

## Italy: The Val d'Orcia, Tuscany's happy valley

**The writer Iris Origo spent decades renovating her Tuscan estate in the Val d'Orcia. But, as Claire Wrathall reports, it isn't the only fabulous place to stay in the area.**



The Val d'Orcia has been a Unesco World Heritage Site since 2004

By Claire Wrathall

6:57PM BST 24 Aug 2012

Head south from [Florence](#) and the prevailing colour of the tidy Chianti countryside is green. South-east from Siena, though, and the landscape gradually becomes wilder and less verdant. And by the time you reach the Val d'Orcia, in summer at least, it's almost arid.

There may be wheat, olives and vines, but this is also part of the Crete Senesi, stretches of desolate, eroded clay hillocks that the aristocratic Anglo-American writer Iris Origo described as "bare and colourless as elephants' backs, as treeless as mountains of the moon. A lunar landscape pale and inhuman... a land without mercy and without shade."

Yet something about it appealed to Origo, and in 1924, aged 21, she and her Italian husband, Antonio,

bought "a huge property just south of Pienza called La Foce, looking on one side over the whole of the Val d'Orcia, and on the other, most of Umbria..."

Stretching across 3,500 acres, the estate had 25 all but ruined farms and an 11-bedroom, 16th-century villa "of quite pleasant proportions", but no electricity or bathrooms. It was, she enthused, "quite the most beautiful and wildest bit of country I have ever seen". Not everyone agreed. As her subsequent biographer Caroline Moorehead noted drily: "Their friends thought they were mad."

Born into the sort of wealthy Europhile American milieu that Henry James wrote about (Edith Wharton was a family friend), Iris Origo is best known as the author of *The Merchant of Prato* and *War in Val d'Orcia*, the compelling diaries she kept from 1943-44 during the German occupation, when she risked everything to provide refuge for dozens of orphans and evacuees and hid a succession of partisans, Jews and escaped Allied prisoners of war.

However, the transformation she and Antonio wrought at La Foce and its surrounding land was an almost greater achievement. Over the years, they worked to halt erosion and make it fertile, expanding the estate to 7,000 acres and the number of farms to 57, and acquiring an 11th-century castle and chapel along the way.

They built a nursery and a school for local children (and provided lunch and transport, so their parents had no excuse to keep them at home), as well as a cottage hospital, a social club for workers and a serene cemetery. But their most enduring legacy is the garden, which remains one of the loveliest in Italy.

Conceived as a series of terraces divided into box-edged "rooms", linked by travertine steps and a wisteria-clad tunnel, it's an enchanting fusion of formal Italian parterres, with wilder fragrant English flower gardens, filled with roses, honeysuckle, peonies and irises.

There's a wild Mediterranean stretch of lavender, broom, thyme and rosemary; an avenue of cypresses; and a wood, where I found sharp, striped porcupine quills on the path. The Romans brought porcupines from Africa, and a colony of these labrador-sized creatures still thrives in Tuscany.

Though reduced to perhaps a third of its original size, the estate still produces olive oil, cereals and fava beans, but much of its income comes from tourism, for the Origos' daughters, Benedetta and Donata, have converted some of the outlying farms into nine secluded villas and 10 apartments. All are well equipped and comfortable in a traditional, rustic, homely style, full of books, pictures and photographs.

They might not suit those who crave air-conditioning, down pillows and state-of-the-art bathrooms (though the farmhouse I stayed in, Montauto, had Wi-Fi and a large swimming pool), but there's a real sense of the family and its heritage. And the views from their own glorious gardens across the valley to Monte Amiata – at 5,702ft (1,738m), the highest (extinct) volcano in mainland Italy – are sublime.

It's this volcanic terrain that gives rise not just to the hot springs that feed the many spa towns in the valley, but lend the soil to grape-growing, for two of Italy's greatest wines, Brunello and Vino Nobile, are made nearby, the latter around Montepulciano, one of the highest and most picturesque of Tuscany's hill towns.

Ranged along a narrow ridge, it was the place of greater safety to which the Origos led a column of 60 people, among them 28 exhausted children and four babies, on a 10-mile walk, along mined roads and sometimes under attack, when German forces seized, ransacked and shelled La Foce in 1944.

Reading Origo's remarkable war diary, it seems almost miraculous that the villa (which can also be rented) survived and still looks very much as Origo knew it in peacetime, with its library, fine paintings, antiques and marvellous Thirties bathrooms. "My mother liked to soak," Benedetta told me as she showed me around. "She used to teach my sister and me poetry while she lay in the bath," hence

the comfortable seating opposite the fabulous Thirties dressing table.

The bathroom furniture, like almost everything from the 20th-century buildings on the estate to the gardens and their ornaments to the murals in the villa, were the work of the underrated British architect Cecil Pinsent. But he also configured the landscape, creating the cypress-lined "zigzag road", a traditional Tuscan *strada bianca* ("white road") cut into a neighbouring hillside to form a focal point to the vista from La Foce's garden.

At the top of this road stands La Bandita, a substantial Twenties farmhouse, again designed by Pinsent along traditional Tuscan lines, that is now an enchanting eight-room hotel, independent of La Foce and entirely different in style.

Owned and run by John Voigtmann, a former New Yorker and music-industry executive, it's hip, contemporary, even a little minimalist in style and atmosphere. Guests – a mix of youngish Americans and Brazilians when I was there – are encouraged to eat communally at a long table either inside or out on the terrace, which won't suit everyone. But the conversation was animated, and the wine and food outstanding – Italian in style, but cooked by a young Scot, David Mangan, who trained with Andrew Fairlie at Gleneagles. I loved it.

If Iris Origo was the first American to fall for the Val d'Orcia – a Unesco World Heritage Site since 2004 – Voigtmann is not the last. For four miles south of La Foce, an Ohio-based lawyer, Michael Cioffi, is transforming Castiglioncello del Trinoro, a close-to-derelict walled hill village founded in 1127, with a permanent population of seven.

Cioffi "fell in love with the place", he told me, because "it felt lost in time [and] really retains its medieval character and slow rhythm of life". First he bought "a complete ruin" that he had restored. Then he bought another and another. To date he's acquired seven – he has more in his sights – three of which can be rented. Earlier this month a seven-room hotel, Monteverdi, opened, with supremely lovely modern interiors, all pale oak, travertine and neutral textiles, by the modish Roman designer Ilaria Miani.

More will open in due course. That said, the business model for this development is intended to be self-sustaining rather than profitable. Part of its income is, for example, being used to fund the excavation of nearby Etruscan remains in collaboration with the University of Siena.

And, just as La Foce hosts a world-class summer music festival, so Cioffi has also established a cultural hub, the Maria Mazzone Center for the Arts and Humanities, named after his Italian great-grandmother, a place for classical music, exhibitions, plays and lectures from visiting scholars, that holds performances in the village's ancient Romanesque church, the restoration of which Cioffi has also funded.

Indeed it's his love of music that led him to name the development Monteverdi – literally green mountain – in honour of the Cremonese composer rather than any surrounding verdure. For despite Iris Origo's ambition to "restore greenness" to the valley, even after a wet spring, the hills hereabouts tended to amber, umber and shades in between. The desolate beauty she saw in the valley, though, endures undiminished.

## **WHAT TO AVOID**

The summit of Monte Amiata has been spoiled by a tawdry development and swarms with coach loads of visitors in summer.

If you encounter a porcupine stamping its feet, grunting, raising its spines and rattling its tail, keep your

distance: it's preparing to launch itself backwards and attack.

Don't confuse the Piccolomini Library frescoes in Siena cathedral with the Palazzo Piccolomini in Pienza. Built in 1459 as the summer residence of Pope Pius II, the latter is well worth the €7 (£5.50) admission, but for its architecture, garden and views rather than its decoration.

The Val d'Orcia is not a convenient base from which to explore the city of Siena (37 miles north) or Tuscany's other visitor honeypots.

## GETTING THERE

The nearest airport is Florence, 90 miles away. Meridiana (0871 423 3711; [meridiana.it](http://meridiana.it)) has direct flights from Gatwick from £142. CityJet (0871 663 3777; [cityjet.com](http://cityjet.com)) flies from London City from £236. Pisa is also convenient, served by several charters, Ryanair (0871 246 0000; [ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)) and British Airways (0844 493 0787; [ba.com](http://ba.com)).

## THE INSIDE TRACK

Iris Origo called Pienza, Pope Pius II's 15th-century idealised "new town", "one of the most perfect Renaissance cities", and so it is (though it's actually little more than a village, as Pius died before all but a fraction of his plan could be realised). Its most affecting sight – a favourite of Origo's – is the 10th-century church known as Pieve di Corsignano, outside the city walls, 10 minutes' walk downhill from Piazza Dante. Don't miss the carvings around the south door. It's a good little shopping centre, with linens, leather, cheese and other foodstuffs to the fore.

Bagno Vignoni is the most beautiful of the local spa towns. In place of a central piazza, there's a vast arcaded medieval thermal pool. You're no longer allowed to bathe in it, but the neighbouring Albergo Le Terme has thermal baths and many spa treatments (Piazza delle Sorgenti 13; 0577 887150; [albergoleterme.it](http://albergoleterme.it)).

In 1989 Benedetta Origo and her son, the cellist Antonio Lysy, founded Incontri in Terra di Siena ([itslafaocce.org](http://itslafaocce.org)).

You don't have to stay at Villa La Foce to visit its gardens, which are open on Wednesday afternoons and on the first weekend of the month from April to November ([lafoce.com](http://lafoce.com)).

Poggio Antico (0577 848044; [poggioantico.com](http://poggioantico.com)), near Montalcino, may be the best known of the wineries open to visitors. Less touristy, however, is Salcheto, which opened an excellent enoteca this summer, so you can enjoy its wines with lunch after a cellar tour and tasting (Via di Villa Bianca 15, Montepulciano; 0578 799031; [salcheto.it](http://salcheto.it)).

The English Patient used locations around Pienza and Montepulciano, where Under the Tuscan Sun and the second part of the Twilight saga, New Moon, were partially shot, and Gladiator contains scenes shot in the Val d'Orcia.

## FURTHER READING

War in Val d'Orcia (Allison & Busby, £8.99), is the must-read, but Origo's elegiac autobiography, Images and Shadows (Nonpareil Books, £13.99), is illuminating too, as is Caroline Moorehead's fascinating biography, Iris Origo: Marchesa of the Val d'Orcia (David R Godine, £28.95).

## Where to stay

Our [Tuscany](#) expert recommends the [best hotels, including luxury and cheap options](#)

## Where to eat

### **La Porta £**

Located just inside the main gate of Monticchiello, one of the prettiest walled villages in the area, this restaurant serves outstanding pasta (try it with wild boar or summer truffles) and bistecca fiorentina. Its shaded terrace has superb views of the valley (Via del Piano 1; 0578 755163).

### **Il Dopolavoro ££**

La Foce's simple all-day trattoria: a great place for classic antipasti and hearty pasta (Strada della Vittoria 90; 0578 754025).

### **La Grotta £££**

Opposite the church of San Biagio a few minutes' downhill from the centre of Montepulciano, this is one of the area's smarter restaurants, specialising in refined versions of classic Tuscan dishes such as duck-liver crostini with vin santo and ravioli stuffed with pigeon in a saffron sauce. There's a six-course tasting menu at €48 (£38) (Via di San Biagio 15; 0578 757479).