



GREAT
DEGUSTATION
WALKS
.....
PARMA, TUSCANY
& BEYOND,
ITALY

THE GOOD LIFE

Great Walks explores Parma, Tuscany and the Ligurian Sea on a guided walk that offers plenty of chances to please the taste buds.

WORDS AND PHOTOS **LAURA BONESS**

Exploring Portovenre.



Far left: Castello di Fosdinovo.

Left: Walking through the vines towards Salzana.

Below: The first of many delicious lunches..



THE best way to begin an Italian walking tour is with lunch: torta frita, parmesan, salad, two types of prosciutto, wine, limoncello and a walnut liquor that had several people thinking about mince pies. Hedonistic Hiking's slogan is Food, Wine, Walking, and our enthusiastic group would certainly be enjoying all three over the week.

I'd been invited on their Parma, Tuscany and the Ligurian Sea tour, which starts with a short stroll to lunch in Parma and finishes in Pisa. Several of our group had walked with Hedonistic Hiking before, and many people commented during the tour how much they liked the attention to detail – this began immediately as Jackie, owner of Hedonistic Hiking and one of our guides, told us about Parma on the way to lunch and took us to visit the Duomo and the baptistery afterwards. She and Tansy, our other guide, then drove us towards the Romagna hills and the first of the tours' three hotels. Borgo Casale has been converted from a 15th century village into a boutique hotel and would also be the spot for the first gourmet dinner on the tour.

66 THE TOUR INCLUDES VISITING AN ANNUAL MUSHROOM FESTIVAL AT BORGOTARO.99

Emilia Romagna and Tuscany

Day two was about parmesan and porcini; we started by donning protective clothing and walking around a parmesan factory in the nearby town of Bedonia. Jackie told us about the cheese-making process as we walked from room to room, finishing in a huge space filled with maturing wheels of parmesan. We could then sample and buy some of the cheese before heading off for coffee and our first walk in the foothills of the Apennines.

This lovely 5.4km walk, which took us along and down a ridgeline via a rocky path through chestnut and beech forests, is a good introduction to the region's topography. "When researching a new tour, we will do several hikes in the area before cherry-picking the

best selection to create what we feel is a perfect combination," Jackie says. "We like to start with an easier hike so that everyone relaxes into the walk and we can ensure all the guests are happy."

This was also our introduction to lunches on the tour – we arrived at a small church to find that Tansy had prepared several delicious salads, prosciutto, bread and fruit. As we finished with pastries, Jackie read us a section from *Love and War in the Apennines* by Eric Newby, a WWII prisoner of war who had hidden in the glorious Apennines. The evening, after some R&R in the afternoon, brought us to the porcini: the tour includes visiting an annual mushroom festival at Borgotaro, with stalls selling mushrooms, mouthwatering-smelling mushroom fritters and other foods. Mushrooms were also the star of dinner that night, as they featured in every course except dessert.

Day three saw us walking 20km+ from Passo della Cisa to Pontremoli on a section of the Via Francigena, an ancient pilgrim route that runs 1900km from Canterbury down to Rome. After following the undulating track through beech and then pine forests, we paused

at a more open stretch and looked back to the church at our starting point. As we enjoyed the views of hills behind us and valleys and hills ahead, Jackie told us about the people who walked this route: from Bishop of Canterbury in the 9th century, to the medieval equivalent of tourists and even criminals, who had to wear a yellow cross on their clothing. I couldn't help wondering, as we made our way down into the valley along the rocky forest path, what these pilgrims had worn on their feet in place of comfortable hiking boots.

Tansy was waiting for us down in the valley, in a small village just off the trail, with an ambrosial lunch that included a soup with some of the mushrooms we'd seen at the festival. Jackie read some more of Eric Newby's memoirs and we watched the 'local shop' – a van selling various products such as cheese and cured meats – arrive as we ate.

Those of us who were continuing on shouldered our daypacks – there are options on the longer walks to go ahead to the hotel – and headed back to the trail. This now wound from village to small, pretty village through the woods, past the iconic olives and vines, and over a medieval bridge to our next rendezvous

WALK NOTES | PARMA, TUSCANY AND THE LIGURIAN SEA

Distance: 73km | **Time:** 5 days | **Grade:** easy-moderate



The terrain on the trip includes hills, paved pilgrim trails, woodland and farm tracks. The shortest day's walk is 5.4km, the longest is 20.5km. Highlights of the trip include a visit to a parmesan cheese producer, a hike on one of the prettiest sections of the Via Francigena pilgrim trail and a lazy day on the coast with boat trip to Portovenere or the Cinque Terre.

“WE ATE A MUCH-APPRECIATED MEAL THAT FEATURED LOCAL WINES AND, AMONG OTHER DISHES, WILD BOAR RAGU.”



Walking over
history on the
Via Francigena.

with Tansy. From here the remaining hikers continued along the old cobbled trail uphill through the woods, crossing over more ancient bridges and posing beside a shrine on our way to the top of the ridgeline. We admired the views and the impressive distance we'd already walked, before continuing down to the village of Arzengio via the local stations of the cross (in reverse order).

The rain clouds that'd been threatening disappeared and we walked the final stretch downhill to Pontremoli in the late afternoon sun. Jackie had promised we'd feel euphoric when we arrived at the finishing point and she was right: we were all smiling as we crossed the river and walked through the streets.

Exploring Lunigiana

During our walk, we had crossed from Emilia Romagna into Tuscany's untouched Lunigiana region. We'd be staying for three nights at the Costa d'Orsola Agriturismo – a country hotel near Pontremoli where, after quick showers, we ate a much-appreciated meal that featured local wines and, among other dishes, wild boar ragu.

We explored part of the region and its history over the next two days, starting with a short walk (7.9km with a 10.30am start) to the nearby hamlet of Oppilo on day four; this was visible from our hotel and reached by following a forest path and the roads. As we walked, we could look back to our hotel and up towards the Apuan Alps and the Apennines, including the ridgeline we'd followed down to Pontremoli the previous day, before walking around a corner in the hamlet and meeting Tansy under the bell tower.

After lunch, which included a delectable selection of meats cured by our hotel and Jackie reading from *The Decameron*, a book of short stories from 14th Century Italy, we relaxed in the afternoon before heading into Pontremoli for a tour by a local guide of the Duomo and Castello di Piagnaro. The latter has been converted into a museum featuring the ancient stele (stone statues) of the native Ligurian people, who occupied this area before the Romans and left these markers behind.

On day five we learned about some of the area's more recent history, starting with farming in the area and Zeri lamb – which we'd enjoyed as part of another wonderful dinner in a local restaurant the previous night – as the first part of the hike took us on a steep climb up through chestnut woods, past stone buildings once seasonally inhabited by chestnut collectors. As the trail levelled out, we passed grazing sheep and walked through an abandoned village, where farmers once lived during summer when they brought animals up to graze, on the way to our morning tea rendezvous.

Below: Early morning views from Borgo Casale.
Right: Walking back down from the Passo 2 Santi.



This 18km hike also gave us an insight into Italy's experiences in WWII and the story of the partisans – Jackie showed us a map of the battle lines, landings and other important sites as we crossed from farmland into beech forests. Then, while we enjoyed another delicious lunch prepared by Tansy up at the Passo 2 Santi, she read to us from Major Gordon Lett's *Rossano, a Valley in Flames*.

The walk back down to Zeri took us along another ridgeline, following forest and farm trails and looking across the valley. We nearly reached the road before the threatening rain caught up with us; jackets and pack covers were brought out and we made our way down to the finishing point and refreshments in a local café.

From Tuscany to Liguria

Dinner that night was in another of Pontremoli's restaurants and included crepes with pesto and rabbit cooked two ways. "We try out the restaurants ourselves and/or ask our local friends (hoteliers, guides, etc) for recommendations. We want a good variety of restaurants and experiences for our guests," Jackie says.

The final day of walking (day six) saw us walking 14.9km from Tuscany into Liguria; we could see the coast from our starting point. We walked along roads and paths towards Fosdinovo for a coffee break

“DINNER INCLUDED CREPES WITH PESTO AND RABBIT COOKED TWO WAYS.”

and a brief glance into a local wine maker's establishment – we'd be eating lunch on their terrace and enjoying some of their products after a tour of the castle above. Castello di Fosdinovo, a Malaspina castle dating back to the twelfth century, is now a museum and hotel, and Jackie told us about its history as we walked through its rooms and out along the battlements.

During lunch Jackie read to us from Eric Newby's second book *A Small Place in Italy* – a section about wine making – before we walked through the main street and descended towards the coast. The sun shone down and thunderclouds threatened in the distance as we made our through vineyards and a small gully, past olive trees and hamlets and along roads. The weather surprised us by remaining fine and we finished with a climb upwards to the elegant town of Sarzana – some of us climbed slightly too far and enjoyed the views from the fortress walls before rejoining the others and walking through the streets towards a celebratory cold drink.

Piccolo Hotel del Lido, our accommodation in the coastal town of Lerici, was a former disco that has been converted into a hotel – with a jacuzzi replacing the dance floor – and has its own private beach. We settled in and checked out these facilities before walking into town for a dinner of seafood antipasto, trofie pasta with pesto and a chocolate and pear cake.

Our final day (we'd be heading to Pisa in the morning) was free with several options: swimming, exploring Lerici, or taking a boat trip across the bay to Portovenere; those who felt like going further could stay on the boat and continue further along the coast to the villages of the Cinque Terre. It concluded with a drink, a thank-you speech to our guides and what can only be described as a seafood extravaganza: seven different seafood appetisers, followed by spaghetti vongole, fritto misto and grilled gambero, and a lemon sorbet to finish. 🍷

Great Walks was a guest of Hedonistic Hiking

NEED TO KNOW

Hedonistic Hiking's all-inclusive Parma, Tuscany and the Ligurian Sea tour starts in Parma and finishes in Pisa; these cities can be reached by train from Milan. The tour will be departing from 22 – 29 September in 2017; for more info visit hedonistichiking.com.au

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