

Love & Marriage

Bride's Guide

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TUSCANY

By Linda West Eckhardt

For a truly amazing getaway that even celebrates the simple things in life, visit Tuscany. Everything from great meals to outdoor pleasures like horseback riding in the Italian countryside are offered.



Utter privacy, stunning views, spectacular food, a spa just down the road, your own romantic apartment in an historic building, a fireplace, a swimming pool at your door: and at a bargain rate besides: where can all this wonder be had? A Tuscan farm to be exact, an olive estate on the edge of Montecatini Terme, the world famous spa visited regularly by the stars: Robert DeNiro, Kate Blanchett, and others too numerous to mention. So we'd like to suggest that once the wedding is over, pack up your trousseau and head for the farm.

Fly to Rome or Milan—about seven hours from Newark. Then take a train or a rent car to Tuscany. It's about three hours either way and you'll soon climb into the glorious green hills. You can put

away your American Gothic notions of a farm when speaking of Tuscany. However, Villa Stabbia, a part of Italy's great Agriturismo network, may be a farm to them, but it's more like a country estate to us.

Established by one of the Medici daughters somewhere around the time of our own Declaration of Independence, this farm rolls up a Tuscan hillside, 51 acres of 2,500 olive trees, inter-planted with grapes, apples, pears, pomegranates, persimmons, oranges, lemons, kumquats, as well as lush gardens overflowing with vegetables and herbs.

As if that weren't enough, the glistening swimming pool which seems to fall off the hillside, bicycles, a game room and the able hosts,

(Continued on page 122)

Tuscany

(Continued from page 120)

Mario Marchi Bertolozzi and his Danish wife, Tine Pedersen, will be your guides to this splendid piece of heaven.

Mario and Tine have made their farm into a veritable paradise. There are a couple of spirited saddle horses and plenty of hillsides to roam.

Apartments have been converted from ancient farmhouses that surround the main villa. Sharecroppers used these houses when the landowners were typically absentee. Each two-story unit has two double bedrooms and baths, a living room with a fireplace, full kitchen and dining room as well as a veranda with stunning vistas to the adjoining hillsides. No matter which window you look out from, you will find a room with a view. And the way the farmhouses were set on the hillsides, so many years ago, gives the illusion of total privacy. You may never even lay eyes on the other guests. And the only sounds you'll hear are the songs of birds. You will come to believe that—like Isak Dinesen, who had a farm in Africa—at least for your honeymoon, you have a farm in Tuscany. And all this for far less money than a week at the shore.

Mario and Tine not only offer a country idyll for honeymooners, they produce organic olive oil, vin santo, red and white wines, as well as jams and preserves from their generous orchards. This is a real working farm. Check out their web site if you'd like to order, www.villastabbia.it.

Tine said it was easy fitting out the apartments with antiques because the villa had, "a storeroom full of old stuff." Indeed the furniture in my apartment was glorious 19th century walnut. The sheets on the bed were downy white and had been fresh air-dried and ironed.

Villa Stabbia offers a taste of Tuscan farm life as it was lived for hundreds of years. Terra cotta floors, exposed beam ceilings, rugged stone steps, thick plaster walls, and sturdy country furniture. Did you ever think you could grill your own Florentine Steak, drizzle it with organic olive oil right from the farm, and serve it alongside fresh-grilled porcini you bought off the back of a pickup truck parked at the gate? You can if you rent a farmhouse in Tuscany at Villa Stabbia.

For those of you who love to lounge in the tub, bathtubs that are six feet long and four feet deep seem to be standard here. After a long day's hiking the luxurious, steep hills around the farm, I found a long, hot soak was just what was needed.

Once, we drove to the top of their own hillside road, to a restaurant called Casorino. We arrived at about 9 p.m. on a Friday night. Twinkling lights in the trees welcomed us, and tables outside on a

raked gravel bed held families eating outdoors in the lovely failing light of a Tuscan autumn evening. Inside, the walls glowed yellow.

I might also mention that the chef/owner at Casorino, Allesandro Giuntoli worked in New York eight years at Le Cirque, and then opened Osteria Del Circo, winning a nomination for a James Beard Award for the best new restaurant that year. Giuntoli's mentor, restaurant entrepreneur, Sirio Maccioni hails from these same Tuscan hills. This small, modest restaurant at the top of this Tuscan hill outside Montecatini Terme is a favorite with tourists, locals, and celebrities alike. Robert DeNiro dines here whenever he's in town as well as many other celebs from the world of arts and entertainment.

None of this matters to honeymooners however as much as the fact that this part of the world is just plain magic.

Take a trip to the nearby town of Montecatini Terme—world famous for spas and shops for browsing, and restaurants for dining, as well as luxurious strolls through the public gardens.

For a mid afternoon treat, we stopped by Montecatini's famous pasticceria bar and gelateria, Giovannini. I ordered marzipan and cocoa-dusted torrone candies. The marzipan was in the familiar fruit shapes, and the torrone was in the shape of wrenches, and hammers and other useful carpenter's tools—just for fun. To keep on hand in the apartment, I bought a big square of the famous pane forte—the medieval cake invented here, dark and spicy as a Medici mystery. Fortifying ourselves with perfect espressos at the stand-up coffee bar, we plunged into the street for more sightseeing.

On our last night, we decided to visit one more restaurant, this one at the top of a windy, twisty hillside road to a medieval town called Marliana. Ristorante A Goraiolo. This is not known to tourists, but well beloved by the locals according to the proprietors of Villa Stabbia. We never saw one car going up the perilous road, and I was sure the restaurant must surely be empty, since it was almost 9 p.m. on a Sunday night.

When we made the last hairpin turn, what to our wondering eyes should appear but another grove of trees festooned with Chinese lanterns, tables outside, and the warm glow of a restaurant fairly insisting that we come inside.

At long tables serving up to ten people, we saw cutting boards with hams, huge baskets of assorted sausages—capicola, salami, and other sausages. Here wine was served in a carafe with a wicker

(Continued on page 124)