

Italian farm stays bring simple pleasures

By Pam Brandon, Special to the Times

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When your farm stay is over, travel to the Lake Como area to sightsee and shop in the towns that dot the lake. Walk through the lavish gardens at Villa Monastero in Varenna, originally a monastery.

With two round-trip tickets already purchased to Milan, we were looking for a savvy way to stretch our ever-shrinking dollars. We found it down on the farm.

We took haven at two farms that open their gates to tourists, providing a place to stay and delicious food for much less than it would cost to stay in a hotel and eat at restaurants. A third stop at Lake Como had us in the lap of luxury.

Farm stays are not new to Italy, but thanks to new tax incentives more farms and private estates are participating.

With the spirit of exploring new places, we took a chance on places we found on the Internet: an organic honey farm, a centuries-old vineyard and a hillside olive grove, all within easy driving distance of Milan's Malpensa airport.

You need a car to navigate Italy's countryside, as many farms are far from centralized train stations. Language is rarely a barrier, though in small towns English often is not spoken. But even with our limited Italian, communication was not a problem.

Our three-week journey focused on Emilia-Romagna, a foodie heaven that spans nearly the entire breadth of the "top of the boot," a region less traveled by tourists. Our final week was on Lake Como (and, no, we didn't see actor George Clooney, who has a home there).

A honey farm in the Appenines

Our home the first week was a cozy apartment at Pedrósola, an idyllic honey farm and vineyard on a ridge of the Appenine Mountains midway between Florence and Bologna and owned by the friendly Malavolti family. Three young children romped in our communal yard as Andrea cared for the hives and small vineyard and his wife Patrizia cooked organic meals, made jams and jellies and cared for guests. You don't have to lift a finger.



There are three rooms for rent in their 700-year-old stone farmhouse, plus the modest apartment adjacent to the family home with a small living room and kitchen and a large bedroom and modern bath. In the heat of summertime, it was cool enough to sleep with the windows open in the quiet countryside. The nearby village of Marradi is ideal for shopping for inexpensive fresh produce, regional cheeses, wine and fresh pastas.

The area has numerous hiking trails, and Patrizia recommended nearby San Benedetto in Alpe, a cool, shady walk along the water at the meeting point of three small rivers on the border between Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna in the heart of the National Park of Casentino Forests. It's an ideal day trip and perfect for a picnic on the cool slabs of rock along the banks.

From Pedrósola, it's about a \$7, hourlong train ride to Bologna, a capital of culture since the Middle Ages with narrow, cobblestone streets lined with brick arcades, wide piazzas and Europe's oldest university. This is not a city of tourists, but wealthy Italians, and everything is pricey after time in the countryside. But you can indulge with a memorable scoop of gelati at Sorbetteria Castiglione. (Via Castiglione, 44)

Best splurge: Dinner at Trattoria di Strada Casale, a traditional country restaurant just minutes from the farm. Sophisticated seasonal menu with organic, regional ingredients. (Via Statale, 22)

Best bargain souvenir: Patrizia's delectable jams and honeys, about \$5 a jar.

A Castle in the Vineyards

From Pedrósola, we drove about 100 miles northwest to rural Castello di Luzzano, a prosperous vineyard that dates back to 1000 A.D. Our comfortable, two-story apartment was in an 18th century, thick-walled building that formerly housed estate workers.

With beautiful rolling vineyards and panoramic views, the winery is on the border between Emilia-Romagna and Lombardia, one of Italy's oldest wine zones. Giovannella Fugazza, who inherited the vineyards from her father and runs the successful wine business, was a gracious host, often delivering baskets of fresh tomatoes from her garden to our doorstep. Fresh basil grew in clay pots, ours for picking. Aromatic bushes of rosemary, lavender and sage, and apple, pear and pomegranate trees create a dreamy ambience.

Mornings are ideal for long walks through the rolling vineyards to neighboring towns, and a side trip to Parma is a must. The delightful city is home to Parmesan cheese and prosciutto, artworks and antiques. We worked up an appetite exploring the Piazza del Duomo's magnificent buildings, then strolled down Strada Cavour for prime shopping. Opera fans flock to Parma, home of Verdi and the legendary Teatro Regio (season runs from January to mid April). But eating is really what Parma is all about, where most every restaurant serves buttery prosciutto, regional pastas and crisp pizzas.

The former Customs House now is a restaurant with local cuisine — hand-rolled tortelli with butter and fresh sage is the specialty. But we enjoyed dining on our small patio most evenings. Tomatoes, mozzarella, cured meats, focaccia, tortelli, watermelon and the region's sparkling wines, all from the street market in nearby Castel San Giovanni, make an inexpensive meal of which we never seemed to tire.

Easy side trips include Modena, home of Maserati and Ferrari (no public tours available) and syrupy balsamic vinegar; and Reggio Emilia for a taste of the world's best Parmesan cheese.

Best splurge: Lunch in Parma at La Greppia, for house-made pastas, prosciutto and Parmesan straight from the source. Worth every euro. (39/A Strada Garibaldi)

Best bargain souvenir: A bottle of Castello di Luzzano's best wine, about \$20.

Luxury on Lake Como

We ended our three-week journey at the most luxurious spot of all: a two-bedroom stone house at Castello de Vezio, nestled on the hillside in olive groves on Lake Como in the 6th century village of Vezio.

The estate offers various accommodations, and the most exquisite is Casa Milena, a short walk down a steep sidewalk, but worth the effort for the ultimate privacy and spectacular view of the three branches of Lake Como.

A state-of-the-art kitchen with marble counters was stocked with the estate's fresh olive oil, pastas and other staples. Our dinner table was on the terrace overlooking the lake with spectacular views. At night we slept under cashmere blankets with open windows.

Hiking from village to village was a challenging treat, with countless steep hills to navigate. The most relaxing fun was a day trip on the ferry (about \$12) that crisscrosses the lake from town to town: Varenna, Bellagio, Tremezzo and Cernobbio. You can hop on and off to explore lavish villas to explore, shop or dine on the waterfront.

Best splurge: A day trip to Como to window shop. Renowned for their fine silks, dozens of shops offer bargains worth toting home. Sidewalk cafes are everywhere; take your pick, but they are pricey. For the money, you can't beat a crisp pizza.

Best bargain souvenir: A bottle of Castello de Vezio olive oil, about \$24.

Pam Brandon is a freelance writer based in Orlando.

IF YOU GO

Italian farm stays

There are several Web sites to help with research for Italian farm stays. Among them are italyfarmstay.com, italyfarmholidays.com and holidayfarm.net.

Where we stayed:

Agriturismo Pedrósola, Via Cassiano 95, San Cassiano, Italy 48020. Web site,

pedrosola.it, and e-mail address, pedrosola@libero.it.

450 euros per week (about \$588, 7 days/6 nights)

Castello di Luzzano, Luzzano 5, Rovescala, Italy 27040. Web site, castelloluzzano.it, and e-mail, turismo@castelloluzzano.it.

castelloluzzano.it.

430 euros per week (about \$562 for 7 days/6 nights)

Castello di Vezio, Via del Castellano 16, 23828 Vezio di Perledo, Italy. Web site, agriturismocastellodivezio.it, and e-mail, vezio@robilant.it.

150 euros (about \$196 a night)