

# In search of the undiscovered

Il Duchesco



It is one thing to visit a place, this is the basis of any holiday or excursion, it is quite another to taste a place, and there are so few destinations left in the world that offer such an experience.

Recently I took up an invitation for a press trip to Tuscany. A region of Tuscany called Maremma to be more exact. Little did I realise, I was going to experience a concept in tourism, completely new to me. The name given to this concept is 'Agriturismo,' and even in Italian the word's meaning is obvious. The merging of agriculture and tourism, to create 'Farmhouse Holidays.' In a region rich in the production of wine, cheese and olive oil, and in almost every instance organic. A region whose land has been un-spoilt, and whose people still hold the traditional values of country life and have ultimate respect for the produce of their land, but most importantly know how to enjoy it. And

share it!

The Nations warm hospitality, mixed with the initiative of their farmers has led to a boom in the area's agricultural industry. It is a sad indictment when we compare this to the state of the English Farming industry at this present moment in time. By comparison producers and agriturismo owners receive tremendous support and encouragement from a council level.

In turn they want to promote the quality of their produce to a wider audience by attracting international visitors. The result is the holiday of every foodie's dream!

The Maremma region, located in southern Tuscany, seems to have

avoided the main tourist trail, making it a relatively undiscovered gem. Its landscape of rolling farmland is luscious and iconic of Tuscany. Central to the region is the capital city and province of Grosseto. An area rich in archaeological sites and stunning architecture. During my visit I was staying in an Agriturismo called Il Duchesco ([www.ilduchesco.it](http://www.ilduchesco.it)), just south of Grosseto, and located within the Parco Naturale della Maremma. An area of outstanding natural beauty; encompassing coastline, mountains, rivers and marshlands. They use their nine hectares of land to grow vines, and olives, all of which are organic, making them a member of the Organic Farm Project in a Natural Park. They produce wine, grappa, olive oil, jams and preserves, a range of beauty creams made from grapes and a selection of salamis. I sampled all of the above, and many I brought home with me. I am normally very generous in my souvenir and gift buying, and although many of the purchases I made with the intention of giving them away to friends and family, very few (well actually none) made it to their intended recipient. Whilst staying at Il Duchesco, I spent three days on a tour visiting some of the producers and agriturismos in the region. This gave me the opportunity to taste some of the finest and most authentic Italian foods I have ever encountered. Everything that crossed my lips over the course of the three days was organic and produced ethically. My first visit was to Caseificio Sociale Manciano, which literally translates to the social cheese factory of Manciano ([www.caseificio-manciano.com](http://www.caseificio-manciano.com)). The factory still actively

Caslesciana



Caseificio Sociale Manciano



uses the centuries old principals and traditions of sheep's milk cheese production.

The landscape of Maremma naturally lends itself to the breeding of sheep and cattle, so in 1961 a group of breeders joined to make a cooperative company, with the aim of increasing the value of sheep's milk in the region. Nowadays there are around 500 partners all supplying milk to the factory. Perhaps most interestingly their share of the profits is not calculated in relation to the quantity of milk they supply, but to the quality of the milk. Ensuring the cheese's excellence.

I was shown around the factory and witnessed every phase of production, from the delivery of milk through to the fermentation period. The factory creates a range of cheeses, both hard seasoned cheese and soft fresh cheese that may only have been in fermentation for 20 days. The tour was finished with a tasting of some of the cheeses, which I devoured with delight. My favorite, the freshly made (still warm) ricotta. Once the cheese of peasants, now it's fit for kings. I was asked by an Italian while digging into my pot of ricotta, "have you tried ricotta before?"

"Yes, in England" I replied.

His response; "Then you have never tried ricotta before!"

He was right!

Following my education in cheese, the rest of the day was spent touring various vineyards. Wine being a subject I am much more knowledgeable on. All the vineyards were also agriturismos, offering very agreeable accommodation, which usually included well-appointed en-suite rooms, breakfast and sometimes restaurant facilities in the

evenings, with a communal swimming pool and other sports and activities. Naturally all the produce made by the establishments is available for sale to visitors.

If like me you are interested in the processes they have used to create their wines, then the owners are always more than happy to give you a tour and teach you a little about what they do. After all they are rightly proud of their products, and want to show them off, and the hard work involved in making them.

I am unable to mention all of the agriturismo's I visited, but briefly, should you find yourself on vacation in this part of Italy, here are my recommendations with regards to agriturismos. Two absolute musts for the wine are Casliscana ([www.caliscana.com](http://www.caliscana.com)), a beautiful and high-class vineyard that produces several wines. The one that most interested me was a white wine called Ansonica, native to the Maremma region. It is quite strong for a white wine at 13%, which is full bodied and tastes of ripened fruits with the mildest hint of flowers. This really is a unique wine you would not find anywhere else in Italy let alone the rest of the World. The second agriturismo I would recommend for a wine tasting is

Podere Castellaccia ([www.poderecastellaccia.com](http://www.poderecastellaccia.com)), and in particular their Morellino di Scansano Riserva. After a year of life this wine is then put into oak casks for 13 months. If you are really lucky the owner may let you sample the wine directly from the

Caseificio Sociale Manciano



tapped oak barrel!

The final agriturismo I would recommend is called Fattoria La Capitana, for its splendid hilltop location, giving panoramic views of the Maremma countryside and coastline. The accommodation here is remarkable, set in a huge 17th Century farmhouse that has retained many of its original features. For example the old oil-mill, which would have been driven by a horse in times gone by, or the stone cellars that have been perfectly preserved and are still used today. They even have an adorable little chapel. This really is the ideal romantic get away. My final day in Tuscany was spent visiting some of the inedible attractions of the region. First on the agenda was to explore the natural park we were staying

Maremma Butteri



Maremma Buttero



in, which meant being introduced to the 'Butteri,' the cowboys of the park. It is their job to tame the wild horses of the area and herd the cattle. It is rumored that once a great challenge took place between the local Butteri, and the cowboys riding with Buffalo Bill, to see who could tame a wild horse first. Naturally the Butteri won! Legend or myth? You decide, but meeting with these enormous and solitary characters gives you the impression they are the true masters of the land, and sets your imagination free to explore their lives. Following my meeting with the Butteri, we went to Marina di Alberese, one of the most beautiful beaches I have ever seen. Unaffected by any form of contamination, and positioned in the midst of a pinewood forest. The result is

Maremma calf



an untouched beach scattered with driftwood, forming a sculpted coastal wilderness, against a roaring Mediterranean Sea. While visiting the beach our host led us a short way into the forest, entering a small clearing with a number of picnic tables, then turned to me, and in his best English said "this afternoon this is your restaurant, pick whatever table you want." He then produced two bottles of wine, both products of one the local Agriturismos. It seems romance and passion comes naturally to the Italians, but in Maremma, they are incredibly laid back also.

From the beach we then visited the site of Roselle, an ancient town of the Etruscan period. A people known for their craftsmanship and merchant skills. The Romans took the city in 294 BC, but today the walls of the city have been very well preserved and make for a fascinating excursion. There is even a Roman amphitheatre that still functions perfectly.

Marina di Alberese



After all this sight seeing there was only one thing left to do. Shopping! Italy is great for many things, but the three that spring to mind instantly is wine, food and fashion. It was time to indulge in some retail therapy, and pick up some Italian rags. This meant paying a visit to the city centre Grosseto. A relatively small city when compared to the likes of Rome and Milan, but what it lacks in size it makes up for in culture and atmosphere. I have visited all of these mentioned cities; Grosseto was the only one that I felt safe as a single woman, to be out and about in after dark.

On a Saturday evening the city becomes a promenade, where the young and old, rich and poor don their finest garments, spruce themselves up and head out for a night on the town. Just walking around trying to absorb some of this Italian way of life is a thrilling experience.

In my short stay in Maremma, I discovered a land that has been unadulterated by modernization, a people whose integrity is unquestionable. Farmers that are not worrying about being squeezed by the supermarkets, in fact they do not want to increase their production, as it will effect the quality of the produce. I have experienced a holiday that offers an authentic taste of Italy, that teaches you the value of fine food and wine, and what it takes to create such riches.

**To find out more about the Maremma region of Tuscany, and Agriturismo then click onto**

**[www.agriturismoverde.com](http://www.agriturismoverde.com) this gives a comprehensive guide to farmhouse holidays in the area.**

*By Paula Clark, Editor*



Roselle