TIME FOR A PISA OF THE ACTION

ROSS MCCARTHY TAKES A TRIP TO PISA TO SAMPLE THE DELIGHTS OF TUSCANY

If you have a few hours to spare and decide to take a horse drawn carriage ride through Pisa’s main park you might get chased by a wild boar.

But don’t worry the animal is more interested in the horse than you, I was told.

Our new friend, who has a bit of a fearsome reputation, seemed quite curious and kept up with me and the other passengers for a while and there were others, afterwards, who joined in the chase before giving up.

It did occur to me that they might have been trained to do that just to give a little thrill to the tourists.

The Nature Park of Migliarino San Rossore Massacuccoli is one of the largest natural coastal parks in Europe. It is considered to be the ‘city park’ for those who live in Pisa because it is so close to its gates.

There are rare plants and many animal species to see, as well as wild boar, deer, foxes and possibly even a loan wolf looking for a mate.

Because of its geographic position and climatic conditions it is made up of an unusual variety of environments.

There is a vast wooded area dominated by pines, but also marshy parts, along with expanses of dunes and natural beaches where there is the possibility of dipping your toes into the Med. It even contains a race course which operates during the winter months and can accommodate 10,000 people.

Guided tours are available with excursions on foot, by bicycle, an eco friendly train or our method, a horse-drawn carriage.

The big attraction though of this Tuscan city is its iconic leaning tower. Your memory can play tricks but I am pretty sure I have visited it before, on a family holiday about 40 years ago.

Since then this tilting bell tower, built on a base of sand, clay and lots of water, has survived a mini earthquake and during those intervening years has actually got a bit straighter and is back to the angle it was when Galileo Galilei was dropping objects from the top to test the theory of gravity.

It has caused a lot of headaches and was already starting to lean as it was being constructed, and as our guide, Vincenzo, told us: “They did not know what to do. There is then 100 years of discussions and it was only because they corrected the centre of gravity that it is still standing.”
I climbed up to the top of the 56 metre cylinder and took in the panoramic view of the Miracle Square, covered by a large lawn, and admired the other monuments.

Next to the tower is the cathedral, one of the most ornate you will see in Italy, with its 24 carat gold ceiling, while slightly further away is the domed Baptistery, which also leans a little and was built at a time when baptisms were events to be experienced by the whole community.

Completing the grand collection, on the north side, is the Monumental Cemetery, which has some marvellously graphic frescoes from Medieval times, including The Triumph of Death.

To the north of the city is the old town with its large student population and maze of streets with restaurants, pizzerias and kebab shops where you can get a pretty cheap meal and which transforms into a vibrant scene during the evening.

Little bakeries offer tempting pastries, such as a local speciality, a Torto Coi Bischeri, a substantial object containing chocolate, raisins and pine nuts and which is a ‘meal in itself’.

Travelling east you will be greeted by the wooded Pisa mountains, one topped by a ruined medieval castle, from where the grey and white stone was excavated in order to construct the buildings in Pisa.

It is an area where many olive trees grow and in Calci there is an 11-hectare estate, the Agriturismo Al Palazzaccio, producing organic olive oil and where you can eat some of its fine wines and beers.

The village of San Rossore, where an array of cold cuts were presented on a board including an old friend – wild boar.

If you have ever wondered how pasta is made, go to the family run Martelli business in Lari which has been producing their own special brand, which is dried for 50 hours, while slightly further away is the Foam Museum which contains a unique collection of Vespas, the iconic Italian made scooter, including the one used in Frederico Fellini’s masterpiece La Dolce Vita.

Lovers of history will appreciate towns such as Lari, with its castle perched on the top of a hill and Volterra, surrounded by medieval walls overlooking the Cecina valley with its narrow streets which radiate from the main square, one leading to a magnificent Etruscan gate.

I enjoyed many wonderful dishes during my stay, in particular the seafood ones at La Pergoletta in Pisa, especially one of the starters combining ricotta and anchovy.

My final meal was in the Park San Rossore, where an array of cold cuts were presented on a board including an old friend – wild boar.

Need to know

ROSS McCARTHY travelled with Jet2.com which offers flights to Pisa from Birmingham Airport up to two times a week and also flies there from East Midlands, Leeds Bradford, Manchester and Newcastle.

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The city of Pisa got its name in 600 BC from a Greek word meaning “marshy land”

Watch craftsmen at work

Inside the stunning Pisa cathedral

The guided tour on the horse-drawn carriage
The Leaning Tower of Pisa at first light