

Travel

Driving south from Pisa airport into the Tuscan countryside and a picture-postcard idea comes shimmering into life. From the rolling fields of golden wheat dotted with terracotta-roofed farmhouses to the rows of hay bales and pencil-like cypress trees stretching high into the cobalt sky, there's no denying I'm in Tuscany – the region in central Italy known for its stunning landscapes and world-class food and wine. And it's quite the thrill to discover that the reality lives up to the dream.

After a pleasant one-hour journey I arrive at the five-star Sense Experience Resort on the Gulf of Follonica (B&B doubles from €438 per night). What elevates this beach resort to “experience” status? It starts with the staff, who appear eager to organise bespoke experiences ranging from food and bike tours to horse riding on the beach, diving and kite surfing, beer tours and vineyard visits. Tailor-made excursions to nearby Siena, Lucca and Florence can also be arranged.

At reception, however, all I can focus on is the blue water of the Mediterranean beyond. On the resort's private beach, guests are spoilt with loungers and parasols, plus a personal bell to order food and drinks direct from the bar. This luxury, combined with a view to the island of Elba, makes leaving the hotel seem like a very bad idea indeed.

Then there's the food. And what food it is. The dinner menu on my first evening at the hotel's Dimora restaurant included sautéed spaghetti with clams and truffle, lentil croquettes and goat with pecorino. It's a meal that will live long in my memory.

The next morning our destination was Massa Marittima, a medieval town perched high in the hills of the province of Grosseto. Notwithstanding a colourful row of Fiat 500s outside the church gates, the town seems untouched by time. Saint Cerbonius Cathedral dominates the main piazza and draws visitors with its rare glass rose window and frescoes, which date from the 14th century.



ALAMY, ANDREA GETULI

Ciao down in lovely Tuscany

The way to *Kevin Gleeson's* heart is through his stomach and it's love at first bite as he embarks on a gastronomic tour of this fabled region in central Italy



Kevin Gleeson stayed at the Sense Experience Resort, right, and visited the medieval town of Massa Marittima, above, where he enjoyed local meats and cheeses at Il Bacchino, left



Near the main piazza lies Il Bacchino. What looks like a fairly well-stocked deli and wine shop is in fact one of the most important promoters of locally produced wine and food. The owners, Monica and Madgy, know everything there is to know about the best the region has to offer and are happy to share that knowledge with customers. Il Bacchino is not a restaurant per se, but there are a few tables outside in the narrow, cobbled street. We pull up a seat and feast on confit fig skins stuffed with pâté and drizzled with honey alongside cheeses, meats and breads all sourced locally and washed down with local wines.

When the food is this good it's hardly surprising that it is such a big part of the Italian lifestyle. I barely had time to let

the wine settle before it was time for dinner. The Sense offers a range of dining experiences, but for our last night we ate at the resort's Eaté restaurant. Alessandro Piper, the owner of the one-Michelin-star Piper Roma restaurant in Rome, has collaborated with the Sense to offer a beachfront menu of Mediterranean flavours such as red mullet with smoked scamorza milk and lobster with grapefruit and sour chard.

It was the perfect end to a few days discovering Tuscany for the first time. I can safely say that I was leaving with all of the senses fully sated.

Kevin Gleeson was a guest of thesenseresort.com