



Mark Abouzeid

EXPATS IN FLORENCE by Alexandra Korey

American-born Mark Abouzeid is a visual storyteller who concentrates his efforts in the Middle East, Africa and Europe to help conserve the intangible cultural heritage of the communities with whom he lives and works. But his career didn't start out like this—not in the slightest.

Mark Abouzeid is the first to admit to the low points in his life. In his 2015 keynote speech at the Epic Failures Conference, he listed many of them, recounting his first career as a ruthless manager of Asian mergers and acquisitions in the mid-1980s and 1990s and his second attempt as a dot-com start-upper before a personal crisis set him on a new track. Realizing that his past choices had damaged the lives of too many people, Mark sought personal balance and a career that would positively affect the world.

Now, he says, everything he does is for his daughters. The son of an important international businessman, Mark spent his early years in Brussels and Milan, and after high school and university in the United States, he became interested in the world of Asian finance and moved to Hong Kong. He makes no secret of the fact that his was a hard and fast life. His bio reads cinematically—a series of life-changing moments that sound almost trite in summary. Cumulatively, these moments led him to move to Florence.

When his first daughter, Lucia, was born, during his then wife's long labour, hospital staff sobered him up; when he held his daughter for the first time, he underwent a profound change. Giving up worldly riches in the hope of intangible ones, the couple took advantage

of the flexibility of running an Internet-based company to move anywhere they wanted. His wife chose Tuscany. Mark says that 'some expats move to Tuscany for the dream, others stay for the reality.' Although he and his daughters settled comfortably into the *contadino* life of small-town Castelmuzio, near Pienza, it proved not to be the right place for his wife. A lengthy divorce left him with custody of his two girls, an intense familial bond and an agreement to make all future decisions together. It was for their high school education that the three moved to Florence about a decade ago.

Photography became a career out of chance and Mark's need to work around the girls' school schedule. Finding the right stories to capture in words and images was something Abouzeid found came naturally, and he was lucky: his first two publications were with the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Whenever his daughters were with their mother,

Mark traveled, often to remote places, and found himself not only capturing stories but also learning more about himself. 'Everything I do, I do to learn. I learned acceptance from Mediterranean fisherman. I learned about being a man from the Bedouin.'

When he first moved to Florence from Pienza, he found that there were *aperitivi* literally every night, and he started attending these, armed with an ice-breaking camera that provided his 'in' to so many of the tightly knit communities that make up this city. (Although he made friends, he says, and became part of these groups, he has never felt fully accepted or included.)

The camera became a tool to initiate collaborations and conversations, to spot problems or stories that needed to be told, and to do something about them. A two-week stay in the desert led to a three-year project on the conservation and transmission of the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Cultural Space, the Bedu of Wadi Rum and Petra. Closer to home, his New New World portrait series reimagines Renaissance portraits from Florentine museums with the faces of the city's modern cultural influencers, of all races; he used their exhibit in Palazzo Vecchio in June 2013 to raise funds for the families of the two Senegalese men shot in Florence in 2011.

Although Mark loves Florence very much, he says his roots are not here; until recently, he didn't know where they were. In 2013, as his father was dying, he realized that this was his only chance to understand the heritage about which his father had never spoken. George Abouzeid had left Lebanon to make his future in America. Now, armed with basic information from his father, Mark traveled there to uncover his past. What he found was a Lebanon that is vibrant, modern, and nothing like its current portrayal in the media. Abouzeid is calling his documentary currently in progress, 'Finding My Lebanon'—a fitting title for what is a discovery of the country and of himself, created through his interviews of artists, policy makers and 'men on the street.'

'The past should help define the present and inspire the future,' he says. Having reevaluated the past in his own life, he sees the past as a roadmap also for the future of the city of Florence. 'Most people think I hate Florence. Honestly, I think I love Florence more than anyone.

The mix of cultures and integration that the city has attracted should inspire forward movement, but instead, we become them, we absorb the Renaissance and look back to it instead of helping them overcome it. Everything I have done here has been to try to help especially young people here break this cycle of despair, to encourage them to get out and try to do things without fear.'

Florence Quickfire

1. One place in Florence that makes you happy or inspires you.

Under the Lebanese cedar tree in Bobolino

2. Strangest thing you've seen in the city.

The line outside Tiffany's two weeks before Christmas... If you know you want something, why not go any other time of the year—unless the point is to be seen in the queue.

3. Favourite artwork in Florence?

Alex Tobey's sculpture *El Sueno* (The Dream, private collection): this recent graduate of Charles Cecil Atelier uses real liquid and physical space, and truly builds on Florentine artistic heritage to create new art.

4. Favourite Florentine, past or present?

Pape Diaw, the Florentine elder of the Senegalese community. He never uses the politics of aggression but promotes tolerance, understanding and mutual collaboration. He should be the Florentine Man of the Year, if not decade.

5. Best bar for an aperitivo?

Easy Living during the summer, Pop Café during the fall and spring

6. Best place for typically Florentine food?

Bistrot Culinaria in piazza Tasso has great meats and cheeses from local farms

7. Best place to feel like you're not in Florence?

Piazza Santo Spirito

8. Pet peeve or something you will never get used to living here.

The pure lack of self-esteem in society... Florence is a high school football star who only remembers his glory days.