



Travel

Guided Tour or Fancy-Free? Here's What's "Under the Tuscan Sun!"

By Mira Temkin



The Tuscany region of Italy has such an infinite number of experiences to savor that even for a seasoned traveler, the sheer quantity of art, history and culture can be overwhelming.

To fathom it all and get the most out of the travel experience, a professional travel company is the best way to make the encounter more intimate, more informative and certainly more meaningful.

In many instances, the independent, self-guided approach is fine, but in an art and culture-rich region like Tuscany, a guided tour offers much more insight. A good one, more than a just whistle-stop run through a checklist of sights, can offer:

- A form of constant dialogue with a local expert
- A shared experience in which the contribution of fellow travelers adds a further dimension to the total enjoyment
- An opportunity for a more profound understanding of the places visited
- An elevated cultural experience

Vincenzo de Michelis of Tuscan-Colors, a tour company specializing in the Tuscany region commented, "One common pratfall of independent touring is superficiality. Without speaking or understanding the local language and relying on guide books usually written by foreigners, there is little in the way of true discovery, enlightenment or challenge. If you choose to travel alone, plan to spend at least 4 to 5 days in the major cities and 2 to 3 days in the smaller villages."

Will your free time be spent finding where you're going?

With any tour company, high priority should be given to the rhythm of the touring experience. The best kind of tour is one that gives you adequate time to explore on your own every day. Obviously going alone allows a more leisurely pace. However, weigh the pace against the comprehensiveness of the tour. Michelis agreed, "Consider how much of the 'free time' of independent touring is actually spent finding (or not finding) places, loading and lugging as opposed to true quality time, which can be afforded by a tour where someone else is doing the worrying, planning and logistics!"

Touring Tuscany

In Italy, the key cities to tour are, of course, Rome, Venice and Florence. But simply meandering in Tuscany, with its myriad of hilltop cities and picturesque villages, is another way to experience the true Italy as well. Watch Diane Lane in "Under the Tuscan Sun"; the rich beauty and rolling hills of Pienza will make you want to pack your bags immediately! My favorite Tuscan town is historic Siena, with its thrilling bareback horse-race that has the entire town talking all year long. Or San Gimignano, the most-visited small village in Italy, with its stunning skyline of towers and collection of Renaissance art. Chianti's noble vineyards, age-old cypresses, Romanesque churches and endless dry stone walls will inspire your heart, the mind and soul.

Experiences to last a lifetime

Having traveled through Tuscany on a group tour, I cannot conceive of doing it on my own. I prefer to let the experts make all of the arrangements, while I sit back and enjoy the fascinating commentary of their knowledgeable guides. And marvel at the magnificent countryside. Did I mention new friendships? After touring a working olive mill, dinner at a private castle and enjoying a wine-tasting, new friendships take on these shared experiences. I've also discovered that touring with a group has given me a myriad of once-in-a-lifetime experiences as well as off-the-beaten track adventures. Here's to "la dolce vita!"

For more information about traveling through Tuscany, visit Tuscan Colors, LLC at www.tuscan-colors.com or call 1-888-TRIP-N-IT (1-888-874-7648).

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