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Divine Retreats - My Yoga Healing and Arts Trip to Tuscany, Italy

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Villa Buonvisi

At the beginning of October, I was lucky enough to spend 5 beautiful, relaxing, healthy, healing and fun filled days on a "Divine Retreat" in the magnificent Italian area that is Tuscany.

This was my first ever retreat and it exceeded all of my expectations plus many more. I came back home a different person, calm, appreciative, more loving, motivated, with much more energy and realised in a profound way, that the life I had always dreamed about, being healthy and happy had completely come true.

Whilst I had personally been through hell over the last 20 years due to my debilitating Chronic Fatigue and Severe Depression, which encompassed my every thought, each day, experiencing this Divine Retreat, made me realise just how far I had come. It wasn't that long ago that when going away, I would always feel ill, and have to sit down a lot. I needed my husbands help to carry things and generally felt very out of my comfort zone.

On this Divine Retreat, I experienced pure joy, bliss, met amazing people, some who have become new good friends, fell even more in love with Yoga and experienced absolutely no stress for 5 days, something that had never happened to me before. I felt like the real, true me, who had been hiding for so long. I was now out in the open, looking at the world in a new way, with excitement and love.

After a short one hour 45 minute plane journey from London Gatwick Airport to Pisa, we arrived at our destination so quickly that it was actually quite surreal.

As soon as we stepped off the plane, and out of the small airport, we were whisked away by private car and drove for 40 minutes through Pisa, and along the motorway to "La Fattoria Mansi Bernadini". The sun was already shining and the air crisp fresh and much more inviting!



Our location for the week away, was beyond stunning. I had seen pictures on the internet before I left London, but seeing things in person is always so different. The grand "La Fattoria Mansi Bernadini," which was built in the 14th century, is now part of a massive, sprawling estate, complete with a mini oasis! There were lush banana and palm trees which I discovered on a little walk. This beautiful residence is 20 minutes drive from the beautiful town of

Lucca and 35 minutes from Pisa famous for yes, that Leaning Tower!

La Fattoria Mansi Bernadini has not just one villa but 4 in total, plus 4 smaller houses which meant that 80 people could be accommodated for a large event such as a wedding or conference, more than comfortably. Whilst there were only 20 people on our trip, there was another group (we later found out this had been their 4th visit and they come every year!) staying there, too, whom we hardly ever saw. So big was this estate, there was always enough room to explore, and would make us feel that the whole world, and its masses of people, were a very long way from where we were.

Living in smoggy London, meant that I was literally crying out for fresh air and sun. I felt desperate to be immersed in nature, and upon driving up the hill to our home for the next few days, as I looked out the window at the incredible surrounding countryside, which has inspired many an artist, I knew that this trip was going to be exactly what I was craving.

The main holiday Villa on the estate, Villa Buonvisi, was where our group was staying. Apart from the owners house, Villa Buonvisi was the largest and most impressive. It had room to sleep 14 people comfortably.



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own en-suite complete with stunning views from each window. I lay on my own bed each morning for a few minutes before getting ready for Yoga, and would just stare out my window toward the high mountains covered by those Italian Cypress Trees, which Tuscany is famous for. What a beautiful sight to begin each day with!

Downstairs from where our bedrooms were, was an enormous yet very cosy living room space where we sat each night doing group meditations and also participating in various activities such as Theta Downloads (more on that later) and Chanting as well as just general getting to know each other. With large and comfy sofa's it was easy for it to feel like home! This beautiful room was made even more special with a lit fireplace that took the edge off the slightly chilly Autumn evenings.

This trip, I soon found out, was about more than just doing Yoga twice a day, it was also about healing ourselves through activities such as Theta Healing, Creative Arts, Massage and 'Journey's', all designed to help us release pain from our physical and mental beings, as well as helping us learn to connect with ourselves and to remember that life is about love and enjoyment. Little did I know that these treatments would literally change something inside me and I would go home feeling much lighter in the physical and emotional aspect.

My first taste of the Divine Retreat activities, was held by Dalia Zerman, a talented artist who had created London Paint Jam. Dalia taught us that through creative drawing and painting, it can create brainwaves just like we are meditating, through completely letting go and seeing where our creative side takes us. My piece of art on completion actually really shocked me because even though I was not 'thinking' as to what I was doing, it made me gasp when I saw what I had drawn.

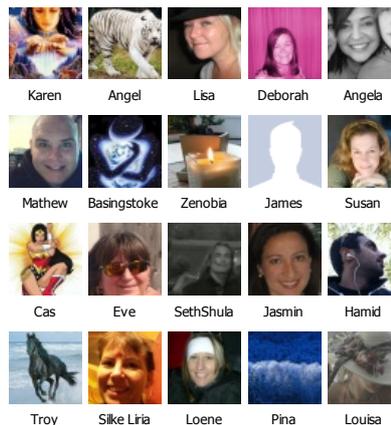
Over the past year, I have been taking some 'Mitochondrial' supplements, that have helped dramatically heal my body, brain and heart and in turn, gave my life back. After spending 30 minutes on my painting, originally thinking what a horrible mess I made whilst 'being in the zone,' I gasped when I saw that the two hearts I had drawn, suddenly morphed into an image of a Mitochondria! My subconscious was coming through my art whilst I was letting go and reminding me of the changes I had gone through that year. How amazing!



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Later that afternoon I experienced my first Divine Retreat Yoga session which was held in the conservatory overlooking the lawn behind the Villa. This beautiful glass building is also used for special events such as wedding receptions.

The glass walls meant that we had loads of natural light coming through and we could witness the sun rising or setting, whilst also being able to easily

relax and meditate after our session because nature was right there in all it's glory. This Yoga room, also had a water fountain inside which meant that we would hear the sound of water flowing which only added to the incredible energy. I looked up sneakily quite a few times during our sessions and couldn't help but marvel at where I was.

Our yoga was taught by Francis D' Angelo, an experienced yoga teacher, based in London with more than 14 years teaching experience. The Hatha style that he teaches is one that promotes balance, primarily physically, then mentally and as one's practice deepens, emotionally. I only started doing yoga with my teacher Frank Arrigazzi, a few months ago and was a bit worried I wouldn't be able to keep up with this new class. I soon realised that there was nothing to be worried about, Francis was someone who made the classes so much fun and had a knack at explaining the poses so easily as he went along that even I kept up with them.

I was surprised at how quickly I saw my body change shape and capabilities over those five days. Most of us did Yoga twice a day, with our first session at 8 am for an hour and a half and the second session later that day was at 5:30 pm. Francis uses spur of the moment, and sometimes colourful (aka a bit rude!) humor all throughout his classes and quite often I found myself giggling out loud with my leg stuck high in the air! Whilst Yoga was a big part of the trip, if you didn't want to do it twice a day, there was no pressure, the trip was about doing exactly what felt right for you.

My yoga sessions were made even better because my entire wardrobe was supplied by Asquith London! Every piece of my exercise clothing was either organic cotton or made from the highly sustainable bamboo. So soft and lovely to wear, I often found myself wearing the tops with jeans and the wrap tops to dinner. Fabric like this makes exercise so much more enjoyable and I am now a huge and loyal fan of the range. I loved wearing the shorter capri pants because it meant I could grab my ankle easily when doing some of the asanas. The bootleg pants are great but I thought would suit more for lounging around the house or even going to the gym. This seasons collection has pieces that are embellished in subtle places such as the cuffs and ankle areas with brilliant sparkly Swarovski crystals. Asquith London, knows I am a big fan and have offered you a 20% off discount, so if you want to get some excellent quality ethical yoga gear, you can't go wrong with checking out the Asquith London range. Use the code 'Yoga Team' to get your 20%



The food during our week in Tuscany was exactly what you would expect from Italy! Fresh and mostly organic (grown locally), colorful, rich, yummy and comforting, this is how one imagines Italian food to be.

Whilst entirely raw food was not on the menu, there was plenty of fresh fruit and salad. We all had the option of buying our own food and preparing what we liked if that's how we chose to eat. The wonderful cooks in the kitchen would prepare vegan and vegetarian meals when requested. I also enjoyed letting my hair down that week in terms of diet and whilst not following my normally very healthy diet, I was amazed at how good I felt the following days. Normally eating bread would give me brain fog galore and a sick feeling in the stomach. This made me think about how incredibly powerful stress is to the body. Perhaps being happy and stress free, meant that our bodies, mainly our digestive systems, could cope so much better and deal with processing tough foods like wheat when we were just feeling so good and carefree.



I booked a deep tissue massage with Krisztina Karanyicz, who is quite possibly the most highly trained masseuse I have ever met. Not only does she do many different types of massage including: Hot Stone, Thai Yoga, Energy Healing, Hawaiian, Egyptian, Swedish and Aroma massage to name a few, this woman is also an intuitive healer. The deep tissue massage may have been one of the most painful I have ever had, but it also released so much tension that I didn't even know was there.

Krisztina explained that areas on the body are connected to certain emotional traumas which are often held onto by the muscles. For example, my right hand side of my back, has always been extremely tense (rock hard!) and sore. This right side, Krisztina mentioned, was said to be the 'male' side. I grew up attracting many abusive relationships with males and it made sense to me that this mind and body connection could be true.

Four days later, after my first massage, I had another and Krisztina said my energy was completely different, she could sense a big change in my emotional and physical well being. I completely agreed with her that I felt like a different person. I still do, even a few weeks after this trip was over, I still have that feeling that something big has now left me. I believe that especially this deep tissue massage, as well as the other therapies I had during my stay, helped to push out toxic emotions trapped in my body.

The massage room, was just beautiful and very memorable. Large, with high ceilings, with the windows shut and kept totally dark apart from candle light. A lovely log fire crackled during the massage. The sound and comforting heat created the most perfect environment for a massage. Krisztina is someone that I will visit again in London, not just because of her amazing techniques but because she really connects with you during the treatment as well. She seemed to know things about me despite not telling her anything! Many of the other guests on the retreat, came out of that room, raving like I did. Despite the fact that it was not a relaxing massage, she was just out of this world and they felt a big shift had occurred in their bodies!

The next day we took a short stroll up the hill behind us to visit a vineyard, for some oh so Italian, wine tasting. The Vineyard named Tenuta Di Valgiano, produces up to 80,000 (per year) bottles of Biodynamic wines and also a high quality organic Olive Oil. I was thrilled to hear all of the wines were Biodynamically produced. I supported this way of manufacturing, I also allowed myself to try them. Because zero harmful chemicals are used in the process of making these wines, it also meant that they tasted incredible. Not normally a drinker of wines, I found myself wishing I had room my suitcase to take a whole carton back home.

The next day trip we took, was a visit to the gorgeous town of Lucca. This beautiful town of 100,000 people that it is worth visiting even if not on a Divine Retreat. We were able to spend a few hours in Lucca and were accompanied with a very passionate and interesting Spanish born English speaking guide, Gabrielle. I have not usually been one for learning about history, and unfortunately it was not something I paid attention to growing up, as I was usually falling asleep in class, but I now find myself so thirsty for knowledge about where people came from these days that I found Gabrielle's stories absolutely fascinating.

The film, 'Portrait of A Lady' starring Nicole Kidman was filmed here in Lucca and it was obvious to see why, it is just so stunning and it was very easy to imagine what life was like, all those years ago.

Puccini, one of the most famous musicians that ever lived, was also born in Lucca so music and the celebration of music is still very much a big part of Lucca life.

Lucca is indeed a town steeped with history. Originally well known for being vastly wealthy due to producing the countries finest silks, Lucca, despite being so lucrative, was also strangely enough, a town that never saw war.

A high stone wall was eventually built to protect the town, but no one ever tried to overturn Lucca. Florence conquered all of the other Tuscan towns, except for Lucca. Charles the 1st, much loved by the town and it's people, made lots of money for himself from Lucca. He threatened to fight anyone if they in turn threatened his beloved Lucca and livelihood. Because of this protection, many aspects of Lucca were preserved, with many 14th century buildings being in pretty much



Walking around the town you will immediately notice people, young and old, comfortably whizzing by on bikes. Bikes can be hired to ride around the inner city and will take only 20 minutes to complete the circle. They will cost you only 1 euro to hire and is very fun to do.

Inside the walls of the city lies 'Garden of the Villa Reale Di Marli' which we did not have time to go inside to see up close, but we could catch a little glimpse from where we were standing. This beautiful and manicured and elegant garden saw many outdoor plays and operas which were performed for Royalty and local Elites.

Lucca was one of the highlights for me of the trip. I loved how peaceful and pretty Lucca was and how we weren't walking through crowds of people. I loved the people watching and it cemented to me, that yet again, many Europeans are far healthier than us Brits. Combined with lots of sun, consuming huge amounts of olive oil in their daily diets, being less stressed, being more family focused, they are aging much better than we are. I saw many healthy looking 70 year olds riding bikes! And, whats even more surprising, is that most Italians smoke like chimneys, too!

It's refreshing to go to somewhere so beautiful, yet not choked full with crowds of people. I definitely want to come back again one day and check out Lucca in more detail. With so much history and the arts, it's a stunning Tuscan City.



Dinner and pre-drinks that evening was hosted at the owner's Villa, overlooking the beautiful valleys covered with Olive Trees. Marcello generously invited us into his stunning home, Villa Bernardini where we had dinner in a room that was, fit for a Queen. Full of original Antiques, I eyed up quite a few pieces that would look fabulous in my house if only it was this size.

The evening was highly enjoyable, we all got to sit around huge tables and chat to each other and Marcello about the history of Villa Bernardini. Marcello, a very welcoming host, was also very down to earth and seemed genuinely happy to have us there in his beautiful home. The Italians love socialising and talking about food and their countries history. And why would they not? It really is an amazing place!

The next few days were full of yoga, food, fun, relaxing (around the pool) and therapies if you wanted to book them. I tried to get as much gentle sun as I could and lapped it up with joy, trying not to think about the London winter that was upon us back home.

My first Therapy I tried was a Theta Healing Session with Lorena Granata who has over 20 years experience with Holistic and Shamanic Medicine. Theta Healing is a fairly new therapy, I never heard of it until this retreat. Described as being natural, simple and surprisingly instantaneous. Theta Healing taps into the subconscious part of the mind and releases thought patterns and belief systems that do not serve us positively, such as 'I am worthless' or "I am ashamed."

Combined with muscle testing, this therapy works in a way that may shock you as you see your body answering things for you that your conscious mind does not recognise! I found it an incredible process and working with Lorena was wonderful, she is one of those people who is warm, loving, kind and who genuinely wants to help others. Whilst this may not be something everyone believes can work, my view is, if you are open to things, with healing, anything is possible. The mind is very powerful and things can enter it within a second and things can leave it within a second also. I found it a great experience!

The next day I had a 'Journey' with the equally lovely Sandra Ferreria. Sandra had cancer only three years ago and came across a book 'The Journey' by the now very well known, Brandon Bays. This form of therapy follows the same principles in the book that to heal, we must go back in time or to a certain memory to truly heal all of our emotions, such as apologising to our younger selves on behalf of the people who hurt us. For example, if you had been brought up by a father who did not treat you very well and did things to you that you took as unkind or cruel, you would take your younger self to the past and apologise to that hurting child. This in turn, will set those emotions free and can let your cells begin to heal any imbalance in the body.

I had one of these journey's a few years back and cried my eyes out because I was still very upset about my past. After years of doing lots of healing work on myself, this session was completely powerful for me because I no longer was bitter at any of the people that hurt me. In fact, I was actually very grateful at all the things that happened to me, including the very bad times where I could have lost my life due to my depression when I felt so low and alone that I wanted to give up.

I thought that my whole life was completely meant to be and every single one of those tough times had brought me right to this very point.

I realised I was living my dream life of being happy and healthy with a sense of purpose that I never thought I would have. I cried a few tears during my session, but they were of amazement at how life can turn out the way you want it to, if you just keep fighting through the tough times and never give up hope!

Sandra also does Reiki, EFT and can combine her Journeys with Massage. She happens to also be



and got the hang of it, I sadly, was not!) with legs us girls were all envious of. My trip away was more than I could have hoped for. I left there with many new friends, a more toned and flexible body (yes it happens that quickly from Yoga!), joy, peace, happiness, appreciation for my husband and motivation to get back home and live life in a better way, every day. I realised also, that having time out from your partner and every day life can be a very good thing. If you don't share similar beliefs (such as one loves yoga and the other doesn't) then going on a retreat just for you is so important. You will come back a different person, so refreshed and happy that it will actually be good for the both of you!



Divine Retreats will be holding their next retreat in May 2011. I have already put my name down to go again. It was that good. Everyone involved in making this retreat a success were brilliant people who I would go and visit in London for their wonderful therapies.

Not only was this trip about Yoga, it was about having lots of fun, seeing a small part of Tuscany, getting to know other people who share similar interests, taking time out

for yourself (where you could walk around the grounds or sit by the pool). It was also about deep healing if thats what you wanted to achieve from this time away. There were no rules here, if you didn't want to do morning yoga, you could sleep in. If you didn't want to go to Lucca or Pisa, you didn't have to. It was all about what you wanted to do.

Divine Retreats can organise retreats for other yoga teachers or practitioners, so if interested, please get in touch with them.

The location could not have been better suited for a trip like this. It was incredible. So stunning was Fattoria Mansi Bernadini that when I meditate at home and think of that special place, this is it!

It made us feel like we were far away from the world, yet in reality, many of the other things to see and do, were only a short drive away.

I hear that Divine Retreats next year are running an option of staying longer for a two week trip with much more focus on the nutritional aspect.

I will be back!

Approximate Prices for a weeks stay start at £850.

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