

UNDER THE TUSCAN TABLE

WORDS & PHOTOS:
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Eating, drinking and, oh yeah, riding across Italy's most rideable countryside



Hilltop village. Grazing sheep. Unwashed shepherd. Curious tour guide. Tuscany struggles to balance 3000-year-old tradition with 21st-century sophistication—and actually pulls it off.



In the fortress city of Assisi, the local friar was just as impressed by one of our tour member's Harleys as we were with his tasteful, yet elegant use of frock and rope to create a timeless, low-budget ensemble.

Tuscany. Land of a thousand backlit, violin-scored chick flicks, typically including a misty-eyed Diane Lane, a gruff-but-accessible Russell Crowe, a doe-eyed Liv Tyler, a mute Keanu Reeves—or someone like them. There will be a fetching local guy or gal, of slightly darker complexion and lower socio-economic status than the star, whom the star inevitably seduces. There will be a vineyard, tended by a rumpled native who's right on the edge of the perfect Chianti, or Brunello, or Sangiovese. There will be a villa, always charming, but in need of restoration. The sun will always be rising or setting. Happiness, as signaled by undtree picnics, discarded camisoles, chirping birds and clinking glasses, will ensue.

Which is great, if you like that sort of thing. But when one contemplates riding a motorcycle through said estrogenic, cinematic paradise, one initially despairs of one's hard-won global street cred. Having ridden through the Soviet Union when there was one, down the unpaved spine of the Chilean Andes, across the roadless Tunisian Sahara and through the steel-gray air and tree-shredder traffic of urban China, the idea of riding through Tuscany fairly reeked of retirement. Kind of a high-end Leisure World for aging moto-journalists, where the food is pre-chewed and the wine is watered down by the white-suited staff. I wonder how you say "Bingo Night" in Italian...

OK. So I actually am (nearly) old, and if not yet outright slow, certainly slow-ish. I might as well get used to it, I conceded, mentally settling into the vibrating, heated ultra-suede recliner of motorcycle touring life.

Of course, riding through Tuscany was nothing like that. It turned out to be challenging, stimulating and eye-opening. Which is, I suppose, why people go to the trouble of getting out of their vibrating recliners, climbing on motorcycles and going places in the first place.



Who needs retirement homes when you've got nice weather, perfectly tended village squares, and benches?



Over the millennia, the inhabitants have built something on top of just about every hill, peak or stone outcrop they could find. Even the faceless parking lots have great views.

After the usual restless purgatory of a 12-hour plane ride, my Alitalia 737 slammed down onto the wet, tiny, single runway of Firenze—or “Florence” to American mapmakers and tour-guide writers. I’ve never understood why we translate perfectly good Greco-Roman names into English. My name may mean “dog-licker” in Swahili, but I’d just as soon they called me Dexter, thank you very much.

This particular tour was run by Edelweiss (www.edelweissbiketravel.com). I found a fellow tourist in the airport, a young Brit named Lee. We found the huge, blue Edelweiss van in the tiny airport parking lot, animated by its always-smiling driver and tour guide, Young Manuel. Who turned out to be the son of Not-So-Young Christian, my tour guide on the China trip. Edelweiss guides tend to run in families.

We dieselied our way out of Firenze and into the hills to the east, marveling at every ancient stone fortress, castle and medieval village along the way. Little did I know that every hill and ridge in Tuscany is festooned with ruins, castles or ancient walled villages just like these. North-central Italy has thousand-year-old castles like Amy Winehouse has hangovers.

Our headquarters for the night was Villa Pitiana, a 13th-century ex-monastery at the top of a lush, olive-tree-covered hill. An ex-monastery that now featured a heated pool, an Internet room and a high-zoot bar, that is.

I was just discovering a fact that actual knowledgeable folks such as *Motorcyclist* Editor Brian Catterson and European Correspondent Alan Cathcart have known for years: Central Italy is pretty much the hottest hot spot for motorcycles and motorcycling in the entire freakin’ universe.

Ducati? About a hundred miles north, in Bologna. Piaggio, owner of Aprilia, Moto Guzzi and Vespa? In Pontedera, about a hundred miles to the west. Benelli, legendary Grand Prix-winning builder and up-and-coming modern motorcycle company? In Pesaro, a hundred miles

to the east, on the Adriatic coast. Mugello, home racetrack of one Valentino Rossi? Just up the road, maybe 30 miles to the north. Misano, another esteemed World Superbike and MotoGP venue? A few kilometers inland of the Adriatic, just a few clicks north of the Benelli factory.

The message: This place is to motorcycles, and motorcycle racing, as Jerusalem is to religion.

I took advantage of this truth to commandeer the most interesting motorcycle I could get my hands on. Almost every other rider in our group would steer some form of BMW, while a couple couples had rented Harleys. “Bah,” said I. If I’m going to ride across Italy, I’m going to do it on an Italian bike. To that end I had arranged a Benelli TreK, a handsome, if unfamiliar, 1130cc, general-purpose, street-going triple. It had been built in the aforementioned factory in Pesaro, and trucked up the road by Benelli’s combination test rider/engineer/PR agent Gianluca Galasso. The TreK came complete with big saddle boxes and a zippy Tom Tom Rider GPS system. Sweet.

Poor Lee, the Englishman, was retaking the very same tour he had taken a week before. It seemed that the always-great Tuscan weather had been not-so-great during his first run, and he’d rebooked his tour on the theory that it can’t rain for a month straight. But it looked as if Tuscany might be going for the record, with dark clouds roiling the sky as we climbed onto our machines.

The road headed south, with the lovely Ursula leading on her Honda CBF600, a kind of semi-naked mini-tourer that is way too sensible and practical to be sold in the States. We were entering the region of Chianti, which is a first lesson on how to remember Italian places. There is almost always a food or drink associated with wherever you’re going. Balsamic vinegar? Like Enzo Ferrari, a product of nearby Modena. Parmesan cheese? From Parma, of course. Spaghetti Bolognese? Like Ducatis, from Bologna. Sometimes it’s hard to keep from salivating whenever you see a freeway sign.

In our briefing, Ursula had warned that the roads were likely to be dirty, slippery and of wildly varying traction. She lied: They were clean, beautifully engineered, well marked and easy to figure out. Instead of America’s doltish stop-and-go intersections, where about half of our serious motorcycle accidents occur, Italy—like most other advanced Western cultures—has thousands of roundabouts. You keep rolling as you enter the circle, blend into traffic when you can and peel off when you must. Roundabouts must save 10 percent or more on fuel, too—not a small consideration when gas is selling for 9 bucks a gallon. They also save time and frustration—and give you great steady-state cornering practice if you happen to take eight or nine laps, just for the hell of it.

The Benelli was an unknown quantity, but I soon grew to appreciate it. The seat looks on the sadistic side of comfortable, but its



proper location and well-crafted shape soon reassured my butt that everything was going to be OK. The upright riding position was within a millimeter or two of perfect, equally suited for hard cornering or laid-back touring. The steel-trellis chassis felt appropriately lean, skeletal and Italian, and once I had the twist-knob preload dialed up for my personal avordupois, steering and overall handling were just as well sorted. The suspension offered limited adjustment, but the damping turned out to be so well tuned that I had little desire to screw with it. The brakes, mid-level Brembos, proved excellent.

The engine is a thoroughly modern, counterbalanced, liquid-cooled, four-valve-per-cylinder triple that bears a passing resemblance to the similarly equipped Triumphs. In fact, the TreK felt a bit like a Ducati Multistrada with a honking 125-horsepower Speed Triple motor jammed under the tank—not a bad idea, now that I think about it.

We quickly learned that there is a great café around any corner, anywhere, at any time. Ursula, Manuel and our fellow travelers seemed determined to visit the majority of them. About once an hour, we would file into yet another thousand-year-old building, from which the best cappuccino you’ve ever had would issue—at a price that would have Starbucks closing down like Wall Street banks. Real Italians only drink cappuccino in the morning, and switch to tiny cups of espresso as the day goes on. We just kept on with the cappuccinos—hey, we’re (mostly) dumb American tourists. What do we know?

Was I annoyed at all this stopping and slurping, when I could have been out on the open road, living my moment, a man among men, challenging the very limits of my skill and the very laws of physics themselves? Hell, no! I’m 55, with three kids, and very happy to get off and flex my quickly ossifying knees whenever possible. I have also spent most of a lifetime going to great, exotic places, and then riding through them locked in an imaginary high-speed battle with space and time itself. Can’t remember much about them, now that I think about it. With that in mind, I have officially decided to slow down, raise my

Our touring group was an eclectic mix of BMWs, a couple Harleys, the tour guides’ Honda, and my all-Italian Benelli Tre-K.

“I have officially decided to slow down, raise my head and actually see where it is I am.”

Our faithful tour guides, Manuel and Ursula, demonstrate exactly how not to ride two-up through San Marino.





head and actually see where it is I am, where I am going and try to have some idea of where it is I have been.

Unless somebody wants to race.

Our featured afternoon stopover was in San Gimignano, a hilltop fortress/village with a dramatic, Manhattanesque skyline. The story goes that the town was located on one of the main superhighways—and trading routes—of its time, the Roman-built Francigena Way. The local merchants got so rich from all their trading, they started building higher and higher stone towers atop their houses, to show just how much more rich and fabulous they were than their neighbors—remember, this was in the days before Lamborghinis, Rolexes and Desmosedicis, those tokens we now use to distinguish the huge of finance, bald of head and tiny of genital.

A mine's-bigger-than-yours war broke out, and at its peak around 1300 A.D., San Gimignano had 72 towers—towers with no real use, other than to be taller than the other guy's. Of the originals, 15 still stand in square, not-that-attractive, nearly-windowless splendor, their builders, now dead 600 years, the unquestioned medalists of this ancient architectural pissing contest.

Speaking of hilltop fortress villages, our night's destination would be Siena. All of these ancient cities we would visit were originally inhabited by the Etruscans, starting as much as 3000 years ago. And they have all retained much of their original shape and charm—the same cavelike, stone-walled bistros that sold bread and wine in 800 B.C. may still be selling bread and wine today. You just have to hope they rotate their stock every millennium or so.

Siena is famous for the Palio, a twice-yearly horse race in the city's central plaza. The Piazza del Campo is a huge, brick-paved, bowl-shaped expanse that doubled as a rain-catching basin in the old days, just in case the city was besieged by the crazy, blood-thirsty Florentines. For the Palio, dirt is trucked in to cover the outside ring of the Piazza, just like Anaheim Sta-



Assisi is filled with nuns, monks, churches, more churches, and even bigger churches. If you fell out of the belfry of a church, you'd probably land on another church.



The Piazza of Siena is the home of wedding after wedding on normal weekends. But two weekends a year, the outer road is covered with dirt, and horses race in a 400-year-old precursor to Supercross.

Some people see Tuscany as a great place to ride motorcycles. Others see motorcycles as a great way to get from one caffè to the next.

dium when supercross comes to town.

There are 17 separate neighborhoods, or Contradas, that compete in the Palio. Each has its own emblem and wild color scheme, the men and boys wearing jester-like tights, pointy shoes and poofy shirts with no apparent sign of embarrassment. Ten Contradas are selected for each Palio, and their hired riders are assigned one of the 10 best horses for the main event. Which is a crazy, three-lap dash around the Piazza, during which the horses trip and tumble, crash into barriers and collide with no-tomorrow abandon. The riders don't seem to have grasped the concept of the late apex, routinely running out of room at the exits of the two tighter corners and hammering themselves into the walls like NASCAR pickups. The first horse that crosses the finish line wins. Whether it has a rider on it or not—a macabre anomaly in the rules which has determined the winning Contrada more than once in the last 400 or so years.

The next day was supposed to be a rest day, but nearly all the tourists headed out under the cloud-filled skies to soak in as much of Tuscany—and of Tuscan rain—as possible. One group headed west, toward Pisa, to see a certain tilted, over-photographed tower. Lee and I chose to head south to the near-island of Monte Argentario, a rugged mountain that sticks up out of

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LA VILLA STRANGIATO

Before I signed up for this trip, I found an Italian village for sale on the Internet. Borgo di Castelnuovo was built in the 13th century and was home to more than 600 people as late as the 1950s. But for reasons that are unclear, it was abandoned, left to crumble, and is now on the market for 900,000 euros. That's \$1.4 million, or about the price of a medium-sized house in the nicer parts of Southern California.

I fantasized about getting some friends together, buying the village, restoring it, and using it as an investment/vacation/retirement spot. We could even bottle our own wine—there must be a craggy native winemaker nearby who could keep an eye on the vines. It's only about 20 miles from San Marino, the bustling beach resort of Rimini and the famous Misano racetrack. It would be a shame not to visit the place while I was in the neighborhood.

But first, I had to find it. It was right there on my Michelin map, but the road it was on didn't seem to connect to any other roads, and the Benelli's GPS had never heard of it. At one point I stopped to ask an older farmwoman for directions, and she laughed aloud. Apparently I wasn't the first clueless foreigner who had come this way looking for the fabled village.

I eventually found a roadwork crew who sent me up a muddy, heavily rutted dirt road that led to a working farmhouse. And there, on the barn, was the "Borgo di Castelnuovo" logo. Hey, it can't be that deserted if it has a logo!

Oh yes, it can. A couple hundred yards down the road, I rode into the village proper. A huge, crumbling fortress rose up on the left, leading to a church whose roof had collapsed, grass and weeds growing up through the wreckage. Just past the church was one of two habitable houses, its paint fresh but its windows shuttered. Somebody lived here, some of the time—most probably a very lonely person.

I needed to shoot some static photos of the Benelli, so I used the tiny plaza in front of the church as my own private studio. And then rode on toward San Marino, my dream of an Italian village of my own lying in ruins.

the Tyrrhenian Sea. Lee actually headed out before me—he seemed determined to get some quality time alone with his R1200GS. With my excellent Tom Tom GPS and Michelin map, navigation was relatively easy, and after an hour or so of swooping forest roads and towering wind generators atop the ridgelines, I caught up just as the clouds decided to piss all over us. I had lent my rainsuit jacket to another tourer who had forgotten his, so I was down to the inner “waterproof” liners of my mesh jacket and pants. Suffice it to say that I’m never, ever going to lend out a rainsuit again. I forged ahead, barely able to see, soaked to the bone, splashing up, over and down the twisted mountains and finally into the sun and over the wheated plain to the sea.

I took a soggy lap of Monte Argentario, a lovely outpost of Mediterranean pleasure with two classically hedonistic port towns, a rugged, rocky interior, and a rough, suspension-hammering road around the cliffs to the south. As I ate lunch in a bistro overlooking the yacht harbor of Porto Ercole, I spotted Lee’s BMW burbling below me on the main street, mixing in with the inevitable hot-dog teenagers terrorizing the town on their hot-rodded scooters.

The ride back to Siena was even wetter than the ride down. I took the autostrada to minimize the agony, blasting through the spray and standing water right at the edge of my vision.

How great is riding around Tuscany? You could be air-dropped with your bike just about anywhere in the region, from the Tyrrhenian Sea on the west coast to the Adriatic on the

You could be air-dropped with your bike just about anywhere in the region, and be riding a twisting, soaring back road in seconds.”



This sad plaque reads, *Per I Caduti Nella Guerra Europea*—“For The Fallen in the European War.” On it are 17 names, among them two Marcaccinis, two Muratoris and two Pieranis. Three sets of brothers? Fathers and sons? Whatever the case, World War I must have ripped the heart out of this tiny town.



During a Benelli factory tour, I got to see their entire production line and some new prototype engines along with the Triple shown here.

"There was no Benelli shop in San Marino, but I had the next-best thing: the Benelli factory, a few miles down the road in the seaside city of Pesaro."

keeps both forging ahead.

High atop a ridge the next day, I could see to the east an impossibly steep, three-peaked mountain, its cliffs looming over the Adriatic. A look at the map confirmed this was San Marino, my target for the night. Most old, central-Italian towns are situated atop hills, but this one looked like it had been built on the steep side of the Rock of Gibraltar.

San Marino is not a part of Italy, though there are no border crossings to indicate that you have slipped into another country. Founded in 301 A.D., it is the oldest constitutional democracy in the world. It's the third-smallest country in Europe, bigger than only Monaco and the Vatican.

The soaring little country has just 30,000 residents. But in World War II, its hotels, churches and private homes were packed with as many as 100,000 "guests." As a neutral country, it was a refuge for Jews, persecuted Italians and others trying to escape the Nazis and Mussolini's Fascists.

In a parking-lot tipover a couple days earlier, I had snapped off the stub of my Trek's shift lever. There was no Benelli shop in San Marino, but I had the next-best thing: the Benelli factory, a few miles down the road in the seaside city of Pesaro.

Gianluca, who had dropped off the bike in the first place, gave me a tour of the plant while underlings tended to my bike. My Trek's fuel injection had a stumble just off idle that had been bugging me.

east, and be riding a twisting, soaring back road in seconds. It's heaven, with well-kept roads, little traffic, happy, upbeat people and perfect food and drink anywhere you might want it. Even here in L.A., we have to endure 45 minutes of smog and superslab to start a real ride. In Tuscany, it's in your backyard. No wonder so many wonderful motorcycles—and riders—come from here.

The night's stop would be Assisi, another towering fortress of yellow stone and a seemingly endless array of churches. Each of these walled cities has a huge Duomo, or cathedral, and then another elaborate church for each tiny neighborhood—as if their citizens had lost the capability of walking more than 100 yards on a Sunday morning.

After dinner, I tried to hike up to the top of the city in the drizzling rain. With college kids drinking, reveling and scootering all around the city, I kept going up one tiny cobblestoned street after another, looking for the top around each corner. I finally gave up, soaked, and slithered down the steep, wet cobblestones to our hotel.

Italy has done a wonderful job of keeping these ancient cities alive and humming, with young couples and students just as prevalent as the older folk one might expect. Unlike much of modern America, which seems intent on bulldozing its history, paving it and putting up a Best Buy, Italy's heritage has found a way to coexist with modern life in a way that



Gianluca himself popped the bike onto a tuning stand, plugged into the CPU and had the thing humming like an electric motor in a few minutes.

It's good to be a journalist.

Our last day's journey was to take us back to our starting point. As usual, we were playing tag with the rain clouds. But the roads were wonderful, the traffic minimal, the scenery spectacular, and the occasional food and drink the nectar of the Gods. I happened to be leading the charge up one fast, sweeping mountain road when I looked in my mirrors and saw an unadorned, white bread van, running on full emergency power, tilting and carving its way through our squadron of GSs and LTs like a supersonic blimp at the Reno Air Races. The driver was, by all indications, imagining himself at the helm of Felipe Massa's Formula 1 Ferrari, dispatching lesser drivers with supernatural grace and a steely resolve. In fact, he was lurching and sliding all over the road, no doubt scattering focaccia and pannini all over his cargo area.

When the bread van got to me, I couldn't resist. I had a quite raceable machine under me and a clear road ahead. I spurted away for a few corners, then sat up and waited to see if the van would still be coming. Sure enough, and sooner than I expected, he was back on top of me. I put my head down again and disappeared up the mountain. No contest. But damn, that guy could drive a bread van!

I was on my own when I neared the monastery, the same place we had stayed the first night. I was rolling along a green valley floor,

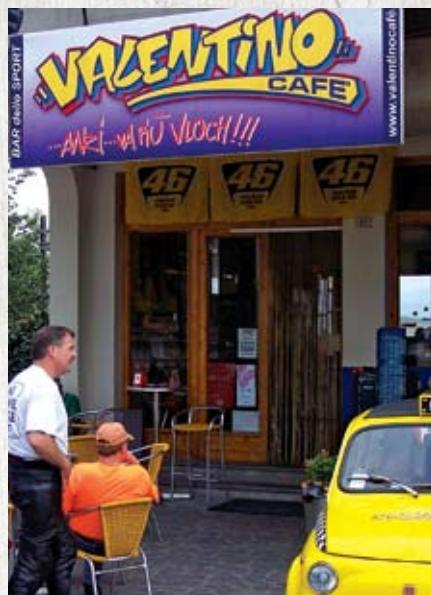
We sneaked into the courtyard of the Duomo—Italian for Really Big church—with our bikes and the Edelweiss van. Our prayers for sunshine were, this particular morning, apparently received and acknowledged.

alongside a river, when a kelly-green stick seemed to wiggle on the road ahead. It was a snake—a big, beautiful snake—and I had no time to dodge it. Ba-bump.

Heartsick, I circled back. Sure enough, its spine was broken. It was still moving when I picked it up, and draped it over the guardrail, on the off chance that it would recover. It died just then, frozen into a hook, its tail looped over the rail, its head and body curled down toward the road.

I didn't tell anybody about the snake. I rolled up, parked my Benelli and walked stiff-legged into the lobby. Got my key, threw my gear down in the room and went straight to the Tuscan Moderne bar for a cold Moretti beer.

MC



DON'T CRY FOR ME, VALENTINO

Valentino Rossi lives in the hills of Tavullia—or at least he used to, before the omnipresent paparazzi forced the seven-time MotoGP world champion to relocate to London. This fact becomes clear the moment you enter the village. There are blazing yellow "46" signs, flags and banners flapping from nearly every window, door and storefront in town. The speed limit, which would normally be 50 kph is now—guess what—46. The social hub of the town is the Valentino Café, painted in his yellow-and-blue colors, which serves each cappuccino with a bold "46" floating, in chocolate-syrup script, atop its head of mocha-foamed milk. I had a cappuccino, talked with a smelly older gentleman in a Benelli T-shirt who wanted me to come and see his personal Benelli museum, and then headed across the street to the official Valentino Rossi gift shop. It's good to be the Doctor...



Nowhere in Tuscany is more than 2 km away from a cappuccino. And in Tavullia, home of The Doctor himself, you can get one with his racing number inscribed on the foam.