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SUNDAY EXPRESS
23 September 2018
Joanna Lumley
On Purdey, Patsy and positivity
Heart of the matter
20 ways to give your health a boost
Autumn glow
Feel good with the best beauty products
Win! Win! Win!
£1,000 with our prize crossword

Take in breathtaking views of Florence among the olive-clad hills

Tuscan heaven

Get a taste for the high life in the wineries and countryside of Tuscany

EM Forster's Lucy Honeychurch and Miss Bartlett may have been looking for that all important room with a view of the River Arno, but for our first family trip to Tuscany my husband Alex and I opted instead for a pool with a view.

Rather than stay in the bustling centre of Florence, we chose a former convent seven miles outside the city. Il Nido del Picchio (The Woodpecker's Nest) is perfectly named as it offers a bird's-eye view of the region; towering cypresses loom out of the olive and lemon groves below, punctuating the seemingly endless countryside.

Recently renovated by its architect owner, the interiors are equally easy on the eye, all high ceilings and Farrow & Ball-esque shades of muted blues, greens and greys. Look carefully in the ultra-modern kitchen and you will find a nod to the nuns who once lived here – the remnants of the Ten Commandments, carved into the stone some 400 years ago.

A short stroll down to the pool reveals the major selling point of the property from the comfort of your sunlounger: an unbroken panorama of the heart of Renaissance Italy, with ancient bridges crisscrossing the historic river and the majestic 13th-century Duomo di Firenze rising out of a sea of terracotta tiles.

While it would be tempting not to move for the whole holiday, we eventually managed to climb back into our hire car to explore the region. As well as spending a day in Florence, we drove through the Chianti Classico region, stopping for lunch at Antinori Winery, which is the most incredible-looking property. I'm told it cost $130million to build (ironically in the town of Bargino) and the results – 129,000 square foot of glass and rusted steel carved into the hillside so as to be almost entirely hidden from view to the casual observer – could easily double as a Bond villain's lair. But head up to Rinuccio 1180, the restaurant on its rooftop and for 40 euros a head you can dine among the vines while pretending you are a millionaire. A more scenic spot – or more skilfully cooked Florentine steak – would be hard to find.

Back down at ground level, we spent an enjoyable morning in the woods hunting Italian truffles with Gina the Wonderdog, as we nicknamed the very affable mutt with a nose for the finer things in life. Every so often our canine guide would bark excitedly and begin rooting around the base of an unassuming tree stump. Within seconds we would have a handful of the world's most expensive fungus to show for her efforts. Thankfully our tour included a chance to taste Gina's wares, concluding with a four-course, truffle-themed extravaganza, which we dutifully dispatched while our son Freddie devoured a bowl of tangy spaghetti napolitana.

Working toddler bedtimes around restaurant dining can be tricky, so if you can't escape for dinner and don't want to cook for yourself, it's worth considering having dinner brought to you – and I'm not talking moped-delivered pizzas… On our final night we booked a private chef, Emilie, to come to the villa and create culinary magic. Decked all in white, the Italian nonna quickly charmed Fred before whipping up an overly generous platter of antipasti, creamy mushroom risotto, roasted pork loin and a silky tiramisu. Not only did she leave the kitchen spick and span, but leftovers were stashed in Tupperware so we had something to savour on our flight home the next day. It certainly sweetened the bitter pill of having to say farewell to our treetop hideaway.

Amy Packer

Tuscany Now & More (tuscanynowandmore.com) offers seven nights at Il Nido del Picchio for £2,971 for four people in May 2019 and can provide private chefs, excursions and other services upon request.

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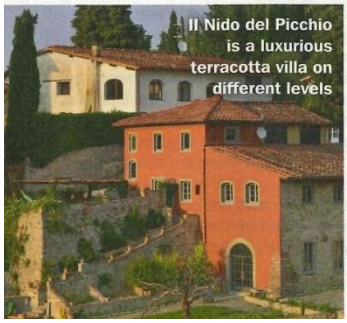
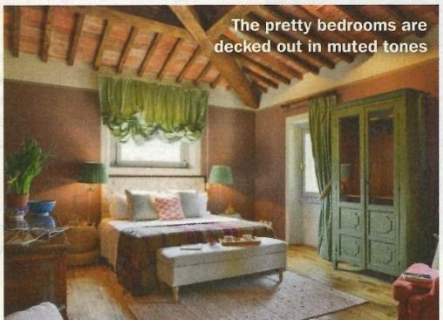
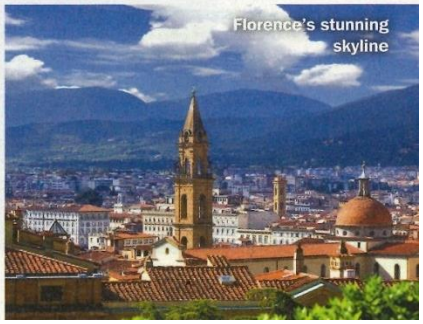

Il Nido del Picchio is a luxurious terracotta villa on different levels


The pretty bedrooms are decked out in muted tones


Florence's stunning skyline