

LOCANDA, TUSCANY

There is something about the soft evening light in Tuscany that casts a lavender hue over the landscape, making you feel like you're in a Giovanni Fattori painting. This is the dreamy scene that greets me and my husband as we drive the twisty, winding roads through the hills of Val d'Orcia for a weekend of wine, pasta and pasticcino at Locanda in Tuscany.

Nestled in a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Siena region (Florence is the closest airport), this rural hideaway is part of the Casas Latinas Collection and is everything you could possibly wish for in a luxury guest house. With just nine bedrooms, it is an intimate, tranquil hideaway that makes us feel so instantly relaxed and at home that we can't help but take a deep exhale, pour ourselves a glass of the region's most sought-after wine, Brunello di Montalcino, and head straight to the pretty outdoor terrace to drink in the magnificent 180-degree views.

The bedrooms at Locanda are simple, but in that low-key, luxurious way that only very stylish people are able to achieve. Some have open fireplaces, others freestanding baths, but all are effortlessly chic in a rustic, unshowy way. Our Grand Deluxe room is spacious and comfortable, with exposed stone walls, terracotta brick floors and linen curtains that billow at the huge shutter-framed windows all adding to the air of Italian romance.

It's not really the rooms that are the scene-stealers here, though: everything is designed to draw your eyes outside to an enticing 20m swimming pool flanked by sunbeds so you can swim, sit and snooze with a spectacular view.

Should you wish to drag yourself away, there is plenty to entertain despite the hotel's remote setting. Verdant valleys are ideal for hiking and biking, you can arrange private yoga and meditation sessions, go truffle and asparagus hunting and even learn to make handmade pici pasta with the local mammas. We decide to head to the medieval spa town of Bagno Vignoni, famous for its hot thermal pools, where we lounge the day away soothing our stressed-out skin in the therapeutic waters. Heaven.

Renting a car is a must here because public transport is non-existent and if, like me, you fancy yourself as the heroine in a Federico Fellini film, I'd suggest you hire a vintage red convertible for the day – and don't forget to pack a silk headscarf and oversized sunglasses.

There are several outstanding restaurants within driving distance of the hotel, but the on-site restaurant, Taverna Di Mozart, in the old stable building, is not to be missed,

serving a delicious breakfast every morning on the bougainvillea-adorned terrace and traditional Tuscan dishes by candlelight at night.

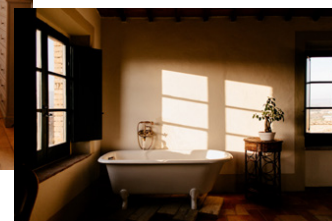
Time stands still in this soothing little haven, and two nights feels like a lifetime. We leave feeling recharged, relaxed and in love with Tuscany. If you are left wanting more – and you will be, I assure you – the whole property is available to hire for weddings, special occasions or just because, so tell all your friends, clear your diary and pack your headscarf.

OONAGH BRENNAN

LOCANDA IN TUSCANY SLEEPS 18 AND COSTS £11,000-£38,000 A WEEK FOR A FULL BUYOUT ACCORDING TO SEASON; VISIT CASAS-LATINAS.COM. HIRE A CLASSIC CAR DURING YOUR STAY VIA BIAGIOTTIDRIVERSERVICE.COM



Above: explore the hot springs of Bagno Vignoni. Left and far left: there are idyllic rural views aplenty from every angle of the guest house



Above: chic vintage decor in the guest rooms lets the glorious balcony view speak for itself. Below: take in the air of Italian romance from the cobbled outdoor patio



PHOTOGRAPHY: MARIA LUISE BAUER