

ON FOOT IN TUSCANY

In search of an authentic holiday that combines the buzz of a foreign city with a holistic approach to wellbeing, **Sumeera Dawood** laced up her walking shoes and explored the cities of Florence and Siena

When I told my friends that I was travelling through Tuscany on foot, I was surprised by the response. “Tuscany, yes – but on foot?,” questioned one.

While others simply giggled kindly at what would be my first attempt at a walking holiday. None of them had heard of the Via Francigena: the network of paths across Italy used by pilgrims who, since 800 AD, were making their way to Rome, the religious hub of the Europe at that time.

Lesser known than Spain’s Camino de Santiago, the Via Francigena is an equally ancient and fascinating pilgrim path. My idea was to walk certain parts of it that still exist – some stretches guided and others solo – as I made my way through the cities of Florence and Siena.

Walking, I discovered, offered me the perfect reprieve from my usually frantic life: it allowed me to slow down, switch off, take stock and see so much more. It also allowed for frequent stops for samples of chianti in the vineyards, to nibble some olives or to nip into an art gallery. Whether you’re passing

through a city, farmland or walled village clinging to a hill, you know you’re soaking up knowledge of local life in the best possible way, gleaning a real feel for the history, culture and cuisine Tuscany has to offer. More importantly, you’re doing it in a way that leaves your body energised and your soul nourished.

City splendour

Striding out in Florence, the first thing that struck me was how many people get around without a car. Women cycled in chiffon skirts while the men, who looked as if they’d just stepped out of a Tom Ford ad, walked briskly from one corner of the city to the other without, it seemed, breaking a sweat.

Our first stop on the Via Francigena kicked off at the epicentre of the old city, the Piazza Della Repubblica. Once a Roman forum, the square is flanked by the Arno River, Florence’s high street and what used to be a red light district. The city was buzzing, and with sights such as Michelangelo’s David in the Accademia, works by Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci in the

Uffizi Gallery and Brunelleschi’s impressive Duomo in such close proximity to one another, there was a surprise around every corner. I hungrily took it in, afraid to miss a thing. It hardly felt as if I’d been on my feet for most of the day.

The simplest things added to the magic of walking the length of Florence, or Firenze as its known in Italian: exquisitely carved lampposts, colourful flowerpots hanging outside tiny apartments, and wafts of sweet jasmine in bloom lining the streets.

Out of the city towards Oltrarno – “the other side of the Arno River” – we passed through artisan workshops and stores where it became evident that the Italian culture of craftsmanship is far from lost. Here they still revere investing time in perfecting that once-off pair of leather shoes, in making the smoothest glass of Tuscan wine, in producing rich time-matured, natural cheese.

I thought about this as I walked all the way home. In fact, Tuscans revere even the simple act of walking – they wouldn’t dream of driving to a shop just 10 minutes away. In my daily life, walking instead of driving doesn’t even cross my mind. And yet, on the rare occasions that I have gone for a walk, it feels good: more than just exercise, it’s as if each step is a conscious act of self-love, of giving to myself, of craftsmanship towards the person I’d like to become. A friend describes her daily walks as her “spa trip for the soul”. She’s right.

Natural high

The next few nights I spent in Il Salviatino, a restored villa perched on the hillside village of Fiesole about 5km out of the city centre. Deep set in nature, the hotel has its own nature trails – one of which touches on the Via Francigena. Because the pilgrim path isn’t a single track, but a network of branching roads, you can split your days in one city doing various parts of the path – each one offering you a different perspective of the city.

From Fiesole at sunrise, the surrounding hill towns were dipped in hues of red, pink and orange. Down below were spectacular views of the slumbering Florentine city centre where neo-classical buildings live side-by-side with Gothic domes in a paintbox palette of pastels. The air was cool, and as I walked my way up the steep winding paths of Fiesole, I considered why it was so important for pilgrims to travel by foot. After only a few days on this Tuscan journey it had become clear to me that walking, besides its health benefits, clears the mind. My head

WHERE TO STAY:

- ▶ Il Salviatino Hotel and Spa: salviatino.com; +39-055-904-1111
- ▶ Hotel Delle Nazioni: hoteldellenazioniflorence.com; +39-055-28-3575
- ▶ The Grand Hotel Continental Siena: royaldemeure.com; +39-0577-56011



The village of Monteriggioni is set on a steep hill



Sumeera and guide Costanza Ricardi pass a field of poppies



A typical Tuscan village grocery store

The walled village of Monteriggioni up ahead

TRAVEL ADVISORY: READER OFFER

► Priced from R11 550 per person sharing, dip into Italian culture with Flight Centre's Tuscan Magic travellers' special. This package includes return flights from Johannesburg, return airport-hotel transfers, four nights at the Delle Nazioni Hotel in Florence with breakfast daily, a San Gimignano & Chianti tour with wine tasting, half-day tour to Pisa, a Wanna Be Italiano cooking class plus a visit to the central market of Florence with lunch and wine tasting. This package is valid for travel between July 1 and September 5, 2011 but does not include travel insurance, which is recommended. To book the Tuscan Magic trip, contact Flight Centre on 0860-400-747 or visit flightcentre.co.za Quote *Shape* and WEBxxxx to get the special reader offer. *Terms and conditions apply

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

► Pack as light as possible. Don't forget to include a pair of comfortable walking shoes, hat, light raincoat and sunblock.
► A Schengen visa is needed when travelling to Italy. To apply for one, you need a copy of your confirmed flight, accommodation and itinerary. Your application will cost around R580.

Sitting down for lunch
in Monteriggioni



was free of complex thoughts and to-do lists for days, and that kind of freedom made up for the aching muscles I had at the end of each day.

Siena serenity

For the second leg of our trip, we made our way by coach through Chianti to the walled city of Siena. I couldn't have walked the distance but I spotted paths and beautiful views that we couldn't fully explore because we didn't walk.

Built on three hills, the city felt more like a village: the streets were cobbled, the neighbourhoods divided into 17 *contrada* or quarters (each marked by their own animal sign on its outside walls), and the eateries still largely family-run. Happy to don my walking shoes again, we walked on the Via Francigena through the length of Siena. I was thrilled to discover that the hotel we stayed at was literally on the pilgrim path!

Rural renewal

Our next part of the trail with local walking guide, Costanza Ricardi, started from Abbadia Isola, about 10 minutes outside of Siena. A far more popular part of the path, the trail – which aptly begins from a Benedictine monastery – was clearly marked with red and white Via Francigena stickers on wooden poles. We walked through fields of poppies, passed pig farms, and moved onto service roads between smallholdings.

Other travellers passed us by, but instead of stopping to chat, we were all lost in our own reveries. While I'm not religious, I felt richer having taken this spiritual odyssey; and as the path delved deeper into thicker and thicker forested terrain, I could feel my mind expand.

And then we saw it: the walled town of Monteriggioni. Set on a steep hill, the town towered over the rural landscape – it was the only blob of brown stone in a kaleidoscope of green. Inside the stone boundary, I caught my breath before I walked the walls separated by 14 lookout towers and sat inside the tiny chapel. The view was awesome: rolling hills, lush valleys, fields of flowers, with a few scattered hilltop towns here and there. It's the kind of scene that epitomised the Tuscan landscape, the postcards have nothing on the real thing.

When it was time for me to head back to Joburg, I left with a clear mind, a rejuvenated perspective of what I want from life, and the knowledge that my body is in fact capable of so much more than I've allowed it. It's taken walking the Via Francigena at the age of 31 for me to finally feel the power of my own body. The downside? It's highly addictive – I planned my next walking holiday on the flight back! ☺

*Sumeera Dawood travelled to Italy courtesy of Flight Centre, Il Salviatino and The Grand Hotel Continental.

WALKING TOURS

► Siena Walking Tours: sienawalkingtours.com;
+39-0577-281605