

# All this and a pizza oven, too!

**HILLTOP HEAVEN:**  
A typical Tuscan  
farmhouse, and, below,  
Henry and Tom

TV's Tom Herbert and his 'Fabulous Baker Boy' brother Henry find breathtaking Tuscany is the perfect destination for a pair of foodies and their famished families



**W**e love Italy as it's the perfect place for a family holiday.

Previous jaunts have taken us to Rome and to the small town of Monopoli, near Bari, while a few years ago we attended a wedding on Lake Garda, which was truly unforgettable.

Why are we attracted to Italy? First of all, it's very relaxed; secondly, the scenery is breathtaking; and finally, there's so much good food and wine to be had.

On our latest trip we went to

Tuscany but instead of flying to Pisa we jetted into Bologna.

At the airport, my brother Henry and I both hired cars for our own families, which we then drove in convoy across the Tuscan border to our destination, Rufina, which was about an hour away.

This was our first experience of Tuscany and we were bowled over. It's just as you see in all those Renaissance paintings – cypress trees and neat vineyards. The landscape also reminded me slightly of Asia – less jungly, obviously, but full of lush, green hills.

Our holiday home, La Villa Di Petroio, was an old hunting lodge,



a huge place that could accommodate up to 16 people, although next door there was an even bigger house for 20 people.

It was very swanky and we had a swimming pool and tennis courts. A pool was important for the children in our group as we weren't near the sea.

Between us, Henry and I have five children, so water plays an important part in chilling out and keeping everybody happy.

Some people hate self-catering holidays because it means they don't get a break from cooking, but as we earn our living from food – as a baker and a chef – and fronting Channel 4's *Fabulous Baker Brothers*, this doesn't bother us at

all. In fact, we love it. Everybody took a turn at cooking. There was no need to organise a rota – it was more a case of fighting each other for a chance to do it because the house had a wood-fired oven.

I would say 'I'm using it!' and Henry would shout back: 'No, I want to use it!'

Practically the first thing we did when we arrived was to light the oven and bake some bread. Using a pizza oven may seem a little daunting to many people, but we're used to them – Henry and I both have one at home.

We also had great fun visiting the little towns in the area and going to markets to buy some of the gorgeous local produce. The people in Tuscany were so nice and generous – perhaps because we have small children we were welcomed everywhere.

**I**n the markets, stallholders would force samples on us and everything was extremely good value. I bought a kilo of porcini mushrooms for €8. Everything on offer was really good quality too: the mozzarella,

parmesan, octopus... loads of fun stuff and, of course, really good fruit and ice cream.

We ate out just twice. We had a fantastic meal in the *L'Osteria di Giovanni* on the Via del Moro in Florence. It was recommended

by a friend, a customer of ours, whose family lives just outside Florence. He said: 'You don't want to go to any of the touristy places – go to this family-run place.'

After the meal we had a quick look around Florence – in summer the place is a tourist maelstrom, but worth exploring nonetheless.

We went to the wonderful

cathedral and climbed to the top of the dome, which was a bit of an adventure. We also visited the old bridge, the Ponte Vecchio, which was spectacular.

One of the highlights of the visit was the Mercato Centrale, the central market, which was left deserted for many years but has since been revived as a major

foodie destination. There are places selling bread, confectionery, fresh fish, fried food, fruit and vegetables, meats, salamis, buffalo mozzarella, cheeses, chocolate, ice cream, fresh pasta, wines, sandwiches and even lampredotto – a local peasant dish made from cow's stomach.

There's a central bar and

some 20 different stands around the outside where you can see pasta being made. There's also a library and a bank... it's like a little food city. You just grab what you want and then perch somewhere and eat.

We went to Florence on the train and it took about 30 minutes from the local station. We had

heard that parking in the city centre is a nightmare, so taking the train was a cheap and much easier alternative.

From experience, we've found that if the owner of the place where you're staying lives nearby, he is the best source of advice about where to go and what to do in the area. Our villa owner,

Eduardo, was no exception. He was so helpful and excited that we were going to stay in his house.

Following our drive from Bologna, we agreed to meet him at a petrol station in Rufina and then follow him in his car to the villa. As promised, Eduardo was waiting there and we then travelled along a series of lanes to the property, which was set in the hills above the town.

As we drove I kept thinking: 'Goodness, where are we going?' The winding lanes seem to go on for ever. But the setting was incredibly beautiful and was like stepping back in time – we half

expected to round a corner and see someone wielding a scythe.

By the time we arrived at the property, it was late and we were anxious we wouldn't be able to buy anything for supper. We needn't have worried: as we stepped into the villa, we were met by the wonderful aroma of hot Bolognese sauce – there was a freshly cooked lasagna waiting for us.

Eduardo told us there was enough to feed us four adults and five children – as it turned out there was more than enough and it fed us for three days.

Eduardo also had a hamper waiting for us, with some local pasta,

his own olive oil and organic wine made from his grapes. Heaven.

As well as the pool, there were

racquets and balls for the tennis courts. We weren't good players before – but we are now and it was great fun.

It was a holiday mainly for chilling out because Henry and I have been working really hard and we needed to unwind a bit.

The children spent much of their time exploring. The house was at the end of a lane and there was no passing traffic, so it was all perfectly safe. Everyone agreed it had been another brilliant Italian adventure.



**SHE'S GOT IT LICKED:** Tom's six-year-old daughter Prudence tucks into an ice cream





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## GETTING THERE

**Tuscany Now & More** offers seven nights at La Villa Di Petroio from €402pp based on 16 people sharing (€322pp for 12 sharing) on a self-catering basis in April or early May. The price increases after that. Rental is Saturday to Saturday. [Tuscanynowandmore.com](http://Tuscanynowandmore.com) has a range of properties across the region and the rest of Italy and can provide private chefs, excursions and other services. Ryanair.ie has Saturday flights to Bologna in April from €150 return.



**HAM-TASTIC:** An enormous meat sandwich, above, at Florence's Central Market and, top, La Villa Di Petroio with its dining table, left, to seat up to 16 guests