

SANTA BARBARA  
**LIFE & STYLE**

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*Fresh for*  
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# LA VITA È BELLA

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We're in the middle of a three hour lunch on the patio at Poggiovalle Country House in Umbria, Italy. I'm sitting next to a few friends at a long wood table accented with bunches of herbs and white daisies in tiny burlap sacks. The yellow gingham runner is topped with slates of cheese and truffle honey, made with milk from the farm estates' cows and black truffles found on the property. We spent the morning accompanying a truffle hunter and his dogs Lilo and Whiskey, watching the dogs search through tall grass sprinkled with red and yellow wildflowers to return with the aromatic delicacy.

It's our first full day in Italy guided by Access Europe; Angelo Amorio and his sons Simone and Marco are our guides for the week. Their charismatic personalities and unbelievable connections open doors typically closed to the public and have attracted a client and friend roster that reads like an awards show guest list, including Ben Stiller, Owen Wilson and Oprah. They bring travelers to the most exclusive and authentic places in Italy, France, Spain, and Greece.

Plates of spaghetti with heaps of black truffle shavings are placed on the table. "Eat, eat!" Angelo encourages us. "When there are three dishes on the table you can eat. Seriously? Oprah told me so at one of her dinner parties, so it must be true." I laugh and start to swirl perfectly al dente black truffle covered spaghetti around my fork.

Across from me, Christiana, the manager of Poggiovalle, is explaining to us that she moved here from the city for a slower paced lifestyle. I can understand why, it's an idyllic countryside setting. Rustic yet refined. From the patio I can see geese, turkeys and chickens roaming freely in the garden where they grow everything from grapes to apricots.



Image courtesy of Four Seasons Hotel Florence

Tart gelato and espresso are soon added to the table, and by the end of the lunch we too are ready to move to Poggioalle. But it's only day one of our expertly planned Italy trip and we have a full itinerary for the week ahead of us.

We speed through the castle-spotted Tuscan countryside, arriving a couple hours later at Four Seasons Hotel Firenze, which encompasses the largest private garden in Florence. We are escorted via golf cart past lush trees, lawns begging to be picnicked on and modern statues to La Villa, the intimate and private hotel-within-the-hotel. I'm welcomed to my room by a bowl of fresh fruit, wine and classical music, which I leave on as it fits the decor and atmosphere of my suite. I'm pleased to discover that the bathroom is almost as big as the bedroom and neatly covered in white and gold marble. Momentarily convinced I won't find anything more beautiful than this hotel in all of Florence, and knowing we have a walking tour in the morning, I settle into the room and sit by the window to watch Vespas whiz by yellow houses on the street below.

At 8 a.m. the next morning we meet Access Europe guide Veronika in the hydrangea filled lobby and set off on foot to see Florence before it fills with tourists. We tell her what we want to see and what photos we hope to capture and she takes us to the best spots, knowing how long the lines will be, when things open, and offering bits of history. The personalized tour is much more enjoyable and efficient than trying to navigate the foreign city on our own or in a large group.

In search of a bird's eye view, we head to Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore. Inside the cathedral, we first reach Giorgio Vasari's The Last Judgement painting on the dome; Art History textbooks could never do justice to the incredible detail I'm gazing up at. We climb the narrow staircases of the Duomo, postcard sized windows in the stone walls teasing us along the way with the most breathtaking views of Florence. The stairs curve near the top and we surface onto a marble platform with 360 degree views of the city's terra cotta roofs and surrounding mountains.







After getting our fix of Florence's magnificent statues and buildings, we return to the Four Seasons to pack our bags. Then we are off to Rome, stopping along the way at the famous Antinori Winery for a private tour of the vineyards and ancient cellars and a beautifully plated lunch at Osteria di Passignano.

Our home for the remainder of the trip is Grand Hotel Via Veneto. With modern yet elegant decor, walls covered in original paintings, and a sleek spa, I couldn't ask for a better place to rest during a busy trip. I drop my suitcase off in my suite before we head to Palazzo Fendi—four stories reflecting the Roman fashion brand's appreciation for all aspects of art—to get a taste for the best the city has to offer.

Once inside the Fendi flagship store, past the pastel dresses, iconic furry keychains and playful handbags, we are welcomed into Fendi's fur atelier. Karl Lagerfeld's sketches are pinned to the wall. Mannequins by the windows are wearing coats with magenta, yellow, gray, and white fur. The pattern makers and fur specialists in their white lab coats are hard at work cutting fur swatches and making paper mockups for next season. I reach out to touch a peach and white striped piece of fur and it's so soft it feels like I'm not touching anything. The exclusive opportunity to interact with the creative process gives me a deeper appreciation for the designs in the store.

We take the glass elevator up to the second floor to Palazzo Privé, where we are welcomed with Champagne to the space otherwise reserved for special events and Fendi's most important clients. It looks like a room out of a palace with its ornate seafoam colored walls, just as impressive, the third floor of the Palazzo is the new Fendi Suites hotel, comprised of just seven ultra modern suites, where Access Europe visitors often stay. Italian brown leather couches and hunter green chairs lend a comfortable element to the fashion forward rooms. After the tour we make our way to the rooftop of Palazzo Fendi, where we start the evening with rosé and fried tofu at Japanese restaurant Zunna as the sun sets over Rome, turning the surrounding buildings from light to deep orange.

Ready for traditional Italian food, we turn down an alley lined with flats and vines hanging from the wires and balconies above. Simone briefs us on the restaurant we're headed to, Hostaria Da Pietro—



they are fully booked weeks in advance and the food is exceptional. We are greeted like regulars and seated immediately. Simone orders for the table and we are soon scooping black truffle sprinkled scrambled eggs, fried squash blossoms, truffle risotto, and spaghetti intertwined with grilled calamari off of our plates. Come 10:30 p.m. the small restaurant is packed. Simone subtly points out a couple celebrity fellow diners, no tourists in sight. As the bottles of Sangiovese run dry we make room on the table and in our stomachs for dessert. Biscotti stuck into a pillow of unsweetened whipped cream and an entire latticed blueberry tart are placed before us and thoroughly enjoyed.

At 11 a.m. the next morning we gather in the lobby for breakfast and are chauffeured to Vatican City. Bypassing the mass of people in line for a three hour wait, we enter through the back door of St. Peter's Basilica to a surreal display of Renaissance and Baroque architecture. Our Access Europe Guide, Georgia, escorts us through the Sistine Chapel and Vatican Museums where we take in the detail and enormity of the holy structures and Michelangelo's masterpieces.

For the grand finale of the tour, Angelo unlocks a hidden door that leads to secret rooms, filled with the Pope's vestments and gifts. Angelo points out where the Pope prays and where his vestments are ironed. The Pope's room of treasures is one of those sighs I never thought to include on my bucket list but is not to be missed. Angelo jokes that we can each take a relic home as a souvenir, making us feel at ease even in the most exclusive of places.

Back at the hotel that evening we dine at Michelin star restaurant Magnolia. Chef Franco Madonna creates a six course tasting menu resembling art 400 years more recent than most everything we've seen on the trip. The highlight of the dinner is the melt-in-your-mouth pink risotto plated in a C shape



with rose petals and negroni leaves nestled on top. And for dessert a rectangular cheesecake topped with candied fruits, spun sugar, violets, and gold leaf. We stop at Magnolia's elaborate candy bar on the way out, filling hiac boxes with easter egg colored malt balls before calling it a night.

Bright and early in the morning we hop in the back seat of Simone's Porsche and drive to the coast for a day on the Mediterranean. At the harbor we board pristine motor yacht Talco, named for the owner's Italian fashion brand. We struggle up with blankets and fresh creme filled donuts for the smooth ride across the indigo water to Ponza Island.

As we approach the island the dark blue water turns transparent, revealing striped fish. Ponza is unpretentious and appears to be little more than a green hill decorated by pastel homes and shops, like stacks of pink, blue and yellow Legos, with a small harbor full of fishing boats. Most of the shops are closed for lunch (the signs on the windows say they'll be back in an hour and a half) so we wander the narrow cobblestone streets eyeing the whimsical doors, quant gelaterias and cats dozing in the sun.

We return to the yacht and round the point of the island to a cove where tall cliffs tower over a small white sand beach, anchoring in sparkling crystal clear water near a natural arch protruding from the sea.

We strip to swimsuits and I jump from the top of the yacht into the refreshing water and swim through the arch to the beach. The water is especially salty so we float around with ease until the smell of pasta sails over from the galley and lures us back to the table on the lower deck.

Rigatoni with a simple tomato sauce and dusting of parmesan is accompanied by prosciutto and what Marco explains to us is the best buffalo mozzarella in Italy, which proves to be true. We top it off with bowls of fresh apricots and strawberries. This kind of bliss and relaxation is what vacation is truly about.

As we head back to shore I watch the wake turn the water aqua and white. My mind drifts to how many trips I've gone on where I've spent countless hours scouring travel sites and asking for recommendations from friends, planning out what to do, and finding the perfect activity only to find out it's 2,000 other people's perfect activity too and there's a waiting list.

Angelo, Simone and Marco take away every stressful part of a trip, not to mention they are fun travel companions. It's nice to be treated like a regular in a city where you don't even speak the language. With zero planning and unfamiliarity of Italy, it's almost too good to be true that I was offered a deep look into Italian culture. All I did was leave the planning to Access Europe, show up and have the time of my life. ✦

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