

TATLER



A Pretty Picture

IT'S NOT ALL WORK FOR MARK MOBIUS ON A TRIP TO **ITALY**. AND WITH SO MUCH FINE WINE, GOOD FOOD AND STUNNING SCENERY IN TUSCANY, WHO CAN BLAME HIM?

KING OF THE CASTLE

TOP The picturesque castle town of Pienza in Siena
BELOW Mark Mobius makes the most of Tuscany's tasty offerings



ITALY HAS HAD A TOUGH TIME DURING THE current crisis, with GDP expected to shrink by over four per cent this year after falling almost one per cent in 2008. Nevertheless, inflation has come down dramatically to almost zero and the stock market has nearly doubled from its lows in the first quarter. To see what was happening in the countryside we partook of some strenuous exercise and delicious food by cycling the hills of Tuscany. The area is full of castle towns, each with a fascinating history.

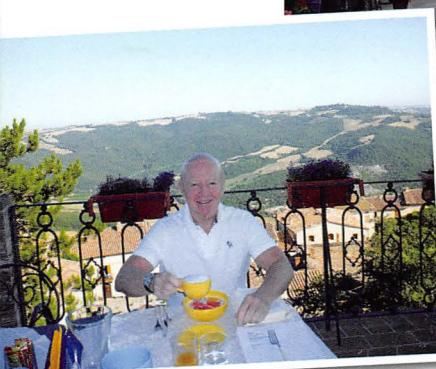
We drove from Perugia airport to Florence where we checked into the Sheraton Hotel on the city outskirts. The next morning we drove south to the Val d'Orcia region of Tuscany, which is characterised by gentle cultivated hills and picturesque towns – a landscape immortalised in numerous Renaissance paintings. In 2004 the region became a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

At Rocca d'Orcia castle town, we stayed at the tasteful Hotel San Simeone. Each morning we dined on the balcony overlooking the Tuscan

countryside, with vineyards and ancient olive groves stretching as far as the eye can see. After returning from our daily excursions we enjoyed the heated pool as the Tuscan sun set and the temperature fell.

Our first excursion was to the castle town of Pienza in Siena Province, a Renaissance city at the top of a small mountain with its exquisite Palazzo commanding breathtaking views of the surrounding countryside. The city was the home town of Pope Pius II, Enea Silvio Piccolomini, who lived between 1405 and 1464 and was pope from 1458 until his death. As pope, he ordered the transformation of his home town with possibly the first city planning exercise in Europe. The pope's palazzo is a well-preserved example of the palace architecture and interior decoration of that period. We toured the rooms, guided by a proud Pienza native whose heavily-accented English added delightful colour to her narrative. Everything in the palace has been preserved as it was when the pope used it as a summer residence. A man of the world, before becoming pope he undertook journeys throughout Europe, crossing the Alps to reach Basel and even visiting England and Scotland. At one point he served Frederick III's court in Vienna. He rose to become Bishop of Trieste and then of Siena. He authored a number of books including his 13-volume autobiography – the only one ever written by a reigning pope. Before his ascension to the papacy he also wrote the *Tale of Two Lovers*, a romance book. In 1460 he proclaimed an unsuc-

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TUSCAN FUN
Mobius takes in the sights and sounds – and fine coffee – of one of Italy's most delightful regions

cessful crusade that was to last three years. He also persuaded Vlad the Impaler of Romania (the inspiration for Bram Stoker's *Dracula*) to start a war against Mehmed II, the Ottoman sultan.

After cycling back from Pienza to the Hotel San Simeone we left for our next stop, Cortona in Arezzo province, which borders the provinces of Siena and Perugia. Once an Etruscan city, it was the setting for the film *Under the Tuscan Sun*. We stayed at the picturesque Relais Borgo San Pietro hotel; a beautifully restored 17th century farm which is located 4 kilometres below the Cortona castle city and has a large swimming pool surrounded by olive trees, cypress trees, lavender and rosemary. The next day we cycled 600 metres up to the old Cortona castle city and found medieval architecture with steep narrow streets ending with vistas of the countryside below. Any walk in the town meant that you were climbing or descending and only the main street, Via Nazionale, is flat with the locals calling it by its old name Ruga Piana, or “level street.” The most ambitious walk was to the fortress surmounting the city, Fortezza di Girifalco, originally built during Etruscan times and witness to many battles over the centuries. In the 15th century when the rulers of Florence held sway in the region, Cosimo I de' Medici was impressed by the stronghold's strategic position. Using Florentine money and heavy local taxation he expanded it to the huge bulwark it is today.

After climbing down from the fortress we retired to the Ristorante el Cacciatore on the Via Roma. One glance at the beefy waiters convinced us that the food must be good and we dug in. The pasta was first class, particularly after the proprietor shaved black truffles over it. This was accom-

We dined on the balcony overlooking the Tuscan countryside, with vineyards and ancient olive groves

panied by Dalcero Cortona wine which set off the food marvellously. There are 22 local producers of wines in Cortona using the Cortona Designation of Origin appellation. Wine production started here in Etruscan times, and currently the local Cortona Rosso grapes are mixed with grapes of other varieties to yield some great vintages.

On other days we sampled restaurants near the hotel. The highlights were Il Melone Ristorante where we had exceptional chicken with ham and veal scallopini. Our other favourite was Canta Napoli with its gracious family owners who welcomed us a few evenings and remembered what we liked. One night we arrived at 10 pm after a long cycling trip and were surprised to find the restaurant still packed with happy diners. We had delicious mozzarella, swordfish carpaccio, veal, pasta vongole with clams and, of course, Cortona wines.

Our longest cycling trip turned out to be 120 kilometres when we made the mistake of deciding to cycle around Lago Trasimeno, a large shallow lake lying in a natural basin with no outlet. It is nevertheless rich in pike, carp and other fish, and was designated a natural park in 1995. A 50-kilometre bicycle path was opened in 2003 around the lake, but unfortunately it does not completely encircle it so we had to resort to some rough unpaved sections and busy roads.

We started our cycling from Castiglione del Lago, the main town on the lake, whose character is derived from its Roman plan with main streets laid out like a chessboard. It still looks like a fortified town with its ancient walls. Because of its strategic position, over the centuries it was squabbled over by Perugia, Arezzo, Siena and Florence. During the 13th century the German Frederic II of Swabia dominated the area and ordered the reconstruction of the town and castle in the way which has survived until today.

The following morning we mounted our bicycles at 9 am for our next excursion, to the hot mineral water resort town of Terme Rapolano. Arriving at 2 pm at the San Giovanni Terme Rapolano Hotel we were grateful for the warm (39 C) outdoor and indoor pools rich with healing sulphur and calcium bicarbonate. The waters are reputedly good for treating skin problems as well as motor and respiratory systems. After a wonderful massage and a long relaxing soak we decided that cycling back was not an option so we took the train from the small Rapolano Terme station, arriving in the warm evening at Cortona station to end a truly memorable trip. ■