

TRAVEL

8 / ITALY



**W**hat is it about Tuscany that still makes the British go weak at the knees, 500 years since our flirtation began? Take your pick. First, there are the landscapes: it's hard to resist the forever-photographed Val d'Orcia, with its zigzagging roads and gentle slopes ablaze with sunflowers, or Chianti, with its hilltop villages and endless sprawl of vines. Then there are the long, lazy Italian lunches, taken under a loggia, looking out over the olive groves. Or how about the buzz of *aperitivo* time at sunset on a city square?

Perhaps it's the towns. Florence has the glamour — the cradle of the Renaissance is home to some of the world's most extraordinary art, and it is possible to enjoy it and avoid the worst of the crowds (see page 13). Then there's Pisa and its grand museums, the crazy cool of Siena and the exquisite architecture of medieval towns too numerous to count: Arezzo, Volterra, San Gimignano, Montepulciano, Cortona...

Tuscany's not too cultured for a lazy day at the beach, though. You can join the fashionable front row in Forte dei Marmi, rove round the rocky coves of Monte Argentario, take the kids to Giannella or go solo on the pine-fringed strands of the Maremma.

There's too much wine to drink, and too many delightful frescoes to squeeze

into a single week, but you can have the holiday of a lifetime trying. Here is our guide to the entire region; we'd advise sticking either to the north, for Florence and Chianti, or the south, for the Val d'Orcia and the beach — which, of course, gives you the perfect excuse to come back next year.

## THE DAYS OUT

**EXPLORE THE HILL VILLAGES OF CHIANTI**  
We call it Chiantishire for a reason — it's an amped-up version of the loveliest English landscapes, with better weather and wine on tap. See it at its finest on this driving circuit. Begin in Greve or Panzano, both home to weekend markets. If you're ready for lunch, you

should drop in to see the demon butcher Dario Cecchini in Panzano and indulge in his *Officina della Bistecca*, a riotous meal feast slapped down on a communal table (set menu £43; [darioceccchini.com](http://darioceccchini.com)). Move on to Radda for chic boutiques, admire the street art in Gaiole and explore the tunnels of Castellina, taking in the vineyard views through the medieval picture windows cut into the hill. End the day with a tasting — Chianti Classico, of course — at the charming Borgo San Felice winery and hotel (tasting from £4.50; [borgosanfelice.it](http://borgosanfelice.it)).

**CLASSIC COUNTRYSIDE IN VAL D'ORCIA**  
Countryside doesn't get much deeper than the Val d'Orcia, a Unesco World Heritage Site south of Siena, where the rolling hills are aflame with sunflowers and the

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## TRAVEL 10

**MONTE ARGENTARIO**  
 Once an island, this wooded promontory is now linked to the mainland by three natural sandy strips. It has something for everyone, without giving in to the rampant commercialism that has marred parts of the Tuscan coast. Kids will be happy in the shallow turquoise waters of La Feniglia and Giannella; yachters will love the pretty coves between gnam Porto Santo Stefano and Porto Ercole;

and adventurers can hike out to unspoilt Cala Piccola and Cala del Gesso for a spot of scuba diving.

## MARINA DI ALBERESE

We've saved the best for last. You'll need to work hard to get to Alberese, the emptiest beach in the Maremma region, and probably in the whole of Tuscany. Stash your car at the visitors' centre in the Uccellina national park, then cycle — or walk — the five miles to the fine white sands. You'll pass dense forests, lush meadows and towering dunes, see wildcats, deer and foxes, and maybe even a Tuscan cowboy or two. After that, you're on your own.

## WHERE TO EAT

### IL RISTORO, CAIOLE IN CHIANTI

Not so much a restaurant as a winery with a kitchen, Il Ristoro is about one thing, showcasing Marco Patanelli's great wines to perfection — and that's just what Giovanni Bonavita's rustic dishes do at this sprawling estate in the Chianti hills. Ask for a balcony table, as the views out over the vineyards are the loveliest for miles. They're all about zero food miles here: local summer favourites include carrot and courgette soufflé with pecorino sauce, and pasta with wild boar eggs. **Mains from £7.50; casafiodioma.com**

### LA PORTA DI SOTTO, BUONCONVENTO

Seasonality is the thing at this bright little osteria in medieval Buonconvento, officially one of the most beautiful villages in Italy — yes, there is a sliding scale. Stefano Sardone has quietly built his reputation on traditional Tuscan food with a twist — and he'll happily share his extensive wine knowledge if you ask. While winter here is all about the lamb ribs baked with wild fennel, summer highlights include risotto with stuffed courgette flowers. **Mains from £7.50; laportadisotto.it**

## TUSCANY TIP

Don't be tempted to hire a car to upgrade a ha getting small hills towns

Top left: Firenze d'Oro; Lecca and, a



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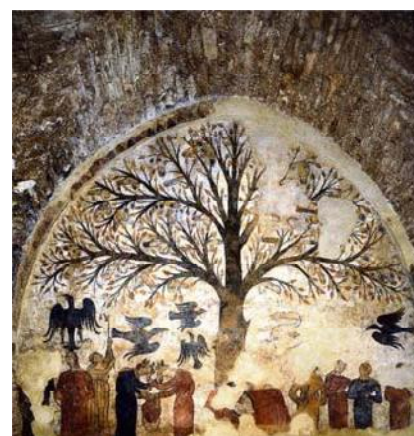
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Members only The medieval penis-tree mural in Massa Marittima





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Couples in need of some space should check out the Casina, a 12th-century watchtower in Siena's city wall that has just opened as the ultimate crash pad for two (from £5,000 a week; thecasina.com). If you want to blow the budget, Bellini has an exclusive on the ultra-glam Villa Tavernelle, in Chianti, which is on the rental market for the first time. Bells and whistles include

## Art and style among the vines

Wine tourism in Tuscany no longer just involves a quick slurp and spit in a forgotten vineyard. Take **Castello di Ama**, a hilltop vineyard in the heart of Chianti. Its co-owner, Lorenza Pallanti, has created a world-class gallery, inviting artists including Anish Kapoor, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Lee Ufan to create site-specific installations among the vines.

The artists come to stay, immersing themselves in the life of the vineyard, tasting the wines and ultimately creating an artwork based on their Ama experience. Their works are no gently pastoral affairs: Daniel Buren's mirrored wall is a bold reflection of a working landscape, while Hiroshi Sugimoto's Confession of Zero, in one of the village chapels, is a mathematical delight. To see Louise Bourgeois's phallic Topiary, you scramble deep into an ancient tank while Chen Zhen's visceral glass work floats high above the cellar's oak barrels.

The estate's 18th-century Villa Ricucci has been turned into four traditionally elegant suites, spiced up with flamboyant pieces by the Brazilian designers the Campana brothers (doubles from £260, B&B, including an art tour: castelodiama.com).

Starchitects are also getting in on the vineyard act. Admirers of Renzo Piano, who designed the Shard, can visit his first winery at **Rocca di Frassinello**, near Grosseto, designed for a label that unites two of the industry's biggest names: Domaines Barons de Rothschild-Lafite and Castellare di Castellina. The estate's oenologist can help guests create their own individual blend (tastings from £13, castellare.it).

There's more radical design by Marit Bittu, in Saverio, whose previous work includes the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. His concept for the **Petra** winery is an astonishing homage to the landscape. Book a guided tour (tastings from £30, petrawine.it).



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on our cruise was  
the humpback whale.

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