



Luxury with eco credentials

On Tuscany's coast, a former children's holiday camp has been transformed into a beachfront oasis, finds Rachel Roberts

Sometimes, it takes vision and a huge leap of faith to realise a dream. And that is certainly the case for The Sense Experience Resort in Follonica, the four-star coastal eco-resort set in southwest Tuscany.

When the soon-to-be co-owner Federico Ficcannerri visited the complex back in 2016, a faded 1950s children's holiday camp, he strode to the top of an unremarkable scrubby hill, confidently declaring that it would one day be an idyllic place where guests would enjoy an unforgettable dining experience.

Fast-forward eight years to summer 2024, and we're raising our champagne flutes to Mr Ficcannerri (and cousin Riccardo, it's something of a family affair) on this very spot, at the start of a two-night stay.

Now transformed into a stylish decked viewpoint platform tucked away from the main resort, during the day, it's the perfect retreat from the searing heat, thanks to the huge cabana-style sunshade. As night falls, guests can reserve the space for an exclusive dinner, after designing a menu with the chef. Oh, and the platform rotates if you simply don't have the energy to move your seat for a better glimpse of the moon/sun.

The trees are symbolic of the resort's sustainability ethos, with not a single one cut down during the renovation process. Any new additions were simply built around them. This commitment to the planet continues with a water osmosis system that meets around 90 per cent of the resort's needs, the recycling of more than 70 per cent of the waste produced onsite, and using local produce.



The Sense Experience Resort in Follonica, main; inside one of the 112 bedrooms, above

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Another key attraction is the resort's 250 metre-long private beach

There's also a chef's garden where freshly grown herbs are picked.

Located within a five-hectare park in Italy's naturally beautiful Maremma region, The Sense is the first luxury experience resort in Tuscany to take nature as its inspiration.

From the outset, the Ficcannerri Group wished to make a minimum impact on the environment by preserving the former camp's layout, so the 112 rooms, including Deluxe, Superior and themed Suites of different categories, have been cleverly reorganised with

exemplary furnishings and touches. Examples include a 50m² one-bedroom suite with sea view and a junior suite with sea view and Jacuzzi. Nature is echoed throughout the interiors via a palette of earthy, harmonious tones such as grassy olive and sea blue, creating a calming cocoon.

Another key attraction is the resort's 250 metre-long private beach – something of a rarity in Italy – which fringes the Tyrrhenian Sea and, on a clear day, has good views of Elba, famous for being Napoleon Bonaparte's place of exile in 1814-15. The sandy stretch also marks another first for The Sense – boasting Eaté, the only beach restaurant along the entire costa.

Our visit happily coincides with a new collaboration with chef Ciro Scamardella, who has already achieved a Michelin star for his outstanding creations at Piperio Rome, so it would be rude not to sit down for an epic tasting menu, bathed in candlelight and the sound of the lapping waves. With a focus on Tuscan produce and,

of course, the diverse bounty from the sea, we sample dishes including melt-in-the-mouth Amberjack carpaccio served with roasted peach and semi-dried tomato, and a rich, complex Cacciucco fish stew reduction, with salmon roe, lime and juniper.

While we can't promise that the same dishes will still be on the menu, if you do plan to visit, you cannot be disappointed. It's truly exceptional. And if you fancy something a little less, well fancy, Dimorà is the resort's second restaurant offering (and breakfast area), where you can tuck into plates such as risotto with seafood and asparagus or locally bred Maremmano beef. For a pre-dinner cocktail or beachside eats, the cute air-stream style Red Rabbit offers a great selection of drinks and snacks, including the biggest pizza we've ever seen. You can even put your order in via WhatsApp and not move a muscle from your sun lounger – although the resort's gorgeous manicured grounds may just tempt you for an easy stroll.

To work off the amazing food, you can head to the resort's well-equipped gym or do some laps in the 25-metre outdoor pool, which is heated to 28 degrees all-year round. The resort has a grown-up vibe overall and generally attracts adults, but this is where the little visitors can head for some fun. And four-legged friends are welcome, for an extra cost. There's also a tennis court, and there are four golf courses nearby for those who want to tee off, or you can hop on one of the resort's complimentary bicycles and take an easy 30-minute peddle along the



The breakfast buffet in the Dimorà restaurant

flat path that hugs the coast to the nearby town of Follinca. You can also speak to one of the many helpful Experience Specialists on-site, who can arrange a whole host of other sporty sessions, alongside day excursions into the local area.

We organise a tour through a local company, Hakuna Matata Outdoor, and head to the hill-top town of Massa Marittima for the afternoon. We are enchanted by its towering Romanesque cathedral and later a visit to the quirky Museo degli Organi Meccanici Antichi, where we meet the charismatic owner who has made it his life's work to track down and restore rare musical instruments. He plays snatches of classical pieces on various pianos to illustrate their different tones and talks passionately about his work. Another highlight is dropping in at Il Bacchino Enoteca, where we are served huge boards groaning under the weight of local cheese and charcuterie, all washed down with fabulous local wines, as we watch the townspeople go about their daily business.

While Tuscany's embarrassment of riches has seen visitors flock from all corners of the globe for centuries, it's only a matter of time before Maremma's location, within very easy reach of Pisa, Lucca, Florence and Siena, earns it a place on any respectable grand tour. People are slowly catching on to this under-the-radar destination, and the growing remarkable reputation of The Sense Experience Resort can only further accelerate it. Don't say we didn't let you in on the secret.

thesensereresort.it



Art of a city break in Provence

The legacy of Van Gogh's time in Arles is reflected in its world class galleries, which along with spectacular Roman ruins and genteel charm, make it the perfect short-break destination, finds Neil Geraghty

On a winter's night above the rooftops of Arles the spectacular alignment of planets is at its peak. In the clear Provençal air Jupiter and Venus are shining so brightly I'm beginning to understand what inspired Van Gogh to paint his starry night paintings. He lived in Arles from 1888 to 1889 and was so inspired by the city's charm that his 15 month stay became the most productive period of his artistic career. In the late 19th century Arles had fallen into decline and as I wander around the Old Town, the crumbling limestone facades of ancient townhouses still exude an aura of a forgotten backwater.

But it wasn't always this way. At the end of a street I walk down a flight of steps and a

magnificent floodlit Roman arena comes into view. During its heyday, Arles was one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire. Adjacent to the arena an elegant Roman theatre completes one of the finest collections of Roman buildings in France.

Direct flights from Edinburgh to Marseilles make Arles an easy short break choice for Scottish travellers. From Marseilles Airport regular commuter trains take 40 minutes to reach the city and from the station it's a short five minute walk to the centre. An excellent way to enjoy Arles' wealth of historic attractions is to invest in a pass avantage from the local tourist board which for €19 gives you access to six UNESCO World Heritage monuments and four museums.

Starting chronologically I head to the arena which was modelled on Rome's Colosseum and could hold 20,000 spectators. During the Middle Ages the arena became a self-contained fortified town and three brooding medieval towers still rise above the elegant tiers of arches. One of these is open to visitors to climb and from the top you get sweeping vistas of terracotta tiled rooftops and church towers overlooking the River Rhône. To learn more about Roman Arles I head over to the city's Archaeological Museum which is home to a treasure trove of sculptures and mosaics and also one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the 21st century. In 2004, a 102ft long Roman trading vessel was discovered in the muddy riverbed of the Rhone. The ship was laden with clay amphora and still had one of its masts intact. Following a meticulous nine year restoration the joinery has been exquisitely preserved and more than any exhibit in the museum the boat conjures up the mastery of ancient Roman craftsmanship.

Close to the Archaeological Museum lies La Roquette, one of Arles' most picturesque neighbourhoods which is a maze of narrow lanes lined with

pretty limestone cottages. Van Gogh painted many scenes of working class life here and after lunch I go for an exhilarating electric pedi-cab tour of Arles' Van Gogh trail. In between bouncing over the cobbles and veering around tight corners we stop at information panels where buildings and even trees depicted in his paintings have been preserved. One of these includes the hospital where Van Gogh recuperated after famously cutting off his own ear. The hospital is now a high school but both the colour scheme and planting in the courtyard garden have been faithfully replicated from his paintings.

Van Gogh's stay in Arles' kickstarted an appreciation of art which continues unabated to the present day. For a city of just 50,000 inhabitants Arles has a world class collection of galleries which include the Vincent Van Gogh Foundation and the futuristic LUMA arts centre designed by Frank Gehry which both stage exhibitions by renowned contemporary artists.

The historic buildings of Arles' Old Town are also blank canvasses for stylish contemporary conversions. In the afternoon I wander over to Bigourdan Distillery where

View of Arles and the Roman amphitheatre, which was modelled on Rome's Colosseum

owner Thomas, inspired by London's microdistilleries, has taken a 13th century townhouse, stripped down its interiors to bare stonework and sprinkled them with a touch of Shoreditch designer magic. On warm summer evenings visitors can sample Thomas' herb-infused pastis creations in a romantic candlelit courtyard.

In the evening I take a twilight stroll along the Rhône where the last faint colours of a blazing sunset and the campaniles of the Old Town are reflected in the water. It's a view that Van Gogh drew great inspiration from and as Venus appears like a torchlight on the horizon, the timeless view slowly transforms into "Starry Night over the Rhône", one of his most acclaimed paintings.

Ryanair operates seasonal flights from Edinburgh to Marseilles three times a week from April to October, www.ryanair.com

For holiday ideas in France visit www.france.fr and for more information on Provence and Arles visit www.myprovence.fr and www.arlestourisme.com

Happy 60th birthday to the Pennine Way

Get your hiking boots on and visit at least part of the beautiful 268-mile route, writes Sarah Marshall



The spectacular High Cup Nick on the Pennine Way

Britain's country paths have been traversed by thousands of pilgrims and hikers over the centuries, but the first official national trail was only inaugurated in modern times.

Inspired by America's Appalachian Trail, journalist and keen Rambler Tom Stephenson called for a "long green trail" which could form "the backbone of England". It took 30 years of battling with landowners for his dream to become a reality, with The Pennine Way finally inaugurated in 1965.

Stretching for 268 miles (431 km) from Edale in Derbyshire to Kirk Yetholm in the Scottish Borders, the path winds through three national parks: the Peak District, Yorkshire Dales, and Northumberland.

Hike a scenic section

Rather than tackle the full thing, sample a stand-out section on a new four-night guided walking holiday. From a base in Appleby-in-Westmorland at one of the trailheads, venture out each day to explore an area lying between the Pennines and the Lake District Fells. Follow a disused railway line passing over grand viaducts, admire the deep glacial gorge of High Cup Nick, and marvel at the stone structures of Nine Standards Rigg.

How: The four-night Enchanting Eden Valley tour starts from £649 per person, including half-board accommodation and guide. Departs July 7, August 18 and September 15, 2025. Visit rambleworldwide.co.uk.

Enjoy the route on four wheels

Not everyone has the stamina

to hike – but that doesn't mean missing out on the scenery. "While the 268-mile stretch is primarily a walking route, road trippers can choose to take the easterly A1 passing through Leeds, Durham and Newcastle upon Tyne, or the westerly M6 through Manchester and the Lake District," says Max Schmidt, head of CamperDays.

"Picking up a four-person roadsurfer Surfer Suite from Manchester over dates 26 April-3 May will cost £723 total, while a four-person Bunk Campers Mystery 2 from London will cost £565."

How: Visit camperdays.co.uk.

Witness local wildlife

Some of the biggest beneficiaries of protected areas are undoubtedly the wild species that inhabit them. Thanks to conservation efforts, Britain's wildlife manages to thrive in national parks.

Focusing on the Peak District, wildlife specialist Naturetrek offers a birding day trip led by naturalist Matthew Capper, with a chance to see moorland birds like the ring ouzel, curlew, whinchat and wheatear.

Visit a blanket bog to see important populations of golden plover and dunlin, and head to woodlands for pied flycatcher and redstart.

How: Dark Peak day trips from £60pp. May departures are currently full but get in touch for future dates. Visit naturetrek.co.uk.