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SOUTHERN TUSCANY

Luxury and historic high culture

It is remarkable how easily the modern world of our exceptionally crafted accommodation at La Bandita Townhouse in Pienza co-existed with historic town halls, regal churches, imposing cathedrals and miniature town squares.

I don't know what the oldest building is in Dubai but I'm guessing some of the traditional houses in the Bastakiya area would qualify as being "old," and although no one lives in these houses anymore, it's great that the area still has a vibrancy about it with the cafes, shops and art exhibitions that occur from time to time.

Now imagine the same scenario but this time with whole villages and small towns at least 800 years old surrounded only by golden, green rolling valleys and gentle hills but still with people living in the dwellings as though nothing has changed.

Not a sky scraper in site but just greenery, more golden fields, acres of proud sunflowers and the tall Cypress trees said to represent the Eternal Flame.

You are in the Val D'Orcia in Southern Tuscany; we visited this place in August during a week that happened to be a culturally important time as the Festival Valdorcia was on between July 28th and Aug. 15th. We were lucky enough to see re-enactments of archery tournaments at St Edigio's church in Montalcino; musical processions by citizens in full medieval dress in Montepulciano's streets; firework displays in tiny village squares in Pienza and even the grand formalities and arrangements for the famous Palio horse race in Siena won by the Snail Mermaids contrade this year.

Southern Tuscany is full of gorgeous hilltop towns with unique examples of fine Renaissance architecture; each one special in its own way. We chose to stay in the heritage town of Pienza, a small but perfectly formed example of everything you'd expect and a bit more from a classic Italian hilltop town.

It was built for Pope Pius the second by

architect Bernado Rossellini and is one of a group of towns that comprise the Valdorcia area of Southern Tuscany. Pope Pius was so pleased with the result that he rewarded Rossellini with two more commissions and today the main street, Corso Rossellino is named after him while the Pope lends his name to the main square: Piazza Pio II.

Remarkable

It is remarkable how easily the modern world of our exceptionally crafted accommodation at La Bandita Townhouse in Pienza co-existed with historic town halls, regal churches, imposing cathedrals and miniature town squares.

There even seemed to be a type of easy synergy between the old and the new, the historic and the modern, that was difficult to define. One of the young Italian concierges at our hotel lived in the village and while during the day she efficiently made bookings for restaurants and winery visits, during the evening we waved to her with her family waiting for festivities to begin as she, like many people, still lived in this UNESCO status village.

Despite our hotel originally being a medieval nunnery and convent, the floors of our rooms were made from a modern, blonde hardwood; the windows were faultlessly double glazed yet retaining an old Italian façade, and overlooking a small walled herb garden that became a starlit terrace for pre-dinner drinks.

Similarly our bathrooms were comparable to Dubai standards with showers and fittings just as modern. No 800-year-old taps here! Food was excellent and I generally opted for the artigianale, or handmade by local artisans, yoghurt, muesli and thick fig jam or mountain





honey at breakfast, and tried Burrata cheese and grown up chocolate tarte for dinner.

Deciding where to go on holiday, getting there and finding a hotel are just the beginning of what can be a huge effort required to “enjoy,” but at La Bandita Townhouse, all those difficult decisions about what to do everyday like swimming in hot springs at the Fosso Bianco pool, visiting the most modern winery in Italy, walking around Montepulciano or Montalcino’s fortress, catching a concert in the spa town of Bagno Vignoni with its unusual flowing square, eating dinner where the locals do and finding the best lavender and peach gelato a few minutes walk from hotel are made for you by the ever smiling and friendly concierges who never tire of sorting out your holiday dilemmas.

One of them even got me a blanket to throw round my shoulders so I wouldn’t be cold at 11pm watching the fireworks in the village square. And having some high quality anti-sting ointment again at an odd time was an unexpected blessing. Did I mention laundry was included in our room rates along with fresh coffee and cool aperitifs in the evening?

Be prepared to witness some of the most historic sites and finest examples of Renaissance architecture in beautifully verdant and natural settings. Be prepared to eat exquisite gelato, pasta and artisan breads cheeses (Pecorino is famous here) and olive oil.

Also be prepared to walk. Hilltop towns really are sometimes on top of hills so parking is restricted, walking shoes are essential but worth it when you see the most incredible views from places like the Piazza San Francesco in Montepulciano. Eat at the Locanda San Francesco, also known as the E Lucevan Le Stelle and fill up on good food, wine and views. Then gently walk back down the hill but stop to buy fabulous leather shoes, bags and gastronomic goodies from the area. And only stay at La Bandita Townhouse in Pienza for the comforts of home with an authentic Italian flavor but no fuss.

How to get there

Nearest airport is Perugia (1.5 hours drive away) or Rome (around 2 hours drive) Or you can get a train from Rome to Chiusi (about 40 minutes drive away) It was very easy from Perugia. Driving is also extremely easy and a real pleasure, but you need a car with a good sat nav and it doesn’t hurt to have a paper map just in case.

La Bandita Townhouse is run by Jon Voigtman who used to work in the music industry in New York but has run the Townhouse and the La Bandita Country house for nearly eight years. They have kindly offered anyone who books via DoinDubai a 5% discount and some Tuscan Treats. Do book early to ensure you get rooms as the townhouse only has 12 rooms. The superior ones are great, standard ones are fine for younger children and teenagers alike. I would return to do this holiday again. www.doindubai.com