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CALIFORNIA DREAMING

From Lucca,



with Love.

GRAND UNIVERSE LUCCA IS THE ULTIMATE RENAISSANCE ESCAPE IN TUSCANY'S LUSH COUNTRYSIDE

BY *Alexandra Lee*

I sit on a shaded bench overlooking a verdant sculpture garden, sipping from a half-bottle of sangiovese red blend somewhere in the heart of Tuscany. I'm blissfully aware of the fact that it's only one in the afternoon, but as they say, when in Rome! Here, I try my best to do as the locals do, which means solo lunch breaks in the piazzas and sticking to the four main food groups: wine, cheese, pasta, and gelato. And bread, and Aperol spritzes. The list goes on.

My lunch, a hearty picnic of focaccia with smoked salmon and cream cheese and a side of olive oil cake, has long since been devoured, though I take my sweet time before leaving my secret spot and hopping back on my trusty steed, the cruiser bike. Pedaling back through the 500-year-old city walls, I revel in the romance of traveling solo, as if I'm starring in my own remake of *Under the Tuscan Sun*—without the quarter-life crisis, that is.

My temporary home is the charming Renaissance town of Lucca, which, in my opinion, is severely underrated within the list of top Italian cities. Yes, there's the classic might of Rome and unparalleled culture of Florence, even the beauty of neighboring Tuscan towns San Gimignano and Siena; yet Lucca's signature superpower lies in one simple characteristic: authenticity. As a lesser hotspot on the tourist itinerary, visitors trade bustling

chaos for a laid-back small town bursting with medieval history, Renaissance architecture, and traditional Tuscan flavor, in the company of charming locals indulging in an espresso doppio and a cigarette break. Though not as iconic as the Colosseum, Lucca's enchanting city walls hold the history of half a millennium. Besides, unhurried afternoons spent strolling piazzas and indulging in the world's finest wine encapsulates *la dolce vita* much better than the chaos of Roman life.

I arrive back at my humble abode, the only luxury hotel within the inner circle of Lucca's city walls. Erected out of a meticulously restored 16th century palazzo, Grand Universe Lucca has served previous lives as a glassblower's atelier, a Renaissance family home, and finally many decades as a monumental hotel. 19th century art frames the walls of both the pearlescent arched lobby and the 55 sumptuous velvet-clad suites, its rich furniture reflecting Lucca's heritage in silks and textile production. A grand piano sits in its lobby, both as an ode to the city's musical history, the birthplace of Giacomo Puccini, and an immersive experience for visitors—a classical composer sits with guests to create their own custom melody in the hotel's "Prelude of Existence." Everything here is proudly tied to the city's storied past. I park my bike and resort to exploration by foot, off to discover if Lucca is truly the city of 100 churches.

A stop for gelato is involved, evidently. “Pistachio, per favore,” I order in my bad Italian accent. Wandering the city’s maze of narrow alleyways, I step aside for a horse-drawn carriage pulling two passengers with matching aperitifs, another signature trademark offered by Grand Universe. The fact that Fiats, Vespas, and horse-drawn carriages alike traverse the same roads here is a charming fusion of medieval past and present. As I stroll, I catch glimpses of the iconic San Michele in Foro between looming buildings. Standing before the real thing, which dates back to 795 AD, is just as awe-inspiring as any Roman monument. A wander through Palazzo Pfanner’s ancient Greek sculpture garden is the perfect cap to an idyllic afternoon. Now, all I’m in need of is a refreshment.

It just so happens that I have friends from Los Angeles staying in town, doing their own version of a house swap (yes, like in *The Holiday*) while the owners of their eclectic Lucca apartment are staying in Manhattan Beach. I meet them for an aperitif date back at Grand Universe’s Sommità Champagne Rooftop, which serves strictly Martin Orsyn deluxe champagne with a sweeping view of the city’s many iconic towers. We order Hugo spritzes and snack on cornichons, reveling in the early evening’s stillness as golden hour illuminates ancient buildings. We have the place to ourselves, only one other couple to our left – though, not even ten minutes later, a sudden commotion draws our gaze, and we gasp with the realization that one half of our rooftop company has gotten down on one knee. A Tuscan proposal.

We stare, stunned, witnessing their love story unfold in front of us, until the couple introduces themselves as Hollie and Tom from England and apologizes for ruining our evening. We assure them it’s been quite the opposite. My friend orders another bottle of champagne; a toast to the newly engaged. “He’s been acting so weird all day!” Hollie exclaims, remarking that Tom had been oddly attached to his backpack. We’re astonished to learn that Tom had only planned to propose here that day, after deciding the original location wasn’t up to par. But the moment is fleeting, as the lovebirds are late for a dinner reservation and fly off into the night.

I come to find that the unassuming Lucca is in fact full of mischievous surprises. Every April, they celebrate the Festival of the Flowers to honor patron Saint Zita with a blooming flower market and spring displays throughout the city. I happen to be visiting right before Lucca Summer Fest, as the usually sleepy town is preparing to host an influx of famous bands and tourists. The opener? KISS. My lively concierge, Cinzia, explains that my current suite is to be given to one of the band members after my departure. The time I gave up my room for KISS, I think. Has a nice ring to it. Sure enough, I later spy a conspicuous figure in shorts and a T-shirt asking



GRAND UNIVERSE SYMPHONY LOUNGE

GRAND UNIVERSE





GRAND UNIVERSE MATTEO BARRO ARIA JR SUITE

GRAND UNIVERSE SOMMITA TERRACE



for directions in the lobby—he would have blended in, except for the massive mop of flowing black hair. Tommy Thayer. There you have it: a rooftop fit for a proposal, and a suite fit for a rock legend.

After the best rooftop toast imaginable, my evening culminates with a reservation at Legacy, Grand Universe's traditional Italian restaurant with an emphasis on regionally sourced ingredients. In a country whose history is so tied to its food, simplicity is king, though Legacy elevates Italian dishes up a notch through luxurious textures and ingredients—not to mention, a wine list chock-full of the world's most coveted bottles, from the iconic Brunello di Montalcino to Chianti and Super Tuscan galore. I dive into my antipasti, marinated cod in hummus with Tropea onions, but the tagliolini with black truffle and zucchini flower is the true star of the show. Although I love a good truffle (as I'd later prove at an osteria in Florence), the best part of this dish is the masterfully delicate execution of a flavor that is usually overpowering. Crema Catalana, the Spanish sister of crème brûlée, is my ultimate demise. I crack through the burnt sugar crust and into the heavenly custard beneath, hoping my indulgence won't come to an end.

Alas, it does, and though I'd love to stay and polish off another glass of Super Tuscan, my eyelids beg for sleep. After all, in the last 48 hours I'd taken a flight from San Francisco to Paris and Paris to Pisa without so much as a good night's rest. As I take one last gaze from my window, perfectly positioned over the deserted Piazza del Giglio, and curl up inside my velvet-upholstered bed, I think to myself... Lucca is well worth it.

I wake refreshed after a solid 8 hours and return to Legacy Restaurant in desperate need of a cappuccino. Although it's already sweltering outside, I can't do a disservice to the Italians by ordering iced coffee. My last day of city excursions takes me right up to the central gates, Porta San Pietro, where I stop to take a peek inside Grand Universe's La Residenza building. If possible, it exudes even more Renaissance character than the hotel; Michelangelo-style frescos splash across the ceilings, and gilded carpets meet decadent velvet furniture. Good thing I don't have a month free, or I'd be in danger of hiding out here.

But, the show must go on, and later that day my train wistfully whisks me away from Tuscany's perfected authenticity onto some other adventure. Lucca is its own grand little universe indeed, full of surprises, old-world charm, and the all-too-Italian celebration of simplicity. La dolce vita and garbo lucchese remain on my mind as the train pulls away from Lucca, with love.*

WHAT to PACK

Tuscan Spring



1 INNISFREE DAILY UV DEFENSE SUNSCREEN \$18

Bring on the Italian sunshine! This brand-new, clean formulation of the cult-favorite sunscreen will leave skin protected all day, from biking the city walls to climbing Guinigi Tower. Plus, zero white cast means it's suitable for all skin tones.

innisfree.com

2 MANSUR GAVRIEL MINI CLOUD CLUTCH \$545

Sporting an Italian leather bag in Lucca just makes sense. Versatile as a clutch, crossbody, shoulder, or belt, this supple lambskin minibag is an everyday staple for venturing both inside and outside the city walls.

mansurgavriel.com



3 ROBERTA EINER LILY DRESS \$936

When life gives you lemons, you take them to Tuscany in the form of a Limoncello-inspired dress. Reflect the blooming hues of the Italian countryside as you dine on truffle tagliolini at Legacy Restaurant—and sip on a golden liqueur to match.

thewebster.com

4 DOLCE & GABBANA PORTOFINO PRINTED MULES \$822

The statement heels that every sun-chasing globetrotter needs in their rotation. These citrusy, floral-printed mules with classic logo heels pair expertly with champagne toasts at the Martin Orsyn Rooftop.

mytheresa.com



by ALEXANDRA LEE