



FOR decades, Europe's ski resorts measured success in snow-fall. Today, as temperatures soar and winter becomes less predictable, they are finding it in sunshine. Alpine resorts once dependent on skiing are reinventing themselves to attract tourists from May to August. Here's our guide.

BEST FOR ACTIVE FAMILIES

Lech, Austria
THIS pretty village has developed one of the most comprehensive summer programmes in the Alps. The Lech Card is one of the best-value summer passes because it gives access to mountain lifts, buses, guided walks, kayaking, canyoning and archery. If one parent buys a card (from €47 for two days), children aged 14 and under receive one free. **HOW TO DO IT:** Three nights at Hotel Gotthard from €870 B&B in a double room, including two adult four-day Lech Cards (*gotthard.at*).

BEST FOR CYCLISTS

Saalbach, Austria
FEW Alpine resorts have embraced four-season tourism as wholeheartedly as Saalbach, where mountain biking is the big draw. Located just over an hour's drive from Salzburg airport, Saalbach has created one of Europe's most extensive lift-served biking networks. Repurposed to carry mountain bikes, lifts link it to neighbouring villages Hinterglemm, Leogang and Fieberbrunn. Expect gentle forest trails, technical downhill runs and flow trails (designed especially



BY GABRIELLA LE BRETON

Picture perfect: Main, Engelberg is ideal for walkers. Inset: Hotel Saint-Georges, Megeve

with its excellent restaurants, hotels and charming medieval village. Summer mornings here might begin with a gentle climb along the Chemin du Calvaire, a pilgrimage trail winding past 15 tiny chapels towards Mont d'Arbois. At Les Fermes de Marie you'll find a collection of Alpine chalets housing hotel rooms, restaurants and a superb spa. **HOW TO DO IT:** Stay at the boutique Relais & Châteaux Hotel Saint-Georges from €282 a night for two adults, room only (*hotel-saintgeorges-megeve.com*). **BEST FOR WINDING DOWN**
Alpe di Siusi, Italy
SET beneath the jagged

limestone towers of the Dolomites, Europe's largest high-altitude alpine meadow obliges you to slow down. Cars are restricted, encouraging visitors to explore on foot or by bike. Gentle trails weave through hay meadows with wildflowers and past mountain huts. Many hotels offer panoramic saunas, outdoor pools and herbal treatments. **HOW TO DO IT:** Doubles at COMO Alpina Dolomites from €815 B&B including access to the COMO Shambhala spa and classes.

BEST FOR FOOD AND STYLE

Megeve, France
TRANSFORMED into one of France's most glamorous mountain resorts by the Rothschild family in the 1920s, Megeve has long attracted summer crowds

for cruising down hillsides). **HOW TO DO IT:** Hotel Panthera, Saalbach, from €200 per room per night, *hotel-panthera.at*.

BEST FOR WALKING

Engelberg, Switzerland
ENGELBERG has reimagined its summers based on 500km of walking trails that loop around the bustling monastery town. Pick of the bunch is the 45km Buirabahnli Safari, a two- or three-day route that leads hikers deep into a landscape of remote Alpine farms. A hiking pass covers rides on eight tiny private Buirabahnli – farmer-owned cable cars – which ferry walkers between high pastures and deep valleys. You spend each night at family-run farms, sleeping in simple guest rooms and sharing hearty suppers. The trail follows sections of the spectacular Walenpfad high-level walks, through meadows and beneath towering cliffs. **HOW TO DO IT:** Doubles at Ski Lodge Engelberg from €200 B&B (*skilodgeengelberg.com*).

BY ISABEL CONWAY

A dolce vita (the sweetness of life) is Italy in a nutshell – perfect pasta, superlative coffee and gelato, captivating shop window displays, sun-dappled ancient village piazzas, and verdant olive groves and vineyards. 'Have you also heard about "La dolce far niente"?' enquires Gigi, the suave welcoming face of Borgo Pignano, a magnificent hotel property on a huge estate built into the hills of Tuscany. I have the good fortune to rest my head and enjoy Michelin-crowned food over a couple of magical days in this hilltop heaven.

With the looks and sartorial dress style of a matinee idol, Gigi's eyes twinkle as he says I will experience this 'sweetness of doing nothing' while here. Indeed, soon after entering my serene, stylish suite, giving scarcely a glance at the complimentary wine and big juicy strawberries for grazing on, my sumptuous gossamer-soft bed beckons. The fragrant air wafting in from the open shutters lulls me into a kind of trance. I embrace the sweetness of doing nothing while swallows soar and swoop outside to a gentle soundtrack of rustling trees. From my hilltop perch, an enchanting panoramic vista of occasional farmsteads, surrounded by slender

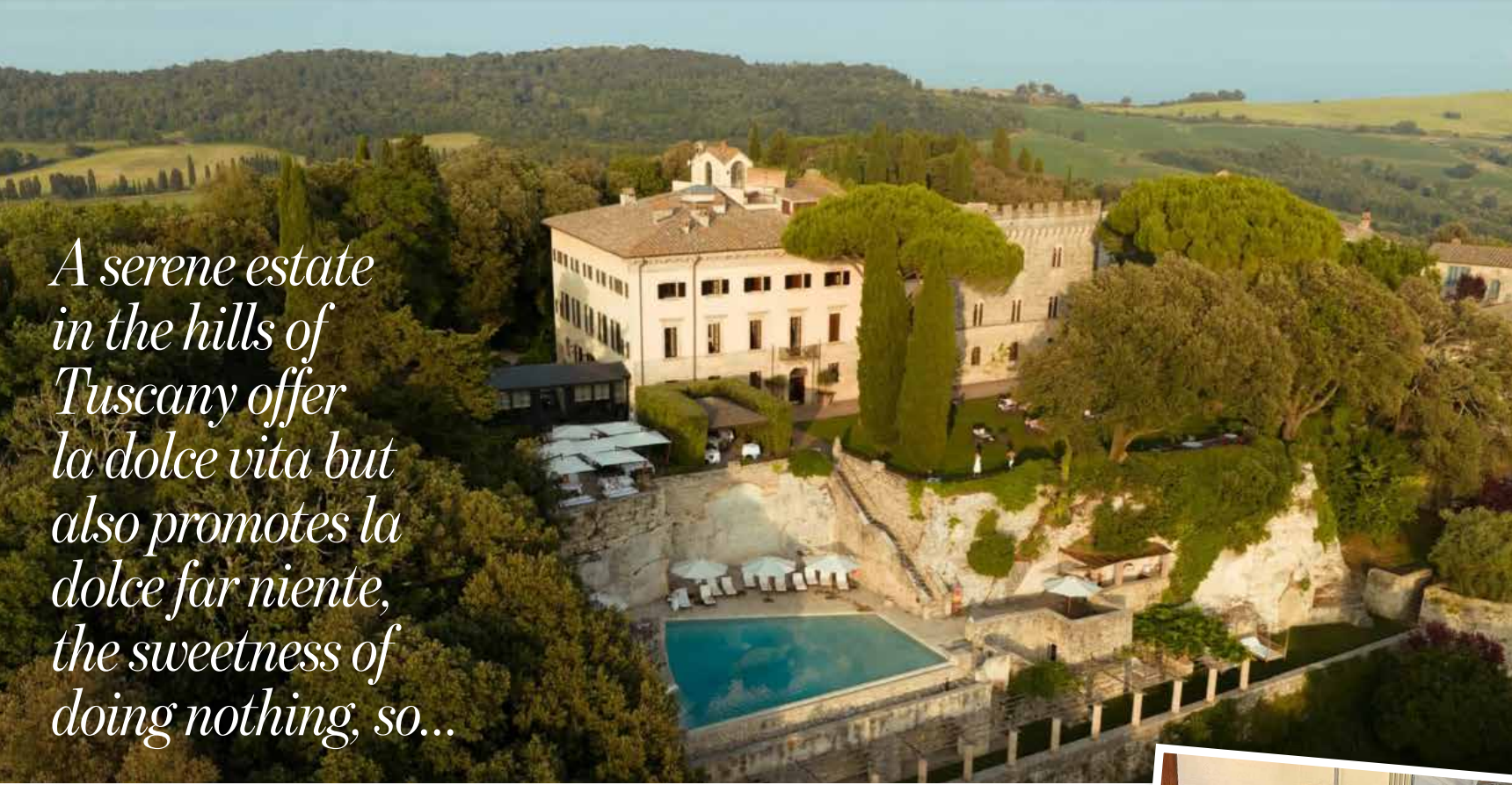


Cypress trees unfolds. Tuscany's rural charm has been immortalised in literature and film, most notably in Under the Tuscan Sun, based on American author Frances Mayes's best-selling memoir that enticed waves of foreigners to descend in search of their own slice of Tuscan nirvana. Property prices went through the roof as a consequence, to the chagrin of outpriced locals. Then You, Me & Tuscany, a feelgood, escapist romantic comedy, was released in April starring Halle Bailey as a naive American who goes to Tuscany on a whim and meets Bridgerton heartthrob Rege-Jean Page. The movie holds audiences spellbound by the Tuscan scenery, showing the loved-up couple cavorting through vineyards and sun-kissed landscapes. After an orange-red sun dips into the Tyrrhenian Sea, I wander outside. The imposing 18th century mansion, gardens, outbuildings, courtyards and cellars, surrounded by high stone walls, once made up the hamlet of Pignano, with records dating back to 1139. As the shadows fall, I can visualise an operatic tragic heroine tripping down the



ancient stone steps beside the church and lofty bell tower for a clandestine assignation with her unsuitable lover. The priest's house – there's a secret door that connects his bedroom with the former church, so as not to be late for Mass – complete with frescos has been converted into a three-bedroom villa. Maisonettes and other luxury villas all furnished in the traditional Tuscan style are scattered about the estate. A splendid staircase leads to 14 individually-furnished lavish rooms and suites in the mansion. Originally settled during Etruscan times, the hamlet of Borgo Pignano was bought over 20 years ago by Welsh-born billionaire venture capitalist and philanthropist Michael Moritz, whose Jewish parents had fled Nazi Germany. Having found the vast, abandoned property, he spearheaded a long restoration of the buildings, transforming 750 acres of neglected farmland into a biodynamic paradise. Think olive groves, vineyards, a self-sufficient food source for the hotel, artisanal breads, pasta, olive oil, honey, preserves, fruits from the orchards, organic vegetables and herbs straight from the

kitchen gardens, and pork and cured meats for farm-to-table menus. Moritz makes a brief unscheduled appearance to look over some renovations in his Relais & Châteaux hotel. Stopping by our table, by now groaning under the weight of assorted starters and accompanying wines in the green Michelin-star Villa Pignano restaurant, he tells how watching the faces of satisfied guests makes him very happy. The 'zero kilometre' cuisine, which includes a signature dish of pappardelle pasta filled with a rabbit ragu, is a delicious take on regional specialities, which also includes a sublime ravioli of wild herbs, robiola cheese and morels mushrooms and duck with rhubarb, beetroot and elderflower on a tasting menu. The buffet and a la carte breakfast feasts are equally divine. Tastings of small batch



A serene estate in the hills of Tuscany offer la dolce vita but also promotes la dolce far niente, the sweetness of doing nothing, so...

SAVOUR THE PAUSE IN ITALY

And... relax: Clockwise from main, Borgo Pignano; Isabel at her soap-making workshop; Some of the fine food on offer; The nearby town of Volterra; A relaxing reading area in Borgo Pignano; and the estate's pool

exclusive organic wines, produced from the estate's vineyards, are savoured. Raffaele Pennetti, the executive assistant manager, worked in Dublin at the Shelbourne and Clarence hotels earlier in his career. We quiz him now on the provenance of that rabbit on the menu. 'It wasn't trapped on the estate,' he says. 'We are very strict on nature conservation and hunting any wildlife, including rabbits and

hares, is not allowed. You will see pheasants, cranes, partridges and more everywhere.' Our talk turns to winter in Borgo Pignano, without lawn terrace cocktails and free scoops of ice-cream that are available all day from a little gelato van in the grounds. 'Bands of rain can sweep in, the wild animals come closer to us, wolves can be heard in the distance and the wild boar are all around,'

he explains. 'We close the gates to stop them rooting the ground up. It's another world, one I also love.' On my first morning, I watch guests don wellies and head off into the forest for wildlife sightings while others choose a horse ride around the estate. There's certainly plenty to do here if you decide to call a halt to 'dolce far Niente', with pasta-making, yoga, truffle-hunting and learning about bee-keeping among

the many activities. I stir myself into action during a soap-making workshop that is interesting and fun. The coming together of smoking caustic soda with lavender essence and various oils and fats is a tad nerve-racking though, reminiscent of science class in secondary school. A swim in the stunningly-situated outdoor infinity-edged pool – carved out of an ancient limestone quarry, thought to have supplied



most of the stone used to build the historic Etruscan gate Porta all'Arco in nearby Volterra – is wonderful. Volterra's most famous sight, the impressive gate, dating from the 4th century, takes on an extra dimension later in the day. A plaque beside it remembers June 30, 1944, when women, children and the elderly ripped up stones paving the gate to prevent Nazi forces from blowing up the town to slow the Allied advance, saving their treasured landmark in a courageous show of defiance. On a walking tour, our guide Claudia shares her passion for unspoilt and compact Volterra. I am smitten by the birthplace of alabaster – a mineral, not a stone, Claudia stresses – exploring one of the most important Etruscan cities 2,000 years ago, before the arrival of the Romans. Unlike other tourist honeypots around Italy, Volterra feels authentic and real, and is small enough to see in a few hours, stopping for coffee or a glass of vino, wandering into medieval piazzas and imposing buildings, and sights like the remarkably intact Roman theatre. A must see also is Artisan Lane (via Porta all'Arco), a steep street lined with shops in which the alabaster craftsmen and artists can be seen carving and polishing their masterpieces. Claudia ends our stroll at famous Isola del Gusto, a small, modest ice-cream shop. Appearances are deceptive, however, as trophies line the shelves, some of Italy's top prizes for artisanal ice-cream and innovative flavours. Generous scoops of wild mint (judged best in Italy) and hazelnut (2025 Tuscan winner) are heaped on to my crispy cone. By now in gelato heaven, I'm truly celebrating where la dolce vita and la dolce far niente meet.

TRAVEL FACTS

Isabel was a guest at Borgo Pignano, located 70km from Florence and 45km from Siena. The nearest airports are Florence and Pisa. A car is essential as there is little public transport nearby. Based on two adults staying in a double room, bed and breakfast from €350 per night. Suites with breakfast through summer months from €954 per night, see *borgopignano.com*.