

Just a few minutes into our walk on the outskirts of Volterra and the Tuscan countryside is simply stunning

Tuscany: Footsteps, food and history

Following in Bonaparte's boot-steps, **Clive Nicholls** savours a walking holiday in Italy that combines hiking, history – and hedonism

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS

Clockwise: The island of Elba – 20 miles across the sea are the snow-capped mountains of Corsica; a short stop to top up water bottles; Jackie from Hedonistic Hiking is the perfect group leader



THE SUN is shining, I'm high up in the hills on the island of Elba enjoying one of the most spectacular walks of my life.

Across the sea, the snow-capped mountains of Corsica are clearly visible and to my left is the island of Montecristo. It's truly spectacular and rather wonderful, and I do indeed take time out to smell the roses – a lifetime memory. I'm in Tuscany in north-west Italy on a fantastic Hedonistic Hiking walking holiday that combines beautiful

walks with visits to historic towns and cities. Not only that, it's fine dining all the way with fabulous picnics, the best of restaurants and lashings of wonderful Italian wines.

Let me turn the clock back a week to the start of my Tuscan adventure as my plane touches down in Pisa in the late afternoon.

I catch the shuttle into the city centre. My hotel is just a short stroll from the station and a friendly policeman is spot on with his directions.

Checked in and with an hour of

daylight left, I pick up a map from reception and head out.

I know I've got a guided tour in the morning but I'm impatient and can't wait – this is Pisa after all. Camera in hand, I turn left onto the Corso Italia, cross the River Arno by the Ponte di Mezzo, through the Piazza dei Cavalieri and there it is – the Leaning Tower. The crowds have gone, the sunlight is fading and it's just stunning.

How it's still standing is a miracle – well, not quite; there's been a bit of intervention. Over the years the

foundations have been adjusted and strengthened but it's a fine balance. If the engineers straighten the tower too much, they lose a tourist attraction. If they don't, they come back one morning and find a pile of rubble.

Whatever they've done works for me and I share the last of the light with a Chinese couple taking selfies pretending to hold up the tower. They hand me their camera and ask me to take their picture. I take a bit of trouble to get exactly what they want and they seem thrilled – a good moment.

The light has gone and as I head back to the hotel I stop at an open-air bar for a glass of wine, just as the nightlife takes over from tourist time.

“Across the sea, the snow-capped mountains of Corsica are clearly visible and to my left is the island of Montecristo. It's one of those moments when you need to take a deep breath and realise just how good life can be”

My Italian is non-existent but I meet a couple who seem happy to practise their English skills – we share a bottle of wine and a few slices of pizza – and it's a wonderful evening. I start my holiday proper in the morning, meeting the group at Pisa station. They are all so welcoming, and the tour leaders, Jackie and Annabel, are so warm, friendly and organised – it's going to be a great holiday.

Our guide for Pisa, Alessandra, is the best, full of information but importantly we always seem to be in the right place at the right time to miss the crowds. The

Clockwise: The Leaning Tower of Pisa survives another day; even the back streets of Pisa are very Italian; the towers of Lucca from the Bell Tower





Clockwise: A breezy day in the hills of Lucca; wild flowers in the Colline Lucchesi; cat on a hot tin roof; picnics to die for



◀ Tower, Cathedral and Baptistery are world-famous but there's so much more – it's a great city.

We move on to the walled city of Lucca at the foot of the Apuan Alps, and the fine dining starts in style with homemade pasta stuffed with ricotta cheese sautéed with melted butter and zucchini. This is followed by baby goat on the spit with artichoke pudding, and topped off with baked and caramelised fruit and chestnut ice-cream. All washed down with the best of Italian wines – not bad, eh?

My first walk is in the hills of Lucca, gently rolling through vineyards, olive groves and wildflower meadows. We meet a local couple on the doorstep of their farmhouse. Jackie has to translate for me but they are so welcoming and it's a privilege to be part of their world.

I also meet a pretty tabby cat dozing on a car roof. She's a bit wary but doesn't seem to mind a bit of attention – just as well as I don't take no for answer. It's a beautiful walk and the picnic is just amazing. It's really a banquet and the roasted asparagus

just melts in my mouth. I can see why they call it Hedonistic Hiking.

Puccini, the opera composer, former resident of Lucca, (he died in 1924) and serial womaniser, has left the world an opera legacy with works including *Madame Butterfly* and *La Bohème*. Now, I'm not an opera sort of guy but when in Lucca – I go to a concert of Puccini classics. I'm still not a convert but as an experience it's amazing.

In the morning it's the optional tough walking day of the week. I've done a bit of

running in the past and my knees are not what they used to be, so I opt to spend the day in Lucca. I walk the city walls before breakfast and later, map in hand, tour the city. The Bell Tower gives amazing views and churches seem to pop up on every corner. I take coffee in the Piazza Napoleone and watch the locals going about their day-to-day business.

In the evening the meal is fabulous. I go for the breast of wood pigeon. It's a first for me and it's melt-in-the-mouth gorgeous – not so good for the wood pigeon, of course.

Next we head south to Volterra and walk in the Val di Cecina. The weather is changeable but the strong breeze creates an ever-changing pattern in the rolling grasslands.

It's a great day for walking and I really don't want it to end, but at least it's a grand finish with a wine tasting hosted by local aficionado Massimo.

I'm beginning to understand Italian wines a little better and I'm soon on the ball when he produces the real classy bottles. He's so enthusiastic and the wine

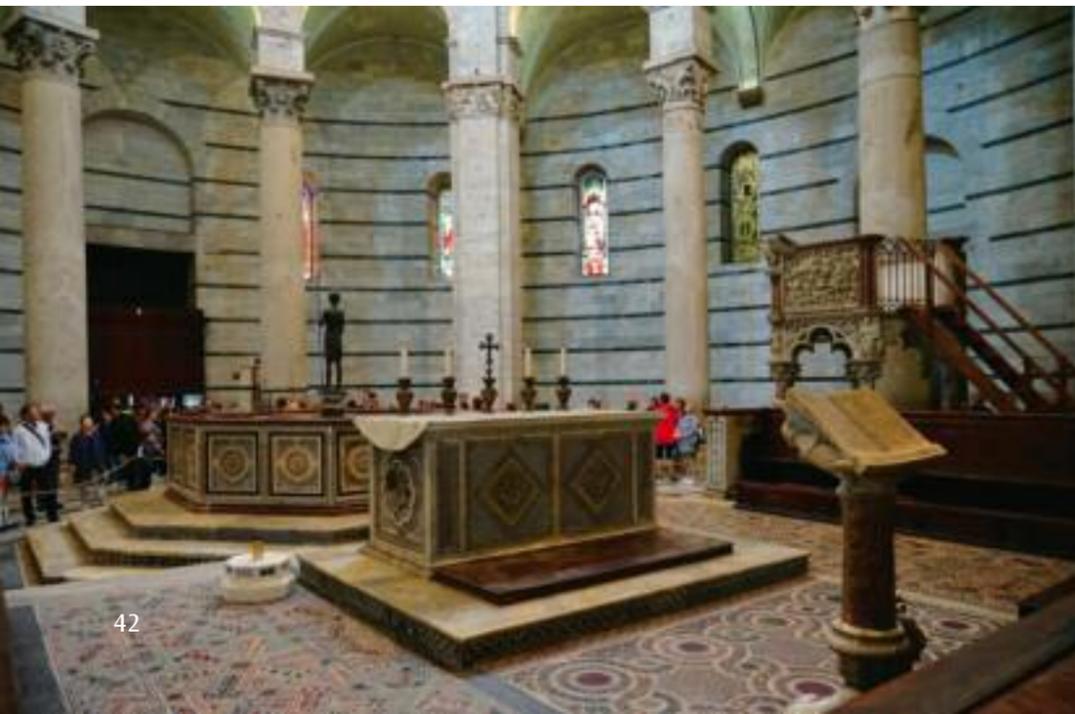
so good that I want to settle in for the evening – but we've got to eat. In the morning we set off on a longish walk, a touch over 11 miles, but my knees are feeling good and the sun is shining as the wonderful Tuscan countryside beckons.

We finish the walk in San Gimignano with its 13th century walls, magical square and probably the best ice-cream in the world.

Former gelato world champion Sergio Dondoli has his ice-cream parlour here. I wait for the queue to drop back before I join them to order my Dandoli special. ▶

Discoveries

◀ Clockwise: The bay of Biodola on Elba; lunch stop at a countryside villa; back streets of Lucca; Collegiate Church in San Gimignano; Bolgheri; Pisa Baptistry of St John





Clockwise: Portoferraio on Elba; war memorial in Volterra; fine dining in Lucca; my one-legged seagull; family time in San Gimignano; Puccini classics in Lucca; Etruscan museum in Volterra



It's served with a flourish with all the trimmings and tastes spectacularly good – truth be known after a long, hot walk a Wall's choc ice would taste pretty good, too, but it's all part of the fun. The 14th century frescos in the Collegiate Church of Santa Maria Assunta are described by UNESCO as 'works of outstanding beauty' and they truly are. Finish your ice-cream first and then pop in for a visit.

A short walk in the morning takes us to

the village of Bolgheri at the centre of one of Tuscany's most exciting wine regions. The lunch here is wonderful but the accompanying wine is out of this world. At 280 euros a bottle (about £260 at the time of writing), it's a Sassicaia 2013 and at that price it's not an everyday wine (at least not for me), but as a special treat it's just amazing – thank you, Jackie, I'm beginning to love Italian wines. On the ferry to the island of Elba, I make friends with a one-legged seagull

“Napoleon was exiled on Elba in 1814, and a tour through his mansion suggests that, despite being in exile, he certainly lived life to the full”

who lands on the stern railing. A group of ageing, boorish German bikers take great delight in shooing her away – I let them know I'm not best pleased.

It's squally on the way over but as the ferry docks in Portoferraio the evening sun makes an appearance. I'm staying at the Hotel Hermitage on the waterfront in the bay of Biodola. There's an hour before dinner so I kick off my shoes and stroll along the water's edge, sea and sand giving my feet a treat. Tonight's menu reads like an exotic cookbook – it's fabulous. I do all the Italian starters but then go for Wellington fillet, Perigordine sauce and a bunch of

green beans for main course. I'm eating so much but I just can't resist it. Isn't that what holidays are for anyway? My final hike on the island of Elba is where I started my story. High up in the hills, Jackie and Annabel break out the picnic (yes, they've hiked it all the way up, wine and all) and I find a comfortable rock to sit on and then enjoy the best picnic of my life. For our last walk it is breathtaking. Views all round: the Ligurian Sea to my right, Corsica straight ahead and the

Tyrrhenian Sea to my left. The weather is kind and visibility is 20 miles or more; dining al fresco has never been better. The last day is a non-hiking one but is spent in Portoferraio, founded by the Grand Duke of Tuscany in 1548. Napoleon was exiled here in 1814 following the Treaty of Fontainebleau, and a tour through his mansion suggests that, despite being in exile, he certainly lived life to the full. Portoferraio harbour is a stunner...



Clockwise: The picnics were wonderful; fine dining all the way; Wellington fillet; the amazing Sassicaia 2013; melt in your mouth breast of wood pigeon



flashy yachts, fishing boats and, of course, the odd seagull or two – it has it all. I find a waterfront café and settle in for a spot of lunch and a glass of wine.

Boats come and go, the coastguards are giving their cutter a spruce-up, there's always something going on.

All too soon it's time to head back to the hotel, stroll along the beach to a restaurant in the bay for our final meal together as a group.

During the walks, we've all become friends and the meal is a celebration of the great times we've shared.

In the morning we catch the

ferry back to the mainland. The sky is overcast and a bit stormy, with a strong wind blowing. Everyone is inside and I have the aft deck to myself. I watch as Elba fades into the distance and, for a moment or two, is lost in a heavy squall.

Losing sight of Elba makes me feel very sad. I know it's irrational but I can't help it; I've had such a great time and I really don't want it to end.

Perhaps that's a sign of a brilliant holiday, and it's been just that – brilliant.

Find out more

- The next Hedonistic Hiking tour to Lucca, Volterra and the Island of Elba will run from May 17 to 25, 2020, costing 3025 euros per person, including eight nights' accommodation, all meals with wine, transfers from Pisa and all activities
- Hedonistic Hiking runs small group gastronomic tours (graded one to five) throughout Italy, from April to October. Tel: 01858 565148, website: (www.hedonistichiking.com).