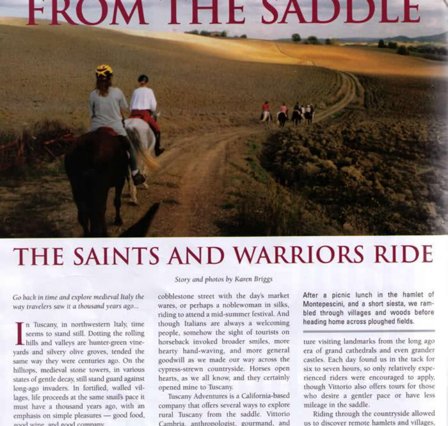
TOURING TUSCANY FROM THE SADDLE



THE SAINTS AND WARRIORS RIDE

Story and photos by Karen Briggs

Go back in time and explore medieval Italy the way travelers saw it a thousand years ago...

In Tuscany, in northwestern Italy, time seems to stand still. Dotting the rolling hills and valleys are hunter-green vineyards and silvery olive groves, tended the same way they were centuries ago. On the hilltops, medieval stone towers, in various states of gentle decay, still stand guard against long-ago invaders. In fortified, walled villages, life proceeds at the same snail's pace it must have a thousand years ago, with an emphasis on simple pleasures — good food, good wine, and good company.

Little wonder Tuscany has earned a reputation as one of the most romantic spots on earth. And what better way to explore it than astride the back of a sure-footed little mare? Seeing Tuscany from the saddle, it was easy to let myself slip back into history and imagine I was an eleventh century peasant, clattering my way down a narrow, cobblestone street with the day's market wares, or perhaps a noblewoman in silks, riding to attend a mid-summer festival. And though Italians are always a welcoming people, somehow the sight of tourists on horseback invoked broader smiles, more hearty hand-waving, and more general goodwill as we made our way across the cypress-strewn countryside. Horses open hearts, as we all know, and they certainly opened mine to Tuscany.

Tuscany Adventures is a California-based company that offers several ways to explore rural Tuscany from the saddle. Vittorio Cambria, anthropologist, gourmand, and horseman, is the congenial, and fluently bilingual, host of the riding tours, which feature his own stable of Lipizzan and native Maremmana horses (a sturdy and hard-working, if somewhat single-minded breed).

I was one of 11 guests who arrived from across North America to experience the Saints and Warriors Ride, a six-day adventure visiting landmarks from the long ago era of grand cathedrals and even grander castles. Each day found us in the tack for six to seven hours, so only relatively experienced riders were encouraged to apply, though Vittorio also offers tours for those who desire a gentler pace or have less mileage in the saddle.

After a picnic lunch in the hamlet of Montepescini, and a short siesta, we rambled through villages and woods before heading home across ploughed fields.

Riding through the countryside allowed us to discover remote hamlets and villages, ruined fortresses and abbeys, and amazing vistas in places seemingly inaccessible to modern vehicles. Many of these paths, the very same paths travelers have used for thousands of years, were essentially unchanged; prior to the footsteps of medieval Tuscans, they were no doubt trod by the Romans, and by the mysterious

Etruscans before them.

Though riding was the focus of each day's activity, there was plenty of opportunity for the other great pleasure of Italy: fine food and wine! Some days we enjoyed a leisurely picnic lunch, while the horses contentedly munched their mid-day meal on a picket line; on others, we walked a short distance to sample the culinary delights of local restaurants: freshly made pasta with sumptuously simple sauces, oven-baked thin-crust pizza, white beans drizzled with olive oil, wild boar, and a fine selection of local wines, which always went down easily!

Vittorio's vast culinary experience guided our selections.

The evenings featured more wonderful Tuscan cuisine, replete with savory antipasto and the local bread, which is made without salt to complement being drizzled with olive oil or nibbled with naturally salty foods such as anchovies. (I'd never been a fan of anchovies before, but I revised my opinion on this trip.) There were delightful desserts, too, including the sugary, crispy "osso de morte" cookies, which are meant to be dunked in sweet wine. Despite spending far more hours in the saddle than I usually do at home, with meals like these I was in no danger of getting any skinnier!

The captivating 11th century Castello di Tocchi, a few kilometers outside the village of Tocchi in central Tuscany, served as our residence for the week. The residences within the walls have been restored in a simple, charming way, with white-washed walls, tiled floors, and wooden-beamed ceilings (but fortunately, completely modern bathrooms). With no televisions or phones to spoil the illusion of living in the Middle Ages, it was easy to forget the e-mail which was undoubtedly piling up on my computer at home. Only the sound of the stonemasons and carpenters restoring more of the apartments within the Castello, broke the silence in the misty mornings to rouse us to our breakfasts (served in the room) and prod us to get into our riding gear for each day's exploring.

The Journey Begins

Each of us arrived at the Castello di Tocchi after having been picked up at the Siena train station in late afternoon. (A glimpse of Siena's unspoiled medieval architecture, built in distinctive brown stone, makes it easy to see why artists use the word "siena" to describe a particular shade of brown.) Vittorio and his translator and right-hand man, Leonardo, deftly piloted two mini-vans through the winding Siennese

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Exploring Tuscany from the saddle allows ample opportunity to stop and appreciate the medieval architecture.

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streets and south to the Castello, some 30 minutes away — with a stop for gelato, the famous Italian ice cream, on the way.

The entrance to the Castello is a stone arch set at right angles to the road, a design which made it difficult for centuries-ago invaders to get up a head of steam with a battering ram to break down the gates! Each morning we were amazed that Leonardo and Vittorio managed to squeeze the mini-vans through this entrance, clearly designed for much narrower conveyances, with bare millimetres to spare.

The horses are stabled at Vittorio's farm, La Ripa, a couple of minutes away. On our first morning, we ducked under the eves in the British-style shedrow stables to escape the rain and meet our mounts for the week, while stable manager Chiara finished outfitting each horse with an English saddle, breastplate, and a lead rope and water bottle attached to the D rings. Each saddle was also rigged with strings on the cantle, to enable riders to tie a rolled-up jacket behind them. The nylon bridles were a convenient endurance-style design which convert to halters when the bit and reins are snapped off.

I was encouraged to see that all of the horses looked sleek, well-fed, fit, and shiny. They ranged in age from five up to their mid-teens, and in size from about 15 hands up to 16:3 hands or so. Many sported the distinctive Roman profile of the Lipizzan breed, and Chiara explained that some are also used for dressage or jumping when they are not working as tour horses.

Vittorio and Chiara had obviously taken great pains to match each rider with a suitable horse. I'd filled out an extensive questionnaire about my riding experience and preferences prior to my arrival, and as I'd indicated I often trained young horses and would be happy to ride a "greenie", I was introduced to Jujula, a round little bay Sicilian-bred mare, named for a local fruit. At five years old, she had only been working in the string for a few months. Chiara warned me she had a sensitive mouth and needed someone with steady hands. No problem, I assured her, pleased to see I wouldn't be spending the week on an unresponsive plug!

By about 10:30 am, the sky had started to clear somewhat, and we all mounted up and adjusted our stirrups. (Tuscany Adventures does require its riders to wear protective headgear; those few of us who had neglected to bring their own were provided with helmets, two of which were sporty bicycle types.) We headed out single file, with Vittorio, on his gray Lipizzan mare, in the lead, and Chiara bringing up the rear.

The first day's ride was relatively gentle and on flat terrain, designed to ensure that each rider was comfortable with her or her mount. We rode between the raindrops for a good part of the morning, but it didn't spoil our enjoyment of the countryside, which began in wooded territory and gave way to open farmland. A number of brisk trot intervals, and one or two rollicking canters, got our muscles warmed up, and by 1:00 pm we were pleased to stop in a secluded area by a bridge to enjoy the first of many picnic lunches. Warm chickpea soup and cold layered vegetable pie, prepared by Vittorio's wife Patricia, were a welcome repast under a tarp suspended between the trees. Conveniently, the sun came out while we finished up our lunch, and blessed us with warm fall temperatures

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for the remainder of the afternoon, and indeed the rest of the week.

The afternoon's ride swung southeast through vineyards and more farmland, where we glimpsed pheasants rising from the not-yet-harvested October corn, and once, a pair of does who burst from the underbrush and bounded away. We rode through the main street of the village of Frontignano, our horse's hooves making a great racket on the paved roads, and back out across the fields. By late afternoon, with our collective tushes growing weary, we were pleased to reach the outskirts of a larger town, Casciano, and note the signs directing us to the Equestrian Centre, our destination for the night. A couple of miles later, we entered the gates to the stables and creakily dismounted, groaning over our stiff and sore anatomy!

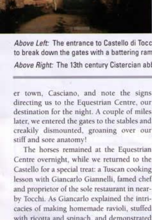
The horses remained at the Equestrian Centre overnight, while we returned to the Castello for a special treat: a Tuscan cooking lesson with Giancarlo Giannelli, famed chef and proprietor of the sole restaurant in nearby Tocchi. As Giancarlo explained the intricacies of making homemade ravioli, stuffed with ricotta and spinach, and demonstrated wonderfully tasty appetizers (made by sandwiching anchovy paste between two sage leaves, then deep-frying the morsels in beer batter), the red wine flowed, and the evening soon deteriorated into a very noisy and joyous occasion. We all had a hand in kneading and rolling out the pasta dough — with varying degrees of success! — and later enjoyed the fruits of our labour along with a succulent roast piglet Giancarlo prepared in the Castello's ancient wood oven. (For those who are interested in exploring Tuscan cuisine further, Tuscany Adventures also offers a "Culinary Conquest of Italy" tour, which combines riding with cooking lessons, wine-tastings, and sampling local specialties.)

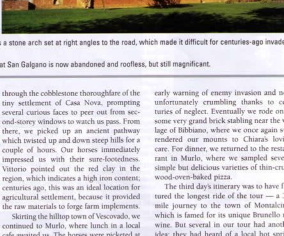
On Day Two, our route got more ambitious. Leaving from Casciano, we clattered through the cobblestone thoroughfare of the tiny settlement of Casa Nova, prompting several curious faces to peer out from second-storey windows to watch us pass. From there, we picked up an ancient pathway which twisted up and down steep hills for a couple of hours. Our horses immediately impressed us with their sure-footedness. Vittorio pointed out the red clay in the region, which indicates a high iron content; centuries ago, this was an ideal location for agricultural settlement, because it provided the raw materials to forge farm implements.

Skirting the hilltop town of Vescovado, we continued to Murlo, where lunch in a local cafe awaited us. The horses were picketed at the bottom of the hill, and we straggled to the top in our riding breeches and boots, sto[...] ping to admire yellow autumn crocuses [...] the way up (and certainly not to catch o[...] breath!). The restaurant afforded us a sple[...] did view of the surrounding hills while [...] slurped up broad papardelle noodles a[...] refreshing sorbetto served in hollowed-[...] lemons. We had a few minutes to wander t[...] beautifully preserved village square, and sti[...] our noses inside a Renaissance-era church [...] view the devotional artwork, before retur[...] ing to our mounts.

The afternoon ride featured more ste[...] hills, dotted with vineyards, olive and [...] trees, and brief stops to admire a thousar[...] year-old stone watchtower, designed to gi[...] early warning of enemy invasion and n[...] unfortunately crumbling thanks to ce[...] turies of neglect. Eventually we rode on[...] some very grand brick stabling near the [...] lage of Bibbiano, where we once again s[...] rendered our mounts to Chiara's lovi[...] care. For dinner, we returned to the resta[...] rant in Murlo, where we sampled seve[...] simple but delicious varieties of thin-cru[...] wood-oven-baked pizza.

The third day's itinerary was to have f[...] tured the longest ride of the tour — a [...] mile journey to the town of Montalci[...] which is famed for its unique Brunello [...] wine. But several in our tour had anotl[...] idea; they had heard of a local hot spri[...] spa, which sounded too inviting to pass u[...]





Above Left: The entrance to Castello di Tocchi is a stone arch set at right angles to the road, which made it difficult for centuries-ago invade[...] to break down the gates with a battering ram.

Above Right: The 13th century Cistercian abbey at San Galgano is now abandoned and roofless, but still magnificant.

Perhaps sore knees and behinds had something to do with the decision to enjoy a half-day's ride along the last part of the previous day's route, drive to Montalcino for lunch, and then enjoy an afternoon soak in the spa's warm waters. The detour was indeed therapeutic; we all came out feeling rejuvenated, and no doubt our horses appreciated the break as well.

We returned to Montalcino after our swim to walk the ramparts of its beautifully restored castle, order some Brunello wine to ship home, and peek into a few of the local shops (ceramics are a specialty). As with many Tuscan towns, the medieval streets of Montalcino are too narrow to permit motorized traffic, so shopping is a relaxed, pedestrian experience.

We took in the sunset from the castle's watchtower, then drove on to the town of Pari for dinner in a private home/restaurant which opens its doors only to those "in the know". The owner not only provided us with choice morsels of lamb, rabbit, zucchini, and fried potato, he also serenaded us with several operatic selections in a fine tenor.

A sunny Thursday saw us riding from Bibbiano through more open farmland and into a nature preserve where the trail follows an abandoned rail route, providing the opportunity to have an uninhibited long gallop past some spectacular scenery. We stopped for a picnic lunch in the hamlet of Montepescini, little more than a bus stop with a medieval church, but the onion pie and red wine, warm sun, and shade from the towering cypress trees, made it a delightful oasis. After lunch and a short siesta, we spent another three hours rambling through fields, villages, and chestnut woods to return to the home base at La Ripa.

Riding the River

Vittorio had saved the most spectacular ride for last. Leaving the Castello on Friday, we headed west to the town of Monticiano, passing more medieval pockets of civilization in surprisingly remote locations among the vineyards, cornfields, and olive groves. The horses had the luxury of being turned loose in a big grassy paddock over lunch, while we sampled pasta with wild boar sauce at a local inn. Then we pushed on to San Galgano, a 13th century Cistercian abbey, now abandoned and roofless, but still impressive; it's accompanied by a 12th century cathedral at the top of the hill, which is still in use today. In the centre of the cathedral is a positively Arthurian sword in a stone. Legend has it that it was

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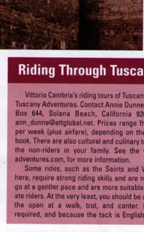

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the sword of a knight named Galgano, who thrust it there when he renounced his former life as a warrior and became a monk.

On our return from the abbey, Vittorio left the trail to lead our group down a riverbank and into the middle of the meandering river Merse, which we'd crossed earlier. Late-afternoon sunlight filtered through the green canopy of trees as we headed downstream, using the river as our path home. It was an unforgettable hour. For the most part, the water was quite shallow, though on a few occasions the horses found themselves immersed nearly to their hips, and at one point I feared for my camera bag, tied to the side of the saddle! The river stones were slick and the footing tricky — this was NOT something I would have tried with my critters at home — but the sturdy Italian horses never put a foot wrong. Eventually, after a couple of false starts, we found a safe place to climb the riverbank and trot the final leg home, arriving, weary but very content, sometime after dark.

On our final evening, we feasted in the cozy dining room at the Castello, enjoying garlic-crusted roast pork, rosemary potatoes, and, of course, more wonderful Tuscan wine. We also sampled grappa and limoncello, a delicate lemon liqueur from Sicily. The day's long ride had left us all a little subdued, or was it a touch of regret over having to leave this idyllic escape and return to the real world? Regardless, I knew I wouldn't soon forget the romantic landscape of Tuscany, or the warm welcome of its people ... and its horses. ●

Watchtower of the beautifully restored castle in Montalcino, a town famed for its unique Brunello red wine. We watched the sunset from the castle's watchtower.

Riding Through Tuscany

Vittorio Cambria's riding tours of Tuscany can be booked through Tuscany Adventures. Contact Annie Dunne, program director, at PO Box 644, Solana Beach, California 92075; (619) 989-9416 or ann_dunne@attglobal.net. Prices range from about $2100 and up per week (plus airfare), depending on the date and the tour you book. There are also cultural and culinary tours available to interest the non-riders in your family. See the website, www.tuscany-adventures.com, for more information.

Some rides, such as the Saints and Warriors tour described here, require strong riding skills and are not for beginners. Others go at a gentler pace and are more suitable for novice or intermediate riders. At the very least, you should be able to handle a horse in the open at a walk, trot, and canter. Protective headgear is required, and because the tack is English you will likely be most comfortable in riding breeches and boots (or half-chaps and paddock boots, which I wore). If you prefer jeans, bring chaps to prevent being pinched by the stirrup leathers. There are a few Western saddles available for use on request.

In these uncertain times, international travel can be a daunting prospect. Remember that all North American airports are operating under increased security, so check your hand luggage carefully to ensure you're not carrying anything which could be construed as a weapon. Even nail files, manicure scissors, and hoof picks may raise red flags — I had my eyebrow tweezers confiscated at Rome airport! If possible, book a direct flight to Italy rather than connecting flights, which increase the chances of delays, lost luggage, and missed connections. Italy has an efficient rail system which can get you to Siena from Rome, Pisa, or Florence.

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