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Renaissance of Tuscany

MICHAEL BROWN FINDS TRUE TREASURES UNEARTHED BY THE RISE OF AGRITOURISM



THE treasures of Tuscany have been a long-time lure for us Brits.

For centuries this central Italian region has been a magnet for lovers of history, high art, fine food and breathtaking scenery – so popular, in fact, part of it was tagged “Chiantishire”.

With its golden rolling slopes, fortified hilltop towns and winding roads – elegantly lined with fragrant “pencil pine” cypress trees – Tuscany’s countryside has been a glorious fleeting backdrop as tourists shuttle between the region’s jewels in the crown of Florence, Siena and Pisa to soak up its culture, spectacle, and stories of warring cities and medieval intrigue.

But now the countryside in this land of Leonardo and Dante is enjoying a renaissance of its own – as new attractions, pushed by the growth of agritourism, offer what locals call the true, authentic character of Tuscany.

It’s a chance to slow down and taste the unspoilt quality, often created using a mix of old and new

techniques. It’s an enriching and delicious experience that also helps energise local farms, communities and traditions.

Our tour of Pisa’s hinterland had plenty of new, exciting experiences, such as a mouthwatering platter of antipasti. As with discovering an ancient Etruscan artefact, the real treasure often lies below the surface, if we take time to look.

Tuscany’s clay soils, mineral rich with shells from ancient sea deposits, produce flavourful wheat, vines and olive trees that make up the region’s prime agricultural products.

Our visit began with a trip to the small family organic olive oil mill Frantoio dei Colli Toscani, where nearly 100 farmers bring their olives to be cleaned, crushed into paste, slowly stirred, centrifuged and cold stored to settle – producing the green liquid gold. All powered by biomass energy.

With cured meats, ribollita soup and organic bread, we sipped a selection of oils – lemon, pepper, garlic or sage and rosemary – in a traditional cobaltino blue glass, almost like wine-tasting.

In nearby Volterra, with its ancient narrow streets, bell towers and high yellow sandstone walls, the history dates back beyond the Romans (with an impressive amphitheatre) and Etruscans, to neolithic times.

But it has a distinct medieval flavour and its imposing town square combines all elements of that period’s power, with a palace, town hall – still used for meetings – church and court house.

It also fosters traditional crafts like jewellery and its famous alabaster. The workshop I saw was an enchanting fairy grotto of statuettes and ornaments made by a modern-day Michelangelo (actually called

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oberto) who within minutes produced an exquisite translucent bowl from a solid block, before our very eyes.

And who thought that salt could be so fascinating? Well, that famous 15th-century Florentine despot Lorenzo de' Medici, for one – he conquered the area around Volterra to get his hands on it.

And, later on, the Grand Dukes of Tuscany, who developed the local mine where salt had been extracted for 3,000 years, into one of Italy's first industrial sites.

Now the Locatelli Salt Factory, it makes Italy's purest salt. Our tour ended with a spectacular salt waterfall in the cavernous parabolic warehouse, which doubles as an art event venue.

After a pick-me-up lunch of Toscani meats, ragu and a latte macchiato, it was on to another subterranean wonder: the former copper mine at Montecatini Val di Cecina, the largest of its kind in Europe before it closed in 1907.

Its 10 levels, which weren't all open to us, go down 1,050ft.

It marked a milestone in workers' rights (including children) when shifts were cut to eight hours by a benevolent owner.

As if to highlight the mix of traditional and new, rustic and intellectual, the landscape is dotted with contemporary art installations.

There's Andrea Bocelli's Teatro del Silenzio, where for one night a year the great and the good flock to a field near the star's hometown of Lajatico to hear him sing. The huge artworks that adorn the stage stand dormant for 364 days.

Or the beautiful village of Peccioli, where a whole street is made over by British artist David Tremlett, with a spectacular futuristic balcony and neon-light renaissance art trails, all a stone's throw from a museum of Etruscan objects.

We overnighted at La Mandriola, a prime example of the agritourism ideal. The 400-

hectare family farm produces its own cereals, honey, olive oil, fruits and wine, as well as pigs and native breed sheep.

With hilltop views, a pool and villas, it has diversified into weddings. No wonder the five-course meal was superb.

Another highlight was truffle hunting, an experience not to be sniffed at. Our guide Matteo and his 12 dogs hunt the truffles year-round – brown, black and, the most prized, the white truffle in December. He sold his biggest to a Swiss restaurant, but would not reveal the price.

His English setter, Bianca, trained as a pup by smearing truffle oil on her mother's teat, was prolific – she can unearth 300g in two hours.

Dashing between trees in the autumn sun, she sniffed out fast-growing black truffles some 30cm deep. In 45 minutes she'd found enough for our group lunch.

We dined at villa winery Tenuta di Ghizzano – one of the oldest farms but highly innovative – along the Pisan Hills Wine Route.

Totally organic, it uses slow bio-dynamic, often traditional methods to produce low-volume high-quality wines and olive oils.

And there's a classical Italian garden populated by symbolic tortoises.

We visited the Temple of Minerva, dedicated to medicine and used for anatomy classes by doctor friends of the visiting Shelleys.

Could it have played a pivotal role in the creation of Mary's seminal novel *Frankenstein*?

At Borgo di Colleoli holiday estate in the hills

between Pisa, Lucca and Florence, we had a memorable ricotta and spinach-stuffed ravioli with Tuscan ragout, and veal cheek with extra virgin olive oil and potatoes. Just the ticket after a day on the bike/walking trails/golf.

Our next day began with a visit to the sumptuous Bagni di Pisa thermal spa, a former residence of the Grand Duke at the foot of the Monte Pisano at San Giuliano Terme. Its grand architecture, which attracted Byron and Shelley, is still popular with Brits, and A-listers including Ringo Starr and John Legend.

A final hurrah – the splendour of Pisa – built on trading power; seat of medieval learning; home to Galileo and Fibonacci.

A guided tour took us to the old city walls and religious monuments in Piazza dei Miracoli: the Duomo, Baptistery, Monumental Cemetery and that never-to-be-straightened tower.

We hot-footed it to the Terre di Pisa Food & Wine Festival, a supreme offering of the region's bounty. We bought flavoured pasta, pecorino cheese, local honey and nougat and enjoyed a wine-tasting masterclass, sampling excellent local wines.

So much to explore and enjoy. A taste of Tuscany's true treasures was intoxicating – but it just left us wanting more.

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NEED TO KNOW

Flights to Pisa, Italy, are available with **British Airways**, **easyJet** and **Ryanair** from 10 UK airports.

Rooms at the **La Locanda hotel** in Volterra, Tuscany, start at around £86 a night. hotel-lalocanda.com

Accommodation at the **Agriturismo La Mandriola apartments** near Lajatico, Tuscany, starts at around £505 for two adults staying three nights. agriturismo.it

Rooms at the **Borgo di Colleoli hotel** in Colleoli, Tuscany, start at around £67 a night. borgocolleoli.com

MORE INFO: terredipisa.it; visittuscany.com



Scent to help:
Truffle hunting



Spa trek:
Michael at Bagni di Pisa



High life:
La Mandriola

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