



# La dolce vita... and how

If you're going on a trip to Tuscany, why just visit Pisa when you can take in Forte dei Marmi too, asks Kate Wickers

**I**n Pisa's Piazza dei Miracoli, a steady stream of tourists line up to have their photos taken, positioning their hands to give the illusion they're single-handedly holding up the famous Torre Pendente – the leaning tower.

Meanwhile, I'm enjoying a gelato and biding my time until I have the tower all to myself. Most visitors tick off Pisa in just a few hours, but I'm lingering in the city for 24 hours before heading to the nearby beach resort of Forte dei Marmi, which makes for a perfect combination of twin-stay break. Flights to Pisa are cheaper than elsewhere in Tuscany and, compared with the likes of Lucca or Florence, accommodation is a relative bargain. Plus, there's a vast choice of bars, cafes, and restaurants to choose from,

offering authentic food at excellent value.

At 6pm, once the hordes have thinned, I head into the Duomo to enjoy it in peace. The oldest parts date back to 1064, but the main façade was completed in the 13th century. Not to be missed is the wooden ceiling embellished with 24-carat gold, and 14th-century octagonal pulpit sculpted from Carrara marble. Next door you'll find the pretty baptistery, and the Camposanto, an atmospheric cemetery within a cloistered quadrangle. I save the leaning tower, with its views over Piazza dei Miracoli, until just before sunset, when the marble is positively aglow.

A stalwart on Pisa's dining scene since the Eighties, Ristorante La Buca is known for speciality dishes of the region, including creamy burrata with anchovies, paccheri (large



The striking Tuscan coastline, main; the lobby of the La Serena hotel, above

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tubular pasta) with a seafood ragu, and a pillowy, signature pistachio soufflé. The three-course meal with wine costs me €30.

Next morning I stroll along the banks of the river Arno to the waterside triple-tiered church of Chiesa di Santa Maria della Spina, a gothic gem with towering spires and statues built to house a thorn from Christ's crown, the story goes. To breakfast like an Italian, I saunter across the Ponte di Mezzo bridge, taking in the rippling pastel reflections of grand palazzos,

to Borgo Stretto and its cafes under ancient porticoes. After a pastry with a marmalada filling and an espresso, I tucked my map away with a plan to get happily lost among the washing strung, ochre-hued lanes of Pisa's oldest quarters, remembering to look up so as not to miss the flower-filled balconies. I pop into Palazzo Blu – a pale blue 14th-century building housing Pisan art from the 14th to 20th centuries, then explore the Orto e Museo Botanico – walled gardens filled with palms, ponds and antique greenhouses, home to Europe's oldest university botanical collection, dating from 1543. Then, it's time to catch my train.

The chic resort of Forte dei Marmi sits on the Tuscan coastline, a 40-minute, scenic journey from Pisa. In early May, the beach clubs have just come out of hibernation and the atmosphere is wonderfully relaxed. Not yet the heady months of July and August, there's no extra charge to settle down in a deckchair at sun-dappled Alpe Mare, a beautifully restored 1920s

beach club belonging to legendary Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli. With its turquoise-blue changing huts and elegant cabanas it looks like a film set designed by Wes Anderson. An astounding 80 beach clubs line Forte's generous sandy beach, including those that are more budget friendly places such as Bagno Sacro Cuore, where I go barefoot in the sand for pizza.

Tourism began here in the late 1800s, but it was the likes of Sophia Loren and Giorgio Armani who put the resort on the map while holidaying in the Sixties. You'll find no high-rise builds here, only attractive pastel-hued villas and period hotels, most extravagantly priced. A breath of fresh air on the scene is the recently opened and fully refurbished hotel La Serena in Vittoria Apuana, Forte's prettiest neighbourhood, where umbrella pines soar.

Built in the Sixties, restored design features of the era include the staircase, all swirling, green-painted ironwork, and the jelly bean-shaped swimming pool, which just begs to be lounged at, Campari in hand. Of the 28 rooms, six are suites, and there's a garden with plenty of areas to relax, and a tucked-away art fresco gym. There's a daily free "light" lunch of hot seafood salad, grilled aubergine, local cheese, and focaccia. Complimentary green bicycles are casually lined up to the side of the building, which is by far the easiest and most fun mode of transport for exploring.

My garden suite is huge, with a Sixties-inspired designer leather bed and a lavish Carrera marble bathroom with views to the mountains it was chiselled

from. On my terrace, I sip a local white wine, and enjoy views to the Apuan Alps, where I spot snow on high peaks. In the other direction, over villa rooftops, I spy the ocean.

More bohemian, the hill town of Pietrasanta, famed for its galleries and public artworks, lies five kilometres from Forte. On arrival, the first gargantuan piece you'll see is Colombian artist Botero's bronze sculpture of a warrior. Of all the sculptors lured here to work with marble quarried from the nearby Carrera mines it is Botero who left the greatest mark.

On my final evening, I join in with an age-old Italian tradition – the passeggiata, a slow, sociable walk. In Forte's bijoux centre, elegant holidaymakers browse the boutiques of Italian design giants, among them Prada, Missoni, and Gucci. Arborescent trees line marble-paved piazzas, home to many a Michelin-starred restaurant, but you don't have to splash the cash to eat well. A generously stuffed focaccia at All' Antico Vinaio, located on pretty Piazza Garibaldi, goes down well with the jet set, as does seafood street food at local favourite, Pesce Baracca. As the sun sets, I follow the peacocking crowds along the 275-metre-long Pontile pier, built in 1876, to gaze back on Forte in all its perfectly manicured glory, the very vision of la dolce vita.

**Double rooms at Palazzo Cini start at £155, [www.palazzocinilux.com](http://www.palazzocinilux.com). Doubles at La Serena from £230 on B&B basis. The property is open from April to end of October, [www.laserenahotel.it](http://www.laserenahotel.it) Ryanair fly direct from Edinburgh to Pisa from £49.98, [www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)**



A Galileo tribute mural in Pisa by Brazilian street artist Eduardo Kobra



## Cooped up in the nicest way

Gaby Soutar nests in a cosy doocot conversion in Northumberland

I've stayed in safari tents, shepherd's huts, treehouses and yurts, but never a doocot. These structures, otherwise known as columbarians, were used to house pigeons and doves, which were kept for their meat, eggs and dung.

The Dovecot at Reedsford in North Northumberland was built for that purpose in the 18th-century, and was virtually derelict until owners, Wild Plum, reimaged and refurbished the Grade II listed property, then offered it as quirky and dog-friendly self-catering holiday accommodation last year. Now, it's part of Crabtree & Crabtree's portfolio of luxury holiday homes.

The architects added a south-facing extension to the original

structure, so there's just enough space inside for a couple to nest comfortably. However, they managed to retain the quirky character.

We especially loved that the inside of the building is still lined with the dinky pentagon-shaped coops, where the birds would roost. They've been sealed with a white cork and lime plaster, which gives the interior an adobe-like feel. Now, instead of feathered friends, these nooks are filled with books, detailing local walks, and useful objects.

On our weekend visit we're welcomed with goodies including, among other things, a posy of wildflowers, lemon drizzle cake and muesli from the nearby Heatherslaw Corn Mill.

These are served up in the biggest room – the open-plan

kitchen and living space. It's the new part of the building, on the ground floor, with an oak bench, farmhouse-style furniture and a small dining table pour deux, a squishy sofa and a smart kitchenette.

This area also has a view out to a small patch of lawn, with a bench and picnic seating. Beyond that, and before the lush hillside backdrop, there's a field's worth of cows.

Forget about the telly, as the beasts are surprisingly entertaining. Once every hour or so, the entire herd will start galloping, for no particular reason, in one direction, before resuming normal service, or they will stand stock still, and stare into the doocot.

The double-glazing means you can barely hear them moo. If you go outside they will come up to say hello, though the grass isn't always greener as they rejected my handfults. My favourite coo was the Highland Toffee-coloured one.

There are also plenty of baby rabbits to watch, as they scramble around the roots of the birch trees outside, and we spot a tree creeper hopping around one of the trunks.

The property also includes a mezzanine that boasts a Smart TV and wood-burning stove, which heats the bedroom above

with its insulated flue. This level also features the bathroom, with dappled moss-green tiles around the tub and a handheld shower.

You'll have to tackle a small metal staircase at bedtime. The king-sized bed is up in the tower's eaves, and features a cupola and tiny windows in some of the old pigeon coops, so it's flooded with diffuse light. At one point we can hear coo-ing up here. Are they the spirits of former residents, or is there one on the roof?

If you want to fly off and explore, there are plenty of footpaths to tackle nearby, and you're near the Northumberland National Park and the Cheviot Hills.

The Dovecot visitor book includes lots of recommendations. After browsing page one, we deliberate over a Farne Islands boat trip, and think about heading to Chillingham Castle to see the wild cattle, who are white and look quite different from our new friends.

In the end we settled on heading five minutes along the road to Heatherslaw Light Railway on the Ford and Etal Estates. Our carriage was the steam train Bunty, who took us on a sedate 20-minute journey to Etal.

**The Dovecot at Reedsford in North Northumberland makes for a refreshing weekend break – complete with cows**

There is nothing quite as relaxing as chugging along beside the water, with the steam draping behind like a silver feather boa. It was quite meditative, with the occasional gallous pheasant sighting to keep things interesting. No otters were spotted in the River Till, sadly, though they say it's a possibility.

In the village of Etal, you'll find Lavender Tearooms, where they serve Northumbrian singing hinnies, as well as the 14th-century ruin that is Etal Castle, which is free to explore, and The Black Bull inn, the only thatched pub in Northumberland.

On our return we dropped in at Doddington Dairy Milk Bar in Wooler. The ice-cream is great, but the Cuddy's Cave cheese is even better.

We took a block of that back to our dovecot. It was instinctive. We'd become homing pigeons.

**Two nights at The Dovecot at Reedsford available through Crabtree & Crabtree from £373. To book visit [www.crabtreeandcrabtree.com](http://www.crabtreeandcrabtree.com) or call 01573 226711**

## What happens to your luggage at the airport?

A travel expert tells Yolanne Fawehinmi everything you need to know about bags and handling

Have you ever wondered what happens to your luggage when you take a flight to go on holiday and check in? Many questions and causes for concern can pop up, too. Will it reach my destination? What happens if it gets lost or damaged?

But how safe is your luggage really when you check it in? A travel expert shares some insider information and explains everything you need to know. According to Justin Penny, head of aviation at Flight Centre UK, at check-in the traveller will weigh the item and the agent will print a label which contains information on the traveller, flight number and departure and arrival airport codes.

"It then goes on a conveyor belt where baggage handlers will inspect the items for security purposes and redirect them to the correct flight once cleared," says Penny. "Once loaded onto the plane, they are stored securely in the hold, which the passenger cannot access. On landing, they are unloaded from the hold, driven to the terminal and unloaded onto conveyor belts which will emerge at the baggage reclaim section.

"If a journey involves a connecting flight that doesn't involve going through customs and re-entering airspace through security, your baggage will be transferred to the next aircraft. However, for long international layovers, you may be temporarily reunited with your luggage before checking it back in for the next leg of the journey."

So how do items get lost? Airport staff process many checked items a day, meaning there's always room for error.



Checked in luggage is out of sight but rarely out of mind

"Checked items often get lost during flight connections and this can be the result of either mislabelling at the check-in desk, or a lack of time to transfer the baggage at the connecting airport," says Penny. "While human error is the most likely cause, even a label falling off from the journey between check-in and collection can cause bags to go missing in transit. At this point, baggage handlers leave no stone unturned looking for clues to associate the item to its owner."

Baggage handlers work hard to get luggage from A to B as quickly as they can and often have to work fast to ensure bags make their all-important connections. "Though highly uncommon, baggage can sometimes be damaged in the process, particularly hard-shell luggage with a thin casing, or luggage with handles left up or attachments that can get caught in machines," said Penny.

If luggage is damaged or missing, travellers should always notify the airline or the airline's handling agent before leaving the airport.

"Travellers should also contact their travel insurance provider. Flight Centre recently launched Captain's Pack, a range of benefits essential to hassle-free travel that offer peace of mind – the lost luggage tracking and cover is undoubtedly the most popular add-on among our customers travelling long-haul, or with connections."