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## Away from it all (once you find it)

A new luxury retreat hidden in deepest Tuscany combines the intimacy of staying with friends with the style of a boutique hotel, writes Alex Clark

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**In the middle of lovely nowhere ... La Bandita**

Last year, I got lost attempting to find the road out of a small Irish town called Mallow, setting in train a disastrous series of events that ended with a frantic and ill-tempered tour around the labyrinthine one-way system of Cork.

This year, I got lost trying to find the third turn off a cypress-lined single-track dirt road that snaked around a large hill in the Val D'Orcia in south Tuscany, setting in train a furious argument with my co-driver, who was, as it happens, the same as the previous year. On both occasions, I was the navigator. I like to think that I am getting us lost in more exotic, more beautiful and warmer locations on an annual basis. Next year, we will probably go awry in Kathmandu.

La Bandita is probably not the easiest hotel you will ever have to find - but that is also what recommends it. Once we had recovered from the ignominy of having to telephone the hotel's owner, John Voigtmann, and ask him to rescue us from a piece of road that we had by this time crossed on more than one occasion, we began to see the point.

Stand in the grounds and turn through 360 degrees, and you see little but hills and sheep and the local Maremmani sheepdogs, which are, we were told, more closely related to wolves than one might expect. Strain to catch the sound of distant traffic or squabbling neighbours, and you will fail miserably. Decide to get in the holiday spirit by leaping into the infinity pool starkers and you will not offend Tuscan propriety. You're a long way from the nearest busybody.

It was its solitude and tranquillity that convinced Voigtmann, a former US music executive, to buy the derelict farm and four acres of land he has transformed into a small, luxurious hotel (it will sleep up to 16). He also plans to offer La Bandita as a villa to rent by the day or the week; and the property has a compact building called the Pig Sty, occupied by honeymooners during my visit, with its own sitting room and kitchen.

Renovation has been a lengthy business, with much time spent negotiating complex building regulations and planning laws. A month before we arrived, workmen were still digging out the pool, but just as much attention has gone into smaller-scale creature comforts - the limitless supply of mineral water and coffee that guests are encouraged to help themselves to free of charge, the bespoke beds and roomy white sofas.

Bedrooms are soothing, minimalist and designed for relaxation: in mine, a giant beanbag sat on a large platform, next to a vast, sunken bath, just in case I didn't feel like walking into the out-sized shower; if I had felt the need for even more in the way of bathing facilities, there is a steam bath available. We should go to sleep as much as possible, our hosts told us; the air, the dark and the quiet would not allow us to stay awake for long. They were right.

Voigtmann aimed to create an environment somewhere between hotel and private home, in which guests would feel they were staying with friends. This creates a particular kind of experience, and just as I would recommend the dirt road to La Bandita to confident rather than nervous drivers, I would also say that the fiendishly reclusive might enjoy it less than the more outgoing.

A couple of times a week, chef David rustles up a delicious dinner, which is eaten en masse in the large, open-plan living space or in the garden (though a private dining area can be arranged). On the night we sat down to pea and mint soup, roast lamb, chocolate cake and peaches - all made from local produce - we ate with the host and his wife (travel journalist Ondine Cohane), plus a man who is now a professor of architecture and art history in the US but was once in a band called Harm Farm, his wife, and a baby so disorientated by jet lag that he gurgled happily until after midnight.

Perhaps aided by plenty of wine made just up the road in Montalcino, I loved it, but those who prefer to know their dining companions prior to the antipasti might be better off making the 20-minute drive into the nearest town, Pienza, for supper. On the nights David doesn't cook, that's the only option, remoteness meaning that there are no bars or restaurants in walking distance.

That, however, is no hardship. Pienza is simply one of the most beautiful European towns I have ever seen, a tiny jewel designed to illustrate the finest virtues of Renaissance architecture by Pope Pius II, who was born

there at the beginning of the 15th century. Its piazza, whose four sides are lined with the Duomo and Palazzos Piccolomini, Borgia and Comunale, exudes serenity and beauty and is precisely where you want to sit in contemplation after you've visited one of the town's restaurants.

We did that after a dinner heavy on another local delicacy - thick, hand-rolled spaghetti with pecorino cheese - and T-bone steak, first brought to our table raw so that we might indicate how much we thought our appetites were up to. Committed feminists should be alert to the fact that, in a male-female dining arrangement, the larger portion, complete with the coveted bone, is automatically served to the man. Given that Tuscan cooking brings out the glutton in even the most modest eaters, these things are worth knowing.

Pienza is near enough to nip in and out of quite comfortably, but going further afield need be no great expedition. Siena is an hour's beguilingly straightforward drive away, and afforded the holiday's funniest moment. Those with a head for heights might decide to climb the tower of the Museo Dell'Opera del Duomo to gaze out on the famous Piazza del Campo and its Romanesque cathedral. They might note that Italians do not, apparently, share our mania for health and safety, at least not to the extent that dozens of tourists crammed into a narrow staircase that emerges on a vertiginous parapet presents much of a problem.

They might also observe that one can't help overhearing the conversations of other visitors, in this case a group of American teenagers. The following exchange, which I reproduce verbatim, should be read in the style of Beavis and Butthead: 'What's that?' 'Uhh ... that's, like, the Duomo.' 'Uh-huh. I have to say ... I thought that's what we were climbing.' 'Uhhh ...' 'What shall we climb next?' 'Uhh ... there's some more real ugly things over there.' 'Uh-huh.'

To right-thinking people there is little in Tuscany - and next to nothing in the Unesco Cultural Heritage Site that is the Val d'Orcia - that is ugly. From La Bandita, you can visit at least half a dozen small medieval towns, Montepulciano, Montalcino and the spa town of Bagno Vignoni among them, with ease; several working vineyards are also within easy reach. On the other hand, you may decide that lazing around the hotel drinking Brunello di Montalcino and gorging yourself on the panoramic views is quite active enough.

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## Essentials

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Alex Clark travelled with Black Tomato (020 7610 9908; [www.blacktomato.co.uk](http://www.blacktomato.co.uk)).

Bookings for La Bandita can be made through Black Tomato with prices for a seven-night stay on a B&B basis, including flights from Gatwick and car hire for the week, from £1,299.

