

Exploring the streets and squares of central Florence during a short holiday recently, I recalled some wise advice: *Be very selective about what you see in a few days – or you will end up needing another holiday.* So, with head spinning after visiting the Uffizi gallery, a climb to the very top of Brunelleschi's lovely cathedral dome, Santa Croce church with its tombs of so many illustrious Italians (Dante, Michelangelo, Machiavelli, Rossini and Galileo for starters) and the Bargello museum to find Donatello's bronze David, my husband and I thought 'Enough for now!', chose one last ice cream flavour from a famous gelateria at the southern end of the Ponte Vecchio,

and headed into the Tuscan countryside between Florence and Siena, to a place I seemed to have read about for years, but never visited: Pieve a Castello.

What you see on arrival is a collection of mellow stone buildings with terracotta tiled roofs, built on a slope, with some rounded walls, many arches, terraces and cobbled courtyards – and a vista of woodlands, vineyards and agricultural fields all around you. Then the layers are peeled off and you discover you are in a place built in the 8th century on 2,500-year-old foundations. It has been a monastery, an important staging post for pilgrims on the road between Canterbury and Rome (the Via Romea) and

AS YOU LIKE IT

Pieve a Castello

By Serena Cartwright





a stop for traders between Rome and the north (Via Francigena) throughout the medieval period. What you feel within hours of arrival is warmly welcomed, comfortably housed – and fed like royalty.

Pieve is owned and has been restored over many years by ATG Oxford, a travel company specialising in Italian walking holidays. It is used as a 2-night stop on several of their Tuscan routes, and as a week-long base for art, history, gardens and historic Tuscan food courses, among others, all combined with some outstanding walking. Our

7-night visit, based entirely at Pieve a Castello (bliss not to pack/unpack for a whole week), was dubbed 'As You Like It', offering daily - but optional - visits to many places of interest for art, architecture, Etruscan history and wine tasting. In many cases we walked for an hour or two, arriving at ancient sites on foot, which seemed just right, pilgrims or not. When we were not inclined to do any of these things, the whole estate and its surroundings was there to enjoy, with miles of good walking paths nearby, a swimming pool and many secluded corners in which to



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curl up with a book. I made a mental note that, if the weather turned bad, the library was full of excellent art, history and travel books, as well as shelves of novels.

Adrian was our guide, and he delivered short sound-bytes of information on what we were seeing, never lecturing but usually spurring interest in discovering more. Laura, an Italian who is the route manager for trips from



Pieve, is full of laughter and warmth and between her and Adrian we were led to some superb places. They used Mercedes mini-buses to take us to the start of our walks, and then, remembering what we had learned from Adrian over aperitifs the evening before, we explored the Etruscan remains of Volterra, the tiny walled village of Monteriggioni, the monastery of Monte Oliveto Maggiore with its lively cloister frescos on the life of St Benedict, many-towered San Gimignano and several hill towns with interesting churches. The abundance of great artworks in this part of Tuscany makes it hard to choose where to spend time, but combining art visits with good walks is a great way to avoid the culture-exhaustion syndrome.

On most days we would return to Pieve a Castello for lunch on one of the sunny terraces: like a whirlwind Laura would prepare several dishes of substantial and unusual salads which she would introduce with theatrical flourish and serve with crusty loaves, strong cheeses and many varieties of ham and salami. At the end of summer the veg garden was bursting with edible greenery and herbs, and we would be eating them minutes after they were picked. Wine and water would flow along with conversations among our mixed-nationality group of 14. We were from Australia, the US, South Africa and Britain, couples and singles, and I don't think there was one person who was not bowled over by the pleasure of our surroundings. Sometimes, if we were miles from home at lunchtime, we would descend from the hilltop village we had been exploring to find Laura happily lodged next to our path and putting the final touches to her wonderful table. With a huge smile she accepted compliments from passers-by as well as bunches of their home-grown grapes on our behalf!

Most afternoons could be spent either walking new paths, strolling in the fields and lanes around Pieve or at the pool, which was quite far down the field from the house, across a roughly mown

INFORMATION

- Pieve a Castello is about 1h30 by car from Pisa airport, and visitors are met by an ATG vehicle. The nearest train station is Poggibonsi, a 15min taxi ride away. Nearest town: Colle Val d'Elsa.
- A week of 'As You Like It', from April to October, costs £1895 per person and includes everything except travelling to Italy and home again. Airport shuttles included.
- A chauffeur service to Florence or Siena is available for independent visits, and bicycles can be provided at Pieve if required – both extras.
- Pieve can accommodate 16 guests at a time on the different trips offered.
- ATG Oxford has several independent walking trails which can be linked to this trip.
- For further information in South Africa contact Serena Cartwright at cart@hbic.co.za or Tel: 021 7902207 / 082 686 4076.



meadow full of wild flowers. It was a time to paint, sketch, read or take photographs. In mid-afternoon, as if drawn by magnets, we would drift towards the kitchen where each day a new and delicious Tuscan confection would appear (juicy rice cake full of soft raisins, honey cake, apple or fig tart made with fruit from the garden), dusted with powdered sugar and under a delicate cloth. The kettle and beverages were available at all times.

Each evening we were invited to meet for drinks on a terrace which enjoyed full sunset vistas, and it was fun to see our companions changed from utilitarian shorts, boots and sunhats into chic and colourful clothes. Prosecco – Italian champagne - flowed, with small things to eat (eg prawns sizzled on slabs of hot volcanic lava or battered courgette flowers) while we were given some information about the following day's visit. And dinner. Those evening

meals in the elegantly converted baptistery could take pages on their own, and the daily surprise of a new table decoration added to the anticipation: fresh figs or pomegranates would lie among autumn leaves around tall candles, heavy roses, lavender or lemons – each day had a different theme. Three delicious courses of authentic Tuscan dishes were presented by different chefs throughout the week – nothing too large or rich but entirely satisfying, with wines to match. Long after the meal ended, people would linger over coffee or fresh mint tea in the central courtyard, and from our second storey room up a flight of ancient marble stairs, we could hear the burble of quiet conversations rising on the warm night air.

For those who love exploring a country on foot and also want to enjoy some of Italy's art treasures, I think a week at Pieve a Castello would be hard to beat.