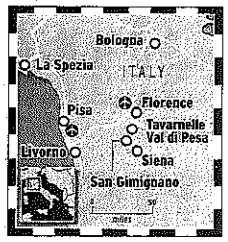
Savouring Tuscan tastes

NICOLA ISEARD discovers the ideal base for exploring the region's many delights, from Florence's museums to Il Palio in Siena, and learns the secret of making perfect tortellini

Pictures: NICOLA ISEARD

TOPPING: Nicola loved San Gimignano's Torre Grosso and, inset, learning to make tortellini



● GETTING THERE:
Castello del Nero (dialling from UK: 0039 055 8064 70/www.castellodelnero.com) offers doubles from €400 per night (two sharing), B&B. easyJet (0871 244 2366/www.easyjet.com) offers return flights from Gatwick to Pisa from £54. Auto Europe (0800 358 1229/www.auto-europe.co.uk) offers car hire in Pisa from £18 per day. Italian State Tourist Board: 020 7408 1254/www.italiantouristboard.co.uk

FIRST we heard the drums. Then, as we drew closer, the almighty roar of a crowd. As we weaved our way through Siena's tangle of medieval streets that unravel out on to the grand Il Campo piazza, we realised that our spontaneous visit to the city for a quiet dinner-for-two might have landed us with more than we'd bargained for.

Finally we reached the fan-shaped piazza. The huge crowd there were now deadly silent. All eyes were glued, as though it were some holy shrine, to the towering Gothic town hall, orange-tinged by the setting sun.

Suddenly, a red and white flag was thrust from a first-floor window alongside a blue and burnt amber one and, to the left of us, a group of around 50 people erupted into cheers. Over the next 20 minutes, eight more flags were hoisted. Each time a new section of the crowd roared. I saw one woman sob with joy.

This remarkable scene, which my partner Christian and I stumbled upon, was part of the lead-up to Siena's legendary Il Palio horse race, which takes place every July and August. The whole city had gathered here to find out which 10 of the 17 contrades (districts) had been chosen to participate in this year's event. Each flag represented a selected contrade.

Before long we were swept up in the revelry, sipping glasses of chianti outside one of the terraced restaurants that line the piazza, and tapping our feet to the drums that paraded past us: a never-ending procession of men clad in medieval hose and waving banners. Quiet dinners for two, we decided, are so overrated.

This was the beauty of staying at Castello del Nero in the small town of Tavarnelle Val di Pesa, half an hour's drive away in the thick of Tuscany's Chianti hills. With Siena, Florence and Pisa right on our doorstep we hopped in the car each morning, map in hand, and went exploring.

Waking up to rain that morning we'd decided it was the perfect time to "do" Florence's museums. If I'm honest, we actually only visited the Galleria dell'Accademia, to lay eyes on Michelangelo's remarkable David statue, carved from a 16ft hunk of marble. I've seen a hundred magazine pictures of it but faced with the real thing, I caught my breath.

Tempted as we were to visit the Uffizi (one of the world's top museums), by midday the rain had given way to glorious sunshine and we reasoned that one of the best ways to soak up Florence was to walk it.

We weaved our way southwards to the Duomo's glorious red-tiled dome and gaped in awe at the cathedral's magnitude and intricate marble. Then it was over the River Arno by the medieval Vecchio bridge, with its jewellers and art dealers.

As beautiful as Florence is, it was the walled hilltop town of San Gimignano, halfway between Florence and Siena, that did it for me. Its 14 medieval towers are visible from miles away. We bought ice creams and scaled the 218 steps of the Torre Grosso, the tallest one, to marvel at the sweeping views of patchwork fields.

Besides its location, there are a couple of other reasons we'd chosen to stay at Castello del Nero. Firstly, this converted 12th-century castle, set on a hill among 1,000 acres of farmland, vineyards and olive groves, is rather splendid. Originally a noble residence, it was turned into a 50-room hotel in 2006; think grand rooms with lofty arched ceilings, frescoes and Renaissance paintings, and a terrace overlooking the grounds.

It also has a fantastic spa. While the focus is on the über-pampering ESPA treatments, we loved the outdoor pool, with its sweeping Tuscan views. Eager to learn the secrets of pasta making we'd signed up for a two-hour private cooking class. If you have ever wondered how to mould ricotta cheese and pear parcels into cookbook-perfect tortellini, head chef Stefano Santo is your man.

After our lesson, we took our beautifully presented tortellini and a bottle of Vernaccia di San Gimignano to sun loungers on one of the grass terraces, the rolling landscape unravelling at our feet. The sun was just starting to set, throwing reds and pinks over the umbrella pines and cypress trees beyond.

Perhaps quiet dinners for two aren't so overrated after all.

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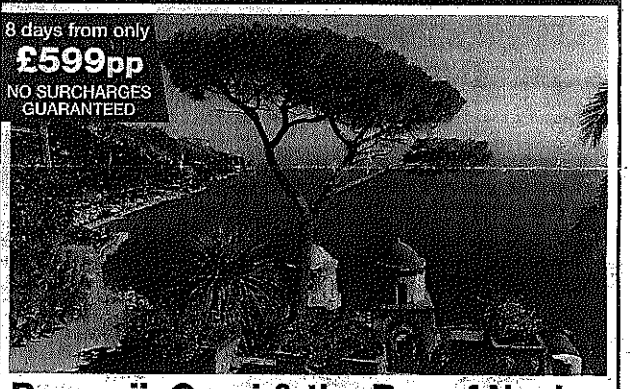

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