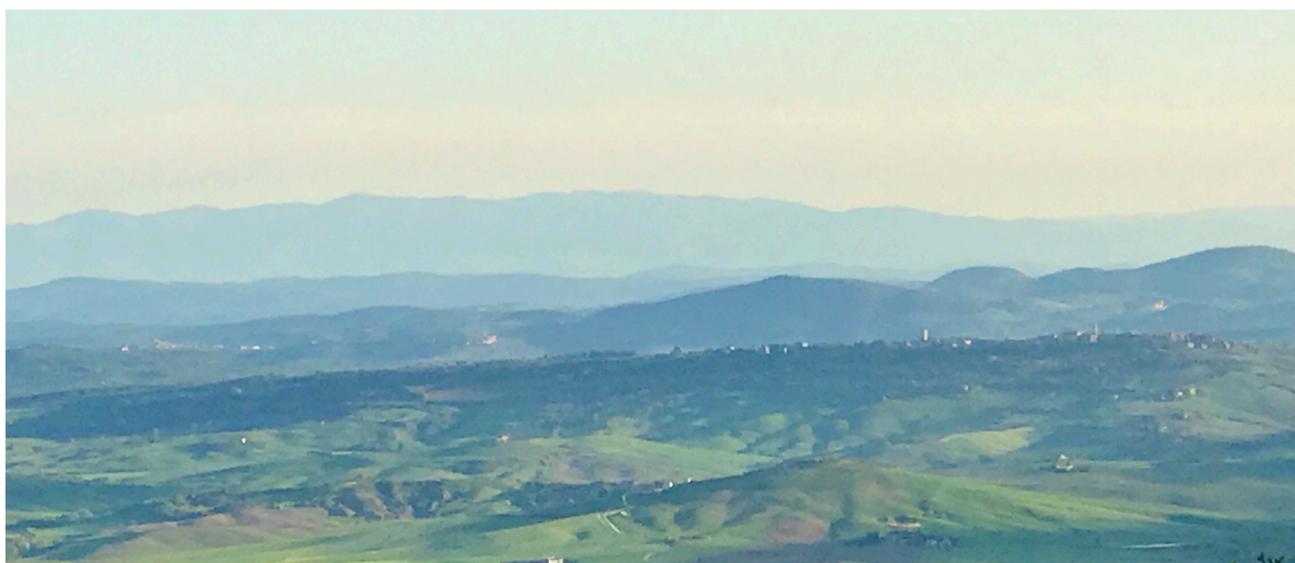


Discover the Val d'Orcia

the Tuscany you're dreaming to visit

*a traveler's guide by **Jan Geenen** expat
resident of this enchanted valley*



Discover the Val d'Orcia *the Tuscany you're dreaming to visit*

About the Val d'Orcia

The Val d'Orcia is an enchanted valley in Tuscany situated in the province of Siena halfway between Rome and Florence. It is so named because it is the home of the Orcia river that flows through it. Most of the valley consists of gently rolling hills that are cultivated with grains or vines with olives and forests higher up. On the western side of the valley there is *Mont Amiata*, an imposing but dormant volcano that rises to over 1,700 metres. This contrast between valley and mountain gives the area its outstanding natural beauty. It was in recognition of this beauty and because of the cultural significance of the Val d'Orcia that it was designated a World Heritage area by UNESCO in 2004.

The Val d'Orcia is rural Tuscany as you would imagine it. The Tuscany of the postcards and movies: with rolling green hills of wheat that turn to gold in summer, cypress lined avenues, countryside chapels, vineyards, olive groves, beautiful historic villages and towns and imposing fortresses. All of these have been featured in movies such as *The English Patient*, *Gladiator*, *Made in Italy*, the TV series *The Medicis* and many more.



But the Val d'Orcia is about more than just the immense beauty of its landscape. It is also about the people, the culture and the history that have shaped the area. The people, from the Etruscans, through to the Romans and Sienese to modern day Tuscans, fought wars over this precious territory and helped to shape it through the sweat of their labour. These are also the people who created a rich cultural heritage with cuisine and wine that today is one of the many great reasons to visit the area.

All of these aspects of the Val d'Orcia will be explored in this traveler's guide. This is an area that because of its location halfway between Rome and Florence is easy

to reach as it is not far from the main E35 north-south highway. So why not add it to your itinerary when visiting Italy? When you come and stay with us at [BelSentiero](#), our farmhouse villa Bed & Breakfast here, we would be delighted to guide you so that you can make the most of your visit to one of the most enchanted corners of Italy.



History of the area

Etruscans

The first civilized people to rule over the Val d'Orcia were the Etruscans. The Etruscan League was an association of 12 city-states centred in what is today Tuscany and Umbria. In many respects this Etruscan culture was similar to the Greek culture of the time: each of the city states were fiercely competitive amongst themselves, but when need arose they would unite to face external threats. Much like the Greeks had Mont Olympus as their holy mountain, the Etruscans considered Mont Amiata, flanking the Val d'Orcia, to be sacred. Today there is still evidence of Etruscan mining for cinnabar on Mont Amiata. One of the Etruscan city states not far from the Val d'Orcia was centered where modern day Chiusi is today and there is a fine Etruscan museum there that is worth visiting.

Romans

Following Rome's conquest of Etruria and the Italian peninsular, they built the famed Roman roads to connect the far-flung corners of their domain. One of their main roads to link Rome to the northern parts of Italy was the via Cassia and today this road in its modern incarnation is still the main road that runs through the Val d'Orcia. The Val d'Orcia at the time was also popular amongst the Romans for its thermal springs, especially at [Bagno Vignoni](#).

Lombard period

After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, a large portion of Italy was ruled by the Lombards. In 743 AD the Lombard King Rachis passed through the area and stopped on the slopes of Mont Amiata where he established a great abbey

that grew into the town of [Abbadia San Salvatore](#). This abbey became very powerful and for many decades ruled over the neighbouring region including the Val d'Orcia. The abbey church can still be visited today and is fascinating especially for its large crypt.

During the Lombard period the [Francigena](#) or "the Road from France", which was the main pilgrimage route between France and Rome, started to develop as the via Cassia was used less and less. The Francigena linked various religious sites and church properties along the route and today is still popular with walkers. It passes within a few kilometres of us at BelSentiero.

Republic of Siena

As the Francigena grew in importance so too did the city of Siena as an important trading city on the route. As Siena prospered it grew into a Republic and slowly gained control over its surrounding territory, including the Val d'Orcia. During this period the Val d'Orcia flourished as wealthy merchants and families from Siena bought land in the valley that was then farmed by tenant farmers under a sharecropping system. This system continued to exist in the area for many centuries until the end of World War II.

To protect their land holdings the families that controlled the Val d'Orcia fortified many of the local towns and villages. They also donated to public works such as piazzas and churches. This included building the Rocca di Campigliola tower that sits above our local village of Campiglia d'Orcia that dates back to the 900s.

The Renaissance and Pope Pius II

During the Renaissance the Val d'Orcia came to represent the idealised Italian landscape as wealthy landowners invested in their properties and Renaissance artists included its landscapes in their paintings. When Enea Bartolomeo Piccolomini became Pope Pius II in 1458 he had the village of Corsignano, in the middle of the Val d'Orcia and where we was born, completely rebuilt along Renaissance humanist urban planning principles. He renamed the town [Pienza](#) (meaning the city of Pius). Intended as a retreat from Rome the urban planning principles used in rebuilding Pienza became very influential, first spreading to other towns across Italy and then across Europe.

Towards the end of the Renaissance in 1559 the Val d'Orcia came under the control of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany controlled by Florence, after Florence won its long war against Siena with the assistance of Spain. Some Siennese noble families continued to resist the Florentines from their base in Montalcino but eventually they too were beaten.

The war period

Following the Renaissance the Val d'Orcia no longer enjoyed the same prosperity as before, with over farming resulting in degradation of the land. This was reversed in the 1920s when vast portions of the Val d'Orcia, especially in the southern part, were bought by the Origo family and rehabilitated. Antonio Origo,

who was Italian, met and married Iris Cutting whom he met amongst the British expatriate community in Florence. Iris was a wealthy heiress who used her considerable wealth to assist her husband in his passion for the land and to establish La Foce. This property then became the centre of a considerable farming community that used modern farming techniques. La Foce was established as an aristocratic Estate with beautiful gardens that can still be visited today.

During the Second World War Iris Origo had to play a very delicate role as she was of mixed British/ American ancestry and thus not above suspicion. Often she and her husband had to entertain Nazi officers while they were in the area while at the same time she was aiding and supplying food to partisans and escaped prisoners of war who were hiding in the surrounding forests and Mont Amiata. The war diary that Iris Origo wrote during this period makes an excellent read.

Modern era

Following the end of the Second World War the tenant farming system that had been in place for centuries broke down. This social change together with the introduction of mechanised farming resulted in many people leaving the land. Many of these people moved first into the local towns and villages but later more and more moved to the bigger cities leaving many properties abandoned. From the 1980s onwards many of these properties started to be bought by well to do Italians and expatriates. A large portion of these are now used as summer holiday homes by their owners or are rented to tourists.

Our own property, BelSentiero, is a typical Tuscan rectangular farmhouse built in the 1920s from local materials. Later it came into the ownership of the church and for a while was the home of the local village priest for Campiglia d'Orcia. In the 2000s it was then bought by an entrepreneur from Rome who renovated the property and converted it into a high end-dining destination. We bought BelSentiero in 2016 and have converted it into our magical Bed & Breakfast with its panoramic views of the Val d'Orcia onto Pienza.

Villages and towns

The hills of the Val d'Orcia are capped by numerous small historic villages and towns, each of which is special for its own particular reasons, such as the attractions that may be located there or food products produced. Each has its own history and story with the identity of these villages often linked to the powerful families that at some point ruled over them. Even today in the smallest villages this history is still celebrated with each having at least one main festival a year to celebrate what it is that makes their place special.

The three biggest towns of the Val d'Orcia are Pienza, Montalcino and Montepulciano. But while these towns are definitely worth visiting, do not forget to also venture off the beaten path and go discover some of the smaller villages as well. One will be surprised by the numerous hidden gems that are waiting to be discovered often without the numerous tourists who tend to flock to the better-documented places.

Pienza

Pienza sits in the heart of the Val d'Orcia and as mentioned previously was completely re-built by Pope Pius II. Due to the tremendous influence that Pienza had on humanist urban planning thinking during the Renaissance, the historic centre of Pienza is today designated as a UNESCO World Heritage area. It is one of those rare World Heritage areas (the historic centre) situated within a greater World Heritage park (the Val d'Orcia). The heart of the city is its beautiful central *Piazza Pio II* with its *Duomo* and the *Piccolomini Palace* (which in its time was the residence of the Pope). The Duomo is one of the earliest examples of the Renaissance cathedral style with its facade covered in travertine and together with the Piccolomini palace are well worth visiting. In addition to its architecture, the views from Pienza are outstanding, especially across the Val d'Orcia towards Mont Amiata and looking onto our village of Campiglia d'Orcia, where we are situated at BelSentiero.

But another reason to visit Pienza is for its food and in particular its pecorino (sheep's) cheese. As soon as you enter Pienza through its main gate you will know where you are with the strong smell of pecorino wafting down the main street from the local cheese shops. So take the time to stop at a few and taste some of the numerous different types of pecorino on offer, from cheese matured in straw and walnut leaves through to the drunken cheese which is matured in the must from the wine making process.

Finally, absolutely do buy a gelato while wandering around and exploring the town. One of Italy's best artiginal gelaterias (ice cream shops), *Buon Gusto*, is tucked away in a hidden corner of the town and well worth seeking out. Flavours include popular choices such as Peruvian chocolate and salted caramel but also include others that change with the seasons based on what is fresh and currently available, so there is always a new taste sensation to discover.



Montalcino

Montalcino is situated in the northwest corner of the Val d'Orcia and is famous as the centre of the Brunello DOCG wine region. Brunello is considered one of Italy's

top wines. Like most Tuscan red wines such as Chianti, Brunello is made from the sangiovese grape, but from a clone that is particular to this region. Brunello, by Italian standards, is a relatively new wine having only come to the fore in the 1860s when the wines being produced by the Biondi Santi family in Montalcino started to gain fame. This fame slowly spread as more and more vintages won awards and other winemakers from Montalcino started producing similar wines. Today there are close to 300 vineyards in the Brunello DOCG producing almost exclusively Brunello di Montalcino (the top end wine) and Rosso di Montalcino (a second less aged wine) with the Brunello di Montalcino amongst Italy's most expensive wines.

When visiting Montalcino a great place to start is at the top end of the town near the fortress (or Fortezza). Here there is a parking that normally has availability if you arrive early enough and from there you can easily wander down into the town and explore. Montalcino has many fine restaurants, some with great views over the valley. If you would like to try some of the wines, then the best is to visit one of the many wine shops (enoteca) to be found throughout the town. Some of these are owned by specific wineries or brands and may therefore have a more limited selection, but others are more generic offering a full selection of wines from across the Brunello and even other parts of Italy. We particularly like [Enoteca Fortezza](#) located in the Fortress at the top of the town, both for the ambience of its setting as well as their large selection of Brunello wines and knowledgeable staff. Alternatively many (but not all) wineries offer cellar tours and tastings if you go and visit them at the winery. It is best to phone ahead though as most wineries require that you make an appointment if joining one of their tours. Further in this guide we discuss some of our favourite wineries and which ones we would recommend visiting.



Montepulciano

Montepulciano is one of my all time favourite Italian hill towns. Its origins are said to stretch back to the Etruscan period as an outlying settlement of the Etruscan city-state of Chiusi. Later it grew into a town in its own right and occupies a strategic position between the Val d'Orcia and much larger Val d'Chiana. This combination of a medieval fortress town with stunning views over the surrounding

countryside, the architecture and the town's oenological history is what makes Montepulciano such a charming place.

Unlike Brunello the wines of the Montepulciano DOCG have been acknowledged as top class wines for centuries, with the top wine produced in the area known as *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano*, because previously it was a wine produced almost exclusively for the nobility. Today when wandering through Montepulciano you will notice that many wineries have their own wine shops within the town. This is as in many cases these wine shops contain their cellars where they store and age their wine underground, dug into the rock foundations below their shops and upon which the town is built. This was for protection from the many marauders who use to raid Italy, making it more difficult for them to run off with the latest great vintage as they would need to conquer Montepulciano first to gain access to the wines.

As with Montalcino, if you would like to try the local wines you can either do so by visiting one of the many *enoteca* or *cantine* (cellars) in the town, or otherwise arrange by appointment to visit some of the wineries located in the countryside outside of the town.

When in Montepulciano make sure to walk up to the very top of the town and visit the *Piazza Grande* with its *Duomo* and civic offices, stopping along the way to enjoy the views of the valley below. If you find the walk too steep there is a mini-bus services that winds its way up to the top with various stops along the way. Just outside of the town is the beautiful *San Biagio cathedral* that is well worth visiting.



Castiglione and Campiglia d'Orcia

In the south west of the Val d'Orcia you will find the commune of Castiglione d'Orcia hugging the slopes of Mont Amiata. This commune consists of five villages of which the largest is Castiglione and Rocca d'Orcia. Here you will find the *Rocca di Tentennano* that has been renovated and can be visited. This fortification was owned by the Tignosi family and helped to guard the Francigena to Rome. The Tignosi were vassals of the Aldobrandeschi counts who owned the nearby Rocca Aldobrandesca. Later, for a time, Saint Catherine of Siena also stayed here.

Further to the south you will find the village of [Vivo d'Orcia](#), famed for its mountain spring, which even today supplies high quality drinking water to all the surrounding villages (including BelSentiero) and via pipeline to Siena.

A little bit further on you find our local village of [Campiglia d'Orcia](#). At BelSentiero we are located just below and out of sight, but within walking distance of the village. The village is built around a conical shaped rock that is dominated by a bell-tower from which it is possible to obtain the most unbelievable panoramic views of the Val d'Orcia. Further back in the forest above the village you can visit the [Rocca Campigliola](#), an ancient ruined tower from the 900s.



[San Quirico d'Orcia](#)

Between Castiglione d'Orcia and Montalcino, on the via Cassia, is the town of San Quirico d'Orcia. Important in the Middle Ages because of its location on the Francigena and via Cassia, today San Quirico is the centre for much of the agricultural activity that takes place in the Val d'Orcia. This includes hosting the Orcia wine festival in May and the festival for the new olive oil in December.

Noteworthy to visit in San Quirico are the [collegiate church of San Quirico](#) (near the civic offices) and the [Horti Leonini](#), a garden designed during the Renaissance in the 1560s.

[Radicofani](#)

Radicofani is located in the far south of the Val d'Orcia and is famed for its great [Fortezza](#) (fortress) that overlooks the entire region with 360-degree views. This was ideal for guarding both the Francigena and via Cassia. The fortress as it stands today was built by the Florentines after incorporating Radicofani into the Duchy of Tuscany following their victory over the Republic of Siena.

For a time Radicofani was the home of Italy's version of Robin Hood, [Ghino di Tacco](#). Ghino was born into a Sienese noble family but turned to robbing wealthy travellers as they used the Francigena to and from Rome. He was considered a gentleman bandit as he only robbed the rich, allowing the poor to travel

unhindered. He used Radicofani as his base due to its strategic position. The story goes that at one point he kidnapped the Abbot of Cluny who was returning from Rome after having feasted too much and was on his way to the thermal springs at San Casciano dei Bagni to try and recuperate. While in Radicofani the Abbot miraculously recovered, most likely because he was only fed a diet of bread, beans and white wine. During this time he developed a strong friendship with Ghino who he then went on to defend once he was released from captivity, allowing Ghino di Tacco to be accepted back into society. Today you will find a statue of Ghino di Tacco in Radicofani.



Contignano

A short distance from Radicofani, on the road to Pienza, you will find the quaint village of Contignano. This is set overlooking the rolling hills of the Val d'Orcia and is the centre of sheep farming in the valley. Many of these farmers are descendants of Sardinian shepherds who migrated to the valley around a hundred years ago. At that time the island of Sardinia had too many sheep and not enough land to support them, so the Italian state made land available in northern Lazio and southern Tuscany, resulting in whole families moving across to the mainland together with their flocks. Much of this migration took place by foot. As a result today the sheep used for making pecorino cheese are Sardinian sheep, famed for the quality of their milk but poor when it comes to providing wool or meat. Today *pecorino di Pienza* is considered to be some of the best sheep's cheese available due to the high quality of the grazing upon which these sheep feed giving the cheese a better flavour. Every year Contignano holds an excellent *ravioli festival* with the ravioli filled with the most delicious ricotta cheese, a by-product of the pecorino cheese production process.

Spa towns of Bagni San Filippo and Bagno Vignoni

Even though Mont Amiata is a dormant volcano, there is still much geothermal activity that takes place around it. This gives rise to a number of thermal springs around which spa towns have developed. Two of these are situated in the Val d'Orcia and are close to us at BelSentiero.

Our closest spa town is at [Bagni San Filippo](#). The thermal springs here are very popular with Italians and are quite different from what you will find elsewhere. The reason for this is that the hot thermal waters feed into the local river, which then flows through the forest. The locals have then built pools within the river using the local rocks and these can then be used by the public at large at not cost. The setting is very rustic but also somewhat surreal, set as it is in the midst of the forest, with vapour rising up off the hot water and some beautiful pools and calciferous rock formations, such as the [Balenna Bianca](#) (white whale), completing the picture.

For a more traditional upmarket spa experience there is the village of [Bagno Vignoni](#). This small village is built around the thermal spring that during the Middle Ages was walled in resulting in a large rectangular thermal pool in the middle of the town. From there the water is piped to three luxury spa hotels. These spas can be visited as a day tourist and include the full range of spa facilities and services, such as saunas and massages in addition to the thermal mineral pools.



[Abbadia San Salvatore](#)

Although technically not within the Val d'Orcia, very close to us at BelSentiero on the eastern slopes of Mont Amiata you will find the town of Abbadia San Salvatore. This is the town that was founded by the Lombard King Rachis in the 700s and is on the road up to the summit of Mont Amiata. As a town situated in the forests and mountain it provides an interesting contrast to the towns situated in the valley. The [crypt](#) of the old abbey church is fascinating as is the [historic old town](#) centre that can only be entered by foot with its narrow alleyways.

For those interested in geology the [mining museum](#) of the town is a must see. For centuries cinnabar (from which mercury is extracted) was mined in the area starting with the Etruscans. This was once the lifeblood of Abbadia San Salvatore until the mine was closed in the 1970s.

Today the town is famously known as the [città delle fiaccole](#) (city of the bonfires) due to the ceremony that takes place every Christmas eve. On this night massive big bonfires are lit in every piazza and available public space within the town

following a ceremony performed by the local bishop in the main town square. So for a Christmas experience unlike any other come and stay with us at BelSentiero and we will take you there.



Seggiano

Another beautiful old historic town on the slopes of Mont Amiata, but this time the western slopes, is Seggiano. Seggiano is famous for its extra virgin olive oil that is made from the olivastra seggianese olive, an olive variety that is endemic to and only grows on the slopes of Mont Amiata. Many of Seggiano's olive groves are hundreds of years old, having originally been planted when the surrounding land was controlled by the church. This combination of a unique olive variety, grown in a very particular climate and terrain from very old olive trees, results in an extra virgin olive oil that is amongst the best that I have ever tasted. This is also recognised with the extra virgin olive oil from Seggiano being one of only 16 areas in Italy that can produce DOP certified oil. To discover more about the olive oil of Seggiano it is possible, by appointment, to take a [tour and visit the Seggiano olive oil museum](#).

San Giovanni d'Asso and Montisi

North of Montalcino you will find an area known as the crete Sienese. This is an area of white clay soils that is famous for its white truffles. You find black truffles throughout Italy including in this area. But much more tasty and rare (and therefore expensive) are white truffles. These come largely from only three areas within Italy and this is one of these.

Black truffles (albeit different varieties) can be found throughout the year, other than in May when truffle hunting is prohibited. White truffles, however, are only available in the autumn. The best way in which to gain a better understanding of truffles is to join a [truffle hunt](#) (maybe followed by a cooking lesson afterwards to learn how to use the truffles) or to attend the annual [truffle festival](#) that takes place in San Giovanni d'Asso in November. So if you're staying with us at BelSentiero remember to ask about these.

Outside the towns

La Foce

On the road between Chianciano Terme and us at BelSentiero you will find the La Foce Estate. La Foce has beautiful *gardens* designed by the English architect Cecil Pinsent that are renowned for their architectural style using grand hedges and cypress trees, interspersed with green lawns and lemon trees in terracotta vases (an old Medici tradition). In the warmer months the gardens at La Foce can be visited over the weekends and on Wednesdays. Plus in July La Foce hosts a grand *classical music festival* in which renowned musicians from around the world participate.



Capella Madonna di Vitaleta

On the road between San Quirico and Pienza you will find the romantic *chapel of Madonna di Vitaleta* that featured in the closing scenes of the film *The Gladiator*. Although on private land it is possible to visit if you park in the designated area off the gravel road and then walk the last few hundred metres to the chapel. In Spring the wheat fields around the chapel will still be green but from June until the harvest these turn to a golden yellow. When this occurs the transition takes place remarkably quickly!

Sant 'Antimo

South of Montalcino on the road towards Seggiano you will come across an imposing church in the middle of empty fields containing only a few ancient Cypresses and Seggianese olives. This is the abbey of Sant 'Antimo. It is said the original chapel on this site, now incorporated into the larger church, was founded by the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne in the 800s. In its time this was an important stop on the Francigena with the abbey and its monks responsible for a lot of the cultivation in the area and where they also produced numerous pharmaceutical products and distillates from their gardens.

While today the Benedictine monks no longer reside at Sant 'Antimo it still has a strong spiritual quality to it and is still used for important religious festivals such as Easter. There is also a small shop attached to the property where it is possible to purchase numerous local products such as essential oils, liqueurs, cosmetics and other products such as would have been produced by the monks in the abbey's heyday.

Mont Amiata and the Cross

Rising 1,738 metres above sea level and dominating the whole of southern Tuscany, including the Val d'Orcia, you will find Mont Amiata. This is an ancient, albeit fortunately dormant volcano, last having erupted some 200,000 years ago. The conical volcano shape of Mont Amiata is best seen from a distance such as from La Foce or Pienza.

There is a dramatic change in both the landscape and vegetation when travelling from the valley floor of the Val d'Orcia (at some 300 metres) to the top of Mont Amiata. While the valley consists primarily of grain fields, meadows and vineyards, as you move higher you reach the olive groves that are then replaced by oak and chestnut forests. Further up the forest changes dramatically as you encounter one of Europe's largest beech forests with its white barked, tall straight trees. This is an especially mesmerising sight to behold in autumn when the yellow of the falling foliage comes into play.

At the top of Mont Amiata there is a faded although still functional ski village with ski runs that operate in winter with the help of snow making machines. While today most people venture further north to go skiing, in its time the area was very popular with skiers from Rome that is not too far away. During the rest of the year the mountain and forest is popular with walkers and cyclists.

At the highest point on Mont Amiata you will find an iron cross-inaugurated in 1910. This was built under the instruction of Pope Leo XIII to celebrate the Holy Year of 1900 and was one of 20 such crosses built on peaks across Italy, one to celebrate each of the past hundred years, including one for the new century. Surprisingly you will also find a small restaurant up at the top where it is possible to enjoy a hot meal.



Quercia delle Checche

On the road between Pienza and us at BelSentiero you will find this ancient oak tree that is designated as one of Italy's living national monuments. This oak is some three hundred years old and a magnificent example of how grand these oaks can become given time.

Wines of the area

There are three main designated wine regions close to us at BelSentiero. The first of these is the Brunello DOCG centred on the town of Montalcino and consistently ranked amongst the top 5 wine regions in Italy. Then there is the Montepulciano DOCG, a much older wine-growing region centered on the town of Montepulciano. And finally there is the Orcia DOC, centered in the heart of the Val d'Orcia. Vines have been growing in the centre of the Val d'Orcia for centuries but not on the same scale and commercially as they were around Montalcino and Montepulciano. So following the second world war many vineyards in the central/ southern part of the valley were removed and turned to other forms of agriculture. Slowly, more innovative farmers have been turning back to planting vineyards in this part of the valley and this then gave rise to the establishment of the Orcia DOC in the early 2000s.

The Brunello of Montalcino

There are now close to 300 Brunello vineyards/ wineries. They predominantly produce Brunello di Montalcino and Rosso di Montalcino. Brunello di Montalcino is made 100% from the local sangiovese grape and needs to be aged for a minimum of 2 years in oak and 4 months in the bottle before being released. Rosso di Montalcino is also made from 100% sangiovese but only needs to spend 6 months aging in oak and a minimum of one year in total aging.

Many of the Brunello wineries (although not all) offer cellar tours and wine tasting. However, it is best to call before and make an appointment, especially if visiting out of season. The following is my list of some of my favourites to visit:

1. *Castello Banfi*

This winery is said to be the largest Brunello producer with their vineyards covering a seventh of the total Brunello vineyard acreage. The property is very grand with its own castle, two restaurants, cellars and a hotel. The wine tasting experience at Castello Banfi is somewhat commercial but nonetheless worth experiencing for the setting and wide range of wines available.

2. *Fattoria Barbi*

This is one of the original Brunello di Montalcino wine producers. They host a fantastic cellar tour where it is possible to also see their collection of very old wines. As one of the larger Brunello producers they have quite a large range of wines at different price points and vintages, so a number of different options

are available as part of their wine tastings. In addition there is a great restaurant located on the property, well known for its bistecca alla Fiorentina that goes well with their riserva Brunellos.



3. *Casanova di Neri*

One of the wineries consistently ranked amongst the top Brunellos is Casanova di Neri. Their modern tasting room is elegant and refined, much like their wines that are always a joy to savour.

4. *Solaria*

This winery is not only famed for its award-winning Brunellos and Super Tuscan, but also for breaking the glass ceiling with an all-female wine-making team, consisting of mother Patrizia and her two daughters.

5. *Altesino*

Yet another top-notch producer, Altesino is located in the northern part of the Brunello. The winery is owned by the Angelini family of pharmaceutical fame who also own a number of other Tuscan wineries. With deep pockets no expense has been spared investing in these vineyards.

The Vino Nobile of Montepulciano

On the watershed between the Val d'Orcia and Val d'Chiana you will find the town of Montepulciano and the Montepulciano DOCG wine region that stretches quite far into the Val d'Chiana until you almost arrive at Cortona. There are just under a hundred wineries in this wine region producing Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, the region's top red wine. This wine consists of at least 70% Sangiovese (but a different clone is used to that in Montalcino) and the remaining 30% can be from other specified local grape varieties. The wine needs to be aged for a minimum of two years of which at least one year must be in oak barrels.

The following are some of my favourite Montepulciano DOCG wineries to visit:

1. *Avignonesi*

This traditional Tuscan winery is now owned by Virginie Saverys, a Belgian lawyer, and her husband. Virginie is one of the smartest ladies I have met. Not

only does she speak multiple languages but is also extremely knowledgeable on just about any topic you would care to converse it. She is also a great believer in organic farming and has introduced a biodynamic philosophy to Avignonesi, whereby all wines are produced with as little harm to the environment as possible.

Avignonesi is a fairly large producer and as such produces quite a number of different wines, including a great *Vino Nobile*. But truly unique is their *Vin Santo*. This is a sweet wine that is particular to central Italy and is produced from grapes that are first allowed to dry for a few months before pressing thereby increasing the concentration of sugar in the juice. Once pressed the juice can be left to ferment in small barrels for quite a long time before being bottled and in the case of Avignonesi this period is especially long at around 13 years! As a result more than half of the wine is lost due to evaporation, or as they say given up as the "Angel's share". The end result is a delectable sweet wine much more viscous than just about any other that you are likely to experienced. Avignonesi make this wine in both a white and red variant. So if you have not visited a winery with a *Vin Santaia* before, then this is one winery that we definitely recommend.



2. *Poliziano*

Another excellent *Vino Nobile* producer is *Poliziano*. In particular their *Asinone* (their *riserva Vino Nobile*) is one of my firm favourites. While a traditional Tuscan wine producer, *Poliziano* has a stunning, modern wine tasting facility with excellent, knowledgeable staff.

3. *Boscarelli*

Boscarelli is a family owned winery that provides a great cellar tour and wine tasting experience in one of their cellars with the walls lined with big Slovenian oak barrels. Their *Vino Nobile* wines are very good having won a number of awards.

4. *Salcheto*

This is yet another great *Montepulciano* winery with a strong organic and biodynamic philosophy. *Salcheto* produces a range of local wines including a *rosato* (rose) and white wine.

Re-birth of wine growing in the Orcia

Modern wine making in the southern part of the Val d'Orcia is fairly new. Although grapes have been grown in the area for centuries, the wine produced was simple and primarily for family and local consumption. After the Second World War many of the vineyards were also uprooted and replaced with other agricultural activities. However, in the early 2000s an innovative group of local wine makers recognised the potential of the terroir (it is midway between the Brunello and Montepulciano after all and therefore shares many similar characteristics in term of climate and terrain). These innovators banded together to form the Consorzio del Vino Orcia and have the area recognised as a DOC wine growing region.

1. *Campotondo*

Campotondo is our neighbour at BelSentiero and is a family owned winery. Paolo Salviucci, the wine maker, was one of the original founders of the Consorzio del Vino Orcia and today it is a real family run business, with Elena the daughter having studied wine marketing and the mother Sabrina also involved in the business. The residence and cellar is located across the road from us, with the vineyards (only some 3.5 hectares) located lower down. For a young winery they make some excellent Sangiovese reds (the clones of which were specifically selected for their terroir) as well as a good Chardonnay that is a firm favourite at Renzo's cafe Le Notti di Campiglia in the village in the summer.

2. *Poggio Grande*

Located in the hills behind San Quirico Poggio Grande is another family owned winery. It overlooks the Brunello but is situated outside of the DOCG. They produce excellent Sangioveses as well as a blend of Sangiovese, Syrah and Cabernet called Scorbutico that I am rather partial to. In addition to vineyards Poggio Grande breeds horses and the wine is named after one of their champions that participated in the Palio horse race in Siena.

Culinary delights

Wine producing regions always seem to have a strong culinary tradition and the Val d'Orcia is no exception. In addition to dishes making use of ingredients originating from the Val d'Orcia, as a place situated halfway between Rome and Florence you will also find many fantastic dishes from these two great cities.

The pasta for which the Val d'Orcia is famous is pici. I call this "fat spaghetti" as it is similar to spaghetti but thicker. This is great pasta for tomato-based sauces, such as those including ground beef or chingiale (wild boar), as the pasta absorbs some of the sauce, adding to the flavour. Another pasta dish for which the area is known is ravioli, using fresh ricotta that is widely available.

Then there is the pecorino di Pienza sheep's cheese. This comes in three basic types, namely fresca (or fresh which is less than a month old), rosso (normally about 6 to 12 months old) and stagionato (or mature and which is normally more

than 18 months old). The fresca cheese is still very soft while the rosso is less so and has a stronger flavour. The stagionato can be quite hard and can be used like Parmesan and grated over pasta dishes. Within these types one can then normally also find various flavoured cheeses, normally for the rosso and stagionato. Examples include cheeses matured in straw, walnut leaves or the drunken cheese matured in the left over must from the wine making process. Others have ingredients added such as cheeses that include chillies or truffles. If you enjoy your cheeses then visiting a local cheese farm and trying the different cheeses they produce is definitely a worthwhile experience.



As you move higher up, especially in the forests around Mont Amiata, you will find woodland food. In season this can include some of the most incredible mushrooms or one of my personal favourites in Spring is wild asparagus in a sauce served with pasta (the wild asparagus is much smaller than traditional asparagus but very tasty). Forest herbs and wild plants are popular in soups and sauces and people with the knowledge of which herbs to use with which food are greatly respected.

Our local village of Campiglia d'Orcia is famous for its chestnuts that are grown in the surrounding forests on the slopes of Mont Amiata. Before moving to Italy my understanding of chestnuts was limited to the roasted variety sold in cold winters on the sidewalks of city streets, which I don't particularly fancy. However, chestnuts can be used for much more than just roasting and in particular chestnut flour is a highly sought after and versatile product. As someone with a sweet tooth I simply love some of the desserts that can be made using chestnut flour. Every last Sunday in October Campiglia d'Orcia hosts its annual chestnut festival which is well worth attending, both to try the diverse range of products made from chestnuts as well as for the festivities.

Also in the forests you will find two very different breeds of pig. The first is the wild boar (or chingiale) that is sought after by local hunters in the winter hunting season. This meat has quite a strong flavour. The second is the cinta senese, a breed of domestic pig that is reared in the forests where it feeds off acorns, chestnuts and other forest vegetation. It is one of only 6 pig breeds in Italy that has DOP status and is famous for the high quality and taste of its meat. So when visiting local restaurants be sure to look out for cinta senese prosciutto or fillet.

Finally, no discussion of Italian cuisine would be complete without discussing extra virgin olive oil, the cornerstone of the Mediterranean diet and the green to gold liquid which if of a high quality can transform even the most bland dish into something fantastic. In the Val d'Orcia, especially on the Mont Amiata side of the valley, the extra virgin olive oil is spectacular.

Quality olive oil depends on a number of different factors of which the variety of olives used is one. In Tuscany the standard blend of olive oil is a blend of the frantoio, moraiolo, leccino and pendolino olives with the frantoio generally being dominant. The frantoio olive is the olive which produces the best quality oil from these varieties, so the more frantoio oil contained in a blend generally the better. However, other single varietal olive oil is also available, such as the DOP olive oil of Seggiano made from the olivestra seggianese olive. This particular olive oil, which is endemic to our region, is one of the best to be found anywhere.

Another factor is the age and quality of the olive trees. Generally older trees that have deeper roots tend to produce better oil, again something prevalent amongst the olive groves of Seggiano.

Finally there is the question of when the olives are harvested and the age of the oil. Olives that are harvested early in the season (before the end of October) tend to produce the best quality olive oil. Normally these olives are not yet fully mature and thus give the oil a sought after grassy or green flavour. But harvesting at this time means a much lower yield and therefore the reason olives used in commercially sold olive oil in supermarkets tend to be harvested much later. Further, unlike wine which improves with age, the best (and normally more expensive) olive oil is fresh as olive oil deteriorates with age. Again, the risk with much of the commercially sold olive oil is that it includes older oil blended into newer oil. At BelSentiero we only ever sell extra virgin olive oil from the latest harvest and that is produced locally. You can order extra virgin olive oil from our on-line store at <https://www.belsentiero.com/shop>

Dining

One of the best ways in which to enjoy the great cuisine of the area is to dine at some of the local restaurants. The following are some of our favourites close to BelSentiero, although there are many more covering the full spectrum from simple trattorias to high-end fine dining establishments.

1. I Lecci

This traditional fine dining restaurant is situated in the forest on the road between us and Castiglione d'Orcia. The menu includes dishes that are traditional to the Val d'Orcia such as pici pasta and chingiale ragu as well as many others. A great place to dine under the direction of host Andrea.

2. *Ristorante e Pizzeria Flora*

Situated in our neighbouring village of Vivo d'Orcia Flora is a simple family run restaurant popular with the locals. Dishes are traditional to the area. In particular they make fantastic, thin crust, wood fired pizzas. Toppings are simple (complex toppings with lots of different ingredients are frowned upon in Italy) but always using the finest ingredients.

3. *Lo Spugnone*

Another traditional restaurant, Lo Spugnone is situated in Bagni San Filippo. The location is authentic and the staff, under the direction of Martha, very friendly, plus the food is tasty and portions filling.

4. *Cerchio delle Streghe*

Run by the passionate chef Luca, Cerchio as we call it (or in full the "The Circle of the Witches") is a great little restaurant in Castiglione d'Orcia. Their menu includes some of our firm favourites, such as Fiocchi di Neve (a light pasta filled with ricotta and topped with truffles) and Tagliata di Chianina (thinly sliced Chianina beef topped with the fat of Cinta Senese or rosemary and pepper).

5. *Dopolavoro*

Part of the La Foce estate, Dopolavoro (meaning After Work) is housed in the former community hall of the estate. Today it is run by owner/ chef Asia who has created a menu including traditional elements but also influenced by her international food travel experiences.

6. *il Silene*

Situated in a non-descript building in the tiny hamlet of Pescina outside Seggiano this restaurant is fine dining at its best. Run by passionate owner/ chef Roberto il Silene is a one star Michelin restaurant that surprises and delights at all levels. They also have a very extensive wine list. Perfect for that special occasion.



Festivals

An important part of la dolce vita (the sweet life) in Italy is enjoying life: having fun socialising with family and friends enjoying the moment and celebrating all that we have to be grateful for. A big part of celebrating life is wrapped up in the many different festivals that take place throughout the year and differ from place to place. These festivals can be religious but can also be related to historic events, or events related to the food or wine of a place, such as after the harvest. If food related then the festival will often include a *sagre*, which will typically mean having a large tent erected in the main piazza where you can go and eat lunch or dinner including dishes made from the food which is the subject of the festival.

The following are some of the important festivals that take place in the Val d'Orcia and which you may wish to attend if you are in the area at the time.

1. *Easter (normally in April)*

As a Catholic country Easter is celebrated throughout Italy. In particular Pienza, as a town built by a Pope, is worth visiting at this time, especially to see the *Processione degli Scalzi* on Good Friday.

2. *Orcia wine festival (end April)*

This festival celebrates the wines of the Orcia DOC and includes the opportunity for wine tastings and to enjoy dinner with the wine makers. The grand closing dinner in the San Quirico town hall with its frescoed ceilings is worth attending.

3. *Incontri in terra di Siena (July)*

This annual classical music festival is sponsored by the La Foce estate with different concerts held at different locations throughout the area. It brings some of the best musicians in their field to the Val d'Orcia.

4. *Ravioli festival (mid August)*

One of my favourite *sagre* (food festivals) this festival is a great opportunity to try the local handmade *pici* and *ravioli* pasta, accompanied by either a beef or *cingiale* ragu. Simple but delicious especially when eaten under the stars in the old town square in the middle of summer!

5. *Bravio della Botti (last Sunday in August)*

This is one of my favourite festivals and takes place in the hill town of Montepulciano, an important wine growing region. The festival includes stunning parades and flag throwing in traditional medieval dress. But the highlight of the festival is on the last day when each of the town's *contrade* (suburbs) fields a relay team that needs to roll a traditional wine barrel from the town gate up to the Piazza Grande at the very top of the town. The team that gets their wine barrel across the finishing line first wins. Anyone who has been to Montepulciano will appreciate what a feat this is! It's a great day with lots of cheering, festivities afterwards and the winning *contrade* parading around the town as heroes!

6. Chestnut festival (last Sunday in October)

Our local village of Campiglia d'Orcia is renowned for the quality of its chestnuts grown in its vicinity on the slopes of Mont Amiata. To celebrate the annual harvest on the last Sunday in October it hosts its *Festa della Maronne*. Again this is accompanied by lots of festivities and each regione (contrade or suburb) of the town putting on a theatrical performance. In addition it is possible to enjoy local dishes including dolce (desserts) made from chestnuts. A great start to autumn and the harvest festivals.



7. Truffle festival (mid November)

I'm a great lover of truffles of which there are two sorts, the black and the white. The black can be found most of the year round but the white are only available in autumn and only in three distinct areas within Italy. As a result they are substantially more expensive but also that much more tasty. In mid November San Giovanni d'Asso hosts its annual white truffle festival so if you enjoy this delicacy its a great place to learn more and try some dishes that include white truffles.

8. Olive oil festival (December)

As mentioned previously, the Val d'Orcia is a top olive oil producing area and so every December San Quirico organises an olive oil festival to celebrate the olive harvest and availability of the latest extra virgin olive oil.

9. Christmas eve (December)

If spending Christmas with us then there is nothing better than going to visit the festival of the bonfires in Abbadia San Salvatore on Christmas eve. The local bishop hosts a service in the main town square and after this the first bonfire in the square is lit. From there a procession takes place taking a torch lit from this main fire to each of the other squares in the town to light up their bonfires, uniting Christian and pagan symbolism.

If you would like to attend any of these festivals but need assistance then let us know. We have a number of short stay package options available that include accommodation to cater for guests who would like to visit and partake.

Activities

There are numerous different activities to engage in while staying with us at BelSentiero in the Val d'Orcia. The following list is not exhaustive but touches on some of the key ones but always feel free to ask us for assistance if you have something else in mind.

1. *General sight-seeing*

With the numerous historical medieval villages and towns, museums and great panoramas, the Val d'Orcia is a great place to simply drive around stopping along the way to visit the main sights and discover hidden gems. From BelSentiero it is possible to spend a number of days touring and engaging in general sightseeing, each day going out in a different direction in a loop to cover a different part of the region. Feel free to ask us for pointers.

2. *Cooking lessons*

With the food of the region being so fantastic you might want to engage in a cooking lesson to learn a few tips to take home with you. This is a particularly fun experience when with a group of family or friends. We can put you in touch with local Italian cooks that provide such lessons and who also speak excellent English. Lessons can be preceded by a truffle hunt if this is of interest.

3. *Wine tastings*

As mentioned there are numerous great wineries throughout the region from top end to smaller family run gems. As a result there are many opportunities to discover the different wines that the area has to offer.

4. *Farm visits*

With pecorino cheese being a popular product from the Val d'Orcia it is possible to visit farms where this cheese is made as well as other more diversified farms if you would like to understand where local products are sourced from.

5. *Walking (incl. Francigena)*

Quite popular with many of our guests is taking time out to enjoy walks through the various landscapes. This can be as simple as taking a walk to our local village of Campiglia d'Orcia and going up to the Rocca to enjoy the view, or longer walks through the forests of Mont Amiata or the hills and wheat fields of the valley. For the more serious walkers there is the Francigena pilgrim road which does not pass too far from us, so you can use us as a stop along the way.

6. *Running (Tuscany Crossing)*

Every May the Tuscany Crossing series of marathons (there are different distances you can participate in) takes place in the Val d'Orcia. So if running is your passion then this is something to consider and use us as a base for your participation.

7. *Cycling (e-biking)*

Very popular in the Val d'Orcia and Mont Amiata is cycling, both competitively (cycle races often pass through the valley) and for leisure with e-bikes. There are a number of businesses that now offer e-bike services where you can rent a bike from half a day through to a few days. So if you would like to e-bike and need assistance then let us know and we can direct you to some of the local service providers.

8. *Spa days*

The spa towns of Bagni San Filippo and Bagno Vignoni are very close to us at BelSentiero. Bagno Vignoni in particular is a good destination for a spa day with a number of the spa hotels there offering day passes for visitors who would like to use their facilities. The thermal pools in these hotels are typically around 38 degrees celsius (around 100 degrees fahrenheit). Services offered include massages.

BelSentiero

BelSentiero is a Tuscan farmhouse villa that has been lovingly transformed into a romantic Bed & Breakfast in the Val d'Orcia World Heritage area. Here we offer modern elegance and world-class hospitality in a traditional Tuscan setting. Situated on the slopes of Monte Amiata overlooking the rolling hills of the Val d'Orcia, you will experience the most panoramic views of the valley and Pienza. With our ideal location, we are the perfect base from which to explore the Val d'Orcia and southern Tuscany.

About your hosts

We are Jan and Renzo, the owners of BelSentiero and your hosts. Jan is an ex finance executive who has lived and worked in London, Brussels, Australia and South Africa and speaks English (mother tongue), Italian, Dutch and Afrikaans. Renzo owns the local village café (*Le Notti di Campiglia*) and speaks Italian, Spanish and English.



In our travels we discovered and fell in love with Tuscany. Wanting to move on from city life and get to know "la dolce vita" we decided to move to the Val d'Orcia in 2016 and established what is today BelSentiero ("the beautiful path").

This has been the stuff of dreams. Creating BelSentiero has been both trying and exhilarating. Trying in having to navigate the legendary bureaucracy that is Italy and exhilarating to be able to create a home in a place as beautiful as the Val d'Orcia (a World Heritage area).

We would love for you to come and stay with us and have the most unforgettable holiday experience. BelSentiero is not just about offering you a room for the night. Rather, BelSentiero is about experiences, a place of remarkable landscapes and beauty, and great food and wine. BelSentiero is a place where old friends reunite and new friends are made, a place where you can enjoy all the best that Italy and Tuscany have to offer, all while in the comfort of our luxury Tuscan villa.

We appreciate that modern life can be stressful and that your time is precious. We want you to enjoy your vacation in Tuscany as much as possible and therefore believe in personal service. Be it in helping you to compile your itinerary, organising a spa day, or making reservations at the local restaurants or wine estates, or just relaxing on the veranda enjoying the views with a glass of prosecco.

Stunning Facilities

We are an intimate B&B as we only have four guests' suites to ensure that we can offer you our best personal service. Each guest suite consists of a minimum of 24 square metres (258 square feet) and comes with an over-sized King bed complete with Egyptian cotton linen. All rooms have air-conditioning for the summer and heating for the winter, as well as a writing desk, mini-bar fridge, tea and coffee facilities, large sized wardrobe and individual en-suite bathroom. The bathrooms are stocked with quality toiletries and freshly laundered towels. Plus of course we have free high speed internet via wifi. The suites are comfortable and spacious befitting a quality destination.



BelSentiero is located in a fantastic position on the slopes of Mont Amiata overlooking the Val d'Orcia with a direct view onto Pienza. This you can enjoy from our large, 120 square metre (1290 square foot) covered veranda. The perfect space for the summer barbecue, functions and gatherings of family and friends. It is also where we serve breakfast in the warmer months. Next to the veranda we have a jacuzzi as well as a large infinity pool of 6 x 12 metres (20 x 40 feet) available for our guests to enjoy. So when staying with us be sure to enjoy an Aperol spritz or glass of wine by the pool looking over the valley.

Surrounding the villa are lush green lawns with hedging of rosemary and lavender. These are complemented by the lemons and geraniums in traditional terracotta vases, a style typical of the Tuscan countryside.



Indoors we have our dining area and lounge which is served by our large restaurant style kitchen. Breakfast is served in the dining room in winter when it is cooler outside. This space together with the kitchen is also available to guests when booking the entire villa. The downstairs area is tastefully decorated with a marble fireplace, chandeliers, curtains, walnut furniture and Designers Guild fabrics.

Why BelSentiero?

So, the question if you would like to visit the Val d'Orcia then is why stay at BelSentiero? The answer is because we are so much more than just a bed for the night. Yes, the rooms are comfortable and a notch above many others that you are likely to find in the area. But this is an area that both Renzo and I love and are truly passionate about ... an area that we uprooted our lives for by moving here and starting anew. It is a place of great beauty, history, food, wine and people, but also a place of great calm and serenity. An area where you can rediscover yourself and what it means to enjoy life. Above all this is what we would like to share with you at BelSentiero and help you discover when staying with us.

Package Options

For those guests who would like a more complete experience without the need to organise their own itinerary we offer a number of package options, including our Food & Wine Experiences, Short Stay Packages and Tailor-made options

1. *Food and Wine Experiences* (www.belsentiero.com/food-and-wine)

This option is a one-week all-inclusive package (other than for some external meals), using BelSentiero as your base. The focus is on the food and wine of the region and includes transfers to and from Rome Fiumicino airport, all accommodation, two days for cooking lessons with a fantastic Italian cook, two days to visit the wine regions of the Brunello and Montepulciano respectively and a day exploring the area around Pienza. Included is a traditional Tuscan barbecue on your last day on the veranda at BelSentiero.



2. *Short Stay Packages* (www.belsentiero.com/packages)

These include a number of different short stay packages of two or three nights focused on various activities such as wine tasting, cooking or spa-days to others that are related to specific events or festivals taking place in the area, such as for Easter, our local chestnut festival, truffle festival or Christmas. Perfect to incorporate as part of a broader itinerary if travelling through Italy or Europe and don't have too much time available.

3. *Tailor-made options*

If you have something specific in mind but need help to plan the itinerary, organise third parties and make the necessary bookings, we can assist you by putting together something tailor-made for your requirements. Just let us know what you are looking for and we will let you know what is possible and provide a costing based on our experience and from the relationships that we have in the valley.

A Final Word

I hope that you enjoyed reading this traveler's guide and that I have inspired you to come and visit the Val d'Orcia! Please do take a look at our website at <https://www.belsentiero.com>. I am looking forward to welcoming you to your home from home at BelSentiero and helping you to discover some of the hidden gems of Tuscany. And off course, if you have any questions, I would love to hear from you.

How to Contact us

You can contact us using the following:

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Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/belsentiero/>

TripAdviser:

https://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotel_Review-g2357672-d15508453-Reviews-BelSentiero_Estate_Country_House-Campiglia_d_Orcia_Castiglione_D_Orcia_Tuscany.html

