campo Santa Margherita, towards the impressive stone pier of the Zenobi palazzo, looming large behind the Carmini church. On a

shaded bench in the palazzo's gardens, I breakfast on the grocer's fat figs and lagoon-island peaches, washed down with knock 'em dead coffee from the on-site refectory.

As with many of Venice's ageing palazzos, the Zenobio is endearingly worn but still capable of snatching your breath when you least expect it. Exploring one morning I come across the Sala degli Specchi, a spectacular mirrored ballroom that conjures visions of a thousand masked seductions. But despite its faded grandeur, I feel at home, happy to linger in the sun-dappled courtyard with fellow students, pop in for an early breakfast or simply

wander through its unkempt and occasionally frescoed rooms.

If you book early, you can stay in one of the handful of guest rooms at the Zenobio from HK\$302 a night; they're basic and some are without en suites but all are clean and bright. The academy also offers rates at B&Bs and converted convents and monasteries (beware the curfews).

Over the course of a week we stake out our favourite osteria and trattoria. Word about Grom (grom.it), a newly opened organic gelateria on San Barnaba, spreads quickly among the students.

Its raw ingredients include velvety Venezuelan chocolate, Guatemalan coffee, marsala wine,

Madagascar vanilla and a "sweet" Himalayan pink salt, which is mixed with cane sugar to produce salt caramel.

There are less calorific diversions on the academy's weekly timetable. One morning the creative writers decamp by local water buses to the posh, tiled terrace of the Lido's legendary Hotel des Bain (grandhoteldesbainsvenezia.com), where Thomas Mann set *Death in Venice*. Fuelled by americanos and an inspirational backdrop, we scribble non-stop from 10am till 2pm. At the 8am Social Dreaming Session, hosted by Werdigier, early risers unravel the previous night's stream of unconsciousness to

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relative strangers. There's also an evening piano concert in the Sala degli Specchi and a trip to St Mark's Square to see the work of masters.

Day two of the sculpting course finds us lolling on large sheets of brown paper, noting how our joints, hips and elbows fall, and feeling our pressure points. With my earlier attempt confined to the bin, Fabian demonstrates the sausage method: take one large lump of clay (the body) and then attach sausage-like legs and arms of roughly the required length. It is not an easy discipline to grasp but this method is far more effective than my one-lump approach, and over the course of the week a sculpture takes form.

Entrée: Melbourne

Big deal

Preferred Hotels and Cambodia's newest luxury hideaway are offering an opening special. Pay for two nights, at a 20 per cent discounted rate, and get a third night free at the luxurious new Sothea.

The Siem Reap hotel, a member of Preferred Boutique hotels, features 39 sumptuous suites and is only 15 minutes from Angkor Wat. Rates start from US\$320 per night for a deluxe suite (US\$640 for three nights under the package) and includes breakfast either in the room, in the restaurant or packed in a picnic box; wireless internet, minibar, a personalised butler service from pickup at airport to departure, and a welcome drink.

The special package is valid from April 1 to September 20. To book, call 800 96 3365, or go to [www. PreferredBoutique.com/Sothea](http://www.PreferredBoutique.com/Sothea).

Nick Walton
nicholas.walton@scmp.com



Never doubt the quality of most of Melbourne's restaurants; if one doesn't win awards, then it usually won't survive. The deeply entrenched fine-dining scene of Australia's "cuisine capital" has overflowed from busy streets into atmospheric lanes that hide world-class chefs confidently pushing boundaries.

Gingerboy, 27-29 Crossley St, gingerboy.com.au

From the red-neon sign drawing you down the alley to the glamorous backlit cocktail bar at the entrance, Gingerboy (below) has a real "wow" factor. The food is equally impressive. Sample a range of Southeast Asian hawker-inspired dishes such as aromatic son-in-law eggs or the spectacular baby snapper with hot and sour salad. This second restaurant for lauded chef Teague Ezard (his other is Ezard and he also helped with the menu at Causeway Bay's Opia) is a casual yet fast and fabulous launch pad for a night out.

Seamstress, 113 Lonsdale St, seamstress.com.au

Spend an evening experiencing the different levels of Seamstress. Named for the former tailor shop originally located in the more than 100-year-old building, the décor is eclectic. Seamstress offers Cantonese dishes with a distinct Australian slant, set among trendy surroundings coloured by bolts of cloth. Begin with pre-dinner drinks at the cocktail bar on the top floor before descending to the restaurant on the middle level. Finish the night at the casual bar lounge in the basement.

Maha Bar and Grill, 21 Bond St, mahabg.com.au

Looking for something that sticks to your ribs and lasts through the following day's shopping spree? Sample Melbourne's own brand of Middle Eastern cuisine. Maha is a place to enjoy a banquet influenced by chef Shane Delia's Arabic roots and refined by his French training. Mood lighting and lavish use of

warm woods transport you into the *Arabian Nights*, especially after a few of the well-matched wines.

Cumulus Inc, 45 Flinders Lane, cumulusinc.com.au

Visible through large street-facing windows but with a blink-and-you'll-miss it entrance, Cumulus Inc is a former gallery now offering a fresh, airy dining space. The "no bookings" policy may mean a short wait but it's worth it. Sample fresh oysters, a selection from the charcuterie or the artfully arranged slow-cooked pork loin, five perfect slices aligned on a rectangular plate.

MoVida Bar de Tapas Y Vino, 1 Hosier Lane, movida.com.au

Down a bluestone-cobbled lane leading to Federation Square and opposite a wall of regularly photographed graffiti, you enter the domain of Barcelona-born chef Frank Camorra. Modern and authentic Spanish tapas present well among the dining room's warm, amber tones, vintage prints, dark wood and bottle-lined shelves. Diners must book in advance for the restaurant, which offers Ortiz anchovy crouton topped with smoked tomato sorbet, paprika paté with verdant parsley mojo or the famous Cecina – a dish fanned with thinly sliced air-cured Wagyu beef and centred with truffe foam and poached egg. Should you decide to go at the last minute, you can also try the newly opened MoVida Next Door, which is more relaxed and serves simple, traditional tapas.

Phoenix Arrien



Detours: Bogota

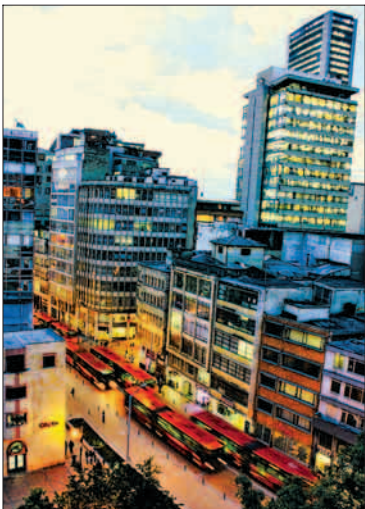
Mike Power

Not so long ago the Colombian capital was a no-go zone at night. It's still wild – but in the best possible sense. Bogota was once synonymous with drugs and danger. But travellers who venture beyond Cartagena and the Caribbean coast are today finding a cosmopolitan city that is quietly edging ahead as one of Latin America's coolest capitals.

Bogota's nightlife is sensational: effortlessly cool, with a young, educated and stylish population that lives for the night and welcomes outsiders. Taxis are safe, plentiful and metered, you can get a swish dinner for two for under 100,000 pesos (HK\$330) and cocktails seldom break 10,000 pesos.

If you follow your taste buds when you travel, you might want to start off in the G Zone, or Gastronomy Zone, located in the heart of Bogota's financial centre (between Calle 69 and Calle 72 and between Carrera 4 and Carrera 7). Here a vibrant foodie hub has emerged and now your only worry is where to spend your cash with fusion restaurants such as Dar Papaya (4 Calle 69) the standout choice here, with its complex but delicious Peruvian-themed dishes.

On Fridays, start out at Pravda in the Parque de 93, a tree-lined square in the city's north, surrounded by trendy bars and restaurants, then check out the Bogota Beer Company bar (near Paseo del Country, bogotabeercompany.com), a microbrewery with stronger beers than the weak lager served



elsewhere. From here take a stroll to Scirocco (sciroccobar.com), a bar-lounge with a Manhattan aesthetic but a lot less attitude. Late at night the city explodes with raw energy. The best club is Cha Cha (elchacha.com) on Saturday nights, set in the ballroom on the 41st storey of the old Hilton hotel. At 5am the dance floor is still rocking to the thrash of European house. Unlike the druggy dance floors of London or Berlin, the clubbers here are fuelled by booze and unabashed enthusiasm.

"When I go to a Latin club, with salsa or merengue, I feel depressed if I don't dance with a girl," says Leon Pardo, a 23-year-old student. "But here I lose myself in the music, alone, it's deep and hypnotic. Our clubs are wild right now."

"It's a bit like Berlin after the wall came down," says artist Carlos

The Academy of Creative Arts holds courses for artists every summer in Venice. The classes were started in 2006 by a German artist, with students of different ages coming from around the world. Photos: Will Taylor/Argus



A couple of afternoons with a model accelerates things – copying a real person is far easier than copying a photo.

During the final afternoon's classes, Fabian shows me how to enhance the sculpted form with a serrated spatula. This, he says, will stop it from looking as if I'd just smeared-up the surface with my finger, which of course I have. As we finished applying "wear marks" to her legs, Wolf Werdigier drops in – and Fabian has a surprise: my original mono-breast attempt had been rescued from the bin. Looking at the two sculptures side by side Werdigier is clearly impressed. Until he sees her bottom half. "What's that on her legs? She looks like she needs a shave." And with that he chortles off to the unsuspecting film students next door.

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Getting there: Cathay Pacific (cathaypacific.com) has direct flights from Hong Kong to Rome, then catch Alitalia (alitalia.com) on to Venice. Alternatively, there's a high-speed rail link between Rome and Venice. Tickets available at italarail.com.

Courses: the Summer Academy (summeracademyvenice.com) runs from June 28 to July 18 (to coincide with the Venice Biennale), with courses in photography, sculpture, painting, film, creative writing, experimental architecture and music.

Santos, on the chill-out terrace at Cha Cha. "We're breathing out, relaxing. The war is still happening, and our government has done many terrible things, but I feel safer than I ever have. Why shouldn't we party?" In the past year DJs such as Berlin's M.A.N.D.Y., New York veteran Harry Romero and Bristol's Nick Warren have shaken the dance floor.

Once Cha Cha closes at 6am, the diehards head to Gotica in Zona Rosa, centred around Carrera 11/13. It's a two-room club with local DJs playing more mainstream house and techno, with soul, funk and disco in the mirror-lined upstairs bar until about 9am.

For a more traditional Colombian experience, jump in a taxi for the 40-minute ride out of the city to the Andres Carne De Res (andrescarnederes.com). It's a theatrical cross between a Cirque du Soleil show, the best steakhouse you've ever visited and a liquor-drenched Colombian knees-up. More than 250,000 people eat 10 tonnes of meat a year here, before partying until 5am in a series of interlinked rooms and dance floors bedecked with magic-realist bric-a-brac.

If by Sunday morning you have any energy or money left, get on your bike for the Ciclovía – Bogota shuts many of its roads to cars on Sundays and thousands of cyclists take over the show. But chances are you'll be hiding in your hotel room, calling room service for painkillers and coffee.

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