

Lots to love in Tuscany: bruschetta at La Chiara di Prumiano

Tuscany's **Treasures**

Uffizi Gallery **FLORENCE**

Home to the world's finest collection of Renaissance paintings, the Uffizi is probably the one sight you should see in Florence if you see no other. To avoid the long entrance lines year-round, reserve a pretimed ticket in advance at firenzemusei.it.

Il Campo SIENA

Intimate and manageable, this medieval walled city south of Florence is crammed with culture. II Campo is the sloping, scallop-shaped square at its heart, where the annual Palio horse races take place. Branching from there, narrow cobblestoned lanes are lined with shops selling Florentine stationery, rainbow mounds of gelato, and other Tuscan goods.

Campo dei Miracoli

In Pisa's central piazza (square), the Leaning Tower survived World War II bombs that ravaged the rest of this Tuscan city of science and learning (Galileo was born here). Visits to the Leaning Tower, which involve climbing 294 steps, must be reserved online 12-20 days in advance at opapisa.it.

Wine Tasting

CHIANTI

Many small wineries in the Chianti region between Florence and Siena offer short, informal tastings and tours. Find a winery with a sign saying Vendita Diretta ("direct sales") or Degustazioni ("tastings").

Adapted from the National Geographic Traveler guidebook Florence & Tuscany.

Visit Tuscany with Nat Geo

The 10-day itinerary for National Geographic Expeditions' "Inside Italy" trip includes visits to the Tuscan cities of Pisa, Lucca, and Florence. For details go to natgeoexpeditions.com.

day, as we reluctantly pack up our room, Jackie declares, "You are both very generous people."

here is one last thing I need to do to round out my soul-searching week: find Venus. Florence is the birthplace of the Renaissance, the cultural shift that introduced diplomacy to politics, observation to science, and perspective to art. Perspective is exactly what I've come to seek.

One of the oldest museums in the world, the Uffizi displays works by Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Caravaggio. But I go straight to Botticelli's "Birth of Venus."

Reaching this moment has taken me five years, 4,366 miles, four airplanes, and the synchronization of a yoga retreat. I sit on a bench directly in front of the enormous painting, and my field of vision is filled with ... buttocks. Tourist buttocks of all shapes and sizes.

I catch glimpses of the seafaring, voluptuous goddess with alabaster skin and Rapunzel hair. Art critics have deemed Venus's elongated proportions "anatomically improbable" and her pose "impossible," as she would certainly tip over her shell and face-plant into the sea. It's also true that her dark outline and lack of shadows renders her flat, like a sticker you can peel. Everything in the painting is moving, fluttering. Yet Venus herself looks as calm as the clamshell she rode in on.

Note to self: Be calm.

Next, I notice her gaze. She is looking toward us, but her eyes indicate that her thoughts are far, far away.

Go inward, I think.

How to decipher her expression? A slight smile plays upon her lips, but her eyes look wistful. Is she happy? Sad? Homesick? Tender is the best I can surmise.

Be tender.

Shocking display of white skin, belly gently rounded. Be authentic, vulnerable, and brave.

Eventually I rise to leave. No dramatic "aha" moment, but one can't argue with the subtle wisdom. I make my way through the throngs for a close-up good-bye. As soon as I draw near the canvas, my head fills with one word. It's as if the volume of my female intuition is turned to its highest setting. "Love!"

I want to smack the painting. Venus drags me all the way to Florence to tell me the secret to life is love? Doesn't everyone know that? Can she be a bit more specific? No. Venus sticks to her monosyllabic script. "Love, love, love, love, love, love."

As I leave the Uffizi, it hits me. Venus didn't let me down at all. She simply finished my soul's incomplete question: Can you receive...love?

MELINA BELLOWS (♥@melinabellows) is National Geographic Partners' Editorial Director for Kids and Family. Contributing photographer CATHERINE KARNOW (@@catherinekarnow) leads photo workshops in Italy.

Better Living on a Scale From... BY JENNIFER BARGER **ILLUSTRATION BY** JAMES TAYLOR **Experiences** that Provide a Mental and Physical Reboot



QUEBEC CITY, CANADA

Recently opened in the heart of Old Quebec, Le Monastère des Augustines offers the serenity of a convent but with options for yoga and scrapbooking thrown in. The 65-room wellness retreat is partly housed in the restored cloister of the Augustinian Sisters, health care pioneers who founded here, in the 17th century, the first hospital in North America outside of Mexico. monastere.ca/en

2 Honor Your Mother

Before journeying up to the Inca

AGUAS CALIENTES, PERU

ruins on Machu Picchu, give your mother a call. Mother Earth, that is. At traditional "payment to the Earth" rituals at Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel (one of the National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World), a shaman helps guests honor Pachamama (Mother Earth) by burning a gift-wrapped package that includes coca leaves, a llama fetus, sweets, and confetti. The two-hour ceremony pays tribute to the apus (mountain gods). "I'm not a spiritual person, but when the shaman bundled things together and put them in the fire," says Noa Artzi-Weill, who participated in the ritual this year, "I was moved." natgeolodges.com

3

TAKE THE WATERS

BATH, ENGLAND

This British town's mineral-rich geothermal waters are purported to increase endorphins and reduce joint pain. The Celts and Romans wouldn't have used those exact words to explain their attraction to this area centuries ago, but they might still feel at home at the new Gainsborough Bath Spa, with its Doric columns and mosaic tile. www.thegainsboroughbathspa.co.uk

4 Decompress in the Desert

MERZOUGA, MOROCCO

Think of it as a sand bath. During the sweltering months of July and August, blue-turbaned Berbers dig bathtub-size holes in the ocher Sahara sand, wait for the grains to heat up in the sun, and then bury customers up to their necks. Participants stay in the ground about 10 minutes, and afterward are wrapped in blankets for an hour and rehydrate with tea. The sweaty sauna-like treatment soothes muscles. Most hotels in the area, including the castle-like Ksar Merzouga, can organize a bain de sable. ksar-merzouga.com/en

WALK ON TREETOPS

UPSTATE NEW YORK

Get a bird's soaring perspective on the Adirondacks via the new Wild Walk, an elevated, bridgelike boardwalk, ranging from two to four stories high, that winds through the forest canopy. Along the way, visitors get a peek at surrounding mountains, lounge in a human-size spider web, and play in a twig tree house. wildcenter.org Yoga Mash-ups

MONTANA AND SWITZERLAND

Yoga classes are flowing off the

mat. In winter, Montana's Ranch at Rock Creek (one of the National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World) offers "snowga." Participants cross-country ski or snowshoe up to higher mountain elevations, then—with boots and snowshoes on and skis offpractice warrior and mountain poses in the snowpack, which is sticky enough that mats aren't necessary. At the historic Gstaad Palace in the Swiss Alps, "woga" classes take place in a heated pool where instructors hold yogis up during seated positions so they're never fully submerged. natgeolodges.com, palace.ch

MOUNTAIN HIGH

Fly-fishing expeditions and backcountry camping are just some of the natural stimulants in Mealy Mountains National Park Reserve. Now the largest park in Eastern Canada, the 4,131-square-mile wilderness is co-managed by native Innu tribes, who also run Park Lake Lodge, which can only be reached via seaplane. Guests there bunk in rustic rooms and when they aren't trying to land the big one, they can take part in Innu-led craft lessons, such as learning how to make hide boots. parklakelodge.com

8Two-Wheel Safaris

SOUTH AFRICA AND SWAZILAND

Safarigoers use cycling legs, not jeeps, on African Bikers' small-group tours, which pedal past zebras, hippos, and impalas amid the dramatic granite peaks and soothing grasslands of the Milwane Wildlife Sanctuary, in Swaziland. Daily rides range from 11 to 37 miles and cruise through Zulu villages and Kruger National Park in South Africa, and along the Indian Ocean shoreline. Get out of the saddle for visits to crafts collectives and Durban's Indian spice market. africanbikers.com

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HEAVENLY HIKE

VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

The 64-mile Great Ocean Walk meanders through deserted beaches and the Otways rain forests, before ending in view of the offshore limestone stacks known as the Twelve Apostles. Hikers might spot kangaroos, wallabies, or whales. Do the whole trail in about a week (there are campsites along the way), or just portions via a guided trip. visitgreatoceanroad.org .au/greatoceanwalk

Waves of Wellness

SUMBA ISLAND, INDONESIA

Surfers travel the world in search of those adrenaline-inducing perfect waves. At Sumba Island's Nihiwatu resort, fronting the Indian Ocean, "there's a juxtaposition of trade winds, swell direction, and distance from storms," says part-time surfing instructor Terry Simms. "It creates some of the smoothest and most undisturbed swells in the world." Experienced boarders tackle Occy's Left, a barreling, long left break; beginners can take lessons using rental equipment. Guests can stay in thatch-roofed villas that mimic traditional Sumbanese houses. nihiwatu.com

DANCE AT DAWN

MULTIPLE CITIES

Daybreaker, a series of early a.m. raves launched in New York, brings booze-free yoga and DJ-fueled dance parties to nightclubs. The clean fun can be found in London, Paris, Washington, and soon, Shanghai and Hong Kong. They're powered by green juice and fair-trade coffee. "I love that you see all shapes, ages, and sizes dancing and smiling," says D.C. fan Deepa Venkataraman. dybrkr.com

D.C.-based writer and fashion stylist JENNIFER BARGER can be found on Twitter and Instagram at @dcjnell.

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