

A second home

Combining their passions of food, wine and walking with their love for Italy, Jackie and Mick Parsons launched Hedonistic Hiking in 2007; and now call two countries home.



JACKIE, ORIGINALLY FROM ENGLAND, and Mick, of Australian descent, met in the early 1990s while working in the tourism industry in Europe. “But Italy always had a special place in our hearts,” says Jackie.

For the past 15 years or so, the pair has lived between Italy and Australia. Their Australian home is in north-east Victoria. “It feels very Italian. When I visited, it was the first place I could see myself living so we set up here after we were married,” Jackie reveals.

For the other half of the year, their home is a quaint little 500-year-old cottage nestled on a working farm in the Chianti wine-growing area, between Siena and Florence. They came across the spot in Chianti Colli Senesi by chance. After living out of a suitcase for a while, the time was right to settle in their own little piece of Tuscan paradise. “The

owner thought we’d only last for one winter. But we love it, it’s home. Once you’ve lived through the Tuscan winter you become accepted as a little bit more of a local,” laughs Jackie.

“We spend five months in Victoria and seven months in Tuscany. We have friends in Tuscany, our life is there too so we can offer a genuine insight. Both places are home for us. We are lucky to call two places our home,” says Jackie.

From their years spent in Italy, Jackie and Mick are both fluent in Italian – Jackie adds that this is a big advantage when hiking. “We might meet a hunter in the woods or a farmer pruning their vines and can stop to have a chat and translate questions for our guests,” Jackie adds. “I think that once you can speak in Italian confidently and win an argument over the phone, you can say you are truly fluent,” she says.

A passion for Italy led Jackie and Mick Parsons to launch their own tour business in 2007.



“Food is a big part of life for Italians. They are always talking about food. It is a big part of the history of the land too. It’s wonderful to see crops being grown and then try the food or to walk through vineyards and then taste the wine.”



And finally, the ‘Lucca, Volterra and the Island of Elba’ tour embraces Tuscany’s medieval towns and villages, including a hike to the town of San Gimignano, which is famous for its towers.

“The lovely thing about Italy is that you don’t have to go very far before everything changes. The food changes, the wine changes. We go so local with the wines that they are typically made within just a few kilometres of where we are,” Jackie adds. “People come on our tours from various English speaking countries. Some will arrive thinking they know a little bit about Tuscan wines but then discover so many wines they had never heard of.”

While walking is no doubt an important part of Hedonistic Hiking’s tours, being able to stop and enjoy great food and wine is also key to the company’s offering.

Jackie and Mick handpick all of the restaurants and menus on their tours. And as Jackie asserts, “It’s because we want guests to experience the real food and wine of the area they are visiting. The journey of discovery is not just on foot but in the restaurants as well.”

Adding to this, visitors have the opportunity to meet with a number of food and wine producers along the way.

“We eat healthily and well. It’s fun to be able to learn about an area through its food and wine,” says Jackie. “Food is a big part of life for Italians. They are always talking about food. It is a big part of the

There are four small group tours within the offering that explore the wonders of Tuscany – and each one is very different.

‘A Tuscan Harvest’ is the quintessential tour of the region taking in its rolling hills and cypresses, strong culinary heritage, Pisa, the beautiful city of Siena and the vineyards of the Chianti wine region, where guests are invited to meet local winemakers and taste their offerings.

Key to this tour is the unique experience of visiting Jackie and Mick’s home, where guests are treated to a pasta-making lesson with a local chef in the villa’s 16th century kitchen. And in true Italian fashion, the lesson finishes with a Tuscan dinner feast. “Many of our clients say this is the best night of the tour. It is very special for them to

have the opportunity to gain that sort of insight into our world. I think people are looking for that experiential type of travel,” says Jackie.

‘The Palio of Siena’ tour is a little less about the hiking and more about the spectacle of this famous Italian festival that is held each year on 2 July and 16 August. It takes in the rituals and folklore that surround this world-famous event.

For the ‘Parma, Tuscany and the Cinque Terre’ tour, guests start in Parma – the gastronomic capital of the Emilia Romagna region. They visit the Slow Food town of Borgotaro for its porcini mushroom fair and a tour of a local Parmigiano Reggiano factory, hike through an ancient pilgrim route to Rome known as the Via Francigena, travel to the Gulf of Poets, and discover Tuscany’s untouched Lunigiana area.

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Though hiking is a big part of the adventure, Jackie asserts that she and Mick are not fitness fanatics and there are different tours to suit various fitness levels. “People that come on our tours are typically active people. That doesn’t mean that they necessarily go hiking, but they may just enjoy getting out and doing the gardening or walking the dog. There are hikes to suit all levels. We grade our hikes and have information that explains how far we will be walking so that people know exactly what they can expect,” says Jackie. “The groups are very friendly and encouraging too. And at the end of the day, it feels like they’ve had a real adventure. Hiking is a central focus but there are a lot of other things to enjoy as well. There is always something you can do instead if you feel one of the hikes will be too difficult.”

With the business continuing to grow, Jackie says that she and Mick have stuck by their plans to run all of the tours themselves, maintaining the personal approach that has kept travellers coming back time and time again.

“We have a lot of repeat travellers. There are solo travellers as well as couples and people travelling with friends. Our

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various tours are all popular for different reasons. I can’t pick a favourite because we designed all of the tours and love all of the areas we visit.”

To cater to the growing list of repeat customers, Hedonistic Hiking adds new tours to its offering every year.

For 2016, the business has introduced two new tours – ‘Medieval Umbria’; and ‘France and Italy’, which for the first time sees Hedonistic Hiking travelling beyond Italy. “We are Italy specialists and that won’t change,” says Jackie. “We’re just giving travellers the opportunity to hike across a border, which is a really lovely experience.”

