

# Take to the hills!

Mark Nicholls travels to Emilia Romagna where he embarks on an epic hiking tour to discover the best sights, gourmet delights and wine that the region has to offer

*We paused at a wayside chapel for a quick snack and some water before venturing deeper into the shaded woodland*





It is hard to imagine the Via Francigena – an undulating track through western Italy – as one of Europe’s busiest ‘highways’ during the Middle Ages. Winding through woodlands rich in wild mushrooms, pale lemon primroses and orchids about to bloom, this was the main pilgrimage route to Rome for hundreds of years. Today, the stretch through Emilia Romagna is a path less trodden yet thankfully not forgotten.

Among those championing its attractions are Mick and Jackie Parsons who run Hedonistic Hiking, offering walking tours in Italy while at the same time showcasing a region’s food, wine and culture. Accommodation is chosen based on its charm, individuality, and picturesque setting, while the chance to try regional dishes further enhances the experience. Hedonistic Hiking organises a number of different walks around Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, Liguria, Piedmont and Cinque Terre.

#### APPRECIATING THE SIGHTS

The group I accompanied on this trip had opted for a four-day tailor-made tour taking in Emilia Romagna and Parma, which promised to show the flavours of ‘Prosciutto, Parmesan and Pilgrims.’

As we hiked a 12km stretch of the Via Francigena, Jackie offered an insight into how it would have been in the year 1200; a highway that guided the faithful to Rome from all corners of Europe, a route where once Archbishops mingled with monks, pilgrims, traders, merchants and vagabonds en route to see the Pope. We paused at a wayside chapel – La Maestà, dedicated to the Madonna – for a quick snack and some water, before venturing deeper into the woodland where the sunlight filtered through overhanging branches.

Towards the end of the walk, the bell tower of the church of St Cristoforo appeared out of the blossom. And there, in its shadow was Mick; stove bubbling away, bench table set ready for the imaginative picnic lunch that has become the trademark of Hedonistic Hiking tours. As befits their ethos,

the lunch reflected the region and the season: wild mushroom soup, *prosciutto*, *mortadella*, *salami*, Parmesan, smoked *scamorza* cheese, all accompanied by local wines such as Sangiovese and Vermentino. Fresh fruit, an orange and fennel salad and home-made chutneys with a bountiful supply of *focaccia* and *ciabatta* finished off the feast.

As she poured a glass of local red wine, Jackie explained, “Hedonistic Hiking summarises what we are all about: we provide high-quality walking experiences, which also focus on the wonderful gastronomy of the region we are in. We are passionate about our guests getting to know a region through the food, wine, landscape and culture.” While lunch is *al fresco*, evening meals can be grand affairs with unforgettable culinary delights.

On another day of the trip we began with a visit to a Parmesan-making factory, which was a truly insightful experience. We discovered how a 40-kilo wheel of cheese is created in 11,000 litre vats before sampling the area’s infamous product. A few hours later, after a 10km walk in the vicinity of Borgotaro, Parmesan that had been bought from the cheese producer turned up as part of Mick’s asparagus and egg salad, eaten picnic-style in the *portico* of a wayside rustic chapel placed just above the village of Folta.

#### GASTRONOMIC LEARNING

The famous 20th century Italian commentator Italo Calvino once remarked, ‘The best way to know a land is to take its food in.’ That ethos has been enthusiastically embraced by Hedonistic Hiking with breaks that offer a fresh dimension to an Italian landscape. Food, wine and walking become inextricably linked to convey the essence and spirit of a region.

What guests experience is a fascinating insight into the landscape, its produce and people, delightful scenery and lungfuls of fresh air taken at a pace that is achievable for all abilities and are as exhilarating as they are rewarding. Plus there’s always a refreshing glass of wine waiting at the end! ■

#### HEDONISTIC HIKING

Mick and Jackie Parsons are the unlikely partnership of a girl from Norfolk and an Australian boy from the bush, who “fell in love... and fell in love with Italy.” Both fluent Italian speakers, they created Hedonistic Hiking three years ago to offer walking tours with the added dimension of showing off the tastes, flavours, culture and history of the Italian region that their guests meander through. Previously, they had both worked for other organisations offering walking tours in Italy.

Married in 1998, they have a home in Tuscany but divide their time between Italy and Australia, organising walks in Europe between Easter and November and offering a similar experience in Australia between November and Easter. Jackie is a linguist with a passion for history and a love of Medieval and Renaissance art, while Mick is a trained chef with an expert nose for sniffing out a bottle of good local wine. The couple have immersed themselves in Italian life and built up a wealth of fascinating walks, as well as choice restaurants and menus to share with their guests. Jackie says, “We chose Italy as the location for our home because of its food, wine, walking, culture and history. We are truly passionate about the country. We believe in what we do and with Mick and I operating the tours ourselves we can ensure we bring a personal touch.”

Hedonistic Hiking seeks to be eco-friendly, with minimal impact on the landscape as its tours pass through, and using locally-sourced seasonal food that not only promotes the produce of a region but also supports those who produce it. Mick says, “We look for the best local produce and elegant restaurants that are atmospheric and offer wonderful food but also those that are more rustic and offer a great local experience. “The areas we cover are a little less known but they offer excellent walking and fantastic food and wine, and we know them really well. Walking through an area is a way of really getting to know it. You can enjoy the food and wine, see what’s around you and meet the local people.”

#### FACT FILE

Hedonistic Hiking offers fully-inclusive guided walking holidays (excluding flights) from Easter to November in Tuscany, Cinque Terre, Piedmont and Emilia Romagna.

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