

Gardens of Tuscany walking tour itinerary 2018

(13 days / 12 nights) - \$7,700 AUD per person

The concept of Tuscany automatically conjures up a vision of the Renaissance towns surrounded by gentle hills, crowned with little towns and villages, that grace the paintings of Simone Martini, Piero della Francesca and Leonardo da Vinci. There is, however, another Tuscany, often concealed behind high walls and iron gates: the landscape of the Tuscan garden, a small paradise where the spontaneity of nature is persuaded to embrace the order and symmetry of reason - our two week tour is dedicated to this Tuscany. The tour will be led by Paul Blanchard, art historian and author of the Blue Guides to Northern and to Southern Italy. A New Yorker who has married and lived in Tuscany since 1980, Paul will use his extensive knowledge and contacts to give you an extraordinary introduction to Italy's most beautiful and celebrated region.

The gardens:

The tour will include guided visits to some of the finest historical gardens in Italy: the celebrated public gardens of Florence; the gardens of two 16th century Medici villas that surround Florence where the classic 'Italian garden' originated; the sumptuous gardens of the aristocratic villas tucked away in the countryside around Lucca and the playful gardens of two Baroque villas outside Siena. Tuscany, however, remains a place of innovation and we will also visit several modern gardens, including a famous villa in the Val D'Orcia and the Tarot sculpture garden of an French/American artist as well as a cutting edge biodynamic farm near Vico d'Elsa. We will also visit two of central Italy's finest national parks: the first on the southern coast is a compendium of Mediterranean plant life, and while the second if one of Europe's largest the wetland sanctuary. Along the way, we'll also find time a visit to one of Italy's finest vineyards, the home of the original 'Supertuscan' red.

The walks:

The walks have been selected to reveal the region's incomparable natural beauty as well as its unique historic and artistic heritage. They are walks and not hikes! The walks range from 6 to 12 kms and follow well-marked trails mostly unsealed country roads over undulating hills. In some cases it is possible to shorten the walk or to opt out and join the walkers for lunch.

The accommodation:

We have sought out the most delightful places the region has to offer including: an elegant 4-star hotel in a Renaissance palace in the pedestrian heart of Florence; a magnificent 16th century estate set in parklands outside Lucca; a beautifully restored 'borgo' surrounded by olive groves with views of the sea; and finishing in a 4-star hotel in a 15th century building in the centre of one of southern Tuscany's most charming towns.

The food:

Food must be a highlight of any visit to Italy – the history and character of each region is best captured in its unique cuisine, which has evolved over centuries and is based on fresh, local, seasonal ingredients. All the restaurants we will visit on this tour have been chosen to introduce you to the finest regional cuisine, from the sophisticated 'ristoranti' of the bigger towns to the simpler home-cooking of the country 'trattorie'. We'll also enjoy a number of picnics during the tour.

Tour Dates	5 to 16 May 2018
Tour Size	7 to 15 people
Tour Cost	\$7,700 AUD per person (two people sharing a double room) (single supplement for a double room for single use \$750 AUD)
Tour Inclusions	12 nights' accommodation (see the itinerary for details) in 4-star boutique hotels All breakfast, and all lunches and dinners listed in the itinerary All transfers during the tours and all paid admissions during the tour All taxes and service charges at the hotels and restaurants as well as all gratuities during the tour Services of two full-time professional tour guide.

Gardens of Tuscany tour itinerary

Day 1: Florence (Florence)

Situated on the banks of the Arno River and set among low hills covered with olive groves and vineyards, Florence is immediately captivating. Cradle of the Renaissance and home of Dante, Machiavelli, Michelangelo and the Medici.

At 2:00pm we'll meet at our hotel in the centre of Florence. On today's walk we'll explore the heart of the city, wander the lush paths of the renowned and Boboli and Bardini Gardens, then ascend to the magnificent church with vast views of the city. After a late-afternoon rest, we'll dine in the hills at a trattoria in Galileo's home town. (Dinner)

Historic city walk, 4hrs (8km), elevation gain/loss 100mts, easy.

Day 2: Fiesole & Settignano (Florence)

Today's exploration takes us into the hills north and east of Florence, with a visit to the splendid gardens of one of the many Medici country houses built in the environs of Renaissance Florence by the city's most prominent family. After a light lunch, we'll set out on the high trail that takes us around the hills via two more fine gardens, both early-twentieth century creations based on Renaissance and Baroque models. (3 hrs, 12 kms). Dinner tonight will find us one of Florence's finest restaurants. (Dinner)

Cross-country walk and historic garden visits, 3hrs (12km); elevation gain/loss 100mts, moderate.

Day 3: The Florentine Hills (Florence)

Our third excursion brings us to the northern portion of the Chianti wine-growing district, an area locally known as the Florentine Hills. We'll start with a three-hour walk through woodlands and vineyards to a ruined castle, a pocket-sized, medieval Pompeii. (3 hrs, 10 kms) Lunch will find us at a castle documented as far back as the 9th century and transformed into a Renaissance manor in the 16th. The present edifice (a large, rambling country house) dates largely from the 19th century. We will spend the afternoon with the owner exploring the estate, which is now a shining example of biodynamic farming and includes a lovely small herb and scent garden. (Lunch)

Cross-country walks and estate visits, 3 hrs (10 km) over hilly terrain, elevation gain and loss c. 100mts (300ft), moderate.

Day 4: The Arno Valley (Lucca)

In the morning we'll visit the gardens of several villas to the west of Florence. Firstly, we'll see the sixteenth-century gardens of the two Medici villas where the classic 'Italian garden' type originated. The gardens of these grand country houses are situated back to back, making it easy for us to explore both in a single walk. In the late morning we'll drive on to a sculpture garden near Pistoia, where we'll also pause for a picnic lunch. In the late afternoon we'll check into our second Tuscan home, a lovely villa with a swimming pool set in parklands in the hills above Lucca. Dinner tonight is at our hotel. (Dinner)

Estate visits, 3hrs (8 km); elevation gain/loss 50mts, easy.

Day 5: Lucca and the Ville Lucchesi (Lucca)

This morning we'll take a walk around Lucca, the only Tuscan city state that was not swallowed up by the Medici Grand Duchy. We'll devote special attention to its wonderful Botanical Garden and follow our visit with lunch in an excellent trattoria. (2 hrs, 8 kms)

In the afternoon we'll visit two of the sumptuous villas and gardens in the hills surrounding the town: a one created for Napoleon's sister Elisa Baciocchi Bonaparte and the other built in the late 16th century but enlarged and remodeled in the 17th century with a garden designed by Filippo Juvarra. Dinner this evening is independent. (Lunch/dinner)

Historic town and country walks. Morning, 2hrs (3km), elevation gain/loss 30mts, easy.

Day 6: San Rossore & Lake Massaciuccoli (Lucca)

Today we head west to the nearby coast to visit the country retreat of the President of Italy, which offers one of the largest and finest examples anywhere of Mediterranean coastal vegetation. Along the way we will also visit another area of great natural interest: a lake, marshes and a major bird sanctuary, this extensive wetland complex covers more than 2000 square kilometres, forming one of the largest moist zones in Europe. On the way back to Lucca we'll stop off in Pisa with free time to visit the Cathedral, the Leaning Tower, and the associated museums. We'll dine this evening in a country restaurant near our digs. (Dinner)

Cross-country nature walk: 3hrs (5km), elevation gain/loss 10mts, easy.

Day 7: The Tyrrhenian Coast (Capalbio)

This morning we leave Lucca heading for Capalbio on the southern Tuscan coast, stopping on the way to visit one of Italy's most famous piece of landscape architecture: not a garden, the long, magnificent avenue of cypresses. Fortunately for us, it also leads past the cellars of one of Italy's top wine estates. We'll walk the lovely lane and enjoy a tasting of one of the finest Supertuscans. (1 hr, 3 kms)

Following an independent lunch in the village, in the afternoon we'll drive on through the 'garden landscape' of Tuscany-by-the-sea to the ancient ruins to a once prosperous port where the Etruscans and then Romans worked the iron ore brought across from the nearby island of Elba (visible on a clear day, with Corsica in the distance). In the late afternoon we'll move on to our home for the next three nights, near Capalbio, a place of understated elegance and charm set in the hills with views of the sea. A buffet dinner awaits us here. (Dinner)

Cross-country walks. Morning, 1 hr (3km, 2 miles); elevation gain/loss 30mts easy.

Day 8: The Monti dell'Uccellina (Capalbio)

Today we visit the a Regional Nature Reserve on the coast, a living compendium of Mediterranean plant life. Here we will find four distinct types of vegetation: woodland, sandy-coast vegetation, wetland vegetation, as well as olive groves and pines planted in the 18th century by Tuscany's Archduke Leopold. On one of the more scenic walks of the tour, we'll spend the entire morning and the early afternoon exploring this fragrant natural garden, breaking our hike for a picnic lunch on the beach. (4 hrs, 12 kms) We will have dinner tonight at a neighbouring farm. (Lunch/dinner)

Cross-country walk, 4 hrs (12 km); elevation gain/loss 100mts, moderate.

Day 9 Capalbio & Environs (Capalbio)

This morning we'll walk from our lodgings to the famous gardens of a French-American painter, sculptor who was born in 1930 and died in 2002. The internationally acclaimed artist intended this to be the first monumental sculpture garden created by a woman. After our visit, we'll walk from the garden to Capalbio, a delightful village with an extraordinary number of fine restaurants and shops (an outcome of its popularity with the Roman elite, many of whom have second homes in the environs). (3 hrs, 12 kms) After an independent lunch you'll have the option to stay to shop and shuttle back later or walk back to the accommodation. (Dinner)

Cross-country walk and garden visit, 3 hrs (12 km); elevation gain/loss 100mts, moderate.

Day 10: The Maremma Highlands & the Val d'Orcia (San Quirico d'Orcia)

Today we transfer to the lovely Val d'Orcia, a stone's throw south of Siena. Not far from Capalbio, in the high hills of Maremma, we pass one of the most fascinating and mysterious anthropological landscapes of all time, the Etruscan 'Vie Cave'. This impressive network of pathways set in trenches up to twenty metres deep between steep rock walls once linked the Etruscan settlements to their respective necropolis. After our visit, we'll stop for a light lunch in one of the villages. (2 hrs, 8 kms)

The afternoon will be devoted to a spectacular garden that lies along our way as we wind through the lovely Val d'Orcia, a UNESCO Heritage of Humanity site to a villa that was built in the 15th century as a pilgrims' hostel on the Via Francigena, the busy medieval highway from Paris to Rome. In 1924 the property was bought by a Roman count and his English wife, who hired the British landscape architect Cecil Pinsent to create a large garden that would set up the Renaissance villa and capitalise on the property's spectacular views over the Orcia River valley and the surrounding hills. Our final destination is San Quirico d'Orcia, a delightful little town where time seems to stand still. Probably established by the Etruscans, in the Middle Ages the town was a stop on the Via Francigena and a subject of Siena. The evening is free. (Lunch)

Morning: cross-country walk, 2 hrs (8 km); elevation gain/loss 200mts, moderate.

Day 11: The Sienese Villas (San Quirico d'Orcia)

Today will be devoted to an intensive exploration of the stunningly beautiful area west of Siena, visiting the two most important villa-and-garden complexes of the 'campagna senese': the first built for the pope's nephew in 1680 is known for its park populated by statues of monsters and animals; while the second is a medieval castle rebuilt as a villa in the 16th century, probably to designs by the eminent Renaissance architect Baldassare Peruzzi. After our visits we will drive to beautiful Siena, 'the most perfectly preserved medieval city in Europe' that was once Florence's arch-rival, where you'll be free to wander, window-gaze and shop; or to explore the magnificent monuments of this extraordinary city. After driving back to our base, we'll have dinner in the hotel's own restaurant. (Lunch)

Day 12: The Crete Senesi (San Quirico d'Orcia)

Our walk today will be through the nearby hills known as the Crete Senesi, the trail following the lovely countryside where the Italian segment of The English Patient was filmed, to the magnificent garden of an American who transformed it into a humid vale surrounded by semi-arid farmland. We'll lunch as the artist's guests, then explore his creation together. (3 hrs, 8 kms)

Our farewell dinner is at you beautiful nearby. The owner, a member of the Italian Culinary Academy, puts together the home grown raw materials to create what may be the finest culinary delights in southern Tuscany. En route we'll take a stroll through probably the finest example anywhere of Renaissance town planning, created in the mid-fifteenth century. (Lunch/dinner)

Morning: cross-country walk and garden visits, 3 hrs (8km); elevation gain/loss 100 mts, moderate.

Day 13: Trip ends in Florence

This morning we'll get an early start for Florence (an hour and a half away) with its airport and railway station.