



Chasing the Tuscan Sun

Want to get the most out of this romantic
slice of Italy? Take it slow

BY SUZANNE LEGUE

See you in Pienza!” the woman joked as she took off in her rented red Fiat, clutching the ubiquitous blue-and-yellow guidebook found in the hands of most North American tourists in Italy.

We had just shared several minutes under the Tuscan sun with the woman and her husband while parked at the side of a dusty highway in the blazing heat, snapping pictures of what must be the most photographed — and starkly beautiful — circle of cypress trees.

We were getting to know the couple from Minnesota quite well, since we had also encountered them at several other photo ops recommended by the travel guides: at the lonely yellow chapel flanked by cypress trees near the village of San Quirico d’Orcia; while admiring the rustic Italian farmhouse with the twisty driveway that was Russell Crowe’s home in the movie *Gladiator*; in front of a serpentine, tree-lined road near Monticchiello.

Later that evening, sunburned and exhausted, my husband and I re-evaluated our travel strategy. We vowed that from that point on, we would stop and smell the sunflowers, so to speak.

A haven for artists

Yes, you can do the “Best of Tuscany” route on the main Via Cassia (SR2) in a few hours if you don’t linger. And yes, you will come home with stunning frame-worthy photos of the “Top 10 Tuscan Views.” But you may also see the same people at each stop and you’ll only scratch the surface of this beautiful area. Slow down and ditch the guidebook, though, and you will gather soul-satisfying memories to last a lifetime.

A haven for artists for centuries, Tuscany is like a Renaissance painting come to life. Under its big sky, gently undulating fields are filled with bright yellow sunflowers, red poppies or golden wheat, depending on the season. Cypress-lined driveways, silvery olive orchards and sloping vineyards heavy with fat, purple grapes lead to stone farmhouses and fortified hilltop towns.

The Val d’Orcia, the picture-postcard valley south of Florence, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Thanks to the bestselling book *Under the Tuscan Sun*, Frances Mayes’ memoir about restoring an abandoned farmhouse in the Tuscan countryside, and especially the 2003 movie starring Diane Lane, this magnificent area captures every romantic, iconic image you’ve ever had of Italy.

Timeless and untouched

The medieval hilltop town of Montepulciano is a perfect base from which to explore this stunning corner of Tuscany. From this walled city perched high atop a limestone ridge, it’s an easy drive to many charming villages, including Pienza, Bagno Vignoni, Montalcino, San Quirico d’Orcia and the larger, more touristy town of Siena to the north.

Montepulciano seems timeless and untouched, particularly since the town centre is car-free. It’s a bit of an uphill hike from where you park your car outside the walls, but once you pass through the gates, you can meander aimlessly through the streets, lined with homes built by nobles 400 years ago and

which are still occupied today. A delightful afternoon can be spent admiring the grandeur of the Piazza Grande, where the rescue scene amid a crowd of red-cloaked villagers was filmed for the *Twilight* sequel *New Moon*.

Home base for our week was the Montorio (“Golden Mount”) in the shadow of Montepulciano. Originally built as a monastery in the 1300s, the restored villa is surrounded by a wall of deep green cypresses, with vibrant red geraniums spilling over huge terracotta urns on the expansive terrace. But it wasn’t always so. Having been abandoned for almost 50 years, the building was a dilapidated ruin with crumbling roof and walls, and engulfed by vegetation when purchased by the Savini family in 1997. But, oh, that view!



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Perched on a hill with a glorious 360-degree view, the villa overlooks the stunning Church of San Biagio, whose beautiful dome inspired the design of the Vatican's St. Peter's Basilica. Acoustics are so exceptional inside the ornate cathedral that it is said a clap reverberates more than 50 times.

Beauty and the three-hour lunch

Before the tourist boom, but confident in its potential, the Savinis spent three years transforming the ruin into the quintessential Tuscan dream. Daughter Stefania operates this apartment villa, along with another nearby luxury property, Villa Poggiano, with "a passion, a pinch of recklessness and lots of enthusiasm." She spends much of her time trying to convince guests to slow down and savour the area's stealthy seduction.

"So many tourists who come here are in a hurry. They want to see all the sights from the movies or books. But look around, those images are everywhere," she says. "The real beauty of Tuscany is discovered when you slow down and linger over lunch for three hours, then stroll through the quiet streets of the village, where life is simple, the silence magical and the daily pattern of one's days follows the time-honoured rhythms of nature. These are some of the memories that I hope my guests will take away with them."

Heeding that advice, each day we drove switchback roads, with that evocative mist

hanging above the valleys, exploring villages throughout the region.

One of our favourites was the medieval spa town of Bagno Vignoni. Boasting a thermal spring pool at its centre, it has been a popular stop for travellers since Etruscan times,

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when pilgrims would stop for a therapeutic dip on their pilgrimage to Rome. While the steaming pool is no longer open to the public, you can dip your toes in the mineral-rich hot streams that wind their way down the hill from the main piazza. Take the time to get lost among the labyrinth of back alleyways, and stop at a tiny trattoria to enjoy a leisurely meal of wild boar salami, thick unsalted Tuscan bread and the amazing local pecorino cheese, all dipped in green olive oil and sweet, aged balsamic. We still talk about the delicious simplicity of that meal.

The temple of wine

The Val d'Orcia is famous for its outstanding full-bodied wines — Brunello di Montalcino

and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano — and no visit is complete without visiting at least one of the dozens of wineries that dot the story-book landscape.

Cantine Dei is a family-run winery on more than 100 acres at the base of Montepulciano. The winery features an architecturally stunning new cellar, described as a "temple of wine," that you access through an expansive travertine amphitheatre and a unique shell-shaped stairwell.

"Get off the beaten track — that's my advice," says opera singer Caterina Dei, who owns the winery and is the granddaughter of Alibrando, the family patriarch who founded the winery in 1964. "Live like Italian people, enjoy the real Tuscan habits and be curious to visit hidden places, not only what the guidebook advises. Most importantly, never be in a rush. If you do 'Tuscany in a day,' you will miss Tuscany."

We did end up running into that Minnesota couple in Pienza, a town in Siena that happens to be another UNESCO World Heritage Site. It looks like a movie set come to life with quaint streets jammed with restaurants and tiny shops.

Over a glass of wine, we marvelled at how completely Tuscany enralls you. How every turn reveals a new delight until you imagine you could spend the rest of your days here, perfecting *dolce far niente*, the sweetness of doing nothing. 🍷



Tuscany's simple pleasures include taking in the stunning views the area is famous for. But don't forget to indulge your taste buds, too. Try wild boar salami, thick slices of unsalted bread and pecorino cheese, all dipped in green olive oil and aged balsamic.



A slower pace means taking in the many “streetscapes,” from the medieval spa town of Bagno Vignoni to the rambling local streets. Experience a different kind of accommodation at Montorio (below left), a restored monestary run by Stephania Savini (bottom left) with “a passion, a pinch of recklessness and lots of enthusiasm.”





What's ordinary for those in Tuscany is often postcard-worthy for the thoughtful tourist. From picturesque countryside to quaint village views to unique local wineries, take the time to take it all in.

Tuscany How-To's

WHEN TO GO

Summer can be stiflingly hot in Italy and very crowded. Early fall is perfect in Tuscany: the crowds have lessened, yet the temperature is still comfortably warm.

GETTING THERE

The Val d'Orcia is not easily accessible by public transit. You need a car, so either rent one in Florence and head south or take a high-speed train north from Rome to Chiusi, near Montepulciano, and rent a car there. Almost all rental cars are small and diesel, making them fuel-efficient.

STAYING THERE

Montorio features five one- and two-bedroom apartments in a fully restored former monastery with spectacular views from the terraces. The town of Montepulciano, shops and restaurants are within walking distance. Daily rates start at 100 euros (C\$139); montorio.com.

Villa Poggiano, built as a summer home in the 18th century, is a luxury hotel surrounded by 14 acres of gardens, statues, fountains and a pool, and is about two kilometres outside of Montepulciano. Daily rates start at 220 euros (C\$306); villapoggiano.com.

EATING THERE

La Grotta, at the base of Montepulciano and next to San Biagio church, is one of the best restaurants in Val d'Orcia. The traditional Tuscan food is outstanding, particularly when served in its lush garden. The six-course tasting menu is 50 euros (C\$70); lagrottamontepulciano.it.

Trattoria Latte di Luna in Pienza is an affordable, unpretentious spot that's a favourite with locals. Try the Tuscan white beans, bread soup and pasta with wild boar sauce, while sitting on the lovely outdoor terrace.

DRINKING THERE

The area is dotted with wineries, big and small, and the Val d'Orcia Consortium website (consorziovinoroarcia.it) includes a map of local wineries. Or, just spontaneously pop into one of the many small, family-run wineries marked by roadside signs.

Cantine Dei winery (cantinedei.com) offers daily tours and wine tasting, with the option of lunch, from 15 euros (C\$21). Many wine shops offer automated wine dispensing machines. For a few euros, depending on the vintage, you can sample a few ounces before you buy. Brilliant!

SHOPPING THERE

Affordable bottles of olive oil, chestnut honey and balsamic vinegar can be found in every gift store, but browse the aisles of a neighbourhood grocery store for better deals and interesting varieties. Most stores will also vacuum pack pecorino or Parmesan cheese for you. All stores pack your wine in a cardboard carrying case for safe transport home. When sipping a delicious Brunello or Nobile, you might be convinced you absolutely must have a case of it for home. Keep in mind, though, shipping is expensive, and the LCBO sells many excellent Brunello and Nobile vintages.