

what lies beyond pisa

YOU HAVE HEARD OF PISA AND FLORENCE, BUT THE LAND OF TUSCANY HAS MUCH MORE TO OFFER IN ITS QUAIN TOWNS. **and** GOES BEYOND THE POPULAR DESTINATIONS TO DISCOVER THE SOUL OF THE PICTURESQUE ITALIAN REGION

Words and Images: Krishnaraj Iyengar

The caress of the Mediterranean summer breeze, the exhilarating whiff of a Tuscan cigar and the earthy warmth of a gruff Italian conversation between two burly gentlemen; this is what welcomes you to Tuscany, a soulful land of crimson wines, creamy Tortellinis, butter-smooth Tiramisus, boisterous laughter and animated conversation.

Tuscany, one of Italy's most popular contributions to the world tourist roadmap, has been spoken about much. Tuscan cities, like Pisa and Florence, are never off the tourist guidebook but in the rush to touch the historic sites, travellers often miss the picturesque region's soul; its people's warmth.

My wake-up call every morning was none other than my boisterous Italiano amico Ivano, with a Pavarottiesque "Chaaaaa kreesnaaa! Buon Giornooooo!" jolting me from dreamland to discover the Tuscany hidden between the lines in glossy travel brochures.

WHERE POETS LIVE

My first stop was Capalbio, a fairytale town in the province of Grosseto that boasts of the famous Villaggio Capalbio, a heaven for writers, musicians and honeymooners with its luxury cottages surrounded by the verdant landscape.

A heavy breakfast got me geared up for a drive again through the scenic countryside to arrive at Volterra, a quaint hilly town with a picturesque view of the Tuscan landscape, souvenir shops selling quaint weapons, cafes serving sumptuous local delights that would have even a vegetarian like me burp in approval.

Volterra's city square with Tuscany's oldest town hall and the old cathedral with Renaissance masterpieces decorating its interiors are what this little town offers to history lovers. While for connoisseurs of sculpture, a visit to Volterra's alabaster workshops leaves you spellbound at the depth of the portrayal of human forms and emotions carved out by the master craftsmen.

MARBLE MASTERPIECES

Following the off-beat track I reached Carrara, the world's marble capital. A visit to the marble factory was an unforgettable experience as I saw marble come alive with the most realistic works of sculpture.

A burly old gentleman at the factory drove me up the marble caves for the most breath-taking view of the steep plunge down the snow-white mountains and the pristine blue Terranean Sea, an inlet of the Mediterranean in the background!

There was a certain magic about these marble caves, especially at that height. Every crevice seemed to be smiling under the blistering Italian sun. Sitting at the very edge of the cave with my blue jeans whitewashed with marble dust, I enjoyed every bit of the breathtaking view and the sonorosity of the old signore's rustic twang and his vivid gesticulations, as he passionately explained the intricacies of working with marble.

BLING AND THE BUBBLY

From the top of the hill down to the ocean, Viareggio was next. An exotic sea-side Tuscan town with sprawling beaches, swank promenades, high heels strutting by million dollar yachts, luxury five star properties, Jazz cafes and piano bars, Viareggio is the rich man's Italy.





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Being a sea lover, I yearned for a glimpse of the light blue sea shimmering under the Tuscan sun from a veranda of the Grand Principe Di Piemonte hotel, where Napoleon is said to have stayed!

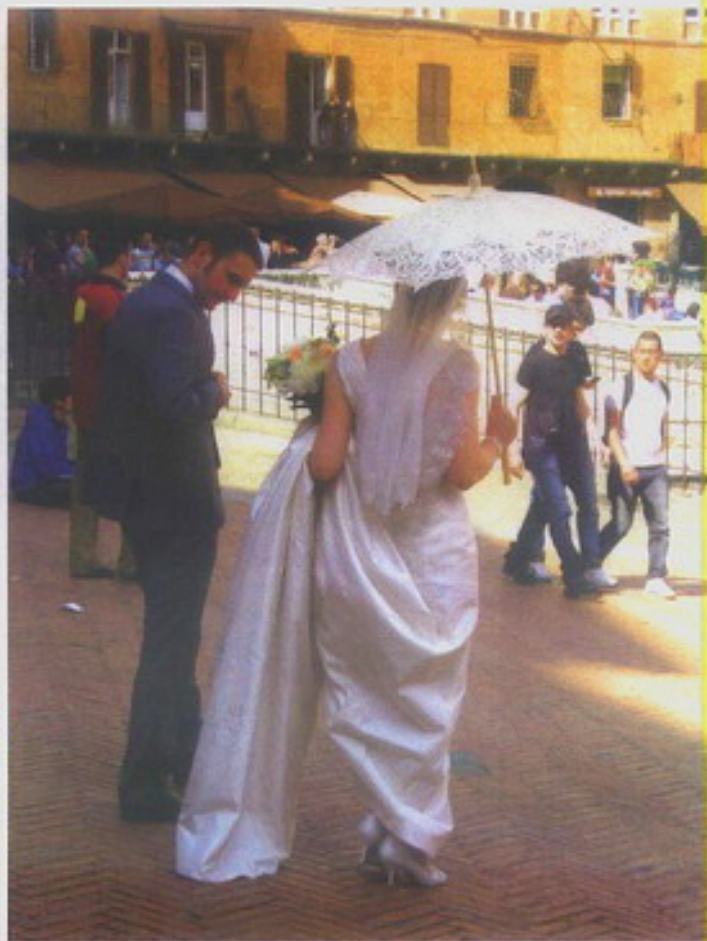
Vareggio is also every musician's dream, the home of the legendary Italian composer Giacomo Puccini, whose famous operas like *Turandot*, *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Tosca* to name a few, are an indispensable part of Italy's musical legacy. A marvel of sound engineering, the open air Puccini Theater built on the Puccini Lake in Torre del Lago was formerly the home of the maestro, now it hosts concerts and even has a music school. The picturesque lake was supposed to have been Puccini's greatest inspiration.

SMOKE AND A SIP

Tuscany is famed for its robust cigars and Florence (Florence in Italian) is also known

for its Tabaccheria tobacco stores. One of the highly acclaimed Tabaccherias of the city is the Sotto Portici, a favourite haunt for cigar aficionados where expert Marco Sbordella carefully handpicks cigars of different lengths and sizes and in impeccable English, provides a neat insight into the various aromas, their subtle differences, and other finer nuances. "These are extremely strong, you must break it in two halves to be able to enjoy it like a cigar," smiles Marco, cutting a dark-brown toadger into two.

Tuscany is synonymous with wines and how could I miss a trip to the Chianti wine region. At Chianti's Villa vignamaggio, wine tasting with exquisite cheese varieties by the expansive of the vineyards is pure bliss. "We prefer fruity wines as compared to the American penchant for the very oaky ones," explains expert Sandro Cheruzzi to the group of mixed international wine



lovers, as he flushed our goblets with the sought-after Chianti Classico. Meditating on the intoxicating flavours of the dry wine, I moved on to Siena, a young, vibrant town where I was delighted to witness a typical Italian wedding. The handsome groom carried his dainty bride out of the cathedral, welcomed by his cheering beer buddies, her emotional father and a very confident mother and the proud maid of honour. Like it is with Indians, marriage is a grandiose affair with the Italians, with pomp, show and tears.

SOLACE GUARANTEED

After a week of wining, walking and live history lessons, I arrived at Tuscany's tranquil getaway, Cortona, a sleepy little town known for its sloping cobbled pathways, cream coloured houses, quaint eateries and scenic countryside. Cortona is solace guaranteed.

A short drive brings you to another abode of tranquility, Arezzo, known for the St Francis Church, a place of peace for worshippers and tourists alike. Two simple yet profound words "Pace e Bene" (peace and goodness) were the fundamental beliefs of one of Christianity's greatest saints. Here, one can even find Capuchin Franciscan Friars (Franciscan monks) after whom the famous Cappuccino was named since the colour of the coffee resembled that of their light brown robes.

Exotic ice-cream parlors, a popular flea market and excellent fine dining options make Arezzo a favourite haunt of tourists round the year. The Le Logge del Vasari outdoor restaurant at Arezzo's city square is a gourmand's paradise with its mouth-watering signature condite con tartufi e funghi porcini, the l'ottima ribollita servita con cipolla fresca e crostone di pane and heavenly desserts. &.

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The most favoured route for people visiting Tuscany is to fly into one of its airports Pisa, Bologna or Florence. At Viareggio, visit the famous Carnival Museum to indulge the child in you.

