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March 2016 • ₹100

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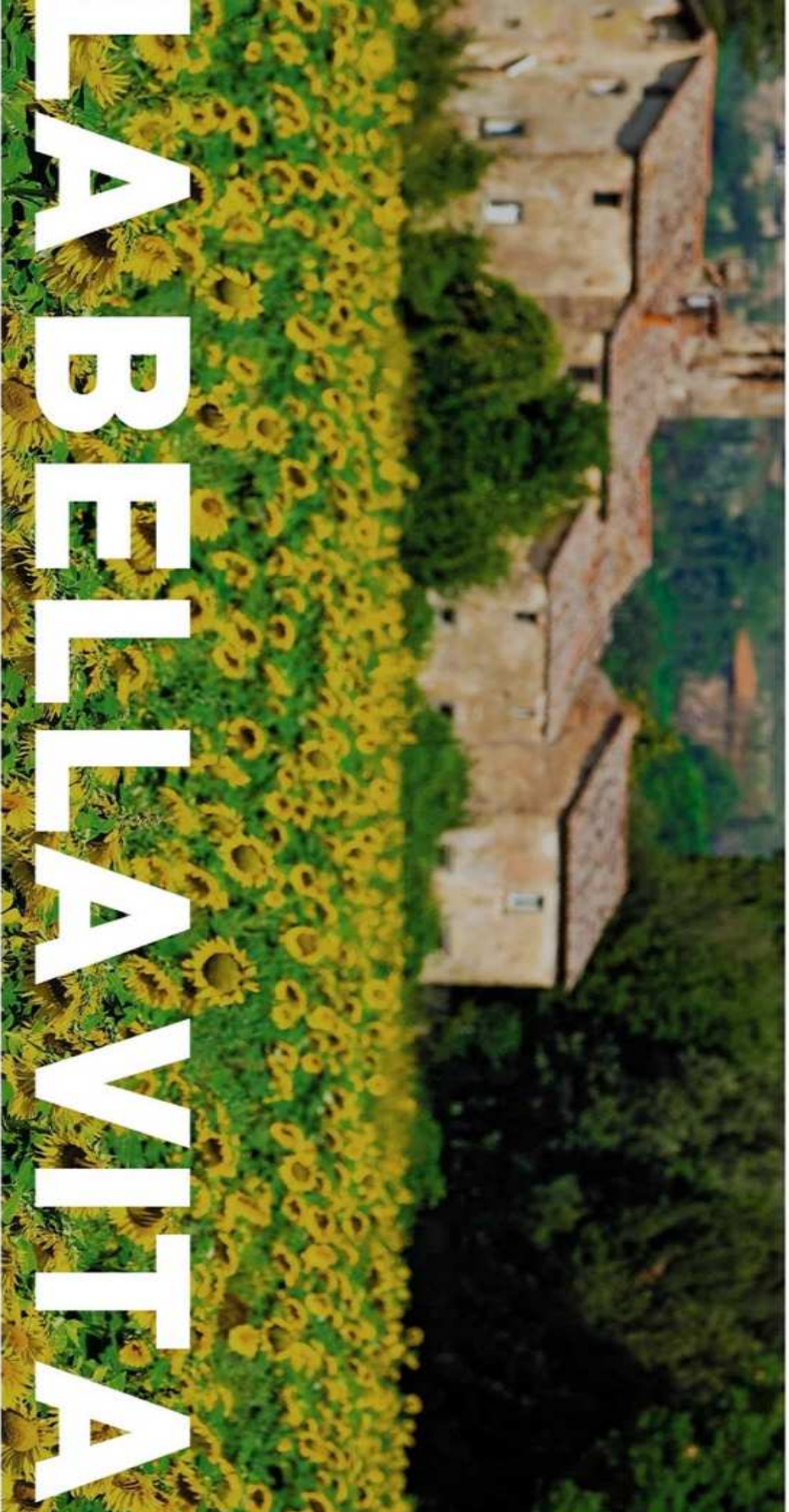
THE LIST Must-visit in 2016

PANKAJ KAPUR ■ GIORGIO LOCATELLI ■ JEHAN NUMA RETIREAT, BHOPAL



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COVER STORY ITALY



ALAMY/SHUTTERSTOCK

NEELIMA AGRAWAL EXPERIENCES THE
GOOD LIFE VIA FARM STAYS IN ITALY'S
AREZZO PROVINCE

*A sunflower field at
Cortona, Arezzo
province in Tuscany*

ITALY

There are some places, perhaps in distant lands, where the moment you set foot, it feels like a homecoming. One such utterly enchanting destination that I visited last summer, during my explorations of Italy in search of offbeat havens of peace and tranquility, was the little Tuscan town of Bučine. Located in the province of Arezzo, just 48 kilometres southeast of Florence, Bučine is all about *la bella vita*, the good life. The gentle Tuscan landscape with green undulating hills, sunflower fields, tall cypresses, old oaks, clear blue skies, and crackling fresh air—I was in picture postcard country. It has inspired painters, writers and poets who have said much in verse and prose about the beauty of Tuscany. The Arezzo region is home to some of the best designers, artists, poets, while top luxury brands like Prada, Dolce & Gabbana, Miu Miu, Salvatore Ferragamo, Gucci and Fendi, have all begun from here. Celebrities

UNDULATING HILLS, SUNFLOWER FIELDS, OLD OAKS, CLEAR BLUE SKIES, AND CRACKLING FRESH AIR—I WAS IN PICTURE POSTCARD COUNTRY

such as Sting, Paolo Rossi and Michael Schumacher have homes here. I am very tempted to do the same. The rules are easy, and the real estate prices much lower than Delhi.

Bučine is the key town in Valdambra, or Val d'Ambra, the valley of the river Ambra, a tributary of the most important Tuscan river, Arno, which lends its name to the Valdarno region. This is fertile land with vineyards, olive groves, sunflower fields, tobacco plantations and cereal. The Sangiovese variety of grape for Chianti wines is produced here. Dotted with small stone villages, old churches, well preserved castles, legends



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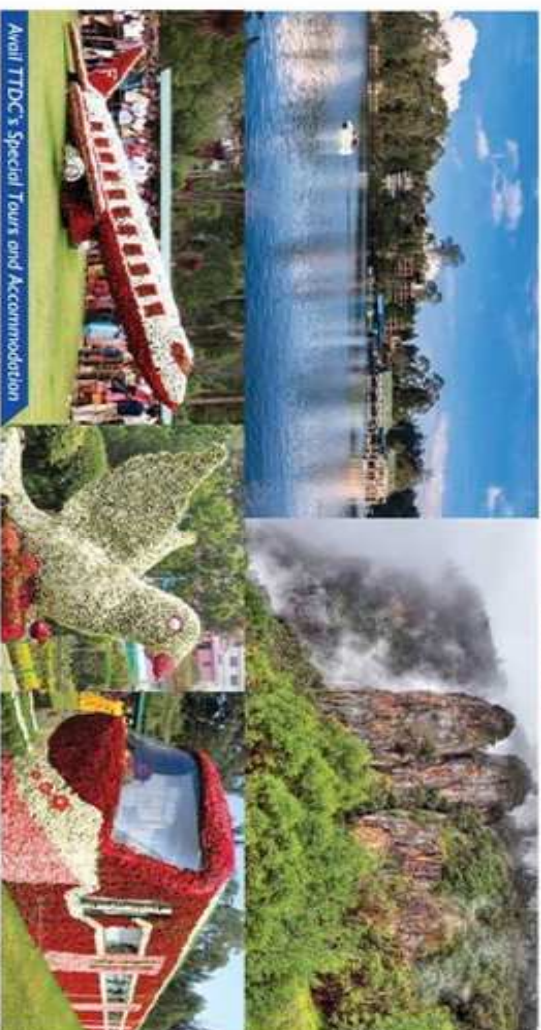


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Clickwise from top left: cured meats are a hallmark of the region; olive groves and cypress trees dominate the Tuscan landscape; fishing in the Arno at Forte Barone; and home-made gnocchetti with pumpkin and chanterelle filling

and here of a rich historical past, Lucerne and the region around it has many stories to tell. During the Middle Ages, this opulent region of Valdarno was the scene of many brutal battles between the ruling Guelfs of Florence and Ghibellines of Arezzo. It also took a pounding during World War II.

Today its serene vistas offer the perfect refuge to indulge in *il Dolce far niente*, the sweetness of doing nothing and charge one's creative batteries. Leonardo da Vinci painted the *Mona Lisa* here. Visible just over her left shoulder is the Ponte Barone, a stone bridge built across the river Arno around the latter half of the 13th century. It can be reached in just 10 minutes by road from Lucerne. The cliffs of Valdarno, called La Balze, also inspired Leonardo da Vinci to paint them. The balze are eroded clay hills, which were formed by nature when a massive lake receded millions of years ago. Declared a protected natural reserve in 2005, it is a popular site for treks.

South of Lucerne, a short drive away is the tiny town of San Pancrazio nestled atop a hill, with a small, close knit community. Balbir Singh Pabla, who moved to this region more than a decade ago, narrated an interesting episode about how he was pleasantly surprised when an elderly Italian, Enzo Panzera, came up to him and identified him as a Sikh from India, although none lived there at that time. During the World War II, Nazi Germany's Hermann Goering Battalion found its way to San Pancrazio, rounded up the men, marched them to a stone warehouse in the main plaza, shot and burnt them. The women and children escaped into the woods. Soon after, Germany lost to the Allies and the Italian Infantry Division of the British Army arrived in San Pancrazio. Sikh soldiers helped the survivors re-build their town. The stone warehouse is now a museum, with all the signs of the brutal night still

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ITALY

MY LIST OF FARMSTAY RECOMMENDATIONS

MONTEBELLUNA A MONTICELLI ALPINA is owned by the Bardelli-Baldelli family, having been held nobly. The houses and apartments are surrounded by hills and woods, organic Chianti and olive groves. Villas come with a football field, a volleyball court and a large, circular swimming pool. Cottages slay have the private gardens and a swimming pool set in stone. Common areas have free Wi-Fi internet connection (+39-55-9789029, info@montebelluna.it).

LA CASINA DEL BOSCO is on a hilltop, surrounded by 6 hectares of Chianti vineyards. Recently restored, it has a waterfall swimming pool of heated salt water and a recreation area for children. Expect a dinner by the very elite hosts (+39-549-907041, la-casina@bosco.it).

PRATO AL SOLE near San Pancrazio is surrounded by woods, and overlooks terraced olive groves and vineyard. Has a garden and a swimming pool (+39-055-992821, prato@prato.it).

IL SOLE VERDE is owned by Guido and Angela, who have two lovely dogs, a swimming pool, a ribbon lawn mower that you might want to bring back (+39-055-991285, ilsoleverde.it).

VILLA PETERLO is a 18th-century manor house with 10 bedrooms and 14 en-suite bathrooms, swimming pool, tennis court, and a private garden (+39-055-9911322, peterlo.it).

POGGIO CERINIA is owned by Paolo Rossi. Set atop a hill, it is surrounded by 85 hectares of organically grown olive trees and vineyards. A 40-hectare forest of tall trees, a 5,000 sqm lake, lighted football pitch, a gym, a Turkish bath and a swimming pool (+39-055-992620, poggiocerinia.it).

LA MURIA FARMHOUSE is a Tuscan Villa built circa 1600 CE near Lucca in the hills above the famous 18th-century spa town of Bagni di Lucca (Bagni di Lucca). It offers a heated pool, and has landscaping. They have a restaurant La Gioia, which serves incredible food (+39-349-744877, la-muria@farmhousepoggio.com).

• MELISSA ACQUAVIVA



Dining room at La Boccia del Mare, part of the Magliana & 1971 property's

THE BEST WAY TO EXPLORE THESE TOWNS IS ON FOOT. DO STOP BY AT ONE OF THE MANY LOVELY CAFÉS FOR A QUICK SNACK OR COFFEE

visible. A large white statue of a woman and her children stands as a testimony to how the women re-built the town. Enzo Panzeri is a survivor of the massacre. He was 15 at that time, and escaped to the woods to survive. Many of his family were killed that day.

To the north of Bucline is the commune of Monteverchi, which has a train station on the Rome-Florence line. There are two reasons that make a visit to the town essential—the Villa Masini and the Prada's Space shopping outlet, which offers 70 per cent discount. A 30-minute ride by train from Florence has tourists coming by busloads to shop. Go early to beat the crowds and get the store's number token before settling down for coffee at the Space Café. The outlet is adjacent to the Prada factory.

The Villa Masini is a grand mansion built in 1924 by a prosperous fur hat manufacturer, Angiolo Masini, for his beloved second wife, who unfortunately died before the villa's completion. The gorgeous villa was featured in Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*. The descendants of Angiolo Masini live here still. It has been declared a heritage home and the garden is being

restored by the government.

The town of San Giovanni Valdarno, just six kilometres up north from Monteverchi, is a typical little Italian town straight out of the history books and old classic movies, with a basilica, museums, a hundred-year-old shop Pratese Drogheria & Cioccolateria which has the best chocolate produce I have ever tasted.

The best way to explore any of these towns is on foot, and stop by at one of the many lovely cafés for a nibble or coffee. Italy is the home of the Slow Food revolution. Food is serious business here. Every region has its own specialties and processing traditions. The Arrezzo region, with its fertile agricultural land, is home to many Italian specialties, besides the Chianti Wine. The family-run enterprises do a fine job. A tasting tour is mandatory for any visitor to get a first-hand experience of these local specialties. The Trevino Toscano cheese is made from sheep's milk, and has the 'Protected Designation of Origin', or DOP, status. A special kind of red potatoes, Patata rossa di Cecina, has a unique taste, and is used in tortelli, stews and gnocchetti preparations. Also try the San-giovannese stew with veal and the local



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ITALY

handmade spaghetti brought that does not include egg in its ingredients. Join a cooking class (they organise short week-end ones for tourists) and learn to make the fabulous ribollita soup. The Prosciutto del Casentino ham is from wild pigs, and its long production process makes it a rarity. The Pratomagno ham is another popular Tuscan appetiser. A rare delicacy is the Cinta Senese ham made from the hind legs of the specially bred wild boar. The giant Chianina cows are specially reared for their beef. The popular desert wine, Vin Santo or Sforzi's Wine is a must.

To pay homage to the luxury brands on their home turf, check out the factory outlets of Fendi, Dolce & Gabbana, Prada and Roberto Cavalli. One can book a tour of The Mall at Via Europa 8, Leccio Reggello, to shop for top Italian brands, international fashion designers and much more. Special bus services run from Florence all day, ferrying tourists who come for the amazing



ALAMY/ROBERT TALL

THE REGION'S WELL ORGANISED AGRI-TOURISM OFFERS MANY FARM STAY OPTIONS, B&BS, GUESTHOUSES AND RESTAURANTS

best experienced by living the Italian way on a farm. The region's well organised agri-tourism offers many farm stay options, B&Bs, guesthouses and restaurants. The Middle Tuscany Land Association has listed twenty three structures. These range from fully furnished apartments to independent cottages, with all modern amenities, well-equipped kitchens offering varying degrees of luxuries, a supply of the house wines and olive oils. The range of accommodation is phenomenal, and fits all budgets.

THE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

By Air: The closest airports are Peretola in Florence, Galileo in Pisa, and Perara S. Egidio Airport. Most airlines from Delhi and Mumbai fly to Rome.

By Car: Motorway A1 (Milan-Rome). Leave the motorway at the Valdarno exit and follow the state road number 69 following signs first for Montevarchi and then to Bucine. It is 15km from the exit.

By Train: From the north using the Milan-Bologna-Florence line and from the south using the Rome-Arezzo line.

THE STAY

Most accommodation is B&B as agri-tourism structures are not allowed to have catering services. Most accommodation requires a minimum three-day stay. Rentals range from €70 to 250 per day for a single room (for two people) or a high-end villa for €7,000 per day (for nine people). Prices are variable and can be checked with the owner.

Any of the many villas, B&Bs and cottages can be booked from Middle Tuscany Land Association (middletuscany holiday). See also

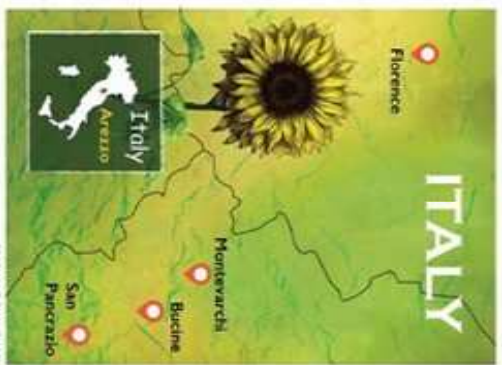
apartment and B&B accommodation.

com: Turcan-Tale (Tuscan Tale) will help out with airport pickup, bus hires, car rentals, reservations, wedding organisation, and tour itineraries.

WHAT TO DO

Bikes are easy to rent, and bicycle tour itineraries are indicated on GPS maps. You can learn to cook local delicacies over a weekend. Food & wine tasting trails for cheese, wines, and other delicacies are available. Tuscany is famous for its truffle hunts. Many luxury outlets and special venues (like The Mall) offer heavy discounts. In summer, every Wednesday evening, the main square of Bucine comes alive with food, wine, music and dancing. Get a personal culture aficionado or join a small group. Tuscany has 31 world class golf courses. July to August is peak season, and it's quite warm then. March to April is low season, with lower rates.

■ NEELMA ADARWAL



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