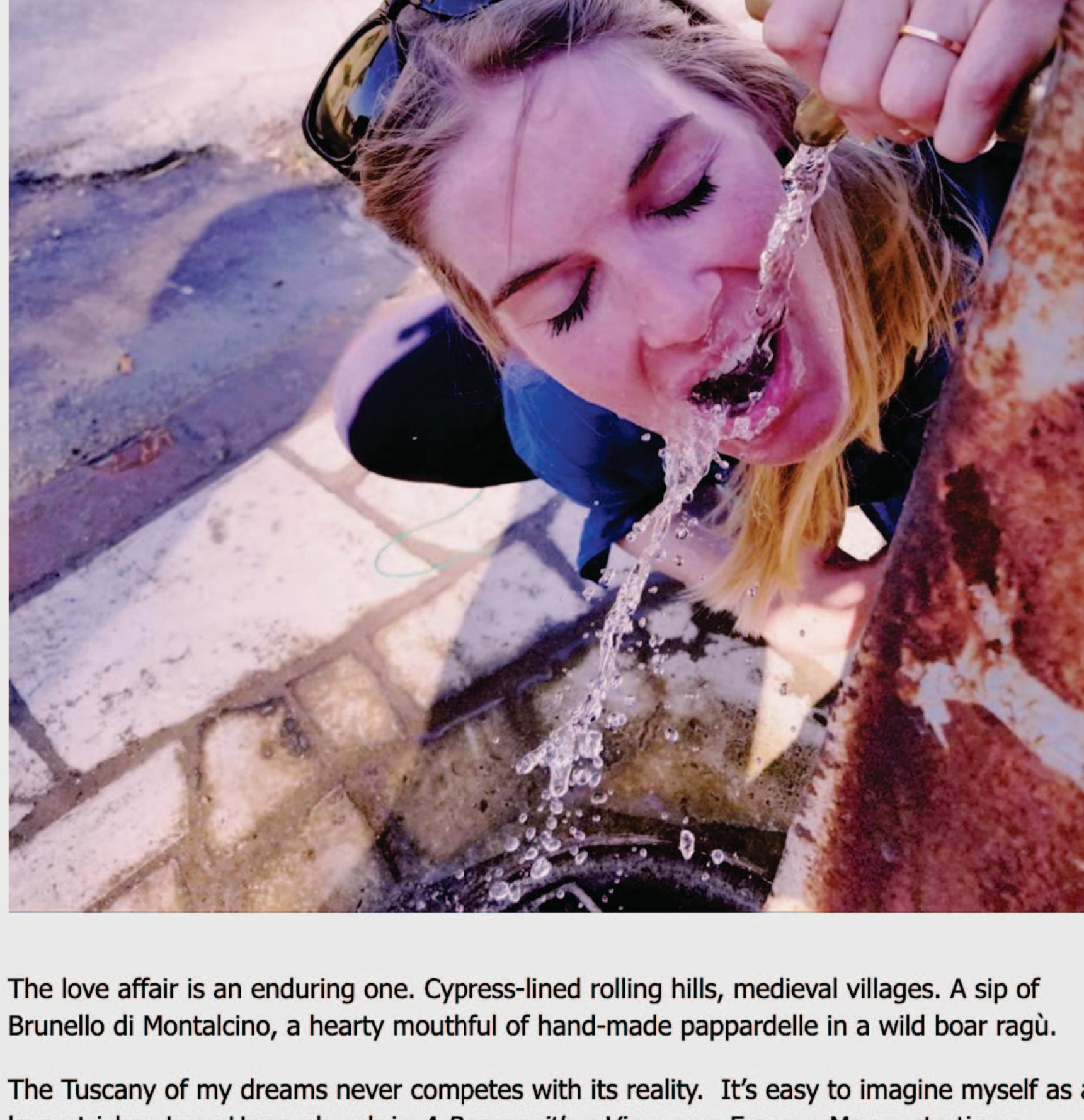


# MY SAVVY TRAVELLER

## A TALE OF TWO TUSCANYS

May 10, 2019

By Shannon Melnyk



The love affair is an enduring one. Cypress-lined rolling hills, medieval villages. A sip of Brunello di Montalcino, a hearty mouthful of hand-made pappardelle in a wild boar ragù.

The Tuscany of my dreams never competes with its reality. It's easy to imagine myself as a love-stricken Lucy Honeychurch in *A Room with a View*, or a Frances Mayes starting a leisurely new life in a Cortona farmhouse in *Under A Tuscan Sun*. But I'm now here to discover the *other* Tuscany. The one injected with a touch of adrenaline. Adventure. And dare I say, the weekend warrior kind of exploration.

Rip-roaring adventure? In Tuscany? Ok, my thoughts, exactly. But I've been invited to spend four days with lovely local Carmen Badiali of Mugello & Tuscany, an enthusiastic guide who encourages me to discover a different Tuscany through sport. Five sports, to be exact. I mention I'm not an athlete, but Carmen insists I will make it out alive. I'm not so sure, but I'm up for the adventure and reframe my visions of lazy days in vineyards into heart-pumping ways to burn off all that pappardelle. Maybe not such a bad idea after all.

### Day 1 – Hiking the Apennines



As promised...Traditional Mugello tortelli at the Diacci Refuge

We head to the upper Mugello to find ourselves hiking the Apennine mountain range in GigoCasaglia Forest Park; we begin at the Abbey of Moscheta, founded by San Giovanni Guaberto in 1034. It's surrounded by pristine woods with streams, the occasional abandoned ancient farmhouse and a large cascading waterfall set amongst a forest floor of marronis. It's chestnut season, after all, and the sight of them serve as a touch of foreshadow for what's to play out come evening. We explore the terrain for the entirety of the day and are promised a hearty meal upon arriving at the rustic and charming Diacci Refuge. Francesco and Virginia are our hosts, who ply us with ficattole, a slap-yo-mama-so-good kind of homemade fried cheese, parmesan cream pappardelle and traditional Mugello tortelli stuffed with local potatoes in meat sauce. The sight of cheesecake after these courses is both horrendous and difficult to resist. I'm tired from the hike and the second-helpings, but before turning in upstairs, I stick around for the fireworks. It seems Francesco wants to show us how to roast marronis over an open fire. We watch him skillfully hold the pan while we huddle around the large stone fireplace and break into hysterics as a few of the nuts combust and explode into the air, sparks flying. It's an entertaining and fun end to the evening and the marronis taste sweet and milky, unlike North American chestnuts.

### Day 2 –Rafting the Arno

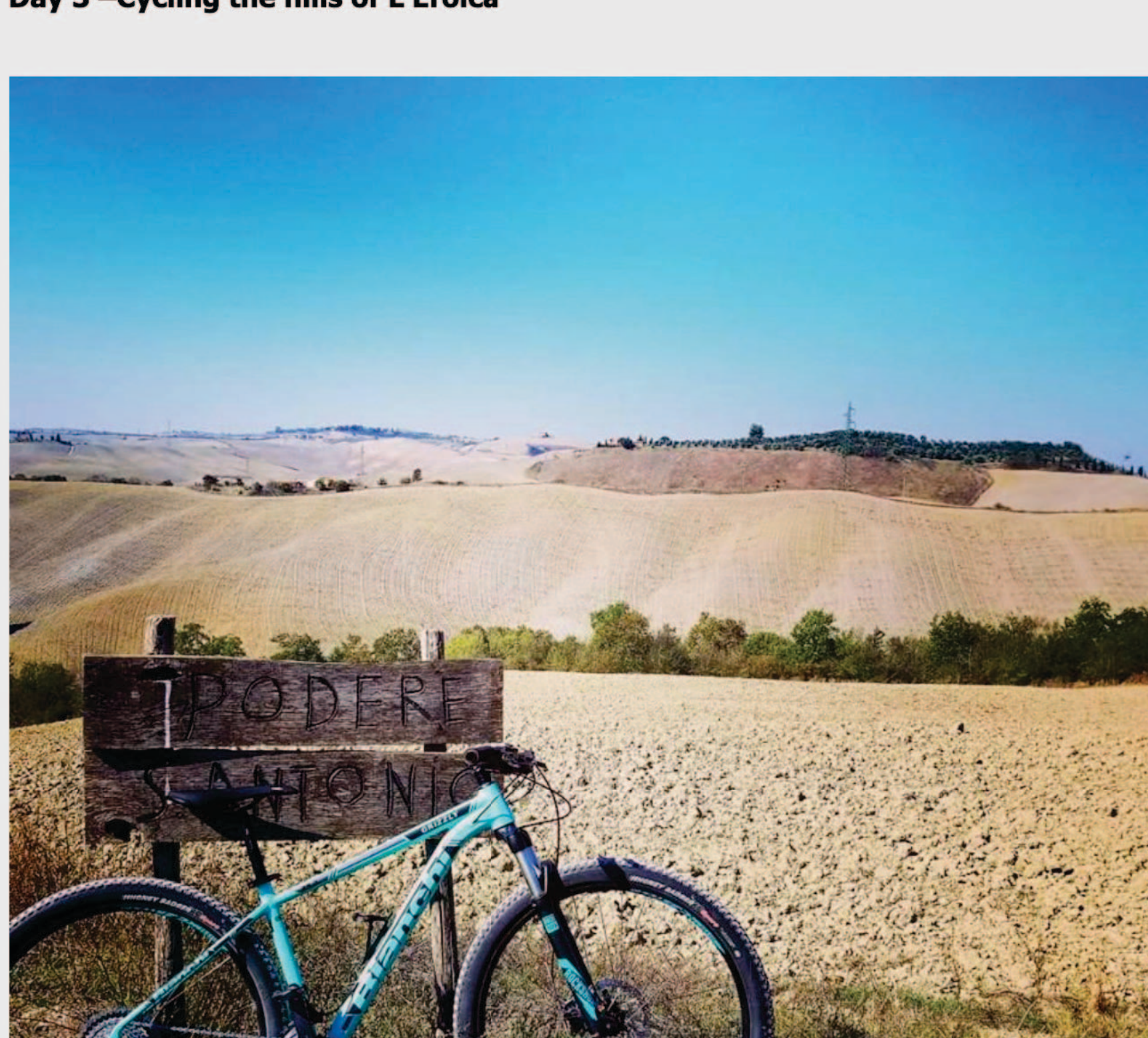


It's time to hike out of the woods and head to the stunning Tuscan capital of Florence, the home of the famous terracotta-tiled Duomo cathedral and Michelangelo's David sculpture at the Galleria dell'Accademia. The old-world charm of this city has been photographed a million times, but not necessarily from the Arno River. I'm in a state of surprise when Carmen tells us we won't be crossing the Ponte Vecchio, (the only bridge not destroyed in World War II), but paddling there for a jubilant toast. Curiously, I find myself dragging an inflatable raft in the shores of the city centre to the Arno, and we indeed paddle to the Ponte. We rest directly under the bridge as curious and amused tourists take our photos and Carmen breaks out the Prosecco and taralli. Working our way back to shore, Carmen unleashes us to explore the city, where we have a truffle-laden lunch and cruise the piazzas in search of the best amarena cherry gelato. Of course, I find a little black Tuscan leather tote bag I cannot resist. Our guide then drives us to Buonconvento, where the farmhouse of my dreams awaits. I'm not sure if it was the affectionate goats and pigs, the whaling donkey, the charming country rooms or the perfection of the light approaching dusk on the hillside, but the Agriturismo Pievesprena is my home in another life. It's here we have yet another hearty Italian marathon of a meal before our next day's adventure.



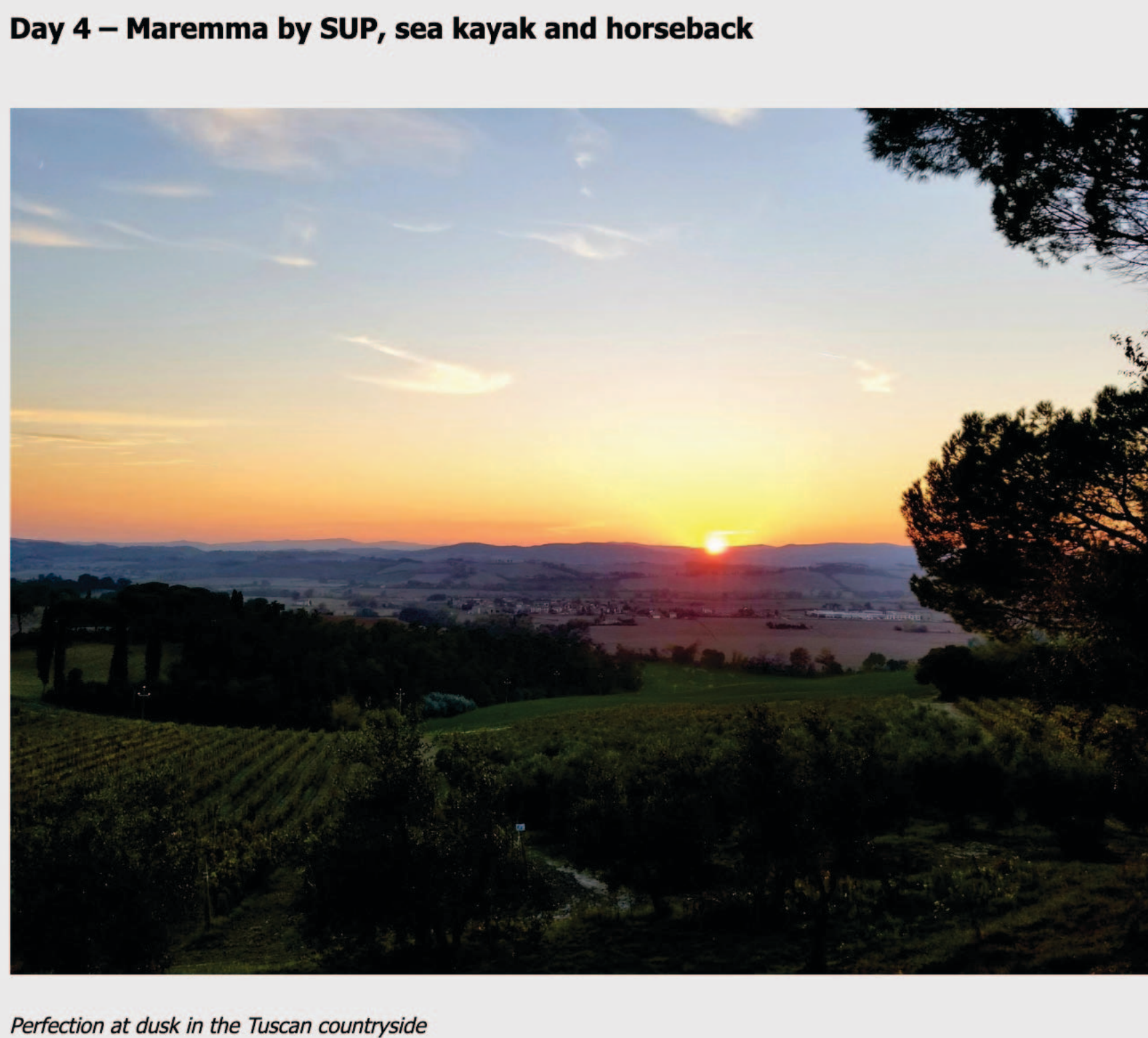
Farm life at the Agriturismo Pievesprena

### Day 3 –Cycling the hills of L'Eroica



We're in the jewel of the Chianti region and suit up for some cycling along the iconic rolling hills of L'Eroica. Truth be told, I haven't been on a bike in years, but that's what e-bikes are for. I recommend requesting one, even if you're an athlete. You don't want an uphill battle between your lungs and the unforgettable views you came for. They make touring enjoyable and accommodate the refreshing Aperol Spritz you might want to indulge decidedly quaint rest stop in Siena. Nothing beats a gentle wind across this giant set of *The English Patient*. We are all at different fitness levels, but it doesn't stop the group from bonding and cheering each other on when the hills get to be a bit much.

### Day 4 – Maremma by SUP, sea kayak and horseback



Perfection at dusk in the Tuscan countryside

One of the most underrated regions and favoured by more local Italians than tourists is the rugged Maremma coastline. We're now in Uccellina National Park in the province of Grosseto. Craggy cliffs and buteri (Italian sea boys) dot the choice of standing paddle boards or sea kayaks. Families are picnic-ing along the pine forest beach and the water is challenging for some, but who doesn't want to fall 25 times in an hour? Good for the character amongst friends and strangers. Nearby, we saddle up with a random mix of gentle and feisty horses and head for the woods to explore the coast from on-high. Ironically, my horse's name is Mexico, so I fear he's terribly lost - but he seems right at home along the peaceful pathways with signs warning us not to feed the wild boars. I have no intention of this and instead my focus is on Carmen's warning that we're about to head down the cliff, onto the beach -and should we choose, into the water. If we go in the water, whatever we do - she instructs, DO NOT stop moving. Well, we find out what happens when you do. It is ultimately Carmen, who is generously trying to take our photos, who halts in the choppy sea and her horse begins to thrash in an attempt to lay down. Fearful of drowning about five guest's iPhones, there is a whole lot of kicking, splashing and screaming. But ever the expert, Carmen emerges, camera unscathed. It's an amazing way to end our surf and turf kind of a day, and our active journey into the Tuscan unknown.

Five sports, four days and if I may say so, an adventure well done. The verdict? I'm converted. Tuscany isn't just the carbohydrate capital of all that is romantic and dreamy - it's an epic amount of fun.



The rustic and charming Diacci Refuge

For more information: <https://www.mugello-tuscany.com/>



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