



Walking in Northern Tuscany

Countryside, gardens, villas & sculpture

24 September–1 Oct 2023 (MJ 904)

8 days • £3,420

Lecturer: Dr Thomas Leo True

Countryside, gardens, villas & sculpture in northern Tuscany.

Six country walks amid the beautiful scenery around Fiesole and Lucca (between 3 and 7 kilometres).

Special arrangements to visit villas and gardens, some with proprietors or gardeners.

Visits to places of artistic and gastronomic interest, and to picturesque towns and villages.

Pleasing views, cooling breezes, the cultivation of vine and olive, light and space: these were key in encouraging wealthy merchants in Florence and Lucca to build villas in the surrounding countryside as their summer residences. But just as the town houses were constructed to demonstrate the accomplishments of the patron and the skills of his architect, their country villas did the same, with the added benefit of a garden.

In these less-visited corners of Tuscany (we deliberately avoid crowded spots), there is an extraordinary number of villas and gardens. This tour includes some of the best, linking them by geographical proximity – and in some cases the feasibility of walking between them – and for the purposes of aesthetic and architectural comparison. There is something about discovering these villas and gardens on foot which enables one better to understand their genius loci and their merits.

As gardens were considered extensions of the villa, they were designed to display artworks of the horticultural variety as well as sculpture of stone and bronze. The shapes of the topiary, the patterns of parterres and the delight of the vistas combine with the beauties of Renaissance and Baroque sculpture carefully positioned to best effect. Traditional sculpture is still practised in Tuscany; in the gracious town of Pietrasanta, there are dozens of small workshops where the five-hundred-year long tradition of delicately shaping a block of marble into art is still very much alive.

Beyond the gardens, the Tuscan climate lends itself to producing a number of well-structured red wines based on Sangiovese and refined white wines, as well as excellent olive oil. The combination of care for provenance of ingredient and excellent cooking means that



Tuscan landscape, etching c. 1920.

the meals should be of a high order. Matching local wines with food is an increasingly popular craft, and this tour offers an opportunity to experience this first hand.

Itinerary

Day 1: Villa La Pietra, Fiesole. Fly at c. 8.15am from London Heathrow to Pisa (British Airways). Villa La Pietra was built in the 15th century by Francesco Sassetti, manager of the Medici Bank, and owned and embellished last century by aesthete and historian Sir Harold Acton. Tour the magnificent garden and visit the villa's interior. Drive to the hotel in Fiesole for the first of three nights.

Day 2: Fiesole, San Domenico. Visit Fiesole's cathedral and then, after an initial steep climb, enjoy an easy walk through the town to Monte Ceceri on small roads and woodland paths, passing stone quarries where Leonardo launched his flying machines (c. 3 km, 1½ hours). Walk the old road to the convent of San Domenico where Fra' Angelico first worked, and see his altarpiece there.

Day 3: Settignano, Pian de' Giullari. A moderate morning walk to Settignano on undulating farm tracks and chalky paths through olive groves and woodland, with fine views of Florence (c. 5.5 km, 2 hours). Villa Gamberaia is one of the most perfect examples of garden art, 18th- and late 19th-century with a formal water garden and high hedges. Drive to Pian de' Giullari for lunch. Overlooking Florence, San Miniato al Monte is a splendid Romanesque basilica with a superb Early Renaissance Chapel.

Day 4: Fiesole, Pistoia, Lucca. Visit Villa Medici, built in the 15th century and subsequently home to Sibyl Cutting and Iris Origo, and Villa Le Balze, where Cecil Pinsent designed a series of green 'rooms' which cling to a steep slope. The exceptionally attractive town of Pistoia has important sculpture including the pulpit in Sant'Andrea by Giovanni Pisano, one of the finest Gothic ensembles south of the Alps, and a silver altarpiece in the cathedral, the product of 150 years' workmanship. First of four nights in Lucca.

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Day 5: Lucca, Matraia, Villa Oliva Buonvisi. San Martino is a Romanesque cathedral with the exquisite Gothic effigy of Ilaria del Carretto. Drive mid-morning to Matraia to begin a short but moderate walk through the olive groves (2.5 km, 30 mins). Lunch and olive-oil tasting at a farm overlooking the hillside. An easier walk follows, on country paths and lanes beside some of Lucca's finest summer retreats. An initial steep descent to Marlia requires walking poles (c. 3 km, 1 hour). Visit the 15th-century Villa Oliva, once owned by the powerful Buonvisi family.

Day 6: Compitese villages, Pietrasanta. Pietrasanta is famous for its skilled marble workers; visit a workshop where classical and contemporary works are produced using methods unchanged since the Middle Ages. A moderate walk on footpaths and country roads through the villages of Sant'Andrea di Compito and San Giusto di Compito (c. 3.5 km, 1½ hours).

Day 7: Camigliano, Villa Torrigiani. Drive to Camigliano to begin a moderate country walk on grassy paths and lanes to Sant'Andrea in Caprile (7 km of which 3.5 km is steadily uphill, 2½ hours). Lunch before visiting Villa Torrigiani and its garden. Dating back to the 16th century when it was owned by the Buonvisi family, the garden was transformed in the late 17th century by Niccolao Santini, the Lucchese ambassador to Louis XIV. Return to Lucca for a wine tasting followed by dinner.

Day 8. Fly from Pisa to London Heathrow, arriving c. midday.

Lecturer

Dr Thomas-Leo True. Art historian specialising in Renaissance and Baroque architecture in Rome and the Papal States, and Assistant Director of the British School at Rome from September 2015. He received his doctorate from Cambridge University, and also studied at the British School at Rome, where he was Rome Scholar (2009–10) and Giles Worsley Fellow (2013). He has lived in Le Marche region of Italy and is currently writing his first book on the Marchigian Cardinals of Pope Sixtus V.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,420 or

£3,270 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £3,920 or £3,770 without flights.

Included: flights (Euro Traveller) with British Airways (Airbus A321); travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 4 lunches and 4 dinners with wine; all admissions; all tips for waiters, drivers and guides; all taxes; the services of the lecturer.

Accommodation. **Hotel Villa Fiesole** (villafiesole.it): an excellent 4-star hotel just outside Fiesole, balancing Italian charm and modern comforts, with beautiful views of Florence. **Hotel Ilaria, Lucca** (hotelilaria.com): an excellently situated 4-star, within the city walls, with friendly staff.

How strenuous? This is a walking tour, graded **moderate**. There are 6 walks, 2 easy and 4 moderate. It is essential for participants to have appropriate walking footwear, be in good physical condition and to be used to country walking with uphill and downhill content. If you are used to them you may find walking poles useful. Average distance by coach per day: 32 miles.

Group size: between 8 and 18 participants.

We are happy to advise on linking accommodation and transport.

Walking tours

This is a walking tour. Our walking tours require a different scale of fitness and agility to our other tours. You should be used to country walking and have a good level of fitness and balance. There are ascents and descents, climbs over stiles and terrain which can be uneven, loose, slippery or muddy. Appropriate footwear and clothing are essential. Only in weather conditions which are so extreme as to be dangerous would a walk be cancelled.

Please attend to the walk descriptions for details of the distances covered, lengths of walks and type of terrain.

We also grade both individual walks and tours as a whole using the following system:

Easy. A short and mostly flat walk lasting 1–2 hours, on well maintained footpaths or roads, perhaps with short periods of gentle ascent or descent. An 'easy' tour will consist of mostly 'easy' walks, perhaps with a couple of 'moderate' ones. There might not be a walk every day.

Moderate. A walk of 2–3 hours' duration, with significant elevation gain, or stretches of rocky, gravelly or slippery paths. A moderate tour will consist mostly of moderate walks, perhaps with a couple of easy or challenging ones, too. There is likely to be a walk every day.

Challenging. A walk that is longer than 3 hours, has steeper, longer or more frequent episodes of ascent and descent, or is tricky under foot. Tours graded as 'challenging' will consist mostly or entirely of this level of walk, perhaps with some moderate or easier walks too.