

Winter in Lucca

New Zealander Prue Scott spent three months in Lucca at the height of winter and found a world of colour and light.

Lucca may not have the breath-taking monuments of other Italian cities, but oh the light!

In a rash moment, sweltering in New York humidity in September 2018, I decided to spend January-March 2019 in Crete, courtesy of a generous friend with an apartment in old-town Chania. *I thought you were planning to go to Italy to practise your Italian*, said another friend.

Right. Water colourist friend Amanda recommended Lucca. She'd done all the research – a city with good transport connections, a walled *centro storico* (historic centre), big enough to have what you need, small enough so no car needed, walkable.

A quick Google search found a wonderful apartment on the first floor of a 300-year-old building. I paid the deposit. Booked an airfare. Canadian friend Maggie arrived from her hotel. *Had a good nap?* she asked. *No, just booked myself to Lucca for three months*, I replied. *As you do*, she returned, and we sweated off into the night.

Three months later, having done none of my usual research, I arrived at Via Pelleria armed with laptop, camera and winter clothing. My apartment was exactly as described. Warm, washing machine, heated towel rail, those big old-fashioned heaters along the walls.

I fell for Lucca immediately. Those of you who know Lucca are probably nodding your heads, but you need to know that I come from a very young country where such history, particularly buildings, doesn't exist. Our first colonial settlers were British and much of that "look" was imported. European style didn't exist.

I walked. And walked. And walked. Most of the time, my mouth was agape and then my camera would come up. I came prepared for grey, wet days, only to find an amazingly mild winter. It's usually very wet, I was told on arrival. In three months, I think we had seven days of rain. The year before, you'd had snow. But, winter dialled down the rain and delivered day after day of brilliant sunshine, sandwiched between freezing mornings and nights. Even a lunchtime walk in blazing January sun had the odd effect of freezing my nose and making it run at the same time.

New Zealand is a pair of small islands, so there's a lot of weather. My jeans were no use in the cold, but I never remembered to put on the warm, fuzzy tights I'd bought from home. I just kept walking.

I loved the narrow, paved streets even though they were hell on my feet (note for return visit: bring better walking shoes). I walked above streets that dated back to Roman times. All those beautifully coloured apartment buildings with green shutters and that amazing blue sky above. The churches! The glimpses of private gardens behind vast doors. Shops closing at 1pm for lunch.

In a previous trip to Tuscany, I realised the landscapes generally had just four elements – stone buildings, cypress trees, grapevines and olive trees. Lucca, on the other hand, has more extensive offerings, from its buildings painted ochre, peach and yellow, highlighted with shutters and topped with terracotta tiled roofs, old brickwork, mosaics in the churches and the carved marble outside...and the walls.

I kept discovering streets and piazzas I'd not seen before and wondered what they must be like in summer with the trees in leaf and people eating outside well into the evening. I marvelled that such history was not only on display but still in use. Most days, my jaw fell open with each turn or each look upward because, in Lucca, you must look up for those wonderful architectural details and that blue, blue sky.

There were new gastronomic experiences, from aperitivo to Tuscan sausage and bean stew; I rediscovered porchetta and had fresh pappardelle with wild boar ragù; I discovered local wines and Prosecco.

And, of course, there were the new friends found through English Mondays and the Facebook groups. I left, determined to return if only for three months. A one-year elective residence visa? Ah, now there's a dream.

– by Prue Scott

Layers of paint and plaster are chipped to show original stonework beneath.



Carved and decorated marble atop the Church of San Michele in Piazza San Michele. The name first appeared in records in 795.



Every now and then, a door would open and there would be a courtyard.



Guinigi Tower, complete with eight oak trees growing atop the tower.



A misty winter's morning outside the walls



Midwinter evening outside the walls



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