

At war under Tuscan skies

To the hordes of Britons who return every year, Tuscany is a seductive neverland. But intrusive development could kill the dream, says Jasper Rees.



Trouble in paradise: prized vistas like this one in the Val d'Orcia may change radically Photo: SIME-4CORNERS

By Jasper Rees

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This month, thousands of British holidaymakers are making the pilgrimage, putting themselves through the purgatory of air travel and the struggle with baggage and car hire. But it will all be worth it when they arrive in the heart of the postcard that every middle-class Brit carries around somewhere in their mind's eye.

In Tuscany, the olive groves dutifully simmer in the heat haze. Villages nestle gorgeously on hill crests. The land swishes its seductive, feminine curves. Cinema's premier fantasy location, whither pallid north Europeans return like migrating wildebeest to marvel at the shimmering duet of light and landscape, is a chimerical neverland which miraculously exists.

Or does it? These days, when you drive around the folds in the hills towards the medieval Manhattan that is San Gimignano, you can't see the fields for the brutally ugly poster hoardings advertising the local Vernaccia. But a billboard can always be taken down.

Lately, however, there have been more ineradicable alterations to the landscape. Take the Val d'Orcia. You'll have quaffed its Brunello di Montalcino and, from the other end of the valley, its Vino Nobile di Montepulciano.

When one pictures Tuscany, it is the Val d'Orcia that supplies the classic image of yellowing *crete senesi* (the Siennese clays) punctuated by a lone farmhouse in a tall cluster of cypresses. That is why it was made a *parco artistico, naturale e culturale*, not to mention a Unesco World Heritage site.

These protections have not so far impeded plans, 10 miles from Montepulciano at Gallina, for a plant that will be visible for miles around, where straw and wood will be burned to make fuel pellets offsite. The location is perhaps a little odd, given that the nearest pellet factory is hundreds of miles away in Le Marche.

Nor, it seems, is there enough raw material in the Val d'Orcia to keep the plant working. It's feared by local campaigners that other waste will be burned there, pumping carcinogenic dioxins and nanoparticles into the pure Tuscan air, as well as large quantities of CO₂ and carbon monoxide.

Anxiety about environmental pollution is already high, thanks to the building of a geothermal plant on the vast tree-smothered slopes of Monte Amiata, at 1,800 metres the tallest mountain in Tuscany.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the mountain at Scansano, one of the leading vineyards, Biondi Santi, was surrounded by wind turbines in 2007. In other corners of Tuscany they have since sprouted like *funghi porcini*, with the difference that, at up to 150 metres tall, they are rather easier to locate. In an area of 12 miles by six miles near the dramatic, unspoilt uplands around Volterra, authorisation has been given for 78 turbines.

These projects continue despite the fact that even Paolo Scaroni, the head of Eni, which controls more than 80 per cent of Italy's domestic natural gas production, recently admitted that the turbines do not produce enough energy because Tuscany simply doesn't have enough wind. But in Italy the incentives for renewables are the highest in Europe. And, as they are paid in advance, there is no process by which investment can be measured against productivity.

In other news, the council in Grosseto has just freed up 200 hectares of archaeologically rich agricultural land in Braccagni in the Maremma for building an industrial village, including 20 hectares of solar panels. The area's Roman-Etruscan heritage is also threatened by a vast new yacht basin planned for Talamone, the ancient port on one of the Italian peninsula's last remaining stretches of undeveloped coastline. And meanwhile, as everywhere else in Europe, the cities and towns encroach on the countryside, the tarmac spreads across hills and farms. In Italy they call it ***lo sprawl***.

One of the most shocking instances of ***lo sprawl*** is planned for a valley known as the Golden Basin, on the green, fertile northern side of Amiata. Here, in one of the last Tuscan valleys to have remained entirely unspoilt since medieval times, the local *comune* has received an application to build a "well-being centre" 500 metres from a national monument, the Castello di Potentino, along with other residential structures, all requiring asphalted access. A hotel, in short – no matter that other hotels in the area are empty for much of the year.

The proposed hotel has become a lightning rod for local feeling. The regional branch of Italia Nostra (Our Italy), the national association for the defence of the historical, cultural and environmental heritage of Italy, was soon involved. It organised a one-day conference to try to persuade the local mayor to think again. Politicians, hoteliers, local businesses and tourism companies were invited to give professional advice to help the local

council change its mind.

To no avail thus far, explains Charlotte Horton, whose vineyard at Castello di Potentino produces a wine this year voted one of the best three in Tuscany. "There is no public scrutiny," she explains. "We have written many letters to the council. They replied with a very evasive answer that gives us no explanation. We have no idea what they are up to. The local councils have too much administrative power over things they are not professionally experienced enough to manage."

Benedetta Origo, the daughter of the formidable Iris Origo, who wrote the best-selling *War in Val d'Orcia* about the resistance to the Nazis in southern Tuscany, says that the enemy is within, and far more slippery.

"Recent laws have given each *comune* almost complete autonomy to decide what is good or not regarding building, expansion, roads, etc," she says. "If the mayor decides that a certain plan is 'good for the community', he has the ultimate power to concede permits, which are then irrevocable. Therefore greed sets in easily.

"Most of the *comuni* are so drastically short of money that they will do anything to fill their coffers. The whole situation is pitiful, and slipping fast."

In other words, it's the old story – greed and short-termism, but all given new momentum by the financial crisis engulfing Italy, and fuelled by a lack of pastoral leadership from Rome. The final defence against despoliation is Article Nine of the Italian constitution. It declares that the state must protect the historic heritage and cultural landscape of the country. That constitutional responsibility has been comprehensively devolved to local governments.

The result? Tuscans are gradually losing the landscape that lures visitors from around the world. They may also, in due course, lose the visitors. So a word to the wise. If you want to visit that postcard in your head for real, book early to avoid disappointment. Pretty soon a fantasy is all that will be left.

The original version of this article stated that a geothermal power plant operated by Enel SpA has caused drinking water pollution, lowered the water table, led to deforestation and incorrectly linked the plant with the region's cancer rates. Enel SpA have assured us that these allegations are unfounded.

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