



ROMANTIC ESCAPE

An Italian villa is the perfect setting for an exotic honeymoon, and to explore Lucca and Florence, discovers Alexia Santamaria

Waking up in Tuscany's Villa Controni gives the feeling of being in a time travel movie. You almost feel the need to check your bedclothes haven't morphed into the kind worn by 18th century Italian nobility.

On the outskirts of Lucca, this stately property is a step back in time. Though most of it was built in the late 1700s by a silk merchant family, parts date back to 12th century strongholds in the wars between Pisa and Lucca. It has had six owners between the original family (the Contronis) and the current ones, including the famous engineer Felice Matteucci, who invented one of the first internal combustion engines.

The Fannuchi family, big players in the Italian dairy industry, bought the dilapidated Villa Controni in 1998 and have given the 11-bedroom villa a full neoclassical renovation. It exudes excess and decadence with its baroque-style furniture: expansive luxurious beds with ornate red velvet headboards, elaborate scroll-leg demimarquise and exquisite carved-mahogany wardrobes.

Despite its old-world charm, the villa has enough modern comforts for a very relaxing stay. We loved that up on the third floor the Wi-Fi didn't work, leaving the bedroom a sanctuary to unplug and gaze outside at the Tuscan hills.

We could, however, come downstairs to watch TV, play pool, have a swim, use the internet or go to the gym outside. You can't be an 18th century princess all day.

The exterior is as charming as the inside with an olive grove and small Italian garden. One of our absolute highlights was sitting outside on a hot summer's night sipping a gorgeous red from nearby Montepulciano, watching dozens of fireflies dart around the camellias and azaleas like tiny fairies. Italian summer magic.

The thing about renting a place like this is that with so many rooms and multiple floors, it's a big, costly, undertaking — above what most people could contemplate.

Our hosts, New Zealand couple Lance and Lisa Green, of Viaggio Lifestyle Vacations, have found a clever way for more people to be able to experience Villa Controni life.

They lease the villa for the months of July and August every year, and rent out rooms — much like a boutique hotel.

Lance's meals are full of flavour and largely locally sourced, making it a truly Tuscan experience — although not a Weight Watchers one. It felt so regal eating dinner in the grand banquet room with its enormous ceilings and impossibly long table, and "retiring to the drawing room" afterwards. A girl could really forget she was actually from suburban Auckland.

Lance is happy for you to accompany him on his produce shopping trips if you want to

The Villa Controni, near Lucca, is a beautiful destination.
Pictures / Supplied

get a feel for the real Italy. He and Lisa have mastered the art of hosting all types, from go-go-see-everything characters to laze-by-the-pool-with-a-glass-of-wine folks. Lots of little touches like flowers, fruit, chocolates and Bulgari toiletries plus a wealth of local knowledge makes it a very personal, but not intrusive experience.

Lucca is only 10 minutes' drive away and is perfect for meandering. The historical centre lies within a wall built of small red bricks in the 16th and 17th centuries as a defence against Florence. It is still intact and the top provides a fantastic circular path for walking or cycling down the wide tree-lined avenues.

Outside the walls sits a modern Italian town but inside are streets filled with alleyways, arches, shops, bars, restaurants and gelaterias. If you are there on a weekend evening you will see families doing the passeggiata — strolling together from 5-8pm. It's truly charming.

The shopping is excellent with a fabulously obscene number of shoe shops, and we didn't have one bad meal, even in the tourist-centric Anfiteatro. We particularly enjoyed the house-made gnocchi at Miro restaurant and loved the hearty, home-cooked food at Trattoria da Leo. It's a family business and the matriarch is an Italian mama straight out of a movie: loud, bossy and lots of fun. We also developed an unhealthy obsession with the gelato and pastries in the pasticcerias.

Lucca was the home of famed Italian composer Puccini, so you can visit his house and museums in his name.

Not far from Lucca lie Florence and Pisa, beautiful thermal areas, wineries, hilltop villages, marble mines, castles and fortresses. I would also highly recommend a visit to Montecatini Terme, one of Italy's most famous spa towns.

• Alexia Santamaria stayed at Villa Controni as a guest of Viaggio Lifestyle Vacations, ph 0800 100 799 or see viaggio.net.nz and luxuryvilla.com.nz

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