

# The Hilltowns of Tuscany

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Travelers to Italy rarely go to the countryside on their first visit to Italy. Tourists have traditionally never gotten there. Italy for most calls up images of intensely beautiful and historically-rich CITIES. The most-traveled "tourist" cities in Italy: Venice, Florence, Rome in that order. Traditionally this has been because the cities are reachable by the mode by which most people travel in Europe: by train. Most young travelers get a "Eurail Pass" and check off countries as if they were rides at Disneyland. And this is precisely why Venice is more traveled than Rome by the average tourist: Because the rail tourist comes in through the North and will often skim the top of Italy as a way of checking it off. Even Florence is a bit out of the way I suspect for these folks. So, most people's impression of "Italy" is Venice on a hot August day when there is not an "Italian" in sight. Some memory. Venice in April? Maybe. Rome will always be a destination for travelers because it is, for many, a pilgrimage destination, for them, a meaningful spiritual voyage. Then there are those who travel "through" Italy, mostly on the way to Greece. As a result, it is much later on a return trip that most people ever get to the interior of the country and see one of Italy's greatest assets: its countryside. Until the 1960's in fact Italy was predominately a rural country, with a majority population of farmers and farm-workers. But with the industrialization of Italy after World War II, the people moved off the land and into the cities, most of them never to return.

For decades following this shift, Abandoned farm-houses dotted the landscape, their roofs caving in but their hundreds year old stone walls standing as if the mason had just left. However, this is NOT the Italian countryside you will see now either. It was the countryside that I saw in the early 1980's as I rode "through" Italy on my way TO Greece! In my case however, the bike allowed me to ride the country, to traverse every dip and twist and to take three weeks to get from Genova to Brindisi. It was here that I fell in love with Italy. It was the smells of the road-side that stuck with me as I was too poor during my travels to enjoy much of the local food then. The local wine on the other hand: another story! During this first ride through the country I was struck by the number of abandoned buildings. They seemed to us (I rode with one other mate), majestic. We would stop and walk through them, admiring the way the stucco clung to the stone wall and revealed the masonry beneath. We saw small vernacular, even crude, frescoes of Madonnas, saints, a risen-Christ.

Roof tiles (pantiles) that were baked but not broken. And the color of those walls, reflecting back a way of life suddenly departed. How was I to know then what had caused this and what would later become of these houses.

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There are, however, a growing number of tourists who are now making it into the interior of Italy. These are a different kind of tourist to be sure, but they are tourists nonetheless. They can afford to rent a car, or they are driving down from countries like Germany, Sweden, or Switzerland. But more than any other group it seems



to be Americans who are in Tuscany these days. Why? Because Tuscany, above all other provinces in Italy, was immortalized. It has been for centuries really: Byron and Shelley, Milton, George Eliot, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Virginia Woolf, Ruskin, Somerset Maugham. They all lauded Tuscany as the most beautiful of all Italian places, one to linger in. But it was E.M. Forster and D.H. Lawrence who secured that reputation forever. Forster with one book: *A Room With A View*. It has indeed become both iconic and abused: there is rarely a restaurant in Vancouver (White Spot for instance) that does not have a "Tuscan chicken" or other such dish on the menu. No Tuscan would be caught eating it trust me. In more recent times an American baby-boomer by the name of Frances Mayes was the latest to arrive and write, in glowing, romantic tones, of Tuscany's myriad charms. Her 1996 book "*Under the Tuscan Sun*" was a bomb that went off that brought busloads of tourists to poor old Tuscany and at the same time was merely the mechanism of what was probably inevitable and what coincided with the most recent change of policy in the Italian countryside.

It was a demographic probability that Americans of that generation would "find" Italy as they began to age and desire to travel and enjoy the fruits of their labor. Her book however, seems also (as always seems to have been the case for this lucky generation) to have caught the front end of one trend and the back end of another. At the time when this began to build the countryside was littered with abandoned farm-houses, the original families still holding onto them but having little intention of returning. Indeed many of these houses had been passed down to Italians who had emigrated to America, Canada, Australia, Britain, Argentina and elsewhere during the mass exodus of Italians after the land reforms of the 1950's when the cities simply could not absorb the influx of people from the countryside nor was it possible for all to find work within Italy. As Mayes describes in her 1996 book, there was no shortage of such houses but

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the trick was getting the families to part with them and not go bankrupt paying for a piece of paradise that would require major work to rebuild. Once published however, her book set off a buying frenzy among people abroad who were similarly yearning and entranced by her description of the place as well as the magic and adventure of fixing up one of these old gems. At the same time however, the Italian government offered a way for Italians to re-purpose their properties in the countryside.



Perhaps the ensuing development was more grass-roots than this but in any case, during the 1990's a new form of vacation opportunity for foreigners was introduced that brought money back to the countryside for those who stayed, and for the families who had held on to them (it also of course brought tourists). This seems to have coincided with Italian farm descendants living in the city seeing that they could use the family farm properties in new ways for their own recreation and as a weekend respite from the noise of the cities. It is possible to get to the lowest reaches of Tuscany from Florence in about an hour by car. And it takes similar amount of time to reach from Rome. From this point forward, the vacation property boom was on. Wily merchant-class Italians from the city who could invest, and land-rich but cash-poor old aristocracy families got together and developed tourist apartments from which to explore the Tuscan countryside. And as all of these audiences came together the countryside has been transformed and in ways, revitalized.

The mechanism for this change was the "agroturismo": the turning of agricultural properties into tourist experiences. Suddenly in these broken-down old farm properties workers quarters, barns, working buildings and the villas of the "padrone" (the old land-bosses) were turning into country resorts that could charge the same as a small hotel or pensione in Florence. The Socialist peasants of the "quarto stato" would turn in their graves. In reading Pelizza da Volpedo's, painting the "fourth estate", we see the descendants, not of the families who owned the land, but the workers who toiled on it striking for their rights. I am not sure that this Italian countryside is even remotely in the minds of tourists buying trinkets in Venice, let alone San Gimignano.

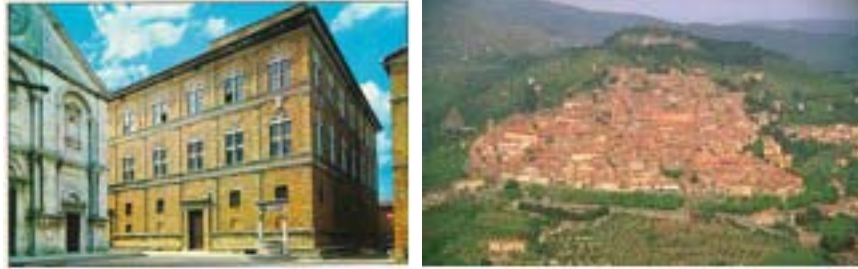
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And so the countryside of Italy is once again undergoing change. Such change is not easy to see in a single visit. The change is incremental and often noticeable only after twenty years. So, at present, Tuscany -once the romantic destination of the few, captured in novels of adventure and romance– has become accessible as never before. And, as with all things: this is good and also not so good.

The Tuscan hill-towns are being visited perhaps as never before. Where before most truly emboldened *tourists* might have made it to Siena and perhaps San Gimignano and the *travelers* might have made it to Montepulciano, now this new breed of car-tourist is to be found en-masse in places as remote as Montalcino and Cortona. Only the remote Maremma region seems still “timeless”, at the moment. And as this change progresses these places are attracting a steadily larger number of cars. And many of these places had never been designed for cars at all. Wine regions and bold varietals across Tuscany such as Chianti, Vino Nobile and Montalcino Brunello have become magnets for wine tourists. Italian wine standards, which have long been uneven, are improving in many places. The agroturismos are filled with such tourists today, and the wineries themselves often boast adjoining apartments, posh kitchens and dining rooms in which to pair their wine and attract purchasers. So, the countryside is beginning to rebuild around wine rather than other crops. Gone is the wheat and rice. In their place; miles and miles of carefully tended vineyards. The Banfi winery near Montalcino, for example, extends for miles in every direction. Italy is today the second largest producer of wine in the world. Thankfully there are places that are just too far in-between (Rome and Florence) and too separated from the motorway and winding roads to be accessible to these various tourists. Pitigliano in the deep Maremma is one of those. Chiusi, ancient stronghold of the Etruscan Confederation, is another. Going to the next level smaller of town: Citta del Pieve, Sant’Antimo, Saturnia, relative peace can still be found. But places as remote as Pienza and Volterra have almost completely given themselves over to tourism in their old centers during some seasons. So why this bleak report?

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Because The Tuscan hill-towns are indeed gems. They are in many ways everything that the novelists have said. They are Italian treasures. For us as students, they are living organisms and examples of urban excellence. They are treasure troves of deep, naturally occurring, pattern languages. They are steeped in affordances at every scale. They are lessons in civiness. For the interaction designer today I would say they are one of the best possible places to study the core discipline of human-centered design.

BUT, they are NOT empty of the plague of treacly mass-tourism. Yet, in almost everything you will read, they are written as if they were Utopia: Etruria reborn. As with most places in Italy today, the lessons are there, but you must have good filters on to see through the other stuff, to get to the lessons. This takes great patience and quiet skills of observation. It takes single-mindedness, and it takes significant focus. But more than anything else, what I have found with students in the past, is that it takes letting go of "romancing" or romanticizing of the place. You can ruin the place by doing so. Frances Mayes, for all of the beautiful prose in her book, "Under The Tuscan Sun" and its follow-up "Bella Tuscany", all of the keen observations, falls into this old trap and seems to love doing so. But I always think of it from the other side: what must ITALIANS think of all of this? What must they think of us making them into adorable, yet mysterious foreigners?

They think WE'RE the foreigners, who act strange. Yet, people who do such writing see Italians as people who do not live modern lives at all. Who seem to be our projections of the romantic Italians we wish to find. There are Italian stereotypes and this kind of writing simply fuels them: one is that Italians are "bumbling". This I have rarely ever found to be the case. Italians are to my mind, at their best, a culture that have resolved the most fundamental of human dichotomies: the efficient and the creative, the art and the science. To my experience and observation, Americans are the worst culprits by far who cannot see the Italy that is before them. But they are of course themselves a cultural stereotype whom many other tourists of many nations, resemble. They do not, I believe, even wish to see it. They wish to have their romance reinforced, and their mythologies kept intact. They wish for the experience

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to be “like home”. They wish to whisk from town to town and “consume it”. They do this by the way they move through it without pause, they do by the way they insist on photographing everything (*and particularly themselves IN FRONT of everything*), they do it by taking no effort to adapt to the local situation, by insisting that all should speak English, by bartering with shopkeepers in a fixed-price establishment (as if it were a third world country marketplace); suffice to say they do it in ways that taxes the patience of the local people and stretch their patience for ALL travelers. After towns like Cortona (the site of Mayes’ book) came to be over-run with this new country tourist, an Italian was moved to write the satirical book, “*TOO MUCH Tuscan Sun*”, in response.



So, an understanding of how Italians are mythologized, and how tourists behave, is important, if we wish to really appreciate these beautiful towns and their equally beautiful way of life. This understanding becomes even more important when we turn our focus from appreciating and enjoying these towns and begin to study, understand, and LEARN from these towns. And believe me, there is much here that we can learn from. What we can learn here that can make better design, and better interaction design specifically. There are age-old patterns here that are under threat, both in Tuscany and in our own cities if we can’t re-humanize the places in which we live and work and which will be lost in other industrialized nations entirely if we don’t learn how to live and how to be human and how, by extension, to humanize the technologies we produce and carry these practices and humanity out into human systems, like the cities and neighborhoods that surround us.

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And to reach this understanding we must make certain that when we look to these towns we do so with our blinders removed. This is not a situation for rose colored glasses. The study (the results of which continue in the paper that follows this one) is meant to find and understand how these towns operate and live. It is meant to find what is great about the way these towns are and find the ways that this can be applied in other endeavors but this is done with the awareness and acknowledgement of the fact that these towns are not perfect and that they are not perfectly preserved pieces of the old ways, nor should they be. These towns, and the buildings within them, are centuries old. Many of them built upon the foundations of towns more than a millennia older than that. But they are not museums. These are thriving, contemporary, and highly urban spaces. And it is in this balance between the past and the present, this mixture of ways old and new and the preservation of humanist planning and design that we went there to study. And it is with this set of filters and with this context in mind that we hope people will look at this region and the ideas we have brought back with us having studied it.