

Insider Tuscany: the lowdown

HOW TO GET THERE

When booking a fly-drive package, note that although the Val d'Orcia is in Tuscany, it's actually slightly closer to Rome than to Pisa. Public transport is irregular; Chiusi is the main hub for trains and buses. A number of UK tour operators offer walking and cycling tours in the Val d'Orcia: **Headwater** (www.headwater.com; 01606 720099) and **Sherpa Expeditions** (www.sherpaexpeditions.com; 020 8577 2717) are among the best. If you'd rather do it yourself, pick up a copy of *Walking and Eating in Tuscany and Umbria* (Penguin, £8.99), which includes some good walks in the area. For other itineraries and a list of bike-hire outlets, order the brochure 'Biking through Siena's Countryside' from the provincial tourist office at www.terresienais.it.

WHERE TO STAY

San Quirico d'Orcia is a handsome, untouristy walled town with a beautiful Romanesque church and a hotel that finally does the place justice. **Palazzo del Capitano** (via Poliziano, 18; 00 39 0577 899028; www.palazzodelcapitano.com; doubles from €130) a restored 15th-century townhouse, has 11 rooms with antique furniture, cast-iron four-poster beds and soothing, colour-washed walls. But the real joy of the place is the walled garden where breakfast is served in summer. In **Bagno Vignoni**, by all means use the **Hotel Posta Marcucci's** thermal swimming pool, which is open to non-guests; but the **Locanda del Loggiato** (piazza del Moretto 30; 00 39 0577 888925; www.loggiato.it; doubles from €130) on the main square is a much nicer place to stay. Terracotta floors and exposed beams are pretty much the norm around these parts, but the four friends who restored this medieval house have done so with the sort of restrained design flair that ends up in coffee-table books; the Romantic and 'Sogno' rooms are particularly attractive. Shatsu and Ayurvedic massages are on offer, and there's a well-stocked wine bar. **Pienza** is more of a problem. **Il Chiostro di Piienza** (corso

Rossellino 26; 00 39 0578 748400; www.reliasilichiodrodiienza.com; doubles from €150), has the historic credentials (it's housed in a 15th-century convent) and the central position, but it feels a little impersonal and is heavily geared to groups. With a car (or a bike, or a strong pair of legs), you'd do better to head for **LC.no** (00 39 0578 755133; www.olimpiaonline.it; doubles from €160), a tastefully restored farmhouse on the Monticchiello road. For the price of an urban three-star residence, it's a heated open-air pool, good country cooking (if you opt for half-board) and stunning views across the Val d'Orcia.

In **Montepulciano**, **Il Borghetto** (via di Borgo Buio; 00 39 0578 757 538; www.ilborghetto.it; doubles from €105) is a simple, clean place

right in the centre; rooms are small, but any claustrophobia is assuaged by the fine views out across the vine- and cypress-covered hills. Another great budget option is the postcard-perfect hilltop village of **Castiglioncello del Trinoro**, or **La Rossa del Trinoro** (via di Mezzo 3; 00 39 0578 266946; www.rossadeltrinoro.it; doubles from €70), a solid, rustic affair that more than fulfils its humble ambition: to provide a comfortable bed and a filling meal in friendly surroundings. Nearby, several farmhouses on the Origo family estate of **La Foca** (00 39 0578 69101; www.lafoca.com) have been turned into luxury self-catering villas, each with its own cook.

Fontalgotto (sleeps eight) and **Gonzola** (sleeps 10) are personal favourites, as well as the castle of Castelluccio – also on the estate – which has two rentable apartments. Prices vary from €400 per week in low season for the smallest apartment (sleeps two) to €9,560 per week in high season for the largest villa (sleeps 14). Finally, for the full-on hot-water experience, the recently restored **Hotel Terme de' Medici** (00 39 0578 572 41; www.fonteverdeterme.com; doubles from €420 half-board) in **San Casciano dei Bagni** has become the Tuscan spa of choice. A Renaissance portico built in the reign of Grand Duke

Ferdinando I has been elegantly restored and extended to create a warm, stylish 80-room hotel, which adjoins the modern Fonteverde spa, centred on a huge thermal swimming pool. The hotel restaurant, which occupies the original Medici bathing establishment (complete with marble basins), is an elegant affair with a lighter menu for dieters, although its soul is in heavier Tuscan pasta and game dishes. Be warned, though: this is very much an international spa experience, with prices and attitudes to match. To put together a DIY San Casciano spa holiday at a fraction of the cost stay at **Sette Querce** (viale Mancini 2; 00 39 0578 58174; www.settequerce.it), just outside the walls of this medieval town, and use the free public thermal basin a short walk away. The hotel, designed by Tricia Guild, is bright, colourful and friendly, and doubles start from only €145.

EATING AND DRINKING

In **Bagno Vignoni**, the **Osteria del Leone** (piazza del Moretto 8; 00 39 0577 887 300; closed Mon; around €35 per person without wine) is a good fuelling-up stop. The decor is rustic-elegant, the food traditional Tuscan. The *primi* include pasta dishes such as *pici alle briciole* (fat, handmade spaghetti in bread sauce); main courses revolve around wild boar, rabbit, and other local meat and game specialties. In summer, the terrace is a lovely place for an alfresco meal. **Pienza** was one of the main locations for *The English Patient*, and **Latte di Luna** (via San Carlo 2-4; 00 39 0578

748600; closed Tues; about €32 per person without wine) was the cast and crew's favourite restaurant. It's really just a down-home trattoria serving decent local cuisine at a fair price, which is why it's always packed. In warm weather, a pretty terrace clinches the deal. Start off with a plate of assorted *crustini* (bread slices with boar pâté, mushrooms, truffles, and other toppings) and finish off with *santredello alla nocciola* (hazelnut ice-cream dessert), leaving room for at least one serious pasta or meat dish in between (the duck with olives is justly famed). Be sure to book ahead, even out of season.

In the picturesque village of **Monticchiello**, east of Piienza, **Osteria La Porta** (via del Piano 1; 00 39 0578 755163; closed Thurs; about €28 per person without wine) is a family-run osteria that clings proudly to its local character. The *pici* is made fresh every day, and served with *cacio e pepe* (sheep's-milk cheese and pepper) or *sugo di anatra* (duck sauce). In the *umma*, *funghi porcini* and truffles feature strongly. Although it sticks to local bottles, the wine list is well chosen and well priced. In **Montepulciano** you can either go for the basic, filling Tuscan standards in a *centro storico* trattoria such as **Diva e Maceo** (via Graciliano nel Corso 92; 00 39 0578 716951; closed Tues; about €28 per person without wine) or **Osteria Borgo Buio** (via Borgo Buio 10; 00 39 0578 717497; closed Thurs; about €35 per person without wine); or you can head down the hill to **La Grotta** (San Biagio;

00 39 0578 758354; closed Wed; about €50 per person without wine), next to the glorious Renaissance church of San Biagio, for a really special meal. In two 16th-century vaulted rooms (or, in summer, in the garden out the back) a gourmet menu is served, its creativity rooted firmly in local traditions and ingredients. The delicious *mailati* are gnocchilike balls of sheep's-milk ricotta and basil, served with a *talleggio* sauce; this might be followed by *brasato di cinghiale alle prugne su letto di spinaci* – wild boar braised in plum sauce on a bed of spinach. The elegant table linen, service and wine list and the elevated (but not exaggerated) prices make it clear that this is not your average Chianti-in-a-straw-flask experience.

Ristorante Daniela (piazza Matteotti 7; 00 39 0578 58041; closed Wed; about €35 per person without wine) in **San Casciano dei Bagni** occupies a large vaulted space giving onto the town's main square and scenic promenade. Run by Sette Querce (see *Where to stay*), it offers a creative, lighter take on traditional local dishes such as flour-and-potato *torrefilli* filled with pigeon meat, or grilled pork *spiedini* (on skewers) with asparagus. Once the local bar-trattoria, the restaurant now has contemporary paintings on bare stone walls and a state-of-the-art wine list; but, for once, the transformation is fully justified by the results. It's not, strictly speaking, in the Val d'Orcia, but geographical quibbles should not keep one away from **Osteria de Gagliano** (via Roma 5; 00 39 0578 268022; closed Tues; about €25 per person) in **Sarteano**, a quiet walled town south of Chianciano Terme. The 20 lucky diners who manage to cram in this tiny osteria of an evening are treated to a succulent (though little-changing) menu that stretches from *accughe sotto pesto* (anchovies in pesto sauce) through *stringozzi* (similar to *pici*), tagliatelle or gnocchi in various sauces to rabbit stewed with herbs or – for those who stop at nothing – triple. Do not miss the excellent *panna cotta*.

