

SPAGHETTI JUNCTIONS

His best friend wants to savour art in Rome. **Alex Allen** wants to scoff pasta in Bologna. The keys to both are in a hire car, and a bonding trip of twists and turns between the two

Photography: **Kate Hockenull**



Tuscan twosome: opposite, on the road from Montepulciano to Pienza. Above, left to right, from top left, looking out from inside the Duomo, Florence's cathedral; the Boboli Gardens in Florence; elegant Bologna; fruit tart at a Florentine cafe; side street in Pienza; poppies lining the road in the Tuscan countryside; final approach to Pienza; the statue of *David* on the Piazza della Signoria in Florence (the real one is in the Accademia Gallery)

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here's a point, as you approach Florence from the north – threading your way along routes built God knows how many centuries ago to the regulation width of a mule cart – at which a stone wall suddenly falls away to reveal a view of the city so stupendous, your eyes can't help but leave the road. When this happened to me, luckily, I had my friend, Ben, in the passenger seat shouting 'woah-hhey-ARGHH!' to alert me to the three-wheeled Piaggio van I was about to plough into. How we laughed... nervously. It'd take more than a potential major prang to drive a wedge between us.

Ben and I have been friends for years, and we've long talked about embarking on an Italian road trip. The food! The wine! The weather! If our two-week adventure turned out to be liberally peppered with emotionally fraught, near-death experiences as we grappled with smartphone cameras (and undefined overtaking laws), so what? It was also utterly unforgettable.

It had, memorably, taken some planning. Academic Ben craved cultural enrichment – art, architecture and

history – so cast his vote for Florence or Rome. Me, I just wanted food – Herculean portions of pasta, pizza and ice cream, prefaced by aperitivos in sunny squares – so I had gluttonous Bologna and truffle-scented Umbria in my sights. In the end, unable to whittle it down, we decided to do it all. The plan: two weeks, starting in Bologna and meandering south through Florence and the rolling fields of Tuscany, before heading into the Umbrian hills to finish with a night in Rome. Our decision to go in October paid off handsomely, with Aperol-tinted sunlight and leaf-scattered streets to greet us on arrival.

For our first two days in Bologna we just wandered, aimless as a couple of lost dogs, gobbling meaty hand-outs in the old Quadrilatero market, nosing around cloistered university courtyards, and stretching our legs on a trek to the hilltop church of San Michele in Bosco – rewarding ourselves with a beer over red-roofed views. We found the grungy, booze-soaked bar where the city's students hang out, and followed a tip-off from one of them to Osteria dell'Orsa – *the* spot to slurp down pappardelle glazed in Bologna's signature *ragù*.

The city was everything I'd hoped it would be, but, above the face-stuffing fun, a cloud of anxiety was mushrooming. Soon we would have to pick up the hire car, and face the first palm-greasing gauntlet of the

Italian roads. We flipped a coin to decide who was going to drive the two-hour leg to Florence. I lost. But luckily, Bologna proved a cinch to get out of. After a few shaky intersections, we were soon rushing along open country roads, arms dangling out the windows. We sped past shining green meadows, apricot-coloured country houses and roadside vegetable stalls run by leathery-faced old men, asleep in plastic chairs. We laughed along to the Italian rap music on the radio, and enthusiastically joined in the chorus of horn tooting that arose from any minor hindrance – a tractor on the road up ahead, or a lost tourist making a U-turn. It wasn't long before we had strayed into full-blown cockiness. 'I'm starting to feel like we've got this "driving on the wrong side" thing nailed,' said Ben, as we accelerated past a crawling caravan. 'I'd even go so far as to say that the wrong side... is starting to feel like the right side!'

Indeed, it seemed we had worried unnecessarily. Everything was *perfetto*. That's when we hit Florence – and very nearly the back of the Piaggio.

After laid-back Bologna, the Tuscan capital was a jolt. Instead of the civilised grid of tree-lined streets we'd found in Bologna, Florence was a chaotic asteroid belt of traffic that sucked us in and spat us out at our hotel, dazed, but intact. And there were more shocks to come.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

Instead of taking the motorway between Bologna and Florence, follow the rural SP/SR65, a road so wonderfully sinewy, it's used to test the latest Lamborghinis and Ducati motorcycles

The next morning, at the Uffizi Gallery, we found ourselves at the back of an ant-like column of tourists, selfie-stick antennae waving above their heads. The line for the Accademia Gallery, housing Michelangelo's *David*, was no shorter. We'd thought that coming in October, we would avoid the worst of the crowds. Apparently, half the world had thought the same.

Luckily, in Florence, the big-name museums are just the tip of the cultural iceberg. South of the river, in the labyrinthine Boboli Gardens, we found a statue-filled grotto as extraordinary as anything in the galleries, and not a queue in sight. And instead of paying £15 entry to the crowd-clogged Florence Cathedral, we visited the free mini-me Abbey of San Miniato al Monte, which comes with skyline views from the top of its stone steps. In the late afternoon, in a sunny market square, we sipped frosted beers and watched locals haggle over dusty antiques strewn across the cobblestones. It felt like we'd caught a glimpse of the real Florence, the one beyond the bus-tour crowds and checklist sights. And this was the lasting impression we'd have of the city, as the next day we'd be driving on to Pienza.

Sitting like a crown of honey-coloured stone atop a green cushion of olive groves, vineyards and herb-filled allotments, Pienza was a two-hour drive south of >



Speciality of the day: pasta with truffles, a mainstay in Norcia. Opposite, clockwise from top left, view across to Siena; bar in Bologna; quiet street in Norcia; chess at the Palazzo Seneca Hotel, in Norcia; the rolling hills of Tuscany; boars' heads adorning a Norcian shop



Florence. We took a winding, rural route, which allowed us to properly settle into the driving, and reflect on what it was that made Italy such a great place for a road trip. First, inescapably, there was the landscape. It was stupidly scenic, like a living painting – from the inky brush-flicks of cypress trees lining farmhouse tracks, to the warm ochre of cropped wheat, spread as if with a palette knife in thick, generous swathes across the hills. There were also the roads themselves, which seemed to have been built to put a smile on our faces as we dipped through wishbone-sharp corners, shifted up through the gears along undulating straights, and leant on the brakes during plummeting downhill. Even stopping at petrol stations was something to look forward to, with many employing smart attendants to fill up the tank and check the oil and tyres, while we topped up with a proper, barista-made espresso at the coffee bar inside. The following couple of days were spent criss-crossing Tuscany from our Pienza base, ticking our way through

its catalogue of jewel-box towns. Montepulciano was a hilltop cluster of clay-coloured buildings that glowed like a heap of embers at dusk, while in Siena, we joined in with a group of schoolboys playing football in the vast, half-moon shaped Piazza del Campo, our voices echoing off the palazzo walls. ‘I can’t imagine this happening in Trafalgar Square,’ said Ben. It was true – there was a feeling of freedom, fun and relaxed playfulness here that transcended both generations and, in this case, around 800 years of architectural antiquity. But before we had time to relax into a rhythm, we were on the move again. The next big chunk of our trip would take us over the Tuscany border and deep into rural Umbria. Inspired by stories of its food – truffles the size of potatoes (the world’s largest-ever white truffle, a gargantuan four-pounder, was unearthed here in 2014), wild boar, and the incomparable Norcian lentil, we felt ready for a change of scene. And boy, did we get it. After bronzed, manicured Tuscany, Umbria felt wild, rugged and unkempt. The >

SPIRITUAL MOMENT
While you're in Montepulciano, don't miss the church of San Biagio, a 16th-century Greek-Renaissance stunner, white as a tooth, standing just outside the town walls, surrounded by vineyards and olive groves

Heavenly vision:
Florence's elaborate
cathedral steals up
on you unawares
from many a side
street

FLORENCE, A CHAOTIC ASTEROID BELT OF TRAFFIC, SPAT US OUT, DAZED, AT OUR HOTEL

L'Oréal-glossy wheat fields became dark, tangled forests of hazel, beech and oak. The sky turned, too – from a clear, swimming-pool blue, to cloudy and storm-bruised.

And it was the weather that shaped our driving experience here. The roads, slick with rain water, we took slowly, and to much horn-tooting from behind. The steep gravel track that led up to our lodging, a rustic cottage on the slope of a wooded valley north of Perugia, turned into a mud chute, and it was all we could do to avoid sliding bonnet-first into a ditch. We got lost in biblical downpours – several times.

But despite the occasional moment of driving stress, we loved it. The air was always thick with the smell of wet soil. Rivers gushed like liquid silver through narrow gullies, and we slept like bambinos to the sound of rain pattering against the vine leaves outside our windows.

Things got wilder as we pushed deeper into Umbria – no obvious Italy, this, for sunlounger softies. Signs of civilisation slipped away, motorways turning into narrow mountain roads, towns into granite-slab hamlets, and our satnav into a redundant blank screen. Earthquakes, we learnt, are an ever-present danger. We bought hikers' fleeces to supplement our warm-weather wardrobes, and by the time we reached the town of Norcia itself – a walled-in fortress of a place, where boars' heads hung outside shops and restaurants – we felt like different people, in a different country.

Norcia was a personal pilgrimage on this road trip. Ben had had his quota of culture, and I couldn't wait to wallow in Norcia's rustic mountain food. Its wild boar *ragùs*, sausage-and-lentil stews and platters of truffle-laced charcuterie didn't let me down.

After a slap-up supper fit for a baron, we were up early the next morning to meet Francesco, a sapling-springy Norcian, who promised to show us around the area. Walking boots on, we followed ancient truffle-hunting trails through dense forest, across tumbling rivers and through villages abandoned, since their inhabitants had lost the ability to live off the land. 'There's still hope that this way of life will return with the younger generation,' said Francesco, as we strode a mossy cobbled street. 'Many are already returning from the cities to rediscover old techniques, and a simpler way of living.'

It was an idea we found ourselves mooting at length as we sped on towards Rome, our final stop, the following day. As much as we were looking forward to our last night in the capital, we couldn't help but watch wistfully as the natural landscape again made way for the urban one. 'Shall we just go and live in Norcia?' said Ben, as we pulled into a motorway petrol station. 'Get a truffle dog each, become professional hermits?' We looked at each other – visibly fatigued and dishevelled from barely two weeks on the road – and cracked up. 'Sadly, I don't think we're cut out for it,' I said, as the pump attendant walked over to our car. 'How about a macchiato instead?' ■



Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

Go independent

EasyJet has one-way flights from Gatwick to Bologna from £34, and from Rome Fiumicino to Luton from £38. **BA** has one-ways from Heathrow to Bologna from £47, and from Rome Ciampino to Heathrow from £50. Or try **Ryanair**, which flies to Bologna from Bristol, Edinburgh, Manchester and Stansted from £17 one-way, and from Rome Ciampino from various UK airports, including Stansted and Manchester, from £21.

Where to stay

In Bologna, **Art Hotel Commercianti** has comfy, stylish rooms that nod to the building's medieval origins (en.art-hotel-commercianti.com; doubles from £93, B&B). Just outside Florence, **Villa La Maschere** is a converted 16th-century Tuscan pile with rambling gardens (villalemaschere.it; doubles from £114, B&B). **La Bandita Townhouse**, in Pienza, is an elegant 12-room boutique with a buzzy restaurant (la-bandita.com; doubles from

£260, B&B). In Umbria, **Casa San Gabriel** is a cluster of converted farm buildings overlooking rolling hills (casasangabriel.com; doubles from £84, B&B). **Palazzo Seneca** is an atmospheric townhouse hotel in Norcia, with doubles from £140, B&B.

Get around

Europcar (europcar.com) has three pick-up locations in Bologna, and 12 drop-off points in Rome, with one-way car-hire between the two from £34 a day. Or try **Avis** (avis.co.uk).

Go packaged

Citalia (citalia.com) has a 14-night self-drive from Bologna to Rome, from £1,799pp, including car hire and return Heathrow flights. Also try **Italian Expressions** (expressions.holidays.co.uk), or **Inghams Italy** (inghamssitaly.co.uk).

Further information

Automobile Club d'Italia (aci.it) has everything you need to know about driving in Italy. See also italia.it.