

Mark Whitchurch attempts to juggle sight-seeing the cultural delights of Italy and indulging his need for touring by car

HOLIDAY dilemmas. Beach holidays just aren't my thing.

Thankfully my fiancé agrees with me on that one, but whereas I would enjoy a long driving holiday, briskly travelling the best roads of Europe, I feel a holiday of this type would spell the end to our relationship.

A compromise was required — a relaxing holiday which included cultural enlightenment with some gentle scenic driving was agreed upon and Italy proved to be the ideal location for such a holiday.

A quick surf of the net landed two Easyjet tickets to Venice and with a few strings pulled a BMW 320 Convertible (thanks, BMW Italia) was at our disposal for a week.

The romantic city of Venice was the ideal start to our holiday. Rather than delving straight into the historic depths of the city we spent our first night on the outskirts on the banks of the Grand Canal — an ideal location to explore a number of salubrious Villas including Villa Widmann. Wealthy merchants built these often elaborate villas to entertain guests. Mussolini and Hitler met for the first time at Villa Nazionale Pisani in 1934.

With just a day to explore the enchantments of Venice we concentrated on the highlights. A one-day vaporetto pass proved the ideal way to witness the wonders of the Grand Canal, conveniently terminating at Piazza San Marco where the tower, Basilica, and Palazzo Ducale were well worth the queues. Those with an artistic streak will be sure to find inspiration at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, full of priceless works of 20th century modern art and sculptures.

Feeling relaxed and cultured, the roof of the BMW was lowered as we headed to Pisa. Driving in Italy is not as bad as many people would have you believe. Sure the motorway pace is brisk and lorries seem to have a mind of their own but road rage has yet to be introduced to their motoring culture.

But if you live by the motto when in Rome do as the Romans do, you soon adjust to their pace and style.

A long morning's travelling takes us to Pisa, a pleasant university city based on the river Arno and dominated by its famous leaning tower — well, its not so much as leaning as banana shaped!

For about £15 per person you get to trek to the very top of the tower. It was one of my holiday highlights, as well as exploring the surrounding cathedral buildings, which are equally as impressive.

From Pisa we cruised north across some exciting mountain passes to the city of Lucca. Once its own principality, this medieval walled city is filled with exclusive shops and is a wonderful place to spend a night with its enchanting piazzas.

A stroll up the Via Fillungo, the main street, allowed us to fully absorb the atmosphere. Driving within the city walls was one of the holiday challenges with streets just wide enough for a horse and cart — a BMW 3-Series fits with a squeeze!

Now in full medieval cultural swing we continued south via some inspiring B-roads to the hill town of San Gimignano. Known as the Manhattan of Italy for its high-rise look out towers, 13 of the 72 towers still stand and are the focal point of the town.

A gentle stroll around the streets proved to be the perfect break before heading into the mountains again to trek our way to Siena.

From experience, an afternoon in



Best of both worlds

Siena is not enough to do the city justice, but provides plenty of time to explore the Piazza del Campo, the main square, as well as the city's stunning cathedral, considered to be one of the most important gothic buildings outside Rome.

As with many religious buildings in Italy, legs and arms need to be covered to explore the elaborate interior.

With the evening sun setting we enjoyed a relaxing drink in the Piazza del Campo with a street actor entertaining the evening diners. The next day proved to be the longest of the holiday, with six hours of driving stretching the balance of cars and culture but, with visits to Urbino and San Marino, the destinations made up for the enthusiastic mountain road.

Urbino, a three-hour drive from Siena, was the birthplace of the painter Raphael and boasts a spectacular palace that was built and decorated by some of the most recognised Renaissance artists in the 12th century.

Today the city is one of the best-preserved and most beautiful hill towns in Italy and is a must visit on a tour of the region.

Just an hour of yet more fantastic remote mountain roads separates Urbino from the principality of San Marino. The views of the surrounding countryside from one of the city's three forts is breathtaking, with views over the sea in one direction and undulating hills in another.

Feeling fully immersed in the history of Italy, I suggested a short drive, two hours in the end, to the city of Modena, where I am told there is a town nearby that is the home to a rather famous Italian make of car.

Upon reaching Maranello, the subtlety of my suggestion is soon blown when a line of Ferraris cruise past in the other direction.

Bribery of a plush hotel and a splendid meal soon reinstated the holiday's status quo.

The following day this was soon unsettled again with a visit to the Galleria Ferrari, the official Ferrari museum as well as a highly-privileged tour of the Ferrari factory, normally reserved for those with enough money to buy into the Ferrari marque.

With a week of touring now near its end, the Autostrada is the most efficient way to return to Venice for a final stroll around Piazza San Marco with an ice cream, before boarding our Easyjet flight back to Bristol.

Even with my occasional motoring biases, the holiday proved to be a fine balance satisfying my lust for rally inspired mountain passes as well as experiencing the sites of Northern Italy — next year we plan to return to the south of the country.

Will I get away with a lap of the legendary Sicilian Targa Florio road racing circuit as well as exploring the Amalfi Coast? I'll certainly try.

Travel details

- EasyJet was the quickest and easiest way to travel. With daily flights from Bristol you can book flights online for a number of Italian destinations now including Rome at www.easyjet.com We stayed in a mixture of hotels, the Michelin website proved to be very useful in sourcing reasonable accommodation as well as recommending sites to see and reputable restaurants.
- While in Venice I suggest you book a night at the Villa Franceschi at Mira Porte, a fantastic villa on the banks of the Grand Canal, also check out the family run restaurant for some of the very best Italian cuisine (0039 041 4266531 or www.villafranceschi.com). The Hotel Sofitel also proved to be convenient for accessing all of Venice's treasures (0039 041 710400).
- Locanda Del Amorosa situated half an hour outside Siena again was a highlight of the holiday, a hotel that encompasses a tiny medieval hamlet. The ancient stables now house a restaurant that served

- some of the most wonderful food, all sourced from the surrounding area, (0039 0577 677211 or www.amorosa.it)
- Just a stone's throw away from the home of Ferrari the Locanda Del Feudo in Castlevetro was another gem of our holiday — a family-run hotel with just six rooms. Advanced booking is recommended as well as their quaint restaurant, (0039 059 708711 or www.locanadelfeudo.it)
- The Lonely Planet book on Italy was a bible with detailed maps as well as relevant and precise information. A map of Venice is another recommended purchase before you go, unless you have a very long ball of string — we bought the Rough Guide map which proved to be invaluable. Hiring a car in Venice was a simple process with all the major rental companies situated in Piazza Roma.
- If driving is not your style then Italy has a fantastic network of trains, book tickets at www.trenitalia.it

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