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Catriona's culinary adventure in Tuscany
 Thursday, October 21, 2010

As a lover of everything Italian and someone with plenty of scope to improve her culinary expertise, Catriona Rowntree was excited at the prospect of signing up for a Tuscookany cooking class in a Tuscan villa.

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Her destination was the 18th-century villa, Torre del Tartufo, high in the Tuscan hills, a couple of hours pleasant drive from Rome. The 200-hectare property is surrounded by a truffle estate and groves of hazelnut and oak trees. It is believed to have once been a chapel and has been added to over the years.

It has recently been restored, using Tuscan materials. Terracotta floors, wood beams and marble bathrooms. There are 12 bedrooms divided into four suites, each with living room, fireplace and small kitchen. A large central area includes kitchen, bar and dining room. Every room has a terrace or balcony with views across the hills.

Catriona loved her room with heated floors and an adorable Juliet balcony. She was also taken by the piazza where meals are served. There is a solar-heated pool, sauna and hot tub for complete relaxation.

With such beautiful surroundings, it could be easy to forget that you are actually there to learn, but it was aprons on and knives sharpened for a hands-on lesson with chef Franco Palandra. Classes are in English, but you can't help picking up bits and pieces of the beautiful local language.

The lesson started with handmade ravioli filled with spinach, ricotta, parmesan and egg. Next was rolled chicken with pecorino and truffles. Everyone went to the garden with a local and his truffle-sniffing dog. Once they get the smell, they scratch the ground and wag their tails and the prize is just half a centimetre underground. The prized truffles are then taken to the kitchen, brushed and cut with a special slicer. That's *really* a hands-on experience.

The passion of the Italian kitchen is contagious and learning to make a range of antipasto, gnocchi, Tuscan fillings and sauces is just wonderful. Desserts include making the perfect panna cotta or warm lemon pie with Italian meringue. Tuscookany has organic vegetable gardens and many ingredients come from local farmers.

Between classes and chatting with other students, Catriona loved just wandering around the estate. It's peaceful and has views that will stay with her forever.

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Location

Tuscany, a three-hour drive from Rome.

Cost

Tuscookany three-day courses are around \$1789. One-week courses are around \$2900. Luxury accommodation, meals, fine wines, food tour and classes are included. They run between April and November.

Emirates has early-bird fares to Rome from:

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Prices correct at October 21, 2010.

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