

# WILD TUSCANY

*With spiky mountains, enchanted forest and views out to Corsica, this is Tuscany but not as you know it, says **Sarah Stirling***

ITALY

**BELLISSIMO: SUNNY  
TUSCAN HIKING**

**WHO'S WRITING?**

**SARAH STIRLING** is a tech-nomadic adventure travel writer. Her life revolves around following the sun to the next outdoor escapade then writing about it and photographing it. She's not quite rootless: her homeland of West Wales frequently draws her back, as does her second home, Chamonix. Find out where she is now at [instagram/sarah\\_stirling](https://www.instagram.com/sarah_stirling) and find out more on [www.sarahstirling.com](http://www.sarahstirling.com).

**I** WAS LIVING OUT OF A SMALL RUCKSACK, POTTERING AROUND EUROPE the summer I decided to drive to Tuscany. I was in Chamonix at the time anyway, and it's magical to skip the usual culture continuum around country borders by tunnelling under Western Europe's highest mountain.

The ingredients of a good holiday – *gelato*, cappuccino, *vino* – suddenly fraction in price, multiply in taste and even get more romantic names. Indulgence and having a nice time generally seem far more important than making money on the sunnier side of Monte Bianco.

I immersed myself fairly equally in the scenery and food as it evolved through the mountain-top castles and quaint village cafes of Aosta Valley down to the limestone sport climbing crags, rambling high-walled old town and seafood restaurants of Finale. From there I hugged the azure sea and watched the landscape transform into gently rolling Tuscan hills, vineyards and olive groves.

Sunned, satiated and somewhat bloated by the Italian good

life, I was getting itchy-footed for mountain adventures again. I turned off the highway, where the road leapt up and away from characteristic Tuscany and started winding about an untamed land of chestnut-forested hillsides, overgrown mysterious gorges and jagged peaks; some topped with what looked like snow, but on closer inspection was pure white stone. The road then deposited me in a vertiginous hamlet called Promiana.

I'd heard that the region was not your typical Tuscany – surprisingly mountainous and wild – but I'd not expected anything on this scale.

"Stay there, I'll come down and get you," said Jamie, when I called from the bottom of the driveway, as arranged. His typically Italian tiny old car popped out from an opening in the shrubbery; I held on tight as we bounced up and around the hillside. I could see the farmhouse above, in a clearing. It looked like a full-time job just to fight back nature enough to exist up there.

Because, of course, it's the easy part, falling in love with

a romantically tumbledown farm, hidden in the middle of nowhere up a driveway so steep and narrow that you need considerable practice to drive up it. The hard part is making a life out of it all, I thought, as we parked. The plot had been abandoned in the 1970s, by local farmers who had barely scraped by for generations, and it was bought by Jamie and Ailsa Reynolds in 2001.

The encroaching greenery all around was the Garfagnana, the 'enchanted forest,' Jamie told me. The Garfagnana region almost completely covers the surrounding Serchio Valley, which dips between the spiky-topped Apuane Alps and the older, more worn and rounded Apennines. These rugged ranges are known only to a handful of mountain connoisseurs so far, but gaining in popularity, which means things like mountain bike tracks and via ferrata are also popping up. That's why the Reynolds had come up with the idea of offering a walker's retreat. I couldn't wait to explore.

But... "I hope you've brought your waterproofs," ventured Jamie, tactfully, as we approached the house. Vegetables

spilled over pots on to terracotta steps. The sun was setting in a sunburst of vivid reds and oranges; rays were illuminating the delicate edges of bright flowers in the orderly garden. The cooling air was becoming saturated with heady scents – jasmine and lavender? Evening air always makes me restless, holding a mixture of calm and promise. Damn you weather. So much for red sky at night, I thought. Apparently we were due the worst weather they'd ever experienced in April.

The next morning, mist was obscuring the tops and ominous dark clouds were gathering as we drove through the steep-sided valley of Fabbriche di Val di Tevere to the village of Palagnana. Atmospheric fog was glowering around tall beech trunks as we began resolutely climbing.

Just as we were emerging from the trees, possibly about to catch our first glimpse of the surrounding Apuane Alps (as Brits we were thriving on the border between despair and hope of better weather any moment), the heavens opened with a huge thunder clap that sent us climactically running for a small stone shelter, in which we stood and dripped for a ►



STEEP SLOG



DRAMATIC LIMESTONE AND A 'MARILYN MOMENT'

short while, making small-talk about how it could be worse before retreating to the farmhouse.

Well, I'd missed the views stretching all the way to the Mediterranean, the limestone gorge, locally-famous wild flower meadows and the marble quarries where Michelangelo sourced the stone for David – the region is famous for the stone – but, shhh, I was totally content that afternoon all the same, tucked up under a blanket by the log burner in the *agriturismo* (farm stay) with a cup of tea, salivating over wafts of duck, hazelnut and blackberry cooking.

A trained chef, Ailsa painstakingly crafted fresh-flavoured dinners from produce mostly raised on the *agriturismo*. She also made gourmet walker's lunches, like *farro* (a local grain) salad with roast vegetables, artfully designed not to give you a sandwich-style carb crash, and beamed when you, in full-flavoured heaven, loved it all.

Over dinner Jamie told me about moving to Lavacchio and tentatively snipping the edges of the derelict Italian wilderness they'd just bought; tiptoeing into the baffling territory of Italian bureaucracy; learning just how many goats and quince trees they needed in order to qualify as an *agriturismo*; figuring out local walks and how to market themselves as a walker's retreat; and then falling exhausted into bed night after night until they were healthy, dusty and wiry, like part of the place.

The next day dawned what we call 'not too bad' in Britain; that is, there was a tiny patch of cloud-free sky on which we were resting all our hopes. We set off for Pignone for the big mountain day of the week, Pania della Croce, and an ascent of around 1,000m. On the way up we were teased with views under clouds and over surrounding rocky wilderness, but the mist grew denser and, as we gained the ridge, became so thick that we could barely see each other. ►

“THE NEXT DAY, I WAS HAVING A MARILYN MOMENT WITH MY SKORT, POSING UNDER A HUGE DRAMATIC LIMESTONE ARCH ON A RIDGE”

## TREK TUSCANY

### AGRITURISMO OWNER JAMIE'S FIVE TIPS FOR WALKING IN THE MOUNTAINS OF TUSCANY

- 1 GET A GUIDE**  
If you want to get off the beaten track, hire a guide. The maps, while looking good, are not very accurate. Look for reputable trekking companies for week-long trips, ask at the local tourist office or check with the Club Alpino Italiano.
- 2 DRINK LOTS**  
Hydrate: carry plenty of water as there are not always reliable streams and springs on the mountain. A couple of litres should suffice.
- 3 HIT THE HUTS**  
Use the excellent network of Rifugi: mountain huts where you can get a drink, a meal or a bed for the night at excellent rates.
- 4 TAKE IT SLOWLY**  
As with all aspects of life in Italy, slow down. There are fabulous views and spectacular memories to take away. You are more likely to spot wild life: mufione (wild sheep), deer, spotted salamanders or even wolves.
- 5 WATCH THE WEATHER**  
Be prepared for all eventualities: the sun may shine when you set out but the proximity to the coast and the height of the mountains mean that the weather can change suddenly.

RUGGED, LITTLE-KNOWN PEAKS





## CULINARY DELIGHTS

### AGRITURISMO OWNER AILSA'S FIVE FOODS TO TRY IN TUSCANY

- 1 **FARRO:** An ancient barley with a nutty taste grown high in the Apennines.
- 2 **FRESH FUNGI:** A Garfagnana speciality and more than just porcini. Stay safe and eat them in a restaurant or you can check their edibility at a pharmacy.
- 3 **OLIVE OIL:** Taste it fresh and marvel at the range of flavours within Tuscany alone.
- 4 **MACCHERONI AL LEPRE:** Flat squares of pasta with a hare ragu. Alternatively, spaghetti with olive oil, black pepper and truffle. So simple, so delicious.
- 5 **CICCHETTI (BAR SNACKS):** Italians wouldn't have a drink without something to eat, and nor should you. Lucca has a few bars with a full-on freshly made buffet, free with a drink. A simple way to taste the region.



“ WE HAD A SATISFYING SCRAMBLE UP A WIDE, WINDING RIDGE, SOAKING UP THE HEADY VIEWS, WARM ROCK IN OUR HANDS ”



At the point where Corsica apparently becomes visible on a clear day, we turned our faces out of the driving hail into thick white, and murmured about having to 'get back' for various things, possibly. But it was no use, we had a Scot with us who was determined to tick the summit. Just below the worst of the weather, the *agriturismo* dog, a lurcher called Finty, wisely sat down like a cow preserving a dry patch and awaited our return, head down.

What a difference the weather makes. The next day I was having a Marilyn moment with my skort, posing under a huge dramatic limestone arch on a ridge, staring about in utter amazement. The light was glaring off limestone peaks. Our

summit for the day, Monte Forato, was above, sharply defined and vivid in the bright light; it seemed you could reach up and touch its pointy white peak. With stones trickling on to the steep meadow clinging to the face below it, it looked like it was snow capped.

All around, dark green forest rippled over mountains like a crumpled blanket, stretching out to the sparkling Mediterranean. After lunch, we had a deliciously satisfying scramble up and along a wide, winding ridge to Foce di Valli, soaking up all the heady views, warm rock in our hands and sunshine, before descending through wild flower meadows. It was another world and our last day – how tantalising!

That night Ailsa and Jamie made pizzas in the ancient bread oven on the terrace. Sitting under the wisteria around the rustic table, with the sun setting and prosecco flowing, I realised I had got quite used to this.

Trying to hammer a bent peg into solid earth with a shoe at the free climber's campsite in Finale the next night, I thought about my wide bed at Lavacchio. I wanted more of those mountains I'd finally seen in all their blazing glory on the very last day. Taking a bite of cold pizza, I thought through my growing list of special places to go back to one day, and added the Garfagnana. Trail running race in summer, you say? Yes please... **AT**



# LET'S GO

## TUSCANY, ITALY

### GET THERE

Pisa airport is an hour from Promiana. Easyjet, Ryanair, Jet2 and BA fly there from a variety of UK airports.

### WALKING WEEKS

I was on a trip called Wild Tuscany, a guided walking week run by Tracks and Trails. It costs from £1,095, including full board, airport transfers and five days of guided walking with an IML mountain guide (with a day off in the middle). See [www.tracks-and-trails.co.uk](http://www.tracks-and-trails.co.uk).

### WHEN TO GO

Wild Tuscany walking weeks take place in May and June, and again in September and October.

### ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation for the week is Col di Lavacchio, a small, organic *agriturismo* (farm stay) with chestnut woodland, olive groves and a small vineyard. There are five bedrooms and three bathrooms in the main house. The sitting room has a wood-burning stove; the kitchen terrace has a barbeque and an ancient bread oven; and there is a table tennis table, a badminton court, tented yoga decking and a pool.

The criteria for *agriturismo* is that you must spend more time work-

ing the land than you do providing care for your guests, which isn't difficult at Lavacchio where days begin at 7am and frequently end late. The produce springing from the terraces in front of the villa includes olives, chestnuts, figs, plums, pears, apples, aubergines, tomatoes, courgettes, cucumber, lettuce, onions, sheep, hens, ducks, guinea fowl, geese and turkeys. The *agriturismo* can also be booked for self-catering holidays in July and August. See [www.lavacchio.com](http://www.lavacchio.com).

### OTHER ACTIVITIES

There are loads of other activities in the region besides hiking. There are several via ferrata, and nine high ropes courses at San Romano. The Lima river above Bagni di Lucca is a great wild swimming spot, and the Parco del Levigliese, just 7km from Lavacchio, offers canyoning down a rocky gorge and tame canoeing on the river and lake. Two cave systems, Grotta del Vento and Antro di Corchia, can be explored over three hours with a guide.

The European and national mountain bike championships have been held in the area for many years. Some endurance routes for downhill enthusiasts have been built recently, and there's a MTB race on 150km of trails in the Apuane and Apennine mountains called the Garfagnana Epic in June ([www.garfagnanaepic.com](http://www.garfagnanaepic.com)). There's also a trail running race in June, Trail Della Apuane, with 13km, 23km and 45km options: [www.traildelleapuane.com](http://www.traildelleapuane.com).

There are two sport climbing crags in

the area: one just out of Glacial, and the other on the route up to Pania della Croce, which offer mid to high grades on varied faces. It's easy to find crags that are not crowded and that will occupy you all day. The guidebook *Toscana e Isola d'Elba* has English directions to the crags and is available from [www.versantesud.it](http://www.versantesud.it).

There are a number of horse-riding companies: Sergio Triffiletti offers a four-hour trek into some beautiful countryside exploring old villages, fortresses and natural parkland. And finally, trips to both Florence and Lucca are worth it. Return train tickets to Lucca cost €8.60 and to Florence €20.40.

### THE MOUNTAINS

The Apuane Alps run parallel to the Versilian coast for 60km north of Lucca. Characterised by jagged tops and narrow gorges, the range is best known for its white marble, from which Michelangelo created his most famous works. Many visitors mistake the white tops of the Apuane for snow even in hot summers.

The Apennines – the main spine of Italy – are considerably older than the Apuane Alps and more weathered and rounded, providing a contrast for the hiker. Both ranges are of similar height, around 2,000 metres, with Tuscany's highest peak Monte Prado (2,054m) lying in the north of the Garfagnana in the Apennine range.

There are lots of hiking tracks in the region, maintained by the Club Alpino Italiano, who are very active in the area.