

Great *escapes*



# The good life

*Travels in time: Vicky Green falls in love with a restored mediaeval hamlet in the Tuscan hills*

**THIS PAGE**

Left: A typical Tuscan home

Middle: The heavenly pool

Right: The walk to Mercatale

**OPPOSITE PAGE**

Main: Borgo di Vagli, as seen from the walk to Mercatale

Inset top: The superb trattoria

Inset bottom: My rustic kitchen

"Happy is the man who remains far from the world of business..." The Italians have always known the value of a pastoral retreat - it was over two millennia ago that Horace eulogised the rural way of life as offering the soul a kind of nourishment it could never get in the city. When I recently visited Borgo di Vagli (literally "between the valleys"), a 14th-century hamlet clinging to a Tuscan hillside, I suddenly made sense of all those Latin lessons.

I'd come from Florence, oppressively hot and swarming with tourists queuing for two hours to gain access to the Uffizi or plodding in a stream of human traffic across the Ponte Vecchio. I couldn't have hoped for more of a contrast. After an hour and a half's train journey to Terontola-Cortona, there was a drive of around 20 minutes, half of which was along hairpin bends through tree-covered hills. Past the 10th-century Pierle Castle which travel writer Frances Mayes said "catapults you into thoughts of princesses and knights" and all around you trees, as many as grains of sand on a beach.

Against this breathtaking backdrop Borgo di Vagli came into view, so rustic it appeared to have emerged organically from the earth. The esteemed architect Fulvio di Rosa spent 10 years lovingly restoring the hamlet in a mediaeval style, right down to the last detail: the salvaged rusty nails, the Tuscan antique furniture, the locally made Busatti linens. It almost came as a surprise to find running water; in fact, there was even an internet connection behind those stone walls.

Although the hamlet was derelict when restoration began, Fulvio managed to track down former resident Dina, who now runs the trattoria; her daughter, Tiziana, waits the tables. Today Borgo operates a fractional ownership scheme, which means you buy a share of the hamlet and have year-round access, depending on availability, to any of the properties within your price band. It also means there is already an established community of visitors who dine together in the trattoria and are on intimate terms with the few staff. (During dinner one night with Lee Cogher, the sales and marketing director, one of the visitors arrived with presents for his newborn baby and heartfelt wishes for his wife.)

Climbing the stone steps to reach my residence, each tiny scurrying sound and flash of yellow denoted another lizard hiding at my approach, like the munchkins when Dorothy first arrives in Oz. All was peaceful but for an intense soundtrack of birdsong and cicadas except occasionally a fellow guest would walk past; we exchanged "hi"s with a half-guilty smile as if to say "I know!"

Being a city girl who's never lived more than a five-minute walk from a 7-11, I had naturally failed to bring any supplies. But I shouldn't have worried; on the kitchen table was an enormous bowl of seasonal fruit and the fridge was stocked with orange juice and wine. There is also a small market at reception selling local produce including olive oil from Borgo's own grove.

Combine this with the superb candlelit trattoria, l'cche c'é c'é (literally "whatever there is to eat", on account of there being a different set menu each night), and you really have no reason to leave. Certainly, as I sat at my table, I rejected all plans to visit even nearby Cortona, with its Medicean fortress and its 5th-century-BC outer wall. Was I lazy? No; for Borgo is all about relaxing, taking a step back to a time when life worked at a slower pace. It wasn't so difficult to imagine the almost self-sufficient community that would have peopled this place, life barely changing, for centuries.

But even they would occasionally have needed to visit Mercatale, the nearest village, for salt; this was as far as I resolved to venture. As I wondered along a path sometimes sheltered by sun-dappled trees, sometimes opening up to reveal a breathtaking vista, things took on the complexion of a Disney movie; here I skipped over a waterfall; there I watched butterflies carousing; I could almost have broken into *Zip-a-dee-do-dah*.

After walking back uphill in what was now the midday sun, I enjoyed perhaps my favourite moment of my stay at Borgo: what could be more pleasant, I wondered, than 30 degrees with a light breeze, an outdoor pool set into a Tuscan hilltop and a panorama of tree-covered hills before you? Although reluctantly, I left Borgo with a sense of being at one with the world, of the kind only a rural retreat can offer you; even a city girl needs to unplug herself from modern life once in a while. ■

*"The hamlet appeared to have emerged organically from the earth"*

## Travel file

Florence is one hour and three quarters away; we flew from Gatwick with Meridiana, return fares from £58 (excl taxes). Bournemouth Airport has flights to Pisa, which is two hours away

### Tell me about the accommodation

Borgo di Vagli is a collection of 10 residences set in 32 acres of Tuscan hillside. Each property is fully restored and furnished in a mediaeval style - think carved stone sinks, cotto tile floors and 50cm thick stone walls. Outside, each property has gardens with a wisteria- or vine-covered pergola.



### What will it cost?

Owners purchase a 1/10th fraction of a residence category, which offers unlimited year-round access to any of the properties within their residence category, in accordance with the reservation policy. One-bedroom residences are priced at £55,000; two-bedroom residences £75,000. There are additional housekeeping, cleaning, linen-change and management fees.

### What else can I do?

If you insist on leaving... the nearby mediaeval town of Cortona has a mediaeval festival and is said to be the birthplace of Ulysses. It has a Medicean fortress and an outer wall dating from the 5th century BC. Lake Trasimeno, famous for a battle between Hannibal and the Romans in 217BC, is just 20 minutes away; Perugia is 35 minutes.



### Don't miss

The hilltop pool; the superb candlelit trattoria, l'cche c'è c'è

### Take a look

[www.borgodivagli.com](http://www.borgodivagli.com)

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