

Destinations

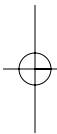


TUSCANY

Chianti Country

THE PLEASURES IN — AND ABOVE — TUSCANY ARE ENHANCED WHEN A NEW PRIVATE SERVICE WHISKS YOU TO ITALY'S LUSH WINE REGION. BY NICK KOLAKOWSKI

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAN SPANIER



Destinations



n early-morning hot-air-balloon ride over Tuscany is like stepping back in time. The mist in the low valleys obscures the sight of electrical wires, the sounds of sputtering Fiats fade to silence and the red-tiled roofs of the villas stand out in sharp relief against the green fields. As you drift quietly in the balloon's wicker basket 700 feet above the Italian countryside, it's as though you've returned to the Renaissance, when a local inventor named Leonardo da Vinci was sketching plans for fantastical flying machines. After floating for an hour according to the wind's capriciousness, with a bird's-eye view of woodlands, vineyards and darting deer, quick blasts from the propane burner lower the gondola. You touch down in whichever farmer's field is handiest for landing, and the colorful pilots of the balloon company, Vastano Mongolfiere, holler in Italian and spread a checkered tablecloth atop the upturned gondola. With a flourish, they pop a bottle of chilled champagne. It's 8:30 on a postcard-perfect June morning. Welcome to Italy.

LA DOLCE VITA

Despite featuring more seating, movie options and bathrooms than a hot-air balloon, summer air travel to Tuscany has typically been a hellish undertaking worthy of Dante. With few direct connections from the U.S., flying to central Italy involved a transatlantic flight to an overcrowded European hub, then a hassle-filled commuter jet to Florence. Erratic schedules, interminable delays and wayward luggage meant passengers weren't exactly in a laid-

back vacation mood upon arrival. Not anymore, though, thanks to Lufthansa's Private Jet service. A partnership that blends the German behemoth's regular long-haul flights with the private services of the Warren Buffett-owned NetJets, the new U.S.-to-Tuscany route is all about posh streamlined convenience: Clients fly Lufthansa's business or first class to Frankfurt, Munich or Zurich, then board a NetJets aircraft that flies them directly to their final destination. There are no delays at customs, and a car service will fetch you on both sides of the Atlantic.

This unlikely union is the result of Lufthansa's expanding interest in the top tier of the aviation market, as more and more customers are willing to pay a premium for perk-laden, stress-free rides. It coalesced as the bottom-line-conscious, 81-year-old airline, the second-largest in Europe, sought to avoid the massive startup costs associated with building a private fleet from scratch. "We stepped in, but in a very low-risk way," says Gerald Wissel, global head of Lufthansa Private Jet. "We found an operator who met our standards. NetJets has homogeneous aircraft, with identical interiors for each, along with the right size fleet."

Lufthansa's largest private jet, the mid-size Dassault Falcon 2000EX, holds 10 passengers and features 184 cubic

feet of baggage capacity. This heft keeps complimentary champagne from so much as fizzing in its flutes when the inevitable Alps turbulence kicks in during the Germany-to-Italy leg. Of course, you never know just how well a service works until fate throws in a rerouting . . . or two. Heading into Florence, high headwinds and a shorter runway force a diversion to nearby Pisa, which in turn refuses to give clearance for landing. The result: The Falcon makes an unexpected, hasty U-turn for Bologna. On a commercial flight, a riot would likely have erupted. But Lufthansa handles the unforeseen itinerary shifts smoothly, making sure our car is waiting at the Bologna airport for the 74-mile drive to Florence and the Villa Mangiacane. Another Lufthansa partnership, the Villa is a heritage-steeped, sixteenth-century estate that has been converted to a five-star hotel offering packages in conjunction with the airline's private-jet service.

The 90-minute chauffeured ride allows time to crack open a copy of *The Prince* by Niccolò Machiavelli, the sixteenth-century Italian political philosopher whose writings on gaining and maintaining power led many to compare him to the devil. A fitting book, considering that the Villa Mangiacane was ini-

THE TERRA-COTTA LOGGIA HAS ALL THE TALL-WINDOWED SUITES AND WIDE-FRESCOED TERRACES THAT COME FROM HAVING EPIC AMOUNTS OF GOLD — AND MICHELANGELO AS YOUR DRAFTSMAN.



FANTASTICO FIRENZE:
(Clockwise from top left)
Villa Mangiacane's infinity pool; house chef Massimo Bocus; the villa's master suite, replete with imperial touches; the Machiavelli family "watchdogs"; just a little something whipped up by the chef



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UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN:
(Clockwise from top left)
Balloons aloft at dawn; the converted blue-jeans mogul discusses his new line of work; a savory dish raised on the neighboring hills; private aircraft beat commuter planes every time; touching up the villa; a bottle of Marco Bacci's Chianti Classico

tially the home of Niccolò's uncle, Cardinal Francesco Maria Machiavelli, himself a skilled power broker. Evidently, the Machiavelli clan's political skill was matched only by their taste in architecture: The Villa, perched on a cypress-shaded hill about eight miles from Florence, sprawls over 247 hectares in the heart of Tuscany's legendary wine-producing region. The imposing terracotta loggia has all the tall-windowed suites, massive wine cellars and wide-frescoed terraces that come from having epic amounts of gold — and (probably) Michelangelo as one of your draftsmen. With 20 hectares devoted to olive groves and another 46 to vineyards, the estate serves its own tangy olive oil and ruby-red Chianti Classico alongside the impressive creations of chef Massimo Bocus.

The Villa's current owner, Glynn Cohen, a Zimbabwe-born entrepreneur and pilot, purchased the sprawling estate seven years ago and set about restoring the then-decrepit property to its former artistic and gastronomic glory. With the first sangiovese, canaiolo, colorino and merlot grapes planted before the deal was even signed — “otherwise we would have missed a growing season,” he explains — Cohen embarked on an ambitious \$30 million overhaul that reversed previous landlords' neglect. In the process, he unearthed the Villa's hidden history, from the frescoes covering the terrace to the World War II relics, including a German helmet and bullets,

rusting in the dirt outside. “Originally, I purchased the Villa to be a personal home, a real-estate investment,” says Cohen, who commutes from his primary residence in Monaco via Eurocopter. “Then it grew.”

The estate's 26 rentable rooms include eight in the main villa and 18 in an adjoining vineyard house. All are luxuriously outfitted with antiques, sculpture (Cohen was instrumental in raising funds for the recent restoration of Michelangelo's David) and distinctive decorating touches — the master suite's onyx-and-marble bathroom, the platform beds in the terrace suites, the vineyard villas with their outdoor showers and plunge pools. Amenities include a Romanesque spa complete with hot-stone massages and dry and wet saunas, plus indoor and outdoor pools. But the Villa uses its environs to greatest effect at mealtimes, with leisurely sumptuous lunches and suppers served in different places each night. You can enjoy hand-rolled gnocchi and fresh tuna within the cavernous wine cellar, on the sun-dappled front lawn or any of the numerous terraces, with their unparalleled view of the maroon dome of Florence's Duomo.

The Villa offers the aforementioned balloon excursions, as well as day trips to Florence, Forte di Marmi and Siena, where millions in dollars and euros change hands on the winning horse at the Palio di Siena, the twice-a-summer race run on a canted dirt track in the central Piazza del Campo. Or

you can simply hike the picturesque countryside, including a jaunt to the hamlet across the road where an exiled Machiavelli spent his later life penning his masterworks.

Oenophiles eager for world-class wine tasting can head to the nearby Castello Di Bossi, the estate of Cohen's friend and occasional business partner Marco Bacci, whose home is a 21-bedroom castle originally on the front lines of the wars between Florence and Siena. Bacci's 650 hectares, 124 of which are under vine, produce nearly a million bottles of chianti a year under the Castello di Bossi label — wine that graces the tables of high-profile restaurants in New York and Miami.

Bacci, who amassed his fortune manufacturing jeans, is living the rat-race dream of abandoning the business world for an idyllic life growing grapes in Tuscany. But it's not easy: Heavy rains or frost can destroy a year's work. “More fun, wine. More profitable, jeans,” Bacci half-jokes during a lunch of grilled venison, courtesy of a deer that made the fateful error of wandering into his prized vineyards. “You are working in a beautiful place, but every time I hear the rumble of thunder . . .”

As Machiavelli himself frequently noted, building and preserving an empire can be backbreaking labor. But a few days spent enjoying the benefits of one — the wine, the accommodations or anything else Tuscany has to offer — now requires scarcely any effort at all.

Trips can be booked by calling the Lufthansa Private Jet Service Team at 888-261-0814. Special packages, until January 2008 (does not include transatlantic air fare):

Small Private Jet round-trip from Frankfurt to Florence, plus deluxe accommodations for two people for three days: \$21,358

Medium Private Jet round-trip from Munich to Florence, with Terrace Suite accommodations for two people for three days: \$25,154

Medium Private Jet round-trip from Munich to Florence, plus deluxe accommodations for two people for five days: \$26,094

Large Private Jet round-trip from Munich to Florence, with Terrace Suite accommodations for two people for five days: \$35,754

LOGBOOK

AIRPORT Amerigo Vespucci Airport, Florence
DISTANCE FROM RESORT 17 miles
FBO Managed by Delta Aerotaxi (phone: 011-39-055-300-450)
FAA DESIGNATION FLR
CONTACT RADIO FREQUENCY VHF 131.425
RUNWAY SIZE 5,538 feet long x 98 feet wide