

Arial view of the Tuscan countryside from the top of San Gimignano Tower in Italy.



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AAA Colorado travel agent Catherine Sodini on the dragon stairs to the Chiang Mei temple, in northern Thailand. © Catherine Sodini

### Travel Edition 2018

AAA Colorado has hand-picked six destinations, on four continents and Hawaii, that take you on adventurous, delicious and otherworldly journeys. Our expert travel agents are ready to help make any of these experiences, or your next vacation, a lifelong memory. Call or visit any of our retail stores (see p. 11), or better yet, visit an agent at the two-day **2018 Vacations Showcase** event, Feb. 2-3, Sports Authority Field at Mile High. Bon voyage!

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Sunset toast on Arno River near Ponte Vecchio in Florence, Italy.



# Dolce far niente

(It is sweet to do nothing)

Autumn in the hills of **Umbria** and **Tuscany** is redolent with the smell of bonfires and woody herbs, the morning mist gently evaporating in the slanted sunshine. Gone are the crowds of summer, and in their place, a very different Italy emerges: languid and relaxed, as Italians sit back and chat amongst themselves, or with you, over a dish of pasta, or a tiny espresso.

**BY JENNIFER EREMEEVA**

**IT WAS TRUE LOVE**—not mine, but a friend's—that first took me to Tuscany in autumn. Lydia married Giancarlo in a spectacular villa outside Florence, but with no firm plans afterward, I decided on a two-week tour by train, with two nights' maximum in each major city, allowing me to check all the boxes on my Italian list. Happily, I was thrown off course almost immediately. Italy invited me to slow down and match her autumnal pace. So, I bought a detailed map of the region and focused on Tuscany alone.



Tourists enjoy Piazza del Campo square in Siena.

Tuscany and Umbria—adjoined at the very heart of Italy, north of Rome, from the Tyrrhenian Sea on the west to Monte Cucco Park in the east—these places are best experienced at a slower pace—no packing and unpacking every day, but instead choosing to do nothing at all, or engaging in an activity that takes more time that a quick-step tour itinerary would allow.

I choose to take a leisurely walk along the Via Francigena, a centuries-old pilgrimage route. Literally “the road that comes from France,” the Via Francigena is a simple, neatly maintained dirt track, marked only by its trademark: a silhouette of a pilgrim with sack and staff. These paths take one right through the heart of the region’s rolling hills, along the perimeter of olive groves and vineyards older than Christianity.

It was on foot that I first saw the 14 towers of San Gimignano. Built by powerful Tuscan aristocrats as a lasting memorial to their wealth and power, they offer an unrivaled panoramic view of the Tuscan countryside from their zeniths. At their base are several excellent restaurants serving the city’s signature Vernaccia di San Gimignano—a crisp white wine with floral accents of the region, pairing beautifully with *fagioli a guisa d’uccellini* (white beans cooked in a light tomato and sage sauce).

## Proud traditions

Further down the Via Francigena lies Siena, that proud medieval banking powerhouse too often eclipsed by its more glamorous neighbor, Florence (which has been an irritant to the Sienese for at least eight centuries).

Siena lacks its rival's blockbuster art collection, for which Florence can thank Anna Luisa de' Medici (1667-1743). This last Medici ruler left the Medici masterpieces in the Uffizi, Pitti Palace, and the family villas to Florence in perpetuity in her will, but with the proviso that they never leave the city's confines. But Siena's red stone, narrow, hilly streets contain their own unique history and carefully preserved traditions that are well worth time spent in this elegant city.

I was initially drawn to Siena after reading *The Winds of War*, Herman Wouk's blockbuster saga of World War II, in which a pair of young lovers research Siena's legendary Palio, a no-holds-barred horse race around the clamshell-shaped Piazza del Campo.

Unrivaled today in both scope and scale of medieval pageantry, the Palio pits Siena's seventeen centuries-old *contradas* or wards against one another. Each *contrada* proudly fields not only a horse and rider but also the famed Sienese flag throwers, who execute complex routines with flags brandishing the animal symbols of their *contradas*: the Giraffe, the Panther, the Snail, the Tortoise, etc.

## Silent charm

"You shall find out how salt is the taste of another man's bread, and how hard is the way up and down another man's stairs."

Dante Alighieri, —*The Divine Comedy*

I'm reminded of Dante's lines as I trudge up the almost vertical cobblestone streets of Gubbio. The struggle is worth it, for when I reach the top, the view of Umbria—the "green heart of Italy"—is unparalleled.

Here the menu never varies: I begin with local wine, a bowl of pale green olive oil, and some of Umbria's famously unsalted bread—baked that way since 1538, when the Umbrians boycotted a hefty papal tax on the condiment.



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Sign of the Via Francigena ("The road that comes from France"), a centuries-old pilgrimage route through the heart of Tuscany's rolling hills, along the perimeter of olive groves and vineyards.

# TRAVEL EDITION

Tuscany's verdant neighbor is the only province in Italy without an outlet to the sea or a shared border with a foreign country, and as such it has always been a somewhat insular region, famed for its profound stillness, intense spirituality, and dynamic creativity.

Umbria's landscape of dense forests, still lakes, and rolling hills of olive and grape is immediately recognizable to any with even a passing knowledge of Renaissance art. This is the native land of Giotto, Perugino, and Piero Della Francesca, pioneer artists who broke free of the stilted, two-dimensional confines of medieval art. They combined *chiaroscuro* (the play of light) and knowledge of classical geometry and anatomy to give movement, depth, and shape to the worlds they created in their frescos, which today grace cathedrals in the small but exquisite Umbrian towns of Assisi, Perugia, Spoleto, and Gubbio.

There is something about Umbria, which insists we slow down, linger, and savor, be it art, nature, food, or our own thoughts. It has ever been thus in this "cradle of saints and mystics."



Street café with panoramic view of Florence at sunset.

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## Autumnal cuisine

Tuscan and Umbrian cuisine is rooted in simple, fresh, local ingredients that are in season. This makes autumn one of the high points of culinary calendar. Of primary importance are the two key products of the region that are harvested and produced in autumn: wine and olive oil, which are celebrated in numerous local festivals throughout the season in villages and towns.

The hearty produce of the region comes into its own in the fall with arugula, potatoes, and zucchini taking center stage. As the hunting season gets underway, game such as pheasant (*fesnt*) and rabbit (*coniglio*) make their way onto the menu, as does the highly-prized wild boar (*cinghiale*), a delicacy of the region that is best experienced in a rich ragú sauce over thick, homemade *pappardelle* pasta.

Chestnuts (*maroni*), as well as hazelnuts, and almonds come into their own, showcased in sweet confections such as *castagnaccio*, a flat cake spiked with rosemary and walnuts. You will also find chestnuts boiled (*ballota*) or roasting (*caldarrosta*) in carts on city streets.

The most celebrated autumnal ingredient, however, is the white truffle (*Tartufo Bianco*) sourced in the dead of night by specially trained pigs. The scantiest of shavings of these white mushrooms onto a simple plate of pasta, dressed with nothing else but olive oil and a grind of black pepper and you'll be hooked. ▣

**Jennifer Eremeeva** worked in the travel industry and financial services sector before becoming a full-time travel writer in 2006.

## AAA RESOURCES

AAA Colorado is offering a one-of-a-kind President's Trip through Tuscany and Umbria in October 2018 that takes a "hub and spoke" approach to accommodation. Rather than packing and unpacking each night, settle into one town for three or four nights, establishing a comfortable base from which you can explore the surrounding villages and environs by public transportation or taxi. Many Tuscan and Umbrian towns offer spa/resorts, such as the Borgobrufa Spa Resort, near Perugia, adjacent to wineries and olive groves, that afford comfort and enjoyment to a leisurely journey through these two regions. For more information on this unique journey, available only through AAA Colorado, go to [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel), or call 877-244-9790, or visit with a travel agent at one of 11 AAA Colorado retail locations (see p. 11).

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