

THE GREEN HILLS OF TUSCANY

EDELWEISS
SCOOTER TOUR
A SENSATION
OF SIGHTS
AND TASTES

By Steve Thornton





All together at a spectacular Florence overlook. That's Ursula in red.

It's near the end of the third day when Prashant gets going about their wedding night. "I'm telling you," he says, "it was really something." The bride and groom and scores of family members and friends had made the ceremony into quite a party, and it cost so much energy and ended so late that the new couple was nothing but exhausted when they finally escaped to their nuptial quarters. "We said, let's just wait until morning," he tells us. Beside him, Sujata keeps her eyes on the table for most of this, but

she is smiling, and from time to time she grins at him, enjoying this as much as we are. We're having dinner somewhere in Firenze, course after course of pasta and cheese and wine and meat so thin you could lose a dozen slices between two hunks of bread. On the morning after their wedding, Prashant and his bride get up, and they're understandably excited. "Okay," he says, rubbing his hands together, "now we're getting down to business." And then there's a knock on the door, and when he answers it the

mother of the bride is there, and so is the father, and so is a large bottle of whisky. "So we had them in and we got drunk all together," he says. "What could we do?"

With the Edelweiss tour guide, there are 13 of us, and by the third day we are clearly starting to warm up to each other. We're all foreigners, of course — this is Italy; specifically, Firenze in the Tuscany region, and none of us is from here. Ursula, our tour guide, is German. She laughs easily and spends a lot of time watching us as we trail behind her on these shoelace-thin Italian roads.

Most of the others are from the United States. There are seven members of one family who come from a handful of places south of Los Angeles, and there is a couple from the Dallas-Fort Worth area; there are the storyteller and his wife from a place near Mumbai in western India; and there is me, from Toronto. Now here we are in Florence, which the locals call Firenze. It is the capital of the Tuscany region of northwest Italy, it is where the Renaissance began, and it is a repository of some of the world's greatest art, including Michelangelo's *David*. We have leaned against a copy





convenience and utility. It wasn't unusual to see someone in an open-face helmet yakking on a cell phone, held up with the left hand, while buzzing down some impossibly narrow cobblestoned avenue, a cigarette in the mouth, of course, and no protective gear beyond the mandated helmet. In California, you have lane splitting, but here, motorcycles and the vastly more common scooters were able to deny the presence of any rules at any time. At red lights, all the scooters would wriggle up past the stopped four-wheelers and form a band of smoking two-strokes at the front, and whatever kind of lane marks existed were ignored as the two-wheelers passed inconvenient cars and trucks at any time, curves or no curves. The drivers of these cars and trucks, with the possible exception of the Dutch (though I won't swear to that), regarded these two-wheeled rascals as operating within their rights. "Cut me off?" says the driver of a battered Volvo, "of course, Signora! Prego!"

Prego, by the way, is an involuntary response to the word "grazie," which means "thank you." Prego means "you're welcome," and like the English word,

of the statue, in fact, in a vast and sumptuous downtown square; like the original, it is taller than five metres; it is located where the original statue was put when Michelangelo completed it 500 years ago, and it is impressive. Not the most impressive thing I will see in Italy, but a real gob-smacker, even for a fake.

Earlier that day, we had climbed onto our scooters at the base hotel, a Best Western on the outskirts of Florence, and ridden north through country that at times — with its dry character, humptyback green hills, and occasional vineyards — reminded me of southern California, though the roads were nar-

rower and the traffic laws were friendlier. "Watch out for the Dutch," Ursula had warned as we approached a group of cars that seemed to be haphazardly piloted. "They're terrible drivers!" I couldn't tell who was Dutch and who was not, but the rules of the road in Tuscany were favourable to scooters. And such scooters! The roads were full of them, mostly 49 cc two-stroke runts, but there were large models, too, and like elsewhere in Europe, people didn't ride them for sport, but for

IT WASN'T UNUSUAL TO SEE SOMEONE IN A HELMET YAKKING ON A CELL PHONE



Central square in Florence is a wonderland. At left, a shop full of prosciutto.





it can be a polite reply, or an invitation. I heard a shop-keeper say it to some women who didn't seem to know if he was open or not. He held the door for them, "Prego!" he said, and in they went. And if you say "Grazie," you will hear the rebounding "Prego!" before you've closed your lips. It's fun to see how fast you can make someone say it.

After about 45 minutes, we descended through a curving stretch of country road to the front gate of Mugello, the race track where MotoGP racers will compete in early June. We stopped to take a picture, catch the flash of some car whipping down a long left hand curve onto a straightaway, and urinate behind some bushes, those of us for whom it was convenient. We had left the wom-

enfolk behind to do some kind of shopping thing, but there were females with us: Ursula, of course; Sujata; and Diane, the wife and wingman of Ron, from southern California. Ron was likely the fastest of any of us on these scooters, and Diane would sit behind him with her arms out, gleefully winging through curve

after curve at lean angles that would frighten some sportbike riders. There were a few other types (including a 300 cc Aprilia and a three-wheeled MP3), but most of the scooters were 278 cc GTS300 Vespas, which were a delight on these serpentine roads, capable of entertaining lean angles and comfortable highway speeds, even with a flying Dianne on the pillion. If you wanted to pass someone, it was a good idea to start planning for it the night before, as acceleration was only a theoretical construct, but despite that significant handicap, it seemed to me that zooming along these narrow, convoluted mountain roads on a Vespa 300 was about as much fun as it would be on a 600 cc motorcycle. Not as fast, but

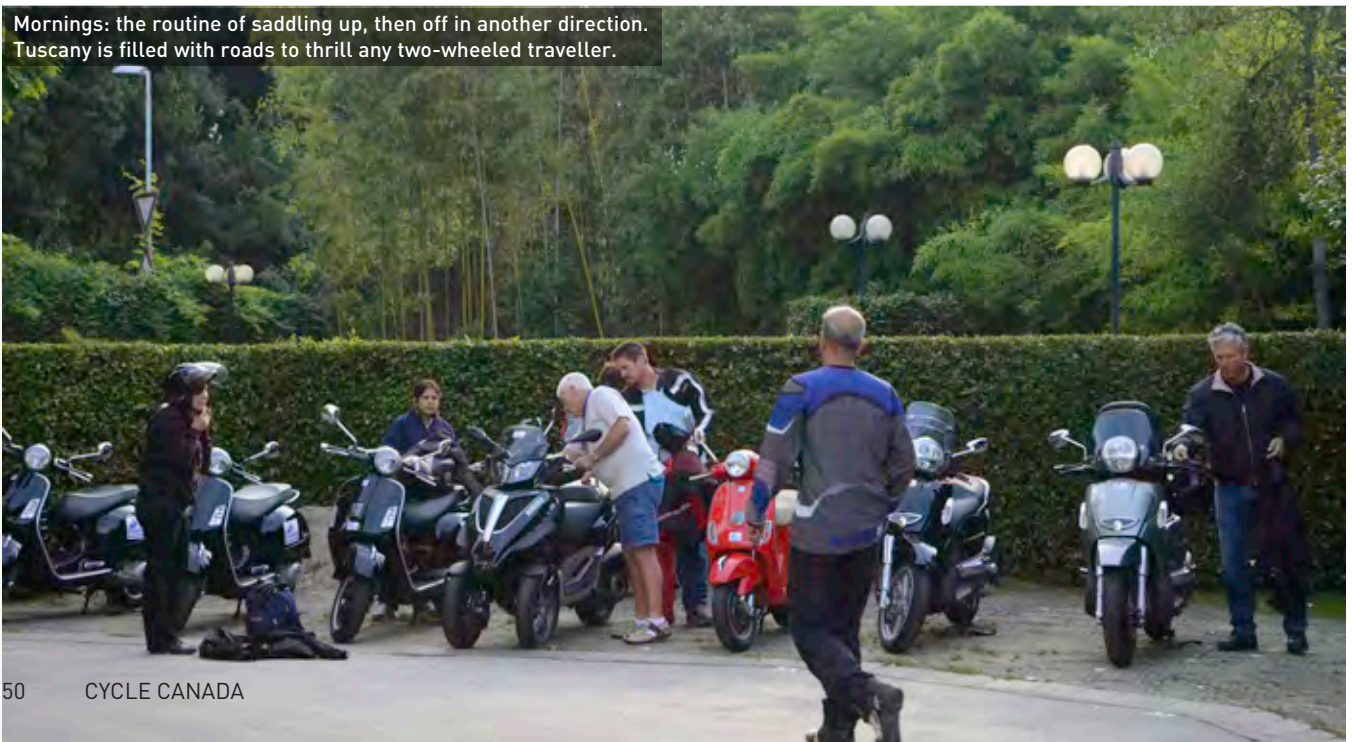
surely as much fun.

From Mugello we carried on north, then east, and then finally south again, back to Firenze, where I plunged into a backyard pool with a couple of others, a welcome refresher after a long day in the saddle. These rides, a full work-week's worth, were about a hundred miles each, and drawn on a map, they were the five petals of a flower, taking us in a different compass direction each day, never straying out of Tuscany.

On the first day, for instance, we went south from Florence, through Greve in Chianti, where we stopped for coffee, an ordeal that required learning the Italian customs around their various types (you can have some kinds of coffee only at certain times of the day, you can pay less if you annoy the bar-tender — that kind of thing) but that produced some thimbles of really excellent coffee, and then we carried on, our strung-out, overcaffienated band of scooterists, down through Castellina in Chianti, where we stopped for lunch (I think — opportunities to note the names of towns, or even find their names, were limited), which meal consisted of an imposing number of

URSULA CLAIMED THAT ONE BITE WAS ENOUGH TO MAKE YOU AN ADDICT

Mornings: the routine of saddling up, then off in another direction. Tuscany is filled with roads to thrill any two-wheeled traveller.





The first sight of the Leaning Tower is breathtaking.



exhaust and roaring noise. The Vespas managed this unseemly trek quite well, and there were glimpses of scenery that broke up the tedium, but for the most part, this day's ride was for the destination, not the getting

came to a wall with an arched opening, and through that I glimpsed Pisa's Cathedral Square and the leaning bell tower.

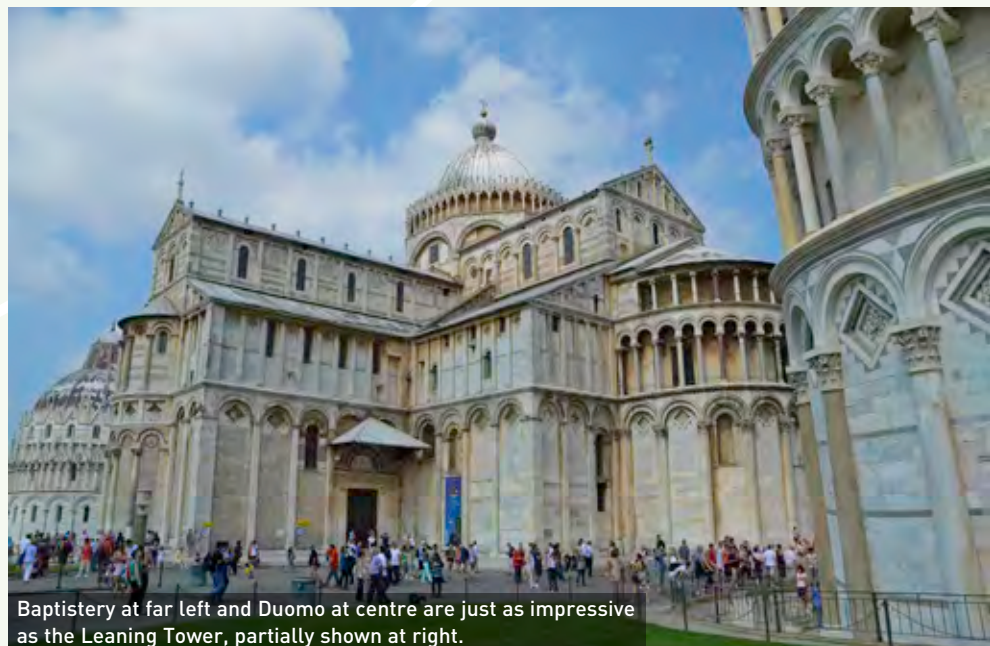
I have only a few times experienced a truly breath-taking sight, something that seized my spirit and filled me with awe. The Leaning Tower is massive, as ornate as a wedding cake, and tilted at a preposterous angle. We marched through this opening into the square, and were immediately surrounded by tourists in shorts and skirts and sandals and running shoes, flailing cameras, the song of a dozen languages filling the air. There were wagons held in place by bored, blindered horses, there were police, there were restaurants and souvenir shops, and shopkeepers, and people standing on a wall and stretching out their hands for photographs in which they might look as if they were holding up the Leaning

courses, salad, pasta, meat, cheese, and dessert, and was made more interesting by the owner's presentation of a lump of something that smelled like dirt and that he said was a truffle; it was later shaved over the pasta, and while Ursula claimed that one bite was enough to make you an addict, I didn't really notice it even while I was eating it. We carried on from there in a western, then northerly direction, riding through hills that receded in fading shades of green and blue, and back to the cobblestones of a street leading to our incongruously named Best Western.

Nights, we usually walked to a restaurant, where we would chow down on fish or steak and pasta pasta pasta and some surprisingly cheap bottles of very favourable wine. On the walk back, we would stop at a gelato place, the same place every evening, and we would choose tiny cups of flavoursome gelato from a cooler filled with choices, and then sit out in the balmy Tuscan evening on little chairs circled on the sidewalk, and enjoy our desserts before the easy stroll back to the hotel.

On the second day, we ventured off to Pisa, riding along a boring highway filled with trucks and cars and smoky

there. In Pisa, we stopped at a gas station and removed our gear, parked our bikes, and left things under the watchful eye of the owner, then Ursula led us to a street that turned right into a town square. Come back in an hour and fifteen minutes, she said; I'll stay with the bikes. We marched down this short avenue and



Baptistry at far left and Duomo at centre are just as impressive as the Leaning Tower, partially shown at right.



No shoulders, abundant curves, and faraway scenery: Tuscany.

told at tables filled with food and good feelings, and there were stunning cathedrals that we explored with eyes wide open, there were artistic triumphs and friendly people and always the labyrinthine roads and architecturally inspired town squares and churches and towers. Eventually, we had had enough, and on the Friday after our last ride, a cold, rainy experience that was nevertheless a joyful

IT WAS A WEEK OF MARVELLOUS PLEASURES AND SPLENDID COMPANIONSHIP

Tower. As we walked down the avenue, we passed the Baptistery and the Duomo, thrillingly ornate and gigantic, and then came to the Tower. I was in the company of a few others from our group, and some of them were hungry, so we found a restaurant and sat down, but I could not sit at the table while this fantastic thing waited just a few metres away. I got up, left my lunch companions, and hurried over to the Tower. You could get close to it, but you could not quite touch it (although if you were patient, you could join a slowly moving entou-

rage that was allowed into it and up to the top — I wasn't). It seemed impossibly beautiful; I felt that I was in the presence of unforgettable greatness, and while I enjoyed photographing it, the experience simply of being there was uplifting in a way that I have only felt one or two other times in my life. Later, we rode to the home of Leonardo, in Vinci, and saw a museum of his many very impressive inventions, but even there, in the shadow of a singular genius, I was more tired and hungry than anything else. Having filled my gaze with the Leaning Tower of Pisa, I had seen all the magnificence that I could handle in one day.

There were other sights and sounds and tastes on this Scooter Tour of Tuscany, of course, dining experiences and riding experiences, tales of humour and joy

mountain endeavour, we turned our keys over to Ursula. This Italian job was one of the cheapest of Edelweiss's tours, and one of the least adventurous, but even on scooters, and restricted to a small portion of Italy, it was a week of marvellous pleasures and splendid companionship and unbounded fascination. And then, of course, there was Prashant, and his stories. If I had time, I'd tell you about the snake that he observed crawling into a garage somewhere in India, a serpent that might, for all he knew, have been a cobra, and that a neighbour had a plan for dealing with. "Just take hold of its tale, he said, and I'll go round and find the head." Prashant did as he was asked, but not with any pleasure. "I'm telling you, I was shitting bricks!" Ah, well, cobra, or just another harmless rat snake, it ended well. **CC**

