

LIVE THE TUSCAN DREAM

Amid world class wines, enjoy amateur theatre on the streets of Monte Carlo or beat the backpackers and shop your heart away in Lucca

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fight the urge. On a flight into Italy, it's wise to resist seeing the sumptuously shot Golden Globe-winning Diane Lane film *Under the Tuscan Sun*. Why watch a celluloid version of what one would soon actually witness and worship firsthand?

The restraint pays off. If there is a place on the planet that offers everything you ever dreamt of — and more — its Tuscany. Rich in natural beauty, blessed with breezy mild weather and cultural treasures, this heaven on earth in

central Italy boasts of a unique culinary heritage as well, thanks to olive orchards and vineyards peppering its every acre. All the requisites for a perfect holiday are in place.

MONTE CARLO

Having satiated ourselves with the pleasures of monumental Florence, we set off on a balmy morning for a trip under sunnier skies, deep into warm and wonderful Tuscany. Journeying beyond Pisa's iconic tilting tower, our first taste of Tuscany is sampled in the agrarian village of Monte Carlo and its smart neigh-

bour, the gated town of Lucca.

With serendipity on our side, our driver for this enchanting tryst in the countryside west of Florence turns out to be Vincenzo Caro, a stage artiste and singer. Vincenzo, simply shortened to Enzo, is a multifaceted man. In the manner of a modern-day troubadour, he travels around explaining the ballads of his bella Napoli, writing colourful books on them. When he takes us to a tiny Monte Carlo village, west of Florence, at the foot of an ancient fortress, we are entranced.

With some pathways too narrow to navigate in a car, Monte Carlo is best to walk around. It is mainly known for excellent white wines, olive oils and friendly locals who make amateur theatre a spirited affair as they routinely recreate scenes from the Middle Ages. During the summer, cheerful tables of its pizzerias and inns move out al fresco, where visitors soak in splendid panoramic views. If the pace of life in Tuscany varies between slow and slower, Monte Carlo embodies this just so.

Enzo fills the spring-turning-to-summer air with impassioned strains of Arrivederci Roma, Isle of Capri and O Sole Mio before we settle to a wholesome spread served in the shade of whispering trees at the Fattorio Il Poggio farm (the very name suggestive of gastronomic excess) in the heart of a lush vineyard. After a divine homemade pasta lunch washed down with an ambrosial array of wines, Donatella, the charming hostess for the afternoon, leads us on a nature ramble.

Thriving in a temperate climate fit to grow grapes that produce fine white wines, Monte Carlo varieties differ from most Tuscan wines. They come from grapes like Semillon and Pinot Bianco as opposed to Trebbiano and Malvasia grapes. Handpicked, estate-grown Monte Carlo bottled oils leave a fruity taste on the front of the tongue and a spicy feel at the back of the throat. Tuscan olives provide a peppery green flavour ideal for meats, salads and vegetables. Its extra virgin oils are perfect for finishing sauces, drizzling on chicken or



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Cafes and pizzerias in the walled city

fish and the pure pleasure of dipping into with sourdough bread.

LUCCA

A short hop away waits elegant Lucca in a fertile plain on the river Serchio. Not far from the Tyrrhenian coast, it is ringed by stunning hills and beaches. It presents massive, fully preserved ramparts and cobbled streets, church squares and amphitheatre ruins, chic tearooms and boutiques stocking posh apparel and pricey leather accessories. But it is most famed for its still-intact Renaissance-era walls which skirt it confidently, as if proudly aware this is the only place in Italy entirely protected by unbroken walls.

Founded by the Etruscans, Lucca became a Roman colony in about 180 BC. The rectangular grid of its historical centre preserves the Roman street plan, the Piazza San Michele occupies the site of the ancient forum and Lucca was where a 56 BC confer-

TRAVEL

Going off track

Those who go off the beaten track, write for us.

HOW TO GET THERE

ENTRY POINTS for Tuscany are Florence, Venice, Milan or Rome. Leading European airlines like Swissair, Lufthansa and Air France fly to these Italian destinations from Mumbai via their respective hubs. Or fly Emirates via Dubai or Qatar Airways via Doha.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

MID-APRIL to end-September, though the 'low season' (winter/ early spring) assures better rates and less tourists.

TRAVELLING IN TUSCANY

CHECK OUT TripAdvisor's Tuscany Travel Forum for Trenitalia train rides in Central Italy. Alternately, book a road trip from Florence. Montecarlo is located near Florence and Lucca, from where it can be reached by bus. Hotels, villas, castles, farmhouses, bed and breakfast stops dot the Tuscan countryside in a range of budgets. www.luccaturismo.it / info@luccaturismo.it

ence reaffirmed the superiority of the First Triumvirate. The Duomo of San Martino and a magnificent aqueduct of 460 arches are among its decided attractions.

Strolling across its Piazza Anfiteatro, noblemen's Gothic palaces or main street Via Fillungo, one feels this jewel of a Tuscan town keeps its civility and reserve, beating off swarms of backpackers. Instead it woos quiet, discerning shoppers and visitors keen to experience its culture. Home to artistic geniuses like musician Giacomo Puccini and the Lucchese poet Guidiccioni, here indeed rests Toscana at its genteel best.

