

*F*ar too much time has passed since the last Vacanza Bella News. Summer has definitely arrived in Italy. So far, though, it's a "normal" summer: hot, but not excessively hot, though it's over 90 here in Rome today. The lake district and northernmost Italy in general suffered extended rain and cool weather right into mid-June, but now all is as it should be.



Those of you who have been with Vacanza Bella for many years know how cynical I can be about Tuscany, the Chianti region in particular. It is overpriced, over-sold, and, in places, over-cute. On the other hand, since living in Italy, I've had occasion to travel much more extensively through the wine country of Spain, France, Germany, and Italy, and I have to admit: The Chianti countryside is by far the most beautiful of all, there's no way around it. The light, the depth of the green, the cypresses, the tile-roofed farm buildings: It's enough to make you weep.

And yes, you can get away from the crowds, and from the cute. In fact, certain towns and villages, precisely because of their proximity to Florence and Siena and the more well-known wine towns, are routinely ignored by visitors. I'm thinking of places like San Donato in Poggio, Impruneta, San Casciano Val di Pesa, Castelnuovo Berardenga, Certaldo. Lovely, authentic places to meander around, to have lunch in, with very very few fellow tourists. Even as big a city as Arezzo, despite the gorgeous Piazza Grande, the delightful churches, and the glorious Piero della Francescas on offer, remains a most definitely untouristy city. Driving tours? Just pick one of the minor roads at random (many are still unpaved), and wander. It's unbelievable how empty those roads still are, even in the height of summer.

So I've decided to feature in this issue our offerings in Central Tuscany, that is, in the quadrangle at whose corners are the cities of Siena, Florence, San Gimignano, and Arezzo.

You'll see I've also appended a couple of short pieces on Opera in Italy and on Alternative Meal Ideas in Italy

Vacanza Bella in Chianti

We won't bore you by going into great detail. For detail, you can simply go to the [VB website](#) and look for yourselves.

If you're just two of you, or a family of four, consider properties like [Iesolana](#), [Casa Montagnana](#), and [Podere Sagna](#). This last property, owned by a Swiss opera fanatic and managed by his very friendly and helpful

Tunisian caretaker, is located along probably one of the most beautiful stretches of the SS222, the "Chiantigiana" wine road linking Siena

and Florence. The accommodations at [Podere Sagna](#) are not at all luxurious, but they're comfortable and extremely reasonably priced.

Given the enormously high prices prevalent in this area, these independent villas with their own private swimming pools offer really excellent value as well.

[Casa Montagnana](#), on the other hand, is the summer/weekend retreat of a Tuscan family who did it up comfortably but very informally for themselves. It's in a little medieval "borgo" that enjoys really spectacular views of the famous towers of San Gimignano. Equally good for a family or for two couples.

[Iesolana](#), equidistant from Flor-

ence, Siena, and Arezzo, is a big estate with several quite independent accommodations of varying sizes. The 2- and 4-person places at Iesolana are unusually good value and good quality. But as you'll see on the webpage, Iesolana also has some excellent accommodations for up to 8 persons. The Tinaia unit, for example, is virtually a free-standing house with its own grounds.

Need something bigger or more private? Two wonderful houses, both beautifully located, are [La Panoramica](#), accommodating 8-10 persons comfortably, and [Casale Luisa](#), accommodating 9. Given the

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Villa Lucia

Vacanza Bella in Chianti (cont'd)

enormously high prices prevalent in this area, these independent villas with their own private swimming pools offer really excellent value as well.

A really big group? Take a look at [Sernigi](#) (for 11), [Gigliola](#) (for 14+), and Villa Lucia (for 19+). Sernigi, which I've offered now for over 15 years, has been my model. If an owner comes to me and says: "I'm thinking of restoring my falling apart villa/farmhouse", I say: "Go see Sernigi". Six equal bedrooms, and six beautiful bathrooms, accommodating owners, beautiful location.

[Gigliola](#) has been on my books for 20 years. Charming, vastly over-extended owner, hard to work with, I tear my hair out. But in the end it all works out and everyone is happy. Pool, tennis court, plus a



Farmhouse at the [Gigliola](#) estate

wonderful chef available as well. If you're more than 14, Gigliola has a whole bunch of smaller farmhouses on offer which you can "add on". In fact, there's space for 30 or more here.

Finally, there's a villa not yet on our website called Villa Lucia.

It's a gorgeous old padronal villa overlooking spectacular vineyards southeast of Florence and northeast of Siena. Sleeps 19 persons comfortably, plus extra space for an additional dozen or more. Again: pool, tennis, excellent household help.

Saving Money (and Time) on Food

Since the introduction of the Euro in 2001, prices in Italy in general have doubled, for just about everything. Restaurants are no exception. Once reasonable, even the simplest trattoria has become unaffordable for many ordinary Italians. In Rome, it's impossible to eat a full meal for less than 20-30 euros per person.

One extremely positive result is the vast increase in the number of coffee bars serving homemade hot dishes, especially at lunch, but also in the evening. In my own neighborhood in Rome, if I want a quick plate of pasta with a side salad, I'll go down to my

local coffee bar and see what they've cooked that day. There are usually a couple of pastas and a couple of main courses. Last week, there was spaghetti with tuna and, given the heat, a fresh pasta salad.

I might also have ordered an oven-baked local fish called *sgombro* with roast potatoes, or a grilled steak.

You carry your own plate to the table, or the barman will do it for you. Usually the whole thing

costs me between 5 and 10 euros, especially since I take it home.

I highly recommend you consider this route, especially those of you who are trying to squeeze some sightseeing in, between meals.

This alternatives means you can actually sit down, without breaking the bank, and without the 2-

hour-or-longer time commitment necessary in a "real" restaurant, no matter how simple.

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A Night at the Opera

Over the past 15 years or so, I've become an opera fanatic. Living in Europe has made it easy to take flying opera-based breaks to London, Madrid, Barcelona, Vienna, Berlin, Zurich, and elsewhere.

In Italy, the quality of opera varies widely. [La Scala](#) in Milan is considered the top opera house, but the sad reality is that at La Scala, as at the Met in New York, you can pay a whole lot of money for a ticket and see a real dog. I can't tell you how often this has happened to me, especially in Rome, but also in New York. Prices at La Scala are double what they are in New York, and

disappointment is a real risk. Still, the atmosphere is electric, and the dress extremely elegant.

It used to be very difficult to obtain opera tickets in advance. But now, with the internet, it's become relatively easy. There are limitations

as to selection, but it's quite possible, as virtually all the opera houses, however obscure, have on-line booking.

We find that the best performances for the money are to be had at [San Carlo](#) in Naples and at the [Comunale](#) in Flor-

ence. If you're staying at a Florence apartment, Tuscan villa, or a cottage in Positano or on Capri, take

a look at the appropriate websites and see what's on. I myself just last week saw a truly wonderful performance of the first half of Wagner's *Ring* in Florence at a quite reasonable price. Another wonderful theatre, perhaps the most "serious" now in all Italy, is the [Teatro Regio](#) in Torino.

How about Rome? Living here, I have to say: forget it. I have wasted more money in the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome than I care to disclose. There are, however, some extremely good opera performances now at the Auditorium complex designed by Renzo Piano. This past year, for example, both Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Rossini's *Tancredi* were performed in excellent con-

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La Traviata at the [Macerata](#) outdoor amphitheatre

A Night at the Opera (cont'd)

cert versions, as well as a charming staged production of a little-known Rossini farce called *Il Signor Bruschino*, just delightful. In November 2007, there will be a concert performance of *William Tell*, very

rarely done, in the original French. For real opera buffs, the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome will present another Rossini rarity, also in late November: *Mosè in Egitto*.

Summer outdoor festivals are quite fun. Perhaps the most famous of these is held at the [Roman Arena at Verona](#). This summer, for example, in addition to its always spectacular *Aida*, the Arena is performing such favorites as *Barber of Seville*, *Nabucco*, *Bohème*, and *Traviata*. Perfect acoustics and top singers. More interesting is the programme at another Roman amphitheatre, this one at [Macerata](#) in the Marche region, offering Verdi's *Macbeth*, Bellini's *Norma*, and Donizetti's little known but marvelous opera, *Maria Stuarda*. Other outdoor festivals are held in [Rome](#) in the Baths of Caracalla and on the grounds of Puccini's home at [Torre del Lago](#) in Tuscany, not far from Pisa and Lucca.

For real opera buffs, perhaps the best summer festival is in the Adriatic city of Pesaro, Rossini's birthplace, and hence the home of the [Rossini Opera Festival](#), with interesting programming and world-

class singers who have included Marilyn Horne, Montserrat Caballé, and Juan Diego Florez.

There are many smaller opera houses and opera festivals throughout Italy. You can find out much more by logging on to the extremely user-friendly website [www.operabase.com](#).

One last thing: dress. Do you have to "dress" to attend the opera in Italy? The answer is: generally, no. La Scala's new director introduced a sort of "dress code" requiring jacket-and-tie for men last year, but this has not been enforced. At the Florence performances of the Ring that I recently attended, in extremely hot

weather (though air-conditioned indoors), only about 1/4 of men "dressed"; the rest were in shirt/slacks, or black t-shirts and slacks. In Rome, during the season, formal dress is only required at the first performances of each opera; after that shirtsleeves is fine, even jeans. On the other hand, tank-tops, shorts, and flipflops are definitely to be avoided. Of course, at open-air opera, there is no dress code at all, and even these last items are just fine.

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Explore the wealth of information available in previous issues of *Vacanza Bella News*



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See you in 3 months or so. In the meantime, do browse our website, [www.vbella.com](#), for Italian travel ideas.

Daniel