

the allure of TUSCANY

From Renaissance artists to Romantic poets, Tuscany has a long history of attracting people to rejoice in its splendour. Sally Thomson fulfilled a lifelong wish to visit, soaking up the food, culture and sun along the way...

We all think we know Italian culture - but we can so easily be lead into stereotypes and pastiches, mostly when we think about cuisine. Food and the act of eating food is so much more than that in Italy - food is revered and understood, it is enjoyed whilst stories are shared around the table, a spirit of mutual generosity pervades. This is what we would come to understand on a recent trip to explore the glorious, ancient hills of Tuscany - where we learnt the true meaning of *la dolce vita* on our own foodie pilgrimage.

Our journey of culinary and cultural discovery began at the glorious Vitigliano, a stunning guest house hidden like a prize jewel within rolling hills. We took a while to find it - it is after all a part of the Hideaway Hotels group, and in this respect it certainly didn't disappoint. By the time we did actually reach our destination - somewhat late - our hosts were there to welcome us and immediately gave us a glass of wine whilst introducing us

as much locally grown organic produce as possible. You can't get much better than that.

We sat outside watching the sun setting whilst enjoying the company of people we had not met before and the hours went by until it was past midnight and we hadn't even taken our suitcases out of the car. We truly enjoyed the company of our fellow guests. Great food always precedes a wonderful slumber, and our bedchambers were nothing short of majestic. Decked out with all the mod-cons you could ever wish for, lofty two-storey ceilings, a palatial amount of space and furthermore - a well-stocked wine fridge in the bathroom. I had a feeling this place might be a hard one to leave...

Come morning after a wonderfully deep sleep we were awoken by the sounds of bird song and cicadas as the sun started to warm us up for the day. As we had arrived late we had not seen the full extent of the glorious setting we were in. We were surrounded by vineyards, pine trees and olive groves, the scents of these rising with the warm breeze that rippled through the hotel's own grounds. Breakfast beckoned - another leisurely event. For me, holidays should always feature a couple of

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to our fellow diners. Owners Marion, husband Kiyan and rest of the guests had kindly waited for our arrival so that dinner could begin.

Surrounded by bucolic fields, we were hoping that the menu would reflect this wonderful local produce - it certainly delivered. The food was delicious - comprising of 4 courses - each one accompanied by a hand-selected wine. The chef, who is Sri Lankan, is superb and his dishes are Italian and on occasion served with a wonderful Asian twist. The mantra is

those deadly sins, sloth and gluttony being particularly pertinent as we lazed by the pool. With glorious crystalline water and the most spectacular views, there are few places lovelier to soak up the sunshine with a book.

I did manage to tear myself away to enjoy a massage in the hotel's lovely spa. I have to say that over the years I have enjoyed many treatments all over the world, but as I said to my husband, this one in particular was without a doubt the best I had ever had.



Main image - Vitigliano in countryside, this image, Vitigliano poolside