

Stay in a castello in Tuscany



Louise Roddon Published at 12:01AM, September 15 2012

A new breed of elegantly restored castle villages is springing up in Italy, offering high-end lifestyle experiences

Just when you thought you knew Tuscany, a new breed of rustic-chic accommodation looks set to reinvent the region. Topping the bill is a clutch of impeccably revived castle-villages encircling Siena — hidden from prying paparazzi, and offering guests a high-end rural lifestyle experience, spanning wild-boar hunting in private game reserves, wine-making courses and saffron harvesting, to pampering in organic-themed spas. This is all about accommodation in a sensitively restored castello or characterful albergo, with a kicked-back glamour.

Authenticity to the original medieval footprint is the key look, complemented either by period furnishings or pared-back minimalism. Alternatively, opt for a dinky-but-spacious Renaissance villa set in the heart of gently-hilled Crete Sinesi — a corner locals reckon is the archetype of dreamy Tuscan landscapes.

Best for rural pampering

Hotel Castello di Casole

A restored Etruscan castle, the all-suite Hotel Castello is an enclave of rural calm. It dominates a pristinely refurbished hill-top hamlet within one of Italy's largest dollops of privately-owned land, and is the newest addition to Timbers Resorts' sprawl of high-end "casali" farmhouses. The mix works well without feeling intrusive, with villa owners joining hotel guests on the terrace of its elegant Ristorante Tosca, or for dips in the sleek infinity pool.

Fourteen of the hotel's 41 suites are set in adjoining properties to the Castello, with private gardens or terraces. My advice is to opt for the less pricey and spacious junior suites in the Castello itself. You won't get a separate living room, or outdoor space — but my bedroom, with its butter-coloured walls and sumptuous fabrics, was beautifully baronial; far better suited to the hotel's flamboyantly-sized antiques. It also gave me fabulous views over the estate's corduroy-neat vineyards and olive groves.

Castello di Casole makes its own wine and oil for guests' use only, and both feature in the creations of chef Daniele Sera's (formerly of Rome's Michelin-starred Mirabelle). I enjoyed his daintily-portioned tasting menu — but you could opt for more typical Tuscan tastes spanning artfully fashioned veal cheek, saffron carmaroli risotto, or wild boar. However, the breakfast buffet proved somewhat limited, even featuring — horror of horrors — foil-wrapped butter pats, and disappointingly, there was no option to eat al fresco.

Castello di Casoli began life under the illustrious Bargagli family. But as interesting is its colourful jet-set past, when Luchino Visconti lived and partied here — reputedly housing his mistresses in the surrounding farmhouses.

Whether true or not, the handsome coffered-ceilinged Visconti Bar has some gorgeous photographs from that era that are well worth a peek.

Details Suites from €630 to €1,600 per night B&B (castellodicasole.com).

Best for eco-chic

Monteverdi

As the local jazz duo played out their last riff on the terrace of Caffè Monteverdi, I joined in the hearty applause, then turned my attention to the delicious aperitivi — bruschetta with pomodoro, a tasty octopus salad, topped off with a sparkling glass of Franciacorta. Welcome to the laid-back Monteverdi mountaintop retreat at Castiglione del Trinoro. Forget stuffy formality; this restored village offers guests a taste of authentic Tuscany with added comforts.

I'm in the heart of the rugged, volcanic Val d'Orcia, where US lawyer Michael Cioffi has spent the past five years sensitively rebuilding a sizeable village he first fell in love with as a young backpacker. There are gorgeous lavender gardens thrumming with bees and butterflies, shady wisteria-clad pergolas, an old church, whose breezy terrace overlooks Mount Amiata, and winding lanes leading to the ruins of a 12th-century castle.

Cioffi's reinvented stone-clad villas are joined by a seven-bedroom boutique hotel. Interior designer Ilaria Miani is the brains behind both the hotel rooms and the villas: her chic, fashion-shoot flair results in a pleasing blend of ancient and modern, (one room even features an 18th-century copper bath tub), with pale citric colour schemes, stripped-back ceilings, huge carved stone washbasins, and sizeable rain showers incorporating private hammams.

The concept is eco-luxe, right down to the non-dyed linen, though this was a mite too rustic for me — akin to sleeping between flattened Weetabix. But oh, it's a lovely place, with a super team of young staff ever willing to organise your days.

Cioffi is a cultured owner, keen to share his concept of la dolce vita, and rates include scheduled events from Monteverdi's Artists and Scholars-in- Residence Series. Think anything from an art history talk to live classical music. In addition, I joined chef Paolo Coluccio (ex-Locanda Locatelli) on a market shopping trip, later enjoying a private cooking lesson. Save time too, for a local winery. I'd recommend the lovely Tenuta di Trinoro, famous for its esteemed Brunello reds. Similarly, the painted Etruscan tomb outside the low-key town of Sarteano is well worth visiting.

Details From €250 to €350 per night, B&B. (monteverdituscany.com).

Best for boutique charm

Villa Armena

"Luxury is time and space," pronounced Edoardo Giacone, owner-manager of Villa Armena in the heart of Tuscany's Crete Sinesi region; "and we haven't compromised on either. We are less a hotel — more a house-guest concept." It was to prove an apt description of my stay here, for this handsome terracotta-toned mansion, designed by the Renaissance architect Baldassare Peruzzi, is highly relaxing, with ten sizeable bedrooms exquisitely furnished by Edoardo's Conran-trained wife, Elena. The young couple opened their property in April, and are joined by Edoardo's sommelier mother, Laura, and 24-year-old chef, Christian Meloni Delrio. The villa feels very much a labour of love, and the family's enthusiasm for delighting guests is palpable. Even their pets — a friendly British bulldog, and a slinky cat — felt a welcome bonus to my stay. Huge attention to detail is the keynote, from the high-tech noiseless light switches, (installed, because Edoardo wants to ensure total peace for guests at all times), to the textural travertine bathroom walls and chrome-therapy walk-in showers. These enormous state-of-the-art bathrooms contrast nicely with the Rococo flourishes of her fabrics and gilded furniture. Christian proved an accomplished chef, and I devoured his tender tartare of wild boar and exquisite fish soup on the villa's chic terrace, while drinking in the view of cypress-studded hills that seemed straight from a Leonardo da Vinci painting.

Buonconvento — one of Italy's 100 most beautiful villages — is a 40-minute hike, or take advantage of Edoardo's activities programme, spanning truffle-hunting to patisserie-making classes.

Details From €295 to €850 per night, B&B. Villa Armena (villaarmena.com) is a member of Great Hotels of the World Luxury Collection (020-7380 3658).

Need to know

Louise Roddon was a guest of Western & Oriental (020-7666 1234, wandotravel.com), which can arrange a four-night break at Hotel Castello di Casole from £947pp, including easyJet flights, car hire and B&B accommodation in a junior suite. (based on travel July-October).

Where to stay for under £100 a night

Locanda Casanuova, San Martino Altoreggi, Valdarno

This former monastery is now a farmhouse with an organic menu which is chalked up on a board every day. Meals are served at large communal tables under vines, and the garden is filled with unusual plants and secret terraces. In a clearing in the woods is a swimming "pond", a natural pool with lily pads, surrounded by decking for sunbathers.

Details Doubles from €90 (sawdays.co.uk)

Quercia Rossa, Maremma

On a clear day, the views from the swimming pool of this hilltop period farmhouse, stretch all the way to the Marsilianna plains and Tuscan coast. Inside, there is antique Rococo furniture, a log fire, dining room with a long communal table and Murano chandeliers, while outside, there are olive groves and a small lake. Nearby are the thermal baths of Saturnia, or the beaches of Feniglia, Ansedonia or Talamone, all about a 30 to 40-minute drive away.

Details Doubles from €74 if taken as five nights for the price of four (i-escape.com)

Monastery Suore Carmelitane, Santuario Santa Maria delle Pace, Santa Teresa di Firenze

This recently restored monastery with imposing medieval façade is in a tiny village in Botinaccio, 36km from Florence, with the requisite views of the rolling Tuscan hills. The rooms are beautifully furnished in a French-provincial style, with historical paintings. Near by is the World Heritage listed Piazza del Campo — well worth a visit.

Details Doubles from €55 (monasterystays.com)

Casa Toscana, Chiusi

This former family residence of Italian nobility has been recently turned into a boutique B&B. Furnished with antiques and retaining its original architectural features, this is old-fashioned luxury at a snip of the price.

Details Doubles from €60 (www.bandbcasatoscana.it)

La Casa nei Pini B&B, Viareggio

This hippie hideout is surrounded by the pine forests of San Rossore Nature Park, and is ten minutes from the coast. It is totally organic — even the paint is natural. Breakfast is served in the dappled shade of the garden, and there's bikes available.

Details From €31 pp (bviareggio.it)

Harriet Addison

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