

NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC
TRAVELLER

family

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The really big wish list

OUR TOP PICKS FOR
THE BESTEST, WILDEST,
GREATEST TRIPS FROM
AROUND THE WORLD

WIN!

AN ACTION-
PACKED BREAK
IN DORSET

CANADA
CANALS
AHOY!

TURN IT UPSIDE DOWN

in Oz

BARRIER REEF & THE
GREAT OCEAN ROAD

**BOOK
NOW**

ALGARVE // CORSICA // GRAN CANARIA // DUBAI // ISRAEL

Tried & TESTED

Our team of writers and their families review the best places to check in, and chill out

Vecchio Frantoio CHIANTI, ITALY

Knockout views are as plentiful as pasta in Tuscany but the rolling rural panorama around Casanuova di Ama is the stuff of Renaissance paintings. Vineyards undulate endlessly from this tiny hilltop hamlet to a distant horizon, perfectly framed in this stone-built villa's elegantly shuttered bedroom windows; a scene fit for hanging in the Uffizi (Florence's gargantuan art gallery is just over an hour's drive away). And from the myriad patios of the tiered gardens, different vistas of woodlands, vines and olive groves; all of which rake down the hillside to a pool with more uninterrupted valley views. Not usually moved to remark on such things, our daughter Ella (12), dashed wordlessly around on arrival, from patios to pool, terraces to hot tub, finally breathing: "Wow. Best. House. Ever."

Built up from the ruins of an olive press, two-storey Vecchio Frantoio (and its little annex cottage) really is superlative. From its four-poster beds to the beautifully tiled, smartly appointed en suite bathrooms, this is perfect Tuscan country-house rustic chic. With suntrap patios, loungers and reclining chairs at every turn, plus that pool, it's made for summer, but our autumn stay was golden: from the fiery foliage lighting up surrounding hills to the harvest bounty at local restaurants.

Half-an-hour's drive from Sienna, an hour-or-so from Pisa and Florence, it's well located for city sightseeing and airport access, but we didn't stray far. Just 15 minutes' glorious country drive in any direction: a choice of postcard-perfect hilltop towns, each with medieval

churches, excellent gelato, and affordable restaurants where families aren't just welcomed but utterly fussed over. Local dishes such as pappardelle or *pici* (thick spaghetti) with ragu, cheese-filled tortelli and pizza a-plenty are a guaranteed hit with young diners, while excellent Chianti is almost on tap for adults.

Of the numerous walks from the villa, our favourite was to neighbouring Castello di Ama, the prestigious winemaker whose estate is embellished with incredible works of art. Wine tastings and a superb Tuscan lunch in the manor house were just as much fun and family-friendly (castellodiama.com).

WHY: For a classic Chianti countryside retreat, close enough to tourist towns, but without any of the crowds.

SUITS: Good for families with children of all ages (ours are 9 and 12), although tots might struggle with the steep, stepped garden.

DID IT WORK: Yes, without exaggeration, it couldn't have been better, although some might miss a proper oven (the kitchen has a mini oven, microwave, plus a bbq outside).

THE DETAILS: To Tuscany offers a week's self-catering at Vecchio Frantoio, near Gaiole in Chianti, from £2,176 to £3,562 per week. The three-bedroom villas have a private pool and sleep six. to-tuscany.com/vecchiofrantoio

Wine tastings and tours at Castello di Ama cost from €50 (£45) per person. castellodiama.com rhinocarhire.com offers a week's rental from Pisa and Florence airports from £49. **SARAH BARRELL**



Hermitage Hotel AND Resort

FORTE DEI MARMI, TUSCANY

"This is bonkers" is what I thought as we were rolling up to the hotel; there are well-groomed pine-shaded streets, well-groomed people, well-groomed restaurants, actually pretty much well-groomed everything, it appears. Forte dei Marmi is famed for its somewhat over-the-top appeal, with designer stores and boutiques sitting alongside smart restaurants.

We were staying at the newly renovated Hermitage Hotel & Resort, situated a 10-minute walk from the centre of the stylish resort on the Tuscan coast. Owned and run by the Maschietto family, this 57-room hotel is the sister property to the fancier Augustus Hotel Resort, both benefitting from the mountain backdrop of the Apuan Alps.

The hotels also share access to the excellent beach club where you can book a 'tent' or 'beach hut' featuring two sun loungers, two seats, a table, poolside service, and access to the exquisite beachside Bambaissa restaurant serving some of the best sashimi and grilled octopus we've ever had.

For younger guests, the Hermitage features a new kids' programme launched in 2018 for ages three to 10 years to learn all about international manners focusing on different cultures and traditions. Other morning activities for the kids include gardening, cooking, arts, music and theatre, but it's the hotel's newly renovated pool equipped with a swimming lane, children's area and Jacuzzi that really captured our children's attention.

The kid's club grounds are extensive enough to house a play area and volley ball net, meaning the first day we struggled to persuade the kids to go down to the beach.

Out and about: our favourite restaurant was the very reasonably priced Ristorante Pizzeria al Bocconcino, right in the centre of Forte dei Marmi's buzzing square — cheap and cheerful with pizza from €6-8 (£7).

WHY: It's a pristine, manicured upmarket resort with a friendly welcome that very much includes children.

SUITS: Families looking for a beach stay with some fine dining experiences and high-end shopping.

DID IT WORK: Yes. The pool was a hit, as was the adult gym. The beachside tent was excellent, too.

THE DETAILS: A basic double room is from €198 (£175) for one night on a B&B basis. albergohermitage.it **MARIA PIERI**