

Globe Life

The Globe's Mediterranean Odyssey cruise

Ravishing Tuscany

That panoramic, romantic reputation for which the region is famous? It's all real

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So, you've quaffed the brunello di Montalcino wine. You've drizzled the cold-pressed extra virgin olive oil over the bruschetta. You've seen *A Room with a View*, *Under the Tuscan Sun* and that famous photo (there are hundreds, but they're always taken in the same place, from the same angle) of a zigzag row of cypresses carving a mark of Zorro onto a green hillside.

Still you wonder, is Tuscany really a place of fine produce rooted in a ravishing terroir, a landscape of vine-covered slopes and walled villages of handsome stone houses, virtually unchanged since the 14th century, when Ambrogio Lorenzetti painted bucolic scenes of country life into his allegorical frescoes of Good and Bad Government in Siena's Palazzo Pubblico?

Strangely, the answer is yes. This is a region of Italy that really does live up to its image. Sure, there are some modern buildings – even Tuscans need new places to live, shop and play five-a-side football every now and again. But there's an inherent respect for the historical and architectural integrity of town and landscape that, at least outside of the main cities, keeps things looking spruce and painterly. Tuscans have a feel for panoramas – so most hilltop villages will have at least one side (usually the one facing the approach road) that takes the breath away with its untouched purity. The new stuff is dusted away at the back.

Tuscany is also pretty big, however. Not by Canadian standards; but in high-population-density Italy, the four-hour meandering drive from Arezzo to Carrara, from the southeastern province of the region to its northwest corner, is an epic journey that takes one through a slideshow of different landscapes, from the eroded clay, Crete Senesi hills east of Siena to the woods and vineyards of Chianti, the plant nurseries of Pistoia, the deckchair-lined beaches of Viareggio and the marble quarries above Carrara itself, where in 1505 Michelangelo personally supervised the cutting of the huge block intended for Pope Julius II's funerary monument (the Pope later changed his mind, and got the irascible Tuscan artist to give the Sistine Chapel a makeover instead).

With so much on offer, knowing where to head can be a headache. The best approach is to divide Tuscany up by theme. Here are three suggestions:

Wine, walks and wide-open landscapes: the Val d'Orcia

One of the region's six UNESCO protected sites, this stunning valley, dominated by the graceful bulk of Monte Amiata, is rural Tuscany at its most iconic.

One of the best places to view it is from La Foce, a few kilometres west of the town of Chianciano Terme. This

huge estate belonged to Marchese Antonio Origo and his Anglo-American wife, Iris; its landscaped garden, laid out by Cecil Pinsent in the 1920s and 1930s, can be visited on Wednesday afternoons from 3 to 7 (see www.lafoce.com for details).

Just beyond La Foce is the Valoresi road, with its famous zigzag line of cypresses. To the north are the twin towns of Montepulciano and Pienza.

The former is a fascinating, archaic place of tight medieval lanes winding up in a sort of DNA helix to the central square, where the duomo houses Taddeo di Bartolo's glorious, lambent *Assumption of the Virgin* triptych. Along the way, you will have any number of opportunities to buy or sample Montepulciano's celebrated gutsy red vino nobile wine: Producers to look out for include Avignonesi, Poliziano and Salcheto. Pienza is a curious example of a Renaissance new town: Commissioned by Pope Pius II (who was born here), architect Bernardo Rossellino grafted a grand papal palace, central piazza and duomo onto what until then had been a rural village. The architectural equivalent of a mouse that roared, it's a delightful place to while away a few hours. Well-maintained white roads link many of the smaller villages in the area, making this ideal walking and cycling territory.

Churches, beaches and gardens: Lucca and around

Lucca is one of those mid-sized Tuscan towns that gets it right. It's not just the glorious intactness of the *centro storico* inside the heavy brick ramparts that enclose and protect it; it's not just the fact that the town has, in San Martino, San Frediano and San Michele in Foro, three of Tuscany's most absorbing Romanesque churches, and in the former Roman amphitheatre of Piazza del Mercato, now lined with medieval houses, one of its most delightful squares. It's the laid-back lifestyle of the *lucchesi* that really hits home. This is a great place for strolling, or sitting and watching the world go by over a glass of summery vermentino wine. And it's also a good base for excursions. The wild Garfagnana Valley to the north is great walking territory, with several marked trails leading up into the high peaks of the Alpi Apuane and the Orecchiella Natural Park. Northeast of Lucca, a sprinkling of grand villas with splendid formal gardens make for a cultured, panama-hatted and linen-jacketed sightseeing jaunt – Villa Reale at Marlia, Villa Torrigiani at Camigliano, and Villa Garzoni at Collodi (a town also known for its rather dated Pinocchio theme park). And to the west is the sea: not the most crystalline water in the Mediterranean, but it's the beach culture that counts here more than the swim. Head for elegant, palm-lined Viareggio and join the locals for the evening *passeggiata*, gelato in hand.

Classic Tuscany: from Chianti to San Gimignano

It's probably the first image that springs to mind when somebody says the magic word “Tuscany”: vine-clad hills, a converted farmhouse glowing gold in the setting sun, a poolside glass of ruby-red Chianti. The good news is, it really exists: “Chiantishire” clichés notwithstanding, this swath of Tuscan perfection between Florence and Siena really is all it's cracked up to be. And it's not necessarily an impossibly expensive dream, as with the recession, villa rental prices are stalling and even in some cases coming down. The main towns of Radda, Castellina, Greve and Gaiole are pleasant enough, but they're little more than focal points and useful gas stops in between what really matters: the landscape. For a road trip you'll never forget, get a decent map, locate the medieval abbeys of Badia a Passignano and Badia a Coltibuono – both now important wine estates – and take the scenic secondary roads that join them, via Panzano and Volpaia. You can do it in an hour, but there are so many photo opportunities and tempting trattorias along the way that it could take all day. San Gimignano, a 40-minute drive to the east of the Chianti zone, is famous as Italy's “Medieval Manhattan,” with its skyline of defensive towers and its rich 13th- and 14th-century heritage – distilled in the glorious frescoes of the town's venerable cathedral, La Collegiata. But try to come out of season or stay overnight: A victim of its own beauty, San Gimignano is overrun by day trippers from May to September.

Or what about the Piero della Francesca trail around Arezzo? Or the Tuscan cowboy country of the Maremma, down the coast from Grosseto? Or the Mugello Valley north of Florence, famous for wine, porcini mushrooms and Formula 1 racing? The problem with Tuscany is that once you get started, you just don't stop. Italy's most effortlessly cultured region is like the fruit-and-nut-packed *panforte* cake that wrecks one's diet in Siena: dense, rich and very difficult to leave.

Pack your bags

Getting there

Pisa's international airport (www.pisa-airport.com) with regular Delta flights to New York, is the main point of entry. If you're heading to southern Tuscany, Rome Fiumicino (www.adr.it) with direct flights from Canada – including a new Air Canada Montreal route – is just as close. Once in Tuscany, it's best to hire a car; the main companies have booths at all the major airports.

The Val d'Orcia

Where to stay: Near La Foce

La Bandita www.labandita.com, 39 0565 794224. Chic, rural boutique hotel. Doubles from \$395.

Where to stay: In Montepulciano

Locanda di San Francesco www.locandasanfrancesco.it, 39 0578 758 725. Stylish four-room bed and breakfast. Doubles from \$308.

Where to eat: In Montefollonico

La Botte Piena www.labottepiena.com, 39 0577 669 481; A great value, creative trattoria in this charming hamlet about 61/2 kilometres north of Pienza. Closed Wednesdays; average \$39 a head without wine.

Where to eat: In Montepulciano

Osteria dell'Acquacheta: www.acquacheta.eu, 39 0578 717 086. Famous for pasta and Chianina steaks. Closed Tuesdays; average \$47 a head without wine.

Lucca

Where to stay

A Palazzo Busdraghi www.apalazzobusdraghi.it, 39 0583 950 856. Charming, historic townhouse hotel. Doubles from \$283.

Where to eat: In Lucca

Buca di Sant'Antonio www.bucadisantantonio.com, 39 0583 55 881. Traditional, but upmarket. Closed Mondays; average \$55 a head without wine.

Where to eat: In Castelnuovo di Garfagnana

Osteria Vecchio Mulino www.ilvecchiomulino.com, 39 0583 62 192. An unmissable daytime wine bar. Closed Mondays; average \$31 a head for wine and meal-sized snacks.

Chianti to San Gimignano

Where to stay: In Chianti

Villa Bordoni www.villabordoni.com, 39 0558 547 453. Elegantly shabby-chic country retreat. Doubles from \$268.

Where to stay: In San Gimignano

L'Antico Pozzo www.anticopozzo.com, 39 0577 942 014. Lovely historic residence. Doubles from \$173.

Where to eat: In Chianti

Osteria di Passignano www.osteriadipassignano.com, 39 055 807 1278. The Antinori family's gourmet Tuscan country restaurant. Closed Sundays; average \$86 a head without wine.

Where to eat: In San Gimignano

Osteria del Carcere Via del Castello 13, 39 0577 941 905. Great slow-food oriented trattoria. Closed Wednesdays and at lunch on Thursdays; average \$55 a head without wine.

Special to The Globe and Mail

Tuscany is a featured destination on The Globe's Mediterranean Odyssey cruise this August.

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