



TRAVELERS DIARY

Meet *Serenella Leoni*

“There’s got to be more to life than this,” Serenella Leoni once thought. And there was.

There was her hometown in Tuscany, a company to start, and people to inspire. We caught up with Serenella at her favorite place in Lucca, the Piazza Anfiteatro, built on top of an old Roman amphitheatre.

Our favorite Italian read? Serenella’s “You Know You’re In Italy When...” list – it’s online now at chicos.com and at her website, www.toscanamia.biz.

What inspired you to lead trips through Tuscany for a living?

I did what many women do – worked a series of jobs and raised a family. Once my sons were grown, I could pay attention to just myself for the first time in a long time – to what I know and love.

What makes Toscana Mia trips different?

They’re more like unique adventures. I strive to keep my small groups in touch with the less-touristy parts of Tuscany and to teach them about the Tuscan lifestyle that I grew up with – slowing down, three-hour lunches, walking a lot, using all the senses, observing the beauty...

We loved hearing that you arrange tours just for women...

Yes. Women around our age are fantastic. In general, they have fulfilled their responsibilities to family and profession and find themselves at a new threshold... what a force of nature they can be. There is a sparkle and mischievous streak, sometimes hidden, that is waiting to be rekindled. Or sometimes they just want to heal and have fun.

Why do so many women find inspiration there?

When women at this stage in life visit Tuscany, magic things can happen. It’s a feeling that some people get: The slower pace of life, the languorous meals, the heightening of all the senses, and the abundance of beauty can truly move the soul.

What is your favorite wine?

We never sit down to a Tuscan meal without a great wine like a good vintage Brunello di Montalcino or a Chianti Riserva DOCG. I also love to find lesser known, delicious wines like the Avignonesi Vino Nobile di Montepulciano.

Favorite restaurant in Italy?

I really love to go exploring for remote places where the *nonna* (grandma) is in the back room cooking, and the bread, salumi (cured meats), olives, olive oil, and cheeses are homemade...

What makes you laugh?

My husband, my very Italian family, quotes from Mark Twain and Groucho Marx (who have the Tuscan spirit), and election campaign promises.

Guilty pleasure?

Chocolate – the darker, the better! I am so happy for the success of the “Valley of the Chocolate Makers” in Tuscany (between Pisa and Florence), where international award-winning chocolates are made.

Favorite vacation spot?

On the beach by the Tyrrhenian Sea (west coast of Italy) in September, when all the crowds are gone.

What’s the secret to happiness?

Being Italian (anyone can be an “Adopted Italian”).