



Under the shade of an ancient olive grove

Sue Wallace took a walking tour through ancient vineyards, medieval villages and along woodland tracks in the Tuscan countryside. The reward for climbing the occasional Tuscan hill? Fine food and wine picnics and authentic Tuscan cuisine in outstanding local restaurants along the way.

GIAVANNI Cannas greets us warmly waving his hands in the air and dismisses any suggestion of coffee, pouring wine to accompany his cheeses that are sold in gourmet shops throughout Europe and also Harrods of London. We sit with Giovanni in the cobblestone courtyard near his rustic farmhouse overlooking the rolling hills of Volterra in southwest Tuscany, which we are soon to tackle. Orazio, an inquisitive donkey also joins us, until he gets a little too noisy.

Giavanni started with a modest flock of sheep some 40 years ago and now has 1,000 sheep that graze on organically grown fodder. His hand-made cheeses, olive oil, honey and beauty products are available at his farm shop. The charismatic cheese maker amuses all with his tales of how he spent too much time at discos when he was younger when he should have been making cheese. He's slightly bemused as we unpack hiking boots, walking poles and backpacks for our eight-day guided walk around the Volterra-Maremma region. "Why walk when you can drive?" he says, offering us his most celebrated cheese, the Pecorino delle Balze Volterrane, which he makes according to a traditional Tuscan recipe.

We spend four nights at Giovanni's Agriturismo Lischeto, near the city of Volterra, 55km from Pisa, in rustic farmhouse accommodation and are treated to great Tuscan dishes, wines and warm hospitality. Each day we head out in different directions or drive to a location and then walk. Some days are easier on the legs than others, but you tend to forget the challenges as guide, Jackie Parsons of Hedonistic Hiking, brings the region's history to life. She and husband Mick divide their time between Australia and Italy taking gourmet walking tours.

Our small group of six follows Jackie through vineyards, woodland tracks and on *strade bianche* - gravel roads - as she takes us to hidden places of interest that you won't find in guidebooks. We walk through quaint villages where we have time to stop and savour the heady smell of fresh herbs and tomatoes in tiny gardens. Our treks take us to the pretty village of Bolgheri, regarded as one of the most exciting wine regions in Tuscany and through the beautiful open landscape of the Colline Metallifere, the "metal-bearing hills" of Maremma which brought great wealth to the region in ancient times.

Jackie also ensures we have time to sit and soak up views of the wonderful Tuscan countryside. There's an emphasis on gourmet food and wine - hence the name Hedonistic Hiking - but you experience much more - a connection with the countryside and the people you meet along the way. Just when I think I can't face another Tuscan hill, we turn the corner and are rewarded with a picnic spread of the freshest local produce and wines from the region prepared by Hedonistic Hiking's food and wine connoisseur Cinzia Long MacNay.

Each morning Cinzia heads to nearby markets and speciality shops for fresh produce. After our gourmet picnic, we are treated to Jackie's carefully chosen readings that provide poignant memories of each track we follow. A trained linguist and history lover, she pulls out a book and reads a quirky story or a passage of poignant poetry about the area.

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In the shade of an ancient olive grove, with stunning views over the medieval town of San Gimignano, we dine on wild boar salami, fresh pecorino cheese, crisp salads, seasonal fruit and a glass of local white wine, Vernaccia di San Gimignano. We are then inspired for our uphill walk into the famous medieval town where most arrive by tourist bus. Italians stop and stare at our little group dressed in outdoor gear, hiking boots and some armed with walking poles.

"Italians rarely walk for pleasure - they think we are crazy," says Jackie, who spends several weeks each year

discovering remote pathways and tracks, some dating back to ancient times, that she incorporates into her walks. Jackie and Cinzia work closely with outstanding restaurants along the way selecting menus that showcase the region's best cuisine and fine wines. They are "local" secrets where you are treated to authentic Tuscan cuisine.

Home for the last three nights is the chic Villa il Tesoro, a luxury hotel converted from 17th century farmhouses, surrounded by olive groves and vineyards. It's situated between the medieval town of Massa Marittima and the beaches of Punta Ala. On our last day we follow the old stock route of the Maremma cowboys through woodlands and remote villages to the Cistercian Abbey of San Galgano, whose monks were once the book keepers for the city of Siena, and the adjoining hermitage of Montesiipi.

We have covered about 100km this week and as I proudly pack away my dusty hiking boots, I can't help thinking Giovanni just doesn't know what he's missing out on. ▶



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HEDONISTIC HIKING

Hedonistic Hiking offers a variety of fully inclusive guided walking holidays in Australia and Italy.

CONTACT: 03 5755 2307 or visit hedonistichiking.com.au

The Volterra-Maremma Guided Walk includes seven nights' accommodation, all meals, wine, gourmet picnic lunches and snacks and dinner in quality restaurants. DATES: May 8-15 2011.

PRICE: €2,235 (about A\$3,087 per person) WALKING: Shortest day, 10km; Longest Day, 20.5km; Total: 100kms. A support vehicle is available if you can't face some of those hills. All luggage is transported. All you need is a small backpack with water.

GETTING THERE

The trip starts and ends in Pisa, which has good train and flight connections.

TO GET TO PISA

BY AIR: Pisa has its own international airport the Aeroporto Galileo Galilei with daily flights from national and international airports.

BY TRAIN: There are direct trains from Florence, Pontedera, Empoli, Montecatini Terme, Pistoia, Lucca and Prato. Pisa Centrale is the main train station of Pisa.

BY CAR: Pisa is well signposted from major roads.

For more information on Italy visit italiantourism.com.au ■

Opening Page: The Tuscan countryside

- 1 Hilltop village of Chiusdino, en route to abbey of San Galgano – the village was the birthplace of San Galgano
- 2 Giovanni Cannas and his flock
- 3 The quaint flowered street of the town of Casole d'Elsa
- 4 Many shops in the historic town of San Gimignano sell wild boar specialties
- 5 Ruined house near Volterra
- 6 Hikers heading towards the 13th century Castelvecchio near San Gimignano
- 7 Gourmet picnics feature the specialties of the region, a great reward after a morning's walk