



# Val d'Orcia

Tuscany has been top of the tourist's cultural hit list for centuries, but head south of the usual suspects and **Alexandra Coghlan** finds a musical heart beating in the birthplace of the Renaissance

*Tuscany, land of fierce hates and wild loves and of limitless passions. Tuscany, home of Petrarca and Dante and lively Boccaccio...*  
– Oscar Fay Adams

A region of superlatives, inspiring poetry and prose as purple as the grapes that cluster on its vines, Tuscany is the cultural heart of Italy. Chaucer, Milton, Dickens – all made their pilgrimage here to the birthplace of the Renaissance. Theirs is a well-trodden path, but in summer it's a struggle to find it under the Nike-clad feet of the swarms of tourists that descend each year on Florence and Siena, Pisa and Lucca, hungry for history, art and pizza (not necessarily in that order).

Travel south, however, and that all changes. Cities give way to small towns, crowds dissolve into a trickle of visitors and green hillsides morph into altogether wilder landscapes – beautiful, still, but with a new austerity, almost architectural in their sharply defined valleys and ridges. It was one of these valleys that so struck a young Anglo-American author in 1923 that she and her husband would make their home there for the next half-century, unwittingly establishing what would survive war and hardship to become one of Europe's most beguiling music festivals.

Today, the gardens of the La Foce estate (open selected days from March to November [www.lafoce.com](http://www.lafoce.com)) are cascading terraces of greenery. Arbours heavy with wisteria offer shady pathways between formal courtyards

flanked by orange trees and topiary hedges – a marriage of structured Italianate design and artful English disarray unique to the region. But it wasn't always like this. Writing of her first impressions of La Foce and the Val d'Orcia, Iris Origo recalls "a lunar landscape, pale and inhuman... a land without mercy and without shade."

Defying the doubts of friends and family, Iris and her husband Antonio brought life to a barren valley, transforming a blasted wasteland into a thriving agricultural community. It's a process evocatively charted in Origo's memoir *Images and Shadows*, though the writer is best remembered for *War in Val D'Orcia* – her diaries of the war years that saw La Foce transformed into an unofficial refugee camp, a haven for escaped Allied prisoners and a hub of partisan resistance. Contemplating the smooth, silent roads up to Montepulciano now, it's almost impossible to imagine the horror of the German attack that forced Iris to lead some 60 people – many of them children – eight miles across mine-filled paths to safety one summer day in 1944.

What began as Iris and Antonio's social mission has become, in the hands of their children and grandchildren, an artistic and cultural one. It was Iris's grandson Antonio Lysy, now an international soloist and Professor of Cello at UCLA, who transformed the informal family music-making at La Foce into something more ambitious. While still a student at the Menuhin School, he would bring colleagues together at the estate to





ITALY

- FLORENCE
- VAL D'ORCIA
- ROME

**TRAVEL INFO****Average Temperatures:**

Winter: 6°C – Summer: 24°C

**Currency:** Euro (AU\$1=EUR 0.68)**Best time to visit:** La Foce's festival takes place in July, but the region is well worth visiting at any time. Winter in Tuscany can be (almost) magically free of tourists.**TOURIST INFORMATION**[www.valdorcia-info.com](http://www.valdorcia-info.com)



The gardens of La Foce estate

work on chamber music. The habit evolved into the annual Incontri in Terra di Siena festival. Now in its 26th year, the festival has grown in scope and stature, attracting the likes of Thomas Adès, The Tallis Scholars, Steven Isserlis and Pascal Rogé. Rooted not only in the family history of the Origos but also the history of the region, the festival's appeal lies as much in its venues as its performers, reinventing historic buildings as concert halls and restoring music to local churches and theatres.

A typical weekend of concerts might start in the shady courtyard of the Castelluccio – the medieval castle perched high up on a ridge overlooking La Foce, all warm stone walls and cobbles underfoot – moving on to the beautiful Romanesque church of San Pietro in the nearby hillside town of Radicofani, before finishing with a recital in one of the exquisite, jewel-box

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theatres that are so unexpectedly found in local towns, funded by local academies of doctors, lawyers and merchants in the 18th century. A highlight of the 2015 festival was hearing Monteverdi madrigals performed in Sarteano's tiny Teatro degli Arrischiati – a baroque gem scarcely younger than the music – by a group under the direction of festival-regular Sir John Eliot Gardiner. Gilded ornamentation rang round an interior itself glowing with gold embellishment – a perfect marriage of music and venue.

Stay for the whole Incontri Festival (between one week and two) and the

programming will ensure you traverse most of the region, right up to the Umbrian border. It's worth making an effort to visit Città della Pieve, the meticulously preserved medieval city that was home to Raphael's teacher, Pietro Perugino. The chance to see his paintings outside a museum-setting is rare, but here you'll find not only the serene *Baptism of Christ* in the town's Duomo, but also an *Adoration of the Magi* hidden in the nearby Oratorio di Santa Maria dei Bianchi.

If your cultural tastes are more contemporary, follow the winding roads from La Foce to Sant'Anna in Camprena – a 15th-century monastery set among olive

groves where Anthony Minghella filmed the convent scenes of *The English Patient*. A short drive will also allow you to see the Piero Della Francesca frescoes that star so memorably in the film, housed in the Basilica di San Francesco in Arezzo. Time your visit correctly and you can hear music performed in Sant'Anna itself, a venue for another fine music festival – Philippe Herreweghe's Accademia della Crete Senesi, a chamber-focused affair often running (conveniently) concurrent with Incontri.

Another very good reason to visit the Val d'Orcia mid-summer period is that it coincides with truffle season. Pasta, gnocchi, even steaks come garnished not with a few scented drops of oil, but great mounds of shavings, black and shrivelled. Wash them down with a bottle (or two) of Brunello from nearby Montalcino and you'll be enjoying a meal as fine as princes, and even Popes, have enjoyed here before you.

Incontri means “encounters”, and it's a concept that speaks to the essence of this very special festival. What has been achieved at La Foce is a series of cultural collisions between artists, audience members, geography and family. Each encounter generates its own electricity, but all are rooted in the history that the Origo family share with this extraordinary place – a valley no longer barren, but rich with life and art. ●



### Pienza

Perhaps the earliest example of urban-planning, the beautiful town of Pienza owes its sunny courtyards and shady loggias to the whim of none other than Pope Pius II (1405-1464). Obsessed with the possibilities of creating a 'model' renaissance city, he took his birthplace of Cortignano, redesigned and renamed it (in his own honour, naturally), creating one of the loveliest spaces in the region. His summer residence, the Palazzo Piccolomini, boasts the earliest modern roof garden, and the cathedral it overlooks is a collage of architectural ideals. Notice anything odd about the piazza outside? It's actually trapezoidal in shape – deliberately intended to fool the eye and broaden the vista.