

# *The* Italian *Job*

A family holiday that will keep parents, teens and younger siblings happy is not the easiest thing to organise, but from gelato-making to fun campsites, our writer found that Italy ticks all the boxes

**INTERVIEW** ARLENE HARRIS

**F**inding a holiday destination which appeals to all the family can be tough – particularly when children have become teenagers and are no longer content to simply splash about in a pool all day long, happy in the knowledge that ice-cream will be on the agenda at some point throughout the day.

My two eldest boys are in their mid to late teens while, at 12, my youngest is just at the cusp. So when planning our annual family vacation, I have to look beyond the lure of kids' clubs and unlimited ►





◀ soft drinks. Last year we took our trio of boys backpacking around Europe and despite the fact that there was a lot of time spent on trains and plenty of last-minute repacking stress, the month-long trip was an outstanding success.

This, I believe, was down to the fact that there was never any time for anyone to get bored, the scenery was changing by the day and there were so many experiences packed into each stop that looking back, the trip seems to have lasted for months rather than weeks.

This year, we were slightly more pressed for time, so decided not to haul our belongings all the way around Europe, but instead to limit ourselves to one area. We decided on Italy.

As my eldest is 18, I was delighted that he wanted to come with us again so tried to ensure that he had opportunity to do his own thing if he so desired or join us on whatever excursion or relaxation we had planned.

We started off in Bologna, a gorgeous city with beautifully preserved medieval architecture and a very accessible city centre. Our first couple of nights were spent in an apartment on the suburbs which was a ten-minute bus ride from all the major sights while boasting its own fantastic local restaurants, parks and riverside walks.

Fresh from school and university, the boys were content to just wander around while we soaked up the atmosphere, people-watched and debated over the best places to go for drinks and evening meals.

After a leisurely two days, we boarded a train and headed to Siena – another stunning city which, despite the hordes of tourists, was easy to navigate and explore via the narrow streets and impressive squares.

Here we had chosen to stay on a campsite, a five-minute bus ride from the centre. This proved a great success with everyone because after an afternoon walking around the majestic cathedral, the civic museum and the wonderfully tranquil botanical gardens, it was sheer bliss to dive into our pool and retire to the small terrace of our wooden cabin. The older boys were particularly pleased as they had a cabin to themselves so could chill out without being told off for leaving their

socks on the floor:

We spent a further day enjoying the cultural and gastronomic sights of Siena before jumping on board another train and heading south to Florence. Here we were going to be living in the lap of luxury in a four-bedroom villa with its own private garden and pool, a mere 15-minute tram ride away from the delights of downtown ‘Firenze’.

The world and its mother seemed to have descended on the city – as they do every summer – so having seen the major tourist sights, we

decided to branch out with something a little different, away from the crowds, with a couple of ‘educational’ afternoons.

The first was a gelato-making class which was given by Geri Lagati, who is something of a legend in the ice-cream world. The Sicilian expert won an international award for his concoction of seaweed and star anise ice-cream when he was just 25 and was thrilled when we chose to make this instead of chocolate as one of our trio of tastings – which also included an Aperol Spritzer granita and a fresh pear sorbet.

The class, which took place in the working kitchen of his gelateria Il Re Gelato (the Ice-Cream King), lasted two hours and while it was hot and thirsty work, we were rewarded royally with some of the most incredible desserts I have ever tasted.

Admittedly, we were all a little wary about the seaweed variety, particularly when he asked us if we liked sushi, but having admitted, somewhat dubiously, that we did, he assured us that his ice-cream tasted nothing like it. Believe me, despite the description, the seaweed and star anise gelato had

the most incredible flavour: Geri described it as tasting like ‘summer’ and to be honest, I would struggle to come up with a better description, you’ve got to taste it to believe it.

Totally sated after our afternoon, our guide from The Art of Leisure took us back to the bus stop where we headed out of the dusty city and into the glorious country lanes where our villa awaited.

Owned by the wonderfully hospitable Vanni and Seraphina Fanfani, and managed by Tuscany Now and More, the centuries-old house was both



palatial and homely and on two evenings during our week-long stay, Seraphina served up a delicious meal in the courtyard which, after all the ice-cream, meant we could really finish our day of gluttony in a fitting manner:

A couple of days later we attended a perfume making class at Aqua Flor in Florence. My eldest two were a little reluctant about taking part in this class and probably only tagged along out of curiosity. But within minutes of meeting Dr Antonio Artese, olfactory specialist, they were hooked.

Seating us at a table in the cellar of his wonderfully antiquated shop, we were instructed to smell a wide sample of different essences and make note of what we thought of them. Then we were given pipettes and a mixing glass and using our notes, put tiny drops of whichever scents we liked the best – adding here and there to ensure our top and base notes were exactly as we required.

Thinking we would get to take away a tester-sized bottle of our personal scent, we were all astounded when, after adding alcohol to our individual mixtures, it was then poured into 100ml bottles, professionally fixed with a spray nozzle and packaged up in its own box before being tied with a ribbon and placed in a gift bag.

At this point we were all thrilled with our own personalised perfume – well, one perfume and four manly colognes – and left the old-fashioned apothecary shop smelling a lot sweeter than I'm sure we did when we arrived several hours earlier.

For the remainder of our time in Florence we indulged in nothing more than hanging out by the pool and exploring our locality before we packed up again and headed to the seaside town of Viareggio.

Once again we had chosen to stay in a campsite as being aware of the teenagers' need for freedom and to let off steam, this site was perfect – admittedly I preferred the luxury of the villa but with a family holiday, it's all about compromise.

So having arrived in the sweltering heat of the afternoon, we dumped our bags and headed straight for the pool, losing the boys to the on-site attractions along the way.

For the next couple of days, while we adults stayed close to the pool or nearby beach, our three boys revelled in their freedom and really only touched base with us for meals.

We had always wanted to visit the stunning Cinque Terre so when our time at the campsite came to a close, we headed for La Spezia, where we would spend another few days enjoying the harbour town and taking the 15-minute train ride to the world heritage site which is made up of five picture-perfect villages – Cinque Terre literally means five lands – carved into the cliff face, all of which boast some of the most incredible scenery I have ever seen. Pastel-coloured buildings crowding around

tiny harbours dotted with fishing boats and restaurants lead to stone steps and paths zig-zagging the cliffs which overlooked crystal clear waters where the blue of the Ligurian Sea and the sky merged into one – it was a truly memorable place to spend our last few days in Italy.

Once we had packed up for the last time, we headed back to Bologna, staying on this occasion in a fantastic apartment right in the theatre district, just a few minutes' walk from more bars and restaurants than you could shake a stick at.

As we sat outside enjoying the evening breeze, we contemplated the trip we were just about to complete. While the travelling had been occasionally tiring, the temperature sometimes far too hot and being together 24/7 had been trying at times, the general consensus was that the holiday was a great success and making sure to arrange a variety of options to suit everyone's needs was essential.

Time and tide waits for no man and our kids are growing up far too fast, but if compromise is what it takes to ensure they want to join us on holiday, then I'm all for it.





## FACTFILE

- TO CREATE YOUR OWN TUSCAN ADVENTURE, VISIT [TUSCANYNOWANDMORE.COM](http://TUSCANYNOWANDMORE.COM) FOR VILLAS ACCOMMODATING GROUPS FROM 2 TO 20 PEOPLE.
- TO ADD A LITTLE LEARNING TO YOUR HOLIDAY, VISIT [THEARTOFLEISURE.COM](http://THEARTOFLEISURE.COM)
- EXPLORE THE DELIGHTS OF SIENA, VISIT [COMUNE.SIENA.IT](http://COMUNE.SIENA.IT)
- FIND YOUR PERFECT APARTMENT IN BOLOGNA FROM €80 PER NIGHT INCLUDING BREAKFAST, BOOKING. [COM](http://COM)
- CAMP OUT IN SIENA FOR €45 PER NIGHT, [SIENACAMPING.COM](http://SIENACAMPING.COM), AND IN VIAREGGIO FROM €59, [CAMPINGPARADISOVIAREGGIO.COM](http://CAMPINGPARADISOVIAREGGIO.COM)
- EXPLORE CINQUE TERRE AND FIND YOUR PERFECT PLACE TO STAY AT [CINQUETERRE.EU.COM](http://CINQUETERRE.EU.COM)



