

Perillo goes beyond escorted tours with ItalyVacations.com

By Michelle Baran

NEW YORK — According to Steve Perillo, there's only one way to survive in today's online marketplace: specialize. And that's exactly what the self-proclaimed "king of Italy" decided to do with the launch of ItalyVacations.com.

"People using the Internet can absorb one leader in any given category," said Perillo, CEO of Italy specialist Perillo Tours, which this year decided to expand its Italy product beyond escorted tours. With the launch of ItalyVacations.com at the end of last year, Perillo now offers independent and custom group travel online.

Agents can also construct FITs using the site and will have an online booking capability later this year.

The rollout coincided with Perillo's withdrawal from the Israel market at the beginning of this year. "To be a leader in any one category, you've got to really put all your eggs in it," he said.

He explained that success online is "based around search terms, which have become very expensive these days. Pretty soon you're spending a few thousand a year [per term]. So I said, 'Let me be the king of Italy on the Internet.'"

Consequently, Perillo Tours chose to focus almost entirely on Italy. (The only exception is Hawaii, which Perillo Tours continues to offer.)

ItalyVacations.com expands the brand's offering into the a la carte Italy travel product space. The website enables users to book three- to five-star hotels, car rentals, rail, semi-escorted tours and customized packages — everything except the standard escorted Perillo Tours product — in 17 out



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The Duomo cathedral in Florence. The city is a stop on Perillo's Slow Food tour of Tuscany and Umbria.

of the 20 regions in Italy, including some 320 hotel properties in 56 cities.

Perillo decided to move into FITs because of the "declining demographic of the tour participant and the newer traveler wanting to do things on their own," said Laurie Roveto, executive vice president of Perillo's ItalyVacations.com.

Perillo added that while "tours are still the highest value," it's becoming much easier and more profitable for operators to offer FIT options with improved technology.

"FITs used to be an extremely long process of booking and confirming with all the services in Italy. And now it's much, much faster," he said.

"It's a much younger demographic finding us online," Roveto said. "We're opening to a whole new set of people."

Agents can register for ItalyVacations.com at www.italyvacations.com/travel-agent-registration, but full online booking capabilities won't be available until later in 2011. For now, they can go as far as quote creation and can then call Perillo to finalize the booking.

Perillo Tours this month also launched culinary tours in conjunction with Slow Food Italia, a sustainable food movement.