

PISA

Discovering *La Dolce Vita* Beyond the Tower

The Tuscan sky put on a twilight show, complete with rosy clouds and amber rays, as a pair of nuns crossed over the Arno's pale stone bridge. The nuns eclipsed a couple at the bridge's center who fell into an embrace. Students wearing cool wraparound sunglasses glided by on bikes as women in fashionable wool suits sauntered arm in arm. I'd arrived in *Pisa* just in time for the *passeggiata* — the early evening stroll.

And oh yes, there was that handsome man

standing close to me with an expectant look on his face: the cabbie waiting to get paid. Even this reality check didn't break the spell cast on me only half an hour after landing in Pisa. The fare for the 15-minute ride from the airport to the doorway of my city-center hotel was just seven euros.

Every year millions of travelers dash into Pisa's *Campo dei Miracoli* — the "Field of Miracles" Piazza which is home to the city's 12th-century triumphs: the *Duomo*, Baptistery, *Camposanto* and the famous Leaning Tower. They snap photos, pick up schlocky souvenirs and dash away. The town is one of the world's most famous "tourist quickies."

I go more for *La Dolce Vita* style than the "quickie" when it comes to Italian travel. From the moment I landed in Pisa's small, hassle-free international airport, my plan to start



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off my Tuscan vacation by immediately indulging in the simple slow rhythms of Italy began to work. What followed were heavenly jet-lagged days, as I poked around to find what lies beyond Pisa's main attraction.

What I discovered was a part of Pisa most tourists miss, even though it's a short walk from the tower: the heart of the historic center. This area is home to the town's other 12th-century treasure, the *University of Pisa*, which still flourishes as one of Europe's most prestigious academic centers.

The neighborhood's look is a sublime blend of arched cobblestone streets, Gothic churches and Romanesque palazzos infused with the vibrant energy of young bike-riding students. This is what the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning was writing about when she called Pisa "one of those small, delicious towns of silence."

My accommodations at the *Royal Victoria Hotel* were the ideal setting for me to take in the city as travelers on the Grand Tour had centuries ago. Run by the *Piegaja* family since its opening in 1837, the rambling *palazzo* features huge marble staircases opening up to grand salons and a rooftop terrace where guests can order up wine and enjoy the view. My spacious single room (bathroom across the hall) cost only 70 euros, and included a lavish breakfast buffet served in the hotel's gracious dining hall.



Vineria alla Piazza



Photos by Susan Van Allen

Porcini for Sale

The creak of fruit and vegetable carts along with merchants' "*buon giornos*" woke me in the morning. It was my cue to tie on my scarf, walk around the corner, and blend with the locals at the daily market. I wandered the harvest display of giant *porcini* mushrooms, inhaling the sharp smells of aged pecorino cheeses and the sweet aroma of hot pine nuts from a *paneficio* where Pisa's specialty *pignole* cookies were being baked.

It was easy to be lured away from the signs that pointed to *Il Torre* (The Tower). Camera-toting tourists streamed by me as I headed in the opposite direction to visit a mini-gothic masterpiece: the *Santa Maria della Spina* church. It was pouring rain as I

approached it — perfect to admire the intricate rooftop as water streamed off its carved pinnacles, angels and saints and then gushed out the mouths of its gargoyles.

Another diversion around the corner from my hotel was *The Borgo Stretto*, the historic center's main walkway where 19th century storefronts offered enticing displays of shoes and lingerie, *gelato* and candies. I slipped into one of the oldest cafes on the stretch, *Salza dalla 1898*, for a pick-me-up *cappuccino* and a few homemade chocolates served in their elegant back salon.

The best place for me to rub elbows with the locals (literally) was at the



Vineria alla Piazza, steps from the market, where diners are seated at long wooden communal tables. A chalkboard outside lists the daily fare, which changes according to what's fresh that day. Waitresses in

denim mini-skirts, t-shirts, black tights and boots expertly pulled off the casual-sexy look while serving fantastic salads and pastas to a lively cross-section of clientele: *mammas* with their *bambini* in strollers, boisterous university students, businessmen greeting each other with the traditional double-cheek kiss.

A "join the *famiglia*" vibe attracted me to the many small *trattorie* and *osterie* in the area, all of which offered three course dinners with wine for 30 euros. My favorite was *Osteria Cavalieri*, where in a cozy alcove lined with wine bottles, I enjoyed *tagliani con*

Where to STAY

Hotel Relais dell'Orologio

Via della Faggiola, 12/14
(39) 050 830361

www.hotelrelaisorologio.com

Rates: Start at 270€ for a single, 800€ for a suite, including breakfast. Check Web site for discounts.

Royal Victoria Hotel

Lungarno Pacinotti, 12
(39) 050 94011

www.royalvictoria.it

Rates: Start at 70€ for a single (w/o private bath), 118€ (w/bath) and 244€ for a family suite (two rooms, two baths, sleeps four).

Where to EAT

Osteria dei Cavalieri

Via San Frediano, 16
(39) 050 580858

www.osteriacavalieri.pisa.it
Closed Saturday afternoon and Sunday.
Closed in August.

Osteria dei Mille

Via dei Mille, 30/32
(39) 050 556263

Vineria alla Piazza

Piazza Vetto Vaglie
Closed Sunday.
Credit cards not accepted.

More Information Online

www.pisaonline.it
www.pisa.turismo.toscana.it

Pisa, six miles from the coast now, was

the locals (literally) was at the *Vineria alla Piazza*, diners are seated at long wooden communal tables."

funghi — pasta with a light mushroom sauce.

Before splurging for dinner at the *Hotel Relais dell'Orologio* (Pisa's only 5-star hotel), I peeked around at the upstairs rooms. The former 14th-century tower house has been meticulously renovated, blending Baroque-chic style with the building's original Renaissance frescoes.

I loved every bite of my *cena* in the intimate six-table dining room, with its ivory cloths and draperies which



Borge Stretto

opened to a garden, where meals are served in warmer months. I began with a mouth-tingling aperitif (a mixture of grapefruit, pineapple and strawberry juices), followed by a grilled eggplant, *mozzarella* and tomato salad, *ravioli* stuffed with *Chianina* beef, and went for the *Bistecca Fiorentina* secondo.

"You are... I don't know if there is an English translation for this word..." said the waiter, as I sat there dip-

ping *cantucci* into *vin santo* (the perfect Tuscan dessert). "You are *solare*. It means you are..."

"Cheerful?" I guessed.

"No... deeper than that. Like... it means you are from the sun... deeply happy..."



Palazzo dei Cavalieri

I always enjoy the flirtations of Italian waiters, and he didn't have to go further for me to agree with him. The perfect word for how I was feeling after having spent a

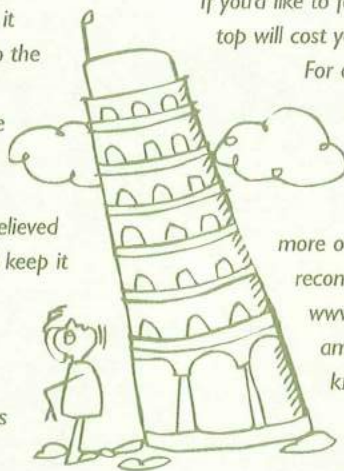
couple of days of blending in with authentic Pisan life, could only be expressed in Italian: Yes, I was *solare*.

—Susan Van Allen

If You Can't Miss the Tower...

Rumor has its original architect actually designed the *Torre Pendante* (Leaning Tower), as it is now known; to lean; the truth is that its drastic tilt is due to its shallow foundation and the sandy quality of the soil on which it was constructed. To give an idea of just how tilted the tower really is, try to picture that the top of it stands almost 13 feet away from where it would be were it perpendicular to the ground! In 1990 the tower was closed to the public for "corrective reconstruction," and it was reopened in 2001 standing a whole 18 inches straighter. It is believed that the improved foundation will keep it standing at least another 300 years...phew!

Begun in 1173, the Gothic/Romanesque structure was built in three stages and took about 177 years to complete, however the identity of the true architect still remains unknown. It was long believed to have been designed by the famous *Guglielmo* and *Bonanno Pisano*, but newer research points to *Diotisalvi*, the architect responsible for the nearby *Baptistry of Pisa*. No matter who actually designed it, the fact remains that there are 296



steps to the top with no elevator... so be prepared to work up a sweat if you want to enjoy the (skewed) view from the top. *Galileo*, a native of Pisa, did it when he dropped two cannon balls from the top to prove that an object's falling speed is independent of its mass.

If you'd like to follow *Galileo's* lead, a climb to the top will cost you 17 euros, by reservation only.

For opening hours and to buy tickets online, visit www.opapisa.it. You can also buy tickets at the door, but expect to wait 45 minutes to two hours in line. For

more on the history, construction, and reconstruction of the tower, check out www.torre.duomo.pisa.it...you'll be amazed at how much you don't know. For instance, did you know that in 1934 *Benito Mussolini* ordered that the tower be straightened, but after they poured concrete into the foundation, the opposite result was achieved and the tower leaned even further? So much for Fascism straightening out all of Italy's problems!

—Laura Cimperman

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a port city in the 5th Century B.C.