

Tuscany trip report – June 2013

By Peter Williams

The English love Tuscany. Having just spent a week there with my mother (Su) on a tour of villas and gardens, I can understand why. Extremely friendly people, beautiful countryside (especially the cypress trees) and great food and wine. You can't ask for much more.

Mum and I were looking for a holiday in Europe with good weather, short flights and no need to hire a car. We found an ideal holiday through the internet provided by Expressions Holidays in Plymouth, a small company that offers both bespoke holidays and a small number of guided tours. We booked on a week's guided tour of villas and gardens in Tuscany. It turned out that there were only four other participants so Expressions (quite understandably) kept the price the same as in the brochure by not sending an English guide with the group. This did not matter. Mum speaks enough Italian to get us by, and we were driven around, in a new Mercedes minibus, by Cristiano, an Italian with a Korean wife, a love of Tuscany and a perfect command of English. We could not have asked for more. (He also arranged that we never got too hot or too wet during our week in Tuscany. The weather was unusually cool for Tuscany in June, but a lovely temperature for visiting gardens.)

The holiday was divided into two halves. The first half was spent in the Chianti region near Siena, in a fantastic hotel that was effectively run by the owners as if we were their honoured guests. The Count and Countess (Corso and Jacqueline Aloisi de Larderel) ate with their guests on the terrace at breakfast and in the evening, and ensured that our every need was met. There was a beautiful garden with a pool, fantastic food and a view (and a sunset) over the Tuscan hills to die for.

Between meals we visited three villas and gardens and also the fantastic walled town of San Gimignano (details of the villas and gardens that we visited are at the end of this trip report).

San Gimignano is an unspoiled walled town that still has 14 towers standing. In medieval times, you built a tower to show that you were better than your neighbours. There were 72 originally, but only 14 now. There is also an astonishing duomo (cathedral) with the entire inside covered with frescoes.

For the second part of the holiday we moved to a hotel in the small spa town of San Giuliano Terme near Pisa. The hotel was large and impersonal, not as cosy as the first hotel and with no proper garden or swimming pool (there was a pool, but it was heated – or perhaps, this being a spa town, cooled – to 37°C). However, the food was unbelievably good, and so plentiful that I began to wonder whether I would manage all four courses every evening (for two of the evenings I had to resort to sorbets for pudding – how sad is that?).

The greatest asset of the hotel was that it was within 30 minutes of the centre of Pisa, and on the changeover day we had time to catch a train into Pisa to visit the Piazza dei Miracoli – which comprises not just the Leaning Tower, but also the Duomo (cathedral) and the Baptistery, with a magnificent font and stunning acoustics. My normally reliable Lonely Planet book said that tickets for climbing the Tower need to be bought well in advance, but at this off-season time we were able to buy tickets at 2 pm for a 4 pm visit. It was the fulfilment of a childhood ambition and the highlight of the holiday for me. Mum raced up alongside me, which impressed the Italians no end, as well as our fellow holidaymakers. We also ate pizzas for lunch at a restaurant not 50 metres from the base of the Tower, with a delightful Californian named Nina whom we had met on the station platform at Pisa when we both alighted from the same train.

From the second hotel, we visited the walled town of Lucca – still with some original walls from the renaissance – and five villas and gardens of varying ages and styles. We were allocated a guide for the second part of the holiday in the form of Linda, a fluent English speaker with an immense knowledge of this area of Italy and a lovely sense of humour. She was also very welcoming, taking us all to her home for coffee when we had a bit of extra time to kill in Lucca.

We were also able to visit the astonishing 13th century arched bridge of Ponte della Maddalena. The ever-reliable Wikipedia says that “it was a vital river crossing on the Via Francigena, an early medieval road to Rome for those coming from France that was an important medieval pilgrimage route.” A great place to eat our picnic lunch.

There is a great sense of history in this part of Italy (and doubtless in other parts as well). Many of the villas have not been tinkered with to any material extent since they were built, and at one stage we were walking on 15th century terracotta tiles. There is some staggering trompe l’oeil painting, and we saw a lot of lemon trees – all of which have to be moved into orangeries (sic) during the winter, as there is snow on the ground here during the winter months.

Lucca is a beautiful town and deserves another visit. The owner of the palace we visited in the centre of Lucca has just done up a holiday flat that is available for letting at only 100-150 euros per night (for up to four people). You would be a fool not to stay there.

In summary: a successful holiday in every way, which we both thoroughly enjoyed. Climbing the Leaning Tower was the icing on the cake for me.

Where we went (links at www.blue-whale.co.uk/tuscany)

Week 1: Staying at Villa le Barone, Panzano in Chianti

Villa Poggi Torselli – splendid gardens (villa not open to the public)

Villa Vignamaggio – home of Lisa Gherardini, said to be the Mona Lisa (villa not open to the public but a tour of the wine cellars is included)

Villa Geggiano – fantastic villa with astonishing paintings and furniture unchanged for centuries, with a tour from the owner himself, with stories of his growing up in the villa in his youth

Week 2: Staying at Bagni di Pisa Hotel , San Giuliano Terme

Palace Pfanner – astounding villa and gardens right in the heart of Lucca

Villa Grabau

Villa Oliva

Villa Reale di Marlia

Villa Torrigiani