



Pilgrim's progress

Following in the footsteps of long-forgotten travellers, Kendall Hill discovers a storied corner of Tuscany beyond the tourist brochures.



A one-legged man hobbles up on crutches, surveys our band of two-legged hikers with walking poles and wicking shirts and asks, “Will you take me with you?”

He’s joking, of course. We’re at the Passo della Cisa, the 1040-metre-high pass on the border of Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany in northern Italy. Ahead lies a nine-hour, 23-kilometre ramble up and down the Apennine Mountains. I’m not sure I’ll make the distance, let alone my new friend.

He waves us off with a smile as we stride up a stairway and through a timber arch marking the northern gateway into Tuscany.

“This is where the adventure begins!” says our tour leader Jackie Parsons as we plunge into the woods, all dim light, silence and serenity. We’re following part of an ancient pilgrim route, the Via Francigena, through pine, beech and hornbeam forests, over 12th-century bridges and past medieval villages where timeworn practices such as cheesemaking and chestnut harvesting endure.

Wild chicory and fennel crunch underfoot and scent the air. Tangles of blackberry and clematis hug the track taking us into the Magra Valley and Lunigiana, this historic but unsung Tuscan region. We pass few other hikers and rarely see anyone in the dormant villages en route.

After several hours we teeter across a swing bridge over a rushing brook and arrive at the hamlet of Cavezzana d’Antena, just as the church bell strikes noon.

Lunch awaits at a fold-out table by the chapel where Tansy Björklund, officially tour manager but more accurately our gastronomic guide, has prepared a banquet of local produce – pecorino and gooey gorgonzola, hand-sliced ham that tastes of wild herbs, focaccia, Puglian olives (“You can almost taste the sun and sea when you eat them,” says Björklund), green plums and sliced nectarines. A local woman



Cheesemaking at the Porcari e Tambini factory in Bedonia (above); the sleepy town of Fosdinovo (below), home to an imposing castle overlooking the Magra Valley (opposite)





(Clockwise from right) A feast of local produce; walkers on the Via Francigena trail; inside the 12th century Compiano Castle



pops over with a plate of sugary biscuits for us – a small gift for the pilgrims.

It feels pioneering to plunge into the Apennine woods along a path untrodden by other travellers but there's nothing new about the Via Francigena. It has existed since the eighth century as part of a 2000 kilometre religious pilgrimage linking Canterbury in England with the centre of Christianity in Rome.

It became famous after Sigeric the Serious, who was named Archbishop of Canterbury in 990, travelled to the Holy City for his investiture. His detailed trip notes listing 80 stops, including 15 in Tuscany, have been the definitive guidebook for pilgrims, merchants and travellers ever since.

"If we were walking this in the year 1000, we would not be alone today," Parsons offers as we trek through sun-dappled woods. "We would be in sandals and a comfy tunic and have a big wooden staff with a metal tip to ward off bears

and wolves. And we would have a leather pouch for our food and valuables.

"Wealthy people often did it as a fun way to travel," she adds, basically describing our group of Australians, New Zealanders, Britons and Americans.

These untamed borderlands are a world away from the Renaissance grandeur and mannered landscapes of tourist Tuscany, that blessed slice of Italy between Florence and Siena. But with the growing popularity of walking holidays and pilgrim paths, such as Spain's Camino de Santiago, and its designation as a Cultural Route of the Council of Europe in 1994, the Via Francigena is being rediscovered by modern travellers.

This walk, which starts in the Apennines and ends at the Ligurian Sea, has been a staple of Hedonistic Hiking's (hedonistichiking.com) Italian itineraries since they were launched by Jackie and Mick Parsons in 2008. The Parsons live in Tuscany most of the year but spend

southern summers at home in Victoria's High Country. They know Italy intimately – its people, history, food and wine – but most of all, its great walks.

"This is almost a frontier land," Jackie Parsons says of Tuscany's northern reaches. "It's so little known that visitors can still feel a sense of discovery here."

The timing of our trek is impeccable. We begin in Parma, the culinary heart of Emilia-Romagna, revered for prosciutto, parmesan and pasta. Our visit to the small village of Borgotaro coincides with its annual porcini mushroom festival and by the time we arrive at the Ligurian coast a week later, Italians will have returned to work from their extended summer break, "so we have the beach to ourselves", says Parsons, grinning.

After lunch we continue into the countryside, past farmlands, forests and occasional lichen-crusting images of Christ or the Madonna sculpted in stone.

At the arched bridge of Groppodoloso, the sight of the clear Magra River on a hot

summer's day is irresistible. After a dip, we find Björklund waiting in the next village with peach iced tea and apple cake to restore our energy before we soldier on into shady sycamore and beech forests, crossing mossy stone bridges that pilgrims have traversed for centuries.

Any creeping fatigue in the afternoon is leavened by the sights along the way. A sign announcing our arrival at a tiny village of hazelnut trees: "Topelecca di Sopra, population five". The descent from the Crocetta Pass to the red-tiled town of Arzenigio via the 14 stations of the cross on a cobbled path built by the Romans. Meadows blooming with pink crocus.

One last push up and we emerge on a ridge with vast views of the handsome city of Pontremoli below, the verdigris dome of its duomo and austere walls of its 10th-century castle vying for our attention. At dinner that night the vibe is upbeat and it's not just the bliss of having conquered

the big hike. The setting at Costa d'Orsola, a ghost village revived as a small, unique hotel by owners Marta and Gianni Bezzi, is sublime, with olive groves, hilltop settlements and the outlines of mountains tracing the horizon. It is a place to drink in the views and sigh a little as you realise this is exactly what you came away for.

Björklund liaises with restaurants in advance to plan our menus. Tonight it is "a really hearty, really typical Tuscan meal", she says, as Costa d'Orsola staff deliver platters of antipasti, rough-cut pappardelle lacquered with wild boar ragu and pork fillet pan-tossed with radicchio as well as tiramisu to finish. To drink, a red blend (cabernet sauvignon, shiraz, merlot and pollera nera, an indigenous Ligurian grape) from Pontremoli and a vermentino from Colli di Luni, the hills of Lunigiana.

Our days slip into a simple rhythm of vigorous exercise and vigorous eating in surrounds rarely short of exhilarating. We

clamber over storybook castles, meet producers and curious locals ("Where have you come from? All that way on foot?") and wander the cobbled streets of towns and small cities in the heart of Italy where, remarkably, our presence as tourists is still viewed as something of a novelty.

In olden times, those who completed the pilgrim trail were said to be "delivered into the hands of God". By contrast, we are delivered into a succession of characterful hotels and excellent restaurants showcasing Lunigiana cuisine such as shredded testaroli (thin pancakes) slathered in pesto and herb-infused lamb from the Zeri Valley.

On our final day, at the lovely, off-season resort town of Lerici on the Bay of Poets, there is no hiking but we have the option of a boat trip to the cliff-hugging townships of the Cinque Terre. I opt to stay put at the hotel, swimming in the Ligurian Sea and strolling to nearby San Terenzo. One pilgrimage a week is more than enough. ●



The medieval hill town of Arzenigio, where the pilgrim path follows an ancient Roman road