

Tuscan Tranquility

Hotel Castelfalfi

Amid the rolling Florentine hills, olive groves and sunflower fields, an ancient village is harnessing the beauty of the natural world to revive the art of slow living.

Words by
Emma J Page

Curves, circles, arches and gentle silhouettes – these are the shapes that my eyes take in when I visit the medieval village of Castelfalfi, perched high on a hill in the Tuscan countryside, equidistant between Pisa and Florence. They are, of course, the familiar outlines of the undulating landscape so synonymous with this region, but I notice something else. Paths and planting meander across the gardens of the hamlet’s eponymous hotel; gently curved sculptures stud the landscape and even the lobby is anchored by a pair of generous circular velvet-upholstered ottomans.

Perhaps this is why I feel surprisingly rested almost as soon as I arrive. Fluid shapes retain perennial appeal – both in nature and decoratively. It’s well-documented that circles in particular, from the wheel to the clock, are part of our evolution. There’s evidence that living with round forms also makes us happier: “It goes back to our primitive roots, where most shapes were curvilinear,” Manuel Lima, author of *The Book of Circles*, tells me. “They are softer and they provide safety, as opposed to angular forms, such as the teeth of an animal. The circle is also an abstract symbol for perfection.”

There’s plenty here to steer visitors towards that treasured state of equilibrium, from easy-on-the-eyes silhouettes to experiences intended to bind us to the outside world and to the seasons. Close to the medieval hill town of San Gimignano, the borgo of Castelfalfi, with its medieval castle and Romanesque church of San Floriano, is rich in history. Dating from the Etruscan era and once owned by the Medici family, its fortunes have ebbed and flowed over the centuries: after the Second World War, it was all but deserted as villagers left to find work further afield. Now, under the watchful eye of the UK-based owner, collector and philanthropist Sri Prakash Lohia, locals are gradually returning to tend the organic vineyards, vegetable gardens and olive groves and perhaps to reconnect with their own precious

corner of the earth. Of course, that means that visitors too are benefitting from the renaissance of the 2700-acre estate, which includes most of the village, the hotel, a vineyard, golf course and extensive agricultural holdings.

One of the joys of visiting Castelfalfi and its resort, is that you are encouraged to set your own pace. Hiking, quad biking and cycling (and even survival experiences involving fire-lighting and shelter-building) satisfy the adventurous. For those who prefer to commune more leisurely with nature, there’s truffle hunting, picnicking and catch-and-release fishing on the estate’s lake. Many of these activities are available throughout the year, but much is tailored to the seasons. Mellow autumn sees the advent of white truffle hunting, while guests can also join the grape harvest during September and the olive harvest in October and November. Here, sustainability is more than just a token gesture: wines and oils are organic; self-harvested rainwater maintains the gardens and golf course; a biomass boiler provides heating and cooling and single-use plastics have been eliminated.

Sunset here is big news: at the rear of the main building – a contemporary structure topped with Tuscan terracotta roof tiles and set low into the landscape – guests are invited to recline on quilted lounges overlooking the cypress tree-dotted hills as a majestic orange sun gently dips out of sight, its glowing fronds streaking the horizon. A nightly dose of this is all that’s needed to truly decompress.

Though the estate is also known for its golf course, my visit entails a cookery class (a more appealing proposition for this non-golfer). The morning involves a light-hearted attempt at pizza making, under the supervision of pizzaiolo (pizza chef) Andrea Russo. Born in Naples, undisputed home of the classic pizza, he nonetheless tutors us in the art of the crunchier, crispier variety beloved by Northern Italians, lighter on the tomato topping and with





dough leavened over several days, making it easier to digest. Getting our hands in the flour, shaping the dough, adding the topping and inserting and extracting the pizza from the wood-fired stove with a traditional paddle is all part of the fun.

After an extensive renovation, the hotel's state-of-the-art wellness retreat recently reopened with an emphasis less on the subterranean cocooning usually associated with body treatments and more on a connection to the outside world. Interiors reflect the landscape as it evolves through the seasons, with terracotta, greens and soft brass finishes and grey-green accents, "inspired by the spectacular mist in the morning during the winter," says design studio Affine, which oversaw the project. Treatments are by Thai holistic medicine specialists RAKxa, drawing on the principles of Chakra rebalancing via massage, hot stone therapy, singing bowls and acupressure, with an emphasis on muscle release to achieve inner calm. They are tailored to take place with nature front and centre – beds are discreetly positioned in al fresco gazebos in sight of waving olive branches and with the heady scent of the area's woody lavender in the air.

Much of the region's rustic appeal is still intact at the resort, from the beamed loggia setting of its informal pizzeria Il Rosmarino (there's also Olivina, a fine dining proposition by Chef Davide de Simone) to La tabaccaia –

a former tobacco warehouse, which houses 31 classic rooms. The main house, comprising 146 suites, offers a more contemporary take on Tuscan living: hand drawn silk wallpapers, intricate mural headboards, ergonomic joinery and marble clad bathrooms add up to an understated elegance (there are also a handful of private villas available, set in their own grounds). A rich colour palette conjures the surrounding woodland right on the cusp of late summer and early autumn – a fitting and instantly restful approach. Here, the needs of guests are anticipated and catered for – from ergonomic Dyson hairdryers in the bathroom to a generous selection of coffee pods and hand selected teas for those tempted to watch the sunrise, morning drink in hand. Staff, the majority of them local, take pride in getting to know their guests' tastes, making food or drinks suited to them, and introducing them to the estate's own-harvested products.

The beauty of this centuries-old village is that it's self-contained, with no interruption between visitors and the unfolding natural world beyond. If you can slow down enough to take it all in, you'll leave feeling like one of the garden's Paolo Staccioli bronze and steel sculptures: poised, balanced and perfectly in tune with the world.

Double rooms from €600 / £522 per night castelfalfi.com