

Under the UMBRIAN Sun

Yes, it's possible to have a wonderful, restful European getaway with a 3-year-old and a 7-month-old! Here's how one family planned its vacation on a farm in the Italian countryside.

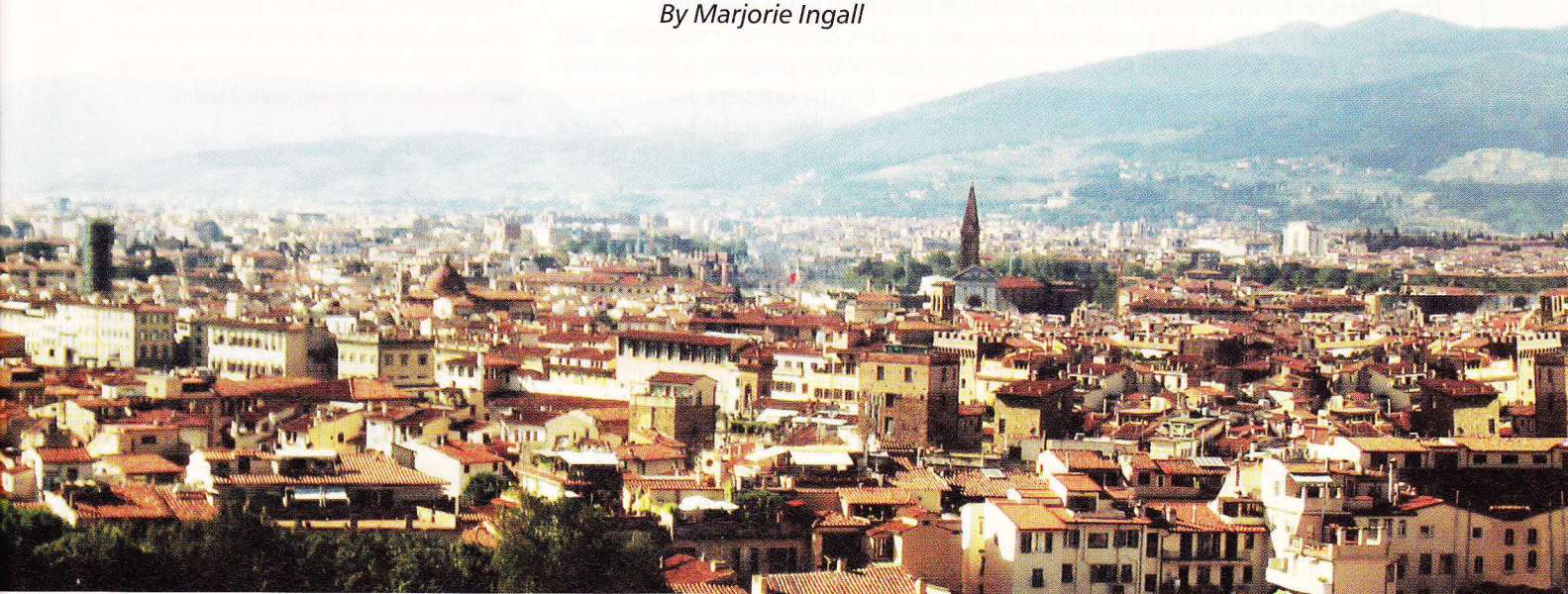
We were broke. But we had frequent-flier miles. And our friends' father had a restored farmhouse in rural Umbria. And we hadn't had a vacation since the birth of our daughter, Josie, three years earlier. And I love homemade pasta almost more than I love my husband. Decision made.

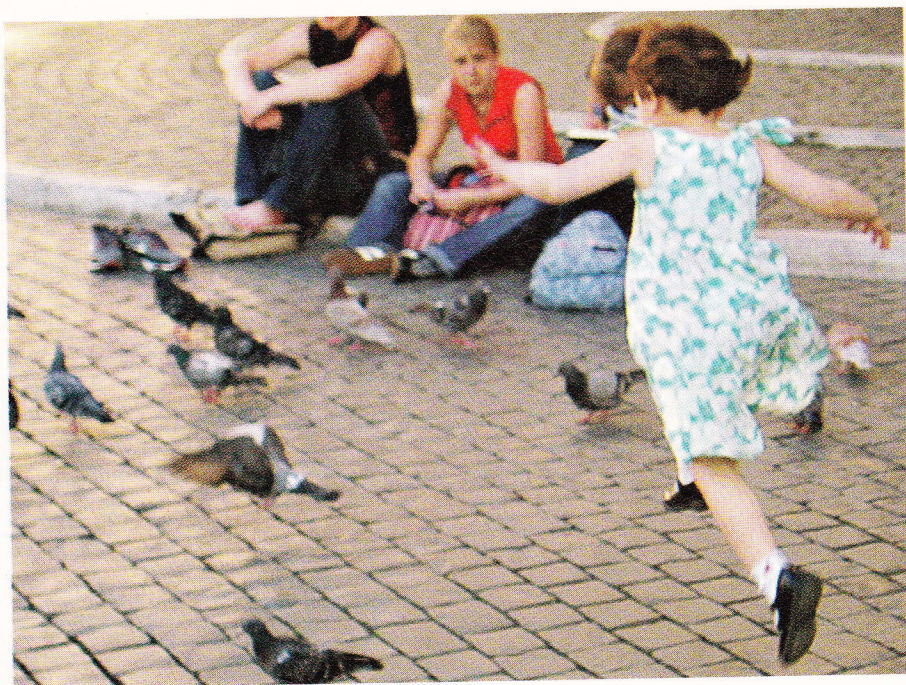
Still, I had some anxieties. (I always do.) For Americans, all flights to Umbria lead to Rome. But when I googled "Rome AND kids," I discovered the experts' advice was, in short, "fuggedaboutit." Narrow streets, scary traffic, few child-friendly options. Feh. I wanted to skip the city and go directly to the countryside. Alas, my husband, Jonathan, and our friends Molly and Matthew outvoted me. (Their daughter, Sterrett, 5 months, and Josie and our baby, Maxine, 7 months, were deemed too young for ballots.) So two days in Rome it would be, followed by a week in Umbria.

Fortunately, we cleared the first hurdle easily. Our overnight flight was as smooth as tiramisu. The Lufthansa flight attendants showered my kids with special snacks, toys, and games and provided organic baby food and tiny spoons—even a cartoon-print baby bottle. Thanks to the comfy bulkhead bassinet, Maxine slept like a, well, baby. By the time we deplaned, with both kids happy and well rested, I wanted to French-kiss everyone on board.

The kids were ready for action, despite the six-hour time change. So we dumped our stuff at our hotel and hit the Villa Borghese, Rome's beautiful rolling park. There were a carousel and a playground to frolic on, a tethered hot-air balloon to ogle, slightly dangerous old stone walls and tree stumps to jump off. We forced the kids to stay awake for as long as possible, stuffed Josie full of cheap pizza, then collapsed like Pinocchio marionettes and slept through the night. *La vita è bella!* ➤

By Marjorie Ingall





But the next morning, we forgot what every parent of small kids knows: It takes longer than you think to get out the door. We'd planned to stroll to the Church of the Immaculate Conception to see the Capuchin Crypt (who doesn't like bones?), but by the time we got rolling, it was noon. In Italy, that's when almost everything closes for a few hours. So we strolled to the Trevi Fountain, where Josie found the thundering water and crowds thrilling. We stumbled on a farmers' market, where we bought tiny fragoline (wild strawberries). We strolled to the Piazza Navona, where my wee fashionista admired the glittery belts sold by street vendors. She loved the Fountain of the Moor, which shows a man wrestling with a dolphin, her favorite form of sea life. And she had her third ice cream cone ever. (On this trip, she also had her fourth through tenth, gelato being ubiquitous, and fabulous, in Italy.)



hus refreshed, we strolled along to the Vatican, which I assumed would be a disaster with a 3-year-old. Wrong again. When we entered the vast, high-ceilinged space with shafts of light slanting down, Josie whispered, "Shh! We're in a forest!" She loved the majesty of the choir, the intensity of the people kissing the foot of the statue of St. Peter, the mystery of glimpsing people in the grottoes below. Afterward, she loved chasing the pigeons in the courtyard of the basilica. The fierceness! The herding! Jonathan and I were soon gasping with laughter.

Later, we all had dinner at a restaurant in the old Jewish ghetto, where Josie had her first experience with fresh tagliatelle (long, flat pasta). And lo, it was even more spiritual than the Vatican. Ordinarily a chatterbox, she was silent and devotional, except for all the slurping. The waiters flirted with Max and Sterrett, peeking at them from behind napkins.

By the next morning, Josie could say *buon giorno*, *grazie*, *arrivederci*, *ciao*, *gelato*, and *cioccolato*. (Truly, does anyone need to say anything else?) We all piled into a rented minivan for the drive to Umbria. Again, I expected the worst. But the kids slept the entire way as we cruised past vineyards, olive groves, and fields of sugar beets and tobacco. After a couple of hours of increasingly narrow roads, we crunched up the steep gravel driveway leading to Alta Bella, the property that would be our home for the next week.

I giggled the minute I saw it. It was a movie-fantasy Italian farmhouse: rough-hewn stone walls, beamed ceilings, a loggia with to-die-for views of the hills, and lush wildflower gardens. *Perfetto*. It had been lovingly restored, with an updated kitchen and an anachronistic

FAVORITE THINGS, PEOPLE & PLACES IN ITALY

OUR FARMHOUSE Alta Bella (altabella.com; e-mail: info@altabella.com) The main house sleeps 11 to 13. A smaller farmhouse nearby sleeps eight, and a beautiful converted barn sleeps two adults and a child. For similar accommodations in Umbria and Tuscany, write to Rentvillas.com, 700 E. Main St., Ventura, CA 93001 (800-726-6702; rentvillas.com).

OUR FAVORITE RESTAURANT IN ROME Al Pompiere (Via Santa Maria dei Calderari 38; telephone: 011-39-066-868377). We loved traditional dishes like battered fried zucchini blossoms (*fiori fritti*), fried artichokes (*carciofi alla Giudia*), tagliarini al limone, osso buco, and pillowy *gnocchi con funghi*.

OUR TOUR GUIDE American expatriate Elizabeth Wholey (elizabethwholey.com; e-mail: elizabethwholey@tiscali.it) can arrange cooking classes (in your rental's kitchen or using a farmhouse fireplace), cheese- and ravioli-making lessons, porcini- and truffle-hunting expeditions, painting classes, and much more.

THE BEEKEEPER Azienda Apistica Montecorona (Montecorona, 323, 06019 Umbertide, Perugia; telephone: 011-39-075-941-1610)

THE POTTERY STUDIO Le Crete di Pa.Tò. (Paola e Tonino) (Viale Ranchi, 15-Verna 06019 Umbertide, Perugia; telephone: 011-39-075-930-2365). If you're there for a few weeks, you can make something yourself and have them fire it.

THE ALPACA FARM Maridiana Alpaca (Niccone 173 06019 Umbertide, Perugia; telephone: 011-39-075-941-0931; alpaca.it; e-mail: info@alpaca.it)

THE MUSEUM The Centro Tradizioni Popolari (Villa Cappelletti at Garavelle, just south of Città di Castello; telephone: 011-39-075-855-2119) contains ancient utensils, farm implements, clothes, wine and olive oil presses, and old trains.



LA FAMIGLIA Above: Josie gleefully chases pigeons in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. Right: Jonathan, Maxine, Josie, and Marjorie enjoy a day trip to Florence.



SIMPLE PLEASURES Playing in an Italian farmyard is as much fun for kids as seeing the sights. Opposite page: The breathtaking view from the top of Boboli Gardens in Florence.

yet delightful infinity-edge pool (safely fenced in). Soon Matthew's brother Andrew, his wife, Frances, and their 2½-year-old son, Sebastian, arrived from Los Angeles, and Josie and Sebastian became instant best buddies. After all, the best entertainment for a preschooler is another preschooler.

We quickly fell into a rhythm: Mornings, a couple of us would head out to the nearby town of Umbertide, about 25 minutes away, to buy fresh pasta and groceries. The rest would swim, take wildflower walks with the kids, bird-watch, look for lizards, read. The sweet, non-English-speaking gardener frequently stopped by with produce from the farm's organic vegetable garden. When fussiness descended, we cranked up the iPod and the kids danced to "Here Come the ABCs."

At dusk, we gathered in the fabulous kitchen with its wide-planked wood table. The kids ate their metric weight in tiny fresh tortellini. I fed Max from an espresso cup filled with organic baby food (sold in every drugstore!). Then I bathed her in the wash-basin we used to carry our laundry out to the clothesline, feeling very Old World. As the sky darkened, we drank Umbrian chianti.

Oh, nothing's perfect. The terra cotta floors were treacherous for a small, unsteady person. The washing machines were temperamental. The grounds were blanketed with caterpillars. (June would have been a better time to visit than May. Butterflies are



CITY SIGHTS Siena's twisting streets and alleys are perfect for strolling. Below: Mother and daughter enjoy a spin on a carousel near the Piazza della Repubblica in Florence.

far more charming than their predecessors.) And the togetherness occasionally got to be a bit much. Sharing the van cut costs but meant we were stuck with one another.

But mostly we had a blast. We hired a local tour guide to plan a couple of kid-friendly jaunts. She took us to a beekeeper in a nearby town, where we tasted different colors of honey—but Josie and Sebastian turned out to be more interested in the newborn kittens under the farmhouse table. That was yet another lesson: The kids had a great time, just not the way I expected them to. When we visited a ceramics studio in an abbey, Josie and Bastian played with lumps of clay and politely watched the owner, Toni, throw a pot on a wheel. But they were (surprise!) far more enchanted by Toni's puppy. Max, my city baby, simply wanted to sit on the grass, patting it repeatedly. I should take a lesson in Zen from her.

Every other day, we'd undertake a longer day trip. The biggest hit with the kids: Siena. It's built around a giant oval piazza where the Sieneese have held horse races called the Palio since the 17th century. The kids loved clip-clopping around pretending to be ponies. They also liked looking for symbols of each neighborhood (*contrada*) on signs and walls throughout the city. There was a she-wolf, an owl, a caterpillar, a seashell ("like Zoo Pals," Josie explained to Sebastian, comparing the ancient icons to her favorite animal-shaped paper plates).

For the kids, the highlight of our day in Florence was getting there. They loved the train's smooth ride, the giant windows, the panini we'd brought to eat onboard ("grilled cheese!"). Once we'd arrived, we felt rushed, knowing we'd have to catch another train for the 90-minute trip back to Arezzo, followed by a 90-minute drive back to the farmhouse, at night, on unlit mountain roads. The famed Boboli Gardens were lovely but proved an unpleasant workout while pushing strollers. It was the only time I craved my former, child-free life. I missed museums! I missed shoe shopping! But Josie's glee boosted my mood. Florence, for her, meant watching Japanese art students make chalk drawings on the street, plus filling her water bottle from a fountain that looked like a spitting gargoyle. Fun.

On our last night, we roasted radicchio from the garden in olive oil from trees on the 155-acre property, then drizzled it with local balsamic vinegar. The kids dumped veggies into the pot for risotto alla primavera. We marinated veal chops and grilled sausages, and Molly made a commel-fig-pine-nut cake from a recipe someone had left lying around.

We never made it to the alpaca farm or the museum filled with homemade mousetraps and steam trains. But now I knew: The kids were happy just picking buttercups. And seeing their joy (and hearing Josie trill "gel-AHH-to" with a perfect accent) was simply *delizioso*.

For the story of a family's vacation on a farm in Tuscany, go to www.child.com/web_links.

MARJORIE INGALL is a columnist for *The Forward* and has written for *Glamour*, *Self*, and *The New York Times*. She lives with her husband, Jonathan, and two daughters in New York City.