



GRAND TOUR  
Italy



Total distance  
1850 miles



ROLLER TEAM  
Auto Roller 746



Duration  
16 DAYS



Italy is a magic mix of  
stunning architecture

medieval villages,  
and turquoise seas

# Reliving La Dolce Vita

GARY BLAKE & WENDY JOHNSON revisit some old haunts in Italy during a culture and cuisine tour of pretty Puglia and enchanting Tuscany



GARY & WENDY took up motorcaravanning after years sailing yachts. Today they enjoy touring across Europe, and further afield

**W**e arrived in Bari, Puglia, late, because of another Greek seamen's strike, 1 May – Labour Day – we should have guessed. At one minute past midnight on 2 May we were finally cast adrift from Patras quay, leaving our Peloponnese adventure behind us (see September 2013 issue) and were now returning home via Italy on what was to be a 4000-mile round trip.

Hooked up to the 220V ship's supply, our motorhome accommodation was free for the cost of a vehicle and two passenger tickets with Superfast Ferries. We had 16 hours to enjoy all the normal facilities of a large ferry. There really was no better place to plan our next round of adventures.

Our itinerary included the hilltop 'white towns' of Puglia, with their conical stone houses known as trulli; Tuscany's timeless landscapes of languid plains and cypress trees, plus the Chianti region; and Florence, to revisit the centre of Renaissance Italy, but this time not as an art student circa 1963, nor in Wendy's old split-screen VW, but in our trusty Auto Roller 746.

## WE'RE OFF TO SEE THE WHITE CITY

Our first night's stop was at the Lido Tavernese, reached via a turning off the fast but dull E55, and right on the beach south of Bari and just above Ostuni or La Citta Bianca, the White City, where we were headed the next day.

Blinding white in the afternoon sun, Ostuni beckoned us to its citadel, built on top of a hill and still fortified by the ancient walls of the old town – a maze of narrow, medieval cobbled alleys winding between whitewashed houses.

Established in the 1st century AD, the city has a splendid 15th-century cathedral, and a buzzing social scene. Ostuni's lofty position catches the

The brilliant white town of Ostuni, sited on a ridge, is reached by roads lined with groves of ancient olive trees many hundreds of years old



afternoon breeze and has commanding views of the countryside below with its magnificent ancient olive trees.

Puglia has a chequered history, fought over by the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Longobards (a northern European Germanic people), Arabs and Normans, but in recent times it has seen dramatic growth as a potential southern Tuscany.

In July and August, it's popular with Italian families, who come here to relax and eat good simple food, but in May and early June finding a campsite open in Puglia was a problem. We returned to Lido Tavernese for a second night.

From the Tourist Office in Ostuni's centre we obtained the 'white town route' or Valle d'Itria with its trio of historic towns, and set off for Cisternino, Alberobello and Locorotondo.

A surprisingly busy agricultural area, Valle d'Itria is packed with stone trulli. They've been around for hundreds of years although most of those standing today are only from the 18th century. Most likely because they were built as temporary dry-stone living quarters that could be dismantled whenever the taxman appeared.

**"For dinner, stop at one of the many hot stoves attached to butchers' shops and enjoy a bombette"**

First, Cisternino and its Norman Swabian Tower guarding the entrance to the historic centre of whitewashed houses, narrow streets and highly polished stone floors. For dinner, stop at one of the many hot stoves attached to butchers' shops and enjoy a bombette – meat parcels skewered on a spit. The promenade of Via Quirico gives great views over to Locorotondo, its neighbour and our next stop.

Locorotondo has a circular layout, quaint streets, white-walled houses and views of the countryside. Old settlements or cummerse – rectangular buildings with sloping roofs – can still be seen in the town.

Alberobello is the main destination of the area and a UNESCO World Heritage site – it is here that the trulli reign supreme. These 1500 or so beehive-shaped houses originating from the 14th century are made of roughly worked limestone boulders collected from the fields. They are extremely unusual, and attract many visitors during the summer months.

Signposts for 'motorhome parking' could be found on entering most of these very congested towns.

**TRAVELLING DOWN ITALY'S 'HEEL'**  
It's just a half hour's drive to Martina Franca, centre top of Italy's 'heel', from Alberobello, but we couldn't find a site for the night. We settled in at a forecourt selling motorhomes, with a partly finished campsite at the rear.



Main pic Locorotondo is one of a trio of historical cities on the 'white town route' featuring Puglia's iconic trulli dwellings. Below, left-right: Eating out in Ostuni. Puglia's landscape is dotted with ancient oak trees



Fancy three ice creams in one? Italy is renowned for its gelato. Below The inviting Puglian coastline near Ostuni







The very unusual trulli, small, cone-roofed stone houses, are peculiar to Puglia. Many are owned and have been renovated by the British

Refreshed, our next day's plan was to see Martina Franca and then Mesagne.

Martina Franca is the commercial centre of the area. It's a buzzing town with a particularly beautiful Centro Storico – old town centre – surrounded by stone walls with prominent Baroque gates leading to piazzas and narrow, winding streets. We roamed around for an hour or two, cameras at the ready.

Mesagne, although a small town, has a castle, built in 1062, which is now a museum. We entered the old town at Porta Grande to explore its narrow streets, ancient churches and houses.

Travelling through old olive groves on what must be Roman roads we were led straight into Lecce's busy ring road and found a sign indicating a campsite at San Cataldo on the coast. It was closed, but in the dark we saw another motorhome so parked behind it on the esplanade and this became our base for the next two nights.

#### BEAUTIFUL SCENERY, VIOLENT PAST

Our next day's trip was along the coastal road to Otranto, a scenic drive of white sands, low rocks with turquoise sea, and fields of wild flowers among the olive groves. Stopping for provisions at San Foca we found the seaside town virtually closed up – it really was too early for Italian tourists.

Otranto, an attractive port town dominated by its castle and once a Roman city, was invaded in 1480 by the

**“Most southern European countries have left behind having a siesta, this is not so in southern Italy”**



A 15th-century fort overlooks the brilliant campsite at Sarteano



Left-right Cooking on the barbie, which Wendy shopped for in the market at Sarteano

Ottomans who insisted the inhabitants converted to Islam. Those who refused were executed and are entombed as martyrs in the cathedral. Today the city is full of winding alleyways and interesting souvenir shops; it's a good place to pick up presents. We tried Otranto's speciality, sea urchins, which are usually served as part of an aperitif. Look for the variety dell'Archiprete, which are supposedly meatier.

Although most southern European countries, including Greece, have left behind the idea of having a siesta, this is not so in southern Italy. Most shops,

tourist offices, and museums close from 1pm to around 5pm, so you must programme this into your daily plans.

Next day we headed for the huge open-air car park, just a short walk from the centre of Baroque Lecce. The magnificent old town, with some Roman remains, including a small amphitheatre, has a wealth of fine architecture – a legacy of religious orders who arrived in the 16th century and paid for the construction of the lavish churches and palaces. The local soft sandstone, carved into the ornate Lecce Baroque style is much admired.



Turquoise sea around rock and foliage are a wonderful backdrop to the Otranto coast road

As hunger struck we found the Syrbar cafe in Piazza Duomo and realised we had sheltered there five years before during a rainstorm. It's a family-run restaurant serving home-cooked food. The staff will talk you through the menu, which includes unusual Italian delicacies and excellent local wines. We tasted savoury cake filled with soft creamy mozzarella and ham, a speciality of the area, followed by ice cream covered with chocolate sauce and Grand Marnier.

We returned to Lido Tavernese for our final night in Puglia, and set off

early the next morning for Tuscany – 400 miles north on motorways via Naples and Rome.

#### TOP TIP FOR A TOP TUSCAN SITE

We were recommended to make for the Parco delle Piscine in Sarteano as 'probably one of the best sites in Europe'. From the A1 motorway we climbed 600m and found a beautiful medieval hilltop village surrounded by rolling hills and overlooked by a 15th-century fort. It was something of a relief to find a civilised, well-run, family-owned site with large pitches,

hedged for privacy, and amenities galore. It has three large, inviting thermal mineral water swimming pools, the water always at 24C, immaculate shower blocks and a restaurant. It's very handy for the town and very child-friendly.

Our pitch faced the fort, which gave us something to contemplate as we set off to choose a pizza from one of the 34 toppings on offer in the site's restaurant.

Sarteano has a good market on Fridays, a bank, and a range of attractive shops and restaurants. Call into Il Granaio as we did, on our way

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The Tuscan landscape in the early evening light with fields of emerald-green crops blowing in the wind, against a backdrop of fortified hill-top medieval villages



## GRAND TOUR Italy



The countryside around this area is lush and the architecture beautiful



Left to right Bagno Vignoni's hot spa pool. Siena's Piazza del Campo is the setting for the Palio horse race. Pitched among wild flowers

into town, and try samples of ham, the local Pecorino sheep's cheese and wine from the barrel.

For all things Etruscan – a pre-Roman civilisation – we visited Chiusi, another small hilltop town about five miles away. The archaeological museum there is the main centre for Etruscan artifacts and the catacombs hold a collection of ancient tombs that are worth visiting. Here is also Tuscany's oldest cathedral, built in the 6th century. We stumbled around in the gloom until we realised we had to put a coin in the meter to illuminate its Romanesque interior.

### GETTING INTO HOT WATER

We were looking for the hot springs at Bagno Vignoni, where pilgrims stopped en route to Rome, and having read about the Val D'Orcia, a UNESCO World Heritage destination, we decided to follow the Orcia river

through the green valley dotted with typical Tuscan farms and cypress trees.

Bagno Vignoni is a tiny village with a large pool, constructed by the Medici family, filled with hot sulphurous water. Even in Roman times it was known for its healing properties. The pool is no longer open for bathing, but within a few steps is the Hotel Posta Marcucci with two pools of hot thermal waters.

We relaxed in both the 32C and 38C pools before lounging in the grounds of the hotel to view the panorama of Rocca D'Orcia, another ancient fortified hill town. For free bathing,

**"In the early evening sun we completed our circular tour by visiting Pienza, Montepulciano and Chianciano Terme"**

walk along the riverbank to a large pool filled from the waters above.

In the early evening sun we completed our circular tour by visiting Pienza, Montepulciano and Chianciano Terme and were wowed by the scenery along the ridges and saddles that link them.

### THE HOME OF LUSCIOUS WINES

The 30 miles between Siena and Florence is Chianti country. With fantastic scenery – steep hills terraced with vineyards and olive groves, castles and bustling market towns – this is what the English call 'Chiantishire'. The unofficial centre is Greve in Chianti with its many wine shops and one of Italy's great butchers, Macelleria Falorni. There are many vineyards to visit but call in advance for opening times. (<http://bit.ly/1fBaxfB>).

Arriving in Siena, we pulled into the municipal car park, very well signed, on the ring road, and paid €20 to

The impressive marble Duomo lies at the centre of the city of Florence



**"With lovely views over the city, the Bardini Gardens is a treasure not to be missed"**

park - phew! We then meandered through medieval spiralling streets to the city's centre, the circular Piazza del Campo, the site of the Palio, the famous horse race that takes place each year on 2 July and 16 August.

Siena is brick-built in the Gothic style in contrast to Florence's Renaissance marble. The Duomo (cathedral) is a magnificent sight with its striped black and white marble exterior and interior, and a treasure house of sculptures and paintings.

We just had to stay for another day and so drove to the only campsite in Siena, Colleverde Siena Camping, which overlooks the city. It's a very well-organised site, and in a perfect location. The bus stopped right outside the site and carried us into the city for another look.

### THE ULTIMATE RENAISSANCE CITY

Back on the SR2 we eventually reached Florence and Camping Michelangelo but not before our sat-nav had taken us the wrong way again. Our rescuer was a lady biker who said "follow me" and after a baffling 10-minute route we were on the campsite overlooking Florence.

It is also in a great location within a 30-minute walk of the centre.

Just a few minutes' walk from the site is Piazzale Michelangelo, with wonderful views over the city. It was a route we used over the next few days to walk into the centre.

This was an excellent site location, but even in April it was overcrowded. And despite being part of the star-rated Elite Club Vacanze it had to be marked down for its basic facilities.

Adjacent to the site are the Iris Gardens. Open during May each year they hold 2500

varieties of the plant that is the symbol of Florence. We also visited the 13th-century Bardini gardens, which have had a €12 million makeover. With lovely views over the city it is a treasure not to be missed. The Boboli Gardens next door are included in the price of the Bardini ticket. The Italian gardens were an inspiration to the English aristocracy for their own estates after their Grand Tours of Europe.

There is something for everybody in Florence - historical gardens, baroque houses, grandiose churches and a wealth of architecture built when the



Above Gary considers swapping his Auto Roller (right) for a tiny Fiat – it would be easier for getting around Florence



powerful Medici dynasty prevailed. Art treasures, architecture and fantastic shopping can be overwhelming so an itinerary is essential.

We managed to see all three of Michelangelo's David statues – the best being the original in the Academia – and the Uffizi Gallery with works by Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, Caravaggio and beyond. On your way to the elaborate Duomo, Florence's massive cathedral and oddly stark inside, stop at Grom, Via delle Oche 24r, for a delicious ice cream made with only the best local ingredients. Close by is the Palazzo Divanzati, preserved as a typical house of wealthy Florentines in the 14th century and fascinating to visit. To save valuable

“We managed to see all three of Michelangelo's David statues – the best being the original in the Academia”

sightseeing time you can pay an additional €4 each to queue-jump at popular museums and galleries.

#### MORE TREATS IN SWITZERLAND

On our long trek home we spent a day in Lucerne: somewhere we'd always wanted to visit. We stayed at Camping Lido on the lake shores with archetypal views of Switzerland - steep snow-capped mountains and pine trees. Cable cars, track railways and mountain gondolas in the national red livery contrasted with the blue sky. We felt we were within a miniature model village.

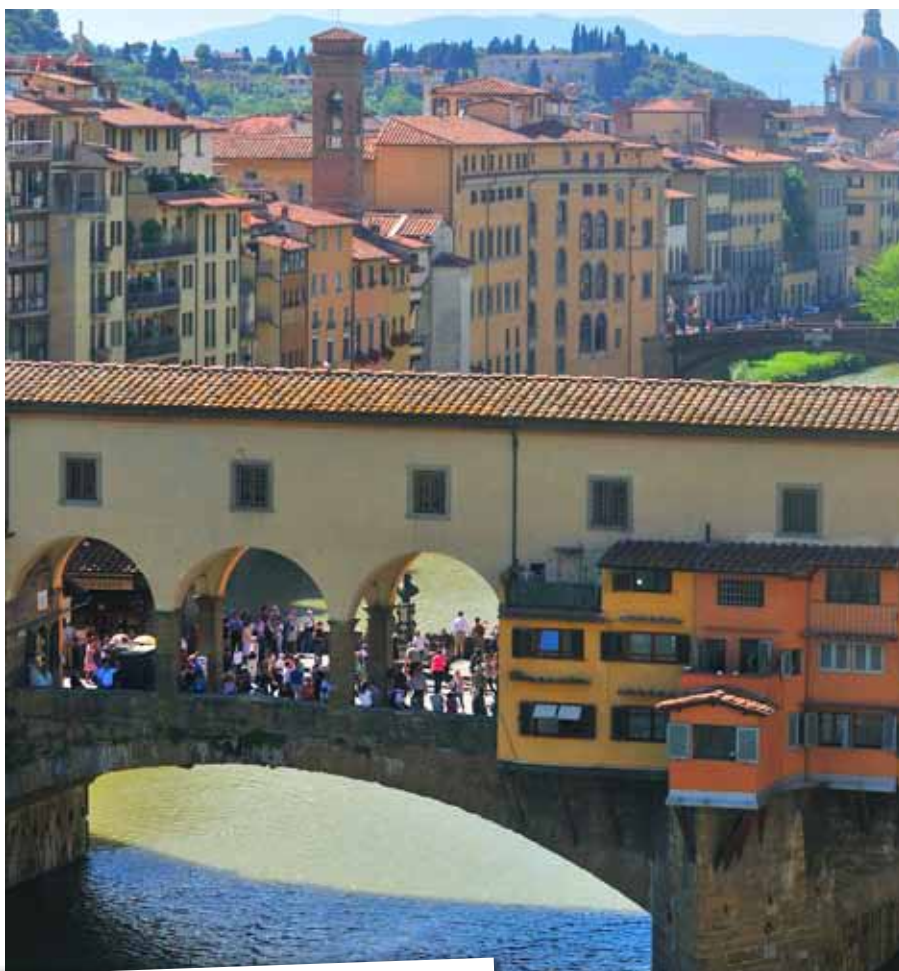
Our 1901 paddle steamer toured Lake Lucerne for the whole day, stopping at small villages - some not accessible by road. The chocolate-box scenery and invigorating clean air gave us a great sense of wellbeing.

We couldn't resist the Museum of Transport, a few steps from the steamer pier, and only five minutes from the site. A diverse collection of boats, trains, planes, cars and space-ships are laid out in an ultra-modern setting with interactive displays galore. It's 'transport heaven' and something the whole family can enjoy.

After discovering the beauty of Italy and a small chunk of Switzerland we were back in our own 'transport heaven', heading home in the very comfortable Auto Roller 746.



The walk from the Camping Michelangelo to Piazzale Michelangelo takes in historical gardens, baroque houses, and panoramic views on the descent into Florence



The shop-lined Ponte Vecchio is a tourist magnet  
Inset A ceiling in the Palazzo Vecchio ( Florence's town hall)



Florence from the Piazzale Michelangelo, close to Camping Michelangelo



**1 Lido Tavernese**  
S/s 379 Torre Canne Sud, Torre Canne di Fasano, Italy  
See website for access  
**Tel** 00 39 328 378 6587  
**Web** www.lidotavernese.it  
**Charges** Pitch + 2 €18-€22  
A modern, rather stylish, tree-shaded site in Puglia with direct access to a sandy beach.  
The site has over 100 pitches, electric hook-up, water points, waste point, a restaurant and bar. There is no Wi-Fi or shop and showers cost extra.  
A beach service comprises sun beds, umbrellas, beach chairs and toilets.  
Ostuni is just a 10-minute drive and the trulli of Alberobello 15 minutes.



**2 Parco Delle Piscine**  
Via del Bagno Santo 29, 53047 Sarteano ( Siena), Italy  
**Tel** 00 39 0578 26971  
**Web** www.parcodellepiscine.it  
**Open** 1 April- 29 September  
**Charges** Pitch + 2 + hook-up €39-€63.60  
It's claimed to be 'probably the best in Europe' and we agreed.  
This is a well-run site and has been managed for more than 30 years by the Guerrini family.  
Set in a beautiful area it has 500 large pitches; three thermal swimming pools, a restaurant, tennis courts and every imaginable facility including great free Wi-Fi all over site.  
The adjacent hilltop village is easily walkable in 10 minutes.



**3 Camping Siena Colleverde**  
Strada Scacciapensieri 47 53100 Siena  
**Web** www.sienacamping.com  
**Tel** 00 39 0577 334 080  
**00 39 0577 332 545**  
**Charges** Pitch + 2+ hook-up €36. Wi- Fi extra  
This is in a wonderful location with views over the city of Siena. Connections to the city centre, 2.5km away, are served by No 3 and No 8 bus routes caught from outside the site. You also have good access to San Gimignano, Montalcino, Montepulciano and Monteriggioni.  
The tidy site is terraced with hardstanding pitches, good facilities and a restaurant.



**4 Camping Michelangelo**  
Viale Michelangelo 80, 50125 Florence  
**Tel** 00 39 055 681 1977  
**Web** www.ecvacanze.it  
**Charges** Pitch + 2 + hook-up €40  
The best thing about this site is its location, just above the city of Florence – adjacent to the Piazzale Michelangelo – and within walking distance, although buses do stop outside. Its location also means that the site gets very busy. Facilities are tired, so it's best to use your own but there is electricity, water and waster water points. The restaurant has a good view of the city and there's a small supermarket. Wi-Fi is poor.

### Food and drink

Tuscany is famous for its wines, which range from light vino della casa to the very best in Europe. The best examples of the Vin Santo or 'holy wine' are sweet. Chianti comes from seven different regions.

The food is simple and rustic with good fish and seafood from the coast. Wild boar and hare also feature in many dishes.

Tuscan olive oil is superb, Peroni beer very refreshing and the speciality of the region is Pecorino cheese (ewes milk).

From Puglia comes Burrata cheese filled with cream and shredded mozzarella.

In August and September truffles are collected, the best coming from San Miniato in the province of Pisa.

Eating out in Florence, Sarteano, Ostuni and Lecce costs approximately €35-€40 for two people, eating two courses and drinking two glasses of wine or beer.



### Way to go

• Ferries Gary and Wendy entered Italy from Greece as part of the return leg of a European tour. They used Superfast Ferries, www.superfast.com, from Patras in the Peloponnese to Bari in Puglia. Ferries leave Patras daily at 6pm and arrive in Bari at 9.30am the next day.

To enter Switzerland you need a Swiss Vignette, which costs €33 (£28) for a one-year vignette, which runs from 1 December to 31 January for any vehicle weighing up to 3.5 tons.

• Pickpockets Be vigilant in the cities, especially Florence, Siena and Rome. Distraction thefts – being sprayed with tomato ketchup or similar – can be a problem and care should be taken. In Rome be wary around the Spanish Steps where gangs cut handbag straps.

### Find out more

• Maps We used Michelin, Italy Map No 735, 1:1000 000 1cm=10 kms  
• Our campsites in Sarteano, Siena and Florence gave A2 maps of their site and the surrounding area from a tear-off pad on reception – a great idea and probably available at all the big sites in Italy  
• Sat-navs It's worth getting the sites' co-ordinates beforehand. Using these is more likely to get you there than using the sites' names and addresses

### The motorhome

Roller Team Auto Roller 746  
Price £43,943 (2013 model)  
From Roller Team UK  
Tel 01472 571 000  
Web www.rollerteammotorhomes.co.uk  
Our 2013 Auto Roller 746 was from the Trigano Group – one of Europe's largest motorhome manufacturers – and is sold in the UK by Auto Trail.

The six-berth 'van had acres of space and made for luxurious living for two people travelling for long extended trips.

Based on the Fiat Ducato 35, 130bhp manual chassis as standard, our model came with a spacious U-shaped lounge at the rear, which was ideal for relaxing after a day at the wheel. It converts into either two singles or a large double bed. We used the king-sized bed over the cabin.

### Motorhome parking

Signs for motorhome parking were indicated on entering the towns. They were mostly coach parks but were still conveniently placed.

### £ The costs

Fuel .....	£345
Tolls .....	£73
Campsites .....	£234
Food and drink .....	approx £120
TOTAL .....	£652