

TRAVEL / ITALY

TASTE OF TUSCANY

Pull on your walking boots and venture off the beaten track to discover some gourmet delights on offer in the beautiful Tuscan countryside, writes **SUE WALLACE**.

IN the shade of an ancient olive grove overlooking the medieval town of San Gimignano we enjoy a gourmet picnic of wild boar salami, fresh and matured pecorino cheese, crisp salads, seasonal fruit and a glass of a local white.

We have walked more than 10km this morning through vineyards where the leaves are just changing colour, along farmland tracks beside deserted ruins and through woods stopping to look at unusual fungi and to listen to birds.

Before we head out on our afternoon walk, our guide, Jackie Parsons, reads to us from the classic *War in Val D'Orcia* by Iris Origo, an Italian war diary set in 1943-44.

It tells how Marchesa Origo, an Anglo-American married to an Italian landowner, hid escaped allied prisoners of war and rescued more than 60 children during the German occupation.

Although set in southern Tuscany near Montepulciano, this area around Maremma and San Gimignano also saw strong partisan activity.

Each day Jackie carefully selects a short reading connected to the route we follow and even now, weeks after our return, I can still picture the scenes.

We are on the fourth day of an eight-day guided walking holiday through Tuscany that takes us far off the beaten track to discover the essence of this picturesque countryside.

But this trip is not just about walking.

Jackie, who, along with husband Mick, runs Hedonistic Hiking, brings to life the culture, nature and history of each route we follow and introduces us to the famous food and wine of the area.

A trained linguist with a love of history, Jackie, who has also studied medieval art, has a wonderful knack of explaining history and telling stories that keep you intrigued, especially when you start to tire on an uphill walk.

We visit hidden places of interest you won't find in guide books, such as Etruscan tombs, and are even given a peek at ancient frescoes in an historic chapel just because Jackie met the caretaker while out walking.

We have time to savour the heady smell of fresh tomatoes and herbs growing in a small village and time to sit and absorb the wonderful Tuscan countryside.

There are no crowds or tourists. In fact, we rarely cross paths with others except when we walk into villages and bigger cities.

The Parsons have been offering guided tours for the past eight years.

They spend six months in Australia, where they take luxury bushwalks around Mount Buffalo, Falls Creek and the Great Ocean Road, then spend six months taking guided walks through Italy.

All tours have an emphasis on gourmet food and wine and great accommodation and aim to create a special connection with you and the countryside.

Walking is moderate to challenging with a few steep hills and each day we take a different route. Jackie spends several weeks each year discovering remote pathways and tracks, some dating back to medieval and Roman times.

One of the best things about the walks is just when you start to tire you turn the corner and are rewarded with a gourmet picnic of fresh local produce and wines from the region.

It is prepared by Italian tour manager and food and wine connoisseur Cinzia Long MacNay.

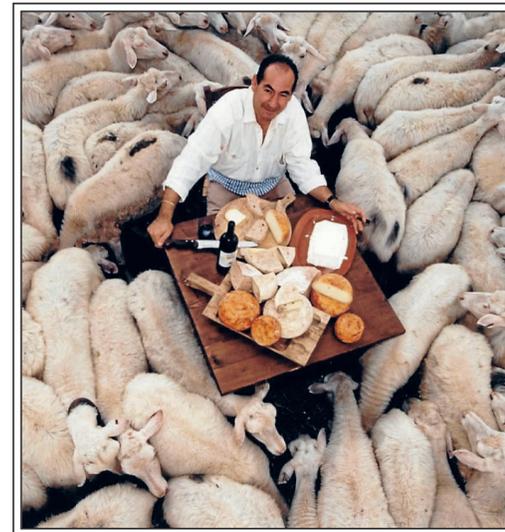
Each morning Cinzia is up early heading to nearby markets and speciality shops for fresh produce and treats.



ABOVE: Hikers walking into picturesque Tuscan villages.

LEFT: Jackie Parsons of Hedonistic Hiking shows walkers the delights of the Tuscan countryside. Picture DICK SLOANE

BELOW: Giovanni Cannas makes his famous cheeses at the working farm, Agriturismo Lischeto.



Jackie and Cinzia work closely with outstanding restaurants along the way selecting menus that showcase the region's cuisine and fine wines.

Agriturismo Lischeto, a working farm 5km from Volterra, is our home for the first four nights.

Jovial cheesemaker and owner Giovanni Cannas greets us and dismisses any thoughts of coffee, organising local wine to accompany his fine cheese, which is sold at gourmet shops throughout Europe and also at Harrods of London.

We sit in the cobblestone courtyard, joined by Orazio the donkey and a few dogs and cats.

As the afternoon wears on and the wine bottles empty, he amuses us with his tales and warm traditional Tuscan hospitality.

What started out as an old farmhouse with a modest flock of sheep some 40 years ago has become a thriving business and tourist accommodation.

Almost 1000 sheep graze on organically grown fodder and handmade cheeses, olive oil, honey and beauty products are available at the farm shop.

If you have time you can enjoy a whey bath in a barrel, which Gianvanno tells us leaves your skin feeling "magnifico". His most celebrated cheese is the Pecorino delle Balze Volterrane made from a closely guarded traditional Tuscan recipe.

The rustic accommodation features a comfortable bed, ensuite and kitchenette.

A highlight is savouring the authentic Italian cuisine at the farm taverna, where we sit down at a communal table, served by Giovanni.

Tonight's dinner features a Tuscan speciality of ricotta cheese and flour gnudi with butter and sage, followed by mutton and sun-dried tomato stew and mixed salad with a finale of ricotta tiramisù.

Next morning we are up early and head across the fields to Volterra for a guided visit of the town known for its amazing Etruscan and medieval history.

Another day we visit the pretty village of Bolgheri, one of Tuscany's exciting wine regions known for its "Super Tuscans" — big red wines that demand attention.

It is also famous for its avenue of cypresses, which gained everlasting fame in the poem *Davanti a San Guido* by Giosuè Carducci, who lived here from 1838 to 1848.

A gourmet feast awaits us at Enoteca Tognoni starting with perch on a Tropea's red onion and white bean cream and thin crostino bread, mixed fish-stuffed ravioli with fresh vegetable sauce, grilled slices of rare local beef with mixed salad and vanilla millefeuilles with vanilla ice-cream.

One of the most challenging walks is into San Gimignano, where most arrive by tourist bus.

Italians stop and stare in amazement at our

little group dressed in outdoor gear, hiking boots, armed with walking poles and some even applaud.

"Italians rarely walk for pleasure — they think we are crazy," says Jackie.

I am rewarded with the most delicious raspberry gelato then visit the famous church and wander along cobbled streets. We also visit the beautiful arts village of Casole d'Elsa, which boasts a beautiful Romanesque church and small museum, then walk across the open landscape of the Colline Metallifere, or metal-bearing hills.

On our way to our second accommodation, the chic Villa il Tesoro, an Italian hunter passes us with his faithful dog, which nearly knocks us over.

His charming master's excuse is: "He's Italian, what can you expect when he sees such women!"

The villa is a luxury hotel converted from a medieval village and surrounded by olive groves and vineyards, near the city of Massa Marittima.

On our last day we follow the old stock route of Maremma cowboys through woodland, pasture and hill, passing medieval villages on route to the Cistercian Abbey of San Galgano. We return tired but exhilarated and dine at the villa.

After our week-long adventure, I pack away my walking boots, which have covered about 100km, and think back on the wonderful experiences.

There is no doubt in my mind that the path less travelled holds the richest rewards.

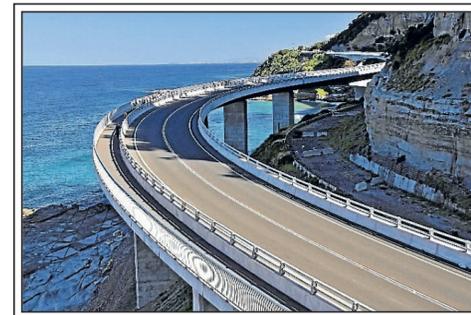
“ We have time to savour the heady smell of fresh tomatoes and herbs growing in a small village and time to sit and absorb the wonderful Tuscan countryside. ”

Travel notes

- Hedonistic Hiking: fully inclusive guided gourmet food, wine and walking holidays in Australia and Italy. Phone (03) 5755 2307, 0406 500 979. Email: info@hedonistichiking.com.au or go to www.hedonistichiking.com.au
- Volterra-Maremma holiday includes seven nights' accommodation at two hotels, all meals including wine, gourmet picnic lunches and snacks, dinner in superb restaurants. Support vehicle available and luggage transported. Trip starts and ends in Pisa, which has good train and flight connections. 2010 Volterra and Maremma eight-day walk, May 9 to 16.
- Other Italian walks: Week in Tuscany, May 23 to 30, September 23 to October 3, Tuscany and Umbria, June 6 to 13, September 5 to 12.
- Jewels of Piedmont: June 26 to July 3, October 9 to 16, Gran Paradiso and Val d'Aosta, July 4 to 11, Parma, Tuscany and the Cinque Terre, September 17 to 24.
- Australian walks include Epicurean Adventure three days, High Country Legends four days and High Country Journey seven days.

SHORT STAYS

WOLLONGONG



Grand Pacific Drive offers the chance for a coastal break plus an opportunity to shop for Christmas gifts.

Coastal escape

GRAND Pacific Drive in NSW is putting the silver lining on this year's Christmas frenzy with appealing coastal breaks and pamper packages.

The drive offers the chance to not just shop for the perfect Christmas gift but to re-energise in a great beach-front location.

Wollongong Central shopping precinct has undergone a makeover and there are great places to stay, activities range from skydiving and scenic flights to relaxing walks and bike rides, themed attractions and great restaurants and bars.

The Novotel Wollongong Northbeach Hotel is offering a Christmas-New Year package with overnight accommodation from \$334* per night in a standard room. Included is parking, breakfast for two, late check-out and a 30-minute facial or 30-minute massage for two at the Spa Indulgence Day Spa.

The offer expires on February 28, 2010 and excludes Christmas Day, New Year's Eve, New Year's Day and Sundays. Phone (02) 4224 3111 or visit www.novotelnorthbeach.com.au

For more package deals and information about Wollongong go to www.visitwollongong.com.au

*Subject to accommodation and day spa availability. Conditions apply.

BALI



The Rock Bar at Ayana Resort Bali is 14m above the ocean.

Paradise found

If you are looking for somewhere special to stay in Bali, try Ayana Resort and Spa in Sanskrit.

Named after "a place of refuge", the award-winning resort is perched on limestone cliffs above the Indian Ocean near Jimbaran Bay on Bali's south-western peninsula.

It features 78 freestanding private villas and a 290-room hotel set amid lush tropical gardens.

Drawing on Bali's rich cultural heritage, the resort embodies the warm hospitality of a boutique property, with the unrivalled facilities of a world-class resort.

Enjoying majestic views across Bali's dramatic west coast and as far as sacred Mount Agung, its secluded location is complemented by its own white-sand beach, yet it is just 15 minutes from Bali's airport.

There are five swimming pools, including the saltwater Ocean Beach Pool extending from the base of the cliff overlooking the beach.

There are 13 dining venues including the amazing Rock Bar perched 14m above the ocean on a rocky outcrop at the base of towering cliffs. For bookings visit www.ayanaresort.com