

Tuscany's Rolling Countryside Invokes The Good Life

Offers travellers a chance to enjoy rural living and hanging out with the natives.

TUSCANY, renowned for its major art centers of Florence and Siena, its legendary wine towns scattered throughout the province and its exquisite landscapes depicted by Renaissance painters (and which look pretty much the same today), has always been a powerful magnet for lovers of the good life.

Now that the dollar has taken such a dramatic dive against the lira, though, the astronomical cost of the better Tuscan hotels (and some not so good) has been keeping many budget-conscious hedonists away.

But there's another way to go...at least for people who relish the delights of rural living, and can enjoy hanging out among the natives instead of just rubbing shoulders with other tourists.

TWO-BEDROOM APARTMENTS: From about \$400 a week off season (May, September and October are lovely there) to \$600 in high season, a family of four (or two couples who don't mind sharing a bathroom) can rent a two-bedroom apartment, frequently fur-

nished with charming antiques.

These apartments, built to accommodate the flood of tourists (mostly European) who have tired of extended hotel living, are frequently located in renovated castles and monasteries and the like, although some are in cottages specially built for the purpose. More often than not they're located out in the fabulous rolling countryside that inspired the 15th century Tuscan painters, but sometimes they're close enough to one of the major cities to take advantage of the restaurants, concerts and shopping there.

There are agencies that specialize in these tourist rentals, and most of them have someone on the staff who speaks and writes excellent English so it presents no problem in making arrangements by international telephone or written correspondence. One particularly well organized agency operates out of Radda in Chianti, a town that, as its name implies, is located right in the hills that produce the splendid wine that gives the area its name. Claudio Magoni, the owner of "Tuscany from Cottages

to Castles," a name that fairly well describes the range of properties he handles, lived in England for many years. He still maintains a branch of his business even now in St. Albans, Hertfordshire, not far from London.

SLEEPS IN EVERY BED: Magoni is an obliging young man who speaks excellent British English and is thoroughly familiar with every piece of property in his book, right down to such details as the comfort of the beds. "I sleep in every bed in every room before I ever consider accepting a rental," says Magoni, grinning impishly. "If I can't sleep comfortably, then my clients can't either." One of the most romantic of his properties overlooks the town of San Gimignano, noted for its art and architecture as well as its excellent white wine, the Vernaccia de San Gimignano among the most luscious in the country.

Villa del Monte, as the property is known, dates from the 17th century and, along with breathtaking views over endless rows of undulating grapevine

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it offers such diverse attractions as a large modern swimming pool set among the formal gardens, and heraldic emblems belonging to the original owners.

The villa has been converted into eleven apartments, of which "Number One" is the prize, furnished as it is with many of the exquisite furnishings used by the former lords and ladies of the manor. Alas, however, all is not perfection. The people occupying one of the bedrooms must travel through the other bedroom (or scuttle around through the billiard room) to get to the bathroom — or the refrigerator for a midnight foray. Small price to pay, though, for living like a king... or, at the very least, a duke.

NEW STONE VILLA: Then, at the other end of the age spectrum, is a brand new stone villa nestled in the woods outside of Radda in Chianti. This beauty with its four apartments, two on the first floor and two on the second is furnished with the same devotion as if the owner, himself, were living there, with every conceivable kitchen utensil and comfortable accommodations, both inside and out, picnic tables and swimming pool included. Magoni can make arrangements for that place, named Villa Verde, as well.

Then, for folks especially interested in being close to the source of the wine they drink, there are some working wineries that take paying guests. Some, like the Fattoria de Selvole, are way out in the country, on an unpaved road, about 35 minutes from Siena. The huge, historic brick building that is home to the winery, also houses several small, basic apartments that might appeal to people who enjoy the remoteness. A large swimming pool and well-maintained tennis courts are available exclusively for the guests.

COTTAGES: Further north, about ten miles outside of Florence, and just a couple of kilometers from the charming town of Mercatale, is Fattoria la Loggia, with a few cottages of varying vintages located on the grounds of a property that was at one time owned by the Medici. One of the newest cottages has mirrored dressing rooms and up-to-the-minute bathrooms, along with antique accented, charm-filled sitting and sleeping rooms. The kitchen pairs contemporary convenience with rustic accoutrements.

The owner has been known, however, to accept a deposit for accommodations and then, when they arrive send his would-be guests elsewhere in the area, so it's imperative to have a firm under-



standing (in writing) about exactly which accommodations a deposit will guarantee. Some recent visitors had to threaten to contact ENIT (Ente Per Il Turismo-Via Manzane 116, Firenze, Tel. 247-8141) before they got a satisfactory place to stay when he didn't deliver the one they had reserved.

People traveling with children or looking for something more structured might be interested in San Luigi Residence not far off the autostrada that runs between Florence and Siena, with many more "holiday" apartments of varying sizes, from tiny studios accommodating two persons to larger facilities with two rooms. These are more like motel accommodations, (on gorgeous grounds) with a dining room on the premises, tennis courts, swimming pool, kiddie pool, sauna, bar, etc.

TOTAL PRIVACY: For total privacy, near the village of Moncioni and the town of Montevarchi, there are the two charming apartments in "Il Poggiolo" owned by a young American woman and her Italian husband, Christy Herman and Antonio Prato. Each apartment houses from 4 to 7 people (depending on how it's used, since two of the bedrooms have access to either apartment). They are structured in such

a way that they can be combined to handle up to 14 people in one large house party. This property offers splendid views over the countryside.

Depending on the season, one of the great treats of having a house or apartment rather than being confined to a hotel, is being able to buy and bring home some of the wonderful Italian foodstuffs. One can purchase the prepared delicacies (and there's plenty of that to be had in butcher shops and delicatessens — called *alimentari* — in almost every little town), or "on the hoof" to prepare at home. There are tiny, chokeless artichokes, superb cheeses in varieties rarely seen in the U.S., as well as the more well-known ones, tuna and roasted peppers in bulk, capers by the handfull, salamis, capicola, prosciutto and other meat specialties of every conceivable variety, made from veal, pork, beef and wild boar. Then there are the breads, some familiar, some not. Mostly made without oil and some with, called foccacia — and some of that is graced with rosemary, or garlic, or sun dried tomatoes, or whatever. And the superb pastries, with cream and fruit and pignolas and almonds. Endless varieties to be taken home and consumed in the privacy of one's own dining area, or on the ter-

race, or wherever it strikes one's fancy at the moment.

EATING OUT: But just because there's a kitchen in every rental apartment doesn't mean that people won't want to eat out. And, almost without exception, no matter how remote the location of the dwelling, there's at least one good restaurant close by, usually with regional, Tuscan food, although "imported" varieties are available, too. For example, in the tiny, unprepossessing town of Bargino, just off the Sienna-Florence autostrada, close to the Fattoria la Loggia, there's a fish restaurant that brings in the freshest and best from just about everywhere. Run by two brothers, Fabrizio and Stefano, one in the kitchen and one at the front desk, the Trattoria del Pesce prepares a multi-course hot and cold seafood antipasto that's worth traveling for. People come from miles around to enjoy it and the delights that follow. . . risotto de frutti di mare, grilled scampi, lobsters, and a huge assortment of familiar and unfamiliar looking fish that are brought, gleaming fresh for inspection at the table before preparation to order.

Then there's La Capaninna, a small country restaurant with excellent food

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and a comedienne of a hostess who helps you choose your meal while she peppers you with laughter. And, in Cerbia Val de Pesa, an unlikely place, there's a most elegant restaurant recognized with one Michelin star, a restaurant where *everyone* dresses up to live up to the atmosphere, and where the service is as graceful and attentive as if it were in a major city.

La Tenda Rossa (The Red Tent) serves such exquisite dishes as foie gras salad with balsamic vinegar and squab stuffed with herbs, along with some more familiar things such as snow white veal chops. The overtone is definitely creative rather than classic, and somewhat French, although the owner is Italian and self-trained, rather than an apprenticed chef. Her husband does a masterful job running the dining room.

LITTLE INN: For the feeling of eating in the dining room of a stylish friend who is also a superb cook, there's Podere Terreno, an exquisite little inn that also feeds people who aren't necessarily staying there. Sylvie and Roberto Melosi and her young son Christopher welcome dinner guests every night of the week and treat them to Sylvie's delightful, original food, and Roberto's lavish hand with the wine that comes with the meal, and (for an additional fee) excellent Negronis — or anything else from the bar. Sylvie is French and *thinks* she doesn't speak English (she actually does very well) and Roberto is Italian, but lived and worked in an executive capacity in the States for many years. The place and its owners are truly gems!

Whether eating or shopping or visiting wineries or museums, churches and the like, the people who visit Tuscany and live more or less like natives will have a different perspective than when they simply live in a rarified hotel atmosphere. It's worth a try. □

PRACTICAL INFORMATION RENTALS

Tuscany from Cottages to Castles,
Casa Toscano, Vignamaggio 53017,
Radda in Chianti
(Siena) Italy,
Sr. Magoni Tel: 0577-73835

Fattoria di Selvole Vagliani,
(Si) Italy
(Sr. Marco) Tel: 0577/322662

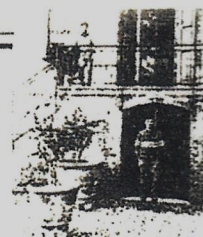
San Luigi Residence,
San Luigi, Monteriggioni,
(Siena) Italy,
Tel: 0577-301055

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Fattoria La Loggia
Via Collina 40,
Montefiridolfi (Firenze),
50020, Italy,
Sr. Baruffaldi Tel: 8244288

Il Poggiolo,
c/o Christy and Antonio Prato,
L'Osteria 53013,
Gaiole in Chianti,
Siena, Italy,
Tel: 0577 749479

Note: Most rentals run from Saturday to Saturday, but some start on Sunday. Best to inquire when making a reservation.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION — RESTAURANTS

13 GOBBI, Via Del Porcella, 9, Firenze, Italy, Tel: 298769: The quintessential classic Florentine restaurant. Superb pasta and veal. Unbelievable fried zucchini. \$50-\$70 for two, including wine.

PODERE TERRENO, Via della Volpaia, Radda in Chianti (Siena), Tel: 0577-738312: Whatever the chef is concocting on any given night. No menu. Call for reservations. The all fish dinner is extraordinary. \$15-\$20 per person including wine.

LA TENDA ROSSA, Piazza del Monumento 9/14, Cerbaia Val di Pesa (Firenze), Tel: 055-826132: Nuova Cucina—Italian with a touch of French. Innovative. Beautifully served, with elegant table appointments. Squab and lamb are outstanding. \$80-\$100 for two, including wine.

TRATTORIA LA CAPANNINA, Via Chiantigiana, 52, San Donato in Poggio, Tavarnelle (Firenze), Tel: 8072777. Country restaurant with big portions of genuinely local food. Ask the hostess what the specials are. \$25-\$35 for two including plenty of house wine.

LA TRATTORIA DEL PESCE, Via Cassia, Bargino, San Casciano (Firenze), Tel: (055) 8249045.

BAR DANTE ALLEGRI, Main Square, Radda in Chianti, Tel: 738059: This isn't a place to eat anything more than a sandwich, *but* Fabrizio, the handsome young owners makes the *best* Negronis, and he's a veritable treasury of information about the whole area. He worked in Washington, D.C., for a spell, and then decided he liked it better in his home town. Can't blame him. □

—Barbara Ann Rosenberg

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