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LIVING LA DOLCE VITA

Italy's just the job if you're looking for classical sights, colour and character and, of course, fabulous food

WORDS: Nick Castle PHOTOGRAPHY: Ali Castle



Nick & Ali Castle...

...are both retired and started motorhoming in 2012. They enjoy waking up in different places and prefer staying at aires and agritourism venues to campsites

While planning a tour to Sicily we had options of ferries from Genoa or Salerno, or spending the extra time to drive through Italy. We opted to drive the whole way, mainly using motorways for speed, but picking out some points of interest along the route.

After a week travelling through France, we reached our first stop at Santa Margherita Ligure, near Genoa. The town, about a mile's walk from the *aree di sosta* (aire), has a lot of buildings decorated in a style called *liberty façade*: plain walls plastered pink or green, with corners and window frames painted to look like carved stone. The main street is colourful and lively with greengrocers, trattorias, delicatessens and café terraces.

At the seafront, palms and statues stand opposite classical-style hotels, again all painted in greens and deep pinks with cream accents. The harbour has a mixture of tourist boats, fishing craft and sleek private yachts. Three-wheeled pick-ups wait to be loaded with the fish and langoustines being landed on the quay.

We sat in sunshine at a harbourside bar with beer and a tray of antipasti, watching

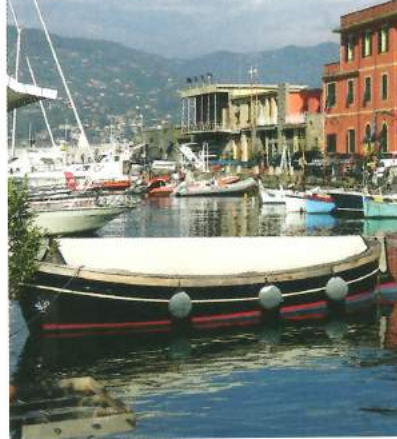
the promenaders out for the evening in their casual finery. Even the municipal policelady strutted along like a fashion model.

Buses and pleasure boats ran the few miles to the exclusive little town of Portofino, but we were keen to keep moving south. A two-hour drive brought us to Pisa.

From the *sosta*, it's a 30-minute walk, without a single signpost for one of the world's most famous landmarks, to the area known as *Campo dei Miracoli* (field of miracles) and the famous leaning tower. Never mind the photos we've seen before, the extent of the tower's lean is really quite startling. Afternoon sun and blue sky accentuated the colours and shadows of this amazing structure, which is nearly 5.5m (18ft) off vertical. It appears that the whole structure is prevented from falling over by successive tourists leaning in to hold it up!

The tower was intended to be the *campanile* for the baptistery, an elegant cathedral started in the 1060s. The *façade* features colourful friezes and massive bronze doors with biblical scenes cast in relief. Inside, there are columns and decorated ceilings, paintings by some of the grand masters and delicate marble carvings. ►

LEFT Tourists keep Pisa's famous tower from falling over



“Strolling among the impressive trulli is like being in a fairytale town of giant beehives”

Down by the river it's all typically Tuscan: green and ochre plasterwork, shutters, big doors and leaded glass. Turning into Borgo Stretto, it becomes quieter and arcades hide little shops, leatherwork, wine tasting and the famous Salza cakes and pastry shop, which has given the people of Pisa their sugar fixes since 1898.

Rome's peripheral motorway may be free, but it's manic. Gladiatorial 'games' include 'advanced slalom for scooterists', the 'hard-shoulder sprint' and 'Ben-Hur lane changer'. There's also the occasional 'bear pit', where the road suddenly opens up into craters designed to test the suspension of the most robust chariots. Thankfully, we soon escaped to the hills of Frascati for a peaceful night on a farm near Genazzano.

Despite much of our route being motorway, the scenery rarely disappointed, especially once we were on the free A3, which meanders high through mountains and valleys of the Pollino National Park, sometimes in tunnels or on high viaducts.

Our next night stop was Morano Colabro. As we approached, it looked like a giant

sandcastle, with buildings apparently sitting one on top of the other. A short drive through the lower town brought us up to parking beside a row of young lime trees.

When we stopped the engine everything was absolutely silent. There was not a soul about; no traffic, no birds, nothing – until a peal of church bells mid-afternoon.

The terrain did not appear to suit my wheelchair, so my wife, Ali, went for a walk to investigate. She got halfway up the ancient cobbles, staircases and alleyways before deciding the climb to the top required sherpas – or knee replacement!

Palmi was an excellent staging post for our interlude on Sicily; 25 miles from the ferry terminal, the campsite sits beneath cacti-covered cliffs with a fine-sand beach across the road. We stayed two nights, one either side of our Sicilian adventure.

So, our Italy 'part two' (that is, after Sicily) started with Alberobello, famous for its trulli houses. Quiet, narrow streets thread between clusters of these circular, whitewashed, windowless little homes. Folklore says that, when tax collectors came, the conical roofs could be collapsed and no tax would be payable.

They fell into disrepair, but now many of these former peasant homes are inhabited or used for tourist accommodation. Strolling among the impressive trulli is like being in a fairytale town of giant beehives. ▶

ABOVE CLOCKWISE Trulli houses in Alberobello; Santa Margherita Ligure's colourful harbour; the walls of Dozza are covered with murals

At the sosta we met a British couple heading to Sicily and swapped notes before driving to Ostuni, known as 'white city' from its whitewash and white stonework.

The cathedral square is famous for the Tarantella festival, including a writhing dance of the victim of a spider bite. Beyond the square are narrow alleys leading to flowery courtyards. All the pavements are polished to a slippery shine.

This area is dense with olive trees; 'grandees' centuries old with trunks a metre thick sitting inside stone walls in perfectly tended, smooth red soil with groups of bright red poppies. Many of these farms operate as self-sufficient communities (called masserias) modelled on classical Roman villas complete with farmhouse, oil mills, cellar, stores and workers' accommodation. Some also include agri-tourism with rooms or camper stops.

Near Carovigno, we checked into Masseria Correo. Senora led us into a field with olive trees, goats and two big golden retrievers. In surrounding fields, donkeys, horses, pigs, chickens and guinea fowl sounded their presence. In the morning we bought olive oil and visited the sheds where two huge sows were suckling their piglets.

We took the beautiful drive along the

BELOW CLOCKWISE

The Gargano Promontory was once connected to Croatia; Grand Prix museum at the Autodromo Enzo e Dino Ferrari at Imola; as one of Piedmont region's 'slow towns', Cuneo has many artisan shops

Gargano Promontory on a coast road that clings to the cliffs. Gargano is noted for its light and bright sunshine, which sparkled on the Adriatic Sea below. There were laybys from where we could look down onto white rocky coves with grottos and caves. Flowers nestled in the verges. Eons ago, Gargano and Dalmatia were joined and it certainly reminded us of a previous trip to Croatia.

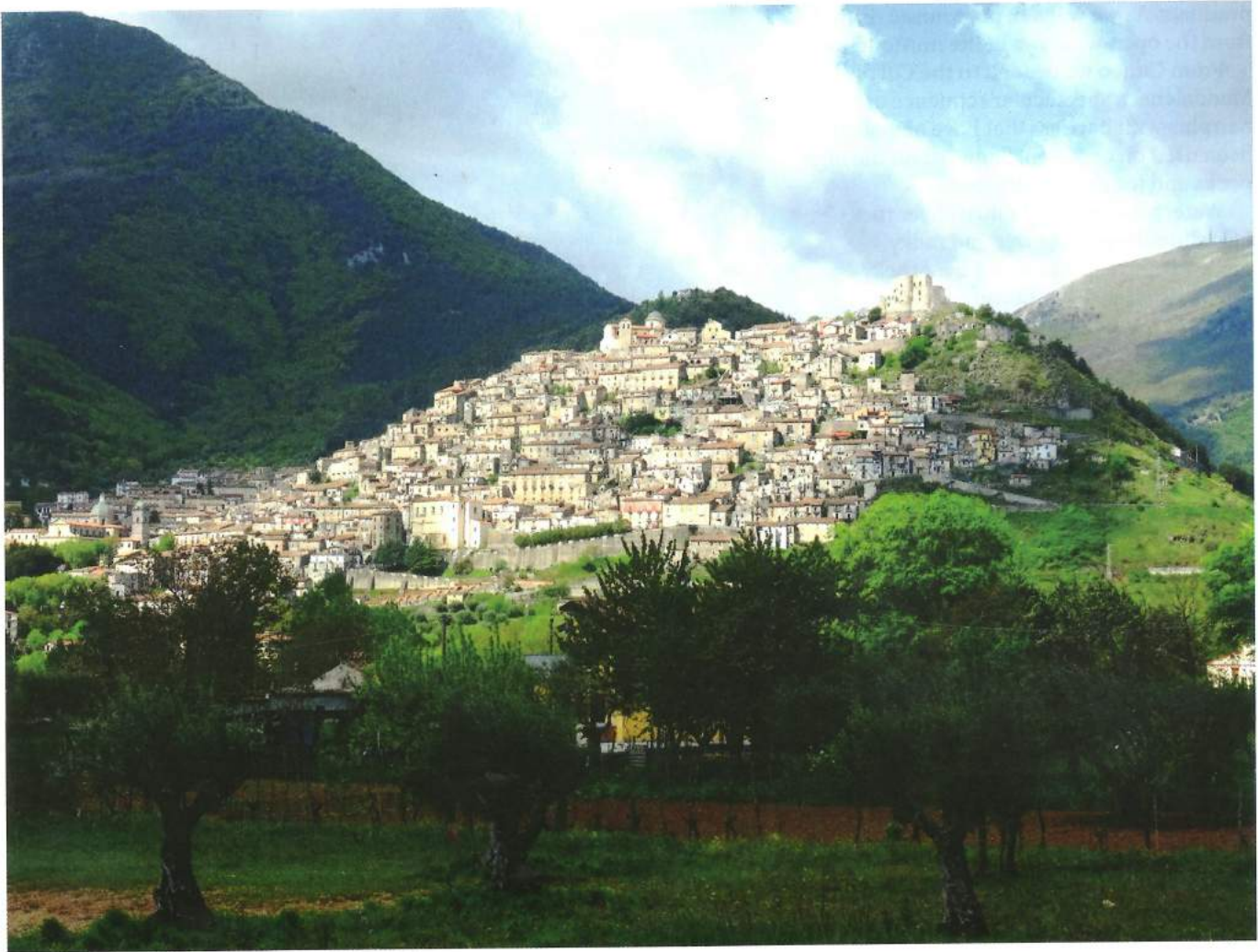
We passed through Vieste and drove on to Garagano's other resort, Peschici. There was a short delay, while goatherds rounded up their animals, before we arrived at Camping Parco Degli Ulivi, set in an olive grove. Parking between the trees, it was the first time we had even noticed olive blossom – every tree was laden with small, yellowy-green flowers.

Walking into town is a steep climb past white plaster buildings growing straight out of the rock. From the hill there are panoramic views to sea and over the olive groves and mountains.

Up by the castle we found Restaurant Da Celestina, its shady veranda surrounded with flowers. The menu is typical Puglian fare, with marinades of olive oil and seafood. By the time we'd finished the complimentary limoncello, our leisurely lunch had taken nearly three hours!

“Waterfalls **cascaded** down sheer rock faces into deep blue lakes and **milky** meltwater streams **tumbled** over rocky riverbeds”





Leaving Peschici, we headed up the winding coast road. At the top we pulled into a layby for photos. A chap had a stall set up on a Piaggio selling handmade woodcraft, liquorice, herbs and chillies. Ali bought some chilli and mountain oregano. As she returned from taking photos, he gave us slices of fresh watermelon.

Below us was one of the *trabucco* that line this coast; believed to be Phoenician in design, these haphazard wooden cranes are operated by men 'walking the plank' to haul their fishing nets.

Two days later we reached Imola. The autodromo's museum displays F1 cars from Imola's Grand Prix years and has tributes to Ayrton Senna, who was fatally injured during the 1994 race. At the Ayrton Senna memorial, there are tributes, some new, some old and faded – the sense of loss still felt by his fans is tangible.

Five miles away is Dozza, which has a small *sosta*. Dozza is a quaint town famous for its twelfth century castle, wine and murals. It was once the stronghold for the

TOP TIPS

Use the Italian motorways for long distances. Where there are tolls, they are cheap and, if you opt to use other roads, these can be poor quality

Arrive at the trulli town of **Alberobello** early, as the crowds grow throughout the day, as does the heat

area's wine – said to be some of Italy's finest – and the castle cellar stores a valuable collection of vintages.

In the cobbled streets many of the façades are decorated with bright, artistic murals that are displayed for two years then replaced with fresh ones.

After a day on the motorway and a night in Alba, a short drive took us to Cuneo. A funicular runs from near the *sosta* up to the town from where a short walk leads through archways into the huge piazza.

The main street, Via Roma, is an elegant and wide thoroughfare with tall, neo-classical terraces framing distant mountains. Some are painted in bas-relief, others with murals; all are different. On each side there are wide arcades with striking shop fronts, which are carved and decorated wood with gilded glass and signboards.

Cuneo and some of the surrounding towns are known as 'slow towns', which have rebelled against global brands. Now every shop and restaurant is an independent enterprise promoting artisan ►

ABOVE Morano Calabro perches on the hill like a sandcastle

products. As we walked, flute music drifted from the open windows of the music school.

From Cuneo we headed to the Col de Maddalena, a spectacular sequence of hairpins with barriers that have obviously been used on occasion! Snow sat on the high peaks and ice clung to the banks.

Waterfalls cascaded down sheer rock faces into deep blue lakes and milky meltwater streams tumbled over rocky riverbeds; there were flower meadows, green pastures and alpine chalets.

We stopped on the border and looked back through the col at a picture-perfect alpine scene then crossed the border into France. Although back in France, our Italian odyssey was not complete until we reached Barcelonnette. We stopped for a drink in its main square and had a laugh with the waiter. After seven weeks hearing Italian we had to correct ourselves as 'per favore' and 'grazie' became 's'il vous plait' and 'merci'.

We sat sipping drinks, reflecting on the many things we'd seen, learned and enjoyed on our fantastic adventure. www

WE STAYED AT

Camping Parco Degli Ulivi, Baia di Peschici 71010, Località Padula

☎ 0039 884 962299

📧 parcodegliulivi.it

📅 12 May - 15 September

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €15 (£13.45)

Camping Lido di Salerno, Via Lago Trasimeno, Pontecagnano 84098

☎ 0039 89 200270

📧 campingsalerno.it

📅 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €22 (£19.73)

STOPOVERS

Via Don G.A. Garibotti, 16038 Santa Margherita Ligure

📅 All year £ €10 (£8.97)

RV Parking, Via di Pratale 78, 56100 Pisa

📅 All year

£ €12 (£10.76) - free for Blue Badge holders

Via Geatano Scorza, 87016 Morano Colabro

📅 All year £ Free

Piazza Fontana, Via Monte del Re, 40060 Dozza

📅 All year £ Free

Sosta Prajola, Via Lungomare Donna Canfora, 89015 Palmi

📅 All year

£ €15 (£13.45) including electric

Camper Parking Nel Verde, Via Cadore 1-3, 70011 Alberobello

📅 All year

£ €18 (£16.14) including electric

Area di Sosta Camper Lago Azzuro, Contrada Carbuccio 25, 63823 Marina di Altidona

📅 1 April - 31 October

£ €20 (£17.94) including electric

Parco Fluviale, Piazzale Walther Cavallera, 12100 Cuneo

📅 All year £ Free

La Sonnina, Via Colle Mufiano 19, 00030 Genazzano

☎ 0039 695 570012

📧 fattorialasonnina.org

📧 lasonnina@virgilio.it

📅 All year

£ Free, but purchase some produce

Masseria Correo, contrada Correo 3, 72012 Carovigno

☎ 0039 831 951899

📅 All year

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Dramatic alpine scenery in the Col de Maddalena