

## *In Tuscany and Umbria With OAT*

Overseas Adventure Travel's *Tuscany and Umbria: Rustic Beauty in the Italian Heartland* is a wonderful three week introduction to northern Italy. This part of the country is filled with small towns containing serpentine streets begging to be explored. I love these gorgeous Tuscan hill-towns, the walled cities, the comfortable family-run hotels, often in historic buildings, the opportunity for new experiences, and the chance to meet interesting people like a Benedictine monk in the small town of Norcia, and a librarian/guide in Pittigliano who closes up her library to guide groups thru her walled town.

I don't think any other company has such an all-encompassing itinerary. The largest towns we visit are Florence and Siena - each just for the day. The rest of the time is spent in the beautiful countryside visiting villages, hill-towns, a school, private villas, wineries, vineyards, old monasteries, even a quarry and a farm.

This itinerary had lots of "experiences": going truffle hunting with trained sniffer dogs; seeing how cheese and hams are cured, learning about the intricacies of balsamic vinegar, a cooking experience, wine tasting, a bike ride and lovely walks.



What a day -- we follow trained dogs as they sniff out truffles, then enjoy fresh truffles over scrambled eggs right in the forest. And for those who don't know what a truffle is (like me!), it is a fungus that grows on the roots of trees. They don't look very appealing (see upper right), but they are yummy.



We have a series of buses and drivers. From a nine passenger mini-van on the pre-trip to a comfortable twenty-five seater bus for a large portion of the main trip. We love the larger bus as anyone who wants can have a double seat. And Mauro not only drives our favorite bus, he is our favorite driver - helpful, charming and cute too.

There are some surprises on this trip -- I had thought Italy would be more chaotic, but it is so organized with trains that run on time, people who drive carefully, wonderful roads with good signage and laws that people adhere to. Even food production is highly regulated and items like Parma Ham (which we buy as Prosciutto di Parma) must come from farms in the province of Parma and from animals which have been fed a special diet; Parmigiano Reggiano cheese can only be made from milk from a certain breed of cow, grazing in certain pastures in the Reggio Emilia province. It must be cooked a certain way and aged for at least 12 months before it is inspected for flavor and texture. Only after it passes inspection and the rind sports an official stamp, can it be sold as Parmigiano Reggiano cheese.

## SOME HIGHLIGHTS

### Parma -- (Day 4)

I think the nicest few hours I spend in Parma were with Vickie, who I met on the *Culture Capitals of Spain* trip a year ago, are at the Baptistry in Parma. That afternoon, our formal touring had finished for the day and rather than walk the mile or so back to the hotel, then return to the same area for dinner, Vickie and I decide to stay in the center of town. We walk around a bit, then decide to visit the Baptistry. What a nice surprise, we are practically the only people there, so decide to sit awhile surrounded by 12th century frescoes and take it all in. We probably sat for two hours, and are finally ushered out by the woman in the ticket office at closing time. But spending so much time in the building, we have time for a good look at the frescoes and discovered some interesting things.



The man in this Baptistry fresco sports an early Christian sign for the expulsion of demons and removal of obstacles like sickness or negative thoughts. More recently it is more known as a way to ward off bad luck or the evil eye, i.e. the "Sign of the Horns"

Or is he an early University of Texas fan?



These Parma Hams are curing for Prince Charles! Other hams were being readied for Prince Albert of Monaco as well as famous chefs.



What would Dan Brown have made of this fresco? Is Jesus giving Mary Magdalene a ring???

**Lucca -- (Day 7)** Have you been there? Imagine Florence without museums or crowds, just a tangle of medieval streets, flanked by honey-brown limestone buildings and lined with enticing, boutique-style stores. Then surround the town with a 20ft high medieval wall so wide 15 Roman soldiers could stand abreast on top to march around its two mile circumference. This is Lucca. Our hotel is a 4-star property just inside the wall. The building had been a “hospital” (providing overnight hospitality for pilgrims on their way to Rome) in the 16th century, and since refurbishment is the 4-star San Luca Palace Hotel.



The lovely old stores of Lucca are little jewels. One of the most picturesque is Carli Jewelry which has been in business since 1655. Their store on Via Fillungo dates to 1831, Browsers are welcome!

## I'm B-A-A-C-K! ----- A return to Florence (Day 9)

A day trip to Florence is part of our itinerary and I was looking forward to it very much. We have a walking tour by a local guide, then are let loose for 4 hours. Luca (our main guide) made reservations for the Uffizi Museum for those who want to visit. This is the #1 thing to do in Florence and five people take advantage of it.

Since Vickie is reading *Inferno* by Dan Brown I give her a tour of the places mentioned in the book and suggests she take pictures of the Ponte Vecchio, the Grotto at Pitti Palace, the windows of the Vasari Corridor and of the statue of Cosimo de Medici's favorite court dwarf, Braccio di Bartolo aka. Morgante, riding a turtle. We also go by Santa Felicita Church, which regrettably is not open.

Then we set out to the Bargello Museum but it is already closed. Winter hours, I guess. So we make our way past the Duomo (Santa Maria del Fiore Church) and notice a man and his son coming out of the Baptistry..... which is supposedly closed for renovation. But luckily for us ..... it opened for a few hours this afternoon!



With Vickie on the Ponte Vecchio

We quickly buy tickets and are immediately overwhelmed by the immensity and beauty of this 10th century building. Frescoes as high as the eye can see, inlaid marble floors, each section in a different, intricate pattern and three statues by Donatello (am not sure what they are doing here, except for safekeeping) surround us. We spend about a half-hour, then continue thru San Lorenzo Market (purse-heaven) to the Cellai Hotel to pick up the duffel left in their care three weeks earlier.

The receptionist remembers me and even looks happy to see me! It is wonderful to be back and Vickie and I have a coke in one of their beautiful lobby rooms. Soon it's time to return to Signoria Square and meet up with the group by 4:45. It is bitter-sweet to have this additional taste of Florence and it left me, as usual, wanting more.

## Holy Moly -- its Pontremoli! (Day 10)

The towns we visit are precious. Often we are the only non-residents wandering about. We stop in Pontremoli, a lovely medieval town for a circular walk that begins in the main plaza, then crosses the Verde River to the other side and back again on another bridge, followed by lunch. There is an ancient old coffee shop called Café Degli Svizzeri which has been on the same corner since 1842. The setting and clients are straight out of a Fellini movie. I observe three women with strong features, lots of character and expressive non-stop voices, who I dub "the Fellini Sisters," They are just finishing their morning espresso and are off to work. During our "free time" I wander into a trendy boutique called Moda Strano, and guess who runs it -- the three "Fellini Sisters"! They have beautiful things including a nice assortment of vintage jewelry. Of course, temptation wins, and I come home with a pair of vintage amber earrings, set in silver. The earrings polished beautifully. As luck would have it, I find a complimentary designed necklace on our tour of the Carrara marble quarries



the next day. Some things are just meant to be.

Pontremoli is typical of the hill towns we visit. An entrance gate, winding, medieval streets and interesting architecture.

### **We have a Marble-ous day (Day 11)**

A visit to a quarry doesn't sound that exciting, but when it is the quarry where Michelangelo selected his milky-white, high quality marble, it makes a big difference. The drive is about an hour from Lucca, thru the Tuscan countryside. Our group moves from our mini-bus into two 4x4's to take us up a steep mountainside lined with slippery marble scree and mud - sometimes coming head-on with huge trucks hauling 20 to 30 ton marble blocks. There is amazing technology in use here. Some mining takes place inside the mountains where they excavate from the interior out and we actually drive into a huge cavern to see the process.

We make several stops to watch men quarry, cut and move the marble blocks. They all know our guide (whose name I can't remember) and greet her warmly.



There are numerous quarries throughout these mountains of white marble. We visit several.



See why you need a 4X4 to visit the quarries? These roads are brutal! Here I am next to one of the smaller marble blocks left by the side of the road.

## **The Villa Lecchi (Day 12)**

All right - I'd been traveling for just about five weeks by now, and decide it's time to take a vacation from my vacation. I pick a day when the group is scheduled for a morning wine tasting and a home-hosted lunch. We are staying at the Villa Lecchi, a family run hotel in the Chianti region. It is a gorgeous, crisp, sunny day and I spend the morning on the wide terrace reading and relaxing in front of a 200 degree view of the Tuscan hills. I can see the towers of San Gimignano and countless little villages surrounded by vineyards and olive groves.

This villa is amazing. Its foundations date from the 1500's and the original property had over 3000 acres. Over the years, acreage was sold, but it is still a hefty 300 acres. The main house has been turned into a 20 room hotel, and there are 15 other rooms in two additional buildings. Frescoes and hand painted copies of original Renaissance artwork hang on the walls of the main building. The family that owns this hotel ranks among the most hospitable people I have ever met.

I soon find there is a much different atmosphere around the house after the group leaves. The property becomes the family's own again. Grandma comes by walking her dog; grandpa takes his morning constitutional around the property, cane in hand. Around noon, other family members start to arrive bringing dishes for the family's Sunday lunch.

Laura, the owner and manager, gave us a tour of the cellars yesterday -- the original cistern is still there, now providing water for the gardens and the toilets. There is a spa, a cellar and a secret tunnel where, during WWII, Jews were hidden. We could only go so far in the tunnel, as it has deteriorated, but Laura tells us it exits quite a distance from the villa in the hills below

Laura and her family bought the property in the 1960's. It had laid neglected for years, and didn't even have a roof. The restoration they have done is wonderful and it is a treat to stay here. Food is excellent too!

Trevi in the morning mist (right) and in all its glory (below). Exploring this town is one of the best experiences of the trip. It is small, but has everything -- history, architecture, beautiful churches, outstanding views, a great hotel and nice people.



## Trevi -- Day 16

The Town of Trevi is our very own Brigadoon. In the mornings and evenings, it is shrouded in fog, with only the highest point and the spire of the 17th century Romanesque church of Sant' Emiliano poking thru. It is lovely town to walk around and make discoveries: the 14th century Church of San Francisco (now secularized) where the good ladies of the church were setting up a children's art exhibit, we wander thru gothic archways, walk medieval ramparts, see antique stores (regrettably not open), and go thru a contemporary art museum. Where we can, Vickie and I peek in thru wooden doors of storage areas and gates to see what is on the other side. This is a town where you want to wander and make discoveries of your own. And its Antica Dimora Alla Rocca Hotel is one of my favorites of the trip.

## **FOOD** -- Eat and be Happy or I Can't Believe I Ate the Whole Thing

Granted.... maybe French is considered the worlds best cuisine, but Italian surely is second. And I don't mean doughy spaghetti noodles smothered in red-sauce. We enjoy incredible northern Italian dishes made with fresh ingredients and perfectly seasoned. I'm sorry to say that Weight Watchers would not do well here

We generally waddled out of restaurants groaning over our distended tummies. But I don't begrudge even an ounce of the weight gained on this trip (4.4 lbs!)

Photo by Frieda



Typical antipasto -- this is for one person!  
Photo by Frieda

Most of our meals are included and menus are wonderfully varied. A true Italian meal has several courses:

1. Antipasto (appetizer)
2. Primo (usually a pasta or sometimes a rice dish)
3. Secundo (meat or fish course)
4. Dolce - dessert
5. espresso or a "Caffe Americano"



Some of the more interesting items we try are wild boar stew (at our farmhouse lunch), vegetable lasagna accompanied by a terrific green salad (Pittigliano), and condiments such as fresh truffles, 25 year old Balsamic vinegar (at Villa Blanca with the Biancardi family [www.acetaivillabianca.com](http://www.acetaivillabianca.com)), various varieties of olive oil, the truly wonderful and pungent Parmigiano Reggiano cheese, and strips of lard (not a typo) served on toast. These strips of pure fat come from the upper back of the pig and are considered quite a delicacy.



Special note: if you scroll down a bit at <http://www.acetaivillabianca.com/es/category/news/> to the photo titled 1...2...3! you will see the photo I took of Claudio, Emilio and Irene, owners of the Villa Blanca estate. This was an absolutely exquisite afternoon learning about balsamic vinegar (the best is aged 25+ years!) and a fabulous lunch in the attic of their villa surrounded by barrels of the quietly ageing vinegar as well as family antiques. And if you are a fan of *Breaking Bad* be sure to look at a very clever parody. "Breaking Balsamic, which was filmed on their estate: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y10HjdU4OY>

And woe to anyone who orders a cappuccino after 11am! The barista rolls his/her eyes as only espresso is served afternoons and evenings. We soon learn to order "un Caffè Americano," a watered-down espresso, and to ask for milk.

## CONCLUSION

So, what did I bring home? I tried not to buy a whole lot of stuff -- well, some jewelry, but I was weak. I did buy olive oil pressed from olive trees from the estate belonging to the manager of the Antica Dimora hotel in Trevi; chocolate truffles from Lucca (for Joe); jars of jam from the vocational school we visited; there are a few other items, and in general, I came home a flying delicatessen.

Five weeks ago, I arrived in Florence with two duffles full of clothes (many to wear then throw out), books, files and the necessities of life. Now, on the eve of returning home I have two duffles, an additional small duffle, a carry-on, an additional carry-bag and an extra purse. Where did all this stuff come from? I've thrown away clothes, given away books and files, and have gotten rid of all the extraneous paper that collects on a trip. Thank goodness for United's generous baggage allowance. I used every ounce.

When people asked me how I chose places to visit (in the days I was going to places like India, Papua New Guinea, Borneo, etc) I would say I am saving Europe for when I get old. Well, that time has come. I am so taken by Italy, its art, its food, its culture and its ease in getting around, that I crossed off a visit to the Lao Elephant Festival and the HaGuiang Province of northern Vietnam and will substitute a return to Italy. I also removed a proposed India trip next December from my list as I never want to get home so close to Christmas again!

And Finally, my personal favorites on this OAT trip:

**Best Hotel:** Most hotels were a fairly high standard. My favorites are Villa Lecchi in Poggibonsi for its hospitality and the Antica Dimora Alla Rocca Hotel in Trevi for its palatial rooms. (finally got a good room!)

**Most fun hotel to stay in:** Hotel Villa Lecchi . This is a huge estate-house lovingly converted to a hotel and family run. My first room was horrible, but thankfully the owner/manger Laura opened up a room on the third floor (I was the only one on this floor) for me. And she was kind enough to do my laundry for free too.

**Best Local Guide:** Our local guides are in general, good. My favorite is Elizabet, the town librarian, who guided us in Pitigliano. At the end of our tour, she opened up her library (located in an old Palace) so we could see it. It is lovely.



This is the main building of the Antica Dimora Alla Rocca Hotel. Our rooms were in the annex, but just as lovely as those in the main building.



Four librarians in a row! l to r: me, Elizabet (guide in Pitigliano), Barb and Patty (fellow travelers). It is always a treat to travel with book-people.



Why didn't I buy this great apron sporting Botticelli's Venus when I had the chance in Florence? Next time!  
Photo by Vickie

Best Shopping Overall: Florence! Gorgeous stores, mostly high end and great for window shopping. But if you want to buy, you can't beat San Lorenzo Market where you bargain to the death.

Best Shopping Experience: Pontremoli with the "Fellini Sisters" and their Moda Strano boutique.

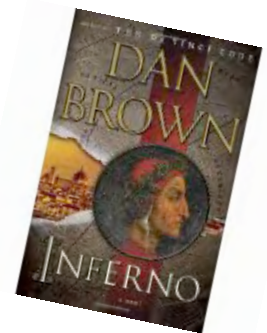
Best Restaurant: Ristorante da Remo in Montereccioni - with its specialty of the house = Florentine Steak.

Museum I'm most grateful for: The Ferragamo Museum in Florence. Those over 65 get in free! And you can sit in their nice squishy leather chairs and watch a movie on the history of shoes and rest. Their bathrooms are beautiful and elegant.



Best Guidebook to have: Rick Steves. Florence and Tuscany. It contained everything I needed to know. And.... no, you can't borrow my autographed copy!

Best Fiction Book to Bring: Dan Brown. *Inferno* You can follow Robert Langdon as he tries to save the world all the while tromping thru the historic areas and museums of Florence, Venice and (spoiler alert) Istanbul.



## REVIEWS OF HOTELS AND RESTAURANTS I POSTED ON TRIP ADVISOR

Sweet Dreams --My TripAdvisor Reviews of the OAT Hotels

### **Bologna: Porta San Mamolo Hotel**

This is a lovely property just inside the "city walls" (which no longer exist) of the city. It is walking distance from just about everything you would want to see in Bologna. I had room 206 which was very comfortable, with good lighting. There are about 6 wooden steps to reach the room, so it may not be good for someone with mobility issues.

Staff is friendly and helpful and the breakfast is excellent. Wi fi was free and fast. Of special note, the hotel had excellent, new editions of guidebooks for guests can use.

I came in from the train station, and the taxi fare was 10euro.

### **Parma: Grand Hotel de la Ville**

This is a new (10 years old) hotel, is contemporary in decor, fresh, clean and well-kept. The location is good, next to a small shopping mall and large supermarket. It is about a 15 min. walk to the main Plaza.

I had room 329 and stayed three nights. Based on the schematic on the door, all the rooms on this floor were pretty much alike in size.

The bed linens were excellent and were changed every day. It was wonderful to slip into the crisp sheets each night.

Of special note, the bathroom had the best magnifying mirror I have ever encountered in a hotel -- at least 20x. It was a pleasure to use! Breakfast was excellent.

### **Lucca: San Luca Palace Hotel**

This hotel is just 7 years old. But the building served as a hospital (resting place) for pilgrims on their way to Rome in the 16,17 and 18th centuries. It is just inside one of the entrances to the walled city and walking distance from the main square. Actually, everything within the walls is walking distance from the main square!

I had room #20 and it was large, comfortable with lovely furnishings including exquisite draperies (and matching bedspread) and a chandelier. I especially liked the large bath towels. The TV has a huge amount of channels and CNN, BBC, CNBC and Bloomberg are in the 860 to 865 range.

Breakfast is excellent with a wide variety of items and certainly something for everyone.

The shower had great water pressure and large shower stall with ample room for amenities.

The very minor negative is that it is the room closest to the elevator, so there might be some hall noise at night. It was not a problem the three nights I was there.

The staff is friendly and helpful. This is a lovely place to stay while visiting Lucca.

### **Poggibonsi: Hotel Villa Lecchi**

I don't think you could stay at a more friendly and hospitable hotel than the Villa Lecchi. Family run, it has an excellent hotel manager (Laura), an excellent chef (her husband), cooks (mom and sister) and all-around helpers and technical assistance (sons). They are kind and gracious people.

This property has been a labor of love for the family. When they purchased the 18th century property some years ago, it had been neglected for over 10 years and didn't even have a roof.

Lets Cook! During ooking class at the Villa Lecchi, Chiyoko and I work on making strips of pasta lunga for this night's dinner.

Photo by Frieda



They have worked hard to bring it up to hotel code. Frescoes have been restored, swimming pool and indoor spa area have been added, and rooms retrofitted to make them suitable for hotel guests. I had the feeling of old-world-Italy as I walked around.

The rooms are comfortable with sparkling clean bathrooms. Consider the bathroom amenities samples as larger sizes are available at reception and in specialty shops. The family owns olive groves which supply the oils for the products. I especially liked the color-coordinated bed linens with details that matched the draperies, coverlet and even lampshade. Be aware that each room has a different configuration and is a different size. I had room #31, on the top floor, with a view of the Tuscan countryside. It faced the front of the hotel. It was average size and I saw both smaller and larger rooms throughout the hotel. It would be worth looking at several rooms as well as their views before accepting one.

Breakfast is excellent with lots of protein available: eggs, cheese, sausages, ham, yogurt, muscli There are home-made jellies and a lovely assortment of cakes. There is even breakfast pizza available.

As far as technical issues: the TV has several hundred channels (many languages available) , including BBC and CNN. The wi-fi (free) was just about the best I experienced in my five weeks in Italy. There was even good reception outside on the terrace.

This is the kind of place where you want to spend a little time. Don't shortchange yourself by staying just one night. Take time to sit on the terrace and enjoy the views. You can walk thru the little village (takes just a few minutes) and visit the church. I loved its address -- #1 Lecchi.

Stay several nights, enjoy the fine hospitality, the good meals, take time and walk the little trails around the property. Day trips to Siena, San Galgano, San Gimignano, Pienza, and hill-towns such as Monteriggioni etc. are easily possible.

### **Pienza: Piccolo Hotel La Valle**



The point of staying at this hotel is to have a view of the countryside. Best rooms for this are on the second level, Rooms 202, 220, 218, 216. View rooms on the ground floor are: 106, 108, 110,

Unfortunately I had Room 214, though it was a nice corner room, it faced someones back yard. And when I asked at reception to change, was shown a much lower quality room, and when I decided to stay in room 214, was laughed at.

The best part about our stay in Pienza is walking around in the walled medieval city.

I did not find reception staff friendly or helpful.

Good points to the hotel:

1. My TV had four (not a typo) channels, including CNN
2. The hangers can be removed from the closet
3. location is good - about 2 blocks from one of the entrances to the old city. Be aware that there is poor street lighting and there are no sidewalks between the hotel and the closest entrance to the old city. Carry a flashlight if you go out at night.
4. free wi-fi, but in lobby only

Negatives

1. Though the one bath towel provided was large, it smelled moldy - as if it might have been folded and stored before it was completely dry. It was the same each day when towels were replaced.
2. electricity in the wall socket (by the bed) was unstable and could not charge camera or laptop batteries. It took awhile to discover this.
3. the hotel uses fragrance sticks in the rooms -- I think to mask the moldy smells.
4. housekeeping leaves the windows wide open after cleaning. This is OK on the second level, but makes rooms on the first level too accessible to outsiders. This could be a problem.

The rate sheet on the back of the door to my room indicated the rooms cost 105 euro a night. I think this is too high to pay for a non-view room.

I found this hotel rather joyless. In five weeks of travels in Italy, it was my least favorite.

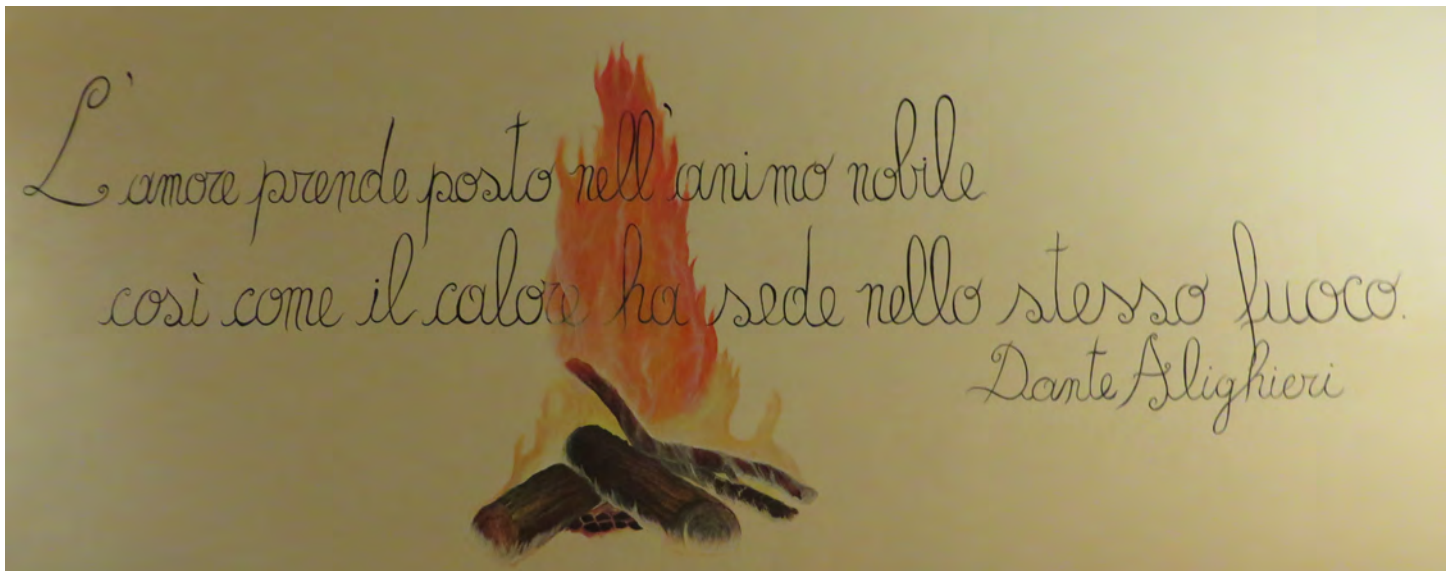
### **Trevi: Antica Dimora Alla Rocca Hotel**

Stay here! First of all, the medieval town of Trevi is a delight to walk around -- very atmospheric and beautiful. There are hidden treasures at every turn, such as a church with old frescoes, a contemporary art museum and enough nooks and crannies to keep you interested for at least an hours walk. There is a walking tour brochure available, but it is in Italian.

The hotel is magnificent. Not only for the quality of the room, but for the hospitality and kindness offered. The managers, Daniel, Marco and the lovely Valentina work hard to make sure all guests have a good experience. I was in Room 405 in the annex (smaller palazzo across the lane from the large, main 17th century palazzo) and it was perfect -- large, comfortable, with access to a (shared) balcony overlooking the pool. Unfortunately since it was early December, it was too cool to use the balcony.

The bathroom was the nicest I had in five weeks of travel in Italy. The amenities were lovely and the magnification mirror (at least 20x) was great.

The TV had numerous stations in English and the wi-fi was excellent (and free).



Each room in the hotel has a quote from Shakespeare or another classic writer painted on the wall. The quote in my room was from Dante. I have no idea what it says.

The breakfast (offered in the main building) is excellent and in addition to the buffet, the waiters offer fresh juice, and do their best to tempt you with a unique cake or strudel.

We used Trevi as a base to visit the Norcia Valley, go truffle-hunting in the countryside, and visit Assisi and stayed three nights. This hotel was an excellent experience and I would stay here again in a heartbeat.

### **Outskirts of Rome - for airport: Borgo di Tragliata**

I was on a group tour and had just one night here. It is about 30 minutes from Rome Airport. There must be better rooms as this hotel is generally well-rated, but our group was in a section that had Wisconsin summer-camp-type rooms. I had room #49 -- Plywood ceiling, basic furniture, and because it was in early December, very cold. I had to ask reception to adjust the heat, and I also turned the towel-warmer in the bathroom on high to heat that area a little more. The front door was warped so I had to pull hard to open it and slam it to close it. No in-room wi-fi, but it is available in the bar and reception area.

But our dinner was wonderful. It was in a private room, was several courses and excellent. I think food is where this hotel excels.

Unfortunately I saw the hotel only at night and the room was acceptable for one night.

## **RESTAURANTS**

My TripAdvisor Reviews of Restaurants on the OAT trip

### **Parma: Trattoria Salumeria Sorelle Picchi**

Very close to the main square, friendly service, and excellent food. Be sure to look at the room decorated in a music theme -- very unique. We had a "tasting menu" of typical foods from Parma, the most memorable was three kinds of ravioli, the tastes of which complimented each other. There was veal sliced very thin with a kind of stuffing - hard to describe, but very delicious.

It is a large restaurant, with two entrances. There is also outside seating.

### **Parma: T- Bone Station** (with small group, on our own)

Good food but .... bad service and bad attitude. Three of us were looking forward to eating dinner here as we had heard their hamburgers were good. They were. But staff attitude was so bad that even though we had two more opportunities to eat here, we went elsewhere. This is what happened: though we were the first ones in the restaurant when it opened at 7:30, we were not allowed to choose where we wanted to sit; we asked for separate checks, we were given one check; then when we asked again, the check was just split in three equal ways; cashier refused to break down a 20euro note so that we could pay separately.

Strange way to run a restaurant where hospitality should be a feature.

### **Lucca: Buca d'Sant Antonio**

The restaurant dates to the late 1700's. It is just off the main walking street. Very friendly and welcoming staff. I was with a group and we ate downstairs. I think eating on the main level would be preferable. We had a set menu and the food was excellent. I especially liked their "typical bean soup" (very hearty), and the ricotta cheese and leeks pie.

Service is very friendly and the setting is atmospheric.

### **Ravenna: Ristorante La Gardela**

Walking distance from the main square. Our guide ordered a "salad" plate with crudite and a soft cheese. It was excellent. On the obligatory pasta, I thought the sauce was skimpy. Lots of locals were eating here.

The mosaics and churches in Ravenna are magnificent and are important enough to be designated a UNESCO World Heritage site.





## Pitigliano: Hosteria del Ceccittino



Clean, bright, very welcoming and hospitable restaurant. I was with a group and had a set menu. Their “green salad” is wonderful as is their vegetable/zucchini lasagna.

Finally, a salad as part of our meal!  
The one in Pitigliano came with lot of fresh greens and buffalo mozzarella.

Photo by Frieda

## Monteregioni : Ristorante da Remo (not listed on trip advisor)

The restaurant is on the main square. Their specialty is florentine steak, which is excellent, tender and delicious. Be forewarned that the Italian “medium” is close to our rare. We also had an appetizer plate consisting of a liver pate, an eggplant soufflé and a brushetta. It was very good. Go easy on the pasta so you can enjoy the hefty portions of the steak.

## Monticciello : Restaurant La Porta (not listed in trip advisor)

Gorgeous little hill-town, very walkable. The food and hospitality was excellent at this restaurant. We had a hearty Tuscan soup (heavy on vegetables and white beans), followed by a kind of stew of very tender beef accompanied by a spinach sauce. Excellent. Dessert was a cheese-flan topped with fresh berries. The restaurant is just inside the city gate and family-owned.



Luca Fabi, our OAT guide was good about giving us background information on what we were seeing and doing. Here he gives us a talk on the bus.