

Accidental Tourists

Buon appetite!

By KRISTEN HAMILTON

I have always wanted to visit Italy. And, on that trip, I thought it would be great to attend a cooking class.

My dream become a reality this winter when my husband and I were able to go to Europe to visit my daughter, Sarah, who was studying in Brussels, Belgium at the time. The first stop was meeting her in Florence, Italy. There we would see the sites and go to one of the original cooking schools in the Tuscany region, the Accidental Tourist.

I chose Accidental Tourist after checking out reviews on Trip Advisor...everyone raved about the hosts, the setting, and the food. The trip included a tour at a nearby winery so how could I go wrong.

Come to find out that the Accidental Tourist is one of the oldest cooking schools in the region and now there are close to 100. The owners, Marco and Majla are involved in every aspect of the operation.



Majla & Marco, Owners of Accidental Tourists



I asked Majla what sets them apart from the other schools.

"I think the key is staying unique. While other cooking classes come and go, we represent a combination of what the other schools offer." She continued "We have the expertise of a Culinary Academy, without the coldness of steel counters, high hats and

big numbers of students; we offer the authentic atmosphere as well as the tradition of generations (like an Italian Nonna's hearth), with added teaching skills, and without the language barrier; we afford the privilege of very intimate classes (maximum eight people down to just one single traveler), and the very highest quality ingredients available in the country and in the world, without the extra-cost of luxury."

Having experienced this firsthand, I'd say she hit the nail on the head. We met our van driver (who happened to be Majla this day as her regular girl had the day off) in Florence at an easy to find location just a short walk from our Airbnb. Sarah and I were joined by another American who happened to be on an extended six-month trip in Italy. Together we headed up into the Tuscan hills.

About 20 minutes later we approached this amazing villa on the highest hill complete with a watchtower. The villa is 900 years old and has been in Majla's family for six generations. It was an orphanage before becoming the farmhouse it is today. During WWII, Rodolfo Paoli (Majla's grandfather) provided shelter to and saved the

lives of many hiding from the Nazis. Majla said "The square in our town is named after my heroic grandfather, as he risked his life during WWII to help others."



We were escorted into the lower level of the home where there was a comfortable dining area with seating for up to 10 people, along with a small kitchen off to the side where Marco was busy preparing delicious courses for dinner. We were led to the back room where there was a large work area with a huge butcher block table. Majla served Chianti and shared stories of the villa, her family, and the area, while we followed instructions and made homemade pasta. While the pasta was rest-



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ing, she took us on a tour of the home and up to the top of the watchtower. The views were simply breathtaking.

I could tell early on that creating pasta and enjoying a meal together was only one component of the day. I asked Majla about a favorite experience with a group. She said, “Something really special seems to happen when people spend a few hours preparing together and then sharing food and wine around an old table, where you can FEEL so many other people have sat and shared before! Total strangers to me and to one-another truly open up. At the end of each class and dinner, there are so many hugs and kisses!”

She continued, “We have had three marriage proposals in our kitchen! One was planned, so I knew about it ahead of time but the other two proposals were impromptu. You can imagine the surprise, and cheers, and tears, and ooohs and ahhhhhhhs!

“And the fact that a human being in love who plans to spend the rest of his life with another, walks into my home, and in a matter of hours decides that it is good enough to get on his knee and open a jewelry box by the end of the evening, is the biggest certification of HOME I could ever hope for!”

Philanthropy runs deep in Majla and Marco’s family. She explains their involvement in Fondazione Progetto ARCA:

“With the premises that you and we are the “upper case *Accidental Tourists*” the lucky ones who can choose the destination and duration of their wandering, and can set the date of their return home; lower case *accidental tourists* are the less

fortunate, who leave without luggage, itinerary, a return ticket, or a home to return to.

“Over 2 decades of making a privileged living, made it consequential to extend some of that warmth to those who can’t afford it, by supporting Fondazione Progetto ARCA, an organization that assists homeless and people in extreme need.

“For every meal we serve a paying guest, one is donated to the organization. Simple as that: one to one.”

They have also continued her grandfather’s legacy by creating a special space called “The Emergency Room” in the villa. It is a large cozy room that sleeps four and is available for anyone who is - indeed - in an emergency situation including: a missed or cancelled flight; stranded with nowhere to stay; medical staff on temporary duty at the nearby hospital (due to COVID19); and even a solo traveler with a case of loneliness.

Spending the day with Marco and Majla with my daughter ended up being the highlight of my visit to Europe. As their website says “As heirs of this abode, we want to honor its vocation: to treat strangers as guests, turn guests into friends.” I can say they succeeded with us.

The only thing I would change is to have my husband go with us next time. He would have loved it as much as we did!

Addio per ora!

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Above photos from left to right: View from the watchtower; Sarah (my daughter) making pasta; “Green” pasta with Stinging Nettle added; Majla demonstrating the perfect pasta touch; Kristen & Sarah standing in the watchtower

The Accidental Tourist is a cultural association, not a business enterprise. 100% of the profit after paying workers is used for projects such as the Emergency Room, supporting the Foundation, the Barter program, etc. Every year we come up with new projects. The yearly membership fee is 15 Euro.

At this time of emergency we would like to ask those who have enjoyed an Accidental Tourist experience, those who would like to in the future, or those who simply like our philosophy, to support us by becoming an Accidental Tourist for 2020.