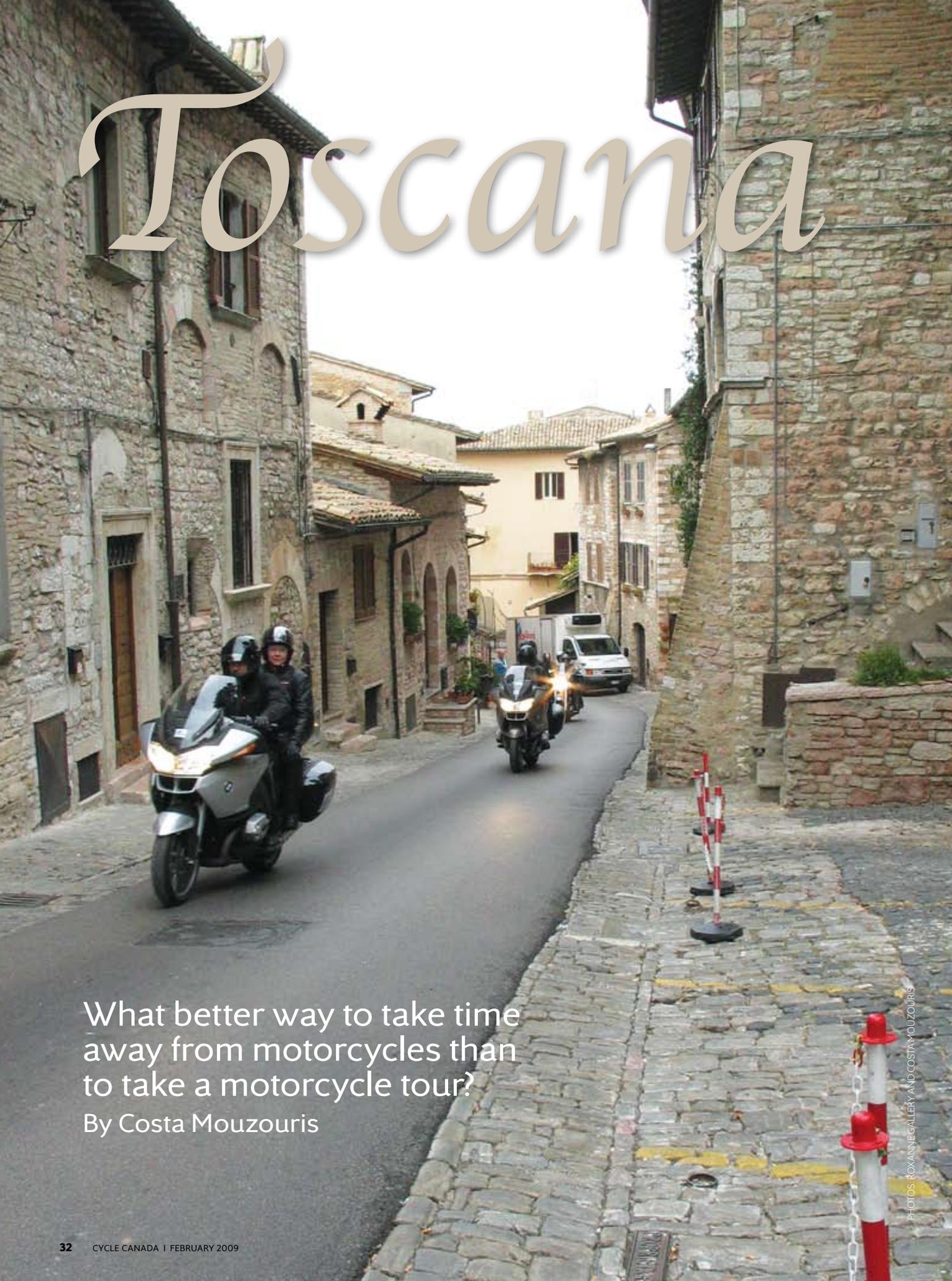


# Toscana



What better way to take time away from motorcycles than to take a motorcycle tour?

By Costa Mouzouris

# Nirvana



There's only one place in the world you can get coffee officially authenticated with Rossi's race number, and it's one of the stops on Edeweiss' Tour of Tuscany.

The road leading to the gates of the Italian villa just outside of Florence where we're to spend the night is a narrow, serpentine lane barely a car wide. The villa rests atop a hill overlooking a lush, green valley, its main building floodlit and eerily aglow in the surrounding darkness. The plastered walls of its hallways no longer echo the muted footsteps of the monks that lived here seven centuries ago. Tonight Villa Pitiana's walls reverberate with the sound of laughter and conversation and the tinkling of fine crystal.

Two-dozen people are gathered in the dining room when we enter. Having taken a train from Nice, France, where I attended a press launch, we're just in time for the main course. Accompanying me is my girlfriend, Roxanne. We're greeted by Ursula, a middle aged former banker from Munich with sculpted, angular facial features and a lean marathon runner's physique, and Peter, a botanist from Innsbruck in his early 30s, of medium height and stocky build; with his closely cropped hair he bears a striking resemblance to actor Woody Harrelson. Ursula and Peter are our hosts tonight—tomorrow they will be our guides on a tour of Italy's Tuscany region, hosted by Edelweiss Bike Travel ([edelweissbike.com](http://edelweissbike.com)).

My job provides ample opportunity to travel, however, tight schedules rarely allow time to take in the sights. I almost know by heart the differences in seat plans between an Airbus A340 and a Boeing 767-400, and which hotel chains offer free room internet, but I've seen very few international landmarks and have rarely experienced a foreign country's cultural nuances. An Edelweiss tour offers me the opportunity to take in the surroundings, and over the next seven days we'll be riding from Florence to Siena, Assisi and San Marino before returning to Florence.

It's 7:30 am, misty and cool as I attach the saddlebags and top case to our R1200RT and install my GPS. Others are also loading their bikes: Joe and Naomi from Duluth, Georgia, Louis and Christine from Buckingham, Quebec, Jim and Dianna from Louisville, Kentucky—we're a group of 21; 10 couples from all over

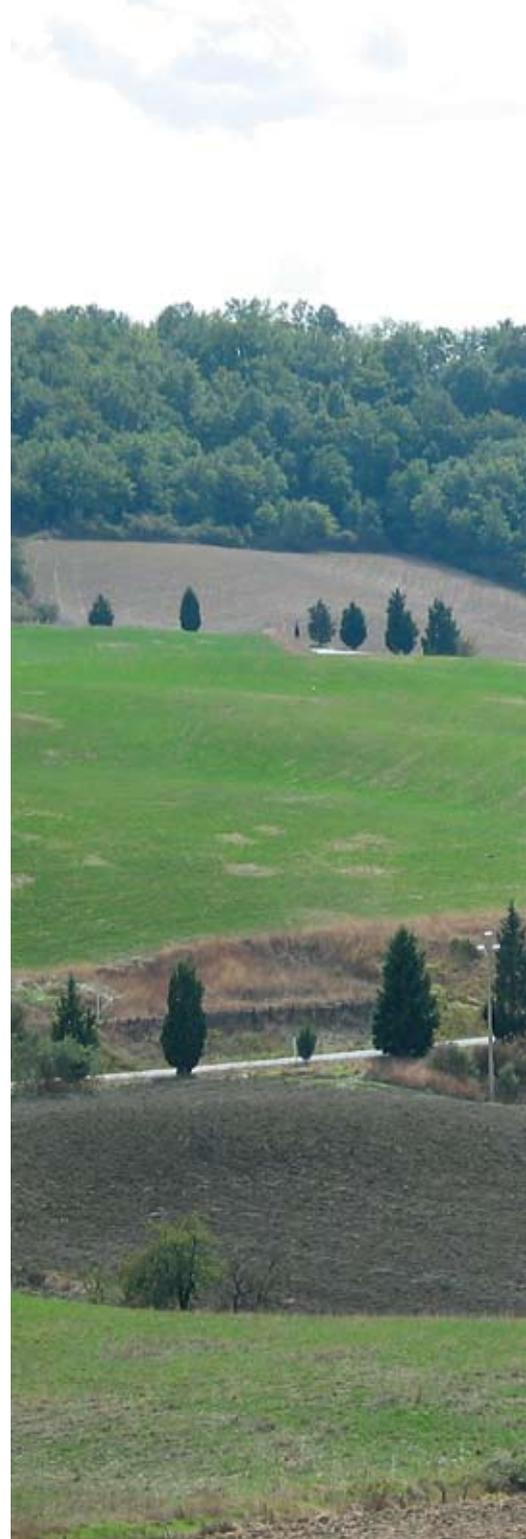
North America, including two more Canadian couples, Jim and Doreen, and Ron and Della from Fairview, Alberta. Tom from Ann Arbor, Michigan is the only non-accompanied rider. It's an eclectic bunch and everyone has a story.

Next to me, loading his RT is John. John, a handsome and affluent gentleman from Nashville, Tennessee, would have towered even taller above my six feet than he did if it weren't for his permanent hunch, the product of an operation to repair two ruptured discs. The retired plastic surgeon also lost partial use of his right hand, with only his thumb and index finger retaining sufficient force to grip the handlebar and work the brake lever, for which he offered this advice before we hit the road: "Y'all might want to ride behind me." He's travelling with 20-year-old Ada; beautifully brunette, shapely and with a sexy southern drawl that my ears can't help but radiate towards like a deer's turning towards the sound of a snapping twig. This odd couple raised a few eyebrows until it was established that Ada is the daughter of John's girlfriend.

We leave for Siena via Greve, where we stop for espresso and shop in an open market where locals display their wares. From roast pig to leather purses, vendors try to coax us out of our Euros.

Roads wind feverishly through the mountainous Chianti region, where vineyards produce Italy's finest reds. Ursula keeps an entertaining pace on her Honda CBF1000, her enthusiasm accented by her occasionally outstretched left arm, motioning as if pulling curtains aside to reveal splendid vistas. We split into smaller groups, each one setting its own pace. Edelweiss tour guides don't pressure anyone to keep up, and regular morning briefings discuss the day's route, as well as provide an outlined map. Guides also stop frequently to allow stragglers to catch up, though without a tail rider this proves somewhat challenging.

Ursula and Peter alternate guide duty and when one is riding, the other follows a different, shorter route to the day's destination in a truck with our extra luggage. If you're the independent, antisocial type you can choose your own route and ride alone, but this is



Edelweiss Bike Travel provides the routes, hotels, bikes and guides; Italy supplies the winding roads, breathtaking scenery and fine food and wine. Prepare before an Edelweiss tour by losing some weight; you're guaranteed to return carrying extra baggage. Also prepare for the European riding style: pass quickly, whenever you can. Drivers are aggressive but courteous.



discouraged—and it's unlikely such types sign up for these tours anyway.

We reach Siena in the evening and I tell Louis, whom I learn is a regular reader, how I'm thoroughly enjoying the roads; they're smooth, scenic and above all, twisty. Louis was slightly overwhelmed by the day's serpentine stretches. "I've been riding for 35 years," he tells me, "I though I was good."

At the introductory dinner at Villa Pitiana, there was also a pair of burly, leather-clad bikers. At first glance you'd think they were patch-wearing club members who'd taken a wrong turn into our tour. Intimidating at several inches above six feet tall each, everyone looked up at John and Mark. This Nebraskan duo rode their rented Harleys from Munich to Florence to meet up with the group.



**Assisi's Duomo di Siena cathedral, its Gothic façade shaped by craftsmen, sculptors and artists, is an awe-inspiring place.**

Mark, who wears a salt and pepper Grizzly Adams beard, works at Microsoft. John, brush-cut and square-jawed rugged, with a basso profundo voice so deep it could carry across a crowded room to rattle windows on the other side, is a semiretired math professor. Articulate and cultured, these two knew more about wine, cigars and classical music than I know about motorcycles. John and Mark became Ursula's adoptive "Hawlee boys", riding up the rear and making sure no one went astray—and everyone asked their guidance when ordering a dinner wine.

Riding days were separated by rest days, on which you could opt to ride a short, guided tour, ride on your own, or stay in



## My other riding partner

Edelweiss offers a wide range of machinery from Japan, Italy, Germany and the U. S. I wanted a bike that could easily carry a passenger and luggage for two, while handling Italy's ever-winding roads with some finesse. I also wanted reasonable weather protection, being that the trip was in early October. That's a demanding list of requests, which is why I selected the BMW R1200RT, though being of the media persuasion, my bike came from BMW Motorrad in Munich. Roomy enough for two, a plush seat and the best fairing in the business, the choice was easy.

The electrically controlled windscreen went up on cool mornings, providing a turbulent-free cocoon of air, and was slowly lowered as the temperature rose. A heated seat and handgrips provided added warmth for those especially chilly morning departures, and an easily accessible accessory outlet made installing my GPS possible in a matter of minutes. My bike was also equipped with a top case, and a tank bag that proved the handiest piece of luggage on the bike, easily snapping onto and off its mount with a push-button release.

Power from the Boxer twin overwhelmed on occasion, and during one quick passing manoeuvre in a lower gear, the bike shot up in an eye-opening power wheelie, fully loaded and two up. More power it doesn't need. Antilock brakes, even though they're linked, provided confidence-inspiring stops, especially for those sharp turns Italians like to place strategically at the bottom of long, downhill stretches. John Frist, the retired plastic surgeon, certainly appreciated the linked ABS on his RT, being that he had reduced mobility of his braking hand.

Most impressive was the bike's handling. I didn't want to be weighed down by a bike softened in the middle by a heavy load, you know, weaving about like it had a hinge. The RT's chassis maintained its composure, and the bike stayed planted and carved corners deceptively well for a loaded machine. Nothing ground out in turns, even at the elevated pace I maintained catching up to the group after stopping for photos. Push-button ESA suspension was set for two-up riding with luggage, in sport mode, and it provided surefooted response and comfort on everything from switchbacks so tight you could almost catch a glimpse of your own tail end, to straight-up highway riding (of which we saw about an hour's worth throughout the tour).

As RT alumnus Jim Sharkey, a dedicated Harley rider when back home in Fairview, Alberta put it: "It's definitely become my rental bike of choice."

—Costa Mouzouris



town and visit the sights. Roxanne and I take a rest from riding midway through the tour in Assisi. We walk about the city with Louis and Christine, visiting Rocca Maggiore, a massive fortress overlooking the city, and several churches including the Basilica di San Francesco, which houses Saint Francis' crypt—an ominously quiet place. Not a deeply religious person, I was nonetheless inspired by the devotion of the monks I saw walking the streets of Assisi, and was spellbound by the melding of Gothic and Romanesque architecture. We stayed away from the torture museums, which are found throughout Tuscan cities and are seemingly the Italian equivalents of Ripley's Believe It or Not! curiosity museums. Walking about was a great diversion from just riding, allowing us time to see the region up close. At the end of this rest day, after the people who'd decided to ride returned, always-busy Peter and Ursula performed a mid-tour maintenance on the bikes, topping up oil and checking tire pressures and lights.

We leave Assisi for San Marino and on the way make a stop in Cortona. This medieval walled city is built on a hillside and is a maze of narrow, intertwining

**Restaurateur Francesco served up a scrumptious meal at this roadside lunch stop; below, a wall of skulls at the entrance of a torture museum.**



streets, only one of which, Via Nazionale, is on relatively level ground. It's here that I get separated from the group.

After a midday coffee stop in the city's main plaza (where I'd parked instead of parking with the rest of the group just outside the city wall) Roxanne and I mount our machine and head towards where the others told us they were parked. One wrong turn severed our link to the group. I twist and turn up narrow alleys and down narrower lanes. I try my best to avoid turning the wrong way onto one-way streets; doing so would get me jammed if I met an oncoming car as there would not be enough room to get around it. I turn downhill onto one cobblestone road, which turns out to be a stepped walkway. Too narrow to turn the bike around, I find myself bouncing the RT, passenger, loaded luggage and all (feet up mind you), down the steps until I reach the bottom, at which point I face an impossibly sharp turn. I somehow manage to extract myself from Cortona's grip, but the group has long gone.

I program the route into my GPS using the notes I'd jotted at the morning's briefing and make my way towards San Marino. I brought the GPS for just such an occasion, and though I also have a map, it proves invaluable as I can't make out Italian road signage and have no clue in which direction to turn. We ride alone for

just a couple of hours before catching up with the group at a lunch stop.

Joe, a couple of days earlier, had tipped his R1200GS over as he stopped on an off-camber parking lot access road to avoid flocking tourists. His wife Naomi hurt her ankle in the mishap and although she continued riding that day, decided to ride in the truck for the rest of the tour. This left Joe solo on his GS. After lunch, Ursula waved Joe and I on, as we constantly filled her rear view mirrors—and she promised we'd enjoy the winding road ahead more if we were unobstructed.

Joe is not very tall, soft-spoken and has a snow-white-capped cranium. His unassuming nature hints at someone who'd maybe worked behind a desk or held some other mundane position, free of risk. Joe is a retired Navy pilot (should have picked up on that from his grey Aerostich one-piece suit that resembles a flight suit), who's flown 144 missions in Vietnam—from an aircraft carrier—and after leaving the Navy became a flight instructor for a major American airline.

I take off behind Joe, and stay there for about three turns. Joe's background leaves him with a very different perception of speed than most ("Once you've flown an F-18 nothing else comes close.") and combining his 60 years of riding experience with regular conditioning at track days on his GSX-R750, he rockets





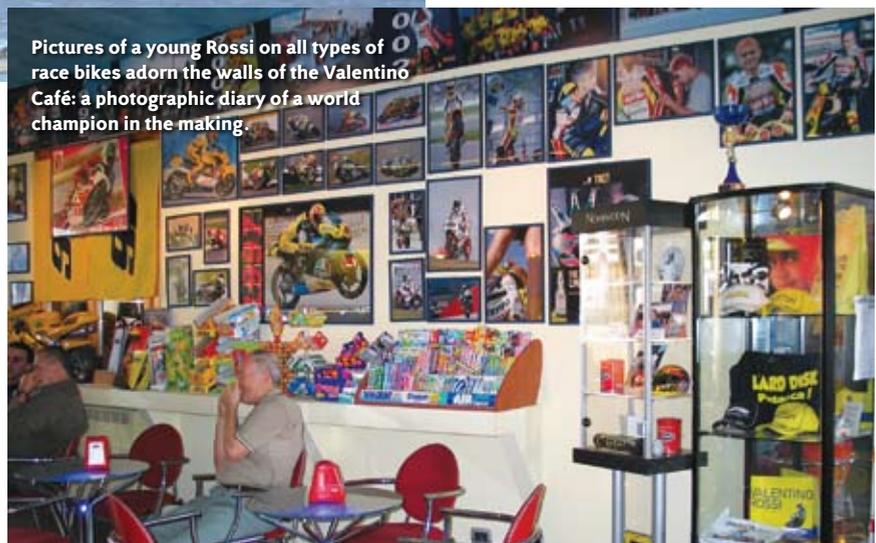
where our trip winds down with dinner back at the Villa Pitiana. Absent are Ursula and Peter, busy loading bikes onto the Edelweiss trailer. The atmosphere is charged with everyone's enthusiasm, but overshadowed by the sadness that this is the final night: tomorrow most everyone will board planes and head home. John and Ada continue touring Italy sans motorcycle, and the Hawlee boys keep their Harleys another week. Louis proudly announces to me how he was grinding footpegs the last couple of days. Contact information and hugs are exchanged, and we head to our room.

If motorcycle touring for you includes spare sets of knee sliders, perhaps an Edelweiss Tour of Tuscany isn't for you; it's for riders who appreciate a more relaxed pace. It's also pricey, ranging from \$3,500 to \$6,100 US per person depending on bike selection and sleeping arrangements. You can also provide your own machine, which lowers the price. Hotels are

away effortlessly, and rather gracefully I might add. Of course, without the added weight of a passenger and luggage I'd have been right on his tail—maybe.

At dinner that evening we sit with Joe and Naomi, John (Ada's absent, nursing a hangover—ah, to be young again), and Tom. Joe tells us how he knew Naomi in high school but their paths separated soon after. They met again decades later, after each had experienced other lives with other loves, now departed. John, who while practicing, had volunteered part of his time to treat leprosy and burn victims in several developing countries, lost his wife to illness four years ago. Tom is on this tour to celebrate his recent recovery from cancer treatment. I soon realize I'm surrounded by people who have suffered deep personal tragedy. Aside from this common denominator, all of them share another bond: a love of riding. As Ursula told me: "Motorcycles are the equaliser—no matter what their social status is when people are back home, when they come on one of these trips they are all the same."

During our final rest day, in San Marino, we detour to the east coast city of Rimini, where the girls strip down to their bikinis and take a dip in the chilly waters of the Adriatic Sea. We then head to the tiny



Pictures of a young Rossi on all types of race bikes adorn the walls of the Valentino Café: a photographic diary of a world champion in the making.

village of Tavullia. Even if you had no idea of Tavullia's significance, entering the town immediately sets things straight. The town is draped in yellow ribbons, and banners with the number 46 hang from balconies and windows. It's the birthplace of Valentino Rossi. We break for espresso at the Valentino Café, which is plastered with Rossi memorabilia and is the home of the official Valentino Rossi fan club. Inside we meet a pair of Rossi's self-proclaimed biggest fans, who insist we don't leave without souvenir photos of them, and we order warm, frothy drinks signed with the world champion's race number.

We head back to Florence the next day

chosen in city centres so sightseeing is easily accomplished on foot, breakfast is included each day, as are several multi-course dinners, and there are a couple of midday picnics too. The price seems more appealing when factoring in the convenience of following guides who are knowledgeable in the region and know their way around, taking the burden of decision making off your shoulders—and you won't waste time riding in circles, something I especially appreciated after once losing the group.

Sure, the riding, scenery and food were exceptional, but for me, the clincher was the people I met—and they all had stories. <<