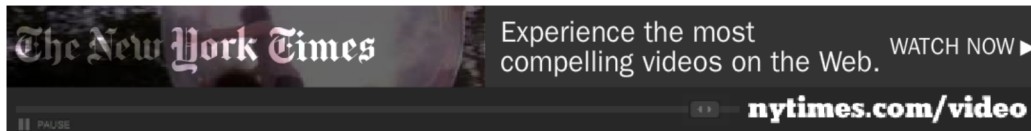


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Tuscany Without the Crowds



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

A view of the Val d'Orcia, known for the cypress trees that line its winding roads, in January.

By DANIELLE PERGAMENT
Published: March 7, 2010

IT was a cold, foggy morning in [Tuscany](#), and La Foce, a 15th-century villa that sits on 2,000 acres of rolling fields overlooking the storied Montepulciano vineyards, was eerily quiet.

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I walked the stone pathways in the manicured garden. Around me, cypress trees creaked, ripe persimmons swayed soundlessly from bare branches and a scattering of white flowers clung to a stone wall for warmth. Far below, a miniature Fiat truck made its way up the hillside, chugging along the empty, winding road.

The last time I was in Tuscany, it was July. Fields were ablaze in that golden yellow you see on postcards, bikers in neon Lycra were swarming the roads, and tour buses jammed the medieval piazzas. And I'd had the brilliant idea of inviting 120 non-Italian-speaking friends to the tiny village of Pienza for my wedding. "Beautiful, hot and full of Americans" was how one ungracious guest had put it.

But now, the temperature had dropped to 40 degrees and the color palette had shifted to the shockingly bright green that appears in these hills only in the winter and early spring. Steely gray fog rolled slowly across the valley, and a blanket of silence suggested a landscape that had gone into hibernation.

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Forget the magazine covers that promise “The Undiscovered Tuscany!” “The Hidden Tuscany!” “The Secret Tuscany!” When a place has been attracting admirers for more than a thousand years, no square inch is undiscovered. The real Tuscany, as locals have been telling me over the years, is found in the dead of winter, when the crowds are thinner and the rooms, flights and restaurants are pleasantly cheaper.

That’s what brought me — along with my husband and our new baby — back to the Val d’Orcia in December. We came to visit friends who live here and to experience a Tuscany populated only by Tuscans.

Bordered to the north by the hills of [Siena](#) and to the south by the imposing arc of Monte Amiata, the valley is known for a few things: the cypress trees that line its winding roads (no calendar of [Italy](#) is complete without a picture of them), the creamy saltiness of its pecorino cheese, and Brunello di Montalcino, a king of Italian [wines](#). Basically everything I care about in life.

The Val d’Orcia is also a [Unesco World Heritage Site](#) (take that, Chianti). “I love the Val d’Orcia in the winter — you get a much truer Tuscany,” said Benedetta Origo, who, along with her sister, Donata Origo, owns the La Foce estate, where their family used to live. Their mother, Iris Origo, wrote “War in Val d’Orcia: An Italian War Diary, 1943-1944” — the de facto textbook of the area.

“This time of year, the clay turns to mud,” Ms. Origo said. “I put on my boots and go for long walks along the quiet paths in the forest. It’s rather poetic. And you can always expect to see a family of wild boar.”

In fact, the wildlife is a big part of the charm of the area. “The landscape is lush and full of boar, hares and pheasants, whereas in the summer, you don’t see animals, and fields are plowed and brown.” This is John Voigtmann, an American expat who turned a crumbling stone barn into La Bandita, an eight-room boutique hotel that sits atop the most-photographed of those cypress-lined roads. With its sleek four-poster beds and infinity-edge pool, it is one of the rare modern-design hotels in the area. “This is the time of year you see real Tuscans sitting in a cafe, drinking a grappa,” Ms. Origo added. “Maybe people are a little friendlier. The Val d’Orcia comes back to its own life.”

In that spirit, we set out on a brisk Wednesday morning for the medieval town of Sant’Angelo in Colle for lunch. As we drove to the tiny hilltop village, it started to drizzle, then pour. Winter in Tuscany is damp and pleasantly cool, with temperatures dipping as low as 30 degrees, though it rarely snows in the valley. And the landscape turns to a vibrant shade of jungle-y emerald — the only place I know that gets more colorful in the winter.

The village — sand-colored stone palazzi and worn cobblestone paths, all drenched in mist and rain — sat like a slumbering animal on top of the hill. I tried to remember if I had been there before. After a dozen trips to the area, I still have trouble telling one beautiful medieval mountaintop village from the next.

There wasn’t a soul in sight. We parked our car on the road (there was no shortage of spaces) and dashed into Il Leccio, a restaurant and wine bar.

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DANIELLE PERGAMENT is a frequent contributor to the Travel section.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 21, 2010

The cover article on March 7, about Tuscany in winter, misidentified the type of fruit that was seen on the bare branches of trees in the garden at La Foce, a 15th-century villa there. They were persimmons, not oranges.

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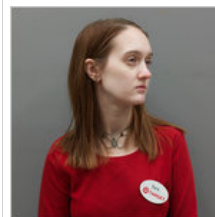


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