

# Our Tuscan adventure

Famed for its architectural and historical significance, **ARLENE HARRIS** discovers the Italian countryside also offers fun for all the family

Villa le Botti and the surrounding vineyards. Inset, the pool at the premises

**T**uscany, by its very name, conjures up images of rolling hills, brilliant sunshine, lush vineyards and rustic farmhouses – and in reality, the region is just as pleasing. Although I had visited

Florence and Pisa as a young backpacker, I had never ventured into the Tuscan countryside, so was keen to see if it lived up to its reputation.

Arriving in Florence by train, my family and I take a local bus to the village of Bacciano, a half hour drive outside the city. Travelling by public transport is a fantastic way to get a feel for a place as despite all the hauling around of baggage, it really puts you at the heart of the community as only the natives seem to travel this way – plus the idea of negotiating a hire car around the hectic Florentine streets is the stuff of nightmares.

We're booked to stay in Villa le Botti, a beautiful farmhouse in the hills, conveniently situated right in the middle of the Frescobaldi Castiglioni vineyard – the location couldn't be more perfect.

After a half-hour walk from the sleepy village down a dusty country lane, the silence broken only by bird song, snippets of rapid-fire Italian from open doors and gardens dotted along the way, and the surprisingly loud chorus of cicadas, our stunning villa comes into view.

Privately owned but managed by Tuscany Now & More, the old farmhouse is beautifully maintained – with lush gardens, bougainvillea covered walls and a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside.

Inside the heavy wooden door, the villa is deliciously cool and we're momentarily stunned by its comfort, size and the wonderful feeling of it being a home from home.

The house comfortably sleeps 12 so the kids spread out and nab a bedroom each – complete with en-suite – and then set about exploring all the ancient nooks and crannies, including a reading tower, which proves to be the perfect place to escape the midday sun).

We spend the first couple of days lounging by the pool and not venturing further than the local



village for supplies – but knowing that the week will fly by if we don't introduce some sort of structure, we make plans to explore the region.

First on the agenda is a day trip to Pisa. Taking the bus from Bacciano to Florence and then a train for the rest of the journey, the trip takes around an hour and a half – which isn't much more than it would have taken us by car and we arrive just in time for mid-morning coffee and pastries. In comparison to Florence and

Rome, Pisa is a relatively quiet place – sure there are tourists milling about, but it has a really relaxed feel about it and no-one seems to be in too much of a hurry.

We decide to walk the 2km to the famous tower from the station as the tourist office has mapped out a circular route which allows visitors the opportunity to see as much of the city as possible. I had seen the leaning tower before when I backpacked as a teenager, but had forgotten how

it suddenly appears almost out of nowhere. The kids are dutifully surprised, particularly my youngest, who is thrilled to come face-to-face with the iconic structure.

And if the streets appear quiet and relaxed, that's probably because every tourist in the region is crammed into the Piazza dei Miracoli (Piazza del Duomo) around the tower and cathedral. We can hardly move for selfie-sticks, tripods and tightly-compacted tour groups, so after a brief

tour of the famous structures – and the obligatory 'holding up the tower' photo – we make good our escape.

Just a few cobbled streets away, we're able to breathe again as the melée is far behind us and we are once again embraced by the relaxed atmosphere of Pisa. We spend the afternoon exploring, shopping and enjoying a traditional Pisa pizza.

After a busy day, the tranquil environs of our

villa had never felt more welcome and sipping a glass of wine while watching the sun go down over the valley of vines, we make plans to visit the neighbouring vineyard the following day.

The Frescobaldi estate has been making wine for 700 years and it started just under our noses at the Castiglioni villa.

Having bought a few bottles from the shop – which is very humbly located along the dusty road to Montagnana – just ten minutes by foot from ►

◀ the villa – we're keen to see where it was made and are privileged to be allowed to explore the vineyard, learn about the grape varieties and how each wine was made, take a tour of the cellar and, most importantly, to taste the difference between different vintages of Chianti and Sangiovese, and sample their fabulous Tuscan Chardonnay.

And while we adults educate our palates, the kids are treated to home-made blackcurrant juice, crusty bread, pecorino cheese and Frescobaldi olive oil.

That evening, watching the sun set over the valley, we recognise the different areas of the vineyard and our evening tittle has more relevance as we knew exactly where it has come from.

No trip to Tuscany would be complete without viewing some of the incredible masterpieces and architecture of Florence.

So the following morning, we hop on our trusty bus and head back into the city for a walking tour of the major attractions with Irish tour company Italy With Us.

We're met by the wonderfully knowledgeable and affable Chiara who took us first to the Uffizi Gallery, pointing out many famous buildings and statues along the way.

The Gallery is thronged with people, but with her expertise, passion for art and know-how, we manage to avoid the mass viewings by heading a different direction to the crowd.

Over two hours later, we've soaked up a huge amount of information and seen famous works by some of the greats including Michelangelo, Leonardo, Botticelli, Caravaggio, Raphael, Rembrandt and more.

With our heads filled with information, Chiara suggests we take an hour off to have something to eat from All Antico Vinaio 'the best sandwich bar in Florence and perhaps the world'.

After showing us down a side-street lined with people eating sandwiches and encouraging us to join the ever-growing queue, she leaves us to our own devices for an hour:

The little sandwich bar has five staff, chopping, slicing and wrapping big hunks of focaccia filled with delicacies such as roast stuffed pork, juicy tomatoes and mozzarella, roasted vegetables, cured meats and much, much more. The ingredients are simple but of the absolute best quality and Chiara was right, they truly are the best sandwiches ever.

Once sated we spend a pleasant half hour



Arlene in All Antico Vinaio, 'the best sandwich bar in the world'

### FACTFILE

- To book a villa – housing groups from 2 to 26 people – visit [tuscanynowandmore.com](http://tuscanynowandmore.com) – prices vary depending on date and venue.
- Tours of Florence cost from €25 per person – visit [italywithus.com](http://italywithus.com) for more information.



Villa le Botti and, right, Arlene and her family enjoy the sights in Florence

wandering around the cobbled streets before meeting up with our guide again for a trip to the Academia to see the famous statue of David and some lesser-known Michelangelo masterpieces. She also shows us a priceless set of Stradivarius instruments crafted for the Medici family and bearing the family crest – and informs us that in order to keep the instruments in good shape, they were played every year at a special concert.

We surmise that the musicians chosen for such an honour must have nerves of steel to handle such treasures.

After an hour in the Academia, we head back out into the brilliant sunshine to conclude our walking tour with a visit to the Cathedral, the

Basilica de Santa Croce, Palazzo Vecchio and the famous Ponte Vecchio.

Having the services of a guide like Chiara not only opens up the secrets of the city to us, but it also reveals the history behind the famous landmarks and gives us an insight into the lesser-known streets and squares.

The rest of our time in Tuscany is spent relaxing in the villa and by the pool, meandering to the local villages for shopping or an evening meal and generally soaking up the wonderful atmosphere of the area.

I love every minute of our time in the region and while this is my first visit to the Tuscan countryside, it definitely won't be my last. 📌