

DRIVE TOUR

# TOURING TUSCANY

BOTTICELLI AND BENTLEY ARE AN IRRESISTIBLE COMBINATION.

*LUXURY TRAVEL MAGAZINE* TOURED RENAISSANCE TUSCANY IN THE WORLD'S MOST LUXURIOUS COUPE.

STORY BY SAM TINSON







Villa Mangiacane



Ancient Italian hill towns are no place for monumentally large luxury motorcars. This is the conclusion I reach as I inch the gleaming snout of a massive Bentley Brooklands coupe around yet another hairpin Tuscan corner. Swerving to avoid an old signora who could have stepped right out of an olive oil advert, I almost flatten a tiny Fiat coming in the opposite direction. Crazy Italian drivers! I reach for the horn, and then realize I'm driving on the wrong side of the road again.

In a trip that harks back to the golden age of the Grand European Tour, when young English aristos barreled around Europe in big cars soaking up fine art and fine wine and planning their next novel, Bentley have invited me to experience Renaissance Florence from behind the wheel of their latest luxury behemoth. So far, despite the occasional close call with a 16th century wall, it's been a hoot. It's hard not to have fun in a Bentley, and the hand-assembled Brooklands, a snip at just under \$700,000, is the most luxurious and powerful model ever to sport the famous 'Flying B'.

Only five hundred Brooklands are being made, which is why I'm a little bit nervous about prancing this one. It's actually a relief when someone else takes the wheel, allowing me to lounge in the back in a silent cocoon of hand-stitched leather and polished walnut, watching the villas, vineyards and olive groves of the Florentine hinterland roll by. We're in the heart of 'Chiantishire', so called because of the heady red wine for which this region is famous, and the number of wealthy Brits who have settled here in restored Renaissance piles.

One of these is the Villa Cetinale, a pink-stoned pocket palazzo of such eye-popping beauty it makes me want to cry, or learn Italian, or both. Built in 1651 for Cardinal Fabio Chigi (later promoted to Pope Alexander VII, no less) Cetinale was

more recently home to the late Lord Lambton, the British politician ousted from office in 1973 amid a scandal involving two prostitutes, some cannabis and several photographs in the tabloid newspapers. Whitehall's loss was Cetinale's gain. Under the Lambton's care, the villa's celebrated frescoes, statues and classical gardens (devoid of illegal plants, I might add) were restored to their former glory. And unlike many renovated properties in

the region, it was not forced to suffer the indignity of modern trappings. In fact Cetinale's current owner, Lambton's son, still makes do without hot running water (no doubt on the premise that if it was good enough for a pope it's good enough for him).

Back in the Bentley we drive, or rather waft, to the historic walled citadel of San Gimignano to wander the cobbled alleyways, jaws agape at the town's famous stone towers. Built by aspiring 13th century locals anxious to keep up with the Joneses, the towers grew progressively taller and more elaborate over the ages, and now San Gimignano boasts a uniquely Tuscan answer to the Manhattan skyline.

Tuscany's hill towns are not to be sniffed at, but for the full jaw-on-the-floor Renaissance experience we head for Florence, and a private after-hours tour of the Uffizi gallery. Without the crowds the Uffizi is an awe-inspiring place (it was originally built as a palace after all) but even amid such opulence, masterpieces like Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* hold their own. That painting's natural luminescence, our guide explains, is down to the undercoat of crushed marble applied by the artist to give Venus her ethereal zing. Six hundred years on, she still dazzles. We move through the frescoed corridors, our guide reeling off a roll call of Renaissance masters. Many of the paintings are striking in their familiarity, so often have they been reproduced, but there's nothing like standing face-to-face with the real thing. You ▶

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Florence Mangiacane Suite

can see the craggy areas where the artist has piled on paint, and the smooth, semi-translucent plains where colour has been draped like silk. Most marvellous of all is how the painters of that era mastered the illusion of light; it shines from every frame, tugging you toward it. The urge to reach out and touch these masterpieces is almost irresistible.

Between rooms 25 and 34 we come to a door, normally kept locked, but open tonight. Stepping through we enter the Vasari Corridor, the famous elevated passageway linking the Palazzo degli Uffizi to the Palazzo Pitti on the other side of the Arno river. The corridor can only be visited by special arrangement, so this is a rare treat. Built by the Uffizi's architect, Giorgio Vasari in 1564 to mark the wedding of Grand Duke Francesco I de' Medici to Giovanna of Austria, the enclosed walkway is carried aloft on huge arches along the banks of the Arno and over the Ponte Vecchio (I'd always wondered what secrets the buildings on that bridge hid), before meandering between private homes to emerge, in something straight out of *The Da Vinci Code*, via a small wooden door in the side of Michelangelo's Grotto. We walk for almost a kilometre, passing some 700 paintings usually hidden from the public eye. Most are self-portraits by famous masters, but there are other oddities, such as the works damaged by the infamous mafia car bombing of the gallery in 1993. Perhaps best of all are the extraordinary views of Florence from the little round portholes on the Ponte Vecchio. Peering through them, it's easy to imagine the Grand Duke keeping a watchful eye on his subjects passing below.

#### TOP TEN

For the best Tuscan hill towns go to [www.luxurytravellmag.com/topten](http://www.luxurytravellmag.com/topten)

The Vasari Corridor is a tough act to follow, but thankfully Tuscany has no shortage of marvels. Our bed for the night is at Villa Mangiacane, a 16th century villa located high in the vineyards and olive groves of the Arno Valley. Once the ancestral home of the Renaissance philosopher and politician Niccolò Machiavelli, the villa is now a luxury hotel and spa. Our suite is vast, occupying an entire wing of the villa. It has its own steam room, two bathrooms, a mezzanine gallery and a Jacuzzi complete with ornate pillars and a cupola. The bed, constructed from wrought silver, is big enough to accommodate our Bentley, and so high it requires a short flight of steps to access it.

Legend has it that Michelangelo himself had a hand in Mangiacane's design, which would explain the magnificent view from the villa's frescoed loggia. A path through the Winter yards leads the eye directly to a gap in the hills, through which the unmistakable terracotta breast of Florence's famous Duomo, the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore, is visible 11km distant. It's views like this that will keep me returning to Italy again and again. Although perhaps in a slightly smaller car next time. ■

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