

TIME stands still in Tuscany. You know this, because the group of curmudgeonly men playing cards at the village square is the same group as the day before, and the day before that. You run after the bus, the only one that will bring you to the largish town of Siena, but it has already turned the corner. Don't worry, say the old men in the square.

Relax. It's OK. The next bus comes in about 45 minutes.

By Clarissa Tan

under a tuscan spell

Across the rolling hillsides of Tuscany, medieval fortress towns – San Gimignano, Montalcino, Arezzo, Lucca, Monteriggioni, Castellina di Chianti – heave their proud, fantastical turrets to the sky. They have not changed for hundreds of years, nor do they intend to.

Many Tuscans still live in these towns, walking and driving on its ancient streets, repairing its walls, restoring any broken bits. They understand that in order to fully move forward, sometimes we must preserve. Medieval pageants, wine festivals, jousts and falconry are still carried out throughout the region. This is not an obsession with dead things; it is a passion for life. Jazz and pop festivals abound, and Tracy Chapman recently held a concert within the 13th century ramparts of Arezzo, her beautiful voice booming across the feudal towers like a battle cry.

When visiting this famous region of Italy, many tourists flock to glamorous Florence, the birthplace of the Renaissance. But for a feel of the rustic, medieval core that is Tuscany, it is better to head to the red-stoned town of Siena. Once an archrival to Florence, Siena's star started to fade after it lost about half its population to the Black Death. As unfortunate as that was, it also means that Siena's architecture and cityscape have hardly evolved since then, the better for sight-seers today.

"Siena is a magical place," says Gianni Stanghellini, a certified guide who runs Walk About Tuscany, which offers individual and group tours of the town and surrounding countryside. "It's a little bit outside of time. Up above one of the gates in the walls, there is an inscription in Latin that says: *Cor magis tibi Saena pandit* – 'Siena opens its heart to you, a heart which is bigger than this gate'."

Since it clings to seven hills, a walk through Siena means you are likely to meet a steep, crooked incline while walking down one street, and face a vast blue sky with a view on a valley while down another. You are likely to pass little restaurants, trattorias, gelaterias, bakeries, antique shops, the unavoidable tourist souvenir stands and – at the imposing Palazzo Salimbeni – the headquarters of the Monte dei Paschi di Siena, the oldest surviving bank in the world, founded in 1472.

You are also likely to come across the Duomo, the main cathedral of Siena, the interior of which looks like it was designed by architects and artists in a fit of Gothic madness (which is not far from the truth), leaving not one square inch of ceiling, wall, pulpit or floor unadorned with either fresco, sculpture, marble, painting, stained glass, candelabra or mosaic, the overall result being oddly fitting, making it one of the most magnificent cathedrals in Europe.

But all roads will eventually lead to Il Campo, the town's enormous central plaza shaped like a semi-circular shell, with its paved bricks radiating outward in nine sections, representing the Council of Nine that oversaw the city's affairs during its heyday. Il Campo is encircled by the Palazzo Pubblico or town hall, its 102-metre-tall



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bell tower (one of the highest in Italy), and the palazzi signorili, once the houses or "palaces" of illustrious Sienese families.

Il Campo is the stage of Tuscany's most famous event, the medieval-style horse race known as the Palio. Every summer, on July 2 and Aug 16, after a spectacular historical pageant known as the Corteo Storico, 10 horses run around the plaza at breakneck speed, in races that last no more than 90 seconds each. The jockeys ride bareback and are often thrown off their horses, with some steeds crossing the finish line without a rider. (If this scenario sounds vaguely familiar, it's because the Palio was the setting of some action scenes in the latest James Bond flick, the *Quantum of Solace*.)

The horses and jockeys represent the 17 different con-

tradas or districts of Siena. The contradas, in a tradition that stretches from the 11th century, are each named after an emblematic animal – thus there is the contrada of the Eagle, the Caterpillar, the Snail, the Dragon, the Tortoise, the Giraffe, the Unicorn and so on.

"Every year, the Sienese people hear the bell calling for the race," says Stanghellini. "They feel a thrill through their veins, just like hundreds of years ago."

But as thrilling as the races are, and as charming as Siena can be, you still haven't got your full taste of Tuscany unless you venture off the beaten track. "What a traveller should not miss is the countryside nearby Siena," says Stanghellini. "The north is home to the famous Chianti wine. Vineyards and olive groves cover most of the territory. The southern part is more wild, more undiscovered, but also famous for best wine in the area, the Brunello di Montalcino."

Montalcino is the little hill town to head for if you want to try the famous local dish known as pici or pinci, handmade pasta that resembles Hokkien noodles in shape and texture. You can do no wrong if you head for the Osteria di Porta al Cassero, where they offer unforgettable pici in two of its most popular variants – soaked in garlicky tomato sauce, or garlanded with breadcrumbs.

Eating pici, drinking Brunello, visiting medieval cities – what else must one do while in Tuscany? Don't leave unless you have taken a drive, walk or cycle – or perhaps even bus ride – across the generous fields of sunflowers. There they are, those yellow-headed plants, bending their bodies imperceptibly but inevitably in rhythm with the sun. It's about time.



SIENA TOWN AND DUOMO CEILING DETAIL PHOTOS BY CLARISSA TAN, DUOMO CATHEDRAL PHOTO BY LUCY SHIEH, CASTIGLION DEL BOSCO PHOTOS COURTESY OF CASTIGLION DEL BOSCO



OLD COUNTRY

Above, for a feel of the rustic, medieval core that is Tuscany, it is better to head to the red-stoned town of Siena. Far left, Il Campo is the stage of Tuscany's most famous event, the medieval-style horse race known as the Palio, attended by thousands. Left, Siena's main cathedral, the duomo, is a frenzy of Gothic decoration. Right, Massimo Ferragamo has refurbished an ancient estate Castiglion del Bosco (below) for 21st century guests



A slice of Italy

IT'S Saturday evening and Massimo Ferragamo, the youngest child of the late Italian shoe designer and chairman of the US side of the family business, is walking down the cobbled driveway. He's a busy man, all the more so since he bought the fabulous 800-year-old Tuscan estate sprawled all around, so he can't chat long.

"Massimo," you make a sweeping gesture at the converted stables, the 14th century chapel, the farmhouses, the manor, the organic kitchen garden, the castle on a hill. "What made you buy this?"

He stares at you for two whole seconds before replying: "I don't know." Then he goes on to say that, since buying the vast and beautiful Castiglion del Bosco in 2003, the estate has completely taken over his life as he oversees every stage of its refurbishment. In an email later, he gives a more detailed response: "What inspired me to buy the Castiglion is the fact that in Italy, such a venture did not exist and the place was an ideal place to do this – it had all the ingredients necessary."

The "venture" that Mr Ferragamo talks about is the fact that he has opened the Castiglion del Bosco – all 4,200 rolling green acres of it – to 150 members who will have the right to a minimum of six weeks every year to one of its 20 villas or 24 suites (many of them restored 17th and 18th century buildings), as well as access to its two restaurants, a culinary academy, a winery, and miles and miles of forest land in which to go horseback riding, biking and hiking. All the villas and suites are impeccably decorated. There's a vineyard – Castiglion del Bosco is the fifth-largest producer of the coveted Brunello di Montalcino – and a golf course and spa are under construction.

With regards to the cost of membership, the Castiglion will say only that it is "undergoing an important business restructuring and the management is available for those who wish to become owners and members." According to a recent article in *Forbes*, each member pays a million euros upfront for a lifetime membership that can be transferred to his or her children.

Says Mr Ferragamo: "With an investment in the Castiglion, you get a membership that allows you to enjoy the estate and its facilities and amenities as an owner. If you had to assemble all those things collectively, it would literally be impossible for any single person to put together."

There are two ways of looking at this venture. On the one hand, if you want to savour authentic, rustic Tuscany, then the Castiglion, isolated as it is from the lifestyle of the average citizen, is not going to give it to you. You are unlikely to have a nice chat over espresso with a group of local village artisans if you live in a members-only luxury estate, where you will more probably rub shoulders with the international jet set.

On the other hand, if you are super-rich or exceedingly famous, then you are likely to seek privacy and security and all the rest of it, in which case the Castiglion will be a refreshing, tasteful change from the many faceless, garish six-star hotels. Plus, as Mr Ferragamo points out, this will gain you a foothold in one of the most sought-after real estate markets in the world. The Castiglion del Bosco is located in the heart of the Val d'Orcia National Park, which in 2004 was deemed a World Heritage Site by Unesco.

So if you have oodles and oodles of cash, and want not only a beautiful casa but a chance for property investment – why not? Go buy your own slice of Tuscany.

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