



The Tuscan Archipelago offers fantastic diving, snorkelling and other water sports adventures. FREDRIK BYE/ATA

Suspended from a safety harness clipped to a zip-line across a narrow gorge, I could be anywhere renowned for adventure travel: the Rockies, the jungles of Peru or the Tyrolean Alps. Anywhere, you might presume, but Tuscany, the Italian region synonymous with Renaissance art and architecture, rolling wheat fields, postcard-perfect hill-top vineyards and gastronomic treasures.

Which makes it all the more remarkable to find myself flying along zip-lines, inching up the rungs of a *via ferrata* and tight-rope walking high above the crystalline Lima River outside the commune of Bagni di Lucca, known since Etruscan and Roman times for its thermal springs. According to legend, a hungry dragon lurks here under the rocky river bed far below Canyon Park, Italy's most challenging high ropes course, waiting to devour the fallen. And the doors to hell are hidden beneath the Lima's frothing white water. I dare not look below as I cling to the sheer rock face.

In her travel memoir *Under the Tuscan Sun*, author Frances Mayes wrote that "Life offers you a thousand chances ... all you have to do is take one." For adrenalin junkies and fresh-air fiends, an active Tuscan vacation offers many such chances of a lifetime. With famously picturesque landscapes ranging from the rugged Apennine Alps to Chianti's emerald hills, this region so rich in culture and history is only now beginning to appear on the adventure travel map.

Here, active travellers can ride horses with butters, the original cowboys of the southern Maremma coastal marshland who introduced their equestrian and ranching skills to the United States in the 1900s. They can heli-hike from the Apennine mountains to the grasslands of the Pratomagno, or go canyoning or rafting in Appennino Tosco-Emiliano National Park, part of the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves. They can strap into a tandem paraglider and soar over Garfagnana, a lushly forested, mountainous part of northwestern Tuscany that also offers superb trekking and mountain biking.

But there may be nowhere better to get your cycling fix than the rolling hill country of Chianti. The classic Tuscan landscapes of pastured lands, shimmering wheat fields, vineyards and olive groves unfold like the pages of a tourist brochure as you pedal along bucolic Strade Bianche back roads, past renovated stone farmhouses,

medieval castles and sleepy hilltop villages offering stupendous views.

On a thigh-burning 40-kilometre guided cycle tour of the Chianti countryside near Florence, I tackle nearly a thousand metres of steep ascents and descents along the winding Via del Castello San Polo route. In the town of Radda, midway between Florence and Siena, we break for mid-morning cappuccino and biscotti, then ride on to Castello di Brolio, a magnificent castle overlooking the village of Gaiole, where Chianti wine was first invented. Home to the Bicasoli family for nearly 800 years, Castello di Brolio was often besieged during the endless wars between Siena and Florence. With its panoramic views of the Chianti countryside, this medieval architectural masterpiece is the perfect setting

for a celebratory wine tasting.

Still more active options can be found off the coast of Tuscany in the Tyrrhenian Sea. A favourite among trekkers is the island of Giglio — once an Etruscan, later Roman military outpost (and perhaps most famously the site of the 2007 Costa Concordia cruise ship grounding incident). After exploring Giglio Castello, its labyrinthine mountaintop fortress, I check out the ancient lighthouse of Vaccarecce, the inspiration for "the lovers' lighthouse" in Federico Moezzi's bestselling novel, *Scusa ma ti chiamo amore*. Next, I trek past settlements that predate Julius Caesar, following ancient dirt and stone-paved mule tracks across oak forests and over sun-baked high plains covered in Mediterranean *macchia* shrubs, olive groves and wind-

sculpted granite outcrops.

My destination is a promontory at the extreme southern part of Giglio Island called Punta del Capel Rosso, one of the wildest and most remote corners of southwestern Tuscany. Overlooking it is a 60-metre-high white-and-red stone lighthouse built in 1883. Its restaurant serves Giglio specialties such as *coniglio alla cacciatora*, *cacciucco* and *palmita alla gigliese*, and its spartan hostel rooms offer marvellous views across the sapphire water to the neighbouring island of Montecristo.

Giglio is part of the Tuscan Archipelago, a string of islands between the Ligurian and Tyrrhenian Seas that includes Elba, where Napoleon was exiled in 1814. For solitude seekers, Elba's Robinson Crusoe siren call is irresistible. Shaped like a fish's body with its bony head pointed toward Corsica and its tail at the Tuscan coastline, the island's jagged spine drops off precipitously toward a series of rocky shorelines containing crescent beaches — many only accessible from the sea — where even today few visitors venture.

Still relatively unspoiled, Elba is fast becoming a paradise for kayakers, sailors, snorkellers, deep-sea fishers and scuba divers searching for ancient shipwrecks amid exotic undersea life such as *gorgonian* fans, rare red coral, *mony* eels, *scallops* and *sunfish*. Hiking is also increasingly popular on the island's dry western half, with its white sand, black volcanic rock and tide-polished stone beaches hidden beneath granite cliffs. As are multicourse feasts such as the one I enjoy at Experience Relais Il Termine, a luxury villa set in a protected woodland boasting breathtaking views of the Gulf of Cavo. I dine on fresh red tuna tartare, cuttlefish dumplings and spaghetti with squid paired with wines from the Etruscan coast.

And therein lies perhaps the best perk of working up a sweat in Tuscany: Along with thrills, you're also guaranteed legendary cuisine, world-class wines and home-style hospitality. The cherry on top of the gelato is a marvellous sense of history, knowing that like-minded adventurers have taken these same roads less travelled since the Etruscans were painting their urns.

The writer travelled as a guest of the Adventure Travel Trade Association. It did not review or approve this article.

Special to The Globe and Mail

Adventures under the Tuscan sun

In Tuscany, Mark Sissons discovers a wilder side to Italy's photogenic region that is starting to attract more active travellers and thrill seekers



Hundreds of coloured flying umbrella hang over the Tuscan art town of Pietrasanta. MARK SISSONS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

YOUR TURN

Florence and Pisa are the jumping-off points for most Tuscan adventures. Both have frequent connections with European hub cities such as London and Frankfurt.

WHEN TO GO

Fall and spring, when the crowds are smaller, the temperatures cooler and the prices cheaper, are the prime seasons for adventure and active travel in Tuscany.

WHERE TO STAY

From humble home stays to luxurious villas, Tuscany is packed with accommodation options. Booking.com is a great source of more affordable alternatives to pricey hotels in tourist centres such as Florence and Siena. Else-

where, recommended hotels include Giglio Island's Hotel Castello Monticello (hotelcastellomonticello.com), Bagni di Pisa Palace and Spa (bagnidipisa.com) near Pisa, Obetello's Hotel San Biagio Relais (santobiagiorelais.com), Hotel Terre di Casole (hoteltterredicasole.it) in Casole d'Elsa and Elba's Experience Relais Il Termine (iltermineelba.com)

WHAT TO DO

Chianti cycling tours: fiesoleBike.it
Trekking in Garfagnana: www.turismo.garfagnana.eu/en.html
Lima River high ropes course: canyonpark.it
Horseback riding, trekking, paragliding, rafting and mountain biking: bagnidiluccaventura.it



Tuscany is famous for cycling, especially in the hilly region of Chianti between Florence and Siena. FREDRIK BYE/ATA