



The Sinner's Grand Tour: A Journey Through the Historical Underbelly of Europe

By Tony Perrottet

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Sex and travel have always been intertwined, and never more so than on the classic Grand Tour of Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Today the Continent is still littered with salacious remnants of that golden age, where secret boudoirs, notorious dungeons, and forbidden artifacts lured travelers all the way from London to Capri.

In *The Sinner's Grand Tour*, celebrated historian and travel writer Tony Perrottet sets off to discover a string of legendary sites and relics that are still kept far from public view. In southern France, an ancient text leads him inside the château of the Marquis de Sade, now owned by fashion icon Pierre Cardin. In Paris, an 1883 prostitute guide helps him discover the Belle Époque fantasy brothel Le Chabanais and the lost “sex chair” of King Edward VII. Renaissance documents in the Vatican Secret Archives point the way to the Pope’s very own apartments in Vatican City, wherein lies the fabled Stufetta del Bibbiena, a pornography-covered bathroom painted by Raphael in 1516.

With his unique blend of original research, sharp wit, and hilarious anecdotes, Perrottet brings us a romping travel adventure through the scandalous backrooms of historical Europe.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Hugely entertaining... Perrottet has a wonderful knack for ferreting out the obscure, the offbeat, and the just plain weird. A real eye opener.”

—*Booklist*

“Lots of people write about sex, and lots of people write about history, but nobody writes about either quite the way Tony Perrottet does. His well-informed wit is front and center in his latest—and, for my money—best book to date. . . . The perfect read for anyone blessed with a sense of humor and a touch of perverse curiosity.”

—Chris Ryan, *New York Times*-bestselling author of *Sex at Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality*

"This X-rated version of “National Lampoon’s European Vacation” segues into an amusing — and absorbing — series of quests... (Perrottet) tears away Europe’s decorous historical facade he pays spirited homage to the rakes and reprobates who subscribed to Casanova’s motto: “I have devoted my life to the pursuit of pleasure.”

-- *The New York Times Book Review*

“Delightful and edifying... Undercover historian Tony Perrottet presents the Tour with a twist: studying the Continent’s most famous, or infamous, sites and relics associated with human sexuality, from the belle époque brothels of Paris to a secret Vatican bathroom covered with erotic panels by Raphael.”

—Trip Lit, *National Geographic Traveler*

“A terrifically funny writer . . . informative and twice as quirky.

—*Boston Globe*

About the Author

TONY PERROTTET is the author of four previous books: *Off the Deep End*, *Pagan Holiday*, *The Naked Olympics*, and *Napoleon's Privates*. He lives in New York City.

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THE DEVIL'S TRAVEL BUREAU

It was a classic summer's day in London the city was enveloped by veils of dismal rain and as I skulked through the lonely backstreets of Bloomsbury, I began to feel like Dr. Jekyll before a binge. Decent folk who passed me by seemed to hasten their step, ducking beneath their umbrellas when they glimpsed my wild eyes.

It was as if they could sense my furtive mission. I wason my way to the British Museum, where I planned to locate the dreaded Secretum, the world's most extensive cache of historical erotica, and then wallow in its shameful contents.

In the high Victorian age, with Oscar Wilde in the defendant box, fig leaves on every statue and moral watchdogs on every corner, many a guilty looking gentleman would have trodden this same path to London's

most hallowed institution. But instead of admiring the respectable exhibits, these discerning types would have slipped through the crowds to meet a museum official, the Keeper of the Secretum. Letters of introduction were presented, written by trustees or college dons, and then the visitor (who might have been accompanied, on rare occasions, by a female companion or two) would be ushered down a dark stairway to the North Basement, to wait for a door to be unlocked.

As the blue flames of the gas lamps spluttered to life, shelves full of writhing limbs emerged from the darkness naked lovers carved in marble, satyrs in gold leaf on parchment, bronze phalluses of astonishing proportions. For the delectation of the chosen few, the Secretum offered an array of historical artifacts that were considered too obscene for public display. Cultures that the Victorians could barely dream of were here, brazenly enjoying themselves in every possible manner.

It must have seemed like a shrine to forbidden pleasure.

The Secretum was created in 1866, at the height of the era's sexual hysteria, to protect the public from the moral perils of history. The year before, 434 ancient phallic objects had been donated by an eccentric doctor named George Witt, who had made his fortune in Australia from banking. Dr. Witt was convinced that all world religions had begun with phallus worship, and had gathered around him a clique of wealthy phallus collectors who supported his thesis. While accepting the bequest, the British Museum trustees voted to allocate a special room where the Witt Collection could be examined in suitable privacy. The room was quickly supplemented with "obscene" treasures from all historical periods. British archaeologists and academics had long been returning from their journeys around the world with shocking depictions of guilt free sex. By the 1890s, the Museum Secretum, Secret Museum, boasted over 1,100 wicked objects.

Today, we can get a detailed idea of the chamber's contents from the Secretum Acquisitions Register, a leather bound tome where each new arrival was carefully noted. Preserved in the museum archives, the Register makes entertaining reading. The word ithyphallic ("erect penis") appears in every second listing, with the pages often enlivened by thumbnail sketches. But it is the breadth of the collection that is most arresting. The Secretum held an eye popping variety of Greco Roman art, including a graphic sculpture of the god Pan fornicating with a she goat; a medieval chastity belt; lewd engravings from Renaissance Venice; eighteenth century porn from the oeuvre of the Marquis de Sade; ribald documents from Georgian British sex clubs; and much more. In short, the cream of Europe's erotica had been gathered in one thrillingly dingy chamber.

Naturally, the Secretum earned an underground, if highbrow, cachet. But despite its fame amongst the cognoscenti, it was so risqué that very few scholars felt comfortable describing their emotions in print; the records that survive are reserved, stiff upper lip complaints about the poor lighting or stale air. Still, we can imagine the enthusiasm of enlightened visitors to be similar to that of Henry James, who examined a portfolio of Lord Byron's graphic letters and sketches with his friend the novelist John Buchan. Buchan recalled in his memoir, "The thing nearly made me sick, but my colleague (James) never turned a hair. His only words for some special vileness were 'singular' 'most curious' 'nauseating perhaps, but how quite inexpressibly significant.' "

In 1912, the Secretum collection was divided up and moved to a series of locked backroom cupboards. Although new pieces, including two hundred year old condoms, were still being added as late as 1953, the official attitude changed during the permissive 1960s. Items were slowly redistributed to their rightful places in the museum, and even the name Secretum fell from use. In 2001, the curator David Gaimster identified the last resting place of its vestiges as Cupboard 55 in the Department of European Prehistory, and published an article with several photographs showing a few last saucy treats, which he regarded as a "time capsule" of

misguided Victorian attitudes to censorship.

Today, although the museum doesn't overadvertise the fact, the entire storage collection is available to the public for "object identification" by appointment on Tuesday afternoons. So when I was in London, I made an appointment to visit Cupboard 55.

Finally, the museum was looming above me, like a haunted temple in the rain. I jostled past noisy tour groups and entered the polished halls of the King's Library. With a set of emailed instructions in my top pocket, my imagination was now racing like a schoolboy's. Perhaps just pulling a certain book from the shelf would open a secret panel, revealing a mahogany lined parlor managed by tuxedoed servants. The reality of my visit was a little less Merchant Ivory. In the appointed room, I muttered my name into an intercom, and a door clicked open to reveal a shabby, abandoned hallway coated in hospital gray paint. A pallid secretary appeared and led me up some echoing stairs to the storage areas. The walls were cracked and chipped, the windows opaque with grime.

I was getting excited.

Waiting for me was a curator, Liz Gatti, a fashionable sylph with an understated nose piercing. She was an incongruous figure, like an emissary from Marc Jacobs somehow lost in Bleak House.

"We get a lot of inquiries about the Secretum," she began, as I signed the visitor's book. "But I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. There's hardly anything left."

"Oh, I'll have a peek anyway," I said with what I hoped was proper aplomb.

We followed a corridor that was now lined with antique wooden cabinetry, each marked with a bronze number plaque, until we stopped in front of Cupboard 55. This was it, the dreaded Secretum's last known resting place.

"No whiff of brimstone," I joked. Ms. Gatti looked at me askance, then pulled out a wad of keys.

I held my breath as she creaked open the aged hinges, as if it were a vampire's casket. Squinting in the semi-darkness, I made out rows of peculiar items that looked a bit like dreidels.

"Egad," I muttered, mystified. They were dreidels.

"Everything really has been moved about," Liz sighed. "Today we use the cupboard to house Judaica."

This was deflating and bewildering news: the last items from Cupboard 55 had been redistributed in 2005.

"But is there nothing here from the former Secretum?" I pleaded.

"Well, actually . . ." she said hesitantly, fingering the keys. "A few bits and bobs."

That was when she cracked open the adjoining door Cupboard 54.

And there, neatly cushioned in a silk lined wooden box, was a selection of candy colored wax phalluses from eighteenth century Italy. Liz explained that they had been donated by the avid phallus hunter Sir William Hamilton, British envoy to Naples during the Napoleonic Wars, who found them being used as fertility

offerings in a village church and liberated them for Britain. (His busy career as a collector in Italy was overshadowed by the scandalous fact that his wife, Lady Hamilton, ran off with Lord Nelson). On the shelf below, a clinically white, acid free Styrofoam sheet held items from the Witt Collection: Rows of ancient Roman phallic jewelry, crafted from coral, amber, and glass and now laid out like colorful insects in an entomology case. Amulets depicted lovers indulging in a range of athletic coital positions. One strange statuette showed a winged dwarf with a monstrous organ. Of course, phallic objects were carried every day as good luck charms in ancient Rome and are no longer off limits. But today, filed away in this cobwebbed corner, they felt like the last buried link to that Victorian hysteria.

My eyes ran over the wealth of oddities badges worn by medieval pilgrims, depicting the female genitals; a tobacco pipe stopper from the Tudor age, showing a knickerless woman pulling up her skirt before settling on the last display. Lovingly laid out on a felt base were four eighteenth century condoms, which had been discovered in the pages of a 1783 British self help book, *The Guide to Health, Beauty, Riches and Honour*. These pioneer contraceptives were handcrafted from animal intestines. They were like works of art, intentionally pretty, tied at the open end by little pink ribbons of silk. They had survived in mint condition, all the way from the era of Casanova.

I was in historian's heaven.

REPROBATES ABROAD

With its breakthroughs in rail and sea transportation, the Victorian age also marked the birth of modern travel, and it would have been a stolid visitor indeed for whom the Secretum did not inspire wanderlust. If such peculiar wonders lurked here in London, how much more could be found in the outside world?

Those last remnants of the cache had the same inspiring effect on me. The British Museum was only the first stop in a personal Grand Tour I'd planned across Europe, in search of forbidden historical fruit. Today, the entire continent is still littered with secret boudoirs, perverse relics, and ancient dungeons, many of which, I was convinced, could be found.

In a way, this was a trip I'd been plotting since I was a teenager. I attended one of the last hard line Irish Catholic high schools in Sydney, where the records of history were hardly less sanitized than they were for Victorians. In this orthodox world view, the ancient Greeks were lofty philosophers, Renaissance popes were cultured patrons of the arts, Georgian aristocrats were demure scientists and scholars, and all those Edwardian writers who moved to Capri were just interested in the scenery.

Even as an adolescent, I suspected there was more to it than that. And in recent years, the academic world has been deluged with research that focuses on the human, daily details of history, overturning the sterile view of the past. Whole volumes are now penned on the gay clubs of belle époque Paris or Weimar Berlin. The Marquis de Sade is more famous than any Catholic saint, and a lesbian nun in Renaissance Venice has as many biographies as Britney Spears.

Now, as I rushed through the dark streets of London, my mind was filled with images of history's most riotous fleshpots. I was going to hunt down the physical evidence of all those subversive texts. What if I found the truth behind Europe's most fabled lost wonders the elaborate love making "thrones" used in nineteenth century French brothels, for example, or the pornographic chambers in the Vatican?

I arrived back at my hotel it was called the Goodenough Club, which sounded like the sort of place Ebenezer Scrooge might put up his mother in law but stopped short outside my room, frozen by the sound of blood

curdling screams from within. It had almost slipped my mind that I wasn't taking this journey of discovery alone.

The moment I turned the handle, reality came crashing back. The floor was ankle deep with clothes, toys, colored markers, plastic bottles and half eaten food. It looked as though a horde of Pictish barbarians had ransacked the place. It was hard to believe the damage had been done by just two kids, aged ten and four. Now Henry and Sam were jumping off the beds like ecstatic ninjas. My wife, Lesley, looked shell shocked. Any attempt to calm the boys had only inflamed their jet lagged frenzy.

Les told me the management had been calling with complaints. Apparently the people downstairs thought a second blitz had begun. It was no use explaining that these kids were fresh off the plane from New York, a cross between Botticelli cherubs and Spielbergian children of the corn.

Instead, I explained to Lesley how I'd just examined a goat intestine prophylactic. She nodded distractedly. "Do they deliver pizza in London?"

Les was very understanding when I'd first broached the idea of this trip back home in Manhattan.

"So it's a young man's erotic journey from Milan to Minsk?"

"What?"

"It sounds great. But I'm coming too. And so are the kids."

I'd clutched my map of Europe, with my route carefully zigzagged in red marker, and began to stammer out the many logical objections to the idea. Dragging both the boys around Europe would be what was le mot juste? excruciating. We'd be better off going up the Empire State Building and tearing up \$100 bills.

"Well, we can't stay here!"

She did have a point. We were staring down the barrel of another brutal New York summer. The city would soon be stewing in its own fetid juices, and the boys would be ricocheting around the walls like Ping Pong balls. Leaving the three of them in our tiny apartment would resemble some sinister Nazi experiment.

I pulled out my trump card: "You know, the material I'm researching is not exactly kid friendly. . ."

But even as I said the words, I knew it was a lost cause. In today's uncensored era, Henry, at age ten, had probably seen more sexual imagery than I had by age thirty five and that's just from watching The Simpsons. He shrugged it all off with one furrowed eyebrow. And growing up in the East Village isn't the most protected environment on earth. His best friend's dad is a celebrated New York pornographer. Visiting the brothels of Old Paris or Pompeii is simply an historical approach to sex ed.

Sam, meanwhile, was only four years old, so would be less interested in randy Roman satyrs than the flavors of Italian gelato. Before I knew it, our "family vacation" was settled. I tried to be philosophical: If nothing else, the next generation would have a broader view of the past than I did.

But now, in London, as I surveyed the wreckage of our first hotel room, the wisdom of the plan was difficult to recall. We were supposed to be traveling for three months, to the most sophisticated corners of Europe, on singular missions that were as delicate as an eighteenth century timepiece. How, precisely, was I going to

stay sane?

At least I could take refuge in my feverish visions of history. To paraphrase Virginia Woolf, every gentleman needs a Secretum of his own.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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As people who live in often the modest era should be upgrade about what going on or information even knowledge to make these people keep up with the era and that is always change and move ahead. Some of you maybe may update themselves by studying books. It is a good choice for you but the problems coming to you actually is you don't know what kind you should start with. This *The Sinner's Grand Tour: A Journey Through the Historical Underbelly of Europe* is our recommendation to help you keep up with the world. Why, because book serves what you want and wish in this era.

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