



The hidden **TUSCANY**

Far from the cities, the Tuscan countryside is still a quiet haven – an almost undiscovered honeymoon destination where the pace is slow, the traditions rich and the scenery incredible, writes Elisa Scarton.



Even if you've never been to Tuscany, you could probably describe its pine tree-covered hills and antique villas in an instant. The central Italian region is familiar, loveable and just a little bit nostalgic. It has been the destination for intrepid travellers since the dawn of time, and has remained on many a destination wedding or honeymoon wish list.

But with so much to take in, it's easy to fall into the trap of experiencing only Tuscany's biggest and most famous cities. Florence is beautiful, Siena is effortlessly romantic and Pisa is breathtaking, but there is a whole other side of this region that embodies a simpler time.

While tourists flock to the bright lights, Italians take their leave in the medieval towns and villages that are strewn across the Tuscan countryside. They explore the castles carved into rock by Renaissance dukes, take a dip on the island where Napoleon Bonaparte spent his exile and enjoy a bite at a 100-years-old trattoria.

MONTEPULCIANO

When exploring the Tuscan countryside, it's best to go at your own pace. Every town and village, regardless of how small, is charming in its own way. Tuscany is known for its wide, open spaces; kilometres of fields, broken by the odd ochre-coloured villa or modest farm. In an effort to stimulate industry, the European Union subsidised the Tuscan farmers who filled their fields with sunflowers. Now thousands of these bright yellow flowers blossom in the countryside.

Your first stop in this region must be Montepulciano. Only a short trip from Siena, Montepulciano is the Tuscany of the silver screen. Its picturesque hills are where Diane Lane escaped to in *Under the Tuscan Sun*. Its winding cobblestone streets and beautiful antique houses were home to the ancient Volturi in *Twilight New Moon*. But even without the Hollywood accolades, Montepulciano is unforgettable. The city was once the jewel in the crown of the Etruscan king, Porsenna di Chiusi. It has been a place of luxury and grandeur since the 4th century BC and, like much of the Tuscan countryside, continues to be defined by its incredible heritage.



TRAVEL TIPS

Best time to go: Early March to September, when the fields are yellow and full of wildflowers.

How long to go: 7-10 days. Anything less and you won't really be able to appreciate the incredible wealth of natural beauty and historical splendour this region has to offer.

How to get there: The best way to get to Siena from Rome is by train. The trip takes about three hours, but make sure you ask whether your train is an express service or one that stops at all stations.

How to get around: The Tuscan countryside doesn't lend itself well to public transport, so renting a car is your best option if you want to explore the Maremma. You can find car rentals in all major cities.

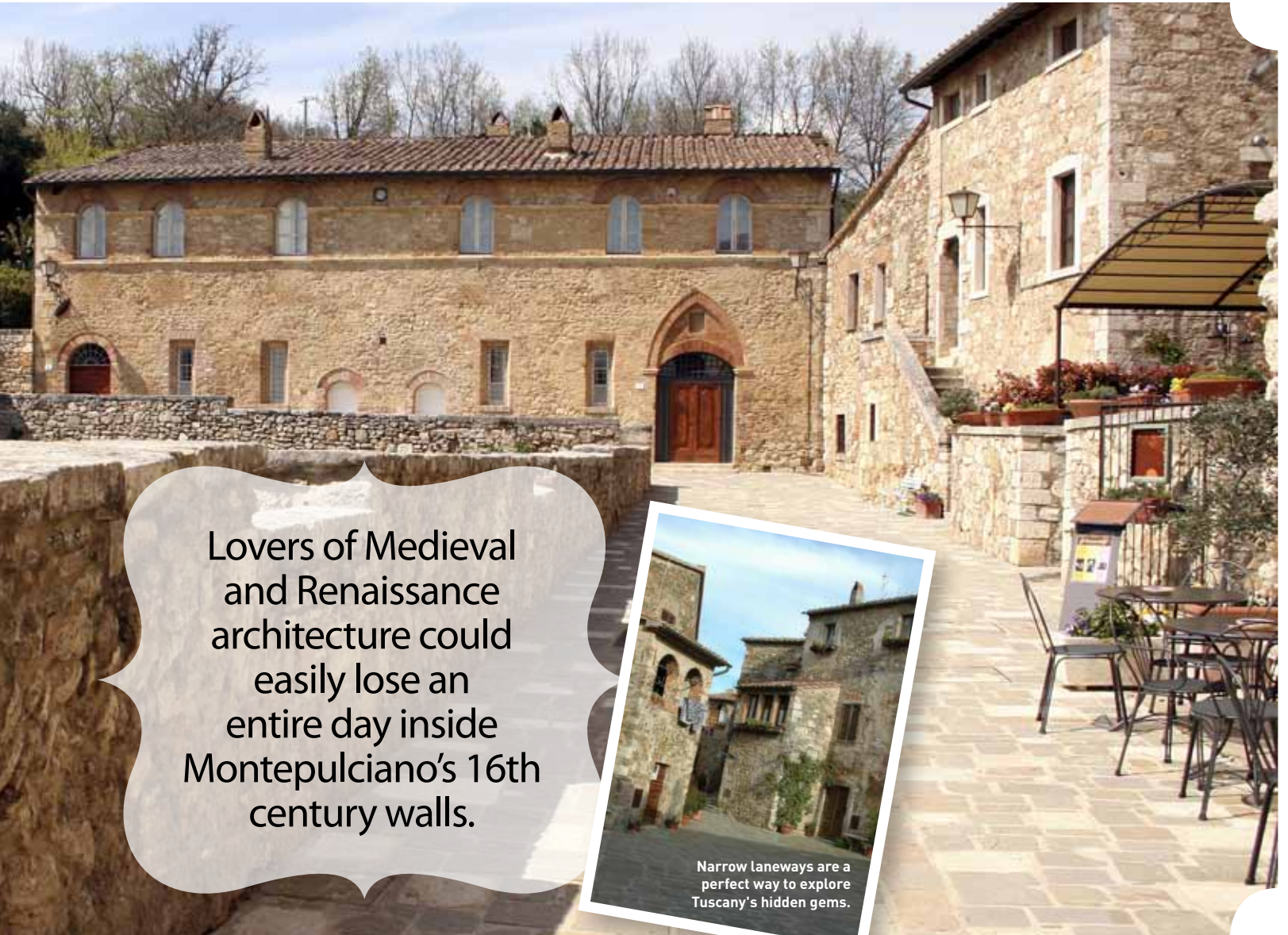
Tour options: The Australian expats who run Hedonistic Tours have a great eight-day package around Volterra and the Maremma. Justin Toscana also has a wide range of tours that include all transport, accommodation and meals, as well as experienced guides. Visit www.hedonistichiking.com.au or www.justintoscana.com

Festivals: The Tuscan countryside is alive and thriving any time of the year, but you don't want to miss festival season. Vivamus is the Maremma's biggest festival and is usually held in the middle of July. A jam-packed four days, Vivamus is a taste of the traditions, a chance to experience the emotions and, of course, an excuse to indulge in the local food and wine!



The ancient village Pitigliano, sits high on the Tuscan hillside.





Lovers of Medieval and Renaissance architecture could easily lose an entire day inside Montepulciano's 16th century walls.

Narrow laneways are a perfect way to explore Tuscany's hidden gems.

Lovers of Medieval and Renaissance architecture could easily lose an entire day inside Montepulciano's 16th century walls. It's also the perfect place to try some of the best delicacies the Tuscan countryside has to offer. Don't miss the Antico Caffè Poliziano; this magnificent Liberty-style cafe counts Federico Fellini among its many celebrity admirers and serves its teas and coffees with delicious teacakes and decadent chocolates. For a romantic dinner for two try the Trattoria Diva e Maceo. The husband and wife team serve proper Tuscan dishes without any fanfare. The atmosphere isn't luxurious, but the pici pasta is freshly made and served with wild boar sauce or black truffles, and the tripe is a family recipe that dates back to the Middle Ages.

A trip to the nearby Civita di Bagnoregio is a must for honeymooners. The Italians call it "il paese che muore" (the town that dies), but don't let that discourage you. There are few places more romantic or more breathtaking. Just make sure you're wearing comfortable shoes – the only way in is by walking over a light bridge that stretches across the Tiber River 900 feet below.

FIORA VALLEY

Leaving the cities and heading further south into the fertile Fiora Valley is an almost therapeutic experience. The towns here sit on leafy hills,

cut off from the great spans of countryside by ancient stone walls and completely removed from the hassles of metropolitan life. The territory is known as the Maremma and the beautiful scenery and calm disposition of its locals make it perfect for a romantic getaway.

Manciano is the valley's hub. A quaint little hilltop getaway, it takes advantage of its elevated position by having some of the best agriturismo in the territory. Part farm, part B&B, agriturismi are perfect for those looking to truly experience Tuscany and meet the people who call it home.

Agriturismi La Rocca dei Briganti, best known for its wine tasting, produces the famed Montauto Bianco di Pitigliano and Rosso di Sovana DOC wines and gorgeous olive oils. Guests can spend the morning strolling through the vineyards and forests on the property, relax at its spa centre or enjoy a homemade breakfast in the garden.

While in Manciano, a visit to its 13th century castle is a must. From the tallest battlements you can see the rolling tides off Corsica, admire the lush hills covered in olive groves in the valley and peer down at the rooftops and bell towers of the other medieval towns.

On a clear day, you can almost see Saturnia, 20 kilometres away. Less of a town and more of a living legend, Saturnia is, if you ask the locals, the mythical refuge of Saturn after he lost the throne of the Gods.



Try some of the best delicacies the Tuscan countryside has to offer.



PLAN YOUR TUSCAN WEDDING

TUSCANY IS EFFORTLESSLY ROMANTIC, SO IT'S NO SURPRISE THAT INTREPID BRIDES ARE SNUBBING THEIR LOCAL CHURCH FOR A WEDDING UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN.

SOVANA HOTEL & RESORT

Most high-end resorts in the Maremma now cater for weddings, but it's always best to spend a little extra and get married in one that has a dedicated wedding planner. Organising a wedding from afar can be a tricky business at times and having someone who knows what they're doing and can help you deal with local suppliers will make all the difference.

A sprawling villa with a gorgeous garden, the Sovana Hotel & Resort is perfect for nuptials among the olive groves with a delicious Mediterranean reception on the patio afterwards.

The resort also has some beautiful rooms for your guests to stay in before and after the wedding and their wedding planner can be relied on to keep everyone occupied with private tours to the nearby medieval towns and museums.

SANTA CRISTINA CASTLE

The Grotte di Castro has a fantastic wedding package. The gorgeous Renaissance castle sits in a 17th century estate that belonged to the ancestors of the family who still run it. With their wedding planner's help, you can organise a summer wedding under an eave of roses outside the castle or say your vows in the original Renaissance chapel.

Then you can treat your guests to an after dinner fireworks show or a traditional flag dance, all organised by staff with minimal fuss.

BEFORE YOU GO, REMEMBER...

Getting married overseas means extra paperwork and permissions. A good wedding planner will be able to organise all of this for you, but if you're doing it yourself, the Australian embassy website has everything you need to know.

Things do, however, get a little tricky for brides who have been divorced and want to marry again in Italy within 300 days of the date of their divorce. If that's the case, you'll need to contact the local Italian authorities and seek special permission.

In Saturnia the marks of the Etruscans, Romans, Aldobrandeschi, Orsini and Medici are still visible, not in museums, but in front of your eyes. In the town square lie the remains of a Roman road, while a magnificent medieval castle looms over the streets, casting a shadow on the nearby stone-carved houses.

The hot springs that surround Saturnia draw thousands of couples to the town each year for the outdoor baths, where temperatures reach a toasty 37 degrees. The springs also boast curative properties thanks to sulphur, the main mineral found in the waters.

For a truly luxurious experience, stay at the Saturnia Tuscany Hotel. With its classic caramel rendered façade and cream shutters, the luxury hotel sits at Saturnia's doorstep and its suites are good enough for a celebrity, indeed the modern and brightly furnished rooms have hosted many. A short distance away, the Terme di Saturnia Spa has swimming pools and artificial waterfalls that flow with warm water fresh from the source of the hot springs, conveniently located below them. Guests at the Saturnia Tuscany Hotel can use the pools for a discounted price. For the rest of us, a full day ticket costs about \$30, but it's worth it.

A trip to the Fiora Valley isn't complete without a stop in Sovana. There are few towns in the Maremma that have maintained both their history and original splendour like Sovana. The sand-coloured streets; well worn, but characteristic buildings and unassuming old town centre are simply beautiful and completely gimmick-free.

Don't miss nearby Montemerano either. The unassuming 15th century walls that surround this small town never betray the incredible charm that hides behind them. Donna Hay travelled here for a summer cook-



The Romans coveted the hot springs around Saturnia, and wiped out the Etruscans to get them.



Saturnia Tuscany Hotel.
Above: Saturnia hot springs, 37.5°C all-year-round.



book photo shoot and Australian actor and producer Danny Raco grew up in one of its beautiful old sand brick houses.

While you're in the Fiora Valley take advantage of some of the incredible tours that are available. Justin Toscana tours have half-day, full-day and weekend trips that capture the four elements that define the Tuscan countryside – food, culture, history and spas. Their tour guides are fluent in English and organise everything from horseback treks through the gorgeous Amiata Mountain with an afternoon spa treatment, to a private tour of a beautiful local vineyard, complete with a romantic dinner. You can also book a cooking course with Justin Toscana and discover the ancient flavours of the Maremman and Tuscan countryside. Try your hand at making fresh pasta, rich ragu or the region's signature dish, aquacotta – a dense vegetable soup.

THE ARGENTARIO COASTLINE

When the Tuscan sun shines bright, the locals retreat to the seaside. Unknown to most, Tuscany has some of Italy's best beaches and resorts, all located on the Argentario Coast, 45 kilometres from Manciano. Famous for its fishing and even more famous for its seafood, Porto Santo Stefano is the biggest port on the coastline.

The countryside that surrounds the city is dotted with fortresses and towers built by the Spanish to keep an eye on their enemies. Beautifully conserved, these 15th century relics can be visited almost all year round.

If you're hankering for some island action on your honeymoon, take the very short ferry trip across to Giglio Island. Giglio might be only 20 kilometres from Porto Santo Stefano, but it's a world of its own with a culture and lifestyle that differs entirely from the mainland.

After a quick meal at one of the cute cafes that line the port, hop on a bus or walk up to Giglio Castello. There you'll find 28 kilometres of the most incredible beaches you'll ever experience.

If you can, spend the night on Giglio Island. The B&B Hotel Campese is renowned for its seaside views and amazing breakfasts. Then, in the morning, catch another ferry to Giannutri Island. No one has lived on Giannutri since the Romans abandoned it, and the island has been allowed to blossom into a nature reserve complete with pristine beaches and Roman relics.

GROSSETO

A honeymoon in Tuscany wouldn't be the same without a stop at the beautiful Renaissance city Grosseto. The capital of the Maremma, Grosseto has spent centuries reconciling with its image as both the cultural playground of the Medici family and the last outpost of the quiet and laidback Tuscan countryside.

Every town and village, regardless of how small, is charming in its own way.



Left: Grosseto Cathedral. Below: Porto Santo Stefano is one of Italy's favourite seaside resorts.



Its town centre is made up of one main street, lined with the most elegant-looking shops, many hidden inside medieval palazzos. At the end of this strip is Piazza Dante – Grosseto's heart, where the true shopaholic can indulge.

Make sure you take a break at one of the indescribably good pizzerias that line the main street. With a thin crust and minimal toppings, these pizzas are nothing like the ones at home, especially the divine nutella and mascarpone dessert pizza.

And that's only the beginning. Those who know little about Grosseto visit the city, savour the ancient buildings and modern, yet relaxed lifestyle of the Grossetani. But those who truly experience Grosseto don't keep to the city centre, they visit the winding alleys where the locals mix with a surprisingly strong Asian community and go further still, to the deserted beaches and oak-filled forests of the Parco Regionale della Maremma.

Stretched over limitless space, the Parco Regionale della Maremma reserve is literally an oasis. Honeymooners with a sense of adventure can spend hours exploring the park's kilometres of walking tracks and the odd ruined medieval castle before finding themselves at the feet of a deserted and pebble-strewn beach.

From here the sun setting over the shores of the Tyrrhenian Sea is breathtaking and, if you look far enough, you can just see the outline of Elba Island, where Napoleon Bonaparte was exiled after his forced abdication in 1814.

But if you'd rather indulge yourself and do absolutely nothing before you head home, check into the luxurious Petriolo Spa Resort in the Val di Farma.

With two high-end restaurants, a truly enviable spa and a pool that looks out onto the Tuscan hills, you'll never want to leave. The resort is also close to Grosseto, so you can make this gorgeous city your last stop, before you catch the train or drive back to Rome, and reality. b

DAY TRIPPING IN ITALY

HONEYMOONING IN TUSCANY DOESN'T MEAN YOU HAVE TO MISS OUT ON ALL OF ITALY'S FAMOUSLY ROMANTIC CITIES. THEY'RE ONLY A SHORT DRIVE OR TRAIN RIDE AWAY.

ROME Rome needs no introduction. The Eternal City is capable of enchanting even the most cold-hearted traveller with the vibrant atmosphere and incomparable beauty of its streets. A two-hour drive or train trip from Grosseto will take you to the centre of Rome, where you can explore the Roman ruins, ancient churches and endless museums to your heart's content. For high-end shopping or window-shopping, stroll down Via Condotta, which opens out into the Piazza di Spagna and the Spanish Steps. For a romantic dinner for two, don't stop at any of the restaurants on the main streets or near the big attractions, but wander a little until you find a spot where the locals outnumber the tourists. They might not be the most luxuriously furnished eateries, but they are where you'll find the most delicious food, and usually for half the price.

SIENA Excuse the cliché, but love is always in the air in Siena. The gorgeous Renaissance city simply embodies romance with its ivy-covered houses and picturesque shops and restaurants. Honeymooners could lose an entire day soaking up the beauty of Piazza del Campo with its shell-shaped stairs and stunning architecture. But don't make the mistake of confining your Sienese holiday to that piazza. At only an hour-and-a-half's drive from Grosseto, Siena's streets are lined with eclectic art boutiques and antique stores overflowing with amazing, and usually one-of-a-kind, treasures. If you're travelling in July or August, time your visit to coincide with the Sienese Palio. The ancient horse race is full of colour, emotion and tradition.

FLORENCE Lucky brides and extremely romantic grooms travel all the way to Florence to buy their wedding rings on Ponte Vecchio. The bridge is lined with picturesque family-owned stores that have been creating gold and silver jewellery for centuries. But you don't need to buy a ring in Florence to live its age-old romance. The city by the Arno River is beyond beautiful and its gorgeous streets and incredible buildings have inspired more than the odd song or book. And, at little more than two hours from Grosseto, Florence is perfect for an afternoon basking in the culture and art of Tuscany.

PISA Romance might not spring to mind when you consider Pisa and its world-famous leaning tower, but this unassuming city has a charming vibe that's hard to pin down. Sitting all alone less than two hours away from Grosseto, Pisa has none of the hustle and bustle of Tuscany's other cities and its abundant gardens and 15th century fortresses will capture the imagination and delight of every visitor.

