

LIFESTYLE

The "Sweetness of Doing Nothing" in the Hills of Florence

By Barbara Diggs

Forty years ago, long before *Under the Tuscan Sun* was a twinkle in Frances Mayes' eye, my parents-in-law bought a 14th-century stone house on a woodsy Tuscan hillside just outside the city of Florence. The foundation of the house dates back to the Roman period and the jagged bits of stone wall found on the lower terrace, underlining a stretch of silver-hued olive trees, is Etruscan. To become owners of all this ancient history, they paid just \$15,000—a steal even in 1972.

Now, each summer, my husband and I perch ourselves on the house's upper terrace and gaze out at the valley below. Shimmering there in the heat is Florence. It thrills us that beneath the haze lies a trove of Renaissance treasures: Michelangelo's David... Brunelleschi's magnificent dome... Botticelli's Venus, standing tall and tranquil on her scalloped sea shell.



The writer's family enjoy the garden of their 14th-century Tuscan home.

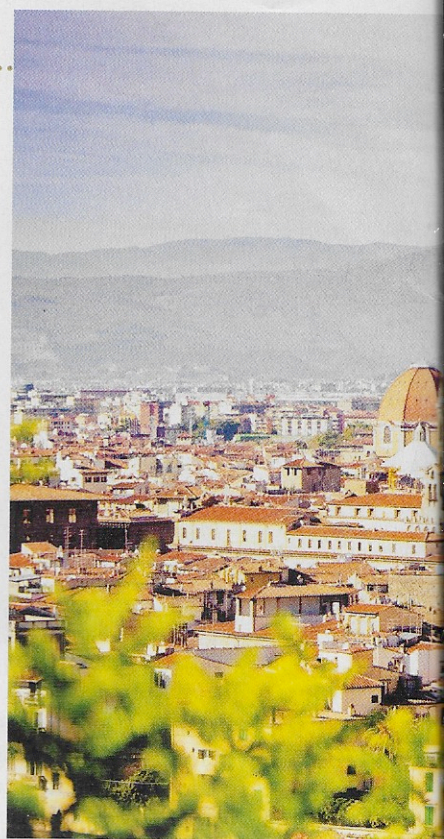
In just 20 minutes we can be down there, wandering Florence's delicious tangle of cobblestone streets, perhaps slipping into a trattoria for some pumpkin-porcini ravioli, or maybe knocking back an espresso Italian-style, standing up in a bar, before visiting these masterpieces.

Sometimes we do exactly that. But truth be told, we usually stay on the hillside. There's something about Italy that compels us to distill life to its barest essence: good food, fresh air, and pleasurable company. As glorious as the Uffizi's works of art are, it is equally glorious to spend the day tramping through the olive groves, eating sweet, sun-warmed figs straight from the tree, or reading under the shade of a grapevine-entwined pergola.

This is the true beauty of Tuscany—almost everything about it, from its golden landscape to its melodious language, begs you to slow down and enjoy the moment. If you're rushing around, trying to cram in visits to its most beautiful towns—Siena, Lucca, Cortona—as if stuffing priceless treasures into a sack, you're missing the point. Part of *la dolce vita* in Italy comes from *la dolce far niente*, "the sweetness of doing nothing." The details of life are to be lingered over and savored, like a superb wine or meal.

As an American who grew up believing that productivity was next to godliness, sometimes I have a difficult time holding onto the sweetness of doing nothing. Thankfully, our Italian friends are quick to remind me. Last summer, while enjoying a glass of wine with our neighbor Jacopo, I remarked guiltily that I hadn't gone further than the local supermarket for days. Jacopo laughed and swept his arm around the terrace, taking in the panoramic view of the valley, our kids splashing in the pool, the hot-pink sun sinking fast into a streak of wispy, purplish clouds. He asked, "Why would you?" Why, indeed.

When you adopt this Italian way of thinking, it's clear that experiencing the sweet life in Tuscany doesn't require spending a fortune. In the municipality of Bagno a Ripoli, where we stay, you can rent a charming two-bedroom stone house, with olive fields and a scenic view of the countryside, for \$113 per night or \$791 per week (see: *Greatrentals.com*). Nearby, in Pontassieve, you can rent a one-bedroom house with a pool and views of vineyards from \$190 per night during high season (see: *Flipkey.com*). For a longer stay, consider a sweet-looking, ivy-covered farmhouse near the





Living near Florence you are close to a vast number of artistic and cultural treasures.

Speaking of food, you can eat elegantly in Tuscany for very little, thanks to the abundance of high-quality ingredients and the delectable simplicity of Italian cuisine. Over the summer I prepared a dinner for 12 that consisted of lemon pasta with red onions and fresh mint, salad, cheese, and figs with honey for dessert. The cost? About \$45...including the wine.

If you interpret *la dolce far niente* as a reason to forego cooking, you can find great-value restaurants in Florence and its suburbs. A family favorite is Nuovo Ranch in Bagno a Ripoli, where main courses range from \$10 to \$18. The Florentine restaurant that has been my hands-down favorite for the past 14 years is Trattoria Mario, a hectic hole-in-the-wall on Via Rosina that's open only for lunch. You'll leave with a bursting belly and a dazed grin for about \$16.

We're lucky, of course, that we can embrace the sweetness of doing nothing in Italy every year. And if you, too, want a permanent connection to this part of Tuscany, a few good-value properties still exist. I found a divine two-bedroom apartment in a stone farmhouse with a swimming pool, 180-square-meter (1,937-square-foot) private garden, and panoramic views of the countryside near San Gimignano. It is going for €265,000, which, when I was researching this article, was \$339,000. (By the time this issue went to print, that price was \$337,000, thanks to the dollar's strength against the euro. These days, it's worth following exchange rates if you're looking at property in Europe. See: Casatuscany.com.)

In the former Medici town of Fiesole, I found a 70-square-meter (753-square-foot), two-bedroom apartment with a gorgeous, unobstructed view of the Florentine hills for \$377,000. (See: Property-italy.immobiliare.it.)

If this is an investment you can afford to make—trust me—the rewards will resonate for generations to come. ■

"Everything about Tuscany begs you to enjoy the moment."

hilltop town of Vicchio, which offers large, double-guest rooms with fully-equipped kitchens, a communal pool, and a garden with sweeping views of the countryside for \$1,303 per month (see: Longtermlettings.com).

You can also get a breathtaking, 300-square-meter (3,329-square-foot) ancient stone house in the Val di Sieve, a Florentine district known for its wine, for \$2,100 to \$2,400 per month, depending on the season. This sprawling property, which sleeps seven, is the classic Tuscan retreat, with panoramic hill views, a private garden dotted with olive, cypress, and pine trees, and a large shaded terrace that has a barbecue—an important feature since you can't prepare *bistecca fiorentina*, Tuscany's delicious answer to a T-bone steak, without one (see: Tuscanfeeling.com).

LUNIGIANA: UNDISCOVERED TUSCANY

By Steenie Harvey

The "Land of the Moon," the Lunigiana is Tuscany's hidden treasure. In the region's north-west, this is a Toscana of marble mountains, chestnut woods, and villages with communal olive presses. Threaded by rivers and pilgrim paths, its identity hasn't been diluted by tourism's demands.

Unspoiled doesn't mean uninhabited. With 13th-century stone bridges and houses climbing in layers up to a castle, Bagnone is from a medieval dreambook. Once under Medici protection, Fivizzano delivers noble palaces and a Tuesday street market. Licciana Nardi's shopfronts are adorned with traditional hand-painted signs. Pontremoli mixes a skyline of medieval

churches with Roman bridges and then adds a museum of stele—mysterious stone idols from prehistoric times.

Buys through Larchitrave.com include a detached two-bedroom house with terrace and land of 1,435 square yards. Priced at \$129,681, it's five miles from Licciana Nardi's shops, bars and restaurants. Rentals for two-bedroom apartments in the larger gateway town of Aulla start at \$518 monthly.

Indulge in as much "doing nothing" here as you want. But from Licciana Nardi, the Gulf of Poets is only a 45-minute drive—and the Cinque Terre's colorful fishing villages lie around the next headland. In winter, you can take to the Apuan Alps' ski slopes.