

GOING PLACES

JOHN COONEY



SAN GIMIGNANO *and Italian must-sees*



If one day you happen to be in Italy, and you find yourself surrounded by vineyards and olive groves and cypress trees and meandering lanes and medieval hilltop towns, you're probably in Tuscany. And if one of those hilltop towns dominates the skyline and bristles with towers and looks vaguely famous, it's probably San Gimignano ...

Tuscany is one of many lovely things about Italy. That long, skinny, boot-shaped country has hung down into the Mediterranean for ... well, forever – and has attracted wanderers and wayfarers from every point on the compass for nearly as long.

It's not hard to see why. I mean, these laid-back Italians have it all!

If you enjoy sniffing around Very Old Stuff, they've got the Eternal City of Rome, with its Colosseum and Forum and Trevi Fountain and St Peter's Basilica. If you like goosebumpy ancient ruins, they've got the buried city of Pompeii. If you prefer canals and bridges and music and romance, try losing yourself in enchanting Venice. And if you're into 'la dolce vita' (the sweet life) with fine food, fine wine and lively conversation – hey, take your pick!

We spent a day (and could've stayed a week) in one gorgeous little spot on the Italian Riviera. Suspended between plunging cliffs and the blue-blue sea is Portofino – reputedly the most-photographed small harbour anywhere. It used to be a fishing village until it was discovered by Europe's glitterati. But it still remains utterly charming with its stacked-up orange and yellow houses, bright-painted rowboats, intimate cafes and jaw-dropping views.

We walked and climbed and oohed and aahed ... took a small-boat cruise along the stunning coastline ... ate lunch at a waterfront *spaghetteria* ... lingered over a glass of Chianti red ... and promised ourselves that we'd come back.

We spent another "wish-would-longer" day in Sorrento, further south on the Bay of Naples. This (according to Roman legend)

was once the abode of the sirens, those naughty mermaids who lured seamen to their death with their sweet songs. Ulysses resisted their call (the legend claims) by stuffing the ears of his crew with wax and tying himself to the mast of his ship!

I never saw or heard any mermaids (although my wife had the wax ready, just in case). But I was totally seduced by this spectacular resort-town with its vines and bougainvillea and lemon groves and zigzagging bends and head-spinning drops and picture-postcard villas that cling to the vertical cliff-face.

We did some more walking, climbing, oohing and aahing ... sampled the region's famous *limoncello* (a delicious lemon-flavoured liqueur) ... and fought our way bravely through the largest, yummiest, cheesiest pizza we'd ever seen!

It was Tuscany, however, that stole our hearts, although it's hard to explain why. In part it's those endless dreamy landscapes filled with olives and grapes and old stone houses perched





on the edge of narrow, windy roads. It's also Tuscany's relaxed, unhurried, been-around-for-hundreds-of-years mood – it makes you want to put down roots and hang about.

We squeezed in a day-trip that included Pisa with its majestic cathedral and iconic Leaning Tower (it really *does* lean, no kidding) ... some local 'beaches' (crowded strips of rock-strewn sand, lined with *chaise longues* and sun-umbrellas for hire) ... and the medieval town of Siena, with its orange-tiled roofs and rabbit-warren lanes and 12th-century palaces and facades.

We sat amongst the Sunday crowds in the vast Piazza del Campo and got carried away by the hustle and bustle and fun that was all around us.

A further one-hour drive took us to the fortified town of San Gimignano. And the first thing we learnt was the correct pronunciation: you sing it, more than say it, and let it roll off your tongue – “*San-jim-an-YAAAR-no!*”



The second thing we learned was that these 800-year-old towns began their hill-top histories as independent city-states – ruled by lords who, because they had no TV, spent their weekends bickering, squabbling and feuding with the neighbours.

The third thing we learned was that San Gimignano owes its famous Manhattan skyline to rival families who tried to outdo each other by building taller and taller towers. In its prosperous heyday there were originally 76 ... 13 of which are still standing!

San Gimignano



This magnificent old fort with its mansions and monasteries lies sunburnt and sleepy under the Tuscan sky and simply drips with atmosphere. But don't take my word for it – you've gotta see it for yourself!

When, finally, our tired feet threatened to go on strike, we sat at a wobbly table in a little *piazza* (square) ... ordered a *caffè* ... and watched a just-married bride-and-groom climb into a tiny white Fiat Bambina and drive off down the cobblestoned streets to a chorus of "Arrivederci!"

Magic? You bet! It felt like they did it just for us ...



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