

Amber Road Tours

Small group journeys through the best bits of Italy

Life In Italy December newsletter, 2008



2009 Tour Calendar

Sicily

May 1-12
Oct 9-20

Week In Tuscany

May 3-9
Sept 6-12

Tuscany/Umbria

May 14-26
Sept 10-22
Sept 24-Oct 6
Oct 8-20

Tuscany/Liguria

May 27-June 4
Sept 16-24

Amalfi/Apulia

Sept 25-Oct 7
Oct 9-21

La raccolta delle olive

Late October begins the olive harvest in Italy, something that we paid minimal attention to until last year when we bought a small, twelfth century home in a hill-top village outside of Spoleto, Umbria. Part of our property is an olive grove of 30 trees – not many actually, considering that most our neighbors have a hundred or more. We bought the necessary equipment – a large net to spread under the tree, a wooden ladder, crates and five-fingered hand rakes – and set to picking. The technique is simple – holding the end of a branch and raking the olives down onto the net. The olives are then gathered by pulling the edges of the net together in order to pour them into the crates. This year the result of our week's work was 166 kilos (over 350 pounds), which we took to a *frantoio* (olive mill) where we swapped them for 27 liters of dark green, slightly spicy oil.



The olive mills are open from early November to mid-January where they work round the clock pressing the harvest from hundreds of locals. Anyone who has land here has olive trees. There are more than 6,000 olive mills in Italy – ten just a few kilometers from our home. Many of our itineraries include an olive oil tasting (they vary in taste quite like wines). Our Tuscany/Liguria tour includes a visit to a small *frantoio* during our walk along the *via Francigena* (ancient pilgrim route to Rome) through the hills above Lucca. Remember to buy only extra virgin olive oil (first press) – anything else is either a chemically extracted second press or combined with another oil such as palm - and use only the current year's oil.

Bread, guns & trains

Pistoia is a little touristed, jewel of a town located in northern Tuscany between Florence and Lucca. Originally Etruscan, in the 2nd century BC it was a fortified city, with the role of provisioning the Roman military in their wars against the Ligurians along the peaks of the Apennine mountains. In fact, the name Pistoia comes from the Latin *pistoria* - an oven for making bread. It became a powerful independent comune in the 11th and 12th centuries, when it acquired the Romanesque aspect that the historic center still has today. Its independence ended in the 14th century when conquered first by Lucca, then Florence. Primary industry during medieval times was ironworking, especially weaponry. In fact, the word *pistol* comes from the name Pistoia. A *pistol* was originally a surgical knife, later a dagger, then a gun. Today Pistoia is an important industrial and agricultural center, with the manufacture of train cars and the largest area of ornamental nurseries in Europe.



A visit to Pistoia and dinner at La Bottegaia are included on our Tuscany/Liguria and Tuscany/Umbria itineraries.

Featured Restaurant



The award winning Osteria La BotteGaia is located in particularly evocative surroundings in the center of the old city of Pistoia: on one side is the Piazza del Duomo, one of the most beautiful in Italy, with its marvelous buildings, and on the other is La Sala, the medieval open-air market, which still operates in the mornings, and where one can still see ancient shops with stone counters and wooden shutters. In warm weather, the Osteria has seating on the edge of the Piazza del Duomo, next to the magnificent Baptistery, a wonderful atmosphere for a fine meal. There is a delightful collection of wines and the menu changes weekly in order to offer only local, in-season products. Dining there recently, I was served an incredible *risotto* with white truffle and Colonnata lard. Sonya enjoyed the best *ribollita* this side of the Apennine mountains. Both were well complimented by a Mompertone Rosso 2005 (60% Barbera, 40% Syrah) followed by a mousse di *castagna* (chestnut) and grappa.

The ribollita is a traditional Tuscany bean soup. Alessandro Olmi, the owner, has kindly provided the recipe.

La BotteGaia's ribollita: recipe for 8 persons

Ingredients:

1/2 head of cavolo nero (black kale)	1/4 head of Savoy cabbage	1/2 bunch of Swiss chard
1 onion	2 potatoes	3 carrots
4 zucchini	3 celery stalks	200 grams (7 oz) borlotti (kidney beans)
extra virgin olive oil	salt, pepper, garlic, sage	

250 grams (approx. 8.8 ounces) of stale, white Italian bread

Pre-soak the beans for about 8 hours. Boil them in two quarts of water with a garlic head, salt and sage until half-cooked. In another pot, sauté the sliced onions in olive oil. Slowly add all of the greens (black kale, swiss chard and savoy cabbage) chopped into large chunks. Let them slowly soften for about 15 minutes. Add the other vegetables cut in small cubes and let them cook for another 10 minutes. Then add the beans with their water and cook over low heat for about one hour and a half.

Meanwhile slice and toast the bread (unsalted). When the vegetables are ready, separate them from the stock and put them in layers with the bread in a tureen. Let them stand for at least 2 hours. Before serving take the desired amount and heat it with a small amount of stock. Serve in earthenware bowls. Pour in a little genuine Tuscan extra virgin olive oil with a full, fruity flavor.

Warming and satisfying on a chilly winter's day.

Featured tour – Tuscany/Liguria

TAKING THE AMBER ROAD

A freelance writer's experience of one corner of Tuscany

When it comes to booking a package tour of Italy, there's the high road and the low road and then there's the Amber road, which I stumbled on as I inexpertly searched the Internet for suitable options. First impressions count: the website was tasteful and professional (no screaming colors or multiple exclamation marks), and plenty of information about what to expect. It struck me as being too active for the Golden Oldies yet too genteel for the party set, which was exactly what I was looking for. The clincher was the fact that the tours are limited to 16 people and that the itineraries mix the big draw cards like Florence and the Cinque Terre with off-the-beaten track excursions to the kind of places you wouldn't get to on your own.

I signed up, and any residual nervousness I felt evaporated when I received a friendly and welcoming reply from Jonathan, who seemed to be at work at the oddest hours for an American on the other side of the planet, until I discovered that he and his Italian wife, Sonya, live in Spoleto, in Italy, where the time difference from my home in Cape Town is just one hour. There's always the risk of disappointment on a package tour. While good hotels and well-planned routes may be assured, there's no predicting what the weather will do, or what the tour guides and fellow travelers will be like. I'm quite open to adventure, and my only intention for my trip was that I would be surprised and delighted in some or other way. The journey turned out to be surprising and delightful in every way; so that I could not have asked for more. First, there was our endlessly accommodating tour leader, Mario. Whether it was wheat intolerance or a phone card or a laundry crisis that needed to be resolved, his standard response was, 'Okay, no problem, I will arrange.' And he did. He told us stories and made us laugh. His take on the way his country works (or doesn't), made our experience of Italy that much richer. We loved him for collecting miniature snowstorms for his sister and for his willingness to wear 'the ugliest shirt in the world' so that we'd be able to spot him with ease while being spared the indignity of following an umbrella in the crowds at Pisa. Next, there was the trusty bus, driven by the endearing and confidence-inspiring Carlo, who wore a jacket and tie on duty, without exception. After walking our feet off, there was something enormously comforting about knowing that Carlo would soon arrive and whisk us and our packages back to the hotel.



The author hiking the Cinque Terre



Then, of course, there was the group; a mixed bunch from Canada, the US and South Africa, who all got on well together and provided the amusement and spice that builds memories. I'll remember the Americans, with the help of several Margaritas, showing us how a simple card game of Spoons could become a blood sport; Charles singing ballads after dinner in the beamed monastery dining room of Hotel Il Convento in Pistoia; Joan explaining how she'd picked each day's outfits weeks in advance by studying projected weather and temperature reports, and Maureen's funny story about being frog-marched the length of a swaying train when she and Kay inadvertently settled in the wrong carriage in a compartment reserved for a large and excitable Italian family.

We had loads of fun and no-one was bored for a minute. Good planning, and the variety and pacing of the tour can be thanked for that. The beautiful walled city of Lucca was our three-night starting point, with day trips to elegant villas and tiny villages where we learned about olive oil and tasted the local produce, even – with many squeals and groans - pure white lard at Colonnata (which wasn't as bad as I'd thought it would be). At the marble quarries at Carrara, our guide, the incomparable Umberto, wove the magic and the mayhem of marble extraction into a rich and complex story. And then we moved on to our second base at the simultaneously rugged and postcard-pretty Cinque Terre, where we walked from the first colorful village to the fifth picturesque port, sampled gelati and soaked up the charm of the surroundings. Here too we had a day trip by ferry to the grey stone abbey at San Fruttuoso, the paintbox-perfect harbor at Portofino and the grand town of Santa Margherita, where artists sit in the square capturing the trompe l'oeil effects on ice cream colored facades. We climbed the tower at Pisa and had time to explore and shop before heading to our last stop in Pistoia, where the windows of the characterful convent-turned-hotel offered panoramic views over the countryside. The climax was our day trip to Florence, to marvel at the works of Michelangelo and the sheer magnificence of the city, but first there was our formal dinner, attended by Jonathan and Sonya, who make a point of driving in for a sociable evening with each of their tour groups. Bonds were formed, farewell tears were shed, and weeks later, emails and photographs continue to whizz round the planet, expanding the pleasure we had on a tour that was more personal than 'package', which each and every one of us would do all over again tomorrow.

Cathy Eden lives in Cape Town.

*Best wishes for merry holidays and a bright 2009.
We hope to see you in the near future.
Jonathan & Sonya*

Life In Italy is published four times a year.

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