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At Home in Tuscany

By SUSAN ROWLAND;

OUR trips always involve a conflict between nature and civilization. My husband, Tony, is happiest on a remote island looking for mussels, and I prefer to be carried from one fabulous building to the next, while being fed labor-intensive meals I could never make myself. Common to us both is a desire to see plants, people, animals and art in situ. We are lucky to live in New York City where the world comes to us, but it arrives detached from its original place: meaningless, dispirited, deconsecrated. Where does it come from? Before it gets transplanted, assimilated, cooked and catalogued, what is it? We travel to find out.

What we wanted to find on this trip was the world we saw in "Painting in Renaissance Siena, 1420-1500," a show that gave us a winter of pleasure at the Metropolitan Museum of Art three years ago. A relatively small show, it drew many people for a new look at paintings that for me at least had been an obscure part of Art 105. My favorite artist here, and I was hardly alone, was the Master of the Osservanza. His "Life of St. Anthony" and "Passion Predella" pictured a vibrant and detailed contemporary environment embracing anachronistic biblical scenes in the foreground.

Because Osservanza's landscape of twisted trees, black hills and brightly colored buildings was unfamiliar to Tony and me, we decided to make a pilgrimage to Siena to find his world. We wanted to spend time in a house in the country rather than in hotels, but without chores and responsibilities. Our whole trip was arranged by a rental agent in San Francisco, Daniel Morneau. I first called him with a vague plan which he transformed into an itinerary that combined interesting places to stay in Florence and Rome with a central week of rural life near Siena. Many photographs, brochures, letters and phone calls between coasts went into our decisions, but Daniel was always ready to gossip and advise, as well as to make all financial arrangements for the house. So we were carefree when we set out from Florence in our rented Eurocar to find Osservanza.

Route 222 south of Impruneta is in Chianti country, a rolling, green, highly cultivated land marred only by billboards advertising vineyards and urging us to "Vendita Diretta," buy directly. It was about an hour's drive to Siena, not including our stop for lunch at Castellina, one of the hill towns en route. Following printed directions from the agency, we left the vineyards for the Siena ring road to the two-lane Arezzo Road. Once on the Arezzo Road we were among blackish brown hillocks topped with spindly trees and square yellow houses. These were the "dreary mud-covered hills . . . the source of the pigment burnt Sienna" that the faithful Blue Guide to Northern Italy described. Wonderful and strange that these sere fields and hills, plowed and stripped, rather than the verdant and cultivated vineyards, were Osservanza's choice to paint.

There was one misstep when we drove into what looked like a castle to our American eyes, but was only the carabinieri headquarters deep in the country. Two miles beyond that, on the same wooded dirt road, came a sudden clearing and a real castle, turreted, surrounded by green fields, a misty valley beyond and our own cottage in front of the walls of Montalto. Diana Coda Nunziante, the owner, greeted us speaking English, as

well she might be from San Francisco, where she met her Italian husband, Giovanni, at the University of California at Berkeley. She showed us our cottage, La Scuola, and gave us the essential information that the bread man would be arriving soon and to write our order, bianco or nero, on the list under the arch, and pay later. Also, if we wanted eggs, herbs, honey, olive oil, tomatoes or firewood, all from the farm, vendita diretta, write it down. Our daily chore.

Our cottage, big enough for only two, was the smallest of the various accommodations at the castle. Stone walled, brick floored, clean and old, it was charming. The kitchen, in a corner of the living room, opposite the fireplace, was like a galley on a small boat, and the furniture was summer-house minimal, but the bedroom had good reading lights, a big comfortable bed, and an amusing Murano light fixture hanging from the ceiling. There was plenty of hot water in the good shower and a washing machine that turned everything gray. I hung the clothes on a line in the private backyard, hiding my laundry shame. Tall windows had heavy wooden shutters that blocked out both light and the chug of the tractor starting for the fields at dawn.

We felt a part of the farm life which was what we wanted, but in the grander tower apartment, Vescovo, which has a separate entrance to a wing of the castle, five people could live a lord's life with a secluded terrace, antiques, piano, baronial fireplace and housekeeping services. For a bigger group this tower can be joined to the guardhouse apartment. There are two other houses within the castle walls and two out on the estate. Prices vary from about \$500 a week for La Scuola in low season to \$2,000 a week for Torre Vescovo in high season. Everyone can use the one tennis court and the 40-foot pool, which has a slight smell of basil from the nearby vegetable garden wafting over it. When we were there last fall, we rarely saw the few other guests, an Irish family and a German couple, but it must be lively in August. At the most, there can be 30 guests, usually two-thirds of whom are European.

That evening we did what we did every evening, walked around the thousand-acre farm among orchards, Etruscan walls, and stone buildings -- many abandoned -- swam in the pool and made a fire and dinner before collapsing after days of touring. The Tuscany nights were deep black except for star glow and silent after we turned off the tiny fridge, which made the only mechanical noise we could hear after dark.

Sometimes we rode around the farm on mares with a history. Familiar from paintings and statues everywhere in Italy, they are Ghibelline horses and were on the side of the Emperor against the Guelphs, who supported the Pope in the 12th century as Italy was emerging from the Holy Roman Empire. You can see them carrying kings through the snow in Sassetta's "Journey of the Magi" at the Metropolitan. These mares are in foal to a stallion from Arezzo where their ancestors pose in Piero della Francesca's great frescoes. Stocky, black and gentle, they were the only export from a town called Murga, in the south; therefore, they were known as murgese. Born to carry armored soldiers into battle, they are now bred in Tuscany for dressage. The procedure for riding at Montalto is simple: go to the tack room in the castle courtyard near the chapel for a saddle, take it to the woods by the barn and catch a horse. No running them while they are pregnant. Be careful which ones you get; they all look alike and come up affectionately, but two have never been ridden. Once we went to get them, but Diana's daughters had taken them on a fig picking expedition.

We had already found that laden fig tree, filled with fruit the color of the landscape, black, green and terra cotta. The figs were great to eat with sheep's cheese (pecorino), and prosciutto from the one-room grocery down the road by the carabinieri quarters. In fact, all the food from the farm and the markets in Siena and nearby towns was so good and fresh that we barely cooked in our little kitchen but just dribbled vintage olive oil on produce and cheese and ate it raw, which was a change from our restaurant lunches of Tuscan specialties like game, porcini and fagioli in fiasco (cooked in a stone bottle).

One afternoon we heard some of the convoluted history of the castle when Diana invited us for tea, which was strictly blue jeans, Lipton's and crockery in the dog-filled family living room. This is no snooty Henry James contessa from America. There are no pretensions at Montalto, although we were next to the great hall covered with frescoes and crossed pikes, and we looked over the valley where pickers were leaving the tobacco fields. The first castle here, now buried below where we sat, was built before the 11th century and became a fortress guarding the Sienese border against the bossy Florentines. Always tangled in the vicissitudes of Sienese politics, even though out of sight of the duomo, the isolated castle was exposed to wars and sieges and considered a hardship post. Diana told us legends of crimes of passion and politics. It's an ancient place and feels like it, almost as big as New York's Cloisters; the castle and farm were home to 150 people until the end of World War II.

The walled city of Siena is 20 minutes from the farm. It is easier to drive into than most of the towns we visited, but one day we went first to the Church of the Osservanza north of town, came in through Porta Ovale instead of the Porta San Marco and, after winding uphill through skinny medieval streets in first gear, found ourselves in the center of the Campo, a car-free zone. Siena is better for walking. We returned to the cathedral many times to admire the black and white stripes of the interior which is often seen in Sienese pictures, including Osservanza's "St. Anthony at Mass." From the duomo we looked out over the land and could understand the economic interdependence of city and castle.

It was disappointing but not surprising that we found most of the paintings we were looking for in Siena in a museum, the Pinacoteca, safe from the damp and thieves that chased them from their original sites. Only the Piero della Francesca paintings in Arezzo, an hour east of us on the hill road, and San Sepolcro, another half hour beyond that, lived up to our hopes of finding great paintings in their intended space. But within about an hour's radius there were many wonders we had not expected: cloisters, churches, gardens, and every wall and sculpture in the cathedral, not to forget pan forte and vin santo. We were even pleasantly surprised by the prices, which were no higher than home. The rate of exchange was 1,100 lire to a dollar, and lunch for two at Mugolone was usually \$63. Chianti cost the same in Chianti as on West Broadway, as did parmesan and Italian clothes. But English paperbacks were \$20, and museum admissions doubled to 8,000 lire on Oct. 1. We paid about \$500 a week for our cottage.

Montalto itself was the major work of art we found was a thousand years old and in situ. We experienced it as it was known in the Master of Osservanza's time. We rode down to the orchard and saw the branches heavy with green olives, just beginning to turn purple. We saw the grapes ready to pick, and we caught war horses in the woods. For a minute we not only saw the picture, we were part of it, little figures in the far right panel of an altarpiece, walking through a field near Siena. SIGNPOSTS FOR A RENTER

Renting

Our rental arrangements were made by Vacanza Bella, 2443 Fillmore Street, Suite 228, San Francisco, Calif. 94115; (415) 554-0234. The agency specializes in properties in Italy and handles many in Tuscany.

Montalto Castle is also represented by At Home Abroad, 405 East 56th Street, New York, N.Y. 10022; (212) 421-9165. This agency lists properties in several European countries, including Italy.

Visitors who want to make reservations at the castle from Europe can deal directly with the owner: Diana Coda Nunziante, Castello di Montalto, 53109 Castelnuovo Berardenga (SI), Italy; telephone, (577) 35675.

Restaurants

Prices are for lunch for two, with wine and mineral water, cheese and dessert.

Trattoria Antica la Torre, off Route 222 between Florence and Siena in the town of Castellina in Chianti; (577) 740236. We had a good Tuscan meal with roasts and potatoes in a paneled dining room where a wedding party was going on. About \$40.

Mariotti-da Mugolone, 8 Via dei Pellegrini, Siena; (577) 283235.

Like the best New York Tuscan restaurants, it had plain stucco walls, lace curtains, serious waiters and wonderful food. Fagioli in fiasco (Tuscan white beans cooked in a stone chianti bottle), porcini, fresh fruit, grilled meat and fish. About \$70.

Le Logge, Via del Porrione, Siena (between the Campo section and the Church of San Martino). Good food, a few tables in front outside, and crowded inside. Lively and friendly, not expensive, a little tearoomy.

Il Molino, Gaiole in Chianti (between Siena and the castle); (577) 747062.

We had a rich beef stew cooked with chianti, in the room where the old mill still stood. There was a big terrace overlooking the field. About \$35. Books

"Painting in Renaissance Siena: 1420-1500" (Christiansen, Kanter & Strehlke, catalogue for the show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988), available at the museum shop, at \$45, and in public libraries.

Blue Guide to Northern Italy, Norton, 1990; \$25.95. S. R.

Photos: Accommodations at the Castello di Montalto on a farm near Siena, left, include an apartment in the tower; the castle's chapel, right. The farm's stocky black horses can be ridden by guests. Diana Nunziante, the owner, in the castle courtyard. (pg. 8); Living room in a cottage at the Castello di Montalto. (Photographs by Stefano Amantini for The New York Times) Map of Tuscany showing location of Castello di Montalto