THE UNDISCOVERED TUSCANY

Although we adore Siena, Pisa, and Chianti, there is another less familiar Tuscany of pristine pine-studded landscapes and charmingly dozy villages that we love just as well. They are off the beaten path, to be sure, but the venture will be richly rewarded.

The Castelnuovo, the beautiful wooded valley by the Arno in the northeast corner of Tuscany, is rich in tiny towns, intact fortresses, and a couple of the region’s great monasteries. The medieval village of Poppi is where the Guidi counts, who ruled the Castelnuovo between 1000 and 1440, had their headquarters and where their castle still stands. Through a magnificent courtyard, a dramatic staircase leads to a series of frescoed rooms; the paintings in the chapel are by Taddeo Gaddi. Opposite the castle is the popular Ristorante Castelnuovo (dinner, $60; 39-0575/529-090), where you can sample game, truffles, and mushrooms in season.

Just east of Poppi is the Franciscan monastery of La Verna. Built on a stark, rocky outcrop given to St. Francis in 1213 (3,700 feet up), it is where he received the stigmata in 1224. A handful of monks still reside in the monastery, and they welcome the few visitors who come to see St. Francis’s cell, the tiny Chapel of the Stigmata, and the two churches with superb terra-cotta altarpieces by Andrea and Luca della Robbia.

The Monastery of Camaldoli, 20 minutes away, is in a dense forest crossed with hiking trails, where deer run wild. Founded in 1012 by St. Romuald, the monastery is today inhabited by Carthusian monks. The cloisters, church, and refectory are open to the public; the monks also still operate the 16th-century pharmacy, selling their own herbal remedies, liquor, and honey. From here, a two-mile hike through the woods will lead you to the oratorio (or hermitage), where hermits live in silence behind a locked gate in a collection of tiny huts sprinkled on the hill. The nearby church and cell of St. Romuald are also open to visitors.

The pretty little Castelnuovo town of Stia is famous for its burnt-orange wool. Samples are for sale in and around the sloping Piazza Tanucci, which is lined with medieval wooden porticoes. Slip into the church of Santa Maria Assunta to see Bicci di Lorenzo’s Annunciation and Della Robbia’s terra-cotta Madonna, then head south to Prato Vecchio to the rustic trattoria Tana degli Orsi (dinner, $75; I Via Roma; 39-0575/583-377) for hearty mountain food and a terrific wine list.

In the southwest area of Tuscany known as La Maremma, the rocky promontory of Argentario plunges dramatically into the sea. About an hour and a half from Florence by car, this hinterland is rich in Etruscan remains, ruined castles, and wild landscapes (see “On the Tuscan Riviera”). Driving around Porto Ercole (the place to use as a base), the hills roll gently, the area mostly farmland. But the scenery changes dramatically as you head back inland, with a sharp bend in the road and the extraordinary sight of Pitigliano, an ominous-looking town spectacularly positioned atop a craggy cliff (the holes in the cliff face are the remains of Etruscan tombs, now used as storehouses). Pitigliano’s picturesque medieval center was once a Jewish ghetto, established in 1570. The community continued to thrive here until World
War II. All that is left is the small Museum of Jewish History, housed in the restored 16th-century synagogue. After a day spent exploring the town, stop at the Tufo Allegro restaurant (dinner, $75; 5 Vicolo della Constituzione; 39-0564/616-192); built into the rock, it serves delicious regional food such as artichoke lasagna and rabbit with wild fennel.

Once an important Etruscan settlement, charming Sovana, northwest of Pititigliano, is now little more than a few cobbled brick streets running from the impressive ruins of its castle to the superb Romanesque cathedral, Santa Maria Maggiore, with its ninth-century carved-marble ciboria. Those interested in archaeology should also visit the nearby Etruscan necropolis; the Tomba della Sirena and the elaborate Tomba Ildebranda, located between Sovana and Saturnia.

Sorano is perched precariously above a series of deep gorges in the wooded countryside northeast of Sovana. A succession of landslides over the years have resulted in a slow exodus of its hearty residents, but the hamlet maintains an eerie beauty. Spend a romantic night in the imposing 11th-century Orsini fortress, now the quite simple but comfortable Hotel della Fortezza (rates, $185-$370; 39-0564/632-010; www.fortezzahotel.it).

A short drive north brings you to the remote area of Val d’Orcia, recently designated a World Heritage site. Squeezed into the southeastern corner of Tuscany, it is dominated by Mount Amiata and a scattering of hilltop villages spilling down the slopes into farmland. A visit to the area should begin in exquisite Pienza, high above the valley and built in the mid-15th century for Pope Pius II. It was considered the perfect Renaissance town then—and still is. The Duomo’s pale travertine facade towers over Piazza Pio II; the central street is lined with shops selling wine and the famous local pecorino. The best restaurant here is La Pergola (dinner, $60; 2 Via dell’Accro; 39-0578/748-051), which pairs local dishes (pasta with wild boar, pollo alla cacciatora) with an unusual choice of wines.

The most spectacular place to stay in the valley—and probably in the entire region—is Le Cose, formerly the home of the writer Iris Origo, and famous for its gardens. Her daughters now run the estate as a working farm and recently converted some of the buildings (including a medieval castle) into gorgeous guesthouses (rates, $840-$8,000 per week; 39-0578/69101; www.lacose.com). Cozy little Bersegliere is a couples’ retreat; the two larger houses, Montauto and Sassaia, can accommodate a large family. Each has its own private garden and swimming pool. All the houses are decorated with

FIVE COUNTRY HOTELS
Ten minutes from Florence, the 18th-century Villa Poggio San Felice is set in a rose garden with views of the city. Filled with antiques, the five bedrooms are not luxurious (there are no phones or televisions), but they are wonderfully peaceful. La Camera del Nonno has a big terrace overlooking the city. Rates, $240-$300; 39-055/220-016; www.villa poggiosanfelice.com.

Villa II Poqgiale is a splendid Renaissance villa just south of Florence. The 24 sunny rooms are quite rustic, with authentic details everywhere: a loggia opening onto a cypress-bordered lawn, claw-foot tubs, an elegant fresco in the Camera del Nonno room. Rates, $170-$290; 39-055/282-31; www.villaipoqgiale.it.

Il Falconiere, near Cortona, has always been one of our favorites for its attentive service and relaxed atmosphere. The 20 rooms are divided among a 17th-century villa and a group of stone cottages (number 33 overlooks the rose garden). Chef Richard Titi serves creative regional cuisine in the Michelin-starred restaurant. Rates, $315-$575; 39-0575/612-679; www.ilfalconiere.com.

Call for directions before setting out for La Locanda, a collection of beautifully restored farm buildings at the end of a dirt road in Chianti. The views from the terraced garden and pool betray no signs of modern life, and it’s easy to feel lost in time in one of the simple but stylish rooms. Rates, $230-$325; 39-0577/738-833, www.lalocanda.it.

Podere Le Mezzelune, a four-room B&B between Livorno and Pisa, has all the charm of its Italian-speaking owners, with fresh-cut flowers, iron beds, an open fire, and a shaded terrace. You can’t get lunch or dinner here, but ten minutes away is the seaside favorite, La Pineta (in Marina di Bibbona; 39-0566/600-016), and 20 minutes away is the famous Gambeto Rosso (in San Vincenzo; 39-0565/701-021). Rate, $210; 39-0566/690-266; www.lemezzelune.it.
antiques, country furniture, and bright fabrics and rugs. Music lovers should book in late July, when the villa hosts an excellent annual chamber music festival.

The valley's second-best village is the medieval walled town of San Quirico d'Orcia, which sits on the Via Francigena, the ancient pilgrim route that led from France and northern Europe to Rome. It is a quiet, pleasant place with a lovely Romanesque church. The Collegiata has three elaborately carved doorways; the finest is beneath a huge stained-glass rose window. At the other end of the town is the Horti Leonini, an Italianate garden laid out in the late 16th century. There is also the stylish Relais Palazzo del Capitano (rates, $160-$260; 39-0577/899-028; www.palazzodelcapitano.com), which occupies a medieval palazzo and has a good restaurant and pretty garden. A few miles south is the tiny medieval spa town Bagno Vignoni, where the Romans once bathed in the thermal waters. (You can do the same at the Hotel Posta Marucci). The large pool that dominates the central piazza was built by the Medici and is an extraordinary sight. Farther south again, Radicofani reigns over the surrounding countryside from the top of a 3,000-foot mound. Inside the two churches, Sant'Agata and San Pietro, are yet more Della Robbia altarpieces. From Radicofani, head east through stunning countryside to Cetona, a perfectly preserved little gem recently in vogue with a sophisticated crowd (Valentino has a house here). La Fratreria, just outside town (rates, $270-$340; 39-0578/238-015; www.lafratreria.it), is a rustic, totally sublime retreat in a series of ancient monastic buildings.

What it may lack in modern amenities (there's no television, for example), it more than makes up for with a superb restaurant. All the vegetables and herbs are straight from the hotel's garden.

DIVING IN ARGENTARIO

Considered one of the best spots in Italy, the waters around the Monte Argentario offer visibility up to 156 feet. There are even a couple of shipwrecks nearby. The man to take you under is Stefano Donnini, who has 30 years of diving experience. He can customize a trip beginning at $1,450 per day, 39-0564/810-145; www.calagaleradiving.com.

PASTORAL PAMPERING

The ground beneath Tuscany bubbles with natural hot springs, making it one of the most popular places in Italy for spas. Locals like their terme traditional—that is, no-frills—but travelers have discovered a handful of more stylish spots to take the waters. Recently spruced up by the folks behind the terrific Fonteverde in San Casciano dei Bagni, the Grotta Giusti spa in Monsummano Terme is in a prehistoric underground-cave system that was discovered in 1849 (in the hottest part of the cave, called Hell, the temperature is a constant 93 degrees, with 100 percent humidity). The adjacent hotel has recently been renovated—a pool was added—and there is now a restaurant serving excellent spa cuisine. Treatments include thermal mud baths, massages, inhalations, facials, and a chocolate face-and-body scrub. Rates, $440-$725; treatments, $10-$285; 39-057/290-777; www.grottagiustisp.com.