

Client: Lungarno Collection

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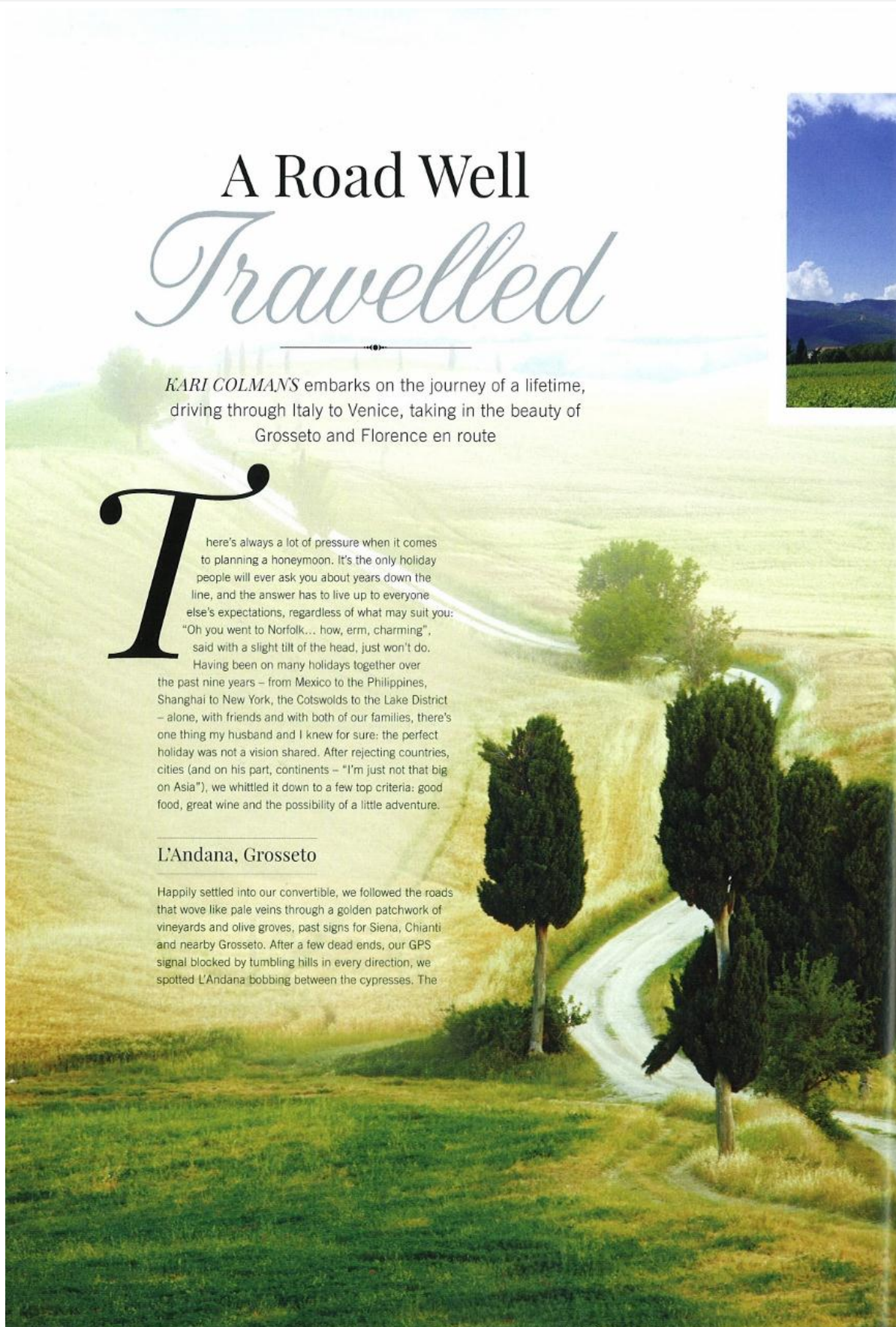
A Road Well *Travelled*

KARI COLMANS embarks on the journey of a lifetime,
driving through Italy to Venice, taking in the beauty of
Grosseto and Florence en route

There's always a lot of pressure when it comes to planning a honeymoon. It's the only holiday people will ever ask you about years down the line, and the answer has to live up to everyone else's expectations, regardless of what may suit you: "Oh you went to Norfolk... how, erm, charming", said with a slight tilt of the head, just won't do. Having been on many holidays together over the past nine years – from Mexico to the Philippines, Shanghai to New York, the Cotswolds to the Lake District – alone, with friends and with both of our families, there's one thing my husband and I knew for sure: the perfect holiday was not a vision shared. After rejecting countries, cities (and on his part, continents – "I'm just not that big on Asia"), we whittled it down to a few top criteria: good food, great wine and the possibility of a little adventure.

L'Andana, Grosseto

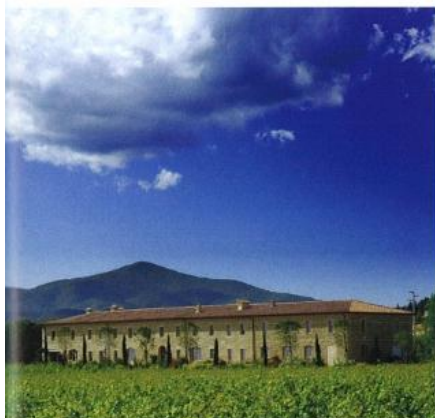
Happily settled into our convertible, we followed the roads that wove like pale veins through a golden patchwork of vineyards and olive groves, past signs for Siena, Chianti and nearby Grosseto. After a few dead ends, our GPS signal blocked by tumbling hills in every direction, we spotted L'Andana bobbing between the cypresses. The



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500-hectare La Badiola Estate is co-owned by the Moretti family and Alain Ducasse, and was once a Medici villa where Grand Duke Leopold II and his court resided during the summer season; the grandeur has only intensified over time. Sitting down for lunch at La Villa, looking out over the never-ending landscape, lunch was an informal affair with a buffet of seasonal salads and cold cuts, with the choice to order "some pasta" if you fancied it. The service here took a DIY approach, more shrugging than "yes signore"-ing; cue a nod towards the public kitchen.

The sprawling suites and De Luxe rooms are intensely rustic (aside from the modern Etro toiletries) with a regal, palatial air; rich with warm terracotta stone, grand pillars, imposing mezzanines, and cast-iron features. Those who are used to the creature comforts of slick city high-rises may find the slow Wi-Fi tiresome, (especially when one member of the party is unable to detach themselves from the football, cricket and golf scores) but for those who don't mind the internet teetotalism, the break is utter bliss.

Designed by Ettore Mocchetti, editor of *AD Italia*, the ESPA spa houses two thermal spas with slate flooring, as well as a vitality pool, while the treatments are inspired by the resort's sensory-provoking surroundings. The main swimming pool is just a few steps from the spa. So quiet you could hear an olive drop, it's ideal for whiling away a wine-fogged afternoon, dozing under the Tuscan sun. If you're looking for something more active, the delightful former golf pro Renato De Rosa offers lessons at the resort's private range, where the views over the Maremma are so breathtaking that even I was persuaded to spend an hour working on my swing. As our rabbi said as he married us in July, "marriage is all about compromise".

Food-wise, a stay at the resort cannot be complete without at least one visit to Alain Ducasse's Michelin-star Trattoria Toscana, located in an old barn and horse stable, for some of the best fine food and wine in the region, with a little French flair thrown in for good measure. The vast windows overlook the Mediterranean



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macchia while the kitchen equipment and wood oven on display herald a laid-back atmosphere, somewhere inbetween traditional trattoria and Michelin-star fanciness. Dishes such as a light, subtle lobster salad, gnocchi with red prawns, and a succulent veal chop were each served with a recommended wine, which had us almost rolling back to our room. Even the cellar at L'Andana is open to view, displaying about 150 labels, including wines made in the cellars belonging to the Moretti family – Petra and Tenuta La Badiola – where the well-established tradition of wine and oil production has been going on for centuries. The Western vineyard, where the soil is the richest in clay, harvests the Acquadoro and Acquagiusta Bianco, while the Eastern vineyard produces Acquagiusta Rosato. The olive oil is also home pressed.

For something more laid back, the ancient seaside port of Castiglione della Pescaia in Grosseto is just a 10-minute drive away. Taxis are easy to come by, and a car makes things easier, but a helicopter is even better, should you wish, and the resort can arrange it. Castiglione boasts a host of fine authentic restaurants, all of which left us glowing with fruity red wine and full-bodied satisfaction. Choose Skipper for an octopus and potato salad with your feet in the sand; Dal Bucaniere for *fritto misto* glistening from the fryer, followed by a rich wild boar ragù; and Pierbacco for hot liver spread on crusty bread. There are also beautiful boutiques to explore, stocking the finest furs and cashmeres from obscure, eye-wateringly expensive Italian brands as well as the usual international suspects. It was after shop 15, our golfing already a hazy footnote, that I needed to remind the other half – a Tod's slipper on one foot, Prada on the other – the secret of la dolce vita. ►

Superior rooms from €440, andana.it

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► Portrait Firenze, Florence

We had without doubt found our culinary calling card in Tuscany and were excited to carry on the adventure through Florence, armed with a list of must-visit eateries from a friend who knows the city's kitchens like the back of her hand: La Trattoria dei 13 Gobbi for hearty rigatoni swimming in molten mozzarella; La Giostra with its fairy light-lined walls and veal Milanese as big as elephants' ears; the tiny Buca dell'Orafo, where ordering is a gamble as nobody speaks English, but every dish (especially the tagliata) will make you mourn for a time when you could taste Italian food in any other country and enjoy it.

The following journey's dreamscape rose to the occasion of our Hollywood-filtered expectations, but we said goodbye to the car at this point; you can walk everywhere in Florence, and it was more hassle than it was worth to find somewhere to park. The newly opened Portrait Firenze was to be our home for the next three days, an impeccably chic townhouse-style hotel, owned by the Ferragamo family and just a few steps from the

You also won't find a better location: situated right next to Piazza della Signoria, you can cross the Ponte Vecchio to Boboli Gardens or you're just a hop skip and a jump from the Uffizi Gallery (home to Michelangelo sculptures and Renaissance paintings) and the artisan districts of Santa Croce and Oltrarno. But the best way to see the city is just to walk, walk and walk some more, preferably with a chocolate gelato as black as tar dripping down your hand. Hans Christian Andersen compared Florence to a beautiful picture book during his trip to Italy in 1833, and it's true that the Duomo (officially called the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore) looks like something from the centrefold of a pop-up greetings card. In between church gazing and shopping (the balance was certainly tipping in my retail-therapy-to-sports-playing favour, especially upon discovering a bespoke pump pop-up shop, viajiyu.com), all we did was eat: Trattoria Gargani, of which there are two, so-named by two brothers who co-owned one and fell out, with the loser forced to open a competing eatery of the same name on the other side of the city; the pretty Il Quattro Leoni for pear- and taleggio-stuffed tortellini; and Il Santo Bevitore for more London-style dining. Stumbling upon a Chinese restaurant, I conceded to one more non-Italian meal for a man who can't go a week without five-spice ribs, and was pleasantly surprised not to have to spit anything out. We didn't note down the name, but there was only one, where amazingly, we were not the only punters (although admittedly, the only non-Chinese ones). Our hotel also offered a more British breakfast option that we (he) had struggled to find elsewhere: who doesn't come to Italy for a full English and chow mein?

The only downside for those travelling in the summer heat is the lack of pool should your legs grow too tired and your belly too full to spend the late afternoon on your feet. However, there are a very small handful of hotels nearby that do offer a pay-for-the-day service but it's worth venturing further out to the Four Seasons for this (a taxi drive away, just outside the city) which offers the very best setting for those wanting to laze around in the sun and order a chicken Caesar salad poolside.

From €450 per night, lungarnocollection.com

The hotel's design was inspired by 1950s Florence and the birth of Italian haute couture

brand's headquarters, which comprise a grand boutique and a dedicated exhibition about the late Florentine designer, Salvatore. Choose the sixth-floor Ponte Vecchio Suite, with its full-facade riverfront terrace over the Arno, and enjoy the hubbub from the holidaymakers pausing for coffee and pastries in the shade of the Ponte Vecchio. Online, the hotel is officially rated as being four-star, but this is wholly misleading, as it ticks every five-star box (much more so, in fact, than the other big-name luxury chains nearby). We recognised in an instant the touch of Florentine interior designer Michele Bonan, who has here drawn his inspiration from 1950s Florence and the birth of Italian haute couture to create a hotel that really does feel like an impossibly stylish friend's city pied-à-terre. Bonan, if you're reading this, I'll sell my soul in return for a two-bedroom job in Chelsea; although I suppose we could manage without the Bluetooth-operated sound system and iPad-fitted lifts.

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Bauer Palladio Hotel & Spa, Venice

The final stop came around too soon but it was the one we'd been waiting for: a city that, for the past nine years, we'd vowed to visit but had never quite made it, and one that no matter how many wonders we'd seen around the world, was still capable of leaving us speechless.

We arrived in Venice by train at the Venezia Santa Lucia station after a smooth journey through the heart of Bologna, stepping straight on to the banks of the Grand Canal. A water taxi took us to our hotel, the Bauer Palladio Hotel & Spa, a converted monastery on Giudecca island (along with the famous Hotel Cipriani). Set apart from the droves of tourists on the main island, it is accessible for guests by private shuttle boat, available from 10am until midnight daily from the dock of the hotel's sister property, the Bauer near St Mark's Square. The lobby in Palladio's main building, an original

16th-century convent, is cavernous with a slightly creepy feel; something to do with the tapestries, and biblical art. But our garden-view junior suite, in a more recently refurbished wing, was a little more to our taste. Here the décor is quite colonial in style; light woods and fresh, neutral hues, a look that extends to the spa's stunning couples' massage room. The real draw at this resort are the four enchanting Venetian gardens, swamped in cream roses and wild hydrangeas and dotted with pairs of white wrought iron loungers. In the spring, I'm told, thousands of wild, colourful blooms enrich a part of these lawns, creating an Oriental rug effect, while woven willow fencing closely guards tomatoes and artichokes. But a trip to Venice can't be spent totally cooped up.

The city is scattered with boutiques specialising in obscure items: Hibiscus will make you feel like a child raiding your grandmother's jewellery box but you'll find the Bond Street equivalents in Calle Vallaresso. Wander into Gianni Basso down a narrow alley that leads to the Fondamente Nuove, where inside this scruffy, dimly-lit shop, surrounded by printing presses, you will find the most exquisite stationery. Marie Brandolini sells brilliantly colourful Murano glass jugs, vases and plates from a small showroom on the Grand Canal, while Articoli per Cani, sat at the very start of the Strada Nuova, stocks the most ludicrous dog costumes you've ever seen, from full carnival get-up to a Sherlock Holmes ensemble.

Fine-dining wasn't hard to come by and we thought we may as well go out with a bang. Our first lazy afternoon was spent wandering St Mark's in a love-struck stupor, having run into Harry's Dolci five minutes before closing, convincing them to let us perch over a carafe, providing we could order in under a minute: pappardelle arrabiata and scampi and zucchini risotto with curry sauce were hasty but wonderful choices. We couldn't resist a gondola ride, every bit as special as we'd imagined, while no doubt as ridiculous to the Venetian resident as an open-top bus ride through Leicester Square.

Our last two evenings were at Cip's Club, following a rainbow of Bloody Marys at Hotel Cipriani, and on the terrace of the St Mark Palladio's gourmet restaurant, De Pisis, with a nightcap on the balcony of the famous Gritti Palace. Overlooking the Grand Canal, with the Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute and bobbing gondolas in the distance, we decided compromise wasn't so bad after all. ■

Leading Hotels of the World offers rooms from £237, LHW.com/palladio

