

THE ENDURING APPEAL OF TUSCANY AND UMBRIA TO THE BRITISH



Tenuta di murlo the lavender garden of Subtilia (il giardino di lavande di Villa Subtilia)

Article by Adam Jacot de Boinod

"Tuscany is especially flowery," wrote DH Lawrence in 1926, "being wetter than Sicily and more homely than the Roman hills" and certainly the region has enjoyed an enduring appeal to the British traveller to which Umbria has now been added by the last generation of holidaymakers. First in 1363 there was a mercenary interest with the legendary Sir John Hawkwood. Later came the connoisseurs collecting Tuscan art before the Romantic poets found their own sacred treasure in the province when Wordsworth in 1837 wrote a poem on the life and character of St. Francis. Tennyson also succumbed with his descriptive lines: "In lands of palm, of orange blossom, of olive, aloe, and maize and vine". Dickens warmed to the great Tuscan cities describing Siena's piazza with its "great broken-nosed fountain in it" and Florence as being "stern and sombre". Browning, Ruskin, EM Forster and Henry James were then all to follow in these illustrious literary footsteps.

The landscapes have an agricultural precision and elegance. It is all so engaging and life enhancing as my senses were enlivened by the many stimuli of their smells, sights and sounds. Fields of poppies, margherita (daisies) and the tiny 'ranuncolo' buttercups all danced in their stunning meadows. Butterflies flitted while bees buzzed along mazy, dappled lanes.

It was very late at night by the time I reached my hotel Castello di Spaltenna (www.spaltenna.it/en/home). But the next morning compensated by heralding the utter joy of opening the shutters of my room, like a gift, to reveal the sunshine streaming in beneath the countryside in her full glory. The hotel is cocooned amongst the ever-present vineyards, cypresses and 'abete' (fir trees) with curves of every shade of green that nature produces. The swallows swooped and swerved amongst the terraced flowerbeds; all very stimulating as I immersed in its utter stillness.

I took myself off to Siena to visit the cathedral. Her striking black and white striped columns reflect the 'balzana', the symbolic shield of the city, from the contrasting colours of the horses ridden by the two sons of Remus, brother of Romulus. I recommend visiting it late in the day when they stay open for twenty minutes after the last entry; for only then can you have it to yourself and



castello-spaltenna

own the experience with its full dramatic hollow silence. Back outside and the black and white façade is beautifully offset by hues of pink as the cloudless blue sky completes the aesthetic picture.

Crossing into Umbria I took a ferry at Lake Trasimene. As a breeze blew from prow to stern, the sea remained totally calm. There was an unruffled glinting mirror of sunlight as the boat moved all on her own along the waters creating in me a profound feeling of satisfaction where simply to exist was enough.

It was quite an adventure to get to my next location: Tenuta di Murlo (www.murlo.com) a castellated estate presiding over the villa San Savino where I was next to stay. When I drove up a long winding road, I was greeted by the ultimate secluded spot, a hideaway with a mesmeric and enchanting view out over mountain peaks and forests, fields and the occasional farmhouse. But its crowning glory was in the absence of cars within earshot or sight across a deep valley stretching many miles. Outside the three cherry trees were bearing their full produce allowing me to imagine myself writing a novel in their shade, so stimulated, enlivened and enriched were my creative juices even before nightfall and the arrival of the stars with their full intensity.



assisi-basilica-di-san-francesco-citta



siena chiasso del bargello



Castello spaltenna

Onto Assisi with her clean, harmonious and monochrome stone. I had come to see the lovely Basilica, perched on her own hillside, with her crypt possessing St. Francis's tomb. It all felt so wholesome since he was an inspirational figure touching so many lives. On the upper two levels are frescoes including those by Giotto, some of which are stunning in their vivid blue. Assisi is a refreshingly spacious town with not too many selfie sticks for June, and luckily some of the more overt touristic traits were tamed by requests for silence and the banning of photos, allowing the nuns on pilgrimage to immerse themselves fully in their thought and their prayers.

Back across to Tuscany to stay at Castel Monastero Resort and Spa (www.castelmonastero.com/en/home). It's a small 11th century former convent for cloistered nuns (the Pope being the only permitted outsider). By the 1400s it belonged to the Chigi Saracini family, renowned for having two Popes, one of whom, Alexandro V11, booted the Mother Superior out of the nunnery causing her such disappointment that she died at his feet. But her spirit remains in the room nearest the church and is still keenly felt by guests today.

Next I popped in on San Gimignano, with the 13 medieval towers (out of the original 76) in full prominence justifying its sobriquet of 'Medieval Manhattan' and where tower once meant power amongst the rival households vying for status. It's an unspoilt, well-preserved town with a lovely approach through cypresses, silvery green olive trees and vineyards. With more open spaces than most Tuscan hilltop towns it doesn't feel unduly touristic in June. The interior of the 'collegiata' (the cathedral's true status) echoes Siena's pillars and Assisi's frescoes on the sidewalls and, like Assisi, it looks straight out into countryside, unmarred by suburbs or modern architecture.

Later I was led by my satnav along some lovely back roads virtually the whole way back to Pisa airport. And, as a British tourist, I was transported in every sense and by every sense!

Adam Jacot de Boinod was a researcher for the first BBC television series QI, hosted by Stephen Fry. He wrote The Meaning of Tingo and Other Extraordinary Words from around the World, published by Penguin Books.

Classic Collection Holidays (0800 047 1064; classic-collection.co.uk) offers 3 nights at Castello Del Nero Hotel & Spa and 3 nights at Castello di Spaltenna, Tuscany from £1849 per person. Price based on 2 adults sharing on a bed & breakfast basis and includes return flights from London Gatwick to Pisa and car hire for the duration of the holiday. Departs 20 September.

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