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RED LETTER *days*

Join Peter and Sheila Merrick on the trip of a lifetime – eight days behind the wheels of three different Ferraris in sun-drenched Italy



day 1: IT ALL BEGINS

IT'S TRUE – Rome's sky really does have a special colour. Sheila and I are approaching the Eternal City for the first time on a sunny April morning, but we're not here as ordinary tourists. We are here to drive Ferraris, probably the most sought-after and stylish cars in the world.

We arrive at our 'lodgings' for the next two nights, the Hotel Exedra, a late-19th-century palazzo, which is absolutely stunning. You could almost reach out and touch the Colosseum and the dome of St Peter's.

Despite being keen to start our Red Style Tour, it would be crazy to come to Rome and not take advantage of its splendours and so tomorrow is ear-marked for sight-seeing. This evening, however, we celebrate our first day in Rome with dinner in the Tazio restaurant, enjoying classic Italian cuisine which 'has been skilfully and masterfully updated' according to the brochure. We just think it tastes amazing.

day 2: DOLCE VITA IN ROME

Today is devoted to Rome. There's a VIP (pronounced 'veep!') shuttle for those who want to visit the wonders of the Eternal City, but

we have foregone that for the equally wonderful world of fashion in Via Condotti, or at least that is what Sheila tells me. Whilst our companions admire the charms of Piazza di Spagna, the Trevi Fountain and the Vatican we are being royally feted by a special presentation laid on for us at the Armani and Versace showrooms. Lucia our amazingly competent guide has also organised visits to Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana and Prada – my cup runneth over. Still there are the Ferraris to look forward to tomorrow so I keep quiet and marvel at the rhapsodising over boots, bags and various other incomprehensible fashion matters.

Just before dinner at the La Frusta restaurant we spend an hour with Guido our Tour Director who gives us a detailed account of our 1000-kilometre trip and readily answers our questions. There are two other couples with us and three Ferraris so we will swap cars whenever we want. We aren't going to be driving in the cities, he explains, just taking advantage of the best roads and the fabulous countryside. Sounds great.

day 3: THE ROUTE OF THE MILLE MIGLIA

At last – Ferrari Day! The VIP shuttle takes us to Ladispoli on the Roman shoreline to meet our cars. Spoiled for choice, I have decided to start off with the 360 Modena Spider F1. Guido makes sure each driver is comfortably settled behind the wheel and as the eight-cylinder engine fires up to a steady growl, our journey begins.

The first stage is short – some 30 kilometres just to get acquainted with the car and its sounds. I am astounded at how well it handles, how right it feels, how I could keep driving forever. This is not on the cards as lunch beckons. A small crowd of admirers circles the cars, something we'll get used to over the next few days! After an aperitif among the yachts anchored in the picturesque harbour of Civitavecchia and lunch beside Lake Bolsena, we set off along the Viterbo-Siena road, a stretch of the renowned Mille Miglia, Italy's oldest car race. What could be more perfect than driving a legendary car along a legendary route?

In the evening, we arrive at the Fonteverde Terme and Hotel near Siena, a villa that once belonged to the de' Medici family, where we are treated like, well, Renaissance royalty. I fall asleep dreaming of winning the Mille Miglia.

day 4: MEDIEVAL ITALY

Another day, another Ferrari. I say good bye to the Spider and hello to the 12-cylinder 575 Maralla F1, a car I have been dying to get my hands on. Its engine sounds more, how can I put it, 'full-bodied' than the Spider, you can feel the power under the bonnet, yet it's amazingly easy to drive. Lulled by the rounded music of the engine, we drive to Assisi, the mediaeval Umbrian city where Italy's patron

saint, St Francis, was born. We are captivated by the town and its rich mix of mysticism and art, particularly St. Francis' Basilica with its frescoes by Giotto and the St Clare Basilica.

After a morning indulging the spirit, the afternoon is devoted to the body beautiful as we drive back to the Fonteverde hotel to enjoy its thermal treatments. I opt for the *Bagno Etrusco*, a hour of relaxation in a sauna, hot room and Turkish bath, while Sheila selects the Beauty Treatment Facial, telling me she wants to look her best for the candlelight dinner on the terrace.

day 5: SIENA AND CHIANTI

Today we've got a thrilling drive through the rolling hills that form the Chianti route. I like the way the driving is a mix of these really great roads: the gentle curves where you can enjoy the handling of the car and then some straights where you can open up the throttle and just go.

Today's destination is Siena, famous for its Palio, a horse race with a long history that, as Lucia explains, is held every year in the summer and watched by wildly excited crowds, with everyone cheering for their own *contrada*.

We have lunch in a fabulous restaurant near the Piazza del Campo and then set off for Villa Il Poggiale near Florence, an early 15th-century manor that is to be our lodging for the next two nights.

In the evening, we go out in the shuttle not because of worries over our prospective alco-



hol intake, but because of the narrow roads. Our restaurant this evening is the Osteria di Passignano, owned by the Antinoris, a long-established family of winemakers. Naturally we get a guided tasting of the 'family jewels' before dinner.

day 6: FLORENCE, THE CRADLE OF RENAISSANCE

The days starts well in Villa Il Poggiale's park as a professional photographer takes pictures of us in 'our' Ferrari. Sheila is keen to get going – Florence and its marvels (and shops) awaits. We set off in the 'veep' and after the *de rigueur* visit to Santa Maria Novella, we to go for a walk in the Boboli Gardens before visiting the Ponte Vecchio with its goldsmiths' shops.

day 7: PISA AND THE PIAZZA DEI MIRACOLI

The last day but one and – to my great regret – the last day in a Ferrari. This time I choose the brand new 8-cylinder F430 F1 to drive to Pisa. The engine sound makes every fibre of your being tingle. I wish I spoke better Italian as Guido's list of adjectives to describe the driving sensation: *ruggente, forte, corposo* sounds so much better than the translation: roaring, strong, full-bodied! The gear change is on the steering column, making driving a breeze, just select from 'sport', 'race', 'wet' or 'auto' with one touch and, like Michael Schumacher, you're away. This has got to be my favourite car of the three.



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In the Piazza dei Miracoli, we make the climb up the well-known Leaning Tower. Guido tells us that making a wish is part of the tradition. No prizes for guessing what our wish is.

In the afternoon, our long farewell drive takes us to the fabulous Hotel Posta Vecchia on the Roman shoreline, where we'll spend the last night of the tour. We visit the Hotel's little antiquities museum before having a farewell dinner in its luxurious Cesar restaurant.

Day Eight – ARRIVEDERCI ITALIA

Our tour ends with a swim in the hotel's indoor pool and a last walk in its park before the *èveepí* shuttle takes us to the airport for our homeward flight. It has been a memorable experience and understandably we have well and truly lost our hearts to Ferraris and to Italy. 

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