

Travel and Adventure: Viva villas - Living the good life in Tuscany

by Gena Reisner

You never forget your first love, in life or in travel. For me it's Italy, especially Tuscany. The gorgeous landscapes and hill towns, great art, openhearted people and delicious food seduced me from my first visit.

This year I finally explored two walled towns that have been at the top of my list for years - Lucca, a medieval gem, and Arezzo, a Renaissance hill town. And I finally got to live in a Tuscan villa.

LEANING TOWER - Visitors to the Tuscany region can once again climb the Leaning Tower of Pisa. CNS Photo by Gena Reisner. LUCCA CAFE - The sidewalk caf  Turandot in the Tuscany town of Lucca is named after Puccini's opera. CNS Photo by Gena Reisner. SHAVED TRUFFLES - One of the many gourmet delights of Tuscany is fresh truffles. Here, a waiter at Buca Di Santonio in Lucca shaves some fresh truffles onto a pasta dish. CNS Photo by Gena Reisner. AREZZO SKYLINE - The Palazzo Communale is in the heart of the Renaissance hill town Arezzo. CNS Photo by Gena Reisner. In early November, I flew into Pisa with a small group of women on a villa vacation put together by LaCURE Villas, a luxury company that just introduced a package with private chef and chauffeured vehicle. This was a splurge, but Tuscan villas are available in a range of prices. Why are villa rentals popular? Watch sunset from your own patio, spend a hot afternoon by the pool, raid the fridge at midnight, have space for the kids to play - and you'll quickly see the charm of having your own home in the Italian countryside.

The LaCURE driver was waiting at the airport, and we were thrilled to leave the driving and navigating to him. As we drove toward our villa, we saw a sudden apparition - the Leaning Tower of Pisa, tilting crazily beyond a field. What a welcome to Tuscany!

At the 18th century Villa Lucia, the ebullient house manager, Paz Parry, a Brit, welcomed us and showed us right to our extraordinary rooms. I had been put in the Michelangelo, a huge antique-furnished room with high ceilings and lightly frescoed walls. I threw open the windows and leaned out into the incomparable Tuscan

landscape - green hills patchworked with fields of crops and lines of cypress and olive trees, villas here and there, the dark mountains beyond, and closer in, the manicured villa gardens.

Back down in the grand entry hall, we found that our cook, Alberta, had laid out a lavish spread including wild porcini mushrooms. "The cook's husband, Francesco, picked the porcini in the mountains," explained Paz. "The hills are private property, but by custom each local family has a small area that they're entitled to forage."

Fortified, we piled into the minivan and were driven to Lucca - one of the most delightful small towns in Italy, and Puccini's birthplace. Enclosed within medieval walls, it has restored old buildings, cobblestone streets, graceful piazzas, sidewalk cafes, enticing alleyways and a rich cuisine that's famous throughout Italy. Most of its narrow streets are car-free.

We were immediately drawn into the first fine chocolate shop. I ditched my friends there, debating their bonbon selections, and joined the evening passeggiata - the leisurely evening promenade that allows townspeople to see and be seen, greet and be greeted. It's one of my favorite Italian traditions.

Suddenly I saw a crowd of excited Lucchese, all vying to be served at a window. I wormed my way in to see what was drawing them - and saw the vendor emerge from the back carrying a large rectangular focaccia bread fresh from the oven, which he proceeded to slice into fragrant pieces and sell to the crowd.

Luck next led me into Lucca's exquisite oval piazza - the Piazzanfi Teatro, once the Roman amphitheater. All the buildings were lit, revealing their curves even in the near darkness. As I stood admiring it, the full moon

rose above the medieval buildings. It was pure magic.

When we got back to the villa - chilled and tired - Paz had set a fire in the upstairs living room and poured us each a glass of Chianti classico. We were home.

The next day was the first Sunday of the month, when Arezzo holds its famous monthly antiques fair. People who buy and restore mansions like Villa Lucia haunt this fair to furnish them. I had chosen Arezzo for a different reason - the Piero Della Francesca frescoes in its San Francesco Church, considered one of the masterpieces of the early Renaissance. These frescoes had long eluded me, having been closed for restoration for 15 years and only reopened in 2000.

Arezzo is well worth visiting in its own right. Inside its medieval walls, it's a stunning Renaissance town with antique towers and churches lining its steep stone streets.

Our driver left us at the escalator up to the Duomo (main cathedral) at the top of town, saving us the climb. Every piazza and street was filled with vendors and shoppers. "If only I had a villa to furnish, I'd be buying chandeliers and sofas and paintings," said one of our group. Instead she snagged more-portable vintage Gucci sunglasses.

That night we strolled to the excellent restaurant just outside the villa's gates in the tiny village of Vorno. A Bimbotto is run by Alba Berchielli, who grew up in Akron, Ohio, and moved back home to Vorno. "This area has so many villas because the wealthy Lucchese used to summer here," explained Alba. "Now a lot of foreign visitors rent the villas. Italy is such a beautiful country, we must share it with the world."

Paz had noticed our appreciation of the Lucca olive oil, which food historian Waverley Root called the best in Italy. For our last evening, she arranged a visit to the communal olive press, where farmers take their olives to be made into the renowned fruity green olive oil. Vats of olives, each with a slip of paper bearing the farmer's name, are put through a series of Rube Goldberg-like machines. At the end, the farmer sees his oil pour slowly from a spout. We saw one man catch a bit in a paper cup and taste it.

Paz then drove us to Lucca, and we walked the old stone streets one last time to the town's oldest restaurant, Buca Di Santonio, first documented in 1782. I ordered Lucca's specialty - tortelli Lucchesi - ravioli made with flavorful egg pasta, stuffed with meat. A bottle of newly pressed olive oil was on the table, and we dipped our bread in it. It was spicy and bitter and fruity all at once - a great last taste of Lucca.

IF YOU GO

Getting there

The best airports for Tuscany are Pisa and Florence. Delta just introduced the first nonstop from the U.S. (JFK) to Pisa.

Villa Rentals

LaCURE Villas (800-387-2726, www.lacurevillas.com) specializes in customized luxury villa rentals worldwide, starting at \$1,000 per night in Tuscany. It offers an unusual all-inclusive one-week package that includes villa rental, chauffeured car, two guide days, food and a cook. The package is designed for a small group and works well for an event like a multi-generation family holiday, reunion or destination wedding. In low season, Villa Lucia costs 15,000 euros a week including a chef, and sleeps 18; for the package it's 26,500 euros. Villa Lucia holds a weekLong cooking school in spring and fall (888-254-1070, www.rhodeschoolofcuisine.com).

Not all Tuscan villas are luxury rentals. Most travelers rent a car and do their own driving and cooking, and love it. See Wendy Perrin's villa primer in Conde Nast Traveler (www.concierge.com, search on "Tuscan villa").

When renting a villa, examine what's included in the price; sometimes even the electricity is extra. If you're driving yourself there, be sure to get the local name for the villa and a phone number to call if you're lost. Most companies will provision your villa for your first dinner and breakfast, a service worth buying.

RESTAURANTS

Arezzo - 83 Corso Italia (name and address are the same), 0575-35-6200, www.corsoitalia83.it. Try the

special of ravioli filled with pecorino and pears, topped with truffles Lucca - Buca Di Santonio, Via Della Cervia, 3, 0583-55881, www.bucadisantantonio.com. Have tortelli Lucchesi, and anything with wild boar, porcini or truffles in season. Vorno - A Bimbotto, Via di Vorno, 177, 0583-971193, www.bimbotto.it. Try the thin-crust pizzas and rich, homemade pastas.

For reservations to see the Piero Della Francesca frescoes in Arezzo, go to www.apr.aretto.it or call 011-39 0575 352 727.
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