



Tempting Tuscany

By Genevieve Northrup

The Tuscany region of Italy spans 8,900 square miles, from the vibrant urban centers of Florence, Siena and Pisa to quaint villages nestled in the countryside. Endless shopping, exquisite artwork, magnificent architecture, peaceful scenery, delectable cuisine and distinguished wine will tempt you to return time and again to Tuscany.

CAPTIVATING CITIES

It would take weeks to truly appreciate the splendor of Florence, Siena and Pisa, but here are a few highlights for your itinerary:

Florence: If you make time for only one city, choose Florence. The Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore's striking carvings of pink, white and green marble create the magnificent focal point of the Piazza del Duomo. Trek up more than 400 steps to the cathedral dome and look beyond the red-tiled rooftops of this busy city.

To see another of Florence's icons requires a trip to the Accademia Gallery. Despite the crowds, you can gaze up at Michelangelo's 17-foot-tall marble achievement, David, and lay eyes on countless other priceless masterpieces.

Watch the sunset and peek in the showroom windows gleaming with gold jewelry along the much-photographed Ponte Vecchio, home to goldsmiths since the late 1500s. Browse around town to find the best prices on bling, and purchase beautifully stitched leather accessories.

Siena: From the modern town below, glance up at the hilltop city, and feel the excitement build as you ride the series of esca-

lators to reach old Siena. Tiny streets, family-owned shops, elegant *ristorantes* and dozens of gelaterias await you.

Though smaller than the Florence Duomo, the Cathedral of Siena is astounding. The intricately sculpted, multi-colored marble exterior is merely a preview of the magnificent artistry inside. Look underfoot at the floor's 50 mosaic masterpieces depicting scenes from the Bible, Siena's history, folklore and philosophy. Also tour the attached Piccolomini Library to regard the exceptional frescoes, still vibrant after more than 500 years.

It seems as though all roads lead to Piazza del Campo, Siena's famous public square that looks today much as it did hundreds of years ago. Each summer, the competitiveness and camaraderie of Siena's neighborhoods culminate in the Palio horse races, as the piazza becomes a racing thoroughfare and grandstand for thousands of cheering spectators.

Pisa: Take funny perspective photos with the 700-year-old Tower of Pisa (La Torre di Pisa) for your scrapbook, but also admire the other Romanesque buildings carved from marble that occupy the Piazza dei Miracoli, or Square of

Miracles. The Cathedral of St. Ranieri is named after Pisa's patron saint and has a fantastic ceiling of recessed square panels decorated with gold-leafed embellishments. The Baptistery of San Giovanni is the largest in Italy and has an ornately carved Gothic dome. Look closely at the Baptistery, and you'll notice that this extravagant monument is taller than the Tower of Pisa and also leans.

WHIMSICAL TOWNS

Welcome the slower pace in towns perched along the hilly landscape, each exuding history and charm. Visit as many as you can, and consider these:

Castellina in Chianti: Castellina was razed and reconstructed multiple times during the feud between Florence and Siena in the Middle Ages. Spend your euros at the Via delle Volte, a tunnel used by soldiers in former times that is now a prime spot for clothing and accessory boutiques.

Cortona: From ancient Etruscan tombs to Roman city gates, a 9th century abbey and medieval cathedrals, you'll find historical evidence at every turn as you explore the setting of the novel and film "Under the Tuscan Sun."



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Lucca: Traverse the old fortress walls for lovely panoramas, and visit Piazza dell'Anfiteatro, the main square built above the foundation of a Roman amphitheater.

Monteriggioni: Discover old Italia in Monteriggioni, a village still enclosed by 30-foot-high stone fortifications that connect a network of 14 guard turrets. Each July, the community commemorates its heritage with a grand medieval festival.

CUISINE & WINE

Buon appetito! Mealtime in Tuscany is epic, and your server will likely give you a strange look if you do not order every course. You will likely end up exclaiming, "We're eating again?!"

Sample an *antipasto* of local cured meats. Then twirl pappardelle noodles coated in a rich, meaty sauce on your fork or slurp a filling soup for your *primo*. Get ready for a *secondo* of rabbit, beef, chicken, pork or boar with a side (*contorno*) of veggies. Dare a hungry friend to order the *bistecca alla fiorentina* — this slab of grilled beef is usually a dense T-bone steak weighing nearly three pounds! You may need to loosen your belt for a sweet finale (*dolce*) or cheese board.

Salute! Tuscany is renowned for Chianti Classico, a wine regulated by the types of grape used (80 percent Sangiovese) and region of production. Chianti Classico bottles bear the region's symbol, a black rooster, and the DOCG label identifying their origin. Vintners use the highest quality Sangiovese grapes and longer fermentation processes to create the superb Chianti Classico Riserva.

Other regional wines include Super Tuscan, quality wines that are made with other locally cultivated grapes; Brunello di Montalcino, made from only Sangiovese grapes; and Vin Santo, a perfect accompaniment to dessert.

TUSCAN RETREATS

Perhaps the best way to enjoy Tuscany is to sojourn at a restored villa or farmhouse tucked amid vineyards, ridges and forests, either as a couple, a small family, a large family with visiting guests, or group of friends. Rates vary by property and time of year, and are usually priced per week. The choices are endless — one-bedroom cottages to 10 bedroom mansions, urban and rural locations, basic or lavish accommodations, and minimalist or full-service experiences.

Complete your must-see list with day trips into major cities, or venture to small towns to pick up local produce and trinkets at weekly markets. Burn calories by bicycling on winding roads and hiking countless trails, or take a dip in your villa's pool and lounge on the patio. Then dine at a nearby restaurant, or hire a chef to take over cooking duties while you relax at your Tuscan hideaway.

Make your stay more memorable with organized services and excursions available through your villa's management company. These may include:

- **Classes:** Photography, Italian, cooking, art
- **Services:** Driver, personal shopper, tour guide, in-villa chef, maid
- **Tastings:** Wine, gelato, olive oil, cheese, regional dishes
- **Tours:** Cities/towns, photography, culinary, shopping, hiking, Vespa, hot air balloon

Visit www.chianti-and-more.com, www.italianvillas.com, www.tuscany-villas.it and www.yourtuscanvilla.com to find the perfect villa, and imagine waking up to the birds chirping and sun rising above the vineyards as your Tuscan adventure begins. *Eccellente!* ■

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