

COASTING THROUGH Tuscany

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

In an attempt to experience Tuscany, the birthplace of Italian Renaissance, we suggest you hop on a bike, shift your gears and pedal the streets of this region and unravel its many facets.

After almost 600 years of inching towards a full topple, the Tower of Pisa's legendary lean has been arrested.



Buona fortuna, amico mio” (Good luck, my friend) says my cab driver sardonically as he puts his car’s wipers into frantic mode to beat the raucous rain. We are on our way from the station to my hotel, talking about the Pisa to Florence cycling route I plan to cover.

The hotel is located exactly 247m from the cathedral’s free-standing campanile or the bell tower or as it is known around the world—the Leaning Tower of Pisa. No photo has prepared me for this moment. It looks as if it is about to topple but some invisible hand has arrested its fall. Braving the pelting rain tourists strike a pose—dazzling smiles and hands outstretched to make social media believe that it is they who are propping the tower up.

SPROCKET POWER

Thankfully the next morning the weather has relented and my cycle arrives at 7:30 am. It is a beautiful hybrid bicycle, which means it has 21 gears and I can also do some mild off-roading with it. My bags will be transferred by the company to my next hotel which is on the outskirts of Lucca. I, however, have to make my way through pretty little Tuscan villages using my maps, the route instructions sheet and milometer. Getting on a cycle after seven years, I realise that nothing has changed; it is still a lot of fun. Besides that, the high build quality of the cycle, the suspension system and light weight make riding it a pleasure. With instructions lucid and accurate, streets and roads well marked, a simply gorgeous countryside with standing-still-in-time villages, my route for that day is just 25 km long. I complete this course in two hours and soon find myself in Lucca around mid-day.

Lucca is a city brimming with history. It was founded by Etruscans who inhabited Tuscany as far back as the 7BC, and became a Roman colony in 180BC.

In fact wandering without a map within the walls (that were built during the Renaissance period), I realise that at some piazzas the iconic Roman Grid plan is still in place. Lucca is a city that should be experienced twice—once from within the walls and the other time walking or cycling on the thick wall that encircles the city.

I choose the latter because my route to Vinci takes me through Lucca before heading out to the undulating vineyard-draped countryside of Tuscany. The operative word here is ‘undulating’ as I constantly work the gears, one hill after the other. My route map gives me pit-stops where I can pick up a refreshing coffee or some delicious ice cream at a local gelateria. The last 10 km to Vinci remind me of my excesses as I huff and puff through a series of hilltop villages with honey-coloured stone houses, topped by bright red-tiled roofs, surrounded by hillsides draped with vineyards.

My night-halt is at a little agriturismo called Il Piastrino. It is set in a beautiful village and run by a very friendly and welcoming family comprising

Above: Stopping often to take in the breathtaking scenery is inevitable in Tuscany.

Below: Espresso bars and gelaterias are two of Tuscany’s most common indulgences.



Explore

husband, wife and grandma. The downpour has started once again and I give the neighbouring Vinci (Leonardo's hometown) a miss and choose to lounge in the agriturismo's pool. The next day the cycle company picks up my bike and drops me to Empoli railway station that is 13 km away and I hop onto a train to Florence Santa Maria Novella Station that is 32 minutes away.

A BRIDGE TO INDULGENCE

Florence is wearing a lovely blue sky decorated with fluffy non-threatening clouds. The iconic dome of the Duomo stands proud over this city from where the Renaissance rippled across Europe. Each bridge across the Arno River is a work of art. The one on my right is the Ponte Vecchio. When I walk across it later in the day I find hordes of women drooling over the jewellery displayed by the jewellery shops that crowd the bridge. The Grand Duke of



Clockwise from above: A busker in Florence during the White Night celebrations; View of Florence over the Arno River with the skyline-defining dome of the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore or the Duomo; The Piazza Della Signoria is Florence's most famous meeting place. Besides housing the *Fountain of Neptune*, the L-shaped square also houses numerous other statues and important establishments.





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Tuscany, Ferdinando I de' Medici ordered jewellers to set up shop here and replace the butchers. This was the only Florentine bridge spared by the Nazis during the WWII.

Just five minutes from the bridge, I go around a corner and am now at the Piazza Della Signoria. Dominated by Bartolomeo Ammannati's *Fountain of Neptune*, this piazza is surrounded by some of Florence's most popular buildings. The fountain itself was commissioned in 1565 to celebrate the marriage of Francesco I de' Medici to Johanna of Austria. It is made from a block of Apuan marble. The figure of Neptune here is a 19th century copy, and you can find the original at the National Museum.

The sun goes down and the city dons its party hat to celebrate the White Night Festival—the coming of summer. With bands playing everywhere in the old town, lively dancing, spontaneous singing and general gaiety fill the streets.

Come morning, I head to Il Borro, a medieval hilltop village converted into a resort, 66 km

southeast of Florence. The dinner destination, Osteria Del Borro turns out to be quite exquisite. Chef Andrea Campani tells me that his menu is an endeavour to add a modern twist to contemporary Tuscan cooking. The results are nothing short of stellar.



Above: A viewpoint in Pienza offers visitors the chance to take in the beauty of Val di Chiana, an alluvial valley in central Italy.

Top: The scenic bridges of Florence have inspired creative minds since the first one was built over ten centuries ago.

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CELEBRATING TUSCANY

Chianciano Terme, about 90 km southeast of Florence, is where the Roman poet Horace came visiting around 1 BC on the advice of his physician to luxuriate in the curative waters that still bubble through the natural springs in town. I drive 86 km from Il Borro to this spa town to spend a day in the Terme di Chianciano—a huge spa on the site of ancient springs. The programme includes going through different pools, showers, saunas, mud baths and chroma, and audio therapy rooms to come out rejuvenated and refreshed on the other side. It does away with all the residual tiredness of the cycling and walking. This was a great decision because the following day had another cycling expedition charted out with Andrea Batelli.

The cycles have been mounted on the car and we head off towards Lake Montepulciano. After cycling around the lake, Ricardo, a fisherman, takes me for a ride in his electric motorboat and we spot ducks and purple herons that are here for summer from South Africa. That afternoon I have my second-best meal in Italy. It is at a quaint little B&B near the lake on Via del Lago called I Chiari. The gnocchi with porcini mushrooms and truffle shavings—one of the four courses for lunch—is tasty beyond belief. Excited about the brilliant and clear afternoon sky, we spend a few leisurely hours exploring the pretty Tuscan villages of Montepulciano and Pienza, often stopping at a cafe at a little piazza for a shot of Illy's espresso.

Mighty hungry after all the cycling and walking, Andrea suggests dinner at Il Buco—one of best-loved local restaurants in Chianciano Terme. We order a Bistecca alla Fiorentina which is a T-bone cut of steak from the region's popular Chianina breed of cattle, with a reputation for taste and tenderness.

Stuffed to the gills, a toast is raised to Tuscany—a land of stunning scenery, arty cities, friendly and pretty villages and food fine enough to make gluttony a virtue. ■



Clockwise from above: A motorboat ride on Lake Montepulciano makes for a very relaxing way to savour Tuscany's natural beauty; Il Borro is worth visiting if only to taste the superb fare offered at Osteria Del Borro; Montepulciano is famous for being car-free and hence conducive for long, refreshing walks.

QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways has daily flights from Mumbai and Delhi to Brussels. From Brussels, you can catch a flight to Florence using our codeshare partner Brussels Airlines.

ACCOMMODATIONS

The pretty city of Florence has plenty of stay options all over town but to stay in the heart of the action, check out Lungarno Collection at www.lungarnocollection.com.

TRAVEL TIPS

For an all-inclusive and very enjoyable self-guided cycling trip in Tuscany visit www.ActiveHolidayCompany.com. Tuscany is also very suitable for a driving trip. A good investment would be a GPS like the Tom-Tom Via 125 if you are really into road trips. It gives you important information like speed limits, free parking places, traffic situations and emergency services.

For a good Tuscan pizza experience in Florence bite into one at La Divina Pizza on the corner of Via Borgo Allegri and Via dell'Agnolo near Piazza Santa Croce.

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