

The best job in the world

Simon Tancred of Hidden Italy Walking Tours turned his passion into his profession and he couldn't be happier.

I used to go walking and camping around Canberra but I didn't really get the bug until I worked in Milan in the '80s. My first walk there started with a ride up to Breglia on Lake Como (85km up hill on a single-gear bike!) and then a two-hour walk up a cobbled path through forest to Rifugio Menaggio, a mountain hut 1000m above the lake, where we stayed for the weekend. The perfect combination of fresh air, ancient trails, local characters and rustic food got me in and I've been doing it ever since.

My walking tour business started as a hobby. I took my first group to Tuscany nearly 20 years ago, basically as a way of paying for my own trip to Italy, and things grew from there. It became an annual event, then, in the late '90s, I set up a website, and in the early 2000s I introduced the first self-guided walks.

In 2006 I left UNSW and went full-time into the walking tour business. I now go to Italy for six weeks in May and six weeks in September for my own trip to Italy, and I organise the self-guided walks for the rest of the year. It's a great life, which I couldn't do without the support of my wonderful wife Carolyn.

Our guided tours – each about two weeks long – go to Puglia, Sicily and Sardinia in May; and to Venice and the Lakes, Verona and the Dolomites and Friuli/Slovenia in September. We have 12 self-guided walking itineraries (week long, inn-to-inn walks), including Lake Como and the Amalfi Coast, as well as some more adventurous routes in central Italy and Sicily.

Despite all the history, the scenery and the great food, our clients often tell us the highlights are the simpler, unscripted things that happen along the way, such as an impromptu evening squid fishing in Sicily; or sharing a glass of wine with a farmer.

I love the Italians and their way of life. Although Italy is little more than 1000km from tip to toe, it has amazing physical, cultural and historical diversity. Every little place has its own stories and traditions and

I love seeking these out. At the end of each tour, I schedule time to research new things (this year I hunted around Sardinia and Friuli). I've been exploring Italy for 30 years and organising walks for nearly 20 and still feel as if I've barely started.

It's easy enough for people to organise their own trips to the big

Italian centres but when you want to get out into the country, it's a bit more hit and miss, which is where we can help. On the self-guided walks, we meet clients at the beginning and end; put them up in the best accommodation and restaurants; move their bags each day; provide them with up-to-date walking notes and maps (with GPS markers) and with 24-hour back up.

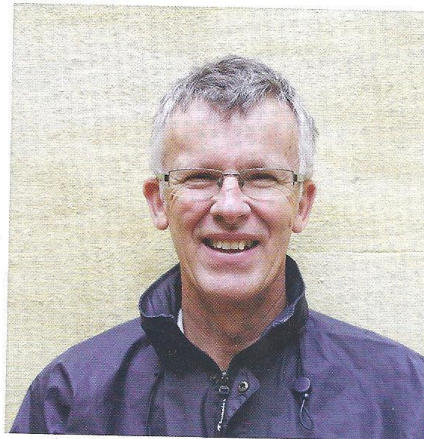
There are support vehicles standing by, so the clients can walk as much or as little as they like each day. On another level, because we know the places we visit very well, we can guarantee the quality and integrity of the experience and introduce our clients to local people and customs.

I'm currently organising a private visit to Italy for a family whose father was a POW in northern Italy from 1941-43. In September 1943, as the Germans advanced, he and some mates escaped from their prison farm outside Vercelli and, with the help of local partisans, made their way through enemy-occupied territory, up into the Alps, over Monte Rosa and into neutral Switzerland.

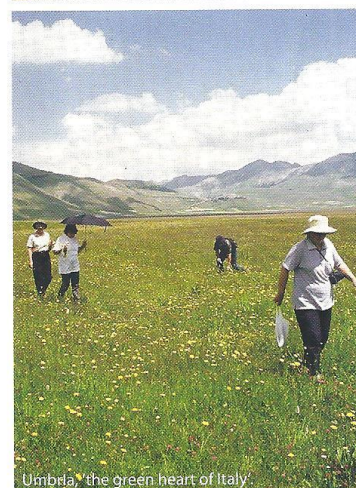
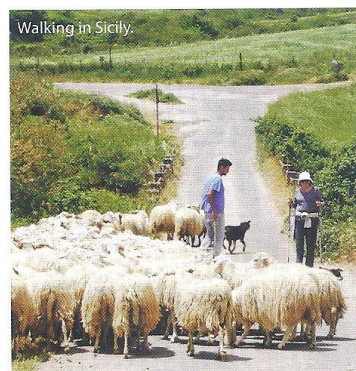
It took them five days over some quite demanding terrain following a medieval trade path. With the help of some local historians, we've managed to plot the route they took. If I get a free week, it's one walk I'd love to do myself. 

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SIMON TANCREED



Umbria, 'the green heart of Italy'