

*I've been meaning to write this newsletter since way back in April, when I took myself up to Tuscany to visit a number of estates whose owners have written to me over the past couple of years. But almost constant travel, alternating with an unanticipated wave of houseguests, has kept me away from the computer.*

*My most recent travel was a month in France: Normandy, Paris, Alsace, and Provence. France is a country I love. But my visit reminded me once again of the uniqueness of the Italian countryside. To me, at least, there's nothing that compares in sheer beauty to those landscapes in the Tuscan countryside.*

*So this newsletter is short: you'll learn about the new places I found in Tuscany, plus a little inn just north of Rome that I have often visited. And as an afterthought, I've done one of my lists: favorite Italian piazzas.*

*I'll be in touch again sometime in the fall.*

*Daniel*

## A Tuscan Ramble

### DAY 1:

I based myself for 3 days at Iesolana, a property I've represented for



Iesolana

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more than 15 years. I hadn't visited [Iesolana](#) since 2001, and I'd never spent the night. Doing so confirmed my belief that while inspecting a property is good, actually settling in reveals so much more about a place, from beds and cooking equipment to lighting and water pressure. This is probably just common sense, but I tend to forget the simple

truth of this reality.

Anyhow, I loved staying at Iesolana. I'd forgotten what a nice part of Tuscany it's in. Bucine, the near-

est town, about halfway between Florence and Arezzo, is a remarkably untouristed jewel. Iesolana's owners are fun and gracious. The place is well-managed. And perhaps most important of all, Iesolana has a guests-only restaurant which can even do room service AND breakfast. When I travel alone, I find going out to a restaurant in the evening terribly depressing; hence, I loved the ability to have a home-cooked meal in my own quarters at Iesolana while watching Euronews on the satellite TV.

On my first full day in Tuscany, Luisa, the welcoming day manag-

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## A Tuscan Ramble (cont'd)

er at Iesolana, took me round to see all of the estate's accommodations in detail. It was the first day of April; the Easter crowds had gone; the place was nearly empty. The thought that kept coming back to me was this: Why don't more people travel off-season like this. The sun was shining; the pool was open; the days were relatively long.



Villa Lucia

I couldn't have asked for better weather.

I particularly liked the way the owners at Iesolana have allocated a nice, private outdoor space to every one of the individual accommodations, including those located up a flight of exterior stairs. This means that even though it's a multiple-unit property – and of course, you're inevitably going to have contact with other guests in a setting like this – you'll have as much privacy as is humanly possible to provide. Beds are great, and even the 2-person units are spacious and inviting, a rarity in Italian rentals, where so many accommodations for 2 are dark and dinky. Not at Iesolana.

After lunch, I scooted over to another of my "historic" properties, one I've offered on and off since the founding of Vacanza Bella: [Villa Lucia](#). You'll find a photo in a prior [newsletter](#). This is a spectacular estate, like Iesolana about halfway between Florence and Arezzo. It's the real McCoy: a genuine noble villa, grand, a little faded, with huge rooms, ornate chandeliers, and a resident staff, private swimming pool and tennis court, the whole surrounded by the estate's vineyards.

We've rented Villa

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Lucia over the years for big family reunions, as the villa alone can hold up to 30 guests, and there are farmhouses available for overflow as well.

Again, I hadn't visited Villa Lucia since 2001, and the owner was eager to show me the many improvements she had undertaken over the past year in particular. Most important, every bedroom now has its own bath. Before, a certain amount of sharing was necessary, which was fine for extended family, but not so great for unrelated couples traveling together. Now, it's a really spectacular place. It rents far, far ahead of time.

### ***Day 2***

I got up at the crack of dawn, eager to get on the road before the traffic. I could tell that it was going to be hot, even though it was only April. This was a day for two brand-new properties, and even though the owners in such cases will have

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## A Tuscan Ramble (cont'd)

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sent me photos in advance, I never really know what I'm going to find. I can't tell you how many times I've been sent incredible photos, only to find the reality far different.

Pistoia is one of my favorite small cities in Italy, and since it was a Sunday morning I thought I'd take advantage of the lack of traffic to wander the cathedral square and the medieval streets around it. Pistoia is one of several cities in the immediate vicinity of Florence which, despite their many attractions, have been protected from mass tourism by that very proximity: people are in a hurry to experience the pleasures of Florence and are unaware of what they're missing in places like Pistoia.

By 930, however, duty called, and I presented myself at [Le Querce](#), whose gracious owners had contacted me 18 months previously. Again, I realized I was seeing it under virtually perfect conditions. The beauty of the place is that you're in the country, and yet you're literally 5 minutes' drive from the center of town. The view over Pistoia is great, including the domes of that city's many churches. With 5 bedrooms, 3 baths, it's an ideal villa for two families traveling together, more than for several couples.

At 11, I moved on to nearby Poggio a Caiano for my visit to the [Villa Caiano](#). Here is another seldom realized fact: The

area south of Florence – the Chianti wine-producing region – is the only one overrun by travelers from around the world.

In the three other directions: north, east, and west, you're talking about equally beautiful landscapes with the same convenience to the city and literally about a tenth the tourist presence.

Even in a place like Poggio a Caiano, just 10-12 miles west of Florence, you find yourself in an entirely Italian environment, and actually MORE conveniently situated than you would be in Chianti for visits to Lucca, Pisa, the Medici villas and gardens, the Ginori factory store, and the Montecatini golf courses, to name just a few of the varied attractions nearby.

I was meeting a guy who had

been writing to me off and on for two years, as he had just purchased and renovated a noble villa

in Poggio, which I've now called the Villa Caiano.

The owner hadn't mentioned to me that he had installed perhaps the most spectacularly sited swimming pool I've seen in my many years in this business; nor that the villa is 5 minutes' easy walking distance into town – a real rarity for a villa of this size with a pool; nor that the villa is perched

against a hillside in such a way that it enjoys an uninterrupted view of the town's famous Villa Medici. I'm no longer easy to impress, but I must confess: I was impressed.

The villa itself is great for families or couples: many bedrooms and baths, comfortable furnishings, that gorgeous pool, and an owner eager to please. He even took me out to lunch at a delightful, unpretentious family-run restaurant in nearby Carmignano, home of some of Italy's very best red wines. By 4, I was on my way back to Iesolana in need of a rest by the pool.

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*A charmingly frescoed bedroom at Le Querce*

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# A Tuscan Ramble (cont'd)

## Day 3

Again, this was a day for two properties new to me. I didn't have to go far to reach the first one, called [Cennina](#), as it turned out to be almost directly opposite the road leading to Iesolana.

Cennina is almost identical to Iesolana, in fact, in its typology: It's a lovely estate – a “borgo”, really – dominated by a castle and family-operated in hands-on fashion. It's a multiple-unit affair, and I was able to see all of the dozen or so independent accommodations sleeping from 2 to 8 persons. Many of the units are unifiable for larger groups, and most have spacious terraces overlooking the surrounding vineyards and offering guests maximum privacy.

Bedrooms at Cennina are air-

conditioned, which is a big plus. There's daily housekeeping, a beautiful pool, and, like Iesolana, a guests-only restaurant so that you don't ever have to worry about breakfast or dinner. We liked Cennina; we liked its owners; and we're trying it out for the first time this season.

A r o u n d noon, I took off on some of my favorite back roads towards Siena. My God, that countryside almost made a

jaded, gimlet-eyed character like me weep for its sheer beauty. (Almost.) I found a little place to have a quick bite and then moved on to the final appointment of my brief tour to Tuscany.

Again, I had no idea what to expect. I thought that it was a reno-

vated farmhouse on a large estate. As it turned out, it wasn't a farmhouse at all. It was a former schoolhouse which I promptly named [The Old Schoolhouse](#). It's a lovely property, sophisticated country elegant, ideal for groups of couples but also good for groups of friends or two small families as well.

The setting and the grounds are immaculately maintained. It's soooooooooooooo close to Siena that you can actually see the towers of the Piazza del Campo from the approach road. And yet it's very much the countryside. 5 bedrooms, 5 baths, household help including cooking available.

So that was it. In the old days, more than 15 years ago, I would have considered such a relaxed schedule unthinkable. 5 properties a day minimum! No longer. Six properties in three days was fine for me. I spent one last night at Iesolana, and the next morning I returned my rental car in Chiusi and was back in Rome in time for lunch.

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Cennina



One of the sitting rooms at The Old Schoolhouse

*The following makes no attempt to be a complete list of anything. It is also not a list of personal “best piazzas”. It’s simply a list of some piazzas I remember and return to with special fondness. You’ll see: It’s mostly Tuscany. I’ve deliberately left out Rome, Florence, and Venice, plus Siena and Pisa. And I’ve left out all the ones I’ve forgotten, of which I’m quite certain there are many.*

**1. Piazza Garibaldi (Piazza del Duomo), Massa Marittima.** I think that this is THE most beautiful piazza in Italy. I love this place.

**2. Piazza del Popolo, Todi.** Kate Simon turned me on to this before anyone but her knew anything about Todi. It’s been tarted up over the years, but it’s still capable of moving me.

**3. Piazza del Duomo, Parma.** That baptistery is amazing.

**4. Piazza del Duomo, Pistoia.** Ditto for the baptistery. But also the little medieval market behind, where the daily produce market is held.

**5. Piazza San Pellegrino, Viterbo.** For the sheer purity of medieval architecture which it represents. A special corner of a very special city.

**6. Piazza della Liberta’, Udine.** Elegant.

**7. Piazza del Duomo, Spoleto,** especially in the evening.

**8. Piazza del Duomo, Bergamo,** in the heart of the upper town in our favorite medium-sized Italian city.

**9. Piazza dei Signori, Vicenza,** one of the best.

**10. The piazza of Bagno Vignoni,** one of the most evocative places in Italy.

And that leaves out Bevagna,

Arezzo, Anagni, Ravenna, Naples, Capri, Perugia, and countless others. I’d be interested in knowing if you have special piazzas you’ve visited.



*Massa Marittima*

# A Jewel of an Inn

We've recommended [Al Gallo](#) in Tuscania for years. Tuscania is our favorite hilltown in all Italy. There's a pair of gorgeous Romanesque churches on a hilltop just outside the town whose timeless forms inspired Corot and other great artists on their Grand Tour. The view of these churches from the little park in Tuscania is unforgettable. Tuscania's Location? About 90 minutes almost directly north of Rome, in the northernmost part of Lazio. The closest real city is Viterbo, 20 minutes away, another of our favorites.

Returning from France, I knew I had a 10-hour drive ahead of me, and I didn't want to end that day in the middle of Rome traffic. So I called Perla Blanzieri, owner of Al Gallo, to see if she had room, and she did. So we went.

Al Gallo is right in town, but it's very quiet. Rooms are well decorated, not fancy, but with extreme good taste. There's an interior patio for drinks. Most important, Al Gallo has a wonderful restaurant, with at one time a Michelin star, and a fantastic wine list. We sometimes drive up to Tuscania for the day, just for the view of the churches, to poke around the antique stores (still affordable!), and to eat at Al Gallo. Tuscania makes a great base for a 3-day circuit of the southern Tuscan towns Pitigliano, Sorano, and



*Al Gallo*

Sovana, plus the stunning gardens: Villa Lante, Giardino dei Tarocchi at Capalbio, Villa Farnese, Bomarzo.

Finally, we recommend Al Gallo as an excellent last-night-before-the-Rome-airport alternative. You avoid the city. You have a great last

meal. And you can drive your rental car straight down the COASTAL autostrada directly into the airport. So much better than an airport hotel! We cannot sing the praises of Al Gallo, its owner Perla, and Tuscania enough.

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

*Daniel*