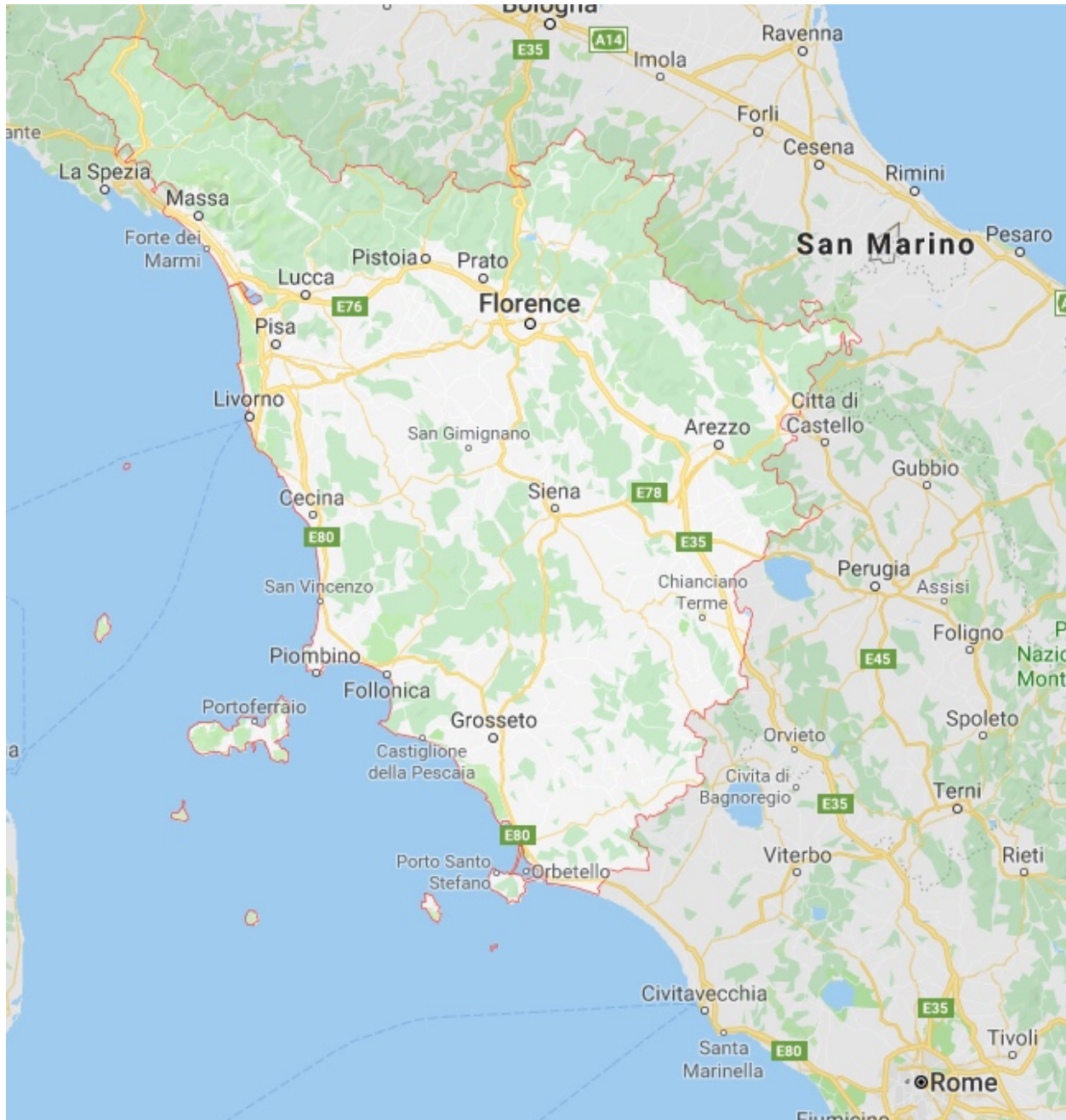


TUSCANY TRAVEL GUIDE – LOGISTICS AND ITINERARY



Oh Tuscany. This place, I can't even. I wanted to be above it and "more traveled" to love such an obviously awesome but overly visited place, but ugh it's just amazing!! Probably top three favorite places I've ever been, and we are already planning on making it an annual trip while we live in London.

Please note that I will not be including Florence in this guide even though Florence is technically in Tuscany. I have never been! Hopefully soon I will be able to go and write a guide on it. Look how big Tuscany is!!



SHOULD I VISIT TUSCANY?

If you love nature / relaxing in nature / wine / food, then this place has the best of all of the above. The rolling hills with Tuscan cypress trees, lush landscapes, and old towns perched on hilltops are so beautiful to drive through. The people are honestly super nice. The food and wine is so fresh and celebrated. The villas (at least ours) are something completely out of a dream or movie. You'll find yourself overwhelmed with how beautiful it all is, how much you want to see it all, and how little you want to leave every location you go.

Tuscany might not be the right destination (or at least you probably won't love it as much as we did) if you don't have much time because the beauty is in enjoying it slowly. If you are a go-go-go type person who gets bored with the same thing over and over again (wine tastings, food, relaxing), then you will also be happy with all the culture and history that these towns hold – from Florence to Siena and all the other

towns in between. There are museums and art galleries and lots to see. I do think the beauty in Tuscany is more in the nature and landscape and I wouldn't go out of the way to see the museums in the small towns (except Florence), but you do you.

Tuscany is a great area to tack on to your northern Italy vacation or even southeast France. Add Tuscany onto Florence, Venice, Milan, Rome, **Cinque Terre**, or **Lake Como** in Italy and **Provence** or **French Riviera** in France.



WHAT TIME OF YEAR SHOULD I VISIT TUSCANY?

At least at our villa, everything shuts down from about November – March. We went in April and the vines were all dead, just about to start spreading their first leaves. So I imagine that as the summer goes on, it gets more green and beautiful. In April too, the weather was beginning to be pretty warm. I wore a dress / skirt during the day with a light jacket at night. As you get into July and August, temperatures are in the 80s and 90s. Mid-September to October is harvest season and according to the webs, the best time to visit (probably also the most expensive).

HOW DO I GET TO TUSCANY?

Coming from the US, Tuscany will probably be part of your grand Italian tour – so you'll be coming from any other city including Rome, Florence, Pisa, or Venice. I am going to highly recommend that you rent a car in any of these locations and drive to Tuscany. Driving in Italy is very easy and intuitive – you just need Google Maps and a partner to help navigate.

When renting a car anywhere in Europe, you must reserve as far in advance as possible if you do not know how to drive Manual. Pretty much all Europeans drive manual so that's what most of the rental cars are. Automatic cars will run you 4-5x as much as manual cars, and they are in shorter supply. Expect to pay about 30 euros a day on a basic rental car, but make sure you check that box for automatic.

We used Thrifty in Tuscany out of Pisa and had a great experience with them. We booked them through Ryanair when we booked our flight, but I usually use Kayak to book my rental cars or my corporate discount with a few larger ones (check if you have a corporate discount, it can save you tons).

Pisa is a smaller airport, so when we landed we could either take a shuttle to the rental car facility or just walk there which took about 10 minutes. We walked. We got a brand new Fiat 500L that was very large with USB ports and a touch-screen – very pleased!

Use Kayak to search for rental cars.

Check out flights to Italy.

IS THERE A LANGUAGE BARRIER IN TUSCANY?

Not at all. Italian accents can be a little hard to understand, and at one restaurant we were assigned the waitress that spoke English, but other than that everyone spoke English.

WHERE SHOULD I STAY IN TUSCANY?

Highly, highly, highly recommend the villa that we stayed at, **Fontelunga**. Favorite place ever (coming in a close second or tie was our cute little place in **Cinque Terre**, ugh... Italy). I found it through **Mr. and Mrs. Smith**, and it will be very hard to go back and not stay here again. The grounds were so beautiful, the hosts were fun and nice, the group dinners on Friday and Tuesday (for a fee) were so fun. I totally felt like I was at someone's house, grabbing my own water glass for water from the sink in the morning with my breakfast spread on the kitchen island, pouring myself some wine in the evening and writing it down on the honesty sheet, the hosts booking my Easter Sunday dinner reservation for me down the street at a place that I never would have found online but was one of the best and cheapest meals we had.





We were a ~30 minute drive to Pienza (our favorite town) and Montepulciano with lots more towns around us that we didn't visit. The "downside" is that if you want to visit Chianti specifically is that we were a 1 hour drive away, but that's why you have a car!!! And then you can drive through the beautiful rolling hills!!

If you don't want to stay where we were, or maybe you have more people and want a bigger house, I do not really think that location matters. I would be somewhere close-ish to Chianti if it's your first time as you will probably want to visit those wineries and restaurants, but really any location will be great.

Look at other properties on Mr and Mrs Smith

Look at AirBnBs

Look at other hotels on TripAdvisor

HOW DO I GET AROUND TUSCANY?

As mentioned above, you will drive everywhere. Probably your biggest question when it comes to driving in Tuscany, as was mine, is how do I drive and drink wine? The answer is either trading off designated drivers or being smart about it. Time moves slowly in Tuscany and you will be spending a lot of time at each destination. For me, this meant enjoying a small glass of wine over the course of the three hour lunch, three hour winery tour, or four hour dinner. By the time we were ready to go to the next spot, I was totally fine. Use your judgment, and if that doesn't feel fine to you, then don't drink at all or spit into the buckets on the table.

Driving on the narrow roads through the hills is definitely the most beautiful way to see Tuscany, but it can be stressful with the switchbacks and low line-of-sight. Just make sure you are awake, alert, and you have a partner guiding you on GPS. I really enjoyed it, but I enjoyed it more and more each day as I became comfortable.

If you're not a comfortable driver, you will probably want to stick to the highway. There are tolls on either side of entering and exiting the highway. When you enter the highway, you just hit a button to get a ticket kind of like how you would entering a parking garage. When you exit the highway, you will pay for the amount in coins, but there is also an option for cards on some of the exits. The machines do take big bills and give change which is nice.

I know there are transportation options in Tuscany as well if you really hate driving and want to stay at your villa the whole time with small trips. You would just need to do some research. You can do guided or private group wine tours or just get a driver when you need one.

Use Kayak to search for rental cars.

HOW MANY DAYS SHOULD I SPEND IN TUSCANY?

I don't say this about all locations, but this is definitely a location where you want to stay a while. I could easily spend a week here, so if you are just passing through or doing a day trip from Florence, you won't quite get the same magic. You will check it off the bucket list, but you'll be hoping to come back one day and stay longer. So Tuscany might not be the right destination (or at least you probably won't love it as much as we did) if you don't have much time.

We stayed for three nights, but next year we will probably extend that a day (though I wish we could extend it a week).

WHAT IS THERE TO DO IN TUSCANY?

EAT FOOD

See "Where do I eat?" below. It's a big one.

DRINK WINE

Gosh there are so many wineries in Tuscany. Since we had two days, I planned on splitting it into Chianti and not Chianti. Siena is the split between Chianti and Not Chianti. North of Siena to Florence is generally the Chianti region, and the area south of Siena to Montepulciano is generally everything else. South of Siena they make Brunellos, Super Tuscans, Vino Nobile. All of them are still made from sangiovese, but slightly different climates. Anyways, I think the way I split it is a nice way to see different regions, though admittedly we lounged by the pool too long our second day to get to a winery so I can't attest to what they are like.

Side note on wine: if you are new to the European wine game, let me tell you a little bit of knowledge I have picked up. In the US, we drink a pinot noir or a cabernet sauvignon, but in Europe, their wines are based off of the regions they come from. So Chianti is a region. Chianti wine is made of sangiovese grapes, mostly. So in the US, if you order a glass of Sangiovese wine, it will have the same grapes as a chianti. I hope that makes sense.

When you google "what winery to visit in Tuscany", you will get 1,000 articles all with different suggestions of the "best wineries in Tuscany". I'll try to aggregate below the ones I saw mentioned the most for you to pick from.

POPULAR CHIANTI

Antinori del Chianti Classico – largest producer in Chianti, modern design winery (huge), expensive tastings (4 Euros per tasting!)

Barone Ricasoli – most think the best chianti around, italy's oldest wine estate (it's in a castle)

Fattoria La Loggia – dates to 1427 with panoramic view of Chianti hills

Ruffino – you're probably familiar with this label in the US, lovely grounds

Villa Pomona – old rambling stone buildings in woodlands, smaller

Azienda Agricola Montefioralle Winery – small winery which is where the charm lies

POPULAR NOT CHIANTI

Castello Banfi – also a major tourist winery, supposed to be beautiful surroundings

Avignonesi – supposed to be beautiful, our hotel hosts' favorite winery in tuscany

Salcheto – beautiful views, biodynamic winery

Biondi-Santi, Tenuta Il Greppo – supposed to be the best Brunello di montalcino in tuscany

NOT AS POPULAR

So honestly I don't even know how I found this place when I was researching, but we ended up spending our day at **Fattoria Viticcio** in Chianti. It was beyond beautiful and that's all I really wanted. It's also organic. I think all the wine in Italy is good so I don't really know how to differentiate between really good and just good. Our tour was very relaxed and beautiful and we actually played soccer in the lawn after and read books before heading to dinner. So don't spend too much time looking at the lists of where to go. Just pick one and I'm sure it will be beautiful. Our tour and tasting was 25 Euros each, for reference.





HOW TO BOOK IT

So once you have a short list of places to go, then you have to see if they're even open or booked up. What I did was call or email each place and ask if they 1) did tastings – how much did it cost, what days were they open, what time was the tasting 2) had an option to do just tastings without a tour (bigger places probably will but not smaller ones). That narrowed some down a lot, especially since I was going over Easter and lots of places were closed. A lot of places that I called only had 1-3 times available, so once you have that booked then you can work your lunch reservation around that. Also note that some of the wineries allow you to eat there and some of them even have guest rooms to stay at.

DRINKING AND DRIVING

Check out my note in the “How do I get around?” section above on this.

EXPLORE TOWNS

So this is a big part of Tuscany too. Someone gave me good advice before I went on my trip. He said, “all the towns are the same, don't waste your time trying to see them all, just pick a few and enjoy them”. Which was true and not true. Yes, all the towns are made of the same stone. They're generally made up of one street with most of the shops with alleys coming off of them. They're on top of a hill. The shops are solely restaurants and tacky tourist shops and gelato places. But the thing that differentiates each town are the views you get from each of them! My husband was actually the one to point out how unique the views were from each town and that's what made them special.

Throughout our stay we visited San Gimignano, Lamole, Greve in Chianti, Panzano, Pienza, and Montepulciano. We enjoyed Pienza the most because of the views. It was just incredible. San Gimignano is the most touristy with Montepulciano a close second (Montepulciano had prettier views than San Gimignano, and driving up to Montepulciano was so dreamy). Greve in Chianti had nothing, Lamole had the lunch place we went to below, and Panzano was actually very beautiful too and was where we had dinner. I'll put pictures of each town in the food section below.

I don't have much more to say than enjoy wandering around, get some wine, get some gelato, find the views, don't try too hard to find cute, trendy shops because you won't find them, but don't bother yourself trying to see too many towns at once.

Note that in the towns, you usually can't drive through the town so you will park in a parking lot and then walk in. Just look for the big blue P sign. In San Gimignano and Pienza we had to pay – but something like €4 each.

I should note here too if you don't read the rest of my blog that my husband and I are admittedly travel hedonists who don't tend to seek out the museums or art galleries in a place. So though I believe Siena would be full of these, we skipped it because we were seeking views.

HOT SPRINGS

Google “[Saturnia Hot Springs](#)” and you will see a very instagrammable hot springs situation in the south of Tuscany. Once I saw this, I really wanted to go check it out. After doing some research, I decided that it was way too far from our villa or any of our other plans, we would probably smell like Sulphur for the entire 2 hour drive back home in wet bathing suits, and I would probably pass. BUT if you happen to be closer to this, I am sure it would be a fun thing to do!

I did look up other hot springs, but they didn't look as pretty and with no websites I had no idea if you had to pay, if they were open, if there were showers/lockers, or anything. So I decided not to drive the 1 hour and risk rejection. But for your information, they were Bagno Vignoni and Bagno San Filippo.

WHERE DO I EAT IN TUSCANY?

This is top priority for me anywhere I go, and Tuscany just makes it really easy. All the produce and ingredients are made nearby so everything is fresh and flavorful. The ingredients most celebrated in Tuscany are pecorino cheese, cured meats (charcuterie / cheese board + wine, duh), truffles, seasonal vegetables (it was fava beans in April), white beans, tomatoes, and florentine steak.

One thing to note is that lunch is generally from 12 – 2:30 and all the restaurants close for siesta until dinner service starts again around 7 PM. If you get to a town looking for lunch at 2:30, you will find touristy options open for service, but we found that places with charcuterie boards and paninos were the spot to go for that late lunch.

You probably will have the question, especially if it's your first time to Italy, on whether you need to order a primi and secondi, or can just order one. Most Americans just want the pasta, the primi. At our lunch and dinner meals that were real meals, we both ordered a primi and split a secondi. I can report though that the table next to us at our last dinner were all Italians and they each got one antipasti (appetizer) and one main meal from either primi or secondi. So if they did that, you can too.

CHEF'S TABLE RESTAURANTS

If you love food, you've probably watched Netflix's **Chef's Table**. It's awesome. Season 1 feature Massimo Bottura's **Osteria Francescana** in Modena, Italy. This is actually outside of Tuscany, north of Florence. But if you're dying to go there, I recommend booking months in advance, saving up, and tying it to your Tuscany trip!

The latest season, Season 6, featured Dario Cecchini, a famous butcher and restaurateur in Panzano (which IS in Tuscany). We happened to watch this episode two days after it was released on Netflix.

Since we already had our Easter trip to Tuscany booked, I went online and filled out a form for a reservations and got it! This place was so much fun. Please watch the episode but basically Dario is a CHA-RAC-TER.

The restaurant we went to, **Officina della Bistecca**, is essentially one long community table where all the meats are grilled in the same room and plated to everyone at the same time. At the table you share conversation, jugs of chianti, and lots of food with complete strangers who probably don't speak English well for a cost of €50 a person.

No, the room was not hot at all despite the live fire cooking.

Since he has become so much more popular since the premiere, they have expanded the dining tables to different rooms and buildings. Unless you are in the main cooking room with the main long table, your experience won't quite be what you see on Chef's Table. We sat at a smaller 8 person table in the corner and still had such a great time.

The meat put on our plates was definitely the best beef I have ever had, and I would definitely recommend it to everyone. We probably wouldn't go back just because you don't really need to go again once you've done it once, but it was amazing. You will also be blown away at how you only pay €50 for all the food and wine you get!!!

RESTAURANTS BY TOWN/REGION

My first step in planning my trip was to try and map out what areas I wanted to go to what days. Once I knew that, I looked up restaurants in those cities/areas. I will list out all the places I read about and whether I went to them or not so that you won't have to do the research.

SAN GIMIGNANO

On our way in from the Pisa airport to our villa, we stopped in San Gimignano – so cute!! We got there around 3 so went to this meat / cheese / wine bar I had read about called Da l' Mariani. It was adorable!! There are 5 bar stools and a small menu with the option to either get a panini, a cheese board, a meat board, or a meat and cheese board for 2. We chose the last one. Thirty minutes later (he sliced everything fresh, gave us tastes while slicing, and explained to us what each piece was in his broken English – don't go if you're in a rush), we had our board. It was full of three types of cheese, 6+ types of meats, a basket of bread, homemade sundried tomatoes and eggplant, and truffle honey. It was delicious and filling and the perfect late lunch.



After lunch, we stopped at Gelateria Dondoli for gelato. They have really interesting flavors (grapefruit and sparkling wine, anyone?) and are pretty famous. The lines move quickly so don't let one deter you – have cash on hand also!

Since each town is so small, I recommend just typing in the town on Google Maps to pull it up and then typing in food. You will see lots of options and can read reviews. Europe uses reviews on Google Maps a lot, and they're usually super accurate and helpful. There are so many good looking restaurants in San Gimignano, so just take a look at a map and pick one.





CHIANTI

Our first full day in Tuscany was dedicated to the Chianti region, and I think that was a great choice. This region is where all of the tourists go so there are lots of places to choose from – restaurants but especially wineries. I had read about two places in a lot of blogs I read, **Ristoro di Lamole** and **La Castellana**. They both have hundreds of reviews and a high rating on Google Maps, but I just picked Ristoro di Lamole because it mentioned beautiful views.

The drive up to Ristoro di Lamole coming from the East was treacherous, I won't lie. We were driving on narrow, gravel roads that were constant switchbacks. The drive down to the West was much better, and maybe our route was very random and your Google Maps wouldn't take you there. Anyways, this was also my FAVORITE drive of the whole trip because of the views. You are slowly ascending this giant hill to get to the restaurant and the views you get over the valley are really unbelievable.

When you get to the restaurant, parking is informal – just find a place somewhere, and the views are incredible. They seemed to have one giant patio overlooking the valley that all the American tourists sat at and another patio without the views that all the locals sat at. The food was also just so amazing and well-priced. We got truffle pasta and a seasonal bacon, pecorino, and fava bean gnocchi to start with some sausage and white beans to finish. Highly recommend, but just know it's quite the trek. Our lunch took an hour and a half.



Dario Cecchini's restaurants in Panzano are also open for dinner, so that can be an option. I would budget 3-4 hours for these lunches.



Another option is to have lunch at the winery you visit – a lot of them had this as an option. The most famous winery and place to have lunch is at Antinori nel Chianti Classico, a super modern winery right off the highway. A great place to stop if you're doing a daytrip because of the location, but you won't quite get the rustic Tuscany feel or views.

PIENZA AND MONTICCHIELLO

Our second full day in Tuscany was dedicated to the southern region including Montepulciano and Pienza. We had too much fun lounging poolside that day that we didn't get to Pienza until 4 PM. I had wanted to eat lunch at Sette Di Vino – a cute restaurant in a little alley with super good reviews. Instead we went with our meat and cheese for lunch credo and found La tavern di Re Artu and it was so cute!! They did three different types of pecorino with three different kinds of honeys and marmalades and a separate meat platter. We loved it. Highly recommend.

Right after that we went to Fredo Il Gelato Artigianale that had long lines and lots of locals – cash only! We also passed a really cute deli called Marusco e Maria where you can order cheese and meats and then go have a picnic somewhere. Bar Il Casello is the most well-known spot because it is a wine bar with amazing views.







I had also read about a place called **Ristorante Daria** in Monticchiello that is supposed to be amazing but maybe a little more upscale.

CORTONA

Our villa was closest to Cortona. Though we never went, our hosts had lots of favorite spots there that I wrote down in case we went. Apparently they filmed *Under the Tuscan Sun* here so it has lots of visitors??

La Grotta

Ristorante La Loggetta

Taverna Pane e Vino

B&B Dolce Maria

Osteria del Teatro

LA LODOLA

Last but not least, for our last night our hosts made us reservations at their favorite spot right down the road. It was a restaurant inside a B&B that you probably can't even know about unless you're local with just 6 or so tables and a chalkboard menu. It was adorable and delicious and well-priced. If you are in the area, you must make a reservation at **La Lodola**.

IS THERE A PLACE TO GO OUT IN TUSCANY?

No, and with the driving situation, that would be a terrible idea. At night enjoy a bottle of wine from whatever winery you went to that day on your lawn, or be surprised that you're still not done with your 8 PM dinner reservation and it's midnight.

WHAT SHOULD I PACK FOR TUSCANY?

Totally up to you, but the Italians are a stylish bunch so you can definitely get away with dressing up for your vacation. Flowy dresses, hats, nice shoes, midi skirts – they're all great options. Of course there are tourists and lots of diversity so you will see everything from cargo shorts and a t-shirt to a getup straight out of Vogue. I wore breezy dresses and skirts during the day with a light jacket for the evening (in late April) and sneakers. Heels are really not a good idea – everyone wears sneakers for a reason. The old cobblestone towns and hilly vineyards are not great for unstable ankles.

Bring sunglasses and a good camera for the bright sun and beautiful views, and don't forget your bathingsuit for lounging by the pool at your villa or heading to one of the hot springs. You will likely also have some trails through olive trees or tennis courts that will be calling your name, so this is actually a location where tennis shoes are a worthy addition to your tiny suitcase.

MY PERFECT 4 DAY TUSCANY ITINERARY

DAY 1

Drive in from whatever direction you're coming from and enjoy one or two stops on the way. From Pisa – stop in San Gimignano. From Florence, stop in a place I don't know about or Panzano or Antinori del Chianti Classico. Check in and enjoy dinner there or somewhere nearby.

DAY 2

Pick a region for the day and have a lunch reservation, a winery reservation, and a dinner reservation. We were staying pretty far from Chianti so didn't go home between wine and dinner, but we had like a 3 hour break. For us, we chose Ristoro di Lamole for lunch at 1 PM, a wine tour and tasting at Fattoria Viticcio at 3 PM, and dinner at Officina della Bistecca at 8 PM. All in Chianti and all amazing.

DAY 3

Pick another region and hang out there. Optional rest day for any of these days where you just stay at your villa or hotel and don't move!! If you have more time especially.

I wanted to focus on Montepulciano and Pienza this day. I originally intended on going to Pienza and having lunch at Sette di Vino, heading to Salcheto for a wine tasting, and then exploring Montepulciano with dinner in Cortona. We were feeling lazy and played tennis and laid by the pool until 3 PM instead.

Keep one day with flexible plans so that you have the choice to relax if that's what you want to do!

DAY 4

Relaxation day, explore more towns, another winery visit, or head home. There is so much to do.

HONESTLY, HOW MUCH DID YOU SPEND IN TUSCANY?

This trip was pretty expensive for us. We paid three times what we normally spend on flight since it was a holiday weekend.

Flight = \$381

Accommodation = \$282

Rental Car = \$135

Food = \$224

Wine Tour = \$28

TOTAL FOR 3 NIGHTS PER PERSON = \$1,050