

// BELLISSIMO! TUSCANY

Our long-time travel writer visits this Italian hideaway with his son for the trip of a lifetime

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Tuscany is one of the most popular Italian holiday hotspots and is fast becoming renowned for its exceptional array of courses.

WE'D BEEN invited to Tuscany to celebrate the opening of Toscana

Resort Castelfalfi's new clubhouse. It was a long way to go to visit just one Tuscan clubhouse so we decided to visit them all - and play their golf courses, too.

// CASTELFALFI

Toscana Resort Castelfalfi is a 'gateway' to the wonderful Italian region of Tuscany. Equidistant from the cities of Pisa and Florence with low-cost airlines whisking you in from most European hubs, you can arrive at the hotel, check-in and be ready to golf in little more than an hour.

This relatively new, 5-star resort is an island of elegance far from the madding crowds. Service levels are exemplary with 5-star care and attention in an expansive, multi-faceted resort.

Castelfalfi is run and operated by TUI Blue, the German tour company, not your typical golf resort operators but they've done something quite exceptional here, renovating a derelict medieval village and returning it to rude health.

// AND SO TO GOLF

We'd come on the occasion of the opening of the new Castelfalfi clubhouse, the final piece of the jigsaw at the heart of a superb 27 holes of surprising diversity.

The main course is called The Mountain, a bit of a misnomer as it's not really mountainous. But it is fairly hilly. The holes flow seamlessly through the undulating Tuscan terrain and you can walk the course as I noticed most of the members doing - but it must keep them fit.

From a playing perspective, the Mountain is noticeably demanding. You need to have your A-game from the first. I recommend you play the course at least twice to appraise its character and capture its full flavour. There are a couple of quirky corners that the designers have done their best to work into the sometimes challenging terrain but all-in-all, they've done a grand job and it's a hugely rewarding experience. Out of numerous remarkable holes, the

ninth is the most memorable, a par-3 with a 50-meter drop. The 18th, although a dog-leg par-4, finishes in a similar fashion.

We didn't have time to play the Lake Course. It looks shorter and more open and would no doubt make a good warm-up round ahead of the more demanding Mountain.

// ON THE ROAD

It was time to hit the road and what a road it was! Tuscany's golf resorts are conveniently positioned about an hour's drive from one another so it makes sense to plan a two or even three-centre vacation. That way you can make time to appreciate all that this fabulous Italian region has to offer.

The village of San Gimignano is only a short drive from Castelfalfi and a highly recommended first-stop. Its medieval skyscrapers and ancient apartments stand amid a warren of slender lanes and diminutive squares. Tuscany is peppered with such hilltop villages and it would be remiss to miss any of them.

// ROYAL GOLF LA BAGNAIA

Our next golf stop was Royal Golf La Bagnaia which might be a mouthful to pronounce but it was certainly not hard to enjoy. Out of all the courses we played, La Bagnaia stands out as the best presented, in superb condition, not long but wide open with amply generous fairways. So if your driver's working well, it can be a good day at the office.

Water and bunkers are the course's main defence but these can be carefully navigated. The Borgo of La Bagnaia is not dissimilar to Castelfalfi in that the main hotel facility had been tastefully blended into original buildings lending the place an air of authenticity.

// SIENA

That evening we took the short drive back to the town of Siena for a stroll around and some dinner. Siena's medieval streets surround a central square, the Piazza del Campo, where Il Palio, a spectacular horse race is held twice a year. Siena is also famous for its cuisine and there are dozens of exquisite little trattoria hidden away in small alleyways. The only problem is which to choose!

// CASTIGLION DEL BOSCO

And now for something completely different! Castiglion del Bosco is one of the most exclusive corners of Tuscany, a unique country estate at the heart of one of the best wine-producing regions in the world. The property includes exclusive accommodations, wine tours and an impeccable Tom Weiskopf-designed golf course.

Wine tours need to be booked in advance but it is definitely worth calling in. Following a round of the cellars and the ageing room, we enjoyed a tasting of four wines including Brunello di Montalcino accompanied by some of the finest Tuscan cheeses and homemade cold cuts.

// SATURNIA

The road to Saturnia took us through some hilly countryside that, if it wasn't for the acres of olive groves and rows of vineyards, reminded me of Scotland. We stopped to take a shot of the landscape and by good fortune, there below us was the Cascades of Saturnia.

The Terme di Saturnia is a spa resort, its main pool fed by a single thermal spring that bubbles up from the earth's mantle at a comfortable 37.5 degrees. There has been a spa here since the Etruscan-Roman era. Today, the thermal pool is surrounded by a full, 5-star hotel facility not to mention 18 excellent holes of golf. Apart from a slight odour of eggs, what more could you ask for?

In the excellent company of Procolo Sabbatino, the club's professional, we enjoyed one of the best rounds of the tour. Saturnia's course was crafted by American architect Ronald Fream back in 2007, a markedly moving configuration, twisting and dipping with never a dull moment



Golf Dell'Ugolino, Near Florence

through an ecologically sensitive area. And after golf, it was straight back to the thermal pool to relax and revive tired golf muscles.

// ARGENTARIO - COASTAL HEAVEN

Our Grand Tour continued with another hour's drive this time towards the coast. The Argentario Golf Resort & Spa is yet another fine, 5-star facility with a strong design-slant, two magnificent restaurants, an extensive wellness centre and the only PGA National golf course in Italy.

Situated on an island, the golf course is never short on views or challenge. What I liked about the Italian courses we'd encountered thus far was their 'shapely' configuration and Argentario is no exception. The greens are small and in a speedy condition so it was here we were most challenged. The overall experience is one of the finest quality and the same can be said of Argentario's main restaurant, 'Dama Dama' where chef Emiliano Lombardelli lead us



through his Tasting Menu, a tour of the flavours, aromas and colours of this delightful corner of the region - with wines to match, of course.

// PUNTA ALA

The skies were darkening as we headed north towards the seaside town of Punta Ala. By the time we reached the town of Punta Ala, the heavens had opened. In the deluge, we missed our hotel entrance and drove on towards the golf course, seeing virtual rivers cascading across the greens and fairways. Surely there would be no golf the next day!

Much to our delight, Punta Ala was perfectly playable the following morning. Set close to the sea, this undulating, wooded parkland drained effortlessly and there

was little evidence of the previous night's floods.

I don't want to go on about how great the courses are throughout Tuscany (as you might stop believing me) but yet again here was another exciting test, completely different from any we'd sampled so far and offering great views to the island of Elba where Napoleon Bonapart was once exiled.

// FLORENCE

If you come to Tuscany, you need to spend at least a day or two in the city of Florence and at this unprecedented time, we were fortunate enough to have the place largely to ourselves. I'd prefer to see the place busy but it was a sort of inverted privilege to stroll through Florence's charming streets and bridges without the customary hordes of tourists. The city doesn't seem that big and even near the principal tourist

area surrounding the Ponte Vecchio, there are lots of little bars and trattoria where the locals congregate with prices a lot less than you would expect. I could get used to a place like this.

// MONTECATINI

From Florence, the GPS led us across the mountains on a winding road that eventually brought us to the district of Montecatini. We could have come more directly and quickly but it was an interesting drive.

This little, unassuming golf club set in the hills of the Montalbano with its 9 guest rooms turned out to be a highlight of our visit. The course is pure fun, not long but twisting through olive groves in a medley of doglegs and drops that keep you on your toes. In the company of two members, we played almost

TRAVEL FYI

- Currency Euro (€)
- Local lingo Italian, with English spoken widely
- Time difference GMT +1
- High season June to Sept (28°C - 30°C)
- Price of pint €1.70 (Florence average)
- More info visittuscany.com



Toscana Resort Castelfalfi



Downtown Florence



Argentario Golf Resort



Golf Bellosguardo Vinci

authentic Italian style, not to mention the incredible food.

The original Florence Golf Club was founded in 1889 but that course is now buried somewhere under Florence Airport. In 1933, the club relocated to more secluded hill country south of the city and has never looked back. It's a par 72 that only measures 5,672 meters (almost 6,200 yards) which tells you a lot of the course's tricky nature. Besides the undulating terrain, you have sloping fairways and small, very well-protected greens.

// BELLOSGUARDO

Just south of Montecatini Terme, we finished our tour at Golf Bellosguardo Vinci, a relatively new facility which, imaginatively celebrates the works of Leonardo Da Vinci who hailed from the neighbouring village. The superb clubhouse restaurant is flanked by an open-air museum with models of his most famous

inventions. There are very comfortable rooms available here also. The course is only 9-holes carved onto the sides of a valley to great effect.

// CONCLUSION

We set out to conquer the entire Tuscan region and we managed it, although I did learn along the way, there are a few more golf courses - 22 in all. I don't recommend you do the same but perhaps pick a selection you want to experience and then plan your own Grand Tour of Tuscany.

For more information on Tuscany, visit davidjwhyte.com where his blog includes more personal insights and details of his and his son's tour around Tuscany. You can also get further information on Tuscany at visittuscany.com or playgolfintuscany.it